

Defining the American Public Opinion/ Foreign Policy Nexus

PHILIP J. POWLICK AND ANDREW Z. KATZ

Department of Political Science, Denison University

This article provides an overview of a broad range of literatures in the development of a framework that specifies the role of public opinion in U.S. foreign policy. Normally, public opinion is latent on foreign policy issues with decision makers only concerned about the potential activation of popular interest. In the absence of public activation, officials feel free to act. The framework proposes the conditions under which public opinion will become activated. To activate the public, foreign policy issues must receive major media coverage in terms that are compatible with public frames of reference. Such media coverage is usually generated by elite debate. Typically, the media present positions articulated by government officials; however, when high-credibility expert commentators dissent from the government position, policymakers seek to enlist public support. When credible elites defect, government efforts to manage public opinion become increasingly problematic.

Over the past two decades our understanding of the relationship between public opinion and American foreign policymaking has undergone considerable revision. From the beginning of the Cold War to the Vietnam War, foreign policy and public opinion analysts (e.g., Gamson and Modigliani 1966; Verba et al. 1967; Mueller 1973) agreed on the followership model of public input into the formulation of national security policy. Leaders in the executive branch were accorded broad latitude in the conduct of foreign policy by Congress, the media, policy elites, and the public. In fulfilling the dictates of containment, all elements of the American political system ostensibly followed the president's lead in defining the nation's external posture. As Seymour Martin Lipset (1966:20) wrote: "The President makes opinion, he does not follow it. The polls tell him how good a politician he is."

James Rosenau (1961) produced one of the first comprehensive models to explicate how American public opinion affected foreign policy by employing the two-step flow hypothesis from communications theory. That theory posits news flows from major media outlets to opinion makers and then on to the public (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; O'Heffernan 1991). The media, according to Rosenau, circulate opinions between decision makers and elites whom he labeled "opinion makers." Rosenau identified at least sixteen types of opinion makers who could

influence foreign policy attitudes and debates, and enumerated three primary and seven secondary channels of communication, but he did not accord mass public opinion an important place in his framework. Using the theater as an analogy, he equated opinion makers with the actors on the stage. Less than 25 percent of the audience, Rosenau argued, occupied orchestra seats and were, as a result, able to interpret and communicate to the others in the auditorium what was happening on the stage. The overwhelming majority in the remainder of the theater were “so far removed from the scene of action” they could “hardly grasp the plot, much less hear all the lines or distinguish between the actors” (Rosenau 1961:34). He characterized this public as being able to react only in emotional terms, either to “sit in stony silence or applaud impetuously, if not so vigorously as to shake the foundations of the theater.” This 75 to 90 percent of the population, because it had the potential for becoming active, had the sole function in Rosenau’s (1961:36) model of “setting . . . the outer limits within which decision makers and opinion makers feel constrained to operate and interact.”

Rosenau’s model belongs to a generation of analysis that had a rather low regard for the foreign policy judgments of ordinary citizens. Empirical studies throughout the 1950s and 1960s confirmed that the public had little understanding of foreign policy and lacked the ability to use politicians’ stands on these issues as a guide for voting. (For a review of this literature, see Holsti 1996:26–37.) Public opinion was assumed to be volatile and emotional concerning foreign policy issues (Almond 1960). These findings gave substance to what many elites at the time were advocating: mass sentiment should be kept as far away as possible from the councils of state. The public, it was thought, should be followers not shapers of foreign policy.

Popular opposition to the Vietnam War led several researchers (see, e.g., Mueller 1973; Holsti and Rosenau 1984; Holsti 1992) to reassess the rationality of public opinion. Increasing levels of opposition to the war were explained as a response to the rising numbers of casualties and the increasing polarization in the positions held by elites (Mueller 1973; Zaller 1994). Still, American public opinion was not given much credit for affecting foreign policy until new research emerged after the Vietnam War that indicated far greater public knowledge of, and impact on, foreign policy than had been assumed (Holsti 1992).

This more recent evidence has suggested that public attitudes on foreign policy are both stable (Page and Shapiro 1992) and coherent (Wittkopf 1990) and that the foreign policy stands of ordinary citizens are informed by their core values (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987). People are seen as cognitive misers who use these core values as heuristics in formulating their positions on issues (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Popkin 1991). Few now question that American public opinion has an effect on foreign policymakers (Page and Shapiro 1983; Graham 1989; Powlick 1991). Indeed, scholars (LeoGrande 1993; Wittkopf and McCormick 1993) refer to the public opinion/policy nexus as reciprocal. Leaders do try to educate or manipulate public opinion as many elite-based models contend, but decision makers also are sensitive to the preferences of the electorate (Hughes 1979; Ginsberg 1986; Stimson 1991).

We still, however, lack an understanding of the mechanisms by which public opinion becomes a factor in American foreign policymaking. In his review of public opinion and foreign policy, Ole Holsti (1992:459) asserted that “by far the least well developed of the areas [of research] discussed in this essay has been the opinion-policy link.” In an attempt to bridge this gap, the purpose of the present review is to propose a framework for defining how public opinion affects foreign policymaking that builds on the research of the previous three decades.

Rosenau and most of his successors (Hughes 1979; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1994; Kegley and Wittkopf 1996) have viewed the public opinion/foreign policy nexus in dichotomous terms: If public opinion is not shown to have a direct impact upon foreign policy, it has no role. Given that a link between public opinion and foreign policy could not be demonstrated empirically, the assumption followed that on such issues public opinion was like the “dog that did not bark.” But policymakers deliberate over issues “at a level of specificity where public attitudes are only infrequently measured” and policymakers are often guided by their sense of “potential public opinion” (Stimson, McKuen, and Erikson 1994:29–30). Even though for the most part public opinion stays inactive on foreign policy, decision makers remain wary of the “dog that could bark.” This review focuses on differentiating the conditions under which the “dog” becomes activated. We will use the literature to argue that public opinion becomes a “barking dog” when an issue produces a debate among elites that is covered by the media in such a way as to focus the public’s attention. Figure 1 provides the reader with a guide to this essay. The left-hand column lists the topics we will cover in our literature review; the body of the figure summarizes the variables and relationships that the literature suggests are relevant to opinion activation.

Our review incorporates literature from not only international relations but also political psychology, American politics, and communications. Although both authors contribute expertise from different subfields within political science to the endeavor, neither of us is a specialist in comparative politics. As a result, the framework presented here is built from literature that is American in focus. It is intended to provide a guide for future researchers to use in determining when public opinion has, or is likely to have, an impact on foreign policy in other settings.

When Does Public Opinion Become Activated?

We start with the assumption that, for most foreign policy issues, most of the time the public can be characterized as disengaged and/or uninformed. Gabriel Almond (1960:53) observed that the public’s “characteristic response to questions of foreign policy is one of indifference.” This fact is well known to those familiar with the public opinion literature. A symptom of this lack of public awareness is what is referred to as “response instability,” where poll respondents randomly change their positions on identical questions administered at two different times (Converse 1964; Converse and Markus 1979; Zaller 1992). Philip Converse (1964), referring to such instability as evidence of “non-attitudes,” found greater instability on foreign than domestic issues. While Converse’s original findings have received criticism on methodological (e.g., Achen 1975) and temporal grounds (e.g., Nie and Andersen 1974), recent scholars (e.g., Smith 1989; Zaller 1992) have settled on the designation “politically unsophisticated” for the American public. As Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro (1992:9) have observed: “All this scholarly revisionism about the capabilities of the citizens scarcely touched the well-established finding that most people’s knowledge about politics is quite meager.” Eric R. A. N. Smith (1989) is careful to point out, however, that an unsophisticated public is not necessarily an irrational one. Emphasizing that sophistication is largely a function of factual knowledge, Smith suggests that rationality and sophistication are distinct concepts. Indeed, because the acquisition of factual information is costly, for most people it might even be considered “irrational” to be sophisticated (Downs 1957; Smith 1989; Popkin 1991).

This lack of sophistication is not surprising given the repeated findings of the quadrennial Chicago Council on Foreign Relations poll that only one-third of the

