Public approval of Congress is the topic of these three works. Durr and his co-authors find that support for the institution declines when it carries out its duties as a legislative and representative body. Ramirez's first article concludes that Congressional approval declines when the degree of partisan conflict in the legislative body increases. His second piece demonstrates that approval is influenced by public evaluations of the policies passed by Congress.


Hetherington focuses on the implications of declining public trust in government. In his book, he presents a convincing case that lower levels of trust are responsible for the conservative shift in domestic public policy that has occurred since the 1960s. Hetherington and Husser extend this conclusion to foreign policy.


As the title suggests, Nunnally's book explores trust among blacks in America. Her thorough examination covers both social and political trust, trust toward members of many different racial groups, and differences within the black community.


In Bowling Alone, Putnam provides a wealth of information documenting recent declines in social capital and civic engagement. He also presents explanations for and describes many implications of these declines. The Handbook of Social Capital contains essays covering a wide range of topics and research related to social capital.


This interactive website contains survey data regarding the public's trust in government. You can graph changes in trust over time alongside other measures, such as consumer confidence, or explore trust among Democrats versus Republicans. Check it out.

CHAPTER 12

Impact of Public Opinion on Policy

ON THE EVE of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, nearly 60 percent of the American public supported U.S. military intervention to force Saddam Hussein from power. In fact, according to polls conducted by the Pew Research Center, a majority of the public had favored sending troops into Iraq since November 2001 (see Figure 12.1). Polls conducted by other organizations showed "exceptionally consistent" results, with all demonstrating majority support for using U.S. troops to unseat Hussein. With public support on his side (as well as congressional approval), President George W. Bush ordered the military into Iraq on March 19, 2003. In a nationally televised speech that evening, Bush announced this action as follows: "My fellow citizens, at this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger."

During the first eighteen months of the war, most Americans continued to express support for Bush's decision. Beginning in October 2004, however, less than 50 percent of the public felt that using military force in Iraq was the "right decision." As the months ticked by, more and more Americans concluded that military action in Iraq should not have happened. By January 2007, only 40 percent labeled the military intervention as the right decision, whereas a slight majority (51 percent) believed it was the wrong decision. Furthermore, over these years, gradually increasing percentages of the public supported bringing U.S. troops home from Iraq. Whereas only 32 percent of people expressed this view in September of 2003, nearly 50 percent did by the beginning of 2007.

It was in this climate of decreased public support for the Iraq War that Bush proposed sending more than 20,000 additional troops to Iraq to serve alongside the approximately 140,000 servicemen and -women already there. At the outset of 2007, he argued that these extra troops were necessary to combat sectarian violence between Shiite and Sunni Muslims in Iraq and therefore improve safety and security in the nation, particularly in Baghdad. Given the public's dissatisfaction with the war and increasing preference to return troops to the United States, it is not surprising that support for the proposed surge was not high. In fact, only
31 percent of the public favored this proposal in January 2007. And of those who opposed it, fully 69 percent believed that Congress should actively try to prevent Bush from implementing his plan, even by withholding funding for the troops if necessary. Despite this lack of public support, Bush did order more troops into Iraq.

Throughout 2007 and 2008, even more citizens began to support bringing U.S. military troops home from Iraq. In fact, a majority of the public held this view during most of those two years (refer to Figure 12.4). Also, only a minority of the public believed that military action in Iraq had been the right decision, a trend that continued through 2010. Clearly, public support for U.S. military involvement in Iraq was not high. In one of his first major foreign policy speeches as president, Barack Obama announced in February 2009 that U.S. combat forces would be gradually removed from Iraq. His goal, ultimately met, was to remove all such forces by August 31, 2010, while retaining up to 50,000 members of the military in Iraq after that date to support the Iraq government and its military. Drawing down troop levels in Iraq was favored by the public. In both April 2009 and August 2010, clear majorities (74 and 68 percent, respectively) of the public approved of “Obama’s decision to end the combat role of U.S. troops and remove most but not all U.S. troops from Iraq by August 31, 2010.”

In subsequent years, Obama’s attention turned to other nations in the Middle East, notably Iran. In July 2015, the president announced that the United States and five other nations had negotiated an agreement with Iran over that country’s nuclear program. Years-long economic sanctions against Iran would be lifted in exchange for Iran agreeing to restrict its capability of acquiring or producing nuclear fuel, fuel that could be used for a nuclear bomb. International weapons inspectors would also be given greater access inside Iran. Initial public views toward this deal tended toward opposition. Polling indicated that, among those Americans who had heard about the agreement with Iran, 48 percent disapproved of the plan compared to 38 percent who approved. Furthermore, 73 percent had no or not very much confidence that “Iran’s leaders will uphold their side of the agreement.” When asked whether Congress should approve or reject the Iran nuclear deal, 52 percent supported rejection.

These four examples of policy decisions made by Bush and Obama present contrasting views of the relationship between public opinion and public policy. Bush’s choice to engage in military action in Iraq and Obama’s decision to remove combat troops from Iraq both coincided with the public’s preferences. In contrast, Bush’s troop surge decision went against the wishes of a majority of Americans and Obama did not have the public firmly on his side for his negotiated nuclear deal with Iran. Which is more common? Do policymakers generally enact policies that a majority of citizens support? Or is the discounting of public opinion more common? Under what circumstances will policy reflect the public’s policy opinions? Does the type of policy matter? Are officials more or less likely to be
responsive to public opinion when formulating foreign versus domestic policy? We address these questions in this chapter.

For a minute, however, let’s think about the first and last examples a bit more carefully. Before the Iraq War began, Bush attempted to persuade the public and other policymakers (notably members of Congress) that the United States should invade Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein. He presented two primary reasons why he felt this action was necessary. First, he warned that Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction and America’s safety depended on stopping this effort. Second, he argued that Hussein must be removed from power because he was connected with al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the 9/11 attacks. A few weeks after announcing the Iran nuclear deal, Obama delivered a high-profile speech designed to influence the opinions of the public and members of Congress. Calling discussion of this agreement “the most consequential foreign policy debate that our country has had since the invasion of Iraq,” he outlined the reasons why he believed the deal to be the best option for halting Iran’s development of a nuclear weapon. Did Bush and Obama’s arguments convince the public to support their plans? If so, are these examples of presidents responding to public opinion or shaping opinion to support their own goals? These questions suggest that to truly understand the role of public opinion in policymaking, we must consider how officials monitor and use public opinion to further their own policy preferences, topics that we also take up in this chapter. First, however, we summarize democratic theorists’ views on the role of the public in policymaking.

**Should Public Opinion Influence Policy?**

Regardless of whether public policy does respond to the wishes of the public, should it? As you have no doubt guessed by now, democratic theories provide quite different answers to this question. Before discussing these differences, recall that all democratic theorists support *popular sovereignty*. This is the belief that power in a democratic society ultimately rests with the citizenry. Differences across the theories emerge over how the people should exercise their power and how capable the public is for democratic governance.

