

Influence from Abroad: How Foreign

Voices Shape U.S. Public Opinion

Posted on 27 November 2011

by Danny Hayes

As Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi sought to suppress a popular uprising threatening his decades-long hold on power, a March 13, 2011 CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll reported that 56% of Americans favored "the U.S. and other countries attempting to establish a no-fly zone" in the North African nation. Just a week later, 70% of Americans supported the action. Why did opinion shift so quickly in favor of intervention?

Numerous possibilities arise, but most analysts would point to the efforts of domestic political elites, such as Barack Obama, who sought to mobilize opinion in support of military engagement. After all, decades of research in political science has shown that public opinion is typically driven by the positions taken by presidents, members of Congress, and other influential elites inside the Beltway. When our political leaders call for action, we line up behind them. But new research by me and Matt Guardino suggests another explanation: the pro-intervention rhetoric emanating from overseas elites, which was widely reported in American media outlets. In contrast to what political scientists have historically believed, the U.S. public sometimes does respond to foreign voices when those voices receive media attention.

In an article recently published in the *American Journal of Political Science*, Guardino, a postdoctoral fellow at Syracuse University, and I report the results of a study of media coverage and public opinion in the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War. We found that although American news outlets paid little attention to dissent to the Bush administration's plan for a pre-emptive strike from domestic sources — liberal Democratic members of Congress and anti-war demonstrators, among others — they devoted significant air time to opposition to the war from abroad.

For instance, in our analysis of every nightly network television news story about Iraq in the eight months before the invasion — 1,434 in all — foreigners constituted one of every three sources that appeared on the air. And these foreign voices — U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix, anti-war members of the British parliament, and officials from France, Germany and various European governments — accounted for 65% of all of the anti-war statements that appeared on the news.

The coverage had a substantial effect on public opinion, suppressing support for the Iraq invasion. According to our analysis of survey data, public support was about nine percentage points lower than it would have been without foreign opposition in the news.

Certain people were especially responsive to influence from abroad. College-educated Democrats, for example, were 37 percentage points less likely to support the war because of opposition from overseas. Independents with college degrees were 59 percentage points less likely to advocate invasion than they would have been in the absence of foreign dissent. Had the media ignored foreign consternation over the invasion, President Bush would have taken the country to war with an even larger reservoir of public support to draw on.

The Libyan intervention is, to be sure, not the Iraq War. For one, the United States and its allies were generally united about how to proceed in Libya. But there is no reason to think that the views of France, Italy and the United Nations were irrelevant to Americans as they contemplated yet another conflict in a far-off land. A growing body of research — including the Government Department's own Terrence Chapman — suggests that the public does care what the international community thinks when the United State contemplates military action. And as people are increasingly exposed to perspectives from international actors — through the internet and other non-traditional media outlets — the potential for the influence of foreign voices on U.S. public opinion will only grow.

Danny Hayes received his M.A. in 2004 and Ph.D. in 2006 (and a journalism degree in 1998). Hayes is an assistant professor at American University. His research focuses on political communication and political behavior in American politics.

Posted in [PhD Alumni Research](#)

Disgust, Politics and Participation

Posted on 27 November 2011

by L. Matthew Vandenbroek

Perhaps you've heard nonvoters complain about "dirty" politics, or vow, "I'll hold my nose when I vote for (so-and-so)." What are they really saying? It's not very likely these individuals literally see dirt on politicians or smell something foul as they cast their ballots. Rather, they are metaphorically invoking disgust, a uniquely human and powerful moral emotion.

Political scientists have recently reinvigorated inquiry into the links between emotions and political behavior. It may be tempting to see this as a new frontier for the discipline. However, emotions have captivated classical political thinkers for centuries. Thomas Hobbes, for example, wrote of the "sudden courage" inspired by anger. The Federalists' concerns about popular "passions" were so dire that they proposed to cure their effects with widespread participation. What is new about recent work in political psychology is the seemingly perverse possibility of emotions being not destructive and irrational "passions," but rather guides to more rational political behavior. Scholars have recently shown that anxiety, for example, snaps citizens out of thoughtless habits and predispositions, heightening attention to political news. Anger, meanwhile, is shown by other political scientists to increase an individual's likelihood of participating.

Disgust may be often invoked in political conversation, but its effects on political participation are heretofore understudied. So far, there is some anecdotal evidence. For example, a 2000 Harvard survey found that more than one-third of nonvoters said they were abstaining because "politics disgusts me and I don't want to get involved." Long form interviews and focus groups also reveal frequent references to disgust. My research attempts to systematize these rhetorical claims, grounding them in psychological theories of how emotions are elicited and their influence on our behavior.

My dissertation proposes that many Americans withdraw from politics, avoiding political news and actively refusing to vote, when they believe the political system routinely flouts their moral expectations of how the system ought to work. To be sure, people often confuse terms like disgust and anger, but psychologists argue that disgust is a unique emotional reaction to perceived threats of moral contamination by poisonous ideas. Disgusting events and people are not ones we can fight back against (as in the case of anger) or run away from (as in the case of fear). Rather, when we are disgusted, we simply reject and avoid the perceived contaminant. When politics is the poisonous idea, individuals become disgust-ed and repulsed by politics, and like spitting out a sip of spoiled milk, they refuse to vote.