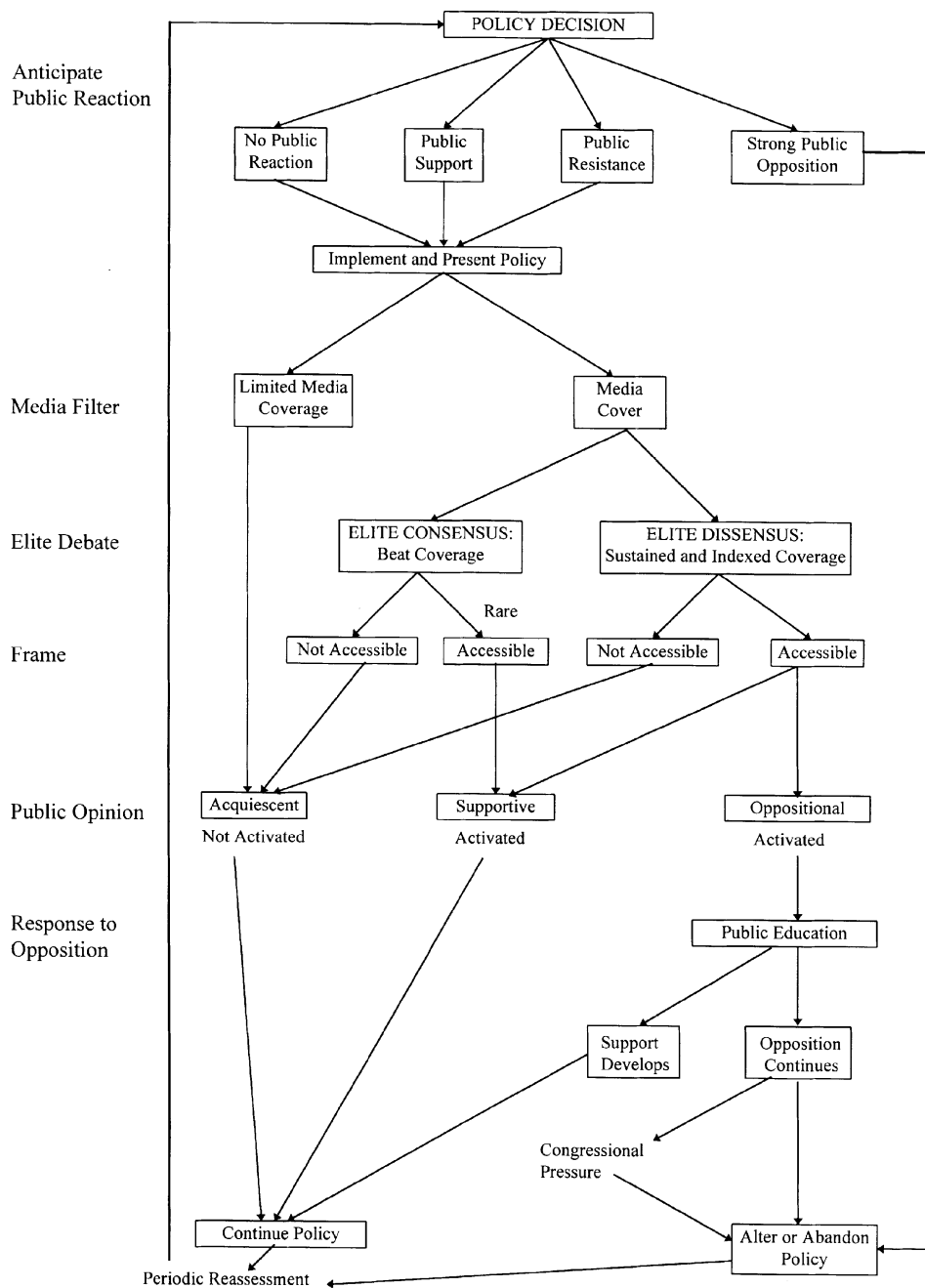


FIGURE 1 Flow Chart of Conditions Shaping Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus

public reports being very interested in news stories about foreign policy (Reilly 1995). Doris Graber (1984) has shown that many people simply avoid or ignore foreign policy news items, often considering them too remote or confusing. Polls seeking to measure the public's grasp of factual information about international issues also often find surprising levels of public ignorance about widely discussed issues. In 1979, for example, one poll recorded that only 23 percent of Americans knew which two countries were involved in the SALT negotiations (Kegley and Wittkopf 1996). Indeed, some researchers (Delli Carpini and Ketter 1991) have even found, controlling for levels of education, that the political knowledge of Americans has actually decreased in recent decades.

To be sure, the public has attitudes, and when asked about a particular policy or problem in a public opinion poll, people will provide answers. However, as John Zaller (1992) has observed, when questioned most people will provide responses that are influenced either by the framing of the question itself or by how accessible seemingly relevant information is in the respondents' minds. Thus, what is often described as public opinion is, especially in foreign policy, more typically a collection of off-the-cuff remarks by "respondents pontificating in a seemingly authoritative, if basically 'truthful,' manner on all sorts of subjects about which they know nothing or to which they have never given any thought whatsoever" (Mueller 1973:1). We do not mean here to cast aspersions upon the public's civic virtue. Rather, we consider public inattention to most international issues and problems to be normal, nonharmful, and probably even "rational." The end result is that on most foreign policy issues most of the time public opinion is more latent than real.

By latent opinion we mean "ingrained sets of values, criteria for judgment, attitudes, preferences, dislikes—pictures in [the] head—that come into play when a relevant action, event, or proposal arises" (Key 1964:264). Latent opinion has the potential for expression, provided it is activated by some message or event. James Stimson (1991) has commented that public opinion is largely latent or acquiescent as long as policies stay within a range of acceptability. Unless it is activated, latent opinion appears to have little relevance for a framework linking public opinion to policy. Latent public opinion should not, however, be considered either meaningless or insignificant for several reasons.

First, latent opinion can have an effect upon foreign policy officials who must, and do try to, anticipate the future impact of current policies (Graham 1989; Powlick 1991; Hinckley 1992; Foyle forthcoming). Latent opinion has the potential to become activated. The probability of such a transformation along with its likely direction and intensity is of great concern to policymakers. Indeed, policymakers strive to anticipate—and to avoid—alternatives that are likely to activate public opposition (Sussman 1988; Powlick 1991; Foyle forthcoming). Thus, even when latent, public opinion can constrain decision makers' options.

Second, as we noted previously, much of what is being measured by public opinion polls is closer to latent than fully formed opinion. If polls have an impact upon policymakers—as Paul Brace and Barbara Hinckley (1992) and Ronald Hinckley (1992) say they do—then this quasi-latent opinion also can constrain policy.

Third, latent opinion does not of course always remain inactive. Occasions do occur when an action, event, or proposal activates public interest, and members of the public choose to express their opinions. In fact, latent opinion forms the basis for manifest or activated opinion. Naturally enough, it is this activated opinion about which foreign policy officials are *most* concerned. Thus we need to consider how it is that such activation occurs (or, as the case may be, fails to occur).

The Importance of Debate Among Elites

The public dialogue among foreign policy elites appears to be a pivotal factor in determining whether public opinion is likely to become activated. In defining who is a member of the foreign policy elite, we adopt the definition used in the surveys undertaken by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (Reilly 1995) and by Holsti and Rosenau (1984; also Holsti 1996). These researchers stipulate that the foreign policy elite includes: (1) current actors within the executive branch of the U.S. government, (2) members of the U.S. Congress, (3) leaders and officers of organized interest groups, and (4) commentators and experts from the media, academia, and research foundations.

One of the first models of foreign policy opinion activation was Gabriel Almond's (1960) so-called mood theory. Pointing out the general inattention of Americans to foreign policy issues, he suggested that elite consensus usually creates an acquiescent public and argued that opinion becomes activated as a function of two phenomena: (1) events that directly threaten the "normal conduct of affairs" (or "grave crises"), and (2) assertive or self-confident moods among the public (Almond 1960:71). When these two coincide, activation is possible. However, because Almond saw activation occurring only under extreme circumstances, he viewed public opinion with regard to foreign policy as essentially unstable and unpredictable, perhaps even dangerous.

In 1970, William Caspary challenged Almond's mood theory observing that the instability of opinion predicted by the theory was not borne out empirically. Two decades later, Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro's (1992) extensive reanalysis of post-World War II survey data also revealed a basic stability in opinion. These challenges to mood theory, however, deal with stability in the direction of policy opinions, not with the process of arousing or activating opinion (however, see Davis 1987). Nevertheless, it has become apparent that public interest in foreign policy issues may be aroused under far less extreme or threatening circumstances than those suggested by Almond. Consider the Michael Fay caning in Singapore in 1994 and the 1986 Ethiopian famine—each aroused public opinion but did not involve a dire national threat to American interests. Moreover, Almond's theory would have characterized the so-called Vietnam syndrome as a mood and have predicted that it would stifle Americans' interest in foreign policy. Whereas, on the contrary, this syndrome has been blamed for causing active public opposition to American interventions in Africa and Central America in the 1970s and 1980s.

Let us posit that foreign policy decisions and actions that elicit no active discussion or debate among foreign policy elites are unlikely to result in the activation of public opinion. When foreign policy decisions result in public discussion among elites, public interest is more likely to become aroused. In fact, we assume that without contentious "public deliberation" (Page 1996) among elites, public opinion rarely becomes a factor in the policy process (Page 1996). We should emphasize the word "public" in the term "public deliberation." Relatively private discussion among elites (such as in this journal) may generate heated exchanges and important conclusions, but if such debates are not reported in some form by the mass media, the public is less likely to know about the problems or issues. Public discussion is taken here to mean the reporting by major news media of government policies and important events, the reporting of elite reactions over a number of days, or editorial and other analysis of policies and events.

The character of elite discussion is also important in determining whether public opinion will be activated, as well as whether activated opinion will be supportive of official policy. Richard Brody and Catherine Shapiro (1991) suggest that public

opinion “rallies” during crises result from the initial wave of elite support that leaders typically receive in the early stages of a crisis. William Gamson and Andre Modigliani (1966) have shown that consensus among elites usually leads to public support for their position once people are made aware of it. The work of John Zaller (1992) has extended these two studies to highlight the critical role that the nature of the elite debate can play in the formulation of public opinion.