Participatory democrats expect the influence of the public on policy to be quite substantial. Policymakers should, in their view, enact policy that coincides with the wishes of the majority. These theorists further believe that officials should debate policy openly, providing the public with meaningful and relevant information about policy options. Leaders should not attempt to manipulate or mislead the public. After listening to an information-rich policy debate, the public can form opinions about public policy, opinions that they communicate to the leaders. Because political equality is also important to participatory democrats, they expect that policymakers will respond to the wishes of the entire public, not only those citizens who are especially involved in politics or who have the financial means to express their opinions most loudly (such as by contributing to candidates for elective office).

Pluralists expect that public policy will reflect public opinion, but they prefer that citizens be somewhat removed from the policymaking process. For them, opinions are best expressed via *organized groups*. Whereas citizens are not knowledgeable enough about policy issues to express clear preferences to officials, pluralists assume that private representatives are. These groups lobby policymakers directly, trying to convince them to support policy that is in the interest of the group’s members. Pluralists also argue that citizens are not attentive enough to politics to follow the goings-on of their elected officials but that interest group representatives do this and communicate details back to their members. Through the interest group link, however, only those people who are represented by groups are likely to have their preferences communicated to officials. This model thus privileges the opinions of those who are organized over those who do not have a group actively involved in lobbying government officials.

Of the democratic theories we have been profiling in this book, elite democrats posit the smallest role for the public in policymaking. These theorists believe that the public should be involved in electing officials but should then leave the policy details up to the leaders. Elite democrats view citizens as disinterested in following politics closely enough to make decisions about complex policy matters and as incapable of seeing beyond their own interest to make choices that are in the best interest of the nation. Thus, elite democrats prefer to leave policymaking to those with expertise—the leaders. Policymakers can attempt to educate the public about the best policy option, but at the end of the day, the officials should do as they see fit. This view was clearly expressed in an opinion column written by the late David Broder, a former *Washington Post* journalist. After describing examples in which the “dangerously compliant congressional leadership” followed the wishes of the public by not enacting policies that Broder thought would be good for the country, he concluded, “Politicians are wise to heed what people want. But they also have an obligation to weigh for themselves what the country needs. In today’s Washington, the ‘wants’ of people count far more heavily than the nation’s needs.”

Despite this view, elite democrats expect that policy might minimally correspond with public preferences. They see this outcome occurring via elections. Citizens elect leaders who they hope will follow their general policy preferences and then have the chance to remove these officials from office if they do not. Thus, elections can produce a connection between the opinions of voters and policy. The voters have control over who is elected, and officials have an incentive to keep the preferences of voters in mind or risk losing their jobs come Election Day. Finally, elite democrats do not hope for or expect that the preferences of all members of the public will be expressed through elections but, rather, only the
wishes of those who are most attentive to and involved in politics. For elite democrats, it is perfectly fine, even preferred, if the opinions of other members of the public do not influence policy decisions.

Judgments about politicians’ responses to public opinion are not restricted to democratic theorists. Everyday conversations include negative descriptions of leaders who do not adopt the speaker’s preferred behavior. Politicians who are perceived to follow the public’s wishes too quickly and uncritically are said to pandering, whereas those who make decisions contrary to public opinion are derided as shirkers or worse. Indeed, you might have strong preferences about whether officials should or should not enact policy that corresponds with the wishes of the public. Whether you do or not, we encourage you to ponder the normative democratic theories as we present findings from empirical research on public opinion and public policy.

**Is Public Opinion Related to Policy?**

As one scholar puts it, “No one believes that public opinion always determines public policy; few believe it never does.” True enough, but sorting out how often public opinion is related to policy is not an easy task. Numerous decisions need to be made, including whether to examine public opinion for one or more issues and whether to focus on national or state policymaking. Thus, researchers have taken very different approaches to studying the relationship between opinion and policy. One method that has been used is a case study, which entails an in-depth analysis of one policy area (such as health care policy) or one policy decision (the passage of a specific bill). Although many case studies of the opinion-policy relationship have been conducted, we instead focus our attention in this section on research that examines many different policy areas and decades at once. After all, if a case study of tax policy in the 2000s finds that opinion influenced policymaking, we cannot be certain that this relationship exists for other issues or for other time periods. In contrast, aggregate studies, which examine many issue domains and years, provide more conclusive evidence about the overall relationship between public opinion and public policy.

Before moving on to review research on this topic, we have a spoiler alert. Early on, scholars concluded that public views are indeed related to the government’s policy decisions. We briefly review this research to give you a sense of the range of work that coalesced around the finding of substantial opinion-policy consistency. Over the past decade or so, however, that conclusion has unraveled in the face of new and contrary evidence. Believe it or not, one of these newer studies was so noteworthy that its authors (two political science professors no less!) discussed their work on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.

**The Old View: Opinion is Related to Policy**

When public support toward an issue changes, does policy then change? This question was addressed by Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro. They examined public opinion survey data between 1935 and 1979 and identified 357 cases in which policy preferences changed significantly over time. Page and Shapiro then studied national and state policies for each case at the time of the first public opinion measure and then again one year after the second measure to see if there had been any change in the policy. Their goal was to assess opinion-policy congruence. For example, imagine that the percentage of the public that wanted the government to spend more money to protect the environment increased from 48 percent in 1978 to 58 percent in 1983. To assess the relevant government policy, Page and Shapiro compared the level of actual spending on the environment in 1978 with that in 1984. Such an approach allowed them to determine whether public policy changed in the same direction as the opinion change (this is congruence), changed in the opposite direction, or did not change. Across all their cases, Page and Shapiro found that when both opinion and policy changed, 66 percent of these changes were congruent. They further demonstrated that congruence was more likely the larger the opinion change.

A related approach to assessing the opinion-policy relationship is to examine public preference for change rather than actual opinion change. This was the approach favored by Alan Monroe. Pursuing the results from public opinion polls, Monroe identified many examples of questions asking about policy change. He did this for two time periods: 1960–1976 and 1980–1993. To assess consistency (Monroe’s term for congruence), Monroe compared public preferences for change with actual policymaking for each policy issue in his analysis. When a majority of the public favors policy change and change did occur in the direction of the public’s wishes, opinion-policy consistency was present. Similarly, consistency also occurred when the majority opinion favored the status quo (no change) and policy did not change. Overall, Monroe concluded that public preferences and policy were consistent 64 percent of the time for the first time period and 55 percent for the second. As you can see in Figure 12.2, however, the preferences of the public were more in line with public policy when the public favored the status quo. Between 1980 and 1993, for instance, when the public preferred that a specific policy not change, this policy stayed the same in 70 percent of the cases Monroe analyzed. When the public wanted change, they got it only 45 percent of the time. This status quo bias is perhaps not surprising. The U.S. political system with its three branches of government that share power and check each other’s power was set up to make policy alterations occur slowly, if at all.

