

Polling on Foreign Policy Crises: Creating a Standard Set of Questions

By Richard Sobel

As the monitoring of public support becomes a more central factor in US foreign policy crises, correctly gauging popular sentiments becomes increasingly important. Yet, the inconsistent and limited survey research in this area makes it extremely difficult to analyze what the public actually thinks during flare-ups in foreign affairs. This deficiency can best be overcome through the use of a standardized and regularly fielded battery of questions on this topic.

Problems With Current Research

Because of the crisis-driven nature of most polling on foreign interventions, questions on contemporaneous surveys tend to be created under immediate time pressures. Though established polling organizations may repeat previous questions and newer pollsters may consult sources of existing items, generally low consistency and comparability within and between survey organizations often hinder the understanding of the complexities of events or trends over time. Furthermore, since public opinion tends to rally during foreign crises, the very activity of being polled during extraordinary times affects the level and intensity of responses. Similarly, because of the crisis-oriented focus of most foreign policy polling, base levels may never be identified, and long lags often occur between surveys when polling halts during calm interludes.

Moreover, because most surveys include only a few foreign policy items, they do not provide the in-depth information necessary to evaluate attitudes or guide policy. While considering the information from several surveys can help to overcome some of these problems, it is better to develop more complete surveys which include a variety of items that permit the tracking and examining of relationships among opinions.

The consistent wordings of regularly repeated items would help to clarify public opinion about complex foreign crises and improve the evaluation of stability and change. In order to understand the dynamics of opinion, questions need to be asked regularly during a particular crisis. To allow comparisons between crises, it is important to ask both general and specific questions about current involvements. Proven items should be the mainstay of foreign intervention polling, but new questions that

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facilitate comparisons need to be developed for emerging crises. The more similar the new items are to established ones, however, the more valid will be the evaluations of similarities and differences across crises.¹

Examples From Past Polling

A few examples indicate the problems, and possibilities, of polling on foreign policy crises. Surveys regarding the current crisis in Bosnia provide a telling demonstration of the difficulties presented when question wordings vary widely. Out of over 600 Bosnia-related survey questions that appear in the Roper Center's POLL database from 1991-95, there are only four fairly general time series that permit consistent tracking of attitudes. They are: awareness of the crisis, approval of presidential handling,

belief about US responsibility, and evaluation of the level of US involvement. For questions about key policy decisions, such as whether to send ground troops, the item wordings have changed so often and the questioning occurred so sporadically that it is almost impossible to identify particular levels of support, let alone trends.

For instance, different wordings among almost 50 questions between 1992 and 1995 regarding the employment of air strikes showed support for allied bombing ranging from 30% to 85% (see box on following page).² The lack of question repetition also makes comparisons with support levels during other crises even harder. A somewhat similar situation occurred during the Persian Gulf crisis, where there were relatively few meaningful time series about policy options among almost 500 questions asked.³

An example of useful trend tracking within and across crises appears in the Gallup Organization's use of the "mistake" question during three wars ("do you think the US made a mistake in sending troops ...").⁴ Continuing a Korean era question asked 13 times from 1950 to 1953 (support ranged from 66% to 33%), Gallup asked the "mistake" question over 23 times during the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1973 (support ranged from 61% to 28%). The same item was repeated for the Gulf War 23 times in 1991 alone (65% to 87% support). Repeating items like these permits comparisons of levels of support both within and between the major conflicts during the latter half of this century.

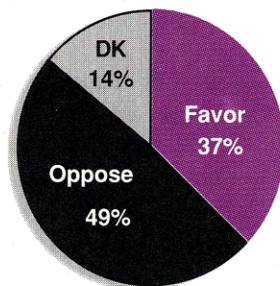
The Goal of Foreign Policy Questions

Based on lessons from past survey research, this article proposes a set of questions and procedures for polling during foreign intervention crises that better identifies public attitudes. The goal of the article is not to establish a requirement but to provide a reference tool for improving the quality of polling and information revealed during crises.

Foreign Crises Questions are so Varied that Comparisons are often Difficult

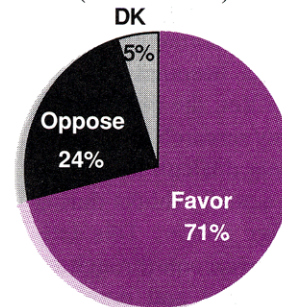
Did Americans Support Air Involvement in Bosnia in June 1995?

Question: Would you favor or oppose having US military planes attack Serbian artillery, military positions and supply lines in Bosnia?



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for *Newsweek*, June 1-2, 1995.

