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PUBLIC OPINION, FOREIGN POLICY AND DEMOCRACY

by

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zed/structured form (as defined above) is seldom addressed systematically. Everts has shown earlier that the two manifestations of public opinion do not necessarily point into the same direction and may have very different impacts.⁵⁸

We would therefore plead here to extend the study of public opinion in these two directions: 1) to develop better measures of saliency which allow us to differentiate between the views of those who are actively involved, and who are the individuals manning the organizations which 2) manifest themselves as organized public opinion. Information about the degree of saliency may also be of help in the normative debate over democratic control of foreign policy.

In recent years, a number of studies -valuable in themselves- have appeared on the evolution of the content of public opinion in particular countries and on particular issues, both descriptive and more analytical.⁵⁹ Progress has also been made and some convergence has been reached with respect to the structure and central elements of public attitudes in this area. But as was noted already above, there is a considerable asymmetry in the sense that the bulk of research covers the situation in the United States and information about Europe is much less abundant. Replications of American studies in what is after all a very different political culture are almost totally absent.

In 1985 a comparative volume of studies was published on public opinion on questions of peace and security, dealing with the situation in six European countries and the US.⁶⁰ The materials included covered the evolution of public opinion up to 1982/1983. Since then no other collective analysis of this type has been made. There are several reasons why an effort should be made to update and extend this work. The Flynn/Rattinger volume found its interest and rationale in the question of the impact of the then very visible and prominent peace move-

⁵⁸ See note 16

⁵⁹ The annual surveys of public opinion published in the *SIPRI Yearbooks* for 1984, 1985 and 1986 by E. den Ouden were discontinued.

⁶⁰ G. Flynn and H. Rattinger (eds), *Public opinion and Atlantic defence* (see note 23).

ment on opinion formation and policy making, but could not include the aftermath of this period. One can, for instance, raise the question of whether the continuity and stability of public opinion on questions of defence and security suggested by many of the data in that study, still holds today in view of the fundamental changes in the policies of the USSR and in East-West relations, which have begun to change or even abolish the Cold War context. It was, one may argue, this traditional context which for many years provided the background against which opinion formation took place. The impact of the 'Gorbachev phenomenon' on public attitudes concerning questions of defence calls for closer and more systematic inspection to see whether and to what extent one may now expect changes which are more than incidental and temporary fluctuations.

With respect to the normative debate on the compatibility of democracy and foreign policy it is important to note that recent studies (Page/Shapiro, Hurwitz/-Pettley, Wittkopf) reinforce the conclusion that the general public is less interested, emotional and volatile in its opinions than earlier observers thought and the elitist approach to foreign policymaking would have it. Public opinion at the mass level is both stable and coherent. This image of a 'rational public' has potentially important normative implications.

The debate on the relationship between opinion and policy is still open. It is still difficult to make general statements on the question of whether there is congruence between opinions and policy - and if so in what causal direction, or whether the two are totally unrelated. To the extent that studies have been made they are - with a few exceptions - of questionable value as far as the possibility of generalization is concerned. The available data also suggest that operationalization and research design in general have a considerable and potentially distortive influence on the outcomes.⁶¹

It is therefore justified to plead for additional efforts to try to fill these

⁶¹ We should acknowledge that a study such as the present one may suffer from lack of information about relevant publications, which should not have been overlooked. We would be grateful for information about additional studies which would force us to adapt our critical assessment.

Eickelberg 1989

study changes in opinions are related to changes in policies (as measured by various indicators for policy outcomes⁵⁶). This implied measurements at different moments in time to establish congruence (i.e. changes in the same direction). Measurements of public opinion took place on the basis of 609 sets of identical questions, with 6 % change taken as the threshold of significance. This analysis led the authors to conclude:

- There is a high degree of congruence between opinion and policy changes: at least 43%, but if further qualitative analyses of noncongruent cases and cases of no-change are taken into account this percentage may increase to 66 % or more.
- If the time factor is taken into account it appears that changes in public opinion more often precede policy changes than vice versa. This suggests a strong 'democratic responsiveness'.

- Congruence is stronger in cases of more profound and lasting opinion changes and when the saliency of the issue is high.

Nevertheless Page and Shapiro are reluctant to claim too much. It is not evident that democratic control is as strong in other less 'conspicuous' cases as the ones analyzed in this study. Also, it is remarkable in how many case policymaking is not responsive and may even take an opposite turn.

The authors warn against drawing too hasty conclusions in spite of their suggestive research design, and suggest topics for additional research which would be necessary before one could give a more decisive answer. These would include the question on the basis of which information opinions are formed, and how the media of communication and politicians shape or even distort and manipulate opinion formation. We have to take into account the possibility that politicians through their relations with opinionmakers and the media - play an independent role in shaping the public opinion to which they then 'respond' at a later stage.

⁵⁶ "Policy-output indicators" have been described in B.I. Page and R.Y. Shapiro in the annex of two papers: Congruence between Preferences and Policy: a Preliminary Report, paper Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Cincinnati, 1981; and Effects of Public Opinion on Policy, paper Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, New York, 1981.

Some scepticism as to the value of the outcomes referred to above seems justified on the basis of other studies in the spirit of the "democratic frustration-school". On the basis of a similar study comparing public opinion in Great Britain, Canada and the US, Brooks concluded that in about 60% of the cases there was no congruence between the majority view and policy. This inconsistency was not dependent on the size of the majority or approaching elections. An interesting difference occurred in Great Britain where lack of congruence was considerably lower under Labour as compared to Conservative governments.⁵⁷

7. SOME PROVISIONAL CONCLUSIONS. WHAT IS NEEDED ?

At the beginning of this paper we argued that we needed conceptual clarification and more empirical knowledge on the nature, content and impact of public opinion in order to make progress in the normative debate on the applicability of the democratic model in the foreign policy process. Without delving too deeply in the various methodological problems it seems warranted to conclude that this need still exists and that available empirical research does not yet provide us with a clear and unambiguous picture of the mutual relationship between opinion and policies in the realm of foreign affairs.