Making use of American National Election Studies data, Zaller (1992, 1993) has designed what he calls a receive-accept-sample (RAS) model to forecast whether individuals will develop political opinions on issues. The model is based upon the amount of political information that individuals are exposed to, the degree to which they already possess contextual information with which to accept or reject that information, and the length of time since a particular piece of information has been retrieved from memory. These variables allow Zaller to develop what he calls the “mainstream” and “polarization” effects. The mainstream effect suggests that when there is an elite consensus, those who are exposed to political information will have only one set of viewpoints to use when forming their opinions; thus, they are more likely to recall consensus opinions when they later think about the policy. Those exposed to high levels of information will support the policy and cease searching for more information. In contrast, the polarization effect suggests that when there is a lack of consensus among elites (i.e., dissensus), those with exposure to political information are more likely to take sides in the debate, depending largely upon which side’s arguments are more consistent with the contextual frames already in a person’s memory. If the elites who are opposed to official policy are better able to tap into the public’s frames, then the public opinion that is likely to be activated will be oppositional in nature. Following Zaller, then, when public discussion among elites reveals a basic consensus, public opinion is more likely to be either *acquiescent* (i.e., latent) or largely *supportive* of the policy actions taken. When public discussion among elites involves real debate and dissensus, public opinion will reflect the various points of view and public opposition to the policy may result.

Using Zaller’s model allows us to examine what led to the polarization of American public opinion during the Vietnam War. In the early 1960s, there was a bipartisan elite consensus on the need for American involvement in Vietnam. This elite consensus resulted in public support for Kennedy and early Johnson administration policy (as reflected in poll data of the period; see Mueller 1973). The RAS model predicts that when the messages presented by elites (and reported in the news media) are predominantly supportive of administration policy, the greatest levels of support for the policy should come from the most politically attentive (also primarily the most educated) segments of the public, with the less attentive and less educated showing weaker support. Indeed, the data presented by both John Mueller (1973) and Zaller (1992) support this prediction. The RAS model also argues that when elite views diverge and active debate on the issues appears in the news media, polarization among the attentive and educated will occur quickly. As turned out to be the case in Vietnam, support for administration policy declined first among elites and highly attentive groups, followed by a gradual erosion of wider public support (Zaller 1992).

Framing

The previous discussion is not to suggest, however, that debate among elites by itself will activate mass public opinion. Elite debate that remains solely at an abstract level is unlikely to elicit much response from the broader public.

Activation of public opinion is more probable when issues have a direct effect on large segments of the public. An in-depth and multifaceted study of citizens in Massachusetts in 1986 by W. Russell Neuman, Marion Just, and Ann Crigler (1992) found that people's knowledge of, and interest in, foreign affairs was significantly lower than for domestic affairs, in part because of the perceived distance between international affairs and real effects on American citizens' lives. They observed, however, that when foreign policy issues were presented within "frames" to which the public was receptive, activation was more likely to occur.

By "frame," we mean the "central organizing idea or story line [in a communication]. . . . The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (Gamson and Modigliani 1987:143). A "frame" can be thought of as a conceptual tool that people rely upon to convey, interpret, and evaluate information (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992). Frames help receivers of information define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (Entman 1993; see also Nelson and Kinder 1996). They are important because through them communicators, consciously or unconsciously, can alter the beliefs and decision processes of recipients of information. "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman 1993:58). Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's (1984) classic study showing that peoples' policy decisions can be drastically altered when essentially the same information is conveyed as a potential loss versus a potential gain illustrates the effects of framing.

While the use of one frame versus another may or may not be a deliberate choice by a communicator, framing is often a useful tool for antagonists in a political debate. "Elites wage a war of frames because they know that if *their* frame becomes the dominant way of thinking about a particular problem, then the battle for public opinion has been won" (Entman 1993:58; emphasis in original). Nevertheless, the concept has been usefully applied to studies of foreign policy issues. Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon (1994) and Barbara Allen and her colleagues (1994) have explored framing effects on public opinion surrounding the Persian Gulf War. Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) applied the concept to studies of public attitudes on the Strategic Defense Initiative and South Africa. Gamson (1992) studied the influence that framing can have on shaping people's opinions on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Dennis Chong (1996) has suggested that there may be certain common frames of reference that serve as interpretations of issues that have been popularized through public discussion. In their study of people in Massachusetts, Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) used extensive, open-ended interviews to identify a number of such common frames. "Human impact," "powerlessness," "economic," and "morality" frames were the most common among their respondents. Gamson (1992) determined that people's decisions on the desirability of collective action were framed by perceptions of injustice, identity (us vs. them), and perceptions of the individual's ability to solve problems (similar to the "powerlessness" frame). In her in-depth study of twenty-one residents of Evanston, Illinois, Graber (1997) examined the types of media stories from which respondents were more or less likely to recall information. She found that stories that had a human interest frame were much more likely to be retained in memory than other stories, whereas stories that dealt with problems seemingly beyond the control of political leaders—similar to the Neuman, Just, and Crigler "powerlessness" frame—were more often forgotten. These studies suggest that elite statements (or media reports) that resonate with commonly used frames have a better chance of activating public opinion than those that do not. Opinion can also be activated

by issues or events from which people can draw analogies to their own lives—a kind of “familiarity frame” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Shimko 1995).

Frames are important because public activation on foreign policy issues is such a rare phenomenon. The literature suggests a mutually reinforcing set of correlations between knowledge of international events, high levels of education, and interest in foreign affairs (Robinson 1967, 1972; Price and Zaller 1993). The so-called attentive public that displays these characteristics is fairly small, thought by most analysts to be from 5 to 10 percent of the total United States population (Neuman 1986; Wittkopf 1990). Activation of the opinions of this attentive public is much more likely than activation of the public-at-large. For activation to occur among the broader public, something needs to break the attention barrier that exists for foreign affairs. We propose that “something” is actually two things: (1) an affective response to particular international events based upon the compatibility of certain issues to widely used public “frames,” and (2) an active discussion among foreign policy elites about alternative policies for dealing with such events. Events alone are usually not sufficient to activate public opinion. Recent studies of public opinion during the Gulf War have shown that public attitudes were largely impervious to events in the period leading up to the allied offensive (Sigelman et al. 1993). Without a debate among elites, this broader public typically will either acquiesce to the apparent elite consensus (Gamson and Modigliani 1966), falling into a “spiral of silence” where individuals self-censor aberrant views (Noelle-Neumann 1984; however, see Page 1996), or it will become resigned to its “powerlessness” (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992) and lose interest.

Who Moves Public Opinion?

An examination of the literature on public opinion, political communication, and political cognition suggests that the public reacts to the comments and pleas of different segments of the elite in different ways. Exploring who moves the public, Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey (1987) analyzed the effects that statements by different types of political actors had on the popularity of American presidents. Because so many polls have repeated the standard “presidential approval” question in recent decades, these researchers were able to use as their dependent variable changes in presidential approval between time points. Examining media coverage and the accompanying elite commentary during the period between two polls, they constructed regression equations measuring the amount of change in presidential approval that was related to the statements of different sets of elites. Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey concluded that the greatest mover of public opinion was the commentary and news analysis done by prominent journalists and “experts.” This group of elites appears to enjoy heightened credibility with the public because of their perceived knowledge, experience, and nonpartisan status.

Perhaps, however, as important as which elites were able to activate the public was who failed to have an effect. Elected officials were found to have no persuasive effect on the public, suggesting that perceptions of partisan bias may serve to rob members of Congress and other elected officials of their credibility on foreign policy issues. Interest groups even had a slightly negative (though not significant) influence. The only other group of elites that showed any effect on public opinion was “popular presidents” (see also Page and Shapiro 1984). Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey also found that exogenous events such as disasters and economic news had no impact on public opinion once elite commentary was controlled.

Given the apparent distrust of elected officials (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995) and the inability of most other political actors to move public opinion, the fora in which elite discussions take place become important. Debates in overtly “political” settings probably have little effect on opinion, whereas the commentary of “experts,” “commentators,” and “pundits” on television programs like PBS’s *Newshour*, CNN’s *Capital Gang*, or ABC’s *This Week* are more significant. It is when elites are given a forum here and in the reporting of networks and newspapers that we would expect to see the greatest impact on public opinion.

Whether or not the American president has the ability to engineer public support for foreign policy is also an important question. The results from several studies (e.g., Rasler and Thompson 1995; Andrade and Young 1996) suggest that popular presidents can move opinion, but certainly not to the degree that they would like, and that unpopular presidents have little if any ability to build foreign policy support (however, see Hartley and Russett 1992). Indeed, Page and Shapiro (1984) found that when a president’s approval rating was below 50 percent, presidential efforts had no effect on opinion; it took a 57 percent popularity rating or higher to yield statistically significant effects on the public’s opinion. Presidential popularity appears to carry with it some degree of credibility as well; members of the public are more willing to follow a president’s lead the higher his overall job approval rating. In this vein, Mondak (1993) has reported that support for policies identified with presidents rose and fell according to presidential approval (see also Sigelman and Sigelman 1981). This effect was greater for issues about which the public had less prior information such as those relevant to foreign policy.

Although there seems to be at least some ability for popular presidents to influence the public on foreign policy issues, this impact appears to be quite limited. Page and Shapiro (1984) have reported that even for the most popular presidents engaging in intensive rhetorical efforts over many months, opinion change never exceeded 10 percent (see also Jordan and Page 1992). Historical cases detailing presidential efforts to move public opinion on foreign policy generally confirm this limited effect. The Carter administration’s attempts to win ratification of the Panama Canal treaties included a wide variety of efforts at persuasion that facilitated winning narrow Senate approval, but that failed to build support or even to move public opinion (see Roshco 1978; Moffett 1985). In spite of prolonged attempts by the Reagan administration to build support for aid to the Nicaraguan contras, survey results showed only small increases in levels of support among the general public (Sobel 1993). The research reviewed above suggests that a more productive presidential strategy for influencing public opinion on foreign policy may be to enlist the support of commentators and news analysts.