Other studies of the opinion-policy relationship used broader measures of public opinion. This approach assumes that when formulating policies, policymakers focus on general opinion trends (such as liberal or conservative swings) in public opinion rather than opinion toward specific policy issues. One broad measure of public opinion used in opinion-policy studies is labeled policy mood or policy sentiment. The measure is obtained by aggregating across opinion toward dozens of specific issues. It captures whether the public feels that the government, in general, is doing too much or not doing enough. In other words,
it measures "global preferences for a larger, more active federal government as opposed to a smaller, more passive one across the sphere of all domestic policy controversies." Are changes in the public's policy sentiment accompanied by changes in public policy? Yes, according to research conducted by Robert Eriksen, Michael MacKuen, and James Stimson. These authors assessed the direction of policymaking by determining the ideological direction of key laws passed by Congress (and not vetoed by the president) between 1954 and 1996. When comparing policy direction with public views, Erikson et al. found that when the public mood changed (refer to the solid line in Figure 12.3) public policy generally followed in the same direction (see the dotted line). In other words, a liberal shift in the public mood was followed by a liberal shift in policy; likewise, conservative opinion shifts were accompanied by policy moving in a conservative direction.

More recently, Stuart Soroka and Christopher Wlezien used a similar dynamic approach to assess policy responsiveness to public opinion. They explored public opinion toward government spending in specific policy domains (such as defense, social welfare, health, education, and foreign aid) between 1973 and 2004. They compared trends over time in public preferences for spending to trends over time in actual spending by the national government. Their conclusion? Policy responds to public views. When the public prefers more spending in a domain, actual spending often does increase. When the public holds the opposite preference, spending is likely to decrease.

Despite the dissimilarities in research designs and goals, all these scholars concluded that national public opinion and public policy tend to be related. Others have explored the U.S. states, finding a correspondence between opinion and policymaking at that level of government also. Finally, researchers have identified characteristics that influence the degree of opinion-policy congruence. First, issue salience matters. The more that the public is especially concerned about an issue or the more that an issue receives national attention, such as in the news media, the more likely it is that public opinion about the policy will closely match actual policy. Public attentiveness is also relevant. Congruence is higher for citizens who follow politics closely than for citizens who pay less attention. Members of the public who care deeply about a policy area as well as the attentive public are likely to know how their elected officials stand on issues and to take this into consideration when they vote. Elected officials also know this, and if they wish to remain in office, they pay attention to the wishes of their aware and engaged constituents. Officials are also vigilant about especially salient issues.
Such issues can provoke those citizens who are normally only marginally attentive to politics to tune in and become informed about the topics. And if these citizens do not like their representatives’ positions on salient issues, they can vote them out of office.

**A New View: Opinion-Policy Congruence Is Probably Overstated**

Turning now to the research findings that call into question whether the public’s views are indeed closely related to public policy, we begin where we ended the last section, on the topic of issue salience. As we noted, past work did explore opinion-policy consistency for issues that the public cares greatly about versus those that the public cares about less. In his 2014 book, Paul Burstein goes a step further to also consider issues that are so low in salience that most members of the public would not even know they are on the policymaking agenda. Scholars who study the opinion-policy relationship generally begin by collecting information about public opinion. Burstein’s work began at the other end of the relationship, by collecting information about policies. His goal was to assess public views toward those issues that policymakers thought it important to address. To do so, he selected a random sample of sixty policy proposals that were introduced in the 101st Congress (1989–1990). He then followed these proposals over time (for most, a few years) focusing on whether they passed and, crucially, whether a majority of the public supported passage.

Among those proposals for which Burstein could determine the opinions of the public, the levels of consistency between opinion and policy mirrored those of the studies we profiled in the prior pages. For about 40 percent of the proposals, however, public opinion data were not available. In other words, the opinions of the public were not readily discernible for these policy proposals, by Burstein or, presumably, by members of Congress. Burstein admits that we do not know whether policy reflects the public’s wishes for this 40 percent, yet he suspects that it would not. These issues tend to be ones that are important to a very small segment of the public (less than 1 percent) and for which many citizens likely do not have firm opinions. On the one hand, policymakers cannot be responsive to the citizenry if they do not have opinions to respond to. On the other hand, because the issues are of such low salience, officials might think they have loads of wiggle room to decide as they see fit, without worrying about public preferences.

More broadly, Burstein cautions us to be careful in interpreting results from other studies of opinion-policy congruence, such as Page and Shapiro’s or Monroe’s. These scholars only examined issues for which there was opinion polling data. As it turns out, and for quite obvious reasons, polling firms tend to survey the public only for issues that are relatively high profile (e.g., of great public concern, in the news, the focus of policymakers’ attention). Questions about policy issues of very low salience tend not to appear on polls. Thus, as a by-product of the research design, most examinations of the link between opinion and policy contain only a subset of all possible policy issues. In other words, **sampling bias** might be at work. Rather than representing the entire universe of issues, these designs overrepresent salient issues. With strong reasons to believe that congruence will be lower for nonsalient issues, the earlier research by Page and Shapiro and by Monroe probably overstates actual congruence across the entire set of issues that policymakers consider.

**Another New View: Opinions of the Wealthy Matter Most**

An emerging body of work suggests that the more income a person has, the more likely that public policy corresponds to his or her preferences, for both national and state public policies. The most systematic of these analyses has been conducted by Martin Gilens, on his own and in collaboration with Benjamin Page. In research for his book *Afluence and Influence*, Gilens compiled public preferences for policy change and actual policy outcomes for nearly 1,800 cases between 1981 and 2002. His study was very similar to Monroe’s with one notable exception. Rather than opinion for the entire public, Gilens segmented opinion by income levels so that he could examine the opinion-policy connection separately for low-, middle-, and high-income citizens. He concluded, as we already mentioned, that the wealthy are more likely to see their views enshrined in policy. This finding is particularly striking when we consider instances in which the preferences of high-income Americans differ from the opinions of either low- or middle-income Americans. In such situations, public policy is significantly likely to be related to the opinions of the high-income group but is unrelated to the preferences of people with lower incomes. Or, as Gilens put it, “For Americans below the top of the income distribution, any association between preferences and policy outcomes is likely to reflect the extent to which their preferences coincide with those of the affluent.”

Using Gilens’s dataset of policy outcomes and public opinion by income level, he and Page added information regarding the policy preferences of two types of interest groups: those representing business interests and mass-based groups (such as AARP, the National Rifle Association, or labor unions). They then analyzed whether enacted policy reflects the views of the following: affluent Americans, average citizens (those at the middle of the income distribution), business interest groups, or mass-membership interest groups. Their approach is noteworthy because they consider the **comparative** influence of each, whereas most studies of the opinion-policy relationship have examined only whether public opinion influences policy. In reality, policymakers have many people and groups attempting to sway their policy decisions, so Gilens and Page’s research design more closely matches actual policymaking conditions. They concluded,
demonstrated in Figure 12.4, that wealthy citizens have the strongest impact on public policy. Both types of interest groups have significant influence as well, although the effect is larger for business groups. The preferences of the average member of the public regarding policy change bear essentially no relationship to whether the policy is changed or not. This study is thus further evidence that governmental policy more closely resembles the wishes of the wealthy than of other Americans. By the way, did you guess that this is the study that was profiled on The Daily Show? We present the link to that segment at the end of this chapter, should you want to watch Jon Stewart talk to Gilens and Page about their research.

