

Why Poll?

The relevance of public opinion in the United States and Germany

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Survey research has become a central feature of public debates about politics and policy in most democracies, and governance in these countries necessitates that public opinion be considered, even amidst legitimate scrutiny of election polling. Still, it is difficult to imagine what international affairs would look like if public opinion were sovereign, as James Madison, the fourth President of the United States and father of the constitution, argued.

Political leaders regularly cite polls when making claims that the public is on their side. While foreign policy may not always be a top-of-mind issue for average citizens, polling makes clear that they do have opinions, priorities, and concerns about international affairs. It is also clear that politicians are paying attention and that public opinion will be an important component of debates about the international challenges facing Germany and other nations. In thinking about the role of polling in foreign policy, two basic questions arise: Why poll on topics related to international relations, and how should

the results of said polls play into the formulation of foreign policy?

The clearest and most compelling rationale for polling is the fact that public opinion surveys give voice and agency to a long-neglected constituent of international affairs: the people themselves. In the mid-1960s, after two decades of examining the impact of public opinion on foreign policy and, in particular, the Second World War, many American political scientists grew skeptical of public opinion. The so-called Almond-Lippmann consensus suggested that public opinion was too volatile and incoherent to be of much relevance to policy-makers. However, more recent studies suggest that public opinion frequently does follow coherent values and sets of ideas. Contrary to many expectations, people do have opinions on heady issues such as the state of democracy or relations between countries.

To be sure, polling has its challenges. Poor-quality surveys can lead to incorrect conclusions, and polls can be manipulated to achieve a desired outcome and obfuscate, divide, or mislead. But high-quality,

reputable polls remain an indispensable tool for understanding people’s worldviews, their sense of justice and proper order in the world, and their support for or aversion to closer relations with foreign governments.

Recent polling, for instance, makes clear that many Germans have begun to re-evaluate their country’s relationship with the United States. For the better part of a century, the country has served as an indispensable security guarantor for Germany and Europe more broadly, but during Donald Trump’s presidency, America’s image has turned sharply negative among Germans. Sure, Hollywood movies continue to appeal, as do most elements we consider part of US ‘soft power’. But Americans are hardly perceived as a political partner, certainly not when it comes to dealing with China (say 63 percent of Germans in this year’s The Berlin Pulse survey), nor for protecting democracy and human rights around the world (57 percent), nor for fighting climate change (84 percent). These numbers may reflect attitudes shaped in response to the current US president, but their legacy may linger. If the public has shifted its view of the United States and of Germany’s role in world affairs, politicians would be wise to consider this. Public support could be critical for major policy changes in how Germany defends its borders, extends its influence abroad and defines risks to national security. Americans, for their part, are still likely to say the relationship with Germany is going well (74 percent). And, as opinions

of China deteriorate across the democratic world, more in the United States prefer a close relationship with Germany (55 percent) than with China (35 percent).¹ Germans largely concur with this assessment. But the imbalance between public opinion in the two countries on the core question of their bilateral relations has implications for how leaders on both sides of the Atlantic handle their own relationship and their interactions with China. Both issues have profound implications for global affairs, especially in a world in which the two superpowers lack popular support.

Policy decisions, of course, are not simply about pleasing the public. Elected leaders need to lead. But inadequate consideration of public opinion can lead to perceptions of elite indifference and fuel the fires of anti-establishment populism. Used wisely, public opinion polls help illuminate areas of divergence and convergence between the worldviews of policy-makers and citizens. Leaders must traverse this topography if they wish to secure enduring policy decisions. A world without polling is a world in which the people’s voice is severed from that of its leaders. Despite the challenges involved with conducting survey research, polling remains the best way of gauging the general populations’ intent, fears and hopes. It ultimately remains the lifeblood of democratic discourse. ✕

1 <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>

