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# It's Worth the Argument!

## Public Opinion on Foreign and Security Policy

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**In Germany, many commentators point to public opinion as an obstacle to a more active foreign and security policy. The saying goes that the Germans are pacifist and that the media is only interested in bad news. Hence the more substantial German role in international security requested by most of Germany's partners could not be communicated to the national public. However, a closer look at how public opinion towards foreign and security policy is formed proves both arguments wrong: Neither is pacifism the right word to describe the Germans' attitudes towards international security, nor do critical events automatically restrict the scope of action. On the contrary, substantive political argument can generate public support for decision-making – even in contested fields of action.**

Until the 1950's, in the United States, the home county of public opinion research, pollsters adhered to the so-called Almond-Lippmann Consensus: Public opinion towards foreign and security policy was considered volatile and inconsistent, and hence it neither could nor should have any impact on the government's decision-making. After the consistently growing opposition to the Vietnam War had already challenged the Consensus, US public opinion research widely debunked it at the latest during the 1980's. Since then, many American scholars consider the (US) population a "rational public" that does, at least in sum, engage in cost-benefit-calculations regarding foreign and security policy.

### **The Problem of Distance: How many hours per day does your neighbor take interest in foreign affairs?**

Today German public opinion research also considers public opinion a relevant factor in this policy area. Yet in Germany scholars remained a lot more skeptical when it comes to cost-benefit-calculations – not least against the backdrop that the political system in the Federal Republic is much more shaped by representative democracy than by direct democracy. This skepticism reflects a problem stemming from the usually large distance between this policy area and the population's everyday life: In contrast to, for example, tax or welfare policy, the effects of foreign and security policy do not overtly affect people's lives every day, and thus it is not easy for the broader population to cogently evaluate them.

Because of that distance, media coverage has even more impact on public opinion here than in other policy areas, because any news – ranging from facts and figures over their interpretation to commentary on governmental policies – reaches the population almost exclusively via the mass media. Studies on media usage show that television still plays a major role, while radio and press have their, yet decreasing, share as well. The importance of online media is growing enormously. In 2018, Germans spent more than three hours per day online, among them over 80 minutes for news media consumption, with upward tendency.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ARD/ZDF-Medienkommission (2018): ARD/ZDF-Onlinestudie 2018. Infografik [online: <http://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de/ardzdf-onlinestudie-2018/infografik/>], rev. 01.12.2018.

However, the rise of online media does not yet seem to result in severe changes in public opinion formation, because the users obviously resort to internet news formats similar to their offline counterparts – like a newspaper enthusiast reading his daily paper online, or a television viewer browsing the large networks’ online content. It is questionable whether the growing use of social media will change that in the long term because, here in particular, the issue of individual “filter bubbles” is even more noticeable than in other media.

### “I only believe in statistics that...”

Although Winston Churchill likely never said the often misattributed catchphrase about statistics, this saying nevertheless points to some risks in opinion polling that even today’s elaborate research methods cannot fully preclude. Polls usually do not feature open questions but instead apply fixed response options, and oftentimes these precast answers have been derived from an ongoing political debate about possible policy options. For example the respondents are then offered *either* diplomatic means *or* military means *or* means of development cooperation, thus suggesting contradictions, whereas the German approach of networked security actually seeks to provide a comprehensive toolbox of diplomatic, military and other means. Apart from that, there is always a risk of distortion by language. For example the renowned institutes Infratest dimap („ARD Deutschlandtrend“) and Forschungsgruppe Wahlen („ZDF Politbarometer“) delivered figures of public support for the Bundeswehr’s Afghanistan deployment varying as much as 14 percent – just because the wording of their polls differed from one other.

The effects of digitalization also have to be considered. For decades, public opinion research has been working with random sample interviews by telephone. Yet with more and more people using smartphones as well as messenger apps and less and less landline phones being in use, opinion pollsters must keep up if they want to avoid growing blind spots in their surveys. While many German institutes still adhere to telephone samples, others apply more cost-efficient online methods. For example the British corporation YouGov uses a growing “panel” of registered users, and the German company Civey, founded in 2015, embeds click-based polls directly into online news articles and other websites. Currently, the polling business is going through a fierce debate about whether such non-sampled approaches deserve the hallmark of “representativity”. It remains to be seen what methods will eventually prevail to deal with the ongoing changes in communication behavior.

### Military restraint is not pacifism

Given these conditions, how does public opinion on foreign and security policy come about? In German public, many voices point to **collectively shared beliefs**. With regard to the Federal Republic, the most salient of these beliefs are a preference for multilateralism and a skepticism towards the use of military force in international politics. As a matter of fact, when Germans are being asked what options they prefer for their nation’s foreign and security policy in general, stable majorities recommend economic sanctions, military training for international partners, or humanitarian aid. In contrast, combat missions or providing armament to third parties are met with skepticism and refusal. Foreign deployments of the Bundeswehr are accepted by a majority of the German population already since the 1990’s, yet sometimes with a clear preference for caveats regarding offensive action within these missions. Already in 1993, when the Bundeswehr was about to be deployed in its first armed foreign mission to Somalia, a majority of the Germans supported a restriction to “repairing roads and drilling wells” (68 percent) as well as “protection for food transports” (80 percent), while “policing tasks” (42 percent) or the fight against “armed gangs” (37 percent) were dismissed.<sup>2</sup> In part, this pattern can still be found in polls about today’s Bundeswehr deployments as well. It is worth noting though, that in European comparison, the Germans are by no means alone with this particular attitude.

