

11 Conclusions

What have we learned and where do we go from here?

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Introduction

The previous chapters have addressed several issues and problems related to the nature and impact of public opinion on foreign policy: it is time to sum up and point to possible conclusions emerging from the research reported in them. Being aware, however, that as much as the blind men in front of the elephant we face a host of difficult methodological and theoretical problems: different cases, in different periods, seen under different perspectives. This, of course, limits the generalisability of our results as much as their very comparison. Philip Everts in the Introductory chapter mentioned three main sets of issues that this book was to address: the nature, content and structure of public opinion on foreign policy issues in a comparative and dynamic perspective; the impact of public opinion on foreign and defence policy making, and the empirical support for the so-called 'casualty hypothesis' or 'body-bag syndrome'.

Each of the chapters makes a contribution to one or more of these issues and the task here will be to summarise the main arguments used and the empirical evidence these chapters bring to bear on the three issue areas of interest. Before starting, one should consider that the levels of methodological sophistication, theoretical development and empirical solidity in each of these issue areas are quite different. In some areas we know far more than in others, even though it is still an open question as to how generalisable this knowledge is (underlining the relevance of our comparative approach). Much has been said and written of the nature, content and structure of public opinion on foreign policy, especially in the American case. However, much less research is being conducted on the question of what difference, if any, the radical changes in the structure of the international system might have produced in what we know of the above (see as an exception Murray 1996). Less is known of the impact of public opinion on foreign policy and this is the sector in which more developments are under way (e.g. Jacobs 1993; Shapiro and Jacobs 1989; Geer 1996; Foyle 1999), but again with some notable exceptions (Risse-Kappen 1991) mostly concerning the American case. And finally, still in its infancy,

is our effort to understand the role casualties play in the support for the use of force in democracies. Accordingly, the tentativeness of our conclusions varies as we move from firm ground to more shaky terrain.

Three domains of study

(1) *The content and nature of public opinion*

Any discussion on the content of public opinions about the use of force and the nature of these very opinions should start out by mentioning a theoretical and methodological problem, which cuts across any effort in this direction. The issue at stake is the extent to which conclusions and considerations at the individual level are compatible or comparable with those at the aggregate level. Two puzzles are at work here. Starting from the individual level, a first puzzle concerns the character and specific content of individual beliefs about foreign policy issues. A second issue, starting from the aggregate level, concerns the nature and specific content of aggregate beliefs about foreign and defence policy issues. There is no way, by now, we can reconcile these two pieces of the puzzle and, even worse, there is no reason why we should even assume that they are pieces of a single puzzle. What I will do here, following the suggestion Dina Zinnes (1980) made to herself in approaching the evidence on the outbreak of war, is start playing with the different pieces, to look for what matches with what.

The piece of the puzzle I will start with is the traditional thesis mentioned by Everts in Chapter 1, Introduction, that, at the aggregate level, mass public opinion is volatile, fickle and emotional and hence not to be taken seriously in foreign policy making. This now appears to be thoroughly demolished. In spite of an often appalling lack of knowledge and interest public opinion should rather be accepted as basically stable, structured and to a considerable degree 'rational', and thus as an important factor in making and understanding foreign policy. With respect to this, almost all the chapters in this book, obliquely or squarely, concur with the stability thesis, generalising conclusions previously valid only for the United States. But these very chapters point to at least two further considerations to take into account.

First, they invite us to pause and think of the possible implications of stability for both public opinions and their impact on policy making. The idea of the aggregate stability of public opinion must not become a new orthodoxy and it should be considered with as much scepticism as the earlier 'Almond-Lippmann consensus'. In fact, where stability has become the normal state of affairs, one can be concerned in normative terms whether this may actually not present an undesirable obstacle to adapting to changed international circumstances. While in the revised theoretical analyses of the linkage between public attitudes and policy making, citizen

People, lacking factual information or clear-cut and ready available interpretations, draw more often upon their basic values. As an example, the relatively greater influence of the structure of beliefs among Germans in the east compared to the west might be due to the fact that people in the eastern states used to be more dependent on so-called shortcuts, due to their presumably lower level of information and their lesser integration into German society.

