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Hanoi Media Days 2016, Vienna June 17-18

Foreign Policy and Public Opinion

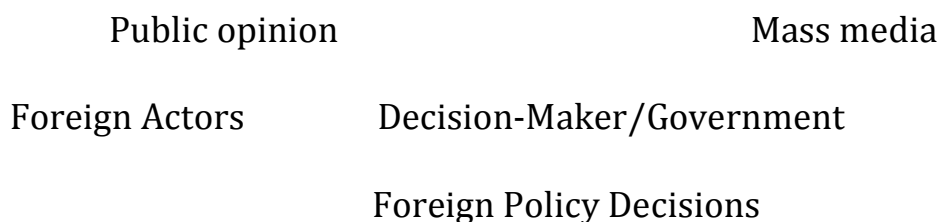
1) Definition of „public opinion“

public opinion which can be defined as “the aggregate of public attitudes or beliefs about government or politics” is empirically represented and can be analyzed in opinion surveys. Due to the increasing role of internet public opinion – „held by private persons which government find it prudent to heed“ (V.O.Key)- public opinion is also found in social media

the media as “publicized public opinion” representing also public opinion/ the media play in foreign policy as “traders of information”0 the crucial role of collecting, framing and distributing information

2) What role does and should public opinion play in foreign policy and in foreign policy decisions?

Figure 1 Main Actors in Foreign Policy and Foreign Policy Decision-Making



3) Vietnam and the crisis of the elitist paradigm concerning the role of the public and public opinion in foreign policy

The dominant thinking in International Relations on the role of public opinion in foreign policy as represented by the Realist School (Henry Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger) was that foreign policy and foreign policy

decisions should be kept free from democratic constraints as much as possible in the interest of an efficient and rational realization of foreign policy goals by statesmen and diplomats. „The public cannot make an effective foreign policy., it can only support one.“ (Gabriel Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy*, 1950).

This sort of elitist thinking was challenged in the second half of the 1960ies and the 1970ies. In the context of the military intervention of the USA in Vietnam a critical public opinion was formed which challenged the competence of the wisdom of the government in Washington and lent the Congress in Washington the political base to end the war. Although the US public didn't possess much geographical and historical knowledge on Vietnam and Southeast Asia, the cost in lives and the economic and social crisis caused by the undeclared war enabled the people and the public opinion to a deeper understanding of the military intervention than the Administration in Washington adhering to a ahistorical and rigid containment policy.

As recounted by Robert McNamara (US Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968) in his book "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam," (1995) the war could and should have been avoided and should have been halted at several key junctures, one as early as 1963. According to McNamara, he and other senior advisers to Presidents J.F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson failed to heed it off through ignorance, inattention, flawed thinking, political expediency and lack of courage. Specifically, McNamara wrote:“ We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decision in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong.“

4) Paradigmatic change to a „rational public“ in foreign policy

A long tradition of political theory –with origins in the classic works of Immanuel Kant, Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill and represented by contemporary theorists like Jürgen Habermas, Bruce Russett – view citizen engagement and responsive Political Leadership as crucial to well-considered policy and peaceful international relations. The informational capacity of the public, its competence to retain information and to use it to formulate coherent opinions has been argued and empirically proven by theorists of the “rational public school”.

Benjamin I. Page/ Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public. Fifty Years of*

Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences (1992) p. 2-3: „It is not our intention to argue that democracy works perfectly in America or to claim that the public is always right... Our point is that the public as a collective body is capable of holding sensible opinions and processing the information made available to it. The chief cure for the ills of American democracy is to be found not in less but in more democracy, not in thwarting the public's desires but in, providing it with good political information and heeding its wishes.“

(see also Benjamin I. Page/ Marshall B. Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect. What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don't Get*, Chicago 2007)

5) Generalizations on the factual impact of public opinion in foreign policy decisions are quite difficult

Despite the great theoretical and political importance of the public's role in foreign policy decisions social scientists have struggled to consistently characterize the public's actual role in the foreign policy process. This is due to the many variations in foreign policy decisions and political conditions (difference between crisis and war interventions and „normal Policy“ / elite consensus or dissens)

6) Role of public and public opinion in foreign policy is getting more important in the last decades

The role of the public and of public opinion in foreign policy and international affairs has become much more important due to the secular democratization process and the increase of the public's informational capacity and competence by the new communication technologies and global media systems.

7) Responsive Political Leadership in Foreign Policy is very much required in a time of very difficult foreign policy decisions and in a situation where national governments are losing autonomy and political legitimacy

Foreign Policy has due to the increasing role of the public taken on a public-relation and media-diplomacy dimension which leads governments and foreign policy decision-makers to strategies of „selling“ their foreign policy

to the public, in certain cases and crisis by means of manipulation. Political leadership responsibility means and requires political responsiveness to the views and desires of the public which as documented in the social media tends in a certain way to become an „irrational public”.

James McGregor Burns, author of the seminal work on „Leadership“ (1978) in which he defines and analyses „transforming Political Leadership“ in contrast to „transactional“ Political Leadership as a positive reciprocal relationship between political leaders and the „followers“, the public. „The transforming leader recognizes and exploits an existing need or demand of a potential follower. But, beyond that, the transforming leader looks for potential motives in followers, seek to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower. The result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents.“ (p.4)

8) But not only governments and politicians, but also the media and scientists and experts should heed the call for a more responsive attitude in helping to inform, to enlighten and to educate the public in the field of foreign policy and international politics. For us scientists this necessitates a critical self-reflexive attitude, a feeling and openness for complexity and the courage to act as public intellectuals in the political system.