With respect to public opinion as a concept we noted an evolution toward treating public opinion as the sum total of all individual opinions, each of which is treated as equally relevant to obtain a picture of the prevailing climate of opinion. It is evident that the bulk of conventional public opinion research works on the basis of this definition. The shortcomings of this approach should be obvious. On the one hand it denies the existence of those differences in degree of knowledge, interest and involvement (or saliency) which appear to be particularly relevant to the impact of public opinion on the policymaking process. Other limitations of this traditional approach include that public opinion in its organi-

⁵⁷ J.E. Brooks, Democratic Frustration in the Anglo-American Politic: a Quantification of Inconsistency between Mass Public Opinion and Public Policy, Western Political Quarterly, 38 (1985), 2, 250-263.

leaders can increase popular approval by acting opposite to public expectations. This can be demonstrated by the cases of presidents Carter and Reagan. One could also point to the fact that only conservative leaders can succeed in making progressive adaptations to new situations. Here we can think of the role of Richard Nixon with respect to ending the war in Vietnam and making an opening toward China, and of President de Gaulle with respect to liquidating the war in Algeria, ⁵⁴

It is generally accepted that economic factors, problems of wages and employment carry most weight with the voters. This does not mean that foreign policy can not be used by leaders as a means to influence public opinion and to increase approval. American presidents, over the past century have been more likely to use or threaten to use military force internationally in years when the economy was doing badly or when there were elections.⁴⁶

Evidence for the view that public opinion controls policy can be gathered from the declining popularity of political leaders because of the length and cost of wars. Cotton concludes that even leaders and parties which start and win wars are likely to be punished by their electorates. All wars carried by the United States in the 20th century show this pattern, even World War II, which was widely seen as just and popular.⁴⁷ Threatening a foreign enemy may not only serve to divert domestic discontent but also to strengthen centralized political control. Once into a crisis leaders are more likely to escalate to war in times of economic difficulties when this may help to increase their rating.⁴⁸ Russett and Graham conclude that there is perhaps a perverse form of democratic responsive-

⁴⁶ B. Russett, Economic decline, electoral pressure, and the initiation of interstate conflict. In: C. Gochman and A.N. Sabrosky (eds) Prisoners of war? Nation states in the modern era. Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1989

⁴⁷ Timothy Y.C. Cotton, War and American democracy, Journal of Conflict Resolution, 30 (1986), 616-635

⁴⁸ P. James, Externalization of conflict: testing a crisis based model, Canadian Journal of Political Science 20 (1987), 573-98. Idem Crisis and War. Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988.

ness in the sense that leaders interact with public opinion by initiating confrontational policies which increase their popularity at home and in the short run, especially when there is economic discontent. They manipulate opinion by increasing their popularity without addressing the underlying causes of discontent.⁴⁹ Evidence to support the thesis that leaders and public opinion interact can also be found in the study of Graham of US arms control policies. He concludes that public opinion played an important role in framing the debate and determining outcomes.⁵⁰

Russett and others have found strong relationships between public opinion and defense spending, again for the US.⁵¹ In their study of Sweden Goldman et al. found that voters' and legislators opinions on defense policy were similar but not on foreign policy in general.⁵² At the macro-level other efforts have also been made to relate policies to aggregated public opinion data.⁵³ But this research too was not without its shortcomings: a small number of cases, the difficulty of operationalizing "policies" in a fashion allowing measurement, and the problem of establishing causal relations. Despite the larger number of cases similar shortcomings are evident in other work.⁵⁴

The most encompassing study so far has been made by Page and Shapiro.⁵⁵ In this

⁴⁹ Russett and Graham 1988, p.9

⁵⁰ T.W. Graham, The politics of failure: strategic nuclear arms control, public opinion, and domestic politics in the United States, 1945-1985. Cambridge Mass. Ph.D. Dissertation, M.I.T., 1988

⁵¹ C.W. Ostrom and R. Marra, 1986 US defense spending and the Soviet estimate, American Political Science Review, 80 (1986), 819-42. B. Russett, Democracy, public opinion and nuclear weapons, The Contribution of the social sciences to preventing nuclear war, P. Tebcock, R. Jervis, Ph. Stern and C. Tilly, eds, New York, Oxford University press, 1988b.

⁵² Goldman et al., see note 3

⁵³ R.S. Erikson, The Relationship between Public opinion and State Policy: a New Look Based on Some Forgotten Data, in: American Political Science Review, 22 (1976), 25-36; R. Weisberg, Public Opinion and Popular Government. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1976.

⁵⁴ A.D. Monroe, Consistency between Public Preferences and National Policy Decisions, in: American Political Quarterly, 7 (1979), 3-19.

⁵⁵ B.I. Page and R.Y. Shapiro, Effects of Public Opinion on Policy, American Political Science Review, 77 (1983), 175-190.

consensus on its exact nature nor on the way in which it should be operationalized. This is probably among the reasons why examples of systematic research in this area are not easy to find. Many authors fall short of empirical theory formation by limiting themselves to what are basically just illustrations and anecdotes.⁴² There are but few systematic and/or quantitative studies of this relationship.

We do, of course, have examples of more qualitative studies of specific decisionmaking processes in which the relative impact of particular factors and actors is estimated via historical reconstruction. It is hazardous, however, to generalize on the basis of such case studies, and overcoming this drawback by making a large number of case studies is very labourintensive and requires a rigorous analytical framework.⁴³ The other road, the more quantitative approach, presents methodological problems of comparable magnitude. The results are very dependent on the, often arbitrary, choice of mathematics. The operationalization of central concepts and ways of measurement also often reflect the subjective judgment of the researcher. Apart from these more general problems, specific problems exist in connection with the relationship between public opinion and policy. First of all, a degree of congruence or correspondence between observed public opinion (however it is measured) and policies has to be established. But correlations are one thing, causality another. Public opinion may cause politicians to behave in a certain way or the opposite may occur, as in the 'rally round the flag'-situation when people support the government whatever it is doing, just because it acts with firmness. And even if one can establish that public opinion precedes policy making, one may ask, how public opinion came about in an earlier phase, and what the role of the political leaders and the media sympathetic to them has been in

⁴² See e.g. R.S. Beal and R.H. Hinckley, *Presidential Decision Making and Opinion Polls, The Adults, Polling and the Democratic Consensus*, vol. 472, 1984, who mention the uses of poll results by American Presidents. A similar study is S. Sudman, *The Presidents and the Polls, Public Opinion Quarterly*, 46 (1982), 301-310.

