The Sources of Public Opinion for American Foreign Policy Officials

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Public opinion is increasingly being considered an important factor in foreign policy decisions. This article thus examines what sources of information foreign policy officials actually use to represent public opinion. A linkage model is hypothesized with communications between government and the public following five paths: elites, interest groups, the news media, elected officials, and the mass, or general, public. The data show that the elite and interest group paths are least used, paths based on the news media and elected officials are most used, with mass opinion sources of moderate importance. Further data show that the use of any one path depends to some extent upon the types of issues with which officials deal, and the institutional position and ideology of individual officials. Foreign policy officials are often skeptical about public opinion polls; however, in using their own alternative "operational" sources, such officials may be more receptive to public input than previously thought. The results of this study are compared with Bernard Cohen's The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy (1973). This comparison finds a significantly diminished use of elite sources to represent public opinion, most likely a result of officials' sense of the "lessons" of Vietnam.

The literature on American foreign policy has recently seen a growing number of articles and books discussing the importance of public opinion. (For an overview see Holsti, 1992.) Whereas public opinion on foreign relations was once seen as largely ignorant, characterized more by "moods" than by well-reasoned opinions (e.g., Almond, 1960), many scholars have now come to view public opinion as both rational (Graham, 1989; Russett, 1990; Page and Shapiro, 1992) and stable (Caspari, 1970; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Pfeffley and Hurwitz, 1992), or, in Bruce Jentleson's (1992) words, "pretty prudent." Accompanying this has been new scholarship regarding the impact that public opinion has on American foreign policy. The conventional wisdom was that public opinion did not much matter to those who made policy (Yarmolinsky, 1963; Cohen, 1973); several recent authors have challenged this assessment, suggesting that foreign policy officials are attentive to public opinion and that public opinion matters in their decisions (e.g., Graham, 1989; Powlick, 1991; Hinckley, 1992).

Accepting the new line of argument that public opinion is important (see

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Powlick, 1991), this article seeks to identify and assess the relative importance of different sources of public opinion to foreign policy officials. If public opinion is important, what do officials look to in order to gauge its tone and direction?

**Public Opinion and Paths of Linkage**

In any democratic society, legitimacy requires popular consent, suggesting that a significant degree of harmony between public opinion and government policy—or at the very least, public acquiescence in policy—is desirable. It has been shown empirically that on most American foreign policy issues such harmony usually exists (e.g., Monroe, 1979; Page and Shapiro, 1983). Yet our understanding of the process by which such agreement is achieved—that is, how government and public opinion are “linked”—remains murky. As a move toward better understanding, this study examines the sources of information that foreign policy officials identify as representative of American public opinion; that is, how do officials “operationalize” public opinion?

In most studies of how government interacts with public opinion, the phrase “public opinion” is used as a term without specific definition. V. O. Key, for example, defined public opinion as “those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed” (Key, 1964:14). Conceptually, such a definition is fine, but operationally, it leaves much to be desired. Which private citizens? On which issues? For which governments or segments of government? Answers to these questions are clearly necessary if we are to better understand how foreign policy is linked to public opinion. In surveying the literature on linkage in foreign policy several possible paths of opinion transmission can be identified and placed within a hypothetical model of foreign policy linkage.

**Elites**

Many scholars have hypothesized a major role for elites in the influence of foreign policy. Gabriel Almond (1960), for instance, saw public influence coming primarily from nongovernmental elites, with a subsidiary role for what he called “the attentive public.” Bernard Cohen (1973) saw a major opinion linkage role for two distinct groups which he called “intimates” (friends and associates of officials) and “experts.” Elites are often thought to represent an articulate and knowledgeable group who often act as both influencers of and receptors for mass opinion on foreign policy. Through their ongoing interactions with policy makers, and through the channels of elite dialogue (e.g., editorials, foreign policy journals), they may serve to mediate or represent public opinion within the foreign policy process.

**Interest Groups**

The classic interest group (or pluralist) model of politics sees public opinion transmitted to government through the self-interested actions of diverse and competitive groups or factions. The activities of such groups in the foreign policy realm have been studied in a limited number of areas. Business groups were studied by Bauer, Dexter, and Pool (1972), ethnic groups by Bard (1988), and single-issue groups by Moffett (1985) and by Kusnitz (1974). No clear consensus has emerged from this literature on the overall degree of interest group influence; group influence is often seen to be either group- or case-specific. In the context of this article, however, it should be kept in mind that gauging the overall influence of
such groups on foreign policy is not necessarily our goal. Rather, we wish to examine the extent to which officials, accepting the pluralist model itself, consider such groups to be representative of public opinion.

The News Media

The news media are, by definition, primarily transmitters of information. In his study of public opinion and foreign policy, however, Bernard Cohen (1973) found that foreign policy officials considered the media to be a source of public opinion. Cohen wrote that this linkage operates in two ways: (1) Reporters may be well-informed members of the public with views worthy of attention, and (2) the news stories they report transmit the opinions of others in the political system and the nation at large. The media’s “priming” and “framing” roles (see Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar and Simon, 1994) are of importance here as well. Media coverage might raise public attentiveness to previously obscure issues, or frame the terms by which the public will evaluate specific policies.

Elected Representatives

In Rousseau’s classic conception of representation, elected officials are to act as delegates, directly voicing the views of those who elected them and using little, if any, of their own judgment (Rousseau, 1960; see also Pitkin, 1969). Such delegate behavior (in theory, at least) represents a fairly “pure” form of linkage. On foreign policy questions we usually look to Congress for examples of such delegate behavior. To the extent that members of Congress do act as delegates, the foreign policy opinions they espouse should be equivalent to public opinion itself. While such an approach may seem naive, both Cohen (1973) and Powlick (1991) have already found that some foreign policy officials do, in fact, consider Congress to represent public opinion in this way.

The General, or Mass, Public

The general, or mass, public seems to be the most common meaning of the term “public opinion.” Yet, when we discuss linkage with foreign policy, it is difficult to find many well-defined avenues of opinion that run more or less directly from this public to policy officials. Demonstrations in Lafayette Park or at the State Department’s C Street entrance of course qualify here. So, too, does the contact that government officials have with ordinary people (especially when traveling). Letters and phone calls also fall within this category, though some might object that such contact is usually initiated by “attentive” as opposed to “mass” publics. In his study of the State Department, Cohen (1973) combined all of these sources into a category he (somewhat derogatorily) called “faceless or impersonal sources.” Cohen also included in this category public opinion polls. Polls are not, of course,

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1 Indeed, one of the best studies of interest group activity in foreign policy (Bauer et al., 1972) found that interest groups have surprisingly little impact upon policy.

2 Cohen also wrote (The Press and Foreign Policy, 1965) that reporters themselves saw the press as the representative of public opinion to foreign policy officials: “Some reporters observe that, so far as the President and many others in government are concerned, what they hear from newspapermen, or what they read in the newspapers, constitutes the most important element in their universe of public opinion as it bears on foreign policy” (1965:32).