Agenda Setting

As our last point suggests, discussion of how elites can affect public opinion becomes moot if the media do not report what elites are saying in the first place. The criteria by which the media decide which stories to cover will be discussed below. However, it is important here to note the critical position that “agenda setting” has in the formation of public opinion. As Bernard Cohen (1963) pointed out some years ago, the media shape the public’s issue awareness. The press, Cohen said, may not be successful in telling people what to think, “but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*” (Cohen 1963:13, emphasis in original; see also McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Most studies of agenda setting portray it as primarily a media-driven process, although some researchers are beginning to identify it as an interactive process where public perceptions of issue salience can, in turn, affect media

coverage decisions (Erbring and Goldenberg 1980), or where “policy entrepreneurs” (Kingdon 1995) work jointly with reporters to create agenda items (Mermin 1997).

Without news media coverage, there is little chance that a given event will arouse public awareness or political action (Page 1996; Graber 1997). Domestic problems may be perceived as salient by members of the public independent of media coverage (for example, through friends and relatives in other parts of the nation), although media reporting obviously enhances issue awareness. The potential for such independent awareness is much weaker on foreign policy issues because ordinary people in most countries (and in the United States in particular) have fewer personal contacts abroad. Indeed, poll data consistently show that the American public is not terribly interested in foreign policy news anyway (Reilly 1991, 1995; Graber 1997), although levels of foreign affairs interest and knowledge appear to be higher for publics in western Europe (Bennett et al. 1995). The agenda-setting role of the media in foreign policy is thus enhanced. As a result, the choices the news media make on any given day regarding which of the many potential foreign policy stories to report can have an obvious impact on opinion activation. On many issues, activation will never occur simply because the media have chosen not to report them.

In addition, choices about which issues to cover can affect how the public perceives major political figures and institutions. As Iyengar and Kinder (1987) have found, issues reported in the news media often “prime” the public’s evaluations of the performance of government and leaders. People’s opinions on foreign policy issues and actors are probably more susceptible to priming because this process appears to have the greatest impact on topics with which people are less familiar (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar and Lenart 1989). Thus, the choice of which stories to cover can have important effects not only on public attitudes and the probability of opinion activation, but also on the standing of political leaders.

Role of the News Media

When does a foreign policy issue or debate become public? Such things become public when elite discussion is widely accessible via the mass media. Thus, discussion is not public merely because it occurs in a public place (like Congress) or is accessible to those who are motivated to take part. Nor is discussion considered public if it is conducted solely in narrow-cast media outlets, such as the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, or *Foreign Affairs*. Rather, a discussion is public when it can be easily perceived by the general public using the more popular media. In the United States, such media would include major television networks, mass circulation daily newspapers, and a limited number of mass circulation magazines (such as *Time* and *Newsweek*). In the 1990s, television news coverage has become particularly important to making a foreign policy discussion public. In recent years, 69 percent of Americans have reported that they use television as a major source of news information, followed by 43 percent for newspapers, 15 percent for radio, and 4 percent for magazines. Moreover, Americans appear to trust television news far more than other sources of information; newspapers run a distant second (Stanley and Niemi 1994; see also Graber 1984). Elite discussions in these fora are the ones that have the potential to create or alter public attitudes on foreign policy issues.

Whether or not elite discussion becomes public is an important issue: if the public is unaware of an issue or the discussion surrounding it, public opinion on that issue remains latent. To be sure, many elites would like to have their concerns

on particular foreign policy issues elevated to the level of public debate; attempting to expand the scope of debate is a natural strategy for an advocate to pursue. As E. E. Schattschneider (1960:4) wrote, "Conflicts are frequently won or lost by the success that the contestants have in getting the audience involved in the fight or in excluding it, as the case may be." However, in the United States whether a foreign policy discussion becomes public is often not primarily a function of the behavior of the individual advocates, but rather of the choices that the major news media make. The decisions that major media reporters and editors make about what to cover, by extension, play an important role in determining what problems and concerns have the opportunity to activate public opinion.

Criteria for Media Coverage

Given that the selection of certain news stories can define the public's interests in, and opinions about, foreign policy, how do the media decide what to report? According to Graber (1997), journalists see themselves as guardians of the public welfare, seeking to report what they feel the public needs to know in order for people to be active participants in a democratic society even when they think readers or viewers might not be interested. Similarly, Herbert Gans (1980) cites journalists' assessments of a story's impact on the national interests or on large numbers of citizens as criteria for story importance. Because journalists are themselves a type of elite, their assessments of which issues are important often are in synch with the opinions of other elite groups. Regardless, however, what journalists themselves consider interesting or important stories are usually assumed to be interesting to the general public as well. "If an interesting story evokes the enthusiasm of story selectors, it is assumed that it will also interest the audience. As a result, journalists do not think about the audience when selecting interesting stories any more than when selecting important ones" (Gans 1980:155).

In reporting on those issues they think are important, journalists are also influenced (and often restricted) by the competitive nature of the media. Media decision makers aim to please; bored audiences will not only tune the media out but will also cause their profits to decline. Thus, according to Graber (1997), journalists' criteria for choosing what to cover are dominated by five elements: (1) can have a strong impact on the lives of audience members; (2) involves violence, conflict, disaster, or scandal; (3) is familiar; (4) has audience proximity; and (5) is timely and novel. With some exceptions, these criteria reduce the likelihood that foreign policy issues will be covered. Consider the fact that in the first ten months of 1992 just over 10 percent of ABC and CNN news coverage was devoted to foreign affairs (Kerbel 1994). In the 1970s, Larson (1982) found that American television networks devoted about nine minutes per evening to international news, while Graber (1997) has reported that in 1976 international stories comprised 10 percent of network and 14 percent of newspaper coverage.

The criteria that Graber identified often bias the kind of international stories that are reported. With violence and conflict as criteria, there is a greater chance that wars, riots, and massacres will be reported than international meetings or agreements as well as stories about disagreements among policy officials and between American and foreign governments. Moreover, the emphasis on familiarity results in a Eurocentric focus in U.S. foreign policy coverage (Graber 1997) and increased attention to what happens to Americans abroad. Furthermore, the emphasis on timeliness leads to a greater number of stories from countries where major media outlets already have reporters and easy access to events. The media need a "peg," or discrete event, on which to "hang" a story. Thus, an event such as the global climate conference in Kyoto becomes the "peg" on which to attach coverage on global warming. A study by

Jonathan Mermin (1997) showed that reports on the Somalia famine and civil war in 1992 were rare unless an event occurred in Washington (such as a Senate hearing) that could serve as a peg for stories on Somalia itself. By corollary, some issues fail to be reported if they cannot easily be attached to a discrete and recent event (Sigal 1973). As a result, long-developing issues that do not manifest themselves in specific events, such as growing opposition to the monarchy within Saudi Arabia, are not reported until they can be attached to a “peg” such as the bombing of an American military housing complex.

Journalistic norms also require that reporters and their editors present information to the public that they can use to make judgments about the state of the political system (Cohen 1963; Graber 1997). Here conceptions of issue importance are critical. What criteria are used to determine what is an important issue? The answer to this question is not particularly clear; indeed, the determination of importance appears to be largely left to the individual journalist. Stories about events or problems that have the potential to affect the lives of many people in the audience are likely to be considered important. Thus, some nonpegged stories appear from time to time about problems such as global deforestation or Islamic fundamentalism. What problems are worthy of reporting? Again, the decision seems largely left up to the correspondent. Given that most members of the news media can be identified as ideologically liberal (Graber 1997), definitions of importance may be closely linked to liberal concerns even when no overt bias is detectable in the final report (Lerner and Rothman 1989).

Journalists and editors who must make choices about which issues to cover face a difficult problem when it comes to international topics. As Philip Seib (1997) has pointed out, journalistic norms and market imperatives often operate at cross-purposes. Important international stories may arise in areas about which the public has little interest. This lack of interest often results from a lack of familiarity with the nations and problems involved. The public is not familiar with these peoples and issues, in turn, because of a lack of prior media coverage. Thus, when the media choose to follow market imperatives, lack of interest in foreign affairs can become self-perpetuating. If journalists consistently reported international events based upon their intrinsic importance, public interest and knowledge about international events would eventually increase. In the short term, however, readers and viewers may have stopped paying attention. And, indeed, a vicious cycle has developed in coverage of international issues in the United States. Lack of media coverage has resulted in lack of public interest, which in turn has made the market for international news small, leading to less international coverage and perpetuating public ignorance of foreign policy issues.

In studying foreign policy news coverage patterns one fact is clear, a few major news organizations act as international “gatekeepers” for the wider news media. This increased influence occurs for two reasons. One reason is simply that only a relatively small number of media organizations maintain the network of foreign bureaus and correspondents necessary to gather international news (Graber 1997). In the United States the gatekeepers include the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the three major television networks, CNN, and a few regional newspapers such as the *Miami Herald* and the *Los Angeles Times*. The decisions of these organizations about which issues to cover necessarily restrict the availability of information for the other media outlets that lack their own information gathering networks. Moreover, an even narrower set of media outlets, called variously the “prestige press” (Cohen 1963) or the “quality media” (Rosenau 1961), may alone be able to set the foreign policy agenda. Cohen (1963) first observed that media decision makers often determine which foreign policy stories are important by

"following the leaders." Journalists and editors will often decide to defer to the "newsworthiness" judgments of organizations seen as having foreign policy expertise. Thus, when the *New York Times*, for example, runs an international story, it serves as a cue for other media outlets to pick up on the issue as well. In recent years, national television organizations have approached a comparable status; NBC's decision to run a story on famine in Ethiopia in 1984 is seen as a classic example of agenda setting among the media (Bosso 1989). Even more recently, CNN's ability to report foreign events instantly from a widespread system of foreign bureaus and correspondents has resulted in this network's elevation to the position of a major "gatekeeper" for foreign news (Graber 1997).