⁴³ See for an example of such a project Ph.P. Evera (ed.), *Controversies at Home: Domestic Factors in the foreign policy of the Netherlands*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985

that respect.

We shall yet take a brief look at the evidence for the four views outlined above.

There is a considerable body of opinion which concludes that the attitudes of the mass public with respect to foreign policy can be discounted, because there is little interest, involvement and knowledge⁴⁴. The final denouement of the battle over nuclear weapons in Europe, the question of the cruise missiles in particular suggests that mass preferences with respect to such things as deployment of new generations of nuclear weapons and doctrines about their use ('no first use') can be ignored as long as elite consensus is maintained or as long as acceptance of nuclear deterrence and its implications is for all practical purposes a condition for access to governmental power.

Also, as Russett and Graham point out, public opinion can be seen as irrelevant when alternative majorities for opposing courses of action can be found⁴⁵. This will be the case when minorities on the periphery of the political spectrum cancel each other out, and the balance is held by large group in the centre with a low degree of commitment to particular ways of action. Public opinion can then be used to legitimize quite different policies. We are thinking again of the question of the cruise missiles in particular. In general, it seems that majorities can be mustered for both confrontational and conciliatory policies as long as both are in moderation.

This element of moderation limits considerably the possibility to obtain a 'rally round the flag' situation, such as has been noted to occur in connection with the initial (successful) use of military power. But the increase in popularity arising from such acts may be shortlived, even ephemeral. Toughness is appreciated, but so is conciliation and negotiation. Some observers note that political

⁴⁴ W. Caspary, *The "mood theory": a new study of public opinion and foreign policy, American Political Science Review*, 64 (1970), 10-11, and T.W. Graham *The pattern and importance of public awareness and knowledge in the nuclear age, Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 32 (1988), 319-354.

⁴⁵ Russett and Graham, *Public Opinion*, p.3

public opinion with respect to foreign policy and international affairs is more structured, stable and rational than previously assumed. An important caveat to be made is that this conclusion is primarily based on analyses of the United States. Replication of these for Europe remains to be done. However, the elitist school which rejects the desirability of (more) democratic control of foreign policy seems to have lost an important argument. "When information is unbiased, public opinion is very much worth taking into account in policy-making. There is no need to fear democracy."³⁶

5. HOW OPINIONS ARE FORMED

With respect to the formation of opinions, recent research gives less support than previously thought to the so-called 'two-step flow of communications', i.e. a flow from policy makers and the media to opinion leaders and from these to the general. If anything, the impact of the media seems to be more direct.³⁷ The media of communication appear not to be able to affect changes without changes in the 'real world'.³⁸ Changes appear to depend on individual knowledge and interest, and exposure to the media, the credibility of political and media figures, and the social network of individuals' direct personal contacts. These networks can have a self-sustaining effect, leading to stable bimodal and polarized distributions of attitudes on controversial issues. Noelle-Neuman refers to 'public opinion' as the set of opinions which people feel that they can safely express without becoming socially isolated. If they feel they cannot do so, a 'spiral of silence' may emerge around certain views.³⁹ Conversely, people with similar views tend to share the same networks.

³⁶ Shapiro and Page, 1988, p.244.

³⁷ D.P. Fan, Predictions of public opinion, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1988.

³⁸ D. Munton, Public opinion and the media in Canada from cold war to detente to new cold war, International Journal, 39 (1984), 171-213.

³⁹ E.Noelle-Neuman, Turbulences in the climate of opinion: methodological applications of the spiral of silence theory, Public Opinion Quarterly, 41 (1977), 143-158.

A considerable school of research explains the formation of opinions not as a social process working from outside, but as a psychological process working from the inside of individuals. Some of these studies have been mentioned above. Although there is evidence that elites have generally more structured and stable belief systems, others have concluded that "the mass public has maintained a coherent and remarkably stable set of foreign policy beliefs in the post-Vietnam decade"⁴⁰ This can still be reconciled with a general lack of knowledge and involvement, because people will turn, if they 'need an opinion' on issues which do not normally concern them, to trusted media or persons in their environment.

6. THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION

With respect to the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy Russett and Graham⁴¹ suggest to distinguish between four possibilities: 1) both are unconnected and mutually irrelevant. When there are structural discrepancies between public opinion and policies one could speak of 'democratic frustration'. Two others assume some causal relationship: 2) public opinion shapes and influences policy, and 3) policymakers shape and manipulate public opinion. In these cases opinion and policy will usually not diverge too much. Finally 4), it is possible that public opinion and policy interact depending on the circumstances.

In the light of democratic theory research on the relationship between policy and public opinion is the most important of the four topics outlined in the beginning of this paper. It may help us to answer the question of how 'democratic' policymaking is, as well as provide us with arguments for or against extending democratic control. Its complexity is, however, just as evident as its importance. Although 'influence' is one of the key concepts of political science, there is no

⁴⁰ E.Wittkopf, On the foreign policy beliefs of the American people: a critique and some evidence, International Studies Quarterly, 30 (1986), 425-45, p.434.

