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Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus

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Abstract

This article surveys and assesses theories and research on public opinion and foreign policy. Most of the evidence is drawn from the literature on the United States. Three twentieth-century wars have had a significant impact on theory and scholarship. World War I—the first public relations war—and

postwar efforts to create a new international order directed much attention to the nature of public opinion and its impact on foreign affairs, issues on which realists and liberals came to quite different conclusions. The period surrounding World War II coincided with the development of scientific polling. Much of the attention during and immediately after the war focused on the extent to which the public might support or oppose an internationalist American role. Extensive research during the first two decades after World War II yielded a broad agreement (the “Almond-Lippmann consensus”) on three propositions about public opinion: (1) it is volatile and thus provides inadequate foundations for stable and effective foreign policies, (2) it lacks coherence or structure, but (3) in the final analysis, it has little if any impact on foreign policy. The Vietnam War and its aftermath stimulated a new outburst of research activity on public opinion and foreign policy, much of which has challenged each of these three propositions. The article concludes with suggestions for further research efforts, including: (1) case studies employing archival sources to assess more directly the impact of public opinion, (2) cross-national studies, (3) development of standard questions in order to encourage better cumulation of survey results, and (4) research that will enable us to distinguish findings that are time- and context-bound from those that transcend the Cold War period.

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