Reliance on Official Sources

Journalists often assess the importance of an issue (and thus whether or not it should be reported) by the degree of high-level governmental attention that it is generating (Gans 1980). This pattern is particularly pronounced in foreign policy reporting; a higher degree of deference (or greater difficulty in finding countervailing opinion) seems to be accorded to official sources than is generally the case with domestic issues (Bennett 1994). The routinization of specific foreign policy "beats" is also a factor here (Sigal 1973; Graber 1997). Major media outlets rely upon reporters assigned to specific venues of U.S. government activity to supply much of their coverage of foreign policy events. These "beats" are largely limited to the White House, State and Defense Departments, and Capitol Hill (Cook 1994). Leon Sigal (1973) found that roughly half of all the sources with some attribution in *New York Times* and *Washington Post* front-page stories were U.S. government officials. Examining the early stages of the 1990 Gulf crisis, Timothy Cook (1994) has shown that 30 percent of all coverage (both foreign and domestic) of the crisis emanated from these Washington "beat" sources. Because most major media outlets structure their coverage around the same beats, drawing information from the same official sources, their coverage of international events is fairly uniform (Graber 1997). Taken as a whole, the system of foreign policy beats usually means that the views and statements of official sources are provided greater media exposure than most others. When there is an absence of active discussion among officials residing within these beats, the effect is to stifle discussion outside of Washington.

The tendency of the news media to focus on Washington-based beats leads to what Lance Bennett (1990, 1994) has referred to as "indexing." As he describes it, indexing is the result of the media's preference for official sources and its preference for stories involving conflict or scandal. According to Bennett (1994:25), "the patterns of foreign policy news . . . can be explained in large part by this tendency to 'index' news coverage to the intensity and duration of official Washington conflicts." As a result, discussion and debate among elites are most likely to enter the news stream when they are conducted through official Washington-based channels. If the Washington debate is sustained, then the "newsgates" are opened to other, nonofficial sources as reporters look for new views and story "angles" away from the usual "beat" sources. Building on the previous several paragraphs, the literature suggests that when debate in Washington is sustained, it is viewed by journalists as an important or interesting story, *and* there exist a series of "pegs" upon which to base new stories, discussion may move beyond Washington and activate public interest and opinion more generally.

The facts that news stories are indexed to Washington beats and preference is given to official sources suggest that foreign policy officials have the potential to influence public opinion on foreign policy issues. The irony, however, is that

media coverage is much less likely if there is not a conflict among Washington elites on a given issue. For executive branch officials this is a mixed blessing: they have unusual access to the media in expressing official viewpoints, but their statements are unlikely to receive significant coverage unless they occur within a context of debate and controversy. In the absence of debate, the issues that they might wish to speak about will not be reported, and building public support becomes more difficult. It is only when there is debate among elites that administration voices can use the media in their efforts to build popular support. However, the very existence of controversy can also create public opposition. The result, according to Barry Sussman (1988:40), is a tendency for high government officials to “bargain and debate among themselves and reach a compromise rather than to create a national debate. . . . True debate stirs up the citizenry and is mostly an insurgent’s tactic.”

Framing News Stories

Getting an issue on the public agenda through media coverage is an important step, but only the first step. As Jarol Manheim (1987, 1994b) has pointed out in his discussions of “agenda dynamics,” generating public interest is a more complicated process than simply whether or not an issue is reported. As we noted above, the public is more likely to become activated when media reports and elite debates are framed in ways that are compatible with their preexisting opinion frames. Consider the frames used by the Bush administration in the period leading up to the Gulf War. The conflict with Iraq was often cast in starkly moral terms by the administration; moreover, the Hitler/Saddam analogy was a readily accessible, familiar analogy for many Americans. The media picked up on these frames in the course of the debate over using economic sanctions versus military intervention and portrayed the debate in terms favorable to the government (Dorman and Livingston 1994; Entman and Page 1994; Mueller 1994; Page 1996).

In assessing the likelihood that the public will become activated on a given foreign policy issue, it is necessary to have some sense of how the media typically frame reports on international stories. How often, in other words, do media reports contain framing and contextual information that facilitates public understanding? Examining the degree to which media reports present “thematic” frames that put stories into context, Iyengar (1991; Iyengar and Simon 1994) found just the reverse—that a preponderance of television reports used “episodic” frames that gave viewers little contextual information on which to base their judgments. Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) have shown that human impact, morality, and powerlessness frames are those most frequently used by members of the public as guides to understanding policy issues. But both these researchers and Gamson (1992) have pointed out that although morality frames are useful to public understanding, such frames are rarely employed by the news media owing to the journalists’ “objectivity” ethic. The media focus, instead, on conflictual or adversarial frames that tend not to resonate with the public. Thus, foreign policy news reports often lead to apathy, not activation of the public. While the reporting of elite debate is necessary to the activation of public opinion, activation also requires information that allows the public to understand what the debate is *about*.

Once the public becomes activated, what factors affect whether it becomes supportive or oppositional to government policy? As we observed earlier, people make sense of the outside world through the use of cognitive shortcuts. Scripts, schemas, analogies, and the like have been cited as means by which individuals interpret phenomena. According to Khong (1992:28), a schema is “a person’s subjective

theory about how the social or political world works.” Several analysts of public opinion have proposed various patterns for cognitive schema regarding foreign policy (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Wittkopf 1990). Whether by interpreting events through the lens of past experience (e.g., the lessons of Munich or Vietnam), core values (e.g., antimilitarism), or an attitude constructed in reaction to prior experience (e.g., Wittkopf’s schema), the public evaluates foreign policy issues through some cognitive filter or belief system. Wittkopf (1990:106) argues that it is imperative for policymakers “to build coalitions of support for their proposals that bridge the gap between those holding different foreign policy beliefs,” warning that if they fail to do so, their goals, along with “their personal popularity with the American people will suffer.” Thus, activated public opinion will be supportive of a foreign policy that has been presented by the government and portrayed by elites and the media as fitting prevailing patterns of public attitudes regarding what would be an appropriate and “good” response.

Foreign Policy Decision Makers and the Decision Process

Decision makers often make decisions without any direct knowledge of public opinion. This statement does not mean, however, that decision makers act without any consideration of public opinion. We assume that decision makers prefer to take actions that stimulate no public attention whatsoever or, alternatively, to act to insure that activation of public interest facilitates the implementation of policy.

As we noted earlier, prior to the Vietnam War there was a widespread academic and elite consensus in the United States that public opinion was not a major factor in foreign policy decision making (Holsti 1992). Cohen’s (1973:62) famous quotation of a State Department official reflects this consensus: “To hell with public opinion. . . . We should lead, and not follow.” While vestiges of such attitudes remain in some official quarters, the prevailing norm among foreign policy officials since Vietnam has emphasized public support for policy (or at least a lack of opposition) as a *sine qua non* for good policy (Powlick 1990, 1991).

It would be a mistake to interpret this “public support norm” among foreign policy officials as requiring that public attitudes be used as positive guides to policy. Even though Hinckley (1992) reports that the Reagan White House made regular use of polling in an attempt to take the public’s attitudes into account in foreign policymaking, by and large, officials still consider “national interest” as the primary criterion in devising policy options (Cohen 1963; Powlick 1991; for a contrary view, see Destler, Gelb, and Lake 1984). Perceived public opinion serves as a constraint in the consideration of options, however. For the most part, policy options likely to generate widespread public opposition are dismissed from active consideration (Kusnitz 1984; Powlick 1990, 1991; Foyle forthcoming). In this way, public opinion becomes a “first cut” factor in the decision process; it conditions the choice of options that can be considered without being determinative of which option is ultimately chosen.

In some decisions, policymakers may recognize that the activation of public opinion is likely or even inevitable (such as with the commitment of troops abroad). When issues of national moment arise, decision makers must respond both to the foreign policy problem and to the likelihood that opinion will be activated (Putnam 1988). Foreign policy officials may prefer to avoid engaging public opinion, because it could act as a constraint preventing the implementation of steps that may be dictated by the national interest (Sussman 1988; Seib 1997). When such activation cannot be avoided, deliberations often turn to questions of opinion management: Can public support be created and maintained?

Policy deliberations usually do not involve empirical indications of current public attitudes on a specific issue (Powlick 1995b). Very few polls are actually taken on pending foreign policy issues, especially on those where there has yet to be an articulated government position. Moreover, few officials have any familiarity with the academic literature on foreign policy attitudes (Hinckley 1992). Sometimes, however, presidents have acted internationally based on survey results or events that were assumed likely to influence future polls (Brace and Hinckley 1992:92). And public opinion soundings on foreign policy questions are frequent and ubiquitous enough to insure that decision makers have “a sense of what postures to emphasize and avoid” (Converse 1987:S22; Cohen 1995:53).