Finally, the available evidence in this book shows also that the structure of beliefs interacts with foreign policy events. This is true, in particular, of the military dimension and connected items. The increasingly humanitarian role of armed force missions affects and changes the way we perceive the use of force. People discriminate between different uses of force and different considerations impinge upon the willingness to see it used. Juhász found that disposition towards the use of force in out-of-area missions involves considerations that differ from the willingness to fight for one's own country. Nationalism and the sense of attachment to the nation-state are more important in explaining willingness to fight; whereas the perception of international threats and attitudes towards the military have a greater role in explaining support for the use of force abroad. Moreover, the role of ideology blurs as we move from a general attitude to specific missions. The perception of the international environment had a remarkable impact on the support for the use of force. The more dangerous the world was perceived to be, the more respondents were ready to become involved internationally. This relationship was particularly clear for the evaluation of specific foreign deployments. In conclusion, willingness to fight for the country is more or less independent of threat perceptions, whereas agreement to foreign deployments is obviously dependent on such perceptions. These results point to the possibility that public opinion might be more reactive to the evolution of the situation in specific crises and so more prone to change if things turn out badly.

The interaction among beliefs and events, on the one hand, can weaken the ability of the structure of belief to shape policy orientation. As an example, in Germany Juhász found that ideology is linked to pacifist persuasion, but when we move to concrete military deployments the connection between ideology and agreement becomes less clear. One reason for this blurring might be the fact that most out-of-area military missions were framed as humanitarian aid, which is presumably supported by everybody. On the other hand, Chittick and Freyberg-Inan, examining both hypothetical and actual crisis situations, find that political opinions concerning the use of force are based on complex dispositions, involving at least two of the three motives stipulated in their framework. This complexity can explain the resistance to change at the individual level. A multidimensional structure provides public opinion with a greater degree of underlying stability than a one- or even two-dimensional structure. While it is certainly possible to distort public opinion in the short term,

such efforts are not likely to change underlying perceptions of the international environment or orientations towards basic foreign policy goals or strategies, and may even be counterproductive in the long term. In other words, as Chittick and Freyberg-Inan argue in their paper, little or no opinion change has occurred after the end of the Cold War because there has been no significant change in the underlying structure of opinions (Chittick and Billingsley 1990).

Hermann offers another explanation for this resistance to change: the rigidity of public structure of beliefs, motivated by a strong desire for congruence between strategic beliefs and operative beliefs, and between the way we define political reality around us and the means deemed most appropriate to deal with it. The desire to live in peace on the one hand and the fear that the compromises required by the Oslo Process could prove to be disastrous, a fear rooted in the belief that the Arabs continue to have hostile intentions towards Israel, created an incongruity in the security beliefs structures. This incongruity left many Israelis not only quite bewildered, but also even resentful of any policy changes that could further aggravate this disturbing cognitive dissonance.

(2) The opinion-policy relationship

Progress on the issue of impact of public opinion on policy making lags relatively behind. This area is methodologically the most complex in view of the variety of factors and actors to be taken into account. The preceding chapters confirmed on the one hand the complexity of the issues involved and on the other hand the extreme usefulness of a comparative selection of case studies.

It is evident that the relationship between public opinion and policy can be manifold: anticipation by governments, direct influence on policy makers (punishment), efforts to please by symbolic acts, and using public opinion as a tool. Relevant factors in explaining these different roles of public opinion include the nature of the political system (presidential vs. parliamentary), the role played by mass media, and the nature of the issue (use of force and which kind of use – peacekeeping versus war, neutrality and so forth). To bring some order to the different cases and approaches used in this book, one should look at three questions and the way the book informs about each of them: do decision makers try systematically to anticipate public opinion? Do they perceive it correctly? And do they tend to act on the basis of their perceptions?

As to the first question – whether it is true that in foreign policy public opinion is largely ignored, or rather that this lack of regard for mass opinion has been changing over time – the cases examined, i.e. France, Ireland, Italy and the United States, stress how common it is to take into account public opinion in the decision makers' calculations. In this connection, the Israeli case offers an appropriate contrast. Even