These findings concern proponents of participatory democracy greatly. Not only do the research conclusions suggest that not all Americans’ preferences are equally likely to be related to the policy decisions of leaders, but they also suggest that economic inequalities are one source of such differing levels of responsiveness. This provides further evidence to these theorists that inequalities among the public need to be minimized. Elite democrats, in contrast, would likely applaud the findings. These theorists prefer that, if the government’s policies do reflect the preferences of the public, the opinions of the most involved and more aware citizens are followed. These citizens, after all, are most likely to have well-considered opinions on policy matters, according to elite democrats. Finally, pluralists would not be surprised to learn that the preferences of interest groups are reflected in public policy, although many strains of pluralism would not predict that the views of one type of group (business) would so dominate those of another type (mass-based).

Figure 12.4 Citizen and Interest Group Influence on Public Policy


Note: Bars represent regression coefficients predicting the impact on policy change of the policy preferences of each group.

Public Opinion in Comparative Perspective

Box 12.1 Comparing Opinion-Policy Congruence across Democracies

The likelihood that governmental policy is responsive to citizen preferences is not the same across nations. Comparative politics scholars have uncovered a few reasons why. First, whether the country has a parliamentary or presidential system seems to matter. For example, the United States has higher levels of policy responsiveness than nations with parliamentary governments (specifically, Denmark, Great Britain, and Canada). In presidential systems, power is separated between the executive and the legislature. Not only are both branches of government involved in policymaking, but the executive and members of the legislature are all directly elected. This seems to create incentives for these officials to be more responsive to public wishes when formulating policy.

Among parliamentary democracies, electoral rules and the degree of party polarization come into play. In the past, the congruence between the preferences of the public and elected officials was greater for proportional representation than single-member district electoral systems. Over time, congruence for nations using single-member districts has increased, in part because parties in such nations have tended to become less polarized. As parties converge toward the middle of a nation’s ideological spectrum, the likelihood increases that the ruling party’s platform will coincide with the preferences of the citizenry. In contrast, parties in the United States have become more polarized in recent decades, perhaps contributing to a decline in opinion-policy congruence.

Finally, some features of public opinion matter also. In both parliamentary and presidential systems, policy is more likely to reflect public preferences when the popularity of the executive is low. This is probably because the president or prime minister is worried about remaining in power and wants to keep the public happy. In the domain of social welfare policy, government spending is more likely to reflect the public’s wishes in nations where the citizens prefer high levels of social welfare spending. Put another way, when citizens send a signal to leaders that they want a high level of social welfare spending, they are more likely to get the policy they prefer than when the signal is for low spending levels.

Do Politicians Follow or Lead the Public?

Before public policy is changed, politicians unveil proposals and publicly debate their preferred policies. The news media often cover these developments. While politicians are debating the merits of various policy proposals, the public thus has the opportunity to learn about the pros and cons of each. And, because it can take many weeks, months, or even years before policy is changed, the opinions of the public can be influenced by the policymaking process. For example, as we suggest at the beginning of this chapter, Bush’s appeals to the public to support his plan to invade Iraq probably influenced public opinion on this matter.

Why do we care about this? It is important to sort out the precise nature of the opinion-policy connection for many reasons, not least of which are democratic theory implications. Democratic responsiveness refers to leaders enacting policy that the public wants. Such responsiveness assumes that governmental policy reflects the genuine opinions of the public. This is what participatory democrats hope for. However, what if the public opinion that the officials seem to be responding to was actually largely created by these officials? If policymakers persuade the public to support the officials’ preferred policy and then policymakers enact this policy, can we conclude that democratic responsiveness has occurred? It depends. If public support for the proposal is genuine, then politicians’ influence on public opinion would not worry participatory democrats so much. What if, however, the public has been manipulated? Manipulation occurs when leaders use “false or misleading arguments or information to turn the public against its true interests (the preferences it would hold if information were accurate and complete).”42 Such a circumstance would undermine participatory democrats’ goal of responsiveness. Thus, it is important to know whether leaders are truly responding to the public or are trying to shape, or even manipulate, citizens’ opinions.

Unlike participatory theorists, elite democrats actually prefer that public preferences be shaped by leaders. The leaders, after all, are the ones who are most aware of what is in the best interests of the nation and who have the expertise to put forth specific policy proposals. Policymakers should share their proposals and reasons for supporting them to the public, thus providing opinion leadership. According to this view, educating the public is an important goal for leaders. If policy reflects the wishes of the public at all, according to elite democrats, it is best if the public’s preferences have been influenced by the wisdom and expertise of the leaders.

To navigate among these competing theories, it is important to consider the context in which public policy opinions are formed, especially the goals and actions of politicians. This entails asking different questions and using different research methods than the aggregate studies of opinion and policy we already profiled. In particular, interviews of policymakers and archival research (interpreting documents from historical collections, such as a past president’s papers) are well suited for these tasks, as you will see in the following sections. We first focus on research that examines how leaders learn about public opinion. Then, we discuss what politicians do with this public opinion information. Do they use it to inform their policy decisions? Or do they use it to try to direct public opinion? Many of the examples on the following pages are from past decades. Please do bear in mind, however, that that is the reality of archival research. Analyzing historical documents can only occur once they are made available, oftentimes years after policymakers served in office.

How Do Politicians Learn about Public Opinion?

One way that politicians try to determine the opinions of the public is through opinion polls. This is especially the case with presidents. Before modern opinion polling techniques were developed in the 1930s, presidents used other means to learn of public preferences. These included reading letters that were sent to the White House, talking to citizens, reading newspapers, interpreting past election outcomes, and counting the number of people attending rallies.43 Franklin Roosevelt was the first president to hire a pollster to conduct private polls for him.44 Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight Eisenhower chose not to follow Roosevelt’s lead, but presidential opinion polling returned with the election of John F. Kennedy. With Kennedy’s inauguration in 1961, “the White House became a veritable warehouse stocked with the latest public opinion data.”45

Presidential Polling. All presidents since Kennedy have relied on private polls to gauge public opinion. These private polls are conducted specifically for the president and contain the questions designed by his personal pollster(s) and advisors. One reason why presidents use private polls is that they consider their own polls more trustworthy and of higher quality than other sources of public opinion.46 Opinion information collected by others (for example, members of Congress, the news media, and interest groups) probably reflects the goals of the collector. Thus, relying on private polls gives the president an independent means to determine the public’s wishes.47

