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The Impact that Public Opinion and The Presidency has on Policy

Introduction

The influence of public opinion on American foreign policy is significant but it's also unpredictable. According to Hook and Skonieczny in *U.S. Foreign Policy: The Paradox of World Power*, Americans typically overlook international concerns unless they have a direct or immediate impact on national security or are one of the focus topics having a lot of media coverage. The way that news companies, political leaders, and political ideologies present world events frequently impacts the public's attention as it changes outward. As a result, there is a cycle of reactions from the public because politicians have a big impact on public opinions they use later to support their decisions. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs poll shows that there's a 21-point increase in Republican support for military aid and support for Ukraine, showing a big shift in perspective. Republican supporters, especially Trump Supporters, match President Trump's energy in the change of attitude toward Russia by expressing their unhappiness with Putin. This shows how powerful leadership frequently influences the impact of public opinion and changes more than common attitudes and opinions. In Paul Pillar's journal paper in *Political Science Quarterly*, it says that Americans usually view foreign affairs through a simple basic perspective that overlooks strategic and ideological differences, and it supports the changing environment. People are encouraged to look at international conflicts in a sense of moral clarity instead of political complexity because of the general long term assumption that the United States is an international power for good. This pattern can be seen with the war in Ukraine, the media covering what's happening as the public's support for America's involvement in the conflict has increased. This moral stance on the topic encouraged Democrats, Independents, and some Republicans who had previously been against America to engage with foreign affairs.

De Tocqueville's idea of the "tyranny of the majority" gives a different perspective on how the general public can be both limiting and influencing foreign policy discussions. He stressed that when the majority of the public decides what is moral or best for the country, different perspectives in America could risk being disregarded or ignored. Today, it's especially noticeable when there's efforts to reduce help or change the attention to national problems and this is viewed as being unreliable or supporting power. But moral choices can restrict the amount of allowable debate to happen, one of the reasons being because they can push leaders to take the opinion they want. Presidents often align their views and what they say with popular moral narratives and arguments, even when doing this could affect strategic goals they planned on, because they understand the political risks of ignoring or opposing the majority of the public's opinion. However Hook and Skonieczny stress that popular involvement in foreign policy tends to be brief and limited. Public interest tends to decline as media attention shifts or

domestic interests take priority. With this perspective this means that public opinion acts more as a short-term restriction instead of a long-term roadmap. Support for Ukraine might be on the rise right now because of the coverage in media and President Trump's statements, but it could also decrease as the costs of ongoing involvement grows more clear. Ultimately popular opinion in American foreign policy is emotionally powerful, but it's also not long term and is unstable. It rarely maintains impact on long-term strategic decisions, but it plays a part in setting the values and guidelines for responding to crises like what's happening with Ukraine.

Presidential Power

Although the emotional state and ethical framework of American foreign policy can be heavily influenced by public opinion, the government's executive branch still has the majority of power to make choices. The president has gained a great amount of power over foreign policy over the last few years, sometimes with little public or political accountability and oversight. As James Goldgeier and Elizabeth Saunders argue, "Constraints are like muscles: once atrophied, they require bulking up before the competitor can get back in the game. Trump did not create the freedom of action he is now routinely displaying. He has merely revealed just how difficult it is to prevent it", (Goldgeier & Saunders, pg. 145). The decreasing strength of the checks on presidential power is an underlying issue that has been around for a long time and is not specific to one leadership. Ultimately, a tightly controlled government structure makes the decision to use the funds or to send weapons. As Goldgeier and Saunders state, "Constraints are like muscles: once atrophied, they require bulking up before the competitor can get back in the game. Trump did not create the freedom of action he is now routinely displaying. He has merely revealed just how difficult it is to prevent it", (Goldgeier & Saunders, pg. 145). This shows the level that presidential authority and freedom has influenced foreign policy. Even when public opinion supports executive action, as it has in Ukraine, administrative pressure and leadership agreement instead of democratic agreement influence policy.