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<sup>2</sup> Emnid (1993): Deutsche Soldaten nach Somalia? Emnid-Umfrage für den SPIEGEL, 19. bis 21. April 1993, in: *Der Spiegel* 17, p. 21.

The close integration into EU, NATO and UN is virtually part of the genetic code of German foreign and security policy. The idea to act outside of this multilateral framework is rejected by an overwhelming majority of Germany's population, too. The fact that this preference for multilateralism does not necessarily point into the direction of military restraint has definitely contributed a lot to today's acceptance of Bundeswehr deployments. At the same time, the side by side of these convictions can lead to some discrepancies as well. For example, a large majority of Germans are in favor of the Federal Republic's NATO membership, while at the same time only a lower number of them would deploy the Bundeswehr for collective defense in case of an attack against one of Germany's NATO partners.

Such widespread skepticism towards the use of force cannot simply be dismissed. In the 1990's, international research on German foreign policy has therefore coined terms such as "antimilitarism", "culture of military restraint" and "civilian power". The convictions do not provide a killer argument, however, that the German population was „pacifist“. Apart from the basic acceptance for foreign military deployments this becomes most clear when looking at the current debate about the funding and troop levels of the Bundeswehr. Since 2015, almost half of the German population supports an increase of the Federal Republic's defense budget, while about one third responding favorably to at least maintain the current funding. In the preceding years, only about one fifth of the Germans wanted to increase the budget and half of them would have kept the funding as it had been. Polls regarding the troop levels show quite similar results.<sup>3</sup> The Bundeswehr has also been ranking high in Germans' trust in government institutions for years, ranging closely behind the Police and the Federal Constitutional Court. In addition, many young Germans can imagine serving in the armed forces. In 2017, a survey among pupils named the Bundeswehr the third-most popular employer behind the police and the Adidas sports brand.<sup>4</sup> Given these numbers, it would be a severe oversimplification to attest the Germans with "pacifism".

### **Critical events, media coverage and the scope of political action**

Nonetheless, collectively shared beliefs are neither the only nor the most influential factor to public opinion formation on foreign and security policy. Public opinion researchers rather point at two other factors instead. The first one of them are critical events transmitted by the media – for example casualties sustained in a Bundeswehr deployment abroad or the peaceful conduct of democratic elections in a fragile state supported by Germany. In close connection with the concept of rational public, pollsters consider such events the base for the population's attention, interpretation and evaluation of government policy. As a matter of fact, polls are oftentimes conducted precisely on the occasion of such events – on the one hand because a survey with today's gold standard of at least 1,000 respondents is expensive, on the other hand because it offers news value.

It is a commonplace that due to the logics of mass media, usually negative events are concerned. For example, scholars consider the Bundeswehr deployment to Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014 a case in which the worsening situation there, transmitted by the media, clearly affected the German population's perception of chances for mission success and thus caused a decline in support.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the increased approval for a higher German defense budget after 2014 can also be traced back to media coverage of the changing security situation in Eastern Europe and of frequent flaws and failures in the Bundeswehr's equipment. Hence, critical events do not automatically pose a restriction to the scope of political action. In addition, it becomes clear that only an increased and clearly visible occurrence of such events over a prolonged time span can cause a sustainable change in public opinion.

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<sup>3</sup> Steinbrecher/Biehl/Rothbart (2017): [Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsklima in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Erste Ergebnisse der Bevölkerungsbefragung 2017](#) (Potsdam: Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr) [online], rev. 01.12.2018, p. 64-65.

<sup>4</sup> Trendence Institut (2017): [Das Ranking der Top-Arbeitgeber der Schüler](#) [online], rev. 01.12.2018.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Biehl/Höfig/Wanner (2015): [Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsklima in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Ergebnisse der Bevölkerungsbefragung 2014](#) (Potsdam: Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr) [online], rev. 01.12.2018, p. 55-56.

In contrast, the short term effects of single incidents on public opinion are anything but predictable. For example, the September 2009 air strike against two hijacked road tankers near Kunduz on request of a Bundeswehr commander was soon criticized as a catastrophic mistake throughout German media. The Germans' support for the deployment to Afghanistan, however, did not decline. The "ZDF-Politbarometer" poll did not show any significant change, and according to the "ARD-Deutschlandtrend" poll, the approval even increased by ten percent for a short time. This seemingly paradoxical outcome can be grasped by the abovementioned problem of distance. While the media had not shown much interest in the German Afghanistan deployment for a long time, the incident caused an almost unprecedented level of attention. Subsequently, the population was provided with a much greater density of information about the mission, and due to the contentious debate, a larger number of politicians argued for its continuation.<sup>6</sup> Despite the incident itself, both factors eventually led to a short term positive effect on public opinion.