3 Indeed, there is some evidence that some legislators are so in touch and in tune with their districts that such delegate behavior is likely to occur without conscious effort to behave as either delegate or trustee (see Fenno, 1978; also Hill, 1993).
direct avenues of opinion; nevertheless, in the academic community they are widely considered to represent mass public attitudes. Indeed, the vast majority of studies on public opinion/foreign policy linkage rely heavily on poll data to describe public attitudes (see, e.g., Page and Shapiro, 1983; Jentleson, 1992).

Polls are perhaps the most controversial source of public opinion in the foreign policy process. Whereas most presidents deny that they respond to polls (see, e.g., Reagan, 1983), and many of their current and former subordinates criticize the use of poll data (Yarmolinsky, 1963; Destler, Gelb, and Lake, 1984), others, such as Altschuler (1990), Hinckley (1992), and Jacobs and Shapiro (1992b) nevertheless tell us that presidents do make frequent use of public opinion polls in considering foreign policy issues. This article certainly cannot resolve the controversy surrounding presidents and polls, but it can examine the extent to which poll data are perceived to represent public opinion by lower-ranking foreign policy officials.

**Toward a Foreign Policy/Public Opinion Linkage Model**

With these five major sources, or paths, of linkage, we can construct a hypothetical model of foreign policy linkage (see Figure 1). The model assumes that all five of the opinion sources listed transmit views to policy officials, who in turn are affected by them. This model also represents the acknowledgment that each of the factors within the model, both governmental and “public,” affect one another. Thus, each opinion source is connected to every other source and to government officials by two-way arrows (i.e., communication operates in both directions). To illustrate the processes at work, consider the following (not entirely hypothetical) example:

The president grants most favored nation status to China. This causes outraged cries from members of Congress, whose speeches are replayed on the TV news. More such speeches from Congress are heard, as members receive calls and letters from outraged human rights activists in their districts. At the same time, business groups breathe a sigh of relief and release favorable public statements. A poll is taken and the public is ambivalent (indeed, many have not heard much about the issue). Responding to what they have seen on the news, a few people write letters to the White House, alternately praising the president’s courage and chastising his cowardice. Policy officials and the president together decide that the basic policy may be sustained, but that some way of standing up to China should be attempted, resulting in a ban on the import of Chinese weapons.

Both the figure and the example above illustrate the same key points:

1. Public opinion is multifaceted. It is not just polls, and not just a vague “public mood.”
2. The process of linkage involves multiple influences. No one public “voice” operates wholly independently of any other.
3. The process is highly iterative. Government both affects and is affected by many different voices over time.

The purpose of this article is not to “prove” such a model. Rather, it is to focus our attention on a limited number of its paths. This article thus examines linkage paths from “public” sources to governmental actors (the heavier arrows in Figure 1) and examines which “voices” are most frequently “heard” in the foreign
policy process. As a prerequisite of the question of influence, we need to know which sources of public opinion are heard most often by foreign policy officials. Which type or types of opinion receive the most attention has implications for the nature of public influence on foreign policy. If, as some scholars now attest, foreign policy officials are attentive to public opinion, are they responding to a narrow segment of opinion? Are they responding to polls? Officials responding to what they consider public opinion might not be responding to what others—such as social scientists, opinion analysts, and policy critics—consider to be “true” public opinion.

Methodology and Sample

The data in this article are based upon a series of 70 interviews carried out by the author throughout 1988 and continuing into January 1989. (See Powlick, 1990.) Those interviewed included both National Security Council staff members and State Department officials, with subjects at State ranging in rank from desk officers to assistant secretaries. The mix of officials represents a broad cross-section of all officials at State and NSC. There is a much larger number of State than NSC officials in the sample (as is the case in reality), and there is a skew toward the lower ranks. (More information on the makeup of the sample may be found in the Appendices.) This broad cross-section should not, therefore, be thought to represent solely foreign policy decision makers (although some are included within the sample), a term usually reserved for the highest officials. Rather, it represents the
broader foreign policy bureaucracy of the State Department and NSC staff. This skew toward the lower ranks also allows for greater comparability across presidential administrations (as will be discussed in more detail below).

Respondents were asked to discuss what represented—or operationalized—public opinion for them in the context of their foreign policy roles. Utilizing both open-ended personal interviews and closed-ended questionnaires, the data upon which this article is based incorporate both the methodology of survey techniques (in order to perform statistical analysis and to present concrete data to the reader) and the richness and depth of open-ended interviews. (Further details on sample and interview methodology may be found in Appendix 1.)

Operationalizing Public Opinion Sources

When asked to explain how they defined public opinion in operational terms, most of the officials interviewed cited a short list of opinion sources (see Table 1). Up to three responses were coded for each interview. Most of the specific responses can be coded as falling within one of the avenues of linkage examined above. (These categories appear on the right side of Table 1.) One category of responses, labeled “Conceptual Non-Operationalization,” comprises responses that were either overly broad and vague or strictly conceptual. (Examples of such responses were that public opinion was, for instance, “what the average American thinks,” “articulate opinion,” or “informed opinion.”) These responses are treated as missing data. For some officials these responses were part of a process of “thinking out loud” before moving on to more specific, operational responses. A few officials, however, never moved beyond such vague answers. Thus, a small number of respondents (3 of 70) are excluded from further analysis.

Table 1. Frequency of Mentions of Operational Sources of Public Opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Responses</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Linkage Path Categories</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Delegates</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National elections</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>News media</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected officials (general)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>News media</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media/news stories</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>News media</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public opinion polls</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Unmediated opinion</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters &amp; phone calls</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Unmediated opinion</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker feedback</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Unmediated opinion</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest groups</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Interest groups</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News editorials</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Conceptual non-operation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends/acquaintances</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Conceptual non-operation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics/experts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Conceptual non-operation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elites (broadly stated)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Conceptual non-operation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass public (broadly stated)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Conceptual non-operation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Expressed opinion”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Conceptual non-operation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 67

*Responses in this category are considered to be missing data and are excluded from further analyses.

Note: Specific responses are grouped according to their correspondence with the linkage path categories on the right side of the table. Each respondent was coded for up to three responses. Percentages represent the percentage of 67 officials who mentioned at least one specific source. Thus, total number of responses exceeds n and total percentages exceed 100%.
Elite Opinion Sources

A small number of officials (only 8 of the remaining 67, or 12%) cited operational sources of public opinion comprising elites. These included newspaper editorials, discussions with friends or family, and the opinions of experts in particular fields of foreign policy (including articles in journals such as Foreign Affairs or Foreign Policy). Several comments are warranted by these results.

First, it should be noted that officials distinguished between editorial opinions (classified here as an elite source) and news media reports. For them, editorials represented a direct expression of knowledgeable opinion, whereas news coverage conveyed the mood of a broader public. It is notable that, whether classified as an elite or media source, only 4 of 67 officials (6%) cited editorials as representing public opinion. Moreover, when other respondents were asked if editorials were a source of public opinion, they explicitly discounted them, usually describing editorials as solely the views of editors and publishers. As such, the large majority of officials did not consider editorial opinion to be very important.

It should also be noted that these findings differ significantly from those reported by Bernard Cohen (1973). Cohen stated, for instance, that “nearly one-third” of officials cited family and/or friends as public opinion sources (Cohen, 1973:80), and that 55 percent of his respondents cited academic experts as among their sources of public opinion (1973:88). He also attributed a great deal of importance to “notables—private men of public standing with prior experience in foreign affairs” as public opinion sources within the State Department (1973:84). It would appear as if there has been a change over time in the degree to which foreign policy officials consider elite opinion to be equivalent to public opinion.4 (This issue is explored further near the end of this article.)