While those in the uppermost echelons sometimes are privy to relevant White House poll data, the vast majority of officials have no institutionally generated information on public opinion upon which to rely (Powlick 1990, 1995a). Examining administrations from Franklin Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan, Graham (1994) detected greater White House interest in public opinion polls than he did in the foreign policy bureaucracy. Indeed, administrations often consult opinion surveys on key foreign policy concerns of the president. For example, the Carter White House factored extensive surveys on arms control and U.S.-Soviet relations into its policy deliberations (Katz 1998). And Brace and Hinckley (1992) have observed that decisions on presidential travel and speeches are based in part on public opinion calculations. More often than not, though, when polls are available, they are used more as a window on how to educate the public than as a guide to policy (Katz 1997).

How, then, do officials gauge public opinion when making decisions? Both Cohen (1973, 1995) and Powlick (1995b) have found that Congress and the news media represent important proxies or “operationalizations” of public opinion for foreign policy officials. In essence, policymakers gauge the degree to which there is debate on their issues and assume (usually correctly) that the absence of debate means the absence of active public opinion. Such operationalizations may be useful guides to the existing state and direction of public opinion, but future opinion is just as much a concern for decision makers. We again come across the “dog that didn’t bark.” Officials may have little concrete understanding of public opinion and consider it not very well informed, but, yet, as Cohen (1995:70) points out in his comparative study of foreign policymaking in the Netherlands and United States, both governments have a “residual concern with it.”

In trying to anticipate future public reaction to policy decisions, officials often must simply use their own political instincts about what public opinion is likely to become. Policymakers act within their own understanding of the general policy attitudes of the public using such interpretations as a set of policy constraints (Key 1961; Powlick 1991). Because the attitudes of decision makers (and foreign policy elites generally) are often not shared by the wider public (see, e.g., Holsti and Rosenau 1984; Wittkopf 1990; Yankelovich and Immerwahr 1994; Holsti 1996), the efforts of leaders to articulate their decision preferences is a critical and politically perilous aspect of the policymaking process. Presenting the war to liberate Kuwait as an effort to promote democracy, for example, would probably have garnered far more opposition among elites—and, subsequently, the public—than justifying the venture as necessary for security or economic purposes.

Presidents and Public Opinion

Even though presidents go to great lengths to frame foreign policy initiatives so as not to engender popular opposition, at the same time they are reluctant to admit that their national security decisions are made with any consideration of public pressures.

Rather, in keeping with the realist tradition of international politics, U.S. presidents stress that their decisions are made solely in the national interest. President Richard Nixon, for example, made clear that his approach to foreign policy would be based on the realpolitik calculations of national interest, while surreptitiously he ran a sophisticated public opinion and public relations operation from the White House (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995a, 1995b; Katz 1997). President Jimmy Carter insisted he would rather be a one-term president and do the “right thing” on the Panama Canal Treaty than do what was popular (Hargrove 1988; Katz 1998). Similarly, President Ronald Reagan strongly denied that domestic political pressures affected any of his decisions regarding the intervention in Lebanon (Powlick 1988).

Yet, even with these efforts by past presidents to conceal the extent to which polling was used in their decision making, evidence for their concern about public opinion is found in the institutionalization of White House polling operations (Jacobs 1992; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994a, 1995a, 1995b) and the use of various public relations apparatuses to build popular support for presidential foreign policy initiatives (Storrs and Serafino 1993; Mannheim 1994a). In fact, during the 1996 presidential campaign, a profile of President Bill Clinton’s weekly political strategy meetings revealed that “someone whose post is as ostensibly non-political” as the Deputy National Security Adviser Samuel Berger was a regular attendee at weekly sessions devoted to polls and campaigning (Berke 1996:9).

Intuitively, it makes sense to suppose that presidents seek to husband their popularity (Neustadt 1990; Kernell 1997). Dennis Simon and Charles Ostrom (1988) refer to “the politics of prestige” to denote the greater likelihood that a president’s agenda will be fulfilled with higher levels of popularity. If we accept this premise, the question becomes: Do presidents act internationally out of concern for their popularity or because such actions are facilitated by high levels of public approval? Ostrom and Brian Job (1986) have constructed a cybernetic model of presidential decisions to use military force between 1949 and 1976 and determined that domestic contextual factors, including absolute presidential approval as well as the relative difference between a president’s initial and current approval levels, has a significant positive impact on the probability of presidential political use of force. Indeed, they found these factors more important than measures of the international context.

Along this line, the public has been shown to be more inclined to reward presidents for displaying military and foreign policy toughness, whereas taking a cooperative stance has hurt them with the public (Ostrom and Simon 1985). This finding leads to another question: Are presidents willing to use force in order to gain public support? Empirical evidence on this question is mixed. Some (e.g., Ostrom and Job 1986; James and Oneal 1991; James and Hristoulas 1994) have found a relationship between presidents’ public support levels and use of force. Indeed, T. Clifton Morgan and Kenneth Bickers (1992) have identified the president’s need to bolster support among fellow partisans as the incentive behind uses of force. A further study (Drury 1996) uncovered evidence of a greater willingness to impose economic sanctions and not to use force when the president’s political standing is in jeopardy. James Meernik and Peter Waterman (1996) have criticized the findings of this so-called diversionary literature, arguing that much of it is based on faulty sample selection (use of quarterly intervals) and erroneous assumptions about the politics of crises. They detect no relationship between domestic political factors and presidential decisions to use force to divert attention from weakness at home. Given the inherent uncertainties of military action, public skepticism about the use of foreign policy to manipulate domestic politics along with the knowledge that even a successful diversionary action would produce only a temporary bump in the polls leads these researchers to contend that use of force

for domestic purposes would be a risky means to increase popularity (see also Brace and Hinckley 1992; Burbach 1995).

Elections have also been suspected of providing an impetus for the use of force to give incumbents or their party a campaign advantage. The fear of an opponent's "October surprise" has figured in more than one presidential campaign (Sick 1991). Ostrom and Job (1986), however, did not find a significant relationship between political uses of force and the timing of national elections. In addition, Kurt Gaubatz (1991) detected a lower likelihood for engaging in warfare prior to an election. These results support Cotton's (1986:632) conclusion after examining U.S. uses of force between 1896 and 1982: war had "a significant, detrimental, and independent [electoral] effect on leaders of the 'war party.'" Thus lack of public support may constrain presidents, but the literature is inconclusive on whether presidents take action in the foreign realm to create public support at home (for a review, see Lindsay 1994:174). Further, a cross-national study of eighteen advanced industrialized democracies found little evidence to support a relationship between domestic political vulnerability and international disputes (Leeds and Davis 1997).

Presidents appear to be most free from constraint when they are responding to an international crisis. The literature suggests that this is the case because Congress is institutionally slow to react (Hinckley 1994; Lindsay 1994), partisanship tends to be minimized, elite criticisms are often muted (Brody 1991), and popular attitudes about the situation are in the formative stage (Hampson 1985). Indeed, James Meernik and Peter Waterman (1996) found no evidence that domestic conditions—regardless of their severity—influence crisis decision making in the foreign policy arena. Yet, a study of three U.S. crises over Cuba reveals that the presidents at the time internalized domestic political constraints and placed their political survival at the top of their value hierarchy even when the national interests were at stake (Hampson 1985). And presidents do get credit from the public for opposing aggression (Oneal, Lian, and Joyner 1996). Thus, even in crises, presidents' anticipation of public reaction may shape their choices, as we have argued it does in their considerations of most ongoing foreign policy problems including those involving economic issues (Destler, Gelb, and Lake 1984; Hinckley 1988, 1992; Powlick 1991).

One particular case provides important insights into the role of public opinion in foreign policy formulation. Former officials of the Reagan administration have claimed that public opinion did not influence that president's Nicaraguan policy. In the words of former Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams: "The polls were tools. . . . [They] could not tell us what policy ought to be. We had a policy. We arrived in office with a policy" (Sobel 1993:106). Nevertheless, the Reagan administration issued a National Security Directive (NSDD-77) to establish an office in the State Department specifically to build public support for the president's Central American policy (Parry and Kornbluh 1988; Powlick 1995a). And the White House greatly expanded the duties of the White House Office of Public Liaison to build support for its foreign policies (Storrs and Serafino 1993). Former officials nonetheless continued to contend that their interest in public opinion was limited to affecting the handful of members of Congress whose votes the administration wished to alter.

Congress and Public Opinion

Evidence on congressional responsiveness to constituent opinion in foreign policy is quite mixed. (For reviews of this literature, see Jewell 1983; Shapiro and Jacobs

1989; Lindsay and Ripley 1992; for methodological critiques, see Achen 1978; Stone 1979; Weissberg 1979; Jackson and Kingdon 1992.) Eileen Burgin (1991, 1993) suggests that perceptions of constituent opinion may shape the activity of members, but not necessarily the intensity with which they act. Some (Overby 1991; Lindsay 1994) suggest that Congress was responsive to public opinion on some fairly high-profile foreign policy items (e.g., the nuclear freeze votes) during the Reagan and Bush years, while others (Arnold 1991; Hinckley 1994) note that members are more reluctant to assert themselves on issues of high salience and controversy. On the high-profile resolution to use force in the Persian Gulf, representatives' votes were associated with how well Bush had run in their districts (Jacobson 1993).

Similarly, in studies of congressional votes on defense spending issues, the effects of public opinion and constituent interests also remain unclear. Examining broad-based defense appropriations votes in 1981, Larry Bartels (1991) found that House members were responsive to district-level constituency opinion regarding defense spending. Moreover, several other studies (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1983; Russett 1989; Hartley and Russett 1992) of defense spending and public attitudes have shown that, in the aggregate, appropriations tend to follow public opinion, not vice versa. But other researchers have reported that members' personal attitudes and ideologies appear to be primary determinants of their defense votes. For example, Frank Wayman (1985) found ideology most important in explaining strategic arms votes in the Senate. Similar findings have been reported by James Lindsay (1990, 1991) on strategic weapons and the Strategic Defense Initiative, by Richard Fleisher (1985) on the B-1 bomber, and by Ralph Carter (1989) on votes for President Reagan's defense priorities.