This proposed theory appears to bear out in data I gathered through the Department of Government's questionnaire on the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Turnout in the 2010 midterms was nearly 18% lower than average among individuals whose most frequent emotional reaction to politics was disgust (rather than anger, anxiety or enthusiasm). This relationship holds in a multivariate model of turnout controlling for well-established predictors of voting such as education, party identification and political interest. All else equal, moving from never being disgusted by politics, to often being disgusted by politics, corresponds with a one-third decrease in the probability of turning out to vote. Among the emotions measured, only disgust predicted less participation.

To further test my theory, I am currently in the midst of experimental studies which directly induce disgust and then offer an opportunity to participate in a political exercise. While preliminary, results using UT-Austin undergrads suggest disgust diminishes participation when the target of the emotion is politics, as well as among morally traditional individuals. Next, I will conduct the final test, a nationally representative simulated campaign experiment funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

Posted in [Graduate Research](#)

Constitutional Reform in Eurasia

Posted on 27 November 2011

by Julie A. George

Snow started falling today in Chişinău, Moldova, where I have come to study state reforms and their impact on secessionist politics and territorial fragmentation. It is my third country in five months; I was in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) this summer and am spending most of the fall in Tbilisi, Georgia.

The countries share some interesting history that makes for rich comparison. All are postcommunist. All have stated aspirations of democratic governance. All profess a need to enhance the capability of the state to implement reforms. All experienced secessionist war in the 1990s and continue to face state fragmentation. In the case of Moldova and Georgia, the regions of Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia operate as de facto independent states, with their own institutions of government, foreign policies and, in the case of Transnistria, their own currency. The 1995 Dayton Accords kept Republika Srpska inside the pre-war boundaries of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but its separatist rhetoric has increased of late, making state governance in BiH challenging.

It is early yet to draw theoretical conclusions. My fieldwork is incomplete and as yet I am caught in a mire of domestic politics and country-specific nuance that bedevils parsimony. Yet some interesting parallels deserve mention. All three countries are exploring constitutional change. Political elites promise that the reforms under consideration would have an almost existential effect on the politics of the day. Some political leaders in Moldova and Bosnia-Herzegovina predict that institutional change will permit the implementation of political, economic and social programs that have been stymied by political infighting and territorial fragmentation. In Georgia, the ruling party casts constitutional reform as a way to finally achieve real democratic governance.

In Moldova, the president is selected by super-majority of parliament; in a multi-party system with a coalition in power, the high-threshold requires support from not only the three parties in the ruling coalition, but also some members of the opposition parties — a deadlock that led to the dissolution of parliament in 2009 and a current stalemate. The Dayton Accords included a constitution for Bosnia-Herzegovina that constructed an ethnicized state with three presidents (Bosniak, Croat and Serb) and each major ethnic group given essential veto power over any law in the case that it "destructs the vital interest" of that group. This clause has been invoked for almost any instance of central state reform, including efforts to construct a country-wide tax system (ultimately successful) and significant police reform (ultimately a failure). Underscoring the dramatic politics in Bosnia-Herzegovina is a view amongst the Bosniak population that the veto power held by Republika Srpska was obtained through ethnic cleansing of that territory's Muslim population. In both Moldova and BiH, powerful ethnic forces seek constitutional change to subvert coalition politics and ethnic fragmentation. At the time of writing, both countries have failed in this endeavor.

Georgia, which is not encumbered by powerful opposition forces, coalition politics or free-wheeling political competition, faces conditions of too much executive energy. Its state capacity reforms fall in a dizzying array of efficacy, leading to expansion of gas and electricity infrastructure, new roads across previously impassable mountain territories, a new tax and customs system, and a total eradication of petty corruption. Memorably, this regime also permitted a brutal crack-down on protesters in 2007 and a war with South Ossetia and Russia in 2008. Georgia's executive-dominated system has recently undergone overhaul with little discussion and negligible parliamentary opposition. The new constitution, which will come into full force after the current presidential term expires in 2013, creates a parliamentary system with a powerful prime minister and a weak, although directly elected, president.

What conclusions might we draw? Institutions matter, yet in new states, among newly empowered elites, they are avenues to obtain and maintain personal influence. They likewise can be altered to maintain that hegemony. Georgia has amended its constitution significantly at least twice since it was first ratified in 1995. Moldova has overhauled its constitution once; the proposed changes will enhance the power of the ruling coalition and be a death knell to the formerly dominant Party of Communists. But new constitutions also can freeze untenable political conditions. The constitution of Bosnia-Herzegovina was designed to end a war, not to run a state. The outcome is an impoverished polity that must maintain three separate administrations for each dominant ethnic group, isolates small Slav ethnic minorities, and cannot even create a tax system without nationalist struggle. Small wonder that they cannot combat corruption.

Julie A. George received her Ph.D. in 2005. George is an assistant professor at Queen's College, the City University of New York. In 2010 her first book was published, [The Politics of Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia](#).

Posted in [PhD Alumni Research](#)