The findings on elite sources carry some theoretical implications as well. It is notable how few officials in this study cited elite opinion in any form as representative of public opinion, calling into question models of foreign policy linkage that emphasize elites generally (such as Almond, 1960), or “intimates” and “specialists” (Cohen, 1975). Thomas Graham, for instance, feels that “perceptions among the opinion and policy [elite] are extremely important because most of the time government leaders mistake attitudes held by these politically active people . . . as public opinion” (1989:302). These data may also cast doubt upon linkage models that depend on an “attentive public” (Almond, 1960; Devine, 1970). Whereas poll data tell us an “attentive” public exists, this study has found little evidence that foreign policy officials are concerned about it, or that they are able to assess, measure, or distinguish it from other forms of opinion.

Interest Groups

As seen in Table 1, 19 of 67 (27%) foreign policy officials cited interest groups as an operational source of public opinion. Many of these officials viewed other forms of opinion as too general or too vague to provide policy guidance. Indeed, on many of the specific issues with which officials deal, it is difficult to assess mass public opinion at all. How, for example, can an official formulating policy toward the civil war in Zaire find public opinion data on his or her issue? Thus, officials who work in highly specialized or obscure areas often see public opinion as the opinions of narrow segments of the public, motivated by unusual interest, and organized into groups.

4 It should be recalled that Cohen’s interviews were conducted in 1965–1966, over 20 years before the present study.
Operationalizing public opinion in terms of interest groups makes possible the consideration of public attitudes on very narrow issues. While the vast majority of officials (92% of those in the sample) indicated a desire to keep informed about the views of interest groups relevant to their issue areas, for most, these groups represented narrow interests rather than the broader interests and concerns of the American body-politic. Yet, on many issues, interest groups are the only “public” officials see, leading some to equate such groups with “public opinion.” The following statement by a State Department desk officer is a good example of this kind of operationalization:

The public opinion which is going to take a position on which variant of the Maverick missile should go to Kuwait, or which enhancement of the F-15 should be allowed for Saudi Arabia, is going to be highly informed and politicized, but narrowly based. It’s going to be AIPAC or a few folks at McDonnell-Douglas. It’s not going to be the man in the street.

Twenty-nine percent of the officials in this study thus expressed operationalizations of public opinion that include interest groups, often while simultaneously expressing misgivings about them. The following African Affairs official is one example:

Part of the problem is that there are a lot of individual pressure groups speaking for the American public, many of whom represent only themselves; their views are not widely shared by the American public, and you end up with one of these agonizing questions . . . Do the silent support the five percent who are speaking out? Does the silent majority support the status quo, or does the very fact that it does not stand up for the status quo in effect give its support to the five percent? One has to take into account public opinion, but it can be very difficult to measure public opinion.

As a result of such misgivings, officials often feel as if they have to strike a balance between the views of interest groups and the broader “public interest.”

These results provide some support to the pluralist view of opinion linkage in the foreign policy process. Interest groups are listened to, and are further considered to be (at least partially) representative of public opinion by 29 percent of those interviewed. However, the fact that other officials express misgivings about the self-interested nature of interest groups’ opinions leaves us with an ambiguous result regarding the role of such groups in the opinion/policy linkage process.

The News Media

For nearly a majority of officials (32 of 67, or 48%) the news media were thought to represent public opinion. Public attitudes were often thought to be reflected in the tone and intensity of news coverage. The media were also seen by some as informed members of the public because reporters both know the issues and have an “outside” perspective on them. While many officials saw mass opinion as being either ill-informed or unable to voice a clear message on specific issues, to many, the press represented both an informed and articulate segment of public opinion. The following statement from a desk officer for a small Asian country is an example:

In some ways, unless you’re talking about a very big issue, there is no such thing as “public opinion.” Public opinion for me is journalists I know and respect, or certain newspapers. So public opinion in the mass doesn’t mean that much. It’s got to be broken down into something that’s much more specific.

Many officials who cited the news media as representing public opinion also expressed skepticism about public opinion polls. One official stated that the media
are “what public opinion means to me. It’s not an Iowa corn farmer’s response to a poll. It’s the Washington Post or other news media.” Another official cited skepticism about polling methods as his reason for emphasizing media coverage as an operationalization of public opinion. “In many cases [public opinion is] what I see in the newspaper or what I see on TV. In general, I’m a little skeptical of public opinion surveys that I don’t read in depth and don’t understand what kind of sample has been taken.” Thus, assessing the “flavor” of media coverage has become, for many, a means of assessing public opinion.

These results substantially reinforce those found previously by Cohen (1973) on the importance of the media as a source of opinion linkage in the policy process. Though this finding is not new, it is not one that seems to have been widely digested. Although the literature on how the media influence both the government and the public through their agenda-setting functions is widely known (e.g., Cohen, 1963; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; however, see Geyelin, 1990), rarely are the media considered to be a means of transmitting public opinion to government. Indeed, it is probably fair to assume that the large majority of the American public would insist that the news media do not represent their views. Yet, for those within the foreign policy bureaucracy, the media play a key role as a form of public opinion. In large part this is because officials recognize their isolation from the American public. Their contact with those outside of “The Building,” let alone their contact with those outside the Beltway, is quite limited. They know that issues that may seem obvious or noncontroversial to policy elites often elicit different reactions among the public at large. Because they consider it a political necessity to be aware of public attitudes (Powlick, 1991), they search for ways to gauge opinion outside of their narrow circle. The media provide an avenue for this.

Elected Representatives

A substantial number of those interviewed (31 of 67 officials, or 46%) defined public opinion (at least in part) as the positions of elected officials and the outcomes of national elections. Office holders’ views were seen not solely as their own, but were thought to reflect public attitudes as well. This was thought to be the case even when the views of constituents on specific issues were not known.

A few officials identified the president as among those fulfilling this delegate role, but a much larger number of officials specifically cited Congress as a source of public opinion. Unlike the broader public which elected them, members of Congress can be contacted by policy officials and their views solicited. They are also likely to be aware of and knowledgeable about many of the questions that foreign policy officials raise.

I don’t think as policy makers we have to sit down and say, “Well how will public opinion react to this.” It’s much more specific. What will Congress think of this, or this particular congressman, or this particular news organization. But as to what American public opinion thinks as a whole? No, you just can’t . . .

Similarly, some officials expressed the need to operationalize public opinion via the Congress due to the relative clarity of views articulated.

Congress is also seen by many foreign policy officials as a more relevant form of public opinion than mass attitudes—or at least mass attitudes as reported in polls. Rarely is mass opinion thought to have a direct impact upon the lower- and middle-ranking officials who make up the majority of subjects in this study. Public

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5 Though not a foreign policy issue, consider, for example, the initially elite and then public reactions to the Zoe Baird nomination for Attorney General.
opinion becomes operationally relevant to them when it is manifested in actions with direct effect, such as the oversight, budgeting, and legislative activities of the Congress. The operational constraints imposed by Congress are often seen as surrogates for public opinion on issues where the public is likely neither to know nor have opinions about policy alternatives. As one official stated, “Public opinion primarily is the collective views of verbal influence in America at large, and it boils down to—in addition to editors and journalists—congressmen who decide an issue is important to them.”

