

When we talk about the impact of public opinion on foreign policy, it matters whether we're talking about the broad American public or whether we're talking about subgroups. The overall American public very seldom directly guides foreign policy. The overall public tends to have two indirect effects.

The first is it can constrain the freedom of maneuver that presidents or Congress can have. The second is that public opinion tends to shape or influence what priority policymakers give foreign policy. Now, when you think of subgroups of the public and lobbies or special interest groups, they can often have a significant impact on foreign policy.

They can do so because they're knowledgeable, they're highly motivated, and often they act in numbers. Silicon Valley high tech companies work very hard to get their input into U.S. policy on, let's say, intellectual property rights. Evangelicals are very active in making sure that US family planning policy and funding overseas does not underwrite abortions.

The media have far less impact on public opinion and on foreign policy than you might think they have. First off, is the fact that people come to the news with their own worldview, people tend to pick news sources that will give them a take on the world they want to hear.

The second thing is, oftentimes when we talk about the impact the media might have, we're really talking about the impact of an event. Take, for example, 911. Clearly, that engendered wall-to-wall news coverage. But the fact that the American public suddenly embraced a much more aggressive foreign policy had a lot less to do with how CNN or MSNBC or CBS

News covered the story than the fact that the United States had suffered a horrific terrorist attack and that 3000 Americans had died in a beautiful, sunny day. Generally speaking, the American public doesn't follow foreign policy very carefully. And so while Americans may become concerned about an issue overseas, they won't necessarily have a detailed view on exactly what it is that the United States should do.

So in that sense, the public often doesn't send clear signals to policymakers about what they need to do. It's important to keep in mind that public opinion can shift dramatically. That poses a real challenge to policymakers.

The fact that the public is with the president or with Congress when a policy is enacted doesn't mean they will be with the president or Congress when the policy goes bad. Many Americans supported the Iraq War which began in 2003.

By 2006 the public was much less enthusiastic. Control of Congress changed hands from Republicans and Democrats, in good part because of dissatisfaction among the American public. But how was the war going? What you see often is how the American public opinion can have conflicting impulses, the public wants two things, but they're in conflict with each other. An example came in 2014, with the Obama administration facing the threat of ISIS fighters or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Many Americans were horrified to see that American hostages had been killed by ISIS forces and wanted something done.

But by the same token, the American public was pretty clear. It did not want to see American combat troops on the ground in Iraq, let alone in Syria. And so the public wanting something done but not wanting to put boots on the ground really bedeviled the president's policy.