Although private polling is now a permanent and institutionalized feature of presidential administrations, some presidents have commissioned more polls than others. Presidents tend to keep details of their private polling secret, but one way to track this activity is to consider how much money was spent on the president’s polls. Two studies have done just this, beginning with Jimmy Carter and concluding with the first two years of the George W. Bush administration. Three results from these studies are noteworthy. First, the amount spent on polls increases gradually every month that a president is in office.48 Second, presidents spend more on polling during their reelection year than during other years, presumably to track voter support for them and their opponents.49 Third, not all presidents
devote the same amount of attention to polling in nonelection years. Specifically, Jimmy Carter’s and George H. W. Bush’s annual spending was lower than Ronald Reagan’s, Bill Clinton’s, and George W. Bush’s.59

A variety of opinions are collected by presidents, including, not surprisingly, public support for specific policy issues. One analysis of the content of polls used by Presidents Richard Nixon through George H. W. Bush demonstrates that policy questions appeared more than other types of questions for Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush.60 These items encompassed a wide range of domestic and foreign policies, although opinions on specific policies were most likely to be gathered for especially salient issues.61 Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford were more interested in popularity data. Their polls contained more items assessing public approval of their own and Congress’s job performance than items about policy matters. This discrepancy was especially clear for Nixon.62 Finally, presidential polls also collect demographic information about respondents, allowing presidents to assess the opinions of subgroups of the citizenry (e.g., partisans, political independents, and the wealthy).54

Other Sources of Public Opinion. Although commonly used by presidents, opinion polls are not the most frequent source of public opinion for all politicians. One reason is cost. Polling is very expensive, and not all officials have access to funds to pay for polls.63 Some politicians, however, simply believe that there are better sources of information on public preferences. Reliance on polls appears to be less common in Congress than in the White House for this reason. Communicating in person as well as examining mail and phone calls received from constituents provides important information to representatives about the issue opinions, concerns, and intensity of feeling among members of the public. Polls are perceived by members of Congress to be especially poor at registering how strongly the public cares about an issue.64

In an analysis of the sources of public opinion information among staff members in the Illinois legislature, Susan Herbst finds that two stand out: the news media and interest groups.65 These staffers assume that media presentations of policy issues (whether in news stories or editorials) reflect public sentiment on the issues. So if newspapers positively portray a reform measure to make criminal sentences harsher, the legislative assistants infer that the public also perceives this policy favorably, regardless of what citizens views actually are. More interesting, however, are Herbst’s findings about interest groups as proxies for the public’s attitudes. Consider the following two quotations from people she interviewed:

Interest groups. That’s how we gauge public opinion. . . . I would have to say that from a public opinion standpoint, we don’t really care what the average Joe thinks. I don’t say that as if we’re not representing them, but we’re representing the people who represent them. It’s one step removed from the general public.

Obviously I think that the lobbyists and organized groups are much more effective than average citizens because they have an organized message. They have money and they’re here. Whereas a lot of people, I think there’s a lot of people in the state that just really don’t care what goes on in Springfield.68

The sentiments expressed here are pluralism in action. The legislative staff members saw interest group positions as a better measure of public opinion than the actual opinions of the citizenry. The groups are organized, their messages are coherent, and their members are more knowledgeable and attentive to politics than is the general public. So when a representative from an interest group, such as an agricultural or labor organization, communicates the group’s position on an issue, legislative aides assume this is the same position held by farmers or union workers.

How Do Politicians Use Public Opinion Data?

After investing millions of dollars in private polls, what do politicians and their advisors do with the detailed public opinion information they receive? Two influential books, both coauthored by Lawrence Jacobs, argue that politicians use these details to try to influence public opinion. In other words, responsiveness to wishes of the majority is not the main goal.

Priming Popular Issues and Personal Characteristics. Peering inside the Oval Offices of three former presidents, James Druckman and Lawrence Jacobs illuminate many aspects of presidential decision making.69 They collected private polling data from the archives of Presidents Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan. In an attempt to understand why certain questions were asked as well as how the results were interpreted and toward what ends they were used, Druckman and Jacobs reviewed internal White House memos, analyzed public statements made by the presidents, and interviewed former staff members of these presidents. One of their most intriguing findings is that presidents try to divert the public’s attention away from unpopular topics and toward those that portray the president in a more favorable light. This is known as priming, whereby leaders attempt to alter the criteria by which members of the public evaluate those same leaders.

As Druckman and Jacobs demonstrate, presidents use two different methods in their attempts to prime the public: issue priming and image priming.60 No matter how popular a president is in the eyes of the public, citizens do not judge the president’s handling of all issues the same. On some issues, a majority of the public agrees with the president’s positions, whereas the president is out of step with the public on others. Presidents and their advisors not only know this, but, thanks to their private polls, they also know toward which issues the president is evaluated more or less favorably. In their public statements, presidents can increase
the number of times they discuss the more popular issues, in the hope that the public will focus their overall evaluation of the president on the president's handling of these issues. President Johnson, for example, "deliberately made more public comments about pushing legislation through Congress to help the poor and create Medicare than about Vietnam in order to shift attention away from the politically damaging situation in Southeast Asia."\(^{60}\) This is issue priming.

In contrast, image priming involves attempting to shape the public's assessment of the president's personal characteristics, such as competence, strength, or warmth. One way to do this is to emphasize issues that portray the desired image of the president. In the words of, respectively, President Nixon and one of his advisors, public statements were to feature "issues that will give us a sharp image" or that "convey the true image of a President."\(^{61}\) For Nixon, this meant emphasizing his foreign policy activity. When his polling indicated that public assessments of his competence were on the decline, Nixon would devote more attention in his speeches to his foreign affairs and diplomatic accomplishments, such as those in China. The intent was to remind voters of his competence in these policy domains. President Reagan also image primed. He talked about his economic policies, emphasizing how they improved the nation's economic health, when public assessments of his strength flagged. Mentions of his diplomatic goals in the foreign policy realm increased when the public thought Reagan was lacking in personal warmth. In the end, Druckman and Jacobs argue, such presidential actions undermine democratic responsiveness. Rather than enacting the public's preferences into law, "elites widen their latitude on policy ... by priming what issues are salient, and by triggering the public to evaluate them on their perceived personality rather than on policy issues."\(^{62}\)

**Crafted Talk and Health Care Reform.** In their book *Don’t Pander*, Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro argue that polling results are used to create *crafted talk*, rhetoric and messages that officials communicate to the public.\(^{63}\) Opinion polls demonstrate to officials which features of a proposal citizens support, which they oppose, and which they are uncertain about and thus open to persuasion on. Polling also helps politicians "identify the words, arguments and symbols about specific policies that the centrist public finds most appealing and that they believe to be most effective in changing public opinion to support their policy goals."\(^{64}\) If politicians are successful at cultivating public support their proposals might become law. Rather than democratic responsiveness, however, Jacobs and Shapiro call this outcome *simulated responsiveness*.