though the Israeli people are characterised by a high level of interest in foreign and security matters, and embrace quite firm opinions in these realms, Rabin's government was severely constrained by its inability (or unwillingness) to take into account the reluctance of public opinion to abandon its previous security beliefs. In this connection it is not the mere neglect of public opinion that helps to explain the setback in the peace negotiations. Rather, the inability to read public opinion is, as Herrmann suggests, due to the pace of democratic regimes, sometimes out of step with the pace of public opinion. In Israel, public opinion was not allowed much time to internalise the new, non-confrontational definition of the situation, mainly because the successive Oslo Accords signed by the leaders determined that the first moves of implementation, for example for the redeployment of the IDF forces in the occupied territories, would take place within a few months and the final ones in less than five years. The pressure to act with considerable haste came not only from the outside, that is, from the American administration and Arab partners to the negotiations, but from some domestic imperatives as well. These had to do with the democratic electoral cycle. Although the public clearly still needed time to adjust to the new reality, the Labour leaders had to produce some tangible results before the 1996 elections. Having to make a decision about priorities, however, they invested more efforts in the negotiations with the Palestinians and failed to deal with the problem of the attitudes of Israelis at home. They hardly addressed or tried to alleviate the fears of those opposed to the peace process, and to win their support. Instead, they denounced the opposition of the Right as irrational and fanatic. Thus, the small gap between the two roughly equal political camps widened, leaving the Labour leaders preaching to the converted half of the population, and the other half believing that their security concerns were virtually being sacrificed for a worthless piece of paper. The outcomes of this study point to the perhaps unbridgeable gap between the need of politicians in democratic systems to react quickly to a changing environment (and to produce quick dividends in order to be re-elected) and the much longer time needed for the public to build some confidence in its former enemies before sweeping changes are undertaken.

In matters of foreign (e.g. neutrality policy) and security issues (e.g. the use of force abroad) decision makers struggle to make sense of what is in the public mind. Before seeing what they do once they have discovered what is in the public's mind, let's first see whether what they read is correct or not. Is there any systematic bias or proneness to misread the public?

The chapter by Kull and Ramsay shows persuasively that in the American case – the country with the most extensive and systematic use of polling in politics – decision makers do take public opinion into account. The problem is, however, that they misread it. Kull and Ramsay argue, first, that the image of the public as 'fickle' is indeed widespread in the

American policy community (the media think the same and both media and politicians tend to discount dissonant information). The general view is that public opinion is as it is because it is isolationist and does not see a link between national interests and use of force. Second, they argue that this image has had a significant impact on US foreign policy. Third, that this image of the public is largely a myth and is not sustained by available evidence. Using data on the use of force and fatalities, they show how far elites are from a clear grasp of mass public opinion. Contrary to widespread expectation of quick and elastic negative reactions to casualties, in fact, polls show little evidence that the majority of Americans are prone to respond to fatalities by wanting to withdraw US troops. If anything, the public is more likely to want to respond assertively.

A similar process is at work in other countries as well. In particular, earlier analyses by Sobel (1996), Bellucci and Isernia (1999), and this book's chapters by Everts, van der Meulen and de Konink and Isernia show that, in the Bosnia and Kosovo case, decision makers underestimated the sustainability of public opinion. Politicians' perceptions of the latter 'lack of stomach' seemed to serve as an alibi for non-intervention policies, to a degree of setting a self-fulfilling prophecy. Earlier analyses of Dutch public opinion with regard to Bosnia as well as in general suggest that, as a rule, the public did and does *not* react in some kind of volatile and feeble way towards new military missions. Rather, the public's mandate seems to provide room to the political and military elite for a (pro-)active posture, risks included. This proneness to (mis)perceive public attitudes affects policy and affects it negatively. Decision makers tend to act under the assumption that public reactions in favour of immediate withdrawal would create an imperative to respond accordingly. Even more, the public's response was also seen as shaping policy by appropriately prompting policy makers to refrain from getting involved in military operations that might lead to fatalities, because the public reaction might require the US (or other countries involved) to make a hasty and embarrassing retreat. These results have at least two interesting implications. First, they raise again the issue of what exactly public opinion means for the political elite. Public opinion, like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder. This suggests that public opinion may mean different things to different people. In particular, elites gather information on the distribution of attitudes through different instruments and through looking at different sources: mass media, editorials, parliamentarians, political advisers, their own electoral constituency, grass-roots movements, etc. Moreover, political systems differ in the preferred mix of intelligence-gathering sources (Jacobs 1993). The mix varies according to the nature of the political culture and the political appropriateness of mass surveys to gauge mass opinion (Cohen 1995). This raises the possibility that the misunderstanding of public opinion is due to the systematically higher attention to other sources of opinions in comparison with mass surveys. In parliamentary systems, with strong and well-organised party

lines, party members and parliamentarians are considered a more appropriate source of public opinion than mass surveys (Bellucci and Isernia 1999). Second, this tendency to misunderstand the people as being systematically more fickle and shakier than shown by empirical evidence points to the possible existence and pervasive influence of a 'confirmation bias'. Decision makers tend to be 'realistic' in their foreign policy beliefs. One tenet of political realism in international politics is that public opinion is moody and too extremist (either too pacifist or too bellicose) to rely on. This central tenet of the realist perspective may shape the perception of incoming information, causing decision makers to discount dissonant information or contrary evidence. It is a question for further research to what extent this expectation about the public's nature shapes decision makers' perceptions of poll results and explains the reported misreading of the public on such crucial issues as the use of force abroad.