### Opinion leadership counts

The seemingly paradoxical effects of the tanker bombing indicate the second factor brought forward by pollsters to explain public opinion on foreign and security policy. More skeptical researchers do not discard the importance of critical events, but they point to opinion leadership as an influential factor instead. According to these scholars, public opinion formation on foreign and security policy critically depends on statements made by senior officials, because only these statements caused sufficient media attention and offered the necessary reduction of complexity – be it for or against a particular policy option. From this perspective, especially cross-party consensus is considered to have a particular strong effect on opinion formation.

The German arms support for the Kurdish Peshmerga against ISIL in Northern Iraq since 2014 is a good example of this. In general, the German population is quite divided about arms shipments as a means in international politics – even if allied states were the recipients of such deliveries. In a 2015 poll, roughly a third of Germans were generally in favor of supplying arms to partners, while another third was against that, and closely less than a third deemed the idea ambivalent. Another 2015 poll, asking specifically for the Peshmerga supplies, yielded a result of 43 percent being in favor and a quarter rejecting them, the rest being ambivalent.<sup>7</sup> Notably, the support for the Peshmerga gained more acceptance than the idea of delivering weapons in general, although the receiver was a non-state actor and there was a contentious debate in the media. Obviously, due to media reports about ISIL's atrocities and terrorist attacks, even some respondents who were against arms shipments otherwise had changed their minds in this particular case.

Yet even much more approval for the shipments was created by clear and unequivocal advocacy on part of the Federal Government. During the aforementioned 2015 polls, the arms deliveries had already faded from public debate. One year before the situation was quite different though: In 2014 Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel (in a state of the nation address), Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen (in a joint statement) as well as a large majority of the German Parliament had decidedly argued for the arms shipments. In a 2014 poll with the very same question, one quarter of the Germans rejected the arms deliveries as well, but a majority of 52 percent approved them, and only one fifth of the respondents were undecided – a difference of almost ten percent.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. von Krause (2011): *Die Afghanistaneinsätze der Bundeswehr. Politischer Entscheidungsprozess mit Eskalationsdynamik* (Wiesbaden: VS), p. 240; Naumann (2013): *Der blinde Spiegel. Deutschland im afghanischen Transformationskrieg* (Hamburg: HIS), p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Biehl et. al (2015): [Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsklima in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Ergebnisse und Analysen der Bevölkerungsbefragung 2015](#) (Potsdam: Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr) [online], rev. 01.12.2018, p. 68; TNS Emnid (2016): [Nutzung von Informationsangeboten des BMVg und der Bundeswehr](#) (Bielefeld: Kantar Deutschland) [online], rev. 01.12.2018, p. 48.

## **Conclusion: The case for political argument**

A closer look at the factors of public opinion formation leads to two major findings. First, public opinion is not only shaped by collectively shared beliefs, but all the more by critical events and political argument. The necessary criterion is media coverage. Second, because in political reality these three factors are always interlocking, media attention and critical events should not be regarded as obstacles to the scope of political action but as chances for explanation and discussion. Debates like the one on lacking spare parts for Bundeswehr equipment or on arms shipments for the Peshmerga show that plain language about problems and dilemmas can contribute to the population's understanding of an otherwise distant policy area. If decision-makers are ready to make their case cogently and transparently then, they can generate public support – even in contentious fields of action. It is worth the argument.

There is a continuous trend for short-term polling on behalf of the news media on any topical issue, such as conscription, fear of terrorist attacks, or possible reactions to the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Especially online media will soon come up with surveys and exploit their results in order to score in the daily race for newsworthiness. Such single polls should be used as political argument only with great caution and only when comparative figures from earlier surveys are available. On the other hand, given today's accelerated and polarized media landscape, poll results can sometimes even serve as arguments of temperance. For example online media often resort to twitter discussions as a would-be excerpt of “the public mood”, although they hardly reflect the thoughts of the broader population. Vice versa, populist voices claim to represent a majority of “the people” whereas statistics yield completely different results. In both cases, public opinion can provide some levelheaded contrast and thus contribute to a more factual debate.

Public opinion on foreign and security policy will never be free from inconsistencies. The Germans' widespread support for NATO in contrast to their lesser willingness to deploy the Bundeswehr in a collective defense scenario is a steady reminder for this. But it would be completely wrong to complain about such discrepancies. In fact they constitute a wake-up call for better education, increased media coverage and more cogent political argument regarding foreign and security policy. This may sound very ambitious, but several state level school curricula, such as the secondary school syllabus in Rhineland Palatinate, have already put more emphasis on this topic. Meanwhile, most nationwide media have already proceeded much further – it is hard to remember any primetime news program that was not full of foreign and security policy issues during the last years. Now it is the decision-makers' turn to take up these issues and make the case for action without shying away from political contention.

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