Scholars engaged in research on the scope of the role that Congress plays in foreign policy debate the influence of public opinion on members' votes. These researchers tend to divide into two camps labeled "skeptics" and "irreconcilables" by Lindsay (1994). Irreconcilables assert that in the modern age, Congress can best protect the national interest by staying out of foreign policy formulation, while skeptics claim that any congressional activity in this realm (e.g., hearings, floor debates, roll calls, reports, etc.) is nothing more than image enhancement. For skeptics, congressional actions in the foreign policy arena are merely for the consumption of interested constituents—to show that Congress is "doing something" on foreign policy. Another interpretation is that Congress responds with action once consensus on policy breaks down (Lindsay 1994). Indeed, Robert Pastor's (1993:223) "inter-branch politics model" approximates this characterization of the congressional role in foreign policy formulation: foreign policy is "the result of an interactive process by which the two branches reconcile their different conceptions of the national mood and interest."

Most members of Congress are deferential to presidential leadership as long as there is consensus on the ends and means of foreign policy. A comparison between two distinct phases of U.S. foreign policy is instructive in this regard. In 1953, during the period of the Cold War consensus on both the goals and strategies that should form American foreign policy, Senator John Kennedy introduced a bill instituting minor restrictions on U.S. aid to the French effort against the Vietminh in Indochina. Kennedy's legislation did not attract more than a handful of votes. In contrast, when there was no foreign policy consensus during the Reagan administration, Congress engaged in a lengthy, highly contentious debate over whether to appropriate a fairly small amount of money to the Nicaraguan contras (Katz 1995).

By definition, if all sectors of the policymaking elite share similar interpretations of the national mood and national interest, anyone critical of presidential policy will be dismissed as a gadfly. Some members, however, do deliberately take,

and persist in, positions that are contrary to the prevailing consensus—sometimes out of personal belief, sometimes in order to become “policy entrepreneurs” (Kingdon 1995). Thus, the key question in determining whether dissenters are covered by the media is whether their positions are gathering support from authoritative or mainstream colleagues inside Congress (Mermin 1997), or from elites outside. The news media do not make the decision that a policy (or a dissenter) is wrong, rather they air what are considered to be legitimate and important elite differences.

Here Daniel Hallin’s (1989) idea of the “sphere of legitimate controversy” is crucial. He argues that the media do not produce critical reports of items in either the “sphere of consensus” or the “sphere of deviance.” When virtually everyone agrees on a policy question, for example, the necessity of containing the spread of communism during the 1950s and 1960s, the policy question is rarely investigated by the media. Conversely, some proposals are so outlandish—for instance, adopting an all-volunteer military during the height of the Cold War—that they are denied media play. The evolution of the debate on the all-volunteer military represents a good illustration of how an issue can go from the sphere of deviance to being legitimate controversy to consensus. Only when an issue enters the sphere of legitimate controversy do the media begin the type of coverage that allows dissenting voices in Congress, the executive branch, and elsewhere to try to influence mass opinion.

For members of Congress, however, the absence of elite consensus means that it is politically acceptable to challenge the president on specific policies. As Lindsay (1994: 25) has written with regard to the demise of the consensus on Vietnam policy: “The boundaries of acceptable political debate were widened, and members . . . could advocate policies that in the 1950s and 1960s would have meant sure electoral death.” When increasing numbers of “respected voices” question the president’s leadership on a specific foreign policy issue, public opinion becomes the focus of attention.

Once a policy decision has been made, we assume that unless the public becomes activated policymakers implement their choice. The prospect that actions abroad or reactions of elites at home may reverse public quiescence, of course, can never be disregarded. When public opinion does become activated on a foreign policy issue, supportive opinion is naturally more desirable than opposition. When opposition arises, a conflict results with what has been called the post-Vietnam “public support norm.” If public support is necessary to carry out the policy, then either the policy or public opinion must be changed. The tendency among most career and middle-echelon officials has been to attempt to change public opinion through what is often (euphemistically) referred to as “educating” the public (Cohen 1973; Powlick 1991). That is, officials mount a public affairs campaign to explain the reasons for adopting the current policy and assume that once the public has all the facts that opposition will evaporate. Few officials consider changing policy an appropriate initial response to public opposition (although sustained opposition may lead to a willingness to alter policy). Thomas Graham (1989) has found that policymakers are unlikely to change policy decisions unless public opposition reaches the “consensus” range (60 percent or greater). Even though the Clinton administration came into office determined to be responsive to public opinion, they too adopted the careerists’ preference for “public education” once they had performed several policy “flip-flops” (Powlick 1995a). Thus, the “public support norm” has led officials to make more attempts to manage public opinion in support of already-adopted policies than to be responsive to the public. We turn now to a discussion of such efforts.

Executive Management of Public Opinion

The genesis of contemporary White House attention to public opinion and its management has been traced to the McKinley administration, with Woodrow Wilson perhaps being the most vigorous early proponent of presidential public relations (Hilderbrand 1981). According to Lawrence Jacobs (1992), White House use of public opinion polling began with Franklin Roosevelt's desire to improve the political capability of the executive branch during the New Deal. The Kennedy administration, however, was the first to institutionalize public opinion polling and make it a routine part of White House operations. Jacobs (1992:212) points out that although opinion surveys were envisaged initially as a tool of manipulation by presidents and their advisers, their use has brought about a "recoil effect" whereby "government officials [have become] more sensitive to popular preferences."

In the White House, polling and public affairs apparatuses have two purposes: (1) as indicators of popular attitudes, and (2) as tools for public relations (Herbst 1993; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995a). The first purpose is more *instrumental* and permits officials to gauge public opinion on international issues before committing to a new course or adjusting standing arrangements. In this vein, the Nixon White House commissioned polls on prospective peace terms for the Vietnam War (Katz 1997) and the Carter administration ran polls to gain some sense of public opinion on questions about Arab-Israeli diplomacy and arms control (Katz 1998).

The second purpose of White House polling is more manipulative or *symbolic*. The vast public relations apparatus built to serve presidential foreign policymaking can be employed to present favorable poll results in an effort to persuade the public, elites, and other policymakers of popular approval for a particular course of action (Sussman 1988; Manheim 1991, 1994a; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995a, 1995b). Popular presidents can "create the illusion of policy support" (Mondak 1993:206) by taking advantage of their standing with the public and introducing new policies when their popularity is high. By creating the impression of public support, the White House public relations machine relies on a bandwagon effect to stifle the emergence of opposition (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995a, 1995b; Katz 1997). Because politicians and government officials are adept at news management—and what former Nixon Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman called "pollsmanship" (Katz 1997)—opinion surveys become one of the chief means "for managing or circumventing the news, shaping their images, and channeling public perceptions" (Manheim 1991:5).

These twin polling functions correspond with the competing empirical and normative interpretations of the place of public opinion in foreign policymaking. The instrumental use of polling is consistent with responsible politics models that suggest leaders must know what the public wants in order to make policy that reflects popular preferences (Key 1964). In contrast, the use of symbolic polling facilitates elites having some control over foreign policy.

Officials legitimate their policy decisions in terms that are designed to resonate with the public (George 1989; Melanson 1996). Sometimes facile analogies are offered to persuade citizens that a national response to external threat is necessary (Shimko 1995; see also Khong 1992). Presidents relate past history to contemporary events to persuade the people of the wisdom of their proposed course of action. Richard Melanson (1996:36–37) coined the concept "declaratory history" to encompass all the historical references, parallels, and lessons American administrations have used to legitimate foreign policy. By invoking the lessons of Munich or those of Vietnam, for instance, policymakers adopt a language to describe their initiatives that resonates with the collective experience of the polity.

Through appropriate issue framing, members of Congress and other elites also try to generate public interest and force deliberation on the merits of specific options or approaches to a problem (Bennett 1994; Lindsay 1994). If the public becomes engaged, actors holding competing images attempt to move public opinion in their direction. One common way of presenting international events is to focus on national security. Issues and policies that are characterized as promoting security usually receive greater support than those framed in more abstract terms, such as in support of human rights or democracy (Jentelson 1992; Nincic 1997). Consider the Clinton administration's appeal to national security (preventing another pan-European war) in attempting to gain public support for its Bosnian policy.

As we noted earlier, crises occupy a special place in the literature on public opinion and foreign policy. Only a "crisis" can generate the celebrated "rally effect," a phenomenon that gives credence to claims that presidents manipulate foreign situations to increase their standing in the polls. One explanation for why presidential approval rises when the nation experiences foreign troubles relates to patriotism (Mueller 1973). As explained by Suzanne Parker (1995:527), "Rally events evoke feelings of loyalty and devotion to the country and political authorities." An alternative explanation is that during a rally event, criticism of the president is muted as the opposition stifles its temptation to score political points so that the administration can deal with the external threat (Brody and Shapiro 1991), or lacks the information upon which to express critical opinions (Brody 1991). Elite debate thus fails to emerge, creating generally supportive press coverage and acquiescent public reaction. John Oneal, Brad Lian, and James Joyner (1996; see also, Jordan and Page 1992; Lian and Oneal 1993) have found that rallies tend to be stronger when presidents have bipartisan support and weaker when the party in opposition is critical.