To provide evidence in support of their crafted talk theory, Jacobs and Shapiro conducted a detailed case study of the formulation of and debate over President Clinton's proposal to reform health care in 1993–1994.\(^{65}\) To determine how Clinton used public opinion, they interviewed key Clinton advisors; reviewed White House documents; examined public statements made by Clinton and others about health care reform; and considered poll results, including Clinton's private polls. They found that, although Clinton polled extensively on health care, he did not do so to help him determine the details of his reform proposal. Instead, the policy details were driven by Clinton's own policy goals, his ideology, and the preferences of key interest groups. Once the specifics of the proposal had been decided on, Clinton's private pollster (Stanley Greenberg) was asked to gather public opinion data. Rather than finding out the public's opinions about health care policy, he instead "poll the presentation of the policy."\(^{65}\) In other words, polling data were used to make decisions about how to sell Clinton's proposal to the public. And getting the public behind his proposal was very important on the assumption that it would put pressure on Congress to pass Clinton's plan.

How exactly did public opinion shape Clinton's presentation of his proposal? It helped Clinton and his advisors identify which aspects of the complex plan were especially popular.\(^{68}\) One of Clinton's policy goals was to provide universal health care coverage for all Americans, a goal that the public also supported. Thus, the overarching theme used to describe his proposal was "Security for All." Clinton also felt that health care reform was necessary to slow down the increase in health care costs. Because the public was less concerned about this problem, he deemphasized this aspect of his plan when discussing the proposal with the public.

Meanwhile, opponents of Clinton's reforms (primarily congressional Republicans and interest groups representing business and health insurers) were not silent. In fact, they were also relying on polling data to determine how to communicate their message to the public.\(^{69}\) Their polls demonstrated that the public was concerned about too much government control over their own health care decisions. Clinton's plan was thus described as mandating a substantial increase in the government's health care bureaucracy. Furthermore, knowing that citizens were generally happy about their own health care coverage but also uneasy about how their coverage might change, Clinton's opponents emphasized the possible negative effects they would witness under Clinton's policy.

**Responsiveness, Opinion Leadership, and Manipulation.** In the end, public support for Clinton's plan declined from nearly 60 percent in favor in September 1993 to 40 percent the following July. The reform plan died in Congress before it reached the floor for a formal vote. This could be interpreted as evidence of opinion leadership and democratic responsiveness. Perhaps the public listened to the politicians' policy debate, were more persuaded by Clinton's opponents than by Clinton and his supporters, and changed their opinions accordingly. This interpretation further implies that policymakers responded to the well-informed and meaningful wishes of the public in deciding not to enact Clinton's reforms.

Jacobs and Shapiro draw quite a different conclusion from their case study. They argue that the public's preferences were manipulated by the policy debate. Citizens grew to oppose Clinton's plan, not because of the plan's actual content but because of the rhetoric that opponents used to undermine the plan. The results from one opinion poll demonstrate this point quite clearly. In March 1994,
when respondents were asked whether they supported "the Clinton health plan," less than a majority did. Yet when asked what they thought about a plan that provided coverage for all people, promoted competition in the health care industry, required employers to provide insurance for their employees, and gave government some power to control health care costs, 76 percent felt that plan had "a great deal" or "some" appeal.29 The details of this hypothetical plan were actually the exact provisions contained in Clinton's plan. In other words, the public wanted the features of Clinton's proposal, but not if it were described as "Clinton's plan." This could be seen as evidence that the public did not learn enough from the elites' health care policy debate to develop meaningful opinions about Clinton's plan.

If this interpretation is correct, participatory democrats should be concerned. Perhaps more disturbing for them is the reality that politicians often feel it is more important to try to shape public opinion, whether through priming or crafted talk, than to respond to the public. Druckman and Jacobs label this the "chronic inent to manipulate."30 This perspective would please elite democrats, however, because it coincides with these theorists' beliefs that the public's capabilities are minimal and that officials should thus discount public opinion when making policy.

Jacobs and Shapiro's case study of the 1993–1994 health care reform debate was extensive and intensive. They have also explored a more recent case of health care policymaking: the debate over and successful passage of health care reform legislation early in President Obama's administration.31 Unlike their prior work, they did not conduct interviews of key policymakers for the 2009–2010 debate. Instead, they relied on publicly available opinion polls and journalistic accounts of the use of polls by Obama and congressional leaders. Their conclusions are thus a bit more speculative. Nonetheless, they argue that the evidence they collected paints a picture consistent with the conclusions of health care policymaking during Clinton's presidency. Obama as well as Democrats and Republicans in Congress closely followed public opinion polls regarding health care reform and then used the polling results to design messages to influence the citizenry. Obama and his Democratic allies in Congress emphasized that leaving problems with the health care system unfixed was too risky and that reform needed to rein in the selfish tactics of private health insurance companies. Republican opponents, in contrast, argued that Obama's approach would amount to the government taking over health care, perhaps even to the point of convening "death panels" to determine which patients would receive health care. Elite policymaking of this nature, argue Shapiro and Jacobs, "becomes a tug-of-war between teams of intense partisans intent on their divergent policy goals and on treating the public as a pawn in their intense power struggles."32

So is it safe to conclude that democratic responsiveness is rare and that manipulation of public opinion is the norm? There is not a clear consensus on this topic. For instance, some scholars have concluded that presidents are responsive to public opinion, especially for salient policies, for domestic policy issues, among electorate-based segments of the public, or when large majorities (more than 70 percent) of the public support an issue.34 Other research demonstrates that, even though presidents do collect opinion data in order to market their preferred policies, the mere collection of the data allows them to monitor the public's attitudes. This monitoring can result in presidents responding to the public's wishes, and it also helps presidents determine when the public is unlikely to be swayed by crafted talk.35 Even Jacobs and Shapiro uncover some evidence of policymakers (particularly congressional Republicans) responding to public preferences during the health care debate.36 Finally, and probably not surprisingly, the likelihood that elected officials will respond to, rather than attempt to lead, public opinion varies throughout their terms. Responsiveness to public wishes increases as Election Day nears.37 We need to continue to explore these topics if we want to link the empirical study of public opinion to normative democratic theory. From a normative standpoint, it is not enough to know that opinion and policy are sometimes related. We also need to know how the opinions of the public are influenced by policymakers, what the quality of public opinion is, and what the officials do once they know public preferences.

**Public Opinion and Foreign Policy**

There are many reasons to suspect that governmental policy might be more likely to follow public opinion for domestic policy than for foreign policy.38 For one, foreign policies are often less salient for the public than are domestic policies. Some people, including policymakers, believe that, because the public is not knowledgeable or sophisticated enough to hold coherent, well-reasoned foreign policy opinions, foreign policy officials should discount public preferences. Compared with other issue domains, policymakers might be more likely to rely on arguments and evidence from experts (intelligence analysts, military officials, and so on) when it comes to foreign policy. Furthermore, public opinion manipulation by policymakers might be especially likely in foreign affairs: "Foreign policy issues are often obscure, distant from everyday life, and the executive often enjoys a high degree of information control as well as substantial bipartisan deference from other elites."39

Finally, elected officials might feel as if they have the flexibility to ignore the public when it comes to foreign policy and not suffer electoral consequences. Given that foreign policies are removed from the day-to-day lives of most Americans, some leaders think they can be successful at educating the public on these issues. Consider, for example, the following comments of former representative Brian Baird (D-WA). When asked in summer 2007 how he would justify to his constituents his view that U.S. troops needed to stay in Iraq longer when he had initially been an opponent of military intervention in Iraq, Baird responded:
I would just say to people who are upset, if you could take the time that I have taken over the last number of months to meet with, not only our leaders on all sides but our military leaders, our ambassadors, leaders from throughout the region, I think you'd have a different impression—I certainly do. And my hope would be people would say someone who's been there on the ground several times now, met with people throughout the region, may have a different insight than just someone who's reading about it second or third hand in the media.  