As to the third question – what do the decision makers do once they intentionally anticipate public opinion – the preceding chapters show a varied set of available strategies. The liberal-idealist interpretation stresses that public opinion does play a role and that governments do (and should) often try to give in and appease public opinion by taking certain actions to comply with public pressures, such as the decisions taken by some European governments (France, the Netherlands) to participate in UNPROFOR. The realist view of international relations generally stresses the limited role of public opinion and emphasises that governments have considerable leeway, perhaps more so in countries like France and Great Britain than in Germany or the United States (Risse-Kappen 1991), and that they use public opinion primarily as a rationalisation, a tool to be used to strengthen one's position. One might argue that when, and as long as, the elite is united, public opinion does not matter and can be discounted, whereas it can become a relevant force when the elite is divided.

La Balme suggests that three types of reactions by policy makers can be distinguished: (1) educating the public in anticipation of negative reactions, such as the efforts made by Presidents Roosevelt in 1940 and Mitterrand in 1990 on the occasion of the conflict with Iraq; (2) taking symbolic measures in reaction to pressures exerted by public opinion in order to appease it and to constrain its impact, for instance by responses such as those offered by France with respect to the war in Bosnia (1994); (3) using public opinion as a resource and as a catalyst, as happened in the case of Rwanda.

Along this line, three variables appear crucial in explaining what the decision makers might do: the salience of the issue for public opinion, the media position and the degree of cohesion among the political elite. La Balme (this book, p. 202) summarises the possible alternatives as follows:

If the public does not have a fixed opinion on a subject, the government can convince it of the judiciousness of its action as long as the media are not actively hostile to it and that the government has a

clear vision. If the public is *a priori* fixed and the media share the same opinion, the government will not be able to reverse the situation without a sustained effort. If the government does not know what it wants, or does not dare say it, it will suffer from the cumulated weight of the public and of the media, one following the other, or vice versa.

In this context, Ireland shows what politicians have to do to count public opinion out of the foreign policy-making process in order not to suffer the cumulated weight of the public, media and events impact. Irish political elites and parties, caught between a changing international context and a consolidated foreign policy tradition (i.e. neutrality) acted as gatekeepers in order to avoid a political debate that they feared might lead the country to disavow its traditional foreign policy. The nature of the issue (such as neutrality) helps to blur political cleavages. Neutrality in Ireland, for instance, is clearly a flexible concept that can be imbued with quite different meanings in different circumstances. Parties exploit this ambiguity. They are willing to debate the issue, but on the other hand frame it as a quasi-constitutional question that only a referendum might reverse, in order to avoid answering the really hard questions. The nature of the political debate, in a 'recoil effect' in reverse (Jacobs 1993), affects the quality of the information provided to the people and, in so doing, keeps low the level of interest and awareness on the same issue. If political parties do not take a clear stand on neutrality, how can the public be expected to know what's what? If rationality is understood as opinion based on the best information available, Irish public opinion is rational in so far as it reflects the political handling of neutrality. The absence of a critical, public debate on neutrality is not a constructive context for stable, consistent, rational and knowledge-based public opinion. The main blame must be laid at the doors of the political parties. This shows how manipulation might be a very subtle operation.

(3) The 'casualty hypothesis'

A third issue addressed in our book concerns the collation of considerable evidence which established that the so-called 'body-bag syndrome' or 'casualty hypothesis', predicting a rapid decrease of the public support for the use of military force in the eventuality or fear of casualties, is, at the very least, a strong simplification. It serves better to establish alibis for fearful politicians than to offer scientific insight. In explaining variations of support a variety of factors, including the reason for which force is used and expectations of the success of the mission, should be brought into the equation. This finding has important theoretical, normative and policy considerations. Looking only at the first, the evidence presented in the relevant chapters in this book shows that we should move from the broad

brush strokes of the general casualty hypothesis to 'increasingly complete accounts of the conditions that limit known findings', and to 'condition seeking' approaches, aimed at 'reducing the generalisability of an existing finding' (Greenwald *et al.* 1986: 223). One puzzle to start with is the notable difference here between aggregate and individual level data. Aggregate data show, at least in the cases of Korea and Vietnam, that support is related to casualties. At the individual level no such clear-cut relationship emerges. Mueller (1973: 63) notes that 'There was no clear tendency for high (or low) estimators to support or oppose the wars.' Larson (1996) is more subtle, but he concurs. Why is this so?