It may be suggested that officials here are operationalizing public opinion via the Congress primarily because of the power Congress wields over them; that is, because Congress both controls their budgets and exercises oversight, it becomes the most salient form of “outside”—therefore “public”—opinion available to them. This idea is only partially borne out in the data. For example, all respondents were asked how important public opinion was as a factor in their own policy decisions or recommendations. As seen in Table 2, there is virtually no difference in responses to this question between those who considered Congress to be a source of public opinion and those who did not. In other words, for officials who equate public opinion with Congress, this opinion is just as important or unimportant to them as it is for officials who use other opinion sources. Moreover, the results of a written questionnaire item illustrate that the vast majority of officials—both those who do and those who do not think that Congress represents public opinion—think of Congress as important for reasons beyond the budget and oversight roles. A mere five (8%) subjects agreed with the following statement:

In the U.S. government, it is often necessary for foreign policy officials to be aware of Congressional opinions and desires because of the Congress’ oversight and budgeting roles. Beyond this, however, foreign policy officials should not be greatly concerned with the Congress on foreign policy issues.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that these results reflect a noninstrumental set of justifications for being aware of congressional opinion. On the contrary, among those who think public opinion is an important factor and also

### Table 2. Importance of Public Opinion as a Decision Factor, by Use of Congress to Operationalize Public Opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Public Opinion</th>
<th>Does Official Operationalize Public Opinion via Congress?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never/rarely important</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly/occasionally important</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat/often important</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very/nearly always important</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(\text{Tau-b = .039; p = .704}\)

Note: Percentages are column percentages. Data are derived from open-ended interview questions which asked the following: “How about public opinion in particular? Is public opinion important to you in formulating policy decisions/recommendations?”

6Cohen’s discussion of the subject is more extensive than that presented here, but his report on the thinking of officials on the topic of Congress as public opinion is very much in line with what respondents to this study stated—pages 113–117 of The Public’s Impact on Foreign Policy is worth an examination by the interested reader.
is represented by the Congress (22 officials), there is a consensus on the need for supportive public opinion in order to sustain policy (see also Powlick, 1991). The idea that congressional support is important to sustain policy has been shown to be a major aspect of the post-Vietnam conventional wisdom among foreign policy elites (Holsti and Rosenau, 1984). When both public and congressional support are seen as necessary elements to successful policy implementation by officials who consider congressional and public opinion to be roughly equivalent, there is, no doubt, a reinforcement of the need to consider Congress while making policy recommendations.

The finding that foreign policy officials often equate Congress with public opinion is not new. Melvin Small (1988) has written that White House staffers often interpret Congress’s opinions as surrogates for public opinion, while Cohen (1973) reported that 71 percent of his State Department subjects equated Congress with public opinion. Most political scientists, though, draw a clear distinction between congressional and public opinions, both in general and in the study of foreign policy making. James Rosenau (1961, 1980), for instance, in several conceptual discussions, has categorized Congress as part of the governmental process, separate from public opinion. Bruce Russett (1990) proposes a model of foreign policy making where the president is surrounded by a triangle of forces, with the international sphere at one corner, the U.S. public at another, and Congress and the Washington bureaucracy sharing the third. This distinction is not without empirical merit, as Miller and Stokes’s (1963) now-classic study of House voting patterns demonstrated. In short, few conceptual models of foreign policy equate public and congressional opinion.

The view of officials within the foreign policy bureaucracy is quite different, however. Whereas the Congress is viewed as a governmental actor that can have a considerable (and concrete) impact upon policy, it is simultaneously viewed by many as a collective proxy for the opinions of its constituents. Legislators have a dual role to both oversee policy and maintain an awareness of public opinion. In effect, legislative behavior manifests much of the constraint that public opinion places upon foreign policy. When the public complains about foreign policy, it is Congress that usually gives both voice and effect to its dissatisfaction. Thus, for many (although not all) foreign policy officials, the conceptual distinction between public opinion and Congress is less important than the operational equivalence of the two. Indeed, from where they sit, this makes a great deal of sense.

**General, or Mass, Public Opinion**

This category includes opinion sources that are more or less direct expressions of public attitudes to policy makers, or direct responses by members of the mass public to public opinion polling. Twenty-six of 67 officials (39%) interviewed cited at least one such avenue of opinion as important to them.

Two unmediated sources of opinion are letters and phone calls directly to the State Department or White House. A few officials (11 of 67, or 16%) saw such direct contact of government as a valid and useful source of public opinion. The following example comes from an NSC staffer: “I define public opinion as any group of Americans who feel strongly enough about an issue to voice their opinion, either by sending their letters to the White House or Congress. . . . Public opinion is expressed rarely, so when it is expressed, we like to take account of it.”

Another direct avenue of opinion (cited by 5 of 67, or 7% of those interviewed) is contact officials have with citizens around the United States, whether on speaking tours or during personal travel. The following (from a State Department office director) emphasizes the importance of opinion gathered during speaking tours.
The best way to get [public opinion] is to get out of this town and to get on an airplane and get out to Iowa or some place like that and do some public speaking, and say, "Look, I can spend an hour telling you what's on my mind, but what are you folks thinking about?" I've done that a few times—tremendously valuable!

This category also includes demonstrations as a direct form of opinion expression. While a small number of Cohen's (1973) subjects (6 of his 50) mentioned demonstrations as a form of public opinion, none of the officials in this study cited them, no doubt owing to the substantial drop-off in such activities since the early 1970s.

In discussing public opinion polls during interviews, more officials specifically indicated they did not think polls were valid or useful avenues of public opinion than thought they were useful for any purpose. A Soviet affairs specialist, for example, expressed his opinion that polls are not worthy of more than casual attention.

They're important and you follow them, but it's just sort of a watching brief for changes; what issues are important. It's something that you watch for trends in a fairly relaxed way, but they don't have any operational currency for us.

Another official stated,

I don't recall dealing on an issue, sitting around a table and saying, "Whoops, we've got a Gallup poll here that's running against us eight to one; let's not do this." It's more intuitive. It's important but I've never seen it swing an issue one way or another. It's a factor, and I see those polls, and frankly I pay some attention to it, but I figure that when we're hearing from the Hill, we're hearing the popular mood.

Even some of those who indicated that polls were useful to them often qualified their statements, such as the following from a deputy assistant secretary:

Polls are sometimes relevant, sometimes not relevant, simply because they're not timely or the questions asked are often sloppy or don't address the actual policy issues facing the administration. And they tend to take attention away from the difficult choices and tend to be black and white kind of questions. They're not real-world kind of grey questions. But by and large, polls do have an impact. They have a very noticeable impact.

In spite of frequently expressed reservations about polls, and even though a majority either did not mention them or discounted their utility, about one-quarter of those interviewed (18 officials) cited them as a source of public opinion. The majority of those citations were made in conjunction with other forms of opinion; sometimes other forms of mass opinion, sometimes not. (For instance, the official quoted directly above also cited Congress and the news media as sources of public opinion.)