⁴¹ B. Russett and Th. W. Graham, Public Opinion and National Security Policy: Researching and Measuring the Impacts, Paper International Political Science Association 14th World Congress, Washington, 1988

underlying dimension²⁸. Analyses of attitudes on questions of defense in the Netherlands (and the same seems to be true for other European countries) found that these correlate quite strongly with party affiliation and one's self-placement on a Left-Right continuum²⁹. On the other hand there is apparently not a single dimension on which foreign policy preferences, especially with respect to the use of force can be arranged. On the basis of factor analysis of attitude scales Wittkopf found that one should distinguish between cooperative and militant internationalism.³⁰ There are therefore four distinct groups: 'Internationalists' (those who favour both cooperative and military involvement of the US in world affairs), 'Accommodationists' (who oppose military intervention, but favour cooperative action), 'Hardliners' (who show the opposite pattern) and 'Isolationists' (who reject both cooperative and military action). Data from 1974, 1978 and 1982 show a stable and equal distribution of the public over these four groups. Internationalists represent the 'Cold War consensus'. Elites are most frequently accommodationists. Only very few hardliners are found in this group.³¹

Comparable studies of the situation in Europe are much more rare.³² Ziegler

²⁸ See for a discussion of the concept of belief system and examples of empirical studies the special issue of *International Studies Quarterly* 30(1986), 4, with contributions by O.R. Holsti and J. Rosenau, Th. Ferguson, E. Wittkopf and Ch. Kegley

²⁹ See e.g. chapter on the Netherlands and other chapters in Flynn and Rattinger 1985 (see note 23). See also O. Holsti and J. Rosenau, Domestic and foreign policy belief systems among American leaders, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 32 (1988), and H. Rattinger, Trends and correlates of West German public opinion on national security issues in the 1980's, paper Conference 'Rethinking national security: The public dimension', Center for International Studies, University of Toronto, May 22-24 1988.

³⁰ E.R. Wittkopf and M. Maggiorio, Elites and masses: a comparative analysis of attitudes toward America's world role, *Journal of Politics* 45 (1983), 307-33; E.R. Wittkopf, Elites and Masses: Another Look at Attitudes toward America's World Role, *International Studies Quarterly*, 31 (1987), pag. 131-159; idem, Public attitudes toward American foreign and national security policy since Vietnam, paper Conference 'Rethinking national security: The public dimension', Center for International Studies, University of Toronto, May 22-24 1988.

³¹ See Wittkopf 1987, table 6, p.146

³² One exception of a comparative study covering 14 countries (including the US and 13 European countries and dealing with such themes as expectations of war, willingness to fight and die for one's country, and faith in the army is O. Linthaug, War and Defense attitudes: a first look a survey data from 14 countries, *Journal of Peace Research* 23 (1986), 1, 69-76

compared four countries: Great Britain, France, West Germany and Italy. He also rejects the idea of a unidimensional (liberal-conservative) opinion structure (as was suggested by Converse³³) and - comparable to Wittkopf - found two dimensions: military and non-military cooperation and four groups.³⁴ The distributions for the four countries show interesting differences (table 1)

Table I Foreign policy orientations

| | BRD | FRA | GB | ITA |
|-----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Atlanticists | 58% | 12% | 29% | 33% |
| Military Allies | 21% | 7% | 43% | 8% |
| Dovish Partners | 12% | 35% | 5% | 37% |
| Isolationists | 9% | 46% | 23% | 22% |

Source: Ziegler 1987

Analyses such as these suffer from the fact that they do not allow us to inspect the stability of attitudes over time. Hurrwitz and Pefley, moreover, have criticized the method of factor analysis for its arbitrary elements. Instead, they offer an 'hierarchical' model. Closest to the surface we find concrete opinions on such questions as defense expenditure or particular courses of action. These are shaped by what they call 'general postures' such as 'militarism' or 'isolationism'. These, in turn are determined by the 'core values' of the individual, such as ethnocentrism or the morality of war. Using the LISREL method Hurwitz and Pefley found empirical confirmation for their theoretical assumptions. Incidentally, they argue, contrary to the usual argument, that consistency and structure are furthered and not hindered by lack of information. In such cases individuals refer back to 'higher levels' and values.³⁵

Despite the methodological controversies it seems fairly safe to conclude that

³³ see note 8

³⁴ A.H. Ziegler Jr., The Structure of Western European Attitudes towards Atlantic Cooperation: Implications for the Western Alliance: *British Journal of Political Science*, 17 (1987), no.4, 457-477. This analysis was based on data of Eurobarometer 1980.

³⁵ J. Hurwitz, and M. Pefley, How are Foreign Policy Attitudes Structured? A Hierarchical Model, *American Political Science Review*, 81 (1987), 1099-1120.

plained as adaptations to -dramatic or usually repeated - real world events²¹ and to changes in the international environment has become rather strong. Today, most (American) authors no longer question whether public opinion is structured and stable, but what this structure looks like. It should be recognized, however, that most of the available studies address the situation in the United States and reflect the peculiarities of that political system. Similar research on the European situation, let alone comparative research, is much more rare. This does create a problem with respect to the generalisability of American findings²². Findings from the Netherlands underscore, however, the conclusion that the volatility of public opinion is certainly not a general phenomenon. It is evident that despite the intense societal debates and efforts by the peace movement distributions of attitudes on nuclear weapons in Western Europe did not change fundamentally during the period of and as a consequence of large scale peace movement activity.²³ Graham notes a similar stability with respect to ideas about strategic defense (ABM, SDI).²⁴ On the basis of 700 surveys in the US in the period 1945-78 Graham selected 175 dealing with arms control and nuclear weapons. He concluded

21 K.W.Deutch and R.L.Merritt, *Effects of events on national and international images, International behaviour: a social-psychological analysis*, in: H. Keiman (ed.), New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966. R.Brody and B.Page, *The impact of events on presidential popularity: the Johnson and Nixon administrations*, A. Wildavsky (ed.), *Paraspectives on the presidency*, Boston: Little Brown, 1976.

22 For a useful bibliography of American research see T.W.Graham, *American Public Opinion - War, Peace, Foreign Policy & Nuclear Weapons. An Indexed Bibliography*, Yale University, International Security & Arms Control Program, 1987.

