

GIVING THE PUBLIC A CLEARER VOICE IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

by Steven Kull and J. Michael Dennis

In the wake of 9/11, a landmark program delivers reliable guidance for policymakers

The events of September 11th have set in motion a critical reevaluation of U.S. foreign policy. However, it is clear that policymakers frequently misread the public's attitudes about America's role in the world. Given that Americans elect their president and their representatives in Congress, it is easy to assume that these representatives have a good understanding of how Americans feel about the important issues of the day. This is not necessarily the case. Sometimes this lack of information leads policymakers to refrain from supporting what they believe would be optimal policies, and leaves the public without a direct link to U.S. foreign affairs.

A major study, conducted in 1996–1997 by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland, found that policymakers had numerous misperceptions of the public. In particular, there was a widespread misperception that the public had turned isolationist in the wake of the Cold War. This and other discoveries,

coupled with the events of 9/11, prompted a new effort aimed at linking citizens with policymakers' actions. A key moment had arrived to include the public in the process of this reevaluation. Working with Knowledge Networks, PIPA initiated a "Foreign Policy and the Public" project. The aim of the FPP is to improve understanding within the policymaking community of the American public's attitudes toward the U.S. role in the post-September 11th world.

With funding from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Ford Foundation, FPP took an inclusive approach by going beyond the normal process of opinion capture by media or academic pollsters. In stark contrast, a working group was established that would bring policymakers fully into the initiative, and create a vested interest for them to use the public opinion research for informing policy decisions. The policy practitioners would *participate* in the process of asking questions of the public.



The core of the project has been a series of monthly seminars with a select group of congressional staffers, executive branch officials, and journalists, which has led to a series of polls of the American public on critical foreign policy issues. Each poll addresses a general area of U.S. foreign policy, as well as current foreign policy issues in the news. At each meeting, the group is briefed on topical polling data, then asked what kinds of questions they would like to see asked in subsequent research. The findings have been made available to more than 6,000 policymakers, journalists, and other opinion leaders within days of collecting the data each month.

Most centrally, the aim of the project has been fulfilled by giving members of the policymaking community the means to understand and effectively create a dialogue with the American public.

It is important to note that while policy practitioners are interested in knowing the

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public's initial response to issues, they also want to know how the public responds to various arguments or to key items of information—in other words, to see how they respond after having a chance to hear some of the arguments that policymakers hear in the process of coming to policy

decisions. This process requires respondents to be exposed to new stimuli and to have a chance to take the time to deliberate. The Knowledge Networks methodology that was applied gives respondents the opportunity to read—and reread—the arguments presented and to come to more thoughtful conclusions about matters that may be somewhat complex. Here are results from the research that have been shared with policymakers:

AMERICA'S INVOLVEMENT IN IRAQ AND THE ROLE OF THE U.N.

Naturally, over the last year and half a major focus of the American public and policymakers has been the Iraq war. Our research sought not only to determine basic attitudes early on about the war, but also to find out more about the perceptions and beliefs that contribute to those attitudes. Going into the war, the public supported the goal of removing Saddam Hussein, but also wanted the U.S. to get U.N. approval. Nonetheless, when asked whether they would support the President if he chose to go ahead without U.N. approval, a majority said they would—and, indeed, they did.

Immediately after the war the public favored putting the rebuilding effort under the U.N.; as the operation has become more fraught with difficulties, this sentiment has only grown stronger. When initially presented, this finding was confusing to some members

of the policy community. Many assumed that, because the U.N. Security Council did not back the war against Iraq, the public was turning against the U.N. PIPA/Knowledge Networks was able to bring clarity by asking an extensive set of questions, showing that, while the public was dissatisfied with the levels of cooperation achieved at the U.N., the desire for such cooperation was actually very high. The public by no means accepted the argument that the U.N. had become irrelevant; if anything, citizens wanted the U.N. to play a larger role. Policymakers had new information to incorporate into their decision making.

Current research indicates that, as the difficulties in Iraq have grown, the public has come to question whether the benefits of the war are worth the costs. The war is no longer a plus for the President's electoral prospects; if a majority comes to believe—which it does not now—that Iraq was not providing support for al Qaeda and did not have at least a major WMD program, signs are that the war could become a negative for the President going into the election. However, it is still only a small minority that favors withdrawing U.S. troops.

AMERICANS ON THE PROLIFERATION OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Most broadly, Americans show a strong and growing preference for a multilateral approach to U.S. security interests. Asked whether they agree with the statement “Since the U.S. is the most powerful nation in the world, we should go our own way in international matters, not worrying too much

about whether other countries agree with us or not,” eight in ten said they disagreed. This is the highest number that has ever disagreed with this question, going back to 1964.