These results may provoke skepticism from two opposite directions. For some, the pervasiveness of polls, both in the modern media and within political organizations, would seem to make their importance obvious. Former NSC staffer Ronald Hinckley has written that "public opinion polls have become a vital element in the creation of foreign policy and the analysis of how foreign policy is influenced by public opinion must examine the roles these polls play in the decision-making process" (Hinckley, 1988:23; see also Hinckley, 1992). Many historical studies have attributed an equally large role to public opinion polls in the policy process (see, e.g., Small, 1988; Graham, 1989; Altschuler, 1990). Thus, some may see these results as an understatement of the degree to which poll data are used by foreign policy officials. The notion that even one-quarter of foreign policy officials value poll data may,
however, seem an overestimation to others. Both social scientists and policy officials who adhere to what Ole Holsti (1992) has called the “Almond-Lipmann consensus” would challenge such results. So, too, would those who assume that foreign policy officials behave according to the realist paradigm (see, e.g., Oneal and Liàn, 1992). Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro’s (1992a) research on the Kennedy administration showed heavy reliance upon poll data in domestic policy making, but conscious contradiction of poll results on foreign policy issues such as aid and trade. Cohen (1973) reported virtually universal disdain for polls in the State Department during the 1960s. More recently, at a 1990 conference on public opinion and American policy toward Nicaragua, several Reagan administration officials (including former Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams) indicated that they considered poll results to be guides to neither public opinion nor correct policy, but rhetorical tools, available to both administration officials and their opponents, to be used in justifying policy positions (see Sobel, 1993).7

What the data here indicate is that neither those who think polls are irrelevant, nor those who think they are critical, are wholly correct. Issue salience is one factor that can cause polls to be virtually useless for some officials and indispensable for others (see below). Another factor may be the level of support or opposition manifest in poll data. Thomas Graham (1989) proposes that public support or opposition to policy under the level of 50 percent in polls has no effect on decision makers, whereas public opposition to policy in the 60–69 percent range strongly influences policy makers, and opposition over 70 percent causes actual changes in policy. If Graham is correct, we might expect foreign policy officials’ views on poll data to be associated with issues on which opinions approach these critical thresholds. Whatever the explanation, the results reported here provide a less-than-definitive answer regarding the importance of opinion polls within the foreign policy process. Some officials show confidence in polls, others are openly disdainful, and many are simply ambivalent.

**Caveat: Political Appointees**

All of the results reported above may be challenged in that they represent the views of career bureaucrats and political appointees at the end of the Reagan administration, and should no longer be assumed to be valid. Two points are in order here. One is that career bureaucrats remain within the system when the White House changes hands. Thus, the results reported here, which represent the permanent foreign policy apparatus, remain applicable. Second, the appointees in this study, although interviewed in Ronald Reagan’s last year, for the most part remained in the same or comparable positions with the succession of George Bush into office. However, most of these officials have not carried over into the present administration, and we should not assume that Clinton appointees share the same attitudes or outlook toward public opinion as did their predecessors (although I suspect they are more similar than might be expected). Thus, it becomes prudent to separate appointees from careerists in this sample to determine the degree to which the results reported above remain applicable. Table 3 reports the frequency of use for each operational opinion category, subdivided by the career or appointee status of the respondents. On four categories of opinion—interest groups, news media, elites, and mass opinion—the data reveal no statistically significant differ-

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7 Such is not to say that these officials were wholly unconstrained by public opinion. Rather, they indicated that Congress was their principal concern. It is thus conceivable that poll data, in influencing members of Congress, may have had an indirect effect on Reagan administration officials; such is the complex and iterative nature of linkage (see Sobel, 1993:106–107, 269–278).
ence between appointees and careerists. We are left, however, with a strongly negative association between appointee status and use of elected officials to represent public opinion. That this relationship emerges should not be surprising, given that the appointees in question were in office in the last days of the Reagan administration. This category of opinion sources is based primarily on responses identifying Congress as the operational equivalent of public opinion. After eight years of battle between Congress and a popular president, if we found many appointees who thought Congress reflected public opinion, we would be properly surprised. Careerists (made up predominantly of Foreign Service Officers, or FSOs), on the other hand, do not appear to have shared the same negative feelings their appointee colleagues displayed toward Congress. By separating appointees from career officials, we now see that the semi-permanent foreign policy bureaucracy is most likely to define public opinion operationally as the views of elected representatives.

Although we can say little about how public opinion is operationalized by political appointees in the Clinton administration, we may reasonably expect that the results reported above continue to be applicable to the career foreign policy bureaucracy.

Other Patterns in Use of Operational Opinion Sources

Further analysis has been performed using the characteristics of respondents to determine if there are additional patterns of use or nonuse of different opinion sources. Respondents’ age and degree of government experience were examined, on the hypothesis that changes in the use of specific opinion sources (compared to Cohen, 1973) are the result of echelon change; that newer and younger officials with different attitudes toward polls and policy elites may have entered the bureaucracy. In fact, no statistically significant relationship was found between either age or experience and any of the categories of opinion used in this study. One might also expect a relationship between a respondent’s rank and the use of certain types of opinion. (This expectation is easily derived from the differences already seen between careerists and appointees.) In fact, no relationship was found between rank and any of the opinion categories.

Findings on appointees (above) might lead us to expect a relationship between type of opinion used and the partisanship or ideology of respondents, with Repub-

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**Table 3. Use of Operational Sources of Public Opinion: Total and Divided by Career Officials and Political Appointees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All (n=65)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Career Official (n=53)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Political Appointees (n=12)*</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Significance of Difference (t-test)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elected representatives</td>
<td>30 46</td>
<td>29 53</td>
<td>2 17</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media</td>
<td>31 48</td>
<td>27 49</td>
<td>5 42</td>
<td>.656</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmediated opinion</td>
<td>24 37</td>
<td>20 36</td>
<td>6 50</td>
<td>.419</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest groups</td>
<td>18 28</td>
<td>16 29</td>
<td>3 25</td>
<td>.781</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elites</td>
<td>7 11</td>
<td>5 9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>.264</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 65

*Political appointees include the following: All those on staff support for the President (in this case the NSC) and the Secretary of State (in this case the Policy Planning Staff); all assistant secretaries; deputy assistant secretaries (or those of equivalent rank) on the SES (executive service) schedule, as opposed to those on the FE-MC schedule (the Foreign Service’s executive service rank). Thus, FSO’s who hold deputy assistant secretary positions are considered to be career officials, not appointees.
licans and conservatives less likely to use Congress and the news media to represent public opinion. Contrary to this expectation, there is no relationship between ideology and use of any operational definition of public opinion. Consistent with expectations, however, self-identified Republicans showed a strong disinclination to look toward the news media to represent public opinion (Tau-b = −.268, p = .012). It is unclear from interviews whether this attitude results more from perceptions of “liberal bias” in the media, or from resentment over the supposedly unfair treatment the media accorded Reagan administration foreign policies. Also consistent with expectations, there is also a tendency among Republicans in the interview group not to identify Congress with public opinion (Tau-b = −.174, p = .102), although this association falls slightly short of statistical significance.