23 See for the situation in Europe in the early eighties in general G.Flynn et al., *Public images of Western security*, The Atlantic Papers, The Atlantic Institute for International Affairs, Paris, No 64/55 (1985); G.Flynn and H.Rattinger (eds.), *The Public and Atlantic Defense*, Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheldt/ London: Croom Helm, 1985; G. de Boer, *The Polls: The European peace movement and deployment of nuclear missiles*, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 49 (1985), 119-132 and B.Russett and D.R.DeLuca, *Theater nuclear forces: public opinion in Western Europe*, *Political Science Quarterly* 98 (1983), 2, 179-. The evolution of public opinion and the sources of support for the peace movement are also discussed in Th. Rochon, *Mobilising for peace: Antinuclear movements in Western Europe*, London: Adamantine Press, 1983. See for the stability in the Federal Republic of Germany H. Rattinger, *Change versus continuity in West German public attitudes on national security and nuclear weapons in the early 1980's*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51 (1987), 495-521 and for the Netherlands Ph.P.Everts, *Continuity and change in public attitudes* (see note 14).

24 T.W.Graham, *Public attitudes toward active defenses: ABM and Star Wars, 1945-1985*, Cambridge Mass., M.I.T. Center for International Studies, 1986.

that the data suggest strong stability in the distributions of attitudes and a complex structure of public opinion. Certainly the public's answers are not 'random guesses'. The impact of question wording on the answers obtained may have been exaggerated.²⁵ The most convincing case, based on data from the US, is presented by Shapiro and Page.²⁶ They looked at 1100 survey items which had been asked more than once between 1935 and 1982. Of these 425 referred to problems of foreign policy. If the criterion for a significant change in opinions is put at 6 %, more than half of all cases show no change, and in cases where there which change close to half of those shifted at a rate of less than 10% per year. In addition, a more qualitative assessment of the changes forces the conclusion not only that opinion stability is the rule, but also that if changes occur it happens in logical and understandable patterns. American citizens have, they conclude, formed and change their policy preferences in a rational fashion - in a manner worthy of serious consideration in deliberation about the direction and content of US foreign policy. The (rapid) shifts back and forth in attitudes on defense spending in the later years of the Carter administration and the early years under Reagan are a case in point of such changes.

Related studies have explored the relationship of foreign policy opinions to more encompassing 'world images' or 'belief systems' and personality traits.²⁷

There has been considerable discussion on the question whether the idea of structured belief systems implies that foreign and domestic opinions go together on one

25 T.W. Graham, *The Pattern and Importance of Public Knowledge in the Nuclear Age*, in: *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 32 (1988), 319-334.

26 R.Y. Shapiro, and B.J. Page, *Foreign Policy and the Rational Public*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 32 (1988), 211-247

27 For an overview of the state-of-the-art and various approaches see H.-J.Rebel and L.Wecke (eds.), *Friends, Foes, Values and Fear: Inquiry into the Mechanisms of Thought in Peace and Security*, Nijmegen: Studicentrum voor Vredesvraagstukken, 1987.

100,000 demonstrators are the famous 'tip of the iceberg', while others may conclude that these are merely a vociferous minority, the views of which can be discounted against those of 'the silent majority'. It is not immediately obvious in all cases which of the various manifestations are the more important and relevant.

As pointed out above, the importance attached by people to a certain issue (its saliency) is equally, if not more, important for the political process as the content of the attitudes and opinions. For it determines whether people are willing to act upon their convictions. Unfortunately, measures of saliency are much less developed and not really reliable. This is particularly true with respect to intended voting behaviour.¹⁶ It is often argued that while the views of SPD in West Germany and those of the parties of the left in the Netherlands have only a marginal, but positive effect on the votes cast for these parties in recent elections, Labour's stand on nuclear weapons played a decisive role in its defeat at the 1983 and 1987 general elections. This was one of the reasons why Labour came to reject unilateralism and returned to a much more 'moderate' view on nuclear weapons in recent years. It is tempting to explain these differences in voting behaviour by differences in saliency.¹⁷

In one of the recent studies of the 'Gorbachev phenomenon' an effort was made to explain the lack of impact of changes in opinions on political behaviour by reference to reduced saliency. Sabin notes radically improved images of the

¹⁶ See Ph. P. Everts, Public opinion, the churches and foreign policy. Studies of domestic factors in Dutch foreign policy. Leiden, Institute for International Studies, 1983. Idem, The peace movement and public opinion. Prospects for the Nineties, presented at the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, London, 28 March-1 April 1989.

¹⁷ See G. Flynn and H. Rattinger (eds.), The Public and Atlantic Defence, (see note 23), in particular ch. 2 (on Great Britain, by I. Crewe) and 4 (on the FRG, by H. Rattinger). An opposite view, i.e. that Labour's position on nuclear weapons does not explain its defeat in the 1983 elections is defended by J. Curtice, The 1983 Election and the Nuclear Debate, in: C. Marsh and C. Fraser (eds.), Public Opinion & Nuclear Weapons, London/Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989, pp. 143-162. See also I. McAllister and A. Maghan, The nuclear weapons issue in the 1983 British general election, European Journal of Political Research 14 (1986), 5-6, 661-676. Based on data for the Netherlands A.E.H. Veuga concluded that opinions on nuclear weapons have no influence on voting behaviour (Opinions concerning nuclear weapons, in: Rebel and Wecke, 1988, pp. 123-141 (see note 27)).

Soviet Union. Yet, this did not result in mounting pressure on the British government to demand concessions and acceptance of the Soviet disarmament proposals. One of the effects - among other - of the new Soviet policy was to drastically reduce the feeling of urgency, which in turn reduced the willingness of people to engage in political pressure. It is ironic that in a sense Gorbachev's policy became the victim of his popularity in the West.¹⁸ In the Netherlands, as pointed out above, opinions did remain remarkably constant during the cruise missile debate, yet it seems evident that the saliency of the issue fluctuated strongly and together with peace movement activity.¹⁹ Quite apart from the question of whether these approaches and the measures used are beyond criticism, it is remarkable that there is so little interest in this question of saliency or willingness to act.

That's because it's so hard to change (policy) for even if it's necessary.