In part, it has to do with the distinction between actual and hypothetical situations. There are considerable problems of question wording related to the casualties that should be taken into account. In their chapter, van der Meulen and de Konink wonder whether the kind of hypothetical 'body-count' often used in questions really makes sense. They point to two problems of such questions. On the one hand, respondents have to choose absolute numbers of casualties, while their relative meaning is unknown. Depending on manpower strength, ten casualties could mean that 1 per cent of all troops would be killed, but it could also mean 5 or 10 per cent. On the other hand, asking about acceptable numbers of casualties can 'deter' people. Nobody *wants* any dead soldiers. Even though this is a problematic question, we don't want to push it aside and overlook its results. It does underscore the fact of sensitivity towards casualties.

With respect to the nature of the relationship between support for missions and acceptance of casualties, we should first of all remember the 'dictum' 'correlation is not explanation'. A correlation between tolerance for casualties and general mission support does not necessarily imply that less acceptance for casualties *causes* a decline in support. In a way, this is a debate about what comes first. Several chapters in this book and elsewhere (e.g. Larson 1996) argue that the reverse is more plausible: when support for mission declines, tolerance for casualties declines as well. The crucial question then is what determines support for the mission and what impact this in turn has on people's tolerance of casualties. Of course, one can imagine that, when there are large numbers of casualties, the effectiveness of the mission will become more unlikely in people's perception. This means there is an interaction between all these factors. Which factor will be decisive for another will vary from one mission to the other. Van der Meulen and de Konink at the individual level, and Kull and Ramsay as well as Isernia using aggregate data, claim that the strongest influence turns out to be that of the perceived chance of success. It is not too far-fetched to expect that the *success* of a mission affects both variables: tolerance for casualties and mission support. To be more precise: the implication is that at the *individual level* perceived mission success will affect support for mission participation and tolerance of possible casualties. This sounds quite logical: public support will be lower to the degree that mission accomplish-

ment seems more difficult in advance. In line with that, the acceptance of casualties will decline when the prospects for success are perceived as dim. The crucial question, which will determine the public's response, is not whether e.g. US vital interests are involved, but whether the operation is perceived as likely to succeed. Kull and Ramsay observed this pattern at work when the public reacted to actual US fatalities in Somalia, in the Gulf War, and in Saudi Arabia; when the public responded to (mis)perceived fatalities in Bosnia; and when the public responded to hypothetical scenarios for fatalities in Bosnia, Rwanda, Haiti, and Kosovo. Support for continuing an operation is likely to be sustained, provided that the public has support for the operation in the first place and believes that it is likely to succeed. If these conditions are not met, then it is possible that fatalities will contribute to a decline in support for the operation and even a desire to withdraw. However, even when confidence in a mission is low, this will not necessarily lead to a desire to withdraw. It is probable that fatalities will heighten public awareness of an operation and will lead to greater scrutiny and thus increase the likelihood that Americans will develop reservations. But it will not necessarily lead to a lowering of support even at high levels of casualties.

However, individual level considerations are not enough to disentangle the conditions affecting tolerance for casualties. Generally speaking, we think one should beware of extrapolating back and forth similar public opinion patterns, without taking into consideration the context of very different conflicts, societies and military organisations. Put otherwise, if the chapters add to the evidence that there is a zero-plus tolerance for casualties among Western publics, we are really talking in the context of present-day military missions, i.e. peacekeeping and peace-enforcing. Likewise, we are talking about military establishments that have become, in the classical words of Morris Janowitz, 'constabulary forces': continuously prepared to act, committed to the minimum use of violence and seeking viable international relations rather than victory.

Some concluding observations

The substantive chapters in this book show, again, that it is relatively easier to make progress in the realm of the description and explanation of popular political attitudes compared to establishing causal or even correlational links between attitudes (and attitude changes) and the outcomes of the policy-making process. In view of the conceptual and methodological issues involved this should come as no surprise. Yet, we have also shown that progress in this area is possible. We have also shown the usefulness – it is indeed indispensable – of moving beyond the confines and limitations of time and place and into the area of comparative studies. Too much earlier research has been constrained by the specific situation in the United States and the conditions of the Cold War era. It is evident that the many

questions raised at the beginning of this book could not be solved within the limitations of one volume of studies, but it seems equally evident that the lines of research suggested above are sufficiently promising to expect that further research along these lines may indeed be fruitful. Increased insight into the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy is also necessary if one continues to believe, as we should, that while public opinion is not an alibi for whatever action or inaction chosen by governments, the same governments can, in the end, ignore or neglect the question of public support for their policies only at their own peril.

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