The president's ability to take quick and major action, often without the approval of Congress, reflects a larger trend towards limited authority that has changed the balance of power in American politics. Because of this amount and value of power, decisions end up being influenced more by the president's choice and political agreement instead of by political discussion, even in cases where the public supports an idea like sending aid to Ukraine. In Goldsmith 2025 study *Maximum Executive Power and the Fate of the Unitary Executive*, he supports this perspective by saying that current presidents are increasingly turning to an "unitary executive" approach. Based on this structure, the president has an extensive and reinforced authority over the executive branch. Which includes foreign policy measures such as diplomacy, sanctions, and using military assistance. Goldsmith warns that "Trump, who is unconcerned by tyrannophobia, is operating with a different playbook. Many of Trump's actions—like the IG firings—are lawful exercises of a president's massive constitutional and statutory power that are designed to exemplify the robustness of his presidential control. But much of what he is doing

either exceeds the Supreme Court's current conceptions of the limits of presidential power or at least are very aggressive and contested assertions of presidential power", (Goldsmith 2025). Major foreign policy decisions, like giving aid to Ukraine, can be decided with little involvement from the public or Congress because of the president's power. Even when support grows, decisions about aid and weapons are made by a tiny executive group that prioritizes the president's goals instead of by the general public opinion.

The National Security Council (NSC), which sometimes avoids using normal government processes, it's known as an important factor in determining foreign policy. It has become a powerful political institution and structure in its own right as Stephen Auger puts it. The president's strategic viewpoint and decision making process are significantly impacted and influenced by what the National Security Adviser, Daalder and Destler describe as "the most influential foreign policy figure after the president". This shift reflects the rise of "emphasizing the rise of presidential "courtiers" on White House national security staffs at the expense of the "barons" who headed the cabinet departments.", (Auger, 2012, pg.168). This controlled process and system, in the instance of Ukraine, means that decisions about giving them aid are decided in a small executive circle, from what the public wants the discussion to be or it being brought to congress's attention. Public opinion is often affected more by authority communication than the public influence, even though it encourages foreign policy, as recent research has shown. Republican support for military support in Ukraine has increased by 21-points, according to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Smeltz and Kafura stated, "The most substantial shifts are among Republicans (+9 percentage points for economic assistance, +21 military aid) and Independents (+7 economic, +10 military). In fact, 51 percent of Republicans now support providing military aid to Ukraine", (Smeltz & Kafura 2025). The increase is mainly because of President Trump and the party leaders' change of their opinion. The sudden change shows how leadership statements have the power to quickly change public opinion, especially if there is an increased of media attention and politicized framing on a topic like this. Stated in *Dramatic Rise in Republican Support for Ukraine*, "Overall, six in 10 continue to support the United States sending arms and military supplies to Kyiv (62%, up from 52% in March) and providing economic assistance to Ukraine (61%, up from 55% in March)", (Smeltz & Kafura 2025). As noted by Hook and Skonieczny, "remain largely insulated from public opinion due to their complexity and low visibility" (Hook & Skonieczny, 2022), become stronger when leadership ideology and media coverage clash during times of crisis. However, this influence usually goes away fast, giving the president and their cabinet significant more freedom and flexibility in taking action in a situation like Ukraine. However, the government continues to control foreign policy and have a big impact on public opinion while also acting as a brief guide instead of a point of reference.

Public Opinion

Considering the limits of public involvement in foreign policy, Paul Pillar and Alexis De Tocqueville give significant view points. According to Pillar, Americans frequently use simplistic moral explanations to understand international events, which overlooks the ideological and strategic complexities of foreign policy judgments and decisions. "The U.S. posture toward Iran is a prominent example of how traumatic history, domestic politics, and emotions that flow from both can overpower more-sober evaluation of the U.S. interests at stake in a foreign relationship. Popular, politically charged sentiment about confronting foreign villains can have benefits; it fueled, for example, the enormous sacrifices by Americans that were necessary to win World War II. The case of Iran shows that it also can have major disadvantages", (Pillar 2013, p. 231). As seen in media coverage of the crisis in Ukraine as an argument between both parties, this tendency makes the public opinions emotionally strong but strategically weak.