4. CONTENT AND CHARACTER OF PUBLIC OPINION

Most research aims merely at discovering what people think about certain issues. A next step is to discover to what extent opinions are related and form part of coherent larger bodies of thought and images. It has long been thought that public opinion on foreign affairs could be discounted because the general public was not informed and only occasionally (in times of crisis) interested in these matters. Consequently attitudes would be shallow and a certain 'moodiness' would prevail. The idea of 'moods' and volatility of public opinion was formulated most sharply by Almond.²⁰ This argument is usually picked up eagerly by the so-called foreign policy experts to argue that foreign policy could best be left in their trusted hands. Meanwhile, the evidence that public opinion is much more stable than thought earlier, and that such changes as do occur can be rationally ex-

¹⁸ P.A.G. Sabin, Assessing a Peace Offensive: the impact of Gorbachev on British Public Opinion, in RUSI and Brassey's Defence Yearbook 1988, pp. 109-123.

¹⁹ See Everts, 1988 (note 14)

²⁰ G. Almond, The American people and foreign policy (see note 6)

In these two cases there is a congruence between opinion and policy but the causal direction is opposite. There is, however, also the possibility that the two diverge, totally or to some extent.

Below, we shall look at these questions in more detail. We shall discuss the available evidence and offer some suggestions as to the potential fruitfulness of some avenues of research. Finally we shall return to our initial questions concerning the suitability of the democratic process in the realm of foreign affairs.

3. THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC OPINION

What do we talk about when we speak about 'Public opinion'? Would it not be better to use the plural 'public opinions' rather than 'public opinion' as the aggregate of individual attitudes? In the present age of a thriving opinion survey industry it has become customary to equate public opinion with opinions at the mass level as measured by opinion polls, in accordance with what Converse referred to as the "one person, one vote" principle. All votes are, moreover, given equal weight. 'Public opinion' is then either the sum total of all individual opinions or the view shared by a majority. Although widely shared today, it is useful to be reminded, as Converse did in an article commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Public Opinion Quarterly, that this view was shared by only a minority in the thirties. In those days, only the views of those who are permanently interested and involved in public affairs were seen as relevant for the concept of public opinion. Public opinion was also equated with the views of the major political groupings, or with the perceptions of important observers (politicians, newspaper editors) of what the mass public thought.¹² Today, however, most research focuses on opinions at the mass level. Although it has become evident that in order to gauge the impact on the political process it is necessary to make further distinctions here between varying degrees of interest, knowledge and

¹² P. E. Converse, Changing Conceptions of Public Opinion in the Political Process, in: Public Opinion Quarterly, 51 (1987), 512-524.

involvement, many polls still neglect this aspect. Moreover, this type of research generally neglects the relevance of the distinctions introduced by Almond between mass public, attentive public and elites, and issue publics¹³.

With respect to the content, one should also distinguish at least between latent and manifest opinions. Politically, public opinion is primarily relevant to the extent that it manifests and expresses itself. Moreover, apart from elections and referenda, public opinion at the mass level is seldom an actor-in-its-own-right. In order to have an impact on the political process it has to be mobilized and organized and given a specific structure. This can take place in many ways: demonstrations, letter writing campaigns, lobbying and other pressure group activity. We find it useful, therefore, to distinguish between the 'nonorganized' public opinion at the mass level and 'organized' or 'structured opinion'. This organized opinion manifests itself, among other things, in particular in the views and statements adopted and promoted by and on behalf of organizations and institutions (such as political parties, pressure groups, peace organizations etc.) and in the activities of these groups.¹⁴ Some authors have tried to measure organized opinion systematically and establish that organizations do have opinions of their own which together present a picture of public opinion which differs from that which emerges from mass surveys.¹⁵

In normative terms a debate is always possible about which of the various expressions of public opinion is the more authentic and representative, and consequently, how much importance should be attached to it. Some may argue that

¹³ Recent research (Neuman 1986) suggests that the idea that 10-20 % of the public can be reckoned to form the subgroup of the attentive public is, too optimistic. At least for the United States only 5 % can be considered politically active, 20 % are apolitical and the rest constitutes a mass that moves in and out of politics.

¹⁴ See Ph. P. Everts, Continuity and change in public attitudes on questions of security: The Case of the Netherlands, paper Conference 'Rethinking national security: The public dimension', Center for International Studies, University of Toronto, May 22-24 1988.

¹⁵ J. Zvi Nemenwirth, R.L. Miller and R.P. Weber, Organizations have Opinions: a Redefinition of Publics, Public Opinion Quarterly, 45 (1981), 463-476. This study, it should be noted, was not devoted to measuring organized opinion in the foreign policy field.

important goal of foreign policy (remember the American war goal in Vietnam 'to win the hearts and minds of the people'). Wars are, however, not only lost or won abroad, but also - or even more so - on the home front. With respect to nuclear deterrence, the problem poses itself in a slightly different but comparable way. The developments of recent years have shown that the weapons which are considered necessary to threaten an opponent can only be maintained or introduced if they are seen as reassuring at home. If this element is absent and public opinion is more afraid of the piling up of weapons on both sides than of the might of the opponent, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain support for a policy of nuclear deterrence.

Recent research suggests that public opinion is much more stable and rational than assumed earlier. Moreover, it is necessary to be more precise in our use of words and at least to distinguish between various forms and manifestations of public opinion, each of which is likely to have a different impact on policymaking.

It is therefore the thesis of this paper that we shall not be able to make much progress in this normative debate until we have clarified our concepts and improved our empirical knowledge considerably¹¹.

2. FOUR TOPICS OF RESEARCH

Logically, this leads to a list of at least four topics of analysis, one conceptual, the others empirical.

1) What do we mean by 'public opinion' and how do we best measure and describe it? One way of defining and measuring public opinion is to state that public opinion is what we measure with opinion surveys, but this is but one way, and perhaps not the most useful one. Below, we shall argue that at least a number of other distinctions should be made, which take into account the degree of interest and involvement on the one hand and the degree of political relevance on

¹¹ This is also the conclusion of Goldman (see note 3).

the other. Especially, we shall distinguish between 'organized' and 'non-organized' public opinion.