Brody (1991) has also shown that the presidential rally effect can be attributed to the tendency of reporters and elites to rely upon information provided by official (administration) sources in the early phases of foreign policy crises, resulting in largely supportive elite reactions, followed by increased public support (see also Nacos 1990; Burbach 1995). Presidential "rallies" erode, however, if and when discrepant information becomes available and a debate occurs among the policy elite (Mueller 1973; Lee 1977; Brody 1991). At times it does appear as if presidents may attempt to use or manipulate the rally effect in order to enhance their approval ratings or electoral prospects, though this chain of events is difficult to prove (Kernell 1993). Richard Nixon's use and timing of crises and "summitry" have often been described as based upon political calculation (e.g., Destler, Gelb, and Lake 1984). Regardless, rally effects are ephemeral, and attempts to create or manipulate them seem to be an ineffective means of improving political standing (Meernik and Waterman 1996).

Distinguishing between government efforts to be responsive to public opinion and attempts to manipulate it can be difficult. The public opinion apparatus that allows one to track public sentiment also facilitates the manipulation of that opinion. We know that various administrations have tried to influence public opinion (see, e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 1995a, 1995b; Dallek 1996; Katz 1997), but it is hard to discern whether or not these efforts bore fruit. What may seem like a movement in the poll numbers in the direction of prevailing policy may be government responsiveness as much as public followership produced by effective sales techniques. In other words, we are limited in our ability to determine the antecedent cause of movement in the polls: Is it public approval of a policy reflecting public preferences or government success in building support through deft public relations (Page and Shapiro 1983; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994a)?

In a sense, presidents only succeed at leading public opinion when there is some correlation between their international goals and popular values. The Gulf War was popular not only because the enemy was effectively demonized and casualties were kept low, but it also conformed to the values of the broader community (Hallin and Gitlin 1994; Parker 1995). Moreover, its purposes were framed in terms that met the public's criteria for the use of force (Jentelso 1992; Nincic 1997). Indeed, the literature on the democratic peace confirms that societal norms become reflected in a state's foreign policy (Russett 1990, 1993); thus, we would expect American presidents to earn public support for their international actions as long as they do not entail contradicting widely held democratic values.

Developing a Framework

Synthesizing the research we have just discussed leads us to a framework that is reminiscent of ideas that Key (1964) proposed decades ago. These ideas are reflected in Figure 1 with which we began this review essay. This framework assumes, as the literature does, that the public is largely passive on foreign policy issues, with citizens essentially exercising retrospective judgment in response to controversy among elites. Much of the time public opinion is not activated and has no direct influence over foreign policy. Presidents, their administrations, and members of Congress pursue policies within the confines of "anticipated future opinion." Officials proceed under the assumption that they have an accurate grasp of what the populace accepts as legitimate in the area of foreign policy, and often they are right. Leaders weigh carefully the degree to which public opinion and Congress may be persuaded to approve departures from prevailing policy, a step that has the prospect of producing domestic contention (Vasquez 1985). Presidents realize they cannot simply lead and expect the citizenry to follow. They make foreign policy choices based on their reading of public "persuadability" and then work to legitimize their choices as being within the confines of what the polity wants. When strong opposition is anticipated, policymakers are likely to abandon the policy, altering the options being considered toward those likely to gain support. If they expect mild resistance, officials are likely to engage in efforts at public education but, nevertheless, to implement the policy. It must be stressed here, however, that no matter how skillful an administration's attempts at public relations, there are certain foreign policy objectives for which the public is unwilling to sacrifice money or lives. Social and political norms, common experiences, and the like place limits on what citizens will accept as legitimate expenditures of national resources.

Indeed, this review has suggested that the public is rational and "pretty prudent" with regard to foreign policy, but is not particularly well informed or concerned about foreign policy issues. When a foreign policy decision is made public, it generates media coverage if it fits the media criteria for a good and important story. Activation of public opinion is rare unless the decision receives media coverage. At this point, elites discuss the policy. If they appear to be in consensus, the media will engage in beat coverage, relying on official sources to provide explanations and justifications for the option that was chosen. Generally, in these cases, the foreign policy discussion will not be accessible to the public, and they will remain acquiescent. In contrast, when a foreign policy decision evokes vigorous elite debate, media coverage will be indexed to reflect the "legitimate controversy." If debate is sustained over a long period of time, it is likely that at least one side in the debate will succeed in framing the issue in terms that resonate with the values or belief systems held by at least a large segment of the public. When elite

critiques of administration foreign policy are reported in accessible frames, public opinion can become oppositional in nature. In response, officials in the executive branch often turn to efforts to “educate” the public. If these efforts succeed and public opinion changes, the policy will continue. When, however, such efforts fail to quell opposition, congressional pressure can emerge and the administration faces the choice of altering the policy or reassessing its necessity. Contemporary foreign policy officials largely assume that trying to sustain a policy in the face of ongoing public opposition is both impractical and politically unwise. Regardless of whether policy is sustained or altered, periodic reassessment in light of ongoing events makes this process recursive.

Agenda for Future Research

This review has focused on the link between public opinion and foreign policy in the United States. An important next step in exploring the opinion/policy nexus is to test the generalizability of the framework derived from research in one country by examining it comparatively. There is a growing literature assessing the public’s opinion of foreign policy issues in other countries and comparatively (e.g., Eichenberg 1989; Risse-Kappen 1991; Jacobs 1992; Cohen 1995; Arian, Shamir, and Ventura 1997). Do these studies reinforce the kinds of linkages that Figure 1 posits or do they indicate that different cultures and political systems lead to more nuanced and contextualized relationships? We note that in investigating the role of public opinion in the consensus-building process regarding Soviet policy during the 1980s in the United States, France, West Germany, and Japan, Risse-Kappen (1991, 1994) has observed that the different domestic structures and coalition-building processes used in these countries influenced how much impact public opinion could have on policy. He found that the French public had the least impact on foreign policy and the U.S. public the most, but also showed that France and the United States stand at opposite ends in terms of the centralization of their political institutions. The United States with its weakly centralized institutions is more open to pressure from the public, whereas French political institutions are highly centralized with the president in charge of foreign policy. Moreover, given the importance of the media in the literature described in this review, what happens when the press operate under different norms? Clearly the present article represents only a first step in the process of building an international understanding of the public opinion/foreign policy linkage.

A second critical next step involves expanding our knowledge about the role that elite debates play in activating public opinion. The research reviewed here reconfirms the importance of elites, but it also indicates how little we know about the impact their discussion and dialogue can have on public attitudes. Why is debate more likely on some foreign policy issues than on others? How does the more general lack of consensus among American elites since the end of the Vietnam War (Holsti 1992, 1996) affect the tendency for debate? Are some presidents more predisposed to consider public opinion in making foreign policy than others? In addressing this last question, Foyle (forthcoming) has found that presidents differ in whether or not they believe that it is normatively important to consider public opinion in making foreign policy choices. Presidents who believe it is desirable to pay attention to public opinion are more likely to be constrained by such opinion; those who are not so inclined are more likely to lead or not pay attention to public opinion. There is a need for more archival research focusing on particular foreign policy decisions and examining where public opinion enters into the policymaking process.

A third area that demands further study is framing. Not only is there a need for more careful theoretical work on frames (Entman 1993), but for more research on delineating the nature of the frames that publics hold in common. Moreover, if—as we suggested above—the activation of public opinion requires that information be presented within easily accessible frames, why should the same not hold true for elites? In other words, what frames do elites react to as receivers and transmitters of foreign policy information? Studies that examine the frames elites use to process information about international affairs would help improve our understanding of the origins of elite debate. If elites and the public make use of fundamentally different frames in interpreting and discussing international issues, then public involvement in foreign policy decisions is much less likely. Thus, more research on framing among both elites and the public could help scholars better appreciate the types of issues and the conditions under which public involvement is more or less likely.

A final issue is whether the standard public opinion poll can give us the information we need to understand the influence public opinion can have on policy. Polls are unlikely to be conducted on foreign policy issues until after the public has become activated. They do not tap the antecedent conditions in the process we have described in this review essay. It would seem important to trace a set of foreign policy issues to see which arouse elite debate and media coverage in order to explore in more detail the linkages proposed here between policy decisions and the activation of public opinion.

A major difficulty to pursuing the research agenda we have proposed here is the “balkanization” of the political science discipline into the distinct subfields of American, comparative, and international politics. Scholars in these areas tend not to engage in the kind of conceptual and methodological cross-fertilization that the linkage questions in this review require. Opinion specialists focus largely on American domestic politics, while those with the greatest knowledge of other political systems (those in comparative politics) generally dismiss foreign policy as the purview of the international relations specialist, who in turn tends not to focus on subsystemic or subnational variables. Questions concerning the foreign policy/public opinion nexus are relevant to each of these subfields, and each has much to contribute to and learn from the other. More broadly, disciplines outside of political science also have much to offer in building our understanding of linkage questions. Insights from political psychology provide us with knowledge about the dynamics of opinion activation and attitude structure. The communications literature is useful in explaining the linkages between publics, elites, and governments. The sociology literature helps in describing the social and political “norms” that define acceptable behavior and policy options at both the national and international levels. As we have learned in undertaking the present review, combining such diverse literatures, disciplines, subfields, and methodologies is not an easy thing to do. But then answering the important questions rarely is.

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