Despite these assumptions that opinion-policy congruence might be lower for foreign compared with domestic policy, early aggregate analyses did not provide supporting evidence. Monroe even concluded that foreign policy was more likely than domestic issues to reflect public preferences. Further, case studies of specific policy issues tended to confirm that opinion does influence foreign policy. Public preferences for defense spending are related to the size of the defense budget, for example, and public opinion has constrained policymakers' decisions regarding U.S. military interventions, such as during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Reconsiderations of Public Influence

As is the case with the broader opinion-policy research we profiled earlier in the chapter, a number of more recent studies paint a somewhat different picture of the relationship between the public and foreign policy. Archival research of Clinton's decisions to launch military interventions in Somalia and Bosnia demonstrates a lack of responsiveness to public opinion. In both cases, Clinton made these decisions despite his own polling evidence showing that the public did not support either intervention. Finally, a very interesting analysis of the mail received by President Lyndon Johnson uncovers a key relationship between the views expressed by certain letter writers and Johnson's decisions regarding the Vietnam War. Even though a majority of the American public did not support Johnson escalating the war, his public statements and military policy became more "hawkish" when he received more letters encouraging him to step up military activity in Vietnam. In this way, Johnson did follow public opinion, but only the opinions of the especially attentive and informed public rather than the wishes of the broader populace.

Benjamin Page, one of the coauthors of an aggregate analysis of opinion-policy congruence, has even reconsidered his earlier conclusion that congruence is similar for domestic and foreign policies. In two separate projects, he has provided compelling empirical evidence that public preferences shape foreign policy minimally, if at all. In the first, Lawrence Jacobs and Page examine the influence of the public, business interests, labor unions, and foreign policy experts (academics, think-tank researchers, and leaders of foreign policy organizations) on foreign policy officials' views. For data, they relied on surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR). The CCFR is a nonpartisan organization that analyzes and disseminates information about foreign policy issues. Between 1974 and 2002, the CCFR measured the opinions of government officials engaged in foreign policymaking (from presidential administrations, the Senate, and the House of Representatives). Note that the data do not indicate which policy decisions government officials made but, rather, what their views are. Although this limits somewhat Jacobs and Page's conclusions about what influences foreign policy, they are probably correct when they argue that "the survey expressed policy preferences of government officials can be used as reasonable indicators of the policies that they enact or purport to."  

The CCFR also gathered the foreign policy opinions of the public, business and labor representatives, and foreign policy experts. Jacobs and Page compared the opinions for each of those groups with the opinions of the government officials. So which has the strongest influence on the views of foreign policy officials? Business. As Jacobs and Page put it, "Internationally oriented business leaders exercise strong, consistent, and perhaps lopsided influence on the makers of U.S. foreign policy." The effect of business leaders on officials in presidential administrations was especially strong. Foreign policy experts were also influential, but less so than business leaders. Further down the influence ladder came labor unions, and weakest of all was the public. Public preferences were more consequential in influencing the opinions of members of the House, for highly salient issues, and for economic matters. Yet, overall, these effects were dwarfed by the substantial impact of business leaders on foreign policy officials.

Results from Page's second project appear in his book with Marshall Bouton. This book provides a careful and thorough analysis of the content of the public's foreign policy attitudes. For their data, they relied on CCFR surveys conducted between 1974 and 2004, with a particularly strong emphasis on the 2002 survey results. They draw two key conclusions regarding the foreign policy opinions of the public. First, of the many possible goals Americans could want U.S. foreign policy to pursue, three broad goals are most important: security from attack, domestic well-being, and international justice and humanitarianism. The first column of Table 12.1 presents the five specific goals most supported by the public in 2002 for each of these three categories. Some of these, as you can see, fulfill more than one broad goal, so they are listed in two of the three categories. Very large majorities (90 percent or more) of the public viewed the security goals of fighting terrorism and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons as very important. Close behind, however, was support for such domestic well-being goals as protecting jobs and preventing illegal drugs from entering the nation (85 and 81 percent, respectively). Although the public believed that the foreign policy goal of international justice and humanitarianism is less important than security or domestic well-being, this goal is not unimportant. Indeed, 61 percent of Americans believed U.S. foreign policy should aim to fight world hunger, and
Table 12.1 Americans’ Foreign Policy Goals, 2002 and 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foreign policy goal</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Security from attack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat international terrorism</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevent spread of nuclear weapons</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain superior military power worldwide</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen UN (also justice goal)</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defend U.S. allies’ security (also justice goal)</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic well-being</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect jobs of U.S. workers</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop flow of illegal drugs into U.S.</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure adequate energy supplies</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control and reduce illegal immigration</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve global environment (also justice goal)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International justice and humanitarianism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat world hunger</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote and defend human rights in other nations</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen international law and institutions (also security goal)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect weaker nations against aggression</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote market economies abroad (also domestic goal)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Entries are the percentage of the public agreeing goal should be “very important foreign policy goal of the United States.”

47 percent viewed the promotion of human rights in other nations as very important. The CCFR, now known as the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, queried the foreign policy opinions of the public again in 2014. As the last column in Table 12.1 demonstrates, the percentage of the public identifying each goal as very important declined. Yet the relative ranking of specific goals within each of the three categories is largely the same in 2014 as twelve years earlier. Furthermore, the public continues to prioritize security and domestic well-being goals over justice goals.

In terms of which specific foreign policies the United States should pursue to meet these goals, the public has a preference for multilateralism. This is Page and Bouton’s second primary conclusion about foreign policy opinions. Multi-lateral foreign policies emphasize working with other nations and international bodies such as the United Nations rather than “going it alone.” Support for a multilateral approach was evident in the buildup to the Iraq War. Although majorities of the public did support sending the U.S. military to Iraq (as we documented at the beginning of the chapter), when asked whether the U.S. military should be the sole force in Iraq or whether the United States “should only invade Iraq with UN approval and the support of its Allies,” 63 percent preferred the latter while only 20 percent supported the former. More broadly, the public has consistently supported (1) U.S. alliances, (2) participating in UN peacekeeping missions, (3) engaging in diplomacy (with allies and adversaries) rather than using force, (4) using international legal bodies for people who violate human rights, and (5) entering into international treaties to solve global problems, such as the Kyoto Protocol to reduce global warming.