2) What is public opinion with respect to particular issues? Here we should note immediately that there are two dimensions which should be taken into account: (1) the content of attitudes and opinions, and (2) the intensity with which they are held (their 'saliency'). We shall argue that the second is no less important in the assessment of the impact of public opinion on the political process than the first. Therefore, we are - or should be - interested not only in what people think and whether public opinion is stable or volatile, but also whether people are interested or not, informed or ignorant, willing to act upon their conviction or apathetic.

3) How do we explain public opinion? Why do people think the way they do? It is particularly relevant - and not only for those of us who have an activist inclination and believe in the possibilities of education and information - to know to what extent attitudes and opinions are, so to say, 'inborn', and to what extent they reflect the interaction between individuals and their environment (the role of governments in particular). We shall have to make distinctions here between layers of attitudes. Some, being more concrete, are less stable and more near the surface, and others, being more general, are permanent and tied more closely to personality traits.

4) These three problems logically precede the last of our set of four questions - which is the more relevant from a political perspective: what is the relationship between public opinion and the foreign policy process? Does knowledge of people's attitudes provide us with guidance concerning the political behaviour which we may expect, for instance in the voting booth? Do policies reflect public opinion, and if they do not do so generally, what conditions have to be fulfilled? Or is the opposite true, in the sense that public opinion follows policy, that governments and ruling groups - having some access to and hence control over the media of communication - are able to manipulate public opinion?

Moreover, it is argued by the proponents of (more) democratic control that while flexibility and coherence may be necessary and secrecy sometimes required, their importance is often grossly overstated and used as an instrument to stifle domestic criticism. Broad domestic support is just as vital for the durable success of foreign policy, and it is difficult to see how this can be brought about other than through open and intense debates. That the freedom to act independently from the immediate public mood, the necessity of which is stressed so often by the adherents to the classical view, has often been used with disastrous results is an additional argument to question the wisdom of the 'experts'. Finally, it is argued by the proponents of increased public participation and democratic control, that if public opinion is at times overly emotional and lacks a basis of knowledge and interest, this may be remedied by education and information. These may provide the basis for an informed and enlightened public opinion. If there is a lack of interest today, this may just as much be due to a traditional lack of influence on policy-making as the other way round.

The plea for a more democratic foreign policy, as mentioned above, is usually not only based on the democratic ethos alone, but also on the results expected from such a change from elitarian toward more democratic forms of policy and decisionmaking in terms of policy output. It is usually argued not only that foreign policy is not so different from domestic politics that the rules of democracy cannot be applied there, but also that a democratic foreign policy would be conducive to peace and disarmament. The argument was particularly strong after World War I, which according to many had occurred as a consequence of secret dealings behind the scene. These arguments can also be traced back in the history of the debate. Again, these ideas are not new. Central in the ideas of the Enlightenment was also the conviction that man can be improved and liberated from ignorance, sickness and war. "The people, being more enlightened, will learn by degrees to regard war as the most dreadful of all calamities, the most terrible of all crimes", Condorcet wrote in 1794. At that time public opinion (the concept

appeared for the first time in the Oxford Dictionary in 1781) began to be seen more widely as a factor conducive to peace. The idea that a democratic foreign policy would also be a peace promoting foreign policy has caught on since then. In this century it has found an echo in the optimism of two American Presidents, Wilson and F.D. Roosevelt, that the wars of their time would make the world 'safe for democracy' and that the introduction of democracy in international affairs (Wilson's "open covenants openly arrived at") would lead to the abolition of war. The peoples of the world, or the United Nations would see to that. Democratically governed states would solve their problems peacefully.

That optimism turned sour very soon, but the belief in the peace-promoting role of public opinion lingered on.

The debate referred to above does not only have academic and theoretical importance but also gained practical relevance as 'the people' became more and more directly involved in international affairs, the preparation and conduct of war in particular. Conscription was introduced in the Napoleonic wars, and remained afterwards. In the 19th century also those forms of production and organization were introduced which would lead to the mass wars of the 20th century. In the same century powerful ideologies began to emerge, such as socialism, liberalism and nationalism, militarism and anti-militarism. These developed into powerful tools to inspire, shape and mobilize public opinion, and became the driving force behind the wars of the present age.

Since the early nineteenth century organized peace organizations also began to appear on the scene. At first they attracted only the interest of very small numbers, mainly among the bourgeoisie, but nonetheless they reflected an emerging interest in international affairs among 'the public'. Public opinion not only became an active force, shaping the conditions and constraints under which foreign policy is conducted, on the impuside of the political process so to speak, but its role on the output side also grew in importance. To maintain or gain the support of public opinion in ideological battles of will is becoming an ever more

foreign policy should not be subjected to domestic squabbles. National interests being what they are, foreign policy should be non-partisan. It is difficult to square these requirements with the nature of the democratic process. Therefore, the rules of democracy, so the argument goes, cannot and should not be applied to foreign policy, which according to Henry Kissinger, should be conducted 'by stealth, out of sight of the public, the Congress, or the bureaucracy'.⁴

The proponents of this view, which we may call the 'classical' view of the foreign policy process, can draw support and inspiration from some of the great writers on democracy and politics of the 18th and 19th century: Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau to begin with, and later followed by Toqueville, all of whom rejected the suitability of the democratic model in the conduct of foreign affairs. Especially Toqueville deplored the tendency of democracies to think and act in terms of white and black, rather than shades of grey, their unwillingness to accept compromises and their preoccupation with the here-and-now rather than the problems of tomorrow, all of which, he said, militate against democratic control of foreign policy.