It may also be suggested that work in certain policy areas might lead officials to look toward different sources of public opinion. We might, for example, expect officials who work in highly salient issue areas to follow the “law of the hammer” and use poll data, letters, and phone calls (obviously more common on high-profile issues) to represent public opinion. Indeed, we find confirmation of this hypothesis. Issue salience was unrelated to four of the opinion categories, but was positively associated with the use of unmediated forms of opinion generally (Tau-b = .217, p = .067), and opinion polls in particular (Tau-b = .217, p = .061). (For derivation of the salience variable see Powlick, 1991.) When officials work in highly salient issue areas, the public’s opinions are thrust upon them, making it often unnecessary to rely upon mediated or "surrogate" forms of opinion such as interest groups or the Congress.

There is also a clear relationship between officials in the State Department’s geographic bureaus—the traditional centers of power among State’s many bureaus—and the use of the news media to represent public opinion (Tau-c = .261, p = .031). No obvious explanation for this pattern comes to mind, although it is plausible that close relationships have developed between officials in these bureaus and journalists who seek out contacts there precisely because these officials are perceived to be more influential than others.

Finally, we find one very strong, issue-based variable among officials in this sample. Officials who work primarily on international economic issues show a definite tendency to look toward interest groups to represent public opinion (Tau-c = .257, p = .000), as well as a tendency not to mention the news media as representing public opinion (Tau-c = −.171, p = .015). That such officials look toward interest groups is not surprising. The issues with which they deal are often technical and not of high salience. Thus, the views presented (particularly) by business interest groups represent knowledgeable opinion for such officials, while media reports on their issues often either simplify complex economic issues or virtually ignore them. Whereas the results reported here indicate that officials working on foreign economic policy are attentive to interest groups’ opinions, thus supporting the pluralist model of policy making, the findings of Bauer et al. (1972) require that we be cautious in assessing the degree of influence that such opinion has, at least in this one area of policy.

**Have the Sources of Public Opinion Changed?**

The picture that has emerged from this study is one where foreign policy linkage is achieved through multiple sources of public opinion information, most prominent of which are the Congress and the news media. Lesser roles are played by interest groups and unmediated forms of public opinion, with a minor part reserved for the views of elites. Some of these results are roughly consistent with prior research in this area, while others (most notably on the role of elites) are quite
different. It would thus seem appropriate to devote some effort to comparing and contrasting these results with those of the most comparable previous study, Bernard Cohen’s 1965–1966 interviews as reported in The Public’s Impact on Foreign Policy (1973).

Table 4 presents a summary of the related findings in this and Cohen’s study. It is not a simple matter to compare these results. First, the sample populations of the two studies, set more than 20 years apart, show some significant differences. (Specific agency affiliations and respondent ranks for the two studies may be found in Appendix 2.) Cohen’s interviews took place in the State Department and the Agency for International Development (AID), whereas this study has excluded AID but has included the NSC staff. Although it does not include the NSC staff, Cohen’s sample does include a higher proportion of top-level officials at State than the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Officials Citing Source, Present Study</th>
<th>Description of Finding from Cohen (1973)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News media, all types 48%</td>
<td>80% “discussed . . . contacts with and exposure to . . . at some length”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected representatives 46%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All types combined 43%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress 46%</td>
<td>70% “explicitly saw . . . as having public opinion role”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmediated sources 39%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All types combined 37%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polls 27%</td>
<td>“Only” 20% “made any mention of”; “only one official . . . paid serious attention”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters 16%</td>
<td>66% “took some cognizance”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public speaking 7%</td>
<td>40% “explicitly mentioned . . . as opinion sampling device”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest groups 27%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All types combined 27%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Right wing” –</td>
<td>“Almost 20% . . . had contact . . . or . . . were aware”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic –</td>
<td>50% “mentioned having contact with economic interests”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic –</td>
<td>“1/3 mentioned . . . as important points of contact with the outside public”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elites 12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All types combined 12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends +/- family 5%</td>
<td>“Nearly one third . . . cited . . . as public opinion sources”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts/academics 4%</td>
<td>“Half . . . mentioned . . . as being . . . in some form of contact”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Notables” –</td>
<td>“Very great importance”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages for present study are based upon number of officials who explicitly stated that mentioned source represented public opinion on foreign policy issues. (See prior sections and Appendix 2 for further information.) Results for Cohen are derived from Chapter 3 of The Public’s Impact on Foreign Policy. Descriptions and percentages are as presented in that chapter. “Notables” are defined by Cohen as “private men of public standing with prior experience in foreign affairs,” citing, for example, Dean Acheson, George Kennan, and Christian Herter (1973:84).
present one (Appendix 2). It is also notable that Cohen included no officials of the Inter-American Affairs bureau, while including a large number of those in the European Affairs bureau (20% of the total sample). Finally, changes in the State Department itself necessarily have produced differences in the samples. Cohen was attempting to create a sample that was representative of the State Department in 1965, but if his sample were replicated today, it would exclude a large number of policy-area bureaus created since the mid-1960s (such as Politico-Military Affairs and Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, itself recently restructured and renamed). Thus, we must be careful in comparing these studies. I have thus assumed that my results demonstrate change only when the magnitude of any difference between this and Cohen’s study is quite large.

One apparent area of difference, and thus apparent change over time, is in the role of elites as representatives of public opinion. Recall that Cohen stated that “nearly one-third” of officials cited family and/or friends as public opinion sources and that 55 percent cited academic experts. Cohen also attributed a great deal of importance to “notables” as public opinion sources. This contrasts strongly with this study’s finding that only 12 percent of officials cited any source of elite opinion as representing the public. To what should such differences be attributed? Some may be due to sample variance, but I would contend that these differences are of a magnitude that cannot be explained solely to sampling variance. Two other possible explanations will thus be explored: coding and change over time.

Coding

Cohen seemed to assume that outside sources of information were necessarily equivalent to operationalized public opinion. For example, policy experts were equated with public opinion because they “were among the people outside of government with whom [officials] were in some form of contact” (1973:88). In interviews for this study, officials were asked to identify external groups or forms of opinion that they strive to be aware of. This broad, open-ended question yielded a variety of responses. One of the most common was “academics,” or “area experts” (mentioned by 31% of respondents). However, when asked to list their sources of public opinion elsewhere in the interview, only three officials stated that such experts represented public opinion. Thus, the major role that Cohen attributed to elite opinion as an operational form of public opinion may be an artifact of how he coded his respondents’ general comments about external opinion.

The problem of coding differences is, in many ways, a pervasive one when comparing these two studies. As Table 4 shows, there are several instances where Cohen’s report is of “contact with” or “exposure to” an outside source, or of officials “taking cognizance” of specific sources, while for some categories of opinion he is quite explicit in stating that a form of opinion was seen as representative of public attitudes. Thus, once again we must take care in comparing specific percentages of sources.

Change Over Time?

Can all of the variance between these two studies’ findings on the operationalization of public opinion be due to sample variance and coding? Might there also have been a change over time in the way officials view public opinion?