Despite recent progress in Pakistan, Libya, and Iran in stemming the spread of weapons of mass destruction, most Americans continue to be highly concerned about WMD proliferation. The median American estimates that there are still approximately ten countries with secret programs for developing weapons of mass destruction. To address the problem, the majority of Americans favors enhanced arms control efforts rather than a reliance on the threat of military force.

Perhaps most striking is that the goal of promoting arms control can take precedence over the goal of capturing Osama Bin Laden. Two-thirds favored putting more pressure on Pakistan to allow international arms control inspectors, even when presented the argument that this might result in Pakistan not cooperating in the hunt for al Qaeda.

NORTH KOREA AND THE IRAQ WAR

Americans have been quite concerned about the North Korean nuclear program, fearing that the U.S. war against Iraq has increased North Korea's motivations to acquire nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, they oppose seeking to overthrow the Korean government with military force and think the U.S. should pursue an approach based on diplomacy, not threats of military force. Contrary to the position of the current administration, most citizens favor establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea and would

support a deal by which the U.S. makes a formal declaration that it will not attack North Korea if it gives up its nuclear weapons program. Most favor continuing food aid to North Korea, although they have concerns about whether the food is getting to the people who need it.

THE WAR ON TERRORISM AND PUBLIC OPINION

While the public expresses confidence in President Bush as a leader in handling the threat of terrorism, the majority also expresses strong reservations about his strategy. A majority sees the Bush administration as overemphasizing assertive and military approaches and that reactions to U.S. foreign policy in the Islamic world are creating conditions that make it easier for terrorist groups to thrive. Despite the various high-profile efforts of the war on terrorism, most Americans say they do not feel safer from the threat of terrorism. An overwhelming majority viewed the more important lesson of September 11th to be that the U.S. needs to work more closely with other countries to fight terrorism. Support for efforts to secure U.S. borders is especially high.

AFRICA AS A VITAL U.S. INTEREST

Despite the fact that America's conflicts with Iraq, North Korea, and al Qaeda have dominated headlines, the American public believes that the U.S. should increase its engagement with Africa in a variety of ways and rejects the argument that the U.S. has no vital interests there. A key area of cooperation is in the war on terrorism,

with a strong majority favoring increased military and police training and exchanging intelligence with African countries. A solid majority supports increased trade with Africa and favors the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which was described as legislation that "eliminated import restrictions on nearly all goods produced in African countries that agreed to embrace market-oriented economic policies and move to open up their markets to U.S. trade and investment."

Public sentiment favors increasing the portion of U.S. foreign aid that goes to Africa. Asked, "How many of your tax dollars would you be willing to have go to economic and humanitarian aid for African countries?" the median response was \$20, when in fact for the median taxpayer about \$3 goes to aid for Africa. However, support for aid to Africa is greatly dampened by the belief that a majority of aid money ends up in the pockets of corrupt African officials. At least half of the U.S. population supports President Bush's proposed Millennium Challenge Account, which would result in increased aid to Africa as well as other regions.



This support approaches nearly 75 percent of the population in response to more detailed information.

GLOBALIZATION AND TRADE: CONDITIONS FOR PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE

Overall, Americans have lukewarm feelings toward globalization and trade. The trend seems to be slightly downward, with much of this downward movement coming from those with higher incomes—possibly in response to the outsourcing of high-end jobs. Americans do not fall into the simple categories of being protectionists or free traders. They support the growth of trade in principle, but attach certain conditions. Above all, they want the U.S. government to make greater efforts to help U.S. workers adapt to the changes that come from trade. The public favors more efforts to uphold labor and environmental standards overseas, because they think it is the right thing to do and because they do not want American workers to be undercut by lower standards abroad. If these conditions are met, an overwhelming majority of Americans say they would support the growth of trade.

A CLEARER CHOICE FOR THE PUBLIC

Via the Foreign Policy and the Public project, U.S. citizens have gained a clearer voice on key issues and a more direct link to the policymaking process. This is true on the

congressional floor and within the fourth estate, which influences decision making. Insights from the FPP program have been cited in Senate floor speeches, used in United Nations briefings, and referenced in the press more than 500 times. The collaborative approach employed by PIPA and Knowledge Networks represents an innovative solution to delivering the insights elected officials need to inform their decision making, filling a void in the feedback process, and improving

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the likelihood that policies will be accepted by the public.

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