" La politique extérieure n'exige l'usage de presque aucune des qualités qui sont propres à la démocratie, et commande au contraire le développement de presque toutes celles qui lui manquent"⁴

The same case against allowing the public a say in the making of foreign policy was put most eloquently by Walter Lippmann when he wrote:

The unhappy truth is that the prevailing public opinion has been destructively wrong at the critical juncture. The people have imposed a veto upon the judgment of informed and responsible officials. They have compelled the government (...) to be too late with too little or too long with too much, too pacifist in peace and too belligerent in war, too neutralist or too appeasing in negotiation, or too intransigent.⁵

He based his judgment on the fact that public opinion on foreign affairs is not based on facts but on "stereotypes" and "mental pictures in our head". Policy-

⁴ Alexis de Toqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol.1, Paris: ed.1961, p.566

⁵ W.Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, New York: Mentor Books, 1966, pp.23-24

makers were well advised to neglect these opinions.⁶

Echoing these ideas, G.Almond presented in 1950 his "Mood theory", which stressed the degree to which public opinion on international affairs consists of extremely volatile and shortlived reactions to current events, on which foreign policy cannot and should not be based.⁷ Conversely, in a later study, found little consistency and stability in public opinion.⁸ Rosenau, in a similar vein, argued that on 'the rare occasions' when the mass public awakens from its slumber it can be expected to be

"impulsive, unstable, unreasoning, unpredictable, capable of suddenly shifting direction or of going in several contradictory directions at the same time".

This would make for instability and irrationality in the policymaking process⁹

Others, however, have argued equally strongly in favour of the opposite view. Their arguments can be brought under two headings. The first refers to the nature of the democratic process, the other to the outcomes to be expected from this process. To start with the first, it is argued in short that democracy implies that those who are affected by a decision should have a say in the making and control of such decisions. And if this principle is to mean anything at all, it should be applied to the most vital decisions affecting the nation and its existence. There is no reason to accept that only a particular group of initiated experts is qualified to determine what the national interest is and how it should be promoted. As it was put in the famous words of Lord Bryce:

The general principles which should guide and the spirit which should inspire a nation's foreign policy are too wide in scope, too grave in consequence to be determined by any authority lower than the people.¹⁰

⁶ Lippmann, W., *Public Opinion*, New York, Harcourt/Brace, 1922.

⁷ Almond, G.A., *The American People and Foreign Policy*, New York; Harcourt/Brace, 1960.

⁸ P.E.Converse, *The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics*, in: D.E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent*, New York: Free Press, 1964, pp. 206-261.

⁹ J.N.Rosenau, *The Opinion-Policy Relationship*, in: A.M.Scott and R.H.Dawson (eds), *Readings in the Making of American Foreign Policy*, New York: Macmillan/London: Collier, 1965, p.79

¹⁰ J.Bryce, *Modern Democracies*, vol.2, London: Macmillan, 1921, pp.403-404

1 INTRODUCTION: DEMOCRACY AND FOREIGN POLICY

The role of public opinion in the foreign policy process is one of those topics which are from time to time the theme of intense and heated debates in society. These debates are, more often than not, the source of heat rather than light, confusion rather than enlightenment. The reasons for this situation are not difficult to discover.¹ It is because the debate is characterized by a rather careless use of concepts and a disturbing mixture of empirical and normative arguments. With respect to public opinion three kinds of questions - which are indeed closely interconnected in many ways - should be kept analytically separate: conceptual (what do we mean by it ?), empirical (what is it ?) and normative (how do we appreciate it ?).

First of all, the debate usually not only concerns empirical facts such as the what and why of public opinion, but also strongly evaluative and normative elements, such as the proper role of public opinion in democratic societies. Secondly, there is much confusion as to what we mean by 'public opinion', a concept which is often used rather loosely, or as to whether it is a useful concept at all. Public opinion can refer to many things, and it is not easy to decide which of these is more important and relevant in the assessment of its influence on the political process.

Then, there are also serious methodological questions involved. We know today a lot about the content of public opinion (though less about the intensity by which opinions are held: their saliency). We also know - though not quite as much - something about the origins and explanation of attitudes and opinions. About the (most important) question of the actual impact of public opinion, Cohen concluded in 1973, we know next to nothing for certain, and in most cases we can merely

¹ For a more detailed analysis of these questions see e.g.:

- Philip P. Everts, Public opinion, the churches and foreign policy: Studies of domestic factors in the making of Dutch foreign policy, Leiden: Institute for International Studies, 1983;
- Bernard Cohen, The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973;
- Marcel Merle, La politique étrangère, Paris, PUF, 1984.

formulate certain hunches about the what, why and how.² This conclusion is as valid today as it was fifteen years ago. While in the natural sciences it is often possible to make experiments and assess the influence of one factor by changing this parameter and keeping all other factors constant, this is hardly ever possible in the social sciences (except in simulations and other artificial laboratory conditions). In the social sciences we have to make do with history, and history cannot be rerun with different parameters. On the question of what would have been the outcome under different conditions we can merely speculate. History, as we all know (or should know), usually points many ways. Correlations, not causation is most often the best we can hope for. It is therefore seldom possible to attribute the outcome of a particular political process to one particular factor (such as public opinion) or assess its relative importance as a causative factor in isolation from potentially equally relevant other factors. Yet, this is precisely what happens in the usual public discussions which implicitly assume that it is possible to single out the role of one specific factor.

The normative question, while undoubtedly essential, is especially confusing. Traditionally, the making of defence and foreign policy has been an elite affair and remains so today in many cases. To many observers it seems evident that this cannot be otherwise.³ The preparation and conduct of foreign policy, which seeks to defend and promote the highest interests of the state, indeed its very existence and survival in an anarchical international environment, requires, it is argued, a great deal of expertise and a way of decisionmaking which is different from domestic politics. Coherence and continuity on the one hand and flexibility on the other are vital ingredients of a successful foreign policy. One has to know when to refuse to yield to either domestic or foreign pressure and when to strike compromises. Secrecy is sometimes another vital element. In order to be successful

² Cohen, The Public's Impact, pp. 7-19.

³ An admirable summary of the arguments in this debate is given by K. Goldman, ch.1 in K. Goldman, S. Berglund and G. Sjöstedt, Democracy and foreign policy: the case of Sweden, Aldershot: Gower, 1986.

Normative = opinion, value, fact, matter
empirical = stable