Both studies rank the news media as the most common form of public opinion operationalization (Table 4). Differences in magnitude (48% versus 80% for Cohen) are probably attributable to significant coding differences. The important and consistent result, however, is that the news media rank at or near the top of both
lists of opinion sources. In the elected representatives category codings seem to be closer. Does the difference in findings (46% versus 70% for Cohen) therefore represent change? The safe assumption here is to say no, again relying upon the ranking of these sources (a close-second in both studies). Moreover, sampling and political differences may also be factors here. Recall that a subset of this study’s sample comprised Reagan appointees (interviewed during Democratic control of both houses of Congress) who did not see Congress as representative of public opinion. When these appointees are removed, 55 percent of the remaining subjects cite elected representatives as public opinion sources. Cohen’s sample includes a higher proportion of top-level officials, presumably Johnson and Kennedy appointees, serving during Democratic control of Congress. When we thus consider the different proportions of appointees in the two samples and the probability that Cohen’s appointees were more sanguine about Congress’s representative role, the gap between findings seems less clear. Again, the safe assumption is that a significant degree of consistency exists between the two studies.

What of the apparent differences in the use of unmediated sources of opinion? With regard to the ranking of the general category, it seems safe to say that, then as now, unmediated sources are used less commonly than either Congress or the news media. Within the general category, however, some wide gaps seem to emerge. Two are probably artifactual, however. On letters, Cohen’s report is too vague to be of much use in comparison; that 66 percent “took some cognizance” of letters tells us little about how many of them thought letters actually represented public opinion. Public speaking does not offer the same coding problems, as Cohen’s report is that 40 percent of his sample “explicitly mentioned” this as an opinion source. Here, sampling is the likely explanation. Again, Cohen’s sample includes a higher proportion of top-ranking State Department officials (see Appendix 2). Cohen reports that the 20 officials who made such explicit use of this source came “disproportionately from the higher levels of the Department” (1973:121). It is thus reasonable to assume that some of the difference here is due to the overall proportions of top-ranking State Department officials in the two samples.

Although this study reports limited use of public opinion polls by officials, this nevertheless suggests a difference from Cohen’s findings. His report that only one of 50 officials “paid serious attention” to polls contrasts with this study’s report that 27 percent explicitly indicate that polls represent public opinion to them. That this apparent change should occur is not surprising, given the increasing use of polls by political leaders and social scientists—it is important to note that a large proportion of foreign policy officials have postgraduate training in the social sciences—and the reporting of polls by the news media. As reported above, this apparent change is not the result of cohort effects; younger officials are no more likely to make use of polls than older ones. The most reasonable explanation would seem to be that salient foreign policy issues are more likely to be the subject of opinion polls now than they were 20 years ago (when polls were both more rare and more expensive to conduct), and that many officials working on high-profile issues (as discussed above) merely follow the “law of the hammer” and make use of such information when it is available.

It is safe to assume a rough equivalence of findings on the use of interest groups. Again, the relative ranking of this source in the two studies is consistent (below Congress, the media, and unmediated sources). Substantial coding differences make further comparison difficult. Cohen’s reports do not include the kind of explicit language that would indicate comparable coding. Moreover, the present study does not differentiate clearly among types of groups, combining them into a general category, whereas Cohen reports specific groups’ types without combin-
ing them into a general type. It can, however, be pointed out that mentions of “right-wing groups” of the type reported by Cohen (such as the Committee of One Million) were wholly absent from interviews for this study, suggesting the virtual disappearance of one sub-avenue of opinion transmission.

The most striking difference between the two studies—and the one we now return to—is in regard to the use of elites. While some of the differences (described above) can be attributed to coding, Cohen’s report that “nearly one-third of the respondents spontaneously and voluntarily cited family and/or friends in and out of the Department as public opinion sources” (1973:80) appears to offer no coding problem. If officials in the 1960s did look to family and friends as sources of public opinion, then the present study indicates a change in how officials assess public opinion, relying less now upon those with whom they have routine personal and professional contact than they did in the past. (Only 3% in this study cited such sources.) Moreover, Cohen’s report (without giving frequencies) that “notables” such as Dean Acheson and George Kennan were of “very great importance” to State Department officials as sources of public opinion finds no verification at all in the present study. Not one of the officials interviewed indicated that any contemporary equivalents to Cohen’s “notables”—such as a Henry Kissinger, Lawrence Eagleburger, or Robert McNamara—had any link with public opinion. Thus, while there are some coding and frequency problems in comparing the two studies regarding the role of elites in opinion linkage, the overall magnitude of the differences suggests the probability of a change in the manner in which foreign policy officials interpret public opinion.

What may have caused this shift in the role of elites? One explanation for this change is technological advance in the news media. The increasing use of television as a primary news source among members of the public, along with the development of satellite technology, has meant that issues can reach salience much more quickly than was previously the case. The public thus now responds to issues that in the past might have been too remote from their lives or perceptions to elicit interest. This is likely to create a heightened imperative for officials to follow the news media and poll data, given the importance of television’s “framing” and “priming” effects (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987).

However, the explanation for change that seems to resonate most among officials themselves is the experience of Vietnam. A recurring theme when discussing the role of public opinion with foreign policy officials—particularly those senior enough to have had Vietnam-era experience—is the impact Vietnam has had upon the way in which public opinion is viewed within the foreign policy bureaucracy. At one level, this change is manifested in the development of a virtually institutional norm that successful implementation of foreign policy is impossible without domestic support for—or perhaps acquiescence in—foreign policy (see Holsti and Rosenau, 1984; Powlick, 1991). Of more relevance to this article, however, is a set of common (though not universal) attitudes that downplay the role of elites in opinion linkage. As has been amply shown by John Mueller (1973), elites showed a higher tendency to follow and support government policy during the critical stages of Vietnam decision making than did the public-at-large. Officials of the period, searching for public opinion among elites in the manner Cohen described, would be likely to find widespread support for Vietnam policy, only to learn later that the greater degree of ambivalence or opposition elsewhere in the public would

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8 Interviews by the author during the summer of 1994 for a similar study yielded several comments attributing technological immediacy for U.S. actions in Somalia and Rwanda. Several officials stated that without pictures of the suffering in these two countries, there would have existed little or no issue salience, and thus little or no public pressure to act.
make the policy unsustainable. Thus, use of elites as a source of “public” opinion decreased as some officials determined that, in the Vietnam case, elite opinion was not synonymous with public opinion.

A related change among officials has been a perceived need to look beyond the realm of elite opinion for feedback on policy due to the perception (by some) that, on Vietnam, the elites’ early confidence was wrong, while wider public ambivalence was more prudent (see Powlick, 1991). Senior officials are often very reflective on this point, having lived through the change. One deputy assistant secretary stated simply that “nobody these days can carry on a sort-of elitist foreign policy; that era has ended, if it ever really existed. You just can’t do that.” Another official of comparable seniority expressed similar ideas at greater length:

There are still a few people around who, like Kennan, think of foreign policy making as a group of wise men doing what is right and then fighting off the ignorant yokels west of Washington, but I really don’t know many of these people and none of them are in positions of authority. The people who make policy now are the people who have learned . . . . I think probably the Sixties were critical—that if you don’t start with public opinion, you’re going to end up by losing.