Leaders have been driven and feel pressured by these high emotional times to act more in response to moral outrage or public outrage instead of the long-term strategic goals. As Pillar has said, "The U.S. posture toward Iran is a prominent example of how traumatic history, domestic politics, and emotions that flow from both can overpower more-sober evaluation of the U.S. interests at stake in a foreign relationship. Popular, politically charged sentiment about confronting foreign villains can have benefits; it fueled, for example, the enormous sacrifices by Americans that were necessary to win World War II. The case of Iran shows that it also can have major disadvantages", (Pillar 2013, p. 231). Even though at times it may sometimes be helpful politically, the emotional pressure can also limit the amount of discussions that happen, especially when moral opinions dominate the public's engagement and discussions. De Tocqueville's idea of the "tyranny of the majority" gives more insight on how popular moral narratives can silence and suppress different perspectives. Different perspectives, for example questioning giving aid or prioritizing national issues instead, face the possibility of being overlooked or ignored once a majority decides what's seen as national or morally correct. When seen together, these ideologies show that although public opinion can influence both the urgency and the tone of foreign policy for a short period of time, it usually doesn't determine its long-term future.

Instead of telling the public, the president is likely to direct American policy actions regarding Ukraine in the future. The course readings, like Jack Goldsmith's then Goldgeier and Saunders, shows how mainly the National Security Council determines the majority of foreign policy choices. A larger shift in American politics is towards strong power can also be seen in the president's ability or willingness to act on something quickly and effectively, sometimes wanting to avoid Congress or long public debates. Government action is often backed by political cues, for example President Trump's changing attitude toward Russia and Ukraine, instead of actual public efforts even when the general public seems to support it, as it does with Ukraine at the moment. Recent polling done by *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs* shows a

21-point increase in Republican support for military aid. Showing how leadership positioning, especially from someone like President Trump and his following, it can quickly change the general public opinion. Smeltz & Kafura stated that, “Trump’s public expressions of frustration with Putin and his subsequent decision to sell US military equipment to Europe to send to Ukraine may have loosened some Republicans’ opposition to some of these policies...It is entirely possible that, should Trump turn his back on Kyiv and embrace Putin’s views of the war, that his Republican base would join him”, (Smeltz & Kafura 2025). This shows that public opinion is responsive and also politically important, but it's not necessarily direct when it comes to impacting policy. In the long run, presidential leadership is still likely to control, but the public may influence decisions during moments of major crisis or when leaders open space for debate. Structural issues, like the structural dominance of the National Security Adviser, the influence of it, and governments decisions strengthening the executive's power, all improving the president’s dominant role. As Hook and Skonieczny mention, “the public’s role in foreign policy is largely reactive,” getting traction only when the leadership like President Trump brings it up and theres media attention converges.

Daalder and Destler in *The Next National Security Adviser* argue that the growing power of the National Security Council and the people who work closely with that President has changed foreign policy decisions, limiting the need for broader discussions and decreasing the impact of the cabinet members. As Daalder and Destler said, “It is at the White House and, within it, at the NSC that such integration occurs—which is why, aside from the president himself, the national security adviser is potentially the most important person in government today”, (Daalder & Destler 2009, p. 8). Even in some instances where public opinion supports an idea or a certain way to go about it, leadership opinion instead of the popular opinion that is seen a lot often determines the support. President Trump and the people who work behind him ultimately decide the direction of American foreign policy, even though popular opinion could influence what happens and the narrative.

Conclusion

American foreign policy is mainly determined by the leadership's decisions based more on the President and less by the public. Public opinion rarely determines the long term strategic goals and actions, but it can affect the urgency and emotional impact of foreign policy, especially during times of crisis or extensive coverage in the media. The president's dominant position is reinforced by governmental structures like the National Security Council, leadership opinions, and the increasing power of the President. Pillar talks about how the public often engages with international affairs and issues using simplified moral narratives, which could improve emotional support but also limit the strategic complexity. De Tocqueville's idea of the "tyranny of the majority" shows how dominant moral systems may suppress debates and limit the discussion that happens on topic. These perspectives show how public opinion is mainly reactive instead of a controlling impact and influence, instead it temporarily influences the narrative but rarely

influences the overall direction of policy. In the situation of Ukraine, the messages from leadership compared to popular opinion has been the main cause of increasing support from the public. In the end, public opinion is more of a start and short term instead of a plan. President Trump and the people who work closely with him will remain to be the ones who are behind American foreign policy.

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