Question: In order to protect the United Nations peace-keeping forces currently in Bosnia, would you favor or oppose the US providing *air support*, trucks, radar, and other assistance to the U.N. forces? (italics added)



Source: Survey by CBS News, June 4-6, 1995.

The article suggests both a full set of items for a complete evaluation and a more limited set for identifying the basic outlines of opinion. Choices within each group depend, of course, on the stage of the crisis.

Because it is particularly important to identify questions which permit comparing attitudes about past, current and future crises, the questions here are drawn largely from those previously asked by various survey organizations. By repeating items that have become recognized for providing valuable perspectives, the quality of polling today and in the future can be improved. When different organizations have asked similar questions, the clearer ones with longer time series are preferable.

Issues to Cover

Survey questions during foreign policy crises should cover nine areas. First, they should determine how important the public feels ongoing foreign policy conflicts are. Second, they should establish the overall level of public attention to and information about a current conflict. Third, they should identify whether people feel the US has an interest or stake in the conflict. Fourth, they should ascertain general approval or dis-

approval of the president's handling of the crisis. Together, these four areas should determine the public's evaluation of the policies the president is currently undertaking.

Fifth, these questions should identify who the public feels is responsible for solving the problem. This should include relative preferences for unilateral and multilateral action. Sixth, they should discover the preferences for alternative policy options ranging from nonmilitary coercion like economic sanctions to military actions such as air strikes and troop deployment. Seventh, they should ascertain what the public thinks might be the likely outcomes of the possible policies, including sanctions and force. Eighth, they should gauge the potential or actual effects that costs and casualties may have on opinions regarding intervention. Ninth, they should evaluate the success of the policies implemented and whether or not the actions ultimately taken are considered to be successes or mistakes.

In addition, in order to evaluate how the crisis nature of the polling affected results, surveys should repeat items like the "mistake" question in retrospect six months after the crisis ends. Moreover, when the next crisis is loom-

ing, polls should ask about support for potential intervention. Finally, polls should include a basic set of demographics, including a measure of self-interest, such as whether there are members of the military in the respondent's family.

Benefits of Using the Series

There are several benefits to developing such a series. First, it would provide a readily available reference for any organization that wants to poll comprehensively during a foreign policy crisis. This should be particularly helpful for media organizations that tend to poll on short notice. With a set of items already available, organizations can start polling as a potential problem looms, but before it becomes a crisis. Not all organizations will choose to ask a complete series, but at least they will not need to construct original questions as events unfold.

A second benefit is that those interested in public opinion on crises would get better information. This includes the media as producers of news and the public as consumers of the news. In addition, these questions would provide more valid and complete information to policy makers who may factor public

attitudes into their political calculations of costs and benefits.

While the availability of a set of foreign policy items may encourage their use in more polling, few organizations are likely to ask all these questions at one time. There are several ways to address this limitation. First, as with the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR) quadrennial polling on public opinion and foreign policy, a small number of organizations might ask a large list of foreign policy questions at fairly long intervals.⁵ Second, more questions can be asked on individual surveys by using split ballots on parts of the sample. Third, survey organizations might alternate among themselves in asking some of these questions. While there will be differences from house effects, at least the question wordings would be consistent.

The policy-oriented questions suggested for polling on foreign affairs appear in the table below. The consistent use of these questions will foster more informed analysis of public opinion regarding current and looming foreign policy crises.

Endnotes:

¹ The tracking of trends is often difficult, not only because question wordings differ, but also because the use of knowledge filters or restricted samples, such as registered voters, produces generally incomparable results.

² Richard Sobel, "American and European Attitudes about Intervention in Former Yugoslavia: Mourir Pour la Bosnie?" in Richard Ullman, ed., *The World and Yugoslavia's War: Implications for International Politics*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996.

³ John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

⁴ John Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985.

⁵ The University of Michigan's Survey Research Center's (SRC) biennial National Election Studies and the National Opinion Research Center's typically annual General Social Survey (GSS) ask a smaller number of foreign affairs items regularly and occasionally include modules on crises in foreign relations; the GSS-related International Social Survey Project (ISPP) asks questions cross-nationally.