Finally, an NSC staffer operationalized such thinking by citing the famous “mother test”:

A guy in our office uses the phrase, “Can I explain it to my mother?,” which is a surrogate for “Is this the kind of policy which you can stand up and defend to the ordinary American?” . . . I think that it’s a belief that if I couldn’t explain the policy to a group of competent, non-specialist American citizens, then maybe the policy is all screwed up.

All of this is not to say that the elite dialogue has become irrelevant; as indicated earlier in this article, many officials (31%) do follow elite opinions in the form of academic area experts. What has apparently changed is the perception that the views of such elites may be considered an aspect of public opinion. Since Vietnam, officials feel an increased need to find public support for their policies, but such support is not likely to be perceived as the views of the “notables,” “specialists,” or “intimates” to whom Cohen attributed a major public opinion role in the 1960s.

Summary and Conclusion

This article has hypothesized five avenues of linkage between public opinion and American foreign policy. Based on interviews with officials, strongest support was found for linkage based on the news media and the Congress. Some support was found for a direct linkage path (where officials used letters, phone calls, and poll data to discern public opinion), though the strength of this link varied significantly with issue salience. Some support was also found for a linkage path based upon interest groups, especially for officials working on economic issues. The weakest of the five paths was one based upon elites. In addition, political appointees were examined and compared to career officials. While differences were found between these two groups, when career officials were examined as a separate group, the resultant patterns reinforced overall findings. Careerists were much more likely than appointees to look to Congress to represent public opinion. Thus, whereas presidential administrations (and their appointees) may come and go, the importance of Congress, and the virtual irrelevance of elites, in linking public opinion to foreign policy officials remains constant. The officials interviewed showed significant divergence on the question of public opinion polls. Although many officials were found who echoed the findings of previous studies (e.g., Cohen,
by saying that they neither used nor trusted poll data, about one-quarter of those interviewed did indicate that they used public opinion polls as sources of information about public opinion. Indeed, both continuity and changes were seen in the sources of public opinion used by officials when compared to the most important prior research in this area, Bernard Cohen’s *The Public’s Impact on Foreign Policy* (1973). The news media and Congress continue to top the list of public opinion sources, while the role of elites has apparently declined significantly. Though the use of unmediated sources as a group does not appear to have become significantly more frequent, public opinion polls, seemingly irrelevant to Cohen’s subjects, are now seen as an important opinion source by about one-quarter of those interviewed for this study.

To officials in the foreign policy process, public opinion speaks with many voices, some of which are not typically thought of as “public opinion” (such as the Congress), and certain voices are more likely to be heard by actors in different positions within the policy process—Congress speaks loudly to careerists, but not necessarily to appointees; interest groups are heard on economic issues, but much less so in other areas of policy. Thus, public opinion as a factor in the foreign policy process should not be viewed as a unidimensional variable, either in terms of how it is viewed by foreign policy officials, or in terms of how it affects (or perhaps fails to affect) policy outcomes. The influence of different forms of opinion must therefore be seen as dependent upon first, whether relevant policy actors actually use a particular source to represent public opinion, which is in turn dependent upon the type of issue involved, the backgrounds and predispositions of the actors, and the positions represented by other (perhaps countervailing) forms of opinion.

The wide range of operational definitions that foreign policy officials assign to public opinion suggests the possibility that they are, in fact, much more attentive to public opinion—as they operationally define it—than was previously thought. Indeed, if we define public opinion as the mass public only, then officials do seem rather inattentive and unresponsive to public opinion. If, however, we adopt the operational definitions used by foreign policy bureaucrats, the process begins to look more permeable to public input and influence. Whether or not we accept such forms of linkage as normatively desirable, their adoption in the policy process allows foreign policy officials to feel as if they have considered public opinion in many more cases than would otherwise be possible under a more narrow definition of public opinion. However, the use of individually defined operationalizations also allows foreign policy officials to justify their policy decisions as having been made after taking public opinion into account, whether or not such decisions necessarily reflect the opinions of the mass public.

**Appendix 1. Sampling and Interview Methodology**

The data and findings presented in this article are derived from a larger study (Powlick, 1990) examining the linkages between public opinion and American foreign policy. Field research was conducted from December 1987 to January 1989, inclusive. General interviews (in person) were conducted with 76 foreign policy officials, all in office at the time of the interview. Of this group, six officials (opinion poll and editorial analysts) are excluded from the data and findings because of their atypical focus on specific sources of public opinion and their separation from the policy-making process. Interviews of the remaining 70 individuals make up the primary source of data.

Of the 70 interview subjects, 64 held State Department positions in Washington; the remaining six were National Security Council staff members in policy (as
opposed to support) positions. (For a breakdown of agency and bureau affiliation see Appendix 2.)

Interview subjects were not chosen at random. State Department officials were selected based upon criteria designed to ensure representation for nearly all of the policy-making bureaus of the State Department, a wide diversity of functional and policy responsibilities, and the full range of ranks from desk officer to assistant secretaries. (See Appendix 2 for a rank breakdown of officials.) The six NSC respondents were chosen based primarily upon issue area; that is, each NSC respondent resided in a different geographic or issue-oriented office. This was done to ensure a diversity of issue and office perspectives.

Interviews averaged about one hour, ranging from 30 to 150 minutes. Interviews were conducted—on background—in the respondent’s office. All subjects were asked if they were willing to have the interview tape-recorded. When taping was declined, interviews were recorded by contemporaneous note-taking and by further reconstruction of responses immediately after each session. Nearly two-thirds of those interviewed agreed to being taped. Such interviews provided a great wealth of quotable (though of course not attributable) accounts. For the vast majority of interview questions, I found no significant differences between the responses of those who were and those who were not taped.

Interviews were conducted through the use of a standard set of interview questions. All items were open ended, and follow-up and clarifying questions were asked where necessary. The data on the operationalization of public opinion were obtained primarily from two questions, spaced several minutes apart in the interview:

1. When you think of the term “public opinion,” how do you operationalize this concept? In other words, what, for you, represents public opinion?
2. What are the most important sources of information you use to gain your knowledge about American public opinion on a given issue? In other words, how do you, personally, gauge public opinion?

In order to maintain a comfortable and friendly dialogue, some variance occurred in the order in which questions were asked. The order of questions within the entire interview often varied if the respondent embarked upon a logical course of argument contrary to that set down in the list of questions. Many questions were asked using examples from the respondent’s recent policy experiences, both to make abstract questions more accessible and to provide examples of how certain decisions were made. In short, the form of each interview was subject to considerable variance. The decision to conduct interviews in this way was taken consciously and deliberately in order to maintain the interest of the respondent, to minimize the formality of the situation, and thereby to enhance the quality of information gained. While such interview methods undoubtedly can result in increased errors in the coding and analysis of data, and perhaps even bias, they also undoubtedly result in greater volume and richness of information.
APPENDIX 2. Comparability of Samples: Present Study and Bernard Cohen's *The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy* (1973)

<table>
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<th>Rank of Interview Respondent</th>
<th>Present Study</th>
<th>Cohen's Study</th>
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<td>Raw #, % of State Only</td>
<td>Raw #, % of State Only</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(n=64)</td>
<td>(n=64)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Deputy Assistant Secretary (or equivalent rank)</td>
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ne = Bureau not in existence at the time of Cohen's interviews.
The Sources of Public Opinion

References