Do the public’s preferences coincide with U.S. foreign policy? Not so much, say Page and Bouton. They provide numerous examples of actual foreign policy decisions that have differed from the public’s wishes. These include privileging the policy goal of security from attack over domestic well-being, stopping the payment of dues to the UN in the 1990s, the decades-long refusal to engage in diplomatic relations with Cuba, and President George W. Bush’s decisions not to sign the Kyoto Protocol or the International Criminal Court treaty.

In a more systematic analysis, Page and Bouton compare citizens’ and policymakers’ responses to the CCPR surveys. These are the same surveys that Jacobs and Page used. And, in line with these earlier findings, Page and Bouton conclude that the policy opinions of policymakers often diverge from those of the public. For instance, the public is significantly more likely than foreign policy officials in Congress, the Defense Department, or the White House to believe protecting domestic jobs and strengthening the UN are very important U.S. foreign policy goals. Citizens also display more support for the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, and decreasing legal immigration. Foreign policy officials are more likely than the public to believe the United States should pursue unilateral foreign policies ("go it alone"), to think that the North American Free Trade Agreement is good, and to support the elimination of tariffs on imported goods. Some of these differences in opinions between the public and policymakers are substantial. Compared to policymakers, the public was 42 percentage points more likely to want foreign policy to prioritize the protection of U.S. jobs, for instance, and 51 percentage points less likely to favor ending tariffs. It is because of findings such as these that
Page and Bouton subtitled their book “What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don’t Get.”

More recent research demonstrates findings similar to those of Page and Bouton. In 2013, the Pew Research Center surveyed the opinions of the public and members of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR; an organization much like the CCIFR).6 CFR members include current and former public officials, academics, journalists, and business leaders, among others. Thus, not all members are foreign policymakers. Some are, to be sure, but others are better classified as foreign policy specialists.

How do the opinions of CFR members compare to those of the public? Among the topics that were also explored by Page and Bouton, the public continues to be more likely than foreign policy experts to want jobs in the United States protected, to strengthen the United Nations, and to decrease immigration (in this case, illegal immigration; see Figure 12.5). On the other hand, CFR members are much more supportive of international trade than citizens are. As for other topics, compared to CFR members, the public was less likely to say addressing global climate change should be a top foreign policy goal, more worried about China’s growing power, more likely to think the United States does too much to solve world problems, and less likely to think U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan had been the right thing to do.

Finally, one area where the 2013 Pew survey differs from Page and Bouton’s results is public attitudes toward unilateralism. A slight majority of the public supported unilateral foreign policies, the highest ever recorded in nearly 50 years of tracking this opinion. In contrast, only 33 percent of the public felt the United States should “go it alone” internationally in 2002, according to Page and Bouton.67 This new isolationist mood among the public was probably driven by fatigue from prolonged military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and the recent economic recession in the United States, leading citizens to be more focused on solving domestic rather than foreign problems. Time will tell whether this public move toward unilateralism was a momentary blip or a permanently changed public outlook. The Pew survey did not ask CFR members a comparable question, so we cannot be sure whether public and CFR views toward unilateralism differ. Yet public support for unilateral policies was much higher in 2013 than in 2002, perhaps even reaching the level of foreign policymakers.

CONCLUSION

Does public opinion influence public policy? As you learned at the beginning of this chapter, aggregate empirical studies had demonstrated that policy is related to opinion more often than not. This congruence between opinion and policy is highest for salient issues. Congruence also varies across individuals; attentive and higher-income people are most likely to have their preferences realized in public
policy. Indeed, there is a strong indication that affluent Americans are driving the policymaking process, with the views of lower-income citizens coinciding with enacted policies only if they share the same views as their wealthier counterparts.

Considering whether policymakers try to influence public opinion during policymaking encouraged us to examine how leaders use information about public opinion. Ambiguous evidence suggests that officials, particularly the president, collect public opinion for the dual purposes of responding to and especially shaping public opinion. When policies reflect the preferences of the public, the public's opinions have been influenced, perhaps even manipulated, by leaders, we hesitate to conclude that democratic responsiveness has occurred. Finally, recent scholarship on foreign policy demonstrates that public opinion influences policies in this domain less than was once thought. Business interests and policy experts exert a stronger influence over foreign policy, which perhaps explains why policy decisions are often out of step with public preferences. Overall, then, we agree with others that, when it comes to control over public policy, citizens are "semi-sovereign." In other words, public policy only sometimes coincides with the public's opinion.

What do democratic theorists make of these empirical findings? Elite democrats would likely be most satisfied. When public policy does coincide with the preferences of the public, it is best that the views of the most attentive citizens are heeded. The fact that politicians are increasingly using polls to try to shape public opinion to support policy options that the politicians have already designed (without following the wishes of the public to do so) would please elite democrats. They would also be heartened to learn that leaders appear to be exercising discretion in the realm of foreign policy and are more likely to rely on the views of business leaders and policy experts than the uninformed public.

The empirical research also provides some, albeit limited, support for the views of pluralists. Those officials who do not conduct private polls appear to rely on interest groups to assess the public's wishes. The nation's public policies also are more likely to match the preferences of interest groups than the public. Yet it does not appear to be the case that a variety of groups actively advocate on behalf of the public's views, as pluralism would suggest. Indeed it tends to be business-oriented groups that have the largest influence over public policy.

Finally, there is much in this chapter to worry participatory democrats. The greater influence of wealthy citizens on policy undermines these theorists' goal of political equality. Also problematic is the evidence that politicians believe there are times they should not follow the wishes of the public. Whether ignoring the public, as seems to be the case in foreign policymaking, or trying to alter citizens' views with crafted rhetoric and perhaps misleading information, the end result is a lack of democratic responsiveness.

**Suggested Sources for Further Reading**


These books explore citizens' foreign policy opinions. Berinsky and Holsti focus on the content and sources of opinions toward war. Gries examines a wide range of foreign policy views, concluding that ideology is a key driver of these attitudes.


These scholars argue that policy does not necessarily respond to the wishes of the American public. Both books demonstrate that politicians can be motivated to manipulate public opinion rather than enact policies the public truly wants.


The essays in *Who Gets Represented?* explore a variety of topics related to equality in the opinion-policy relationship. Notably, the authors explore group differences in policy opinions and whether some segments of the public are more likely to have their views reflected in policy. Gilens also focuses on equality and concludes that policy is more similar to the preferences of the rich than the poor.


These influential studies demonstrate that national policies do correspond with the wishes of the public. Soroka and Wlezien’s book also demonstrates that changes in policy (specifically, government spending) influence public opinion.


This link will take you to the 2014 appearance of Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. These political scientists discussed their study that we profiled in this chapter. Check it out!

Chicago Council on Global Affairs, www.thecouncil.org
Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), www.cfr.org

These websites each contain a wealth of information about contemporary foreign policy issues. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, formerly the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, was formed in 1922, whereas the CFR is one year older. Both have been analyzing global affairs and U.S. foreign policy since they were created.

**PART VI**

What Do We Make of Public Opinion in a Democracy?