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**Table 1
FOREIGN INTERVENTION QUESTIONS**

| I. Importance | | |
|------------------------------------|-----|---|
| * | 1. | What do you think is the most important foreign policy issue/international problem facing the United States today? |
| | 2. | How important do you consider (this problem) to be among all the (foreign policy) issues facing the US? (very important, somewhat important, not too important) |
| II. Attention and Knowledge | | |
| * | 3. | Have you seen, heard, or read about the events in (country)? |
| | 4. | How closely have you followed the news about the conflict between (sides) in (country)? Would you say you have followed it very closely, somewhat closely, not too closely, or not closely at all? |
| | 5. | How well do you think you understand the events in (country)? (very well, fairly well, poorly, not at all) |
| | 6. | Do you happen to know the names of/can you please identify the groups involved in the conflict in (country)? |
| III. US Interest | | |
| | 7. | Do you think the national interest of the United States is at stake in the conflict (country), or don't you feel that way? |
| * | 8. | Would you say that the situation in (country) is a threat to the security of the United States or not? Is that a major threat or a minor threat? |
| IV. Presidential Approval | | |
| * | 9. | Do you approve or disapprove of the way President (name) is handling (foreign policy)/the situation in (foreign country)? Is that approve/disapprove strongly or somewhat? Why do you approve or disapprove of the way (the president) is handling the situation? |
| | 10. | Do you think (the president) has explained the situation in (country) well enough so that you understand why the US is involved in/sending troops, or hasn't he? Do you feel that you have a clear idea or not why (the US) has sent troops? |
| * | 11. | Do you approve or disapprove of the decision by President (name) to (impose economic sanctions, use airstrikes, send American military troops) to (country) or not? Is that (approve/disapprove) strongly or somewhat? |

Table 1 — Continued
FOREIGN INTERVENTION QUESTIONS

| | | |
|---|-----|---|
| V. Responsibility | | |
| | 12. | Do you think the (United States) (UN) has a responsibility to do something about the fighting in (country) or doesn't the US (UN) have this responsibility? If so/not, why is it (not) a US (UN) responsibility? |
| | 13. | Who should be most responsible for solving this problem? The US, UN, NATO, or other countries? |
| VI. Policy Option | | |
| * | 14. | Should the US (UN) use (economic sanctions, military force) to settle the situation in (country) or should it stay out? |
| | 15. | Some people feel that (the US) should begin military action against (country) soon; others say (we) should wait longer to see if economic and diplomatic sanctions are effective. Which comes closer to your view? |
| | 16. | Would you favor or oppose the US taking the following actions in (country): using economic sanctions, imposing a blockade, sending military aid, sending military advisers, conducting air strikes, sending ground troops? Is that (favor/oppose) strongly or somewhat? |
| | 17. | Do you agree or disagree that the United States should take all actions necessary, including the use of military force, to solve the crisis in (country)? |
| | 18. | Would you support military action against (country) under the following circumstances? If no US soldiers were killed or wounded? If 100 US soldiers were killed or wounded? If 1,000 US soldiers were killed or wounded? If 10,000 US soldiers were killed or wounded? |
| | 19. | Do you agree or disagree that the US should go to war with (country) because of the current crisis? |
| | 20. | How long should the US stay involved in the fighting in (country): Less than a month, 1-6 months, 6-12 months, 1-2 years, longer than 2 years, as long as necessary? |
| | 21. | Which of the following do you think we should do now in (country): Pull out entirely, keep our soldiers in but try to end the fighting, take a stronger stand? |
| VII. Likely Outcome | | |
| | 22. | How likely are (economic sanctions, a blockaid, airstrikes, use of troops) to produce a satisfactory solution to the situation in (country)? |
| * | 23. | If the US were to send troops to (country), do you think that situation would end up being more like the Vietnam War or more like the Persian Gulf War? |
| | 24. | If the US goes to war with (country), which of the following do you think is the most likely outcome? A quick war with few casualties and a US victory; a long war with many US casualties and a US victory; eventual US withdrawal without victory; don't know |
| | 25. | Do you approve or disapprove of the decision to (use air strikes, send American military troops) to (country), or not? Is that (approve/disapprove) strongly or somewhat? |
| VIII. Impact of Costs and Casualties | | |
| * | 26. | If the US takes military action against (country), do you think the number of Americans killed and injured will be...? less than 100, several hundred, up to a thousand, several thousand, tens of thousands, don't know? |
| | 27. | How many casualties can the US sustain in the fighting in (country) and still consider this a worthwhile effort? |
| IX. Retrospective/Prospective | | |
| | 28. | In view of the developments since we entered the fighting in (country), do you think the US made a mistake in sending troops to (country)? |
| | 29. | Do you think we did the right thing in getting into the fighting in (country), or should we have stayed out? |
| * | 30. | Would you say the US military effort in (country) has been completely successful, mostly successful, only somewhat successful, or not at all successful? |
| * | 31. | Do you think it will be best for the future of this country if we take an active part in world affairs, or if we stay out of world affairs? |
| | 32. | Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate...who opposed US military action against (country)? |
| X. Demographics/Self-interest | | |
| | 33. | Are you or a family member in the military, or military reserves, or not? (yes, self; yes, family member; no.) |

Key:

* = Basic set of foreign policy questions

Note: Many of these questions were taken, in whole or part, from previously asked survey items.