

nalized by Americans. The result was that American policymakers had much leeway to deal with the Soviet Union and its allies during the cold war years, but only if their policies took a “hardline” approach. Policymakers, hence, were reluctant to appear soft toward communist governments. They could not recognize the People’s Republic of China—the largest country in the world—throughout the 1950s and 1960s for fear that strong anticommunist sentiments among the public might be aroused. The last remnant of this anticommunist legacy in the present era is the constraints that it continues to place on policymakers’ abilities to make foreign policy changes toward Fidel Castro and Cuba, even though the cold war has ended.

Third, public support for a policy may turn rapidly into disapproval. Although the public tends to rally around the flag and the president during a crisis such as war, public support for presidential policies tends to dwindle over time. Studies, such as John Mueller’s *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, demonstrate that the longer a war lasts, the more public support will erode.²² Lengthier wars produce greater numbers of American casualties and indicate that the war is going badly. Such events politicize the issue throughout American society and increase public disapproval of presidential policy. In other words, public support for the use of troops abroad has a limited threshold: quick and successful operations, as in Grenada, Panama, and the Persian Gulf, maximize support; lengthy and unsuccessful conflicts, as in Korea, Vietnam, and Lebanon, bring public disapproval. The Iran-hostage crisis in 1979 quickly rallied support behind President Jimmy Carter, but his inability to resolve the crisis throughout 1980 produced strong public disapproval. Such public disapproval not only constrains presidential power, but can lead to failed presidencies.

Finally, the collapse of the cold war consensus has made public opinion less responsive to the president (the rise and decline of the cold war consensus is examined in the next section on political ideology). During the 1950s, most American leaders and members of the elite public shared a similar cold war view of the world that the mass public tended to “follow.” Since the Vietnam War, however, differing views of the world and U.S. foreign policy have arisen leading to greater diversity and volatility in public opinion. As political scientist Thomas Mann points out, “There is little doubt that changes in public opinion about foreign policy were the root cause of the weakening of the President’s leadership position and of the chronic conflict between the executive and legislative branches that began in the late 1960s.”²³ The continued prominence of the president gives him a distinct advantage in influencing public opinion, but the lack of a public consensus in support of presidential policies has made it much more difficult to shape foreign policy. On the one hand, the president has the potential for more leeway because the split in opinion allows him to promote either a cold war or post-cold war foreign policy; on the other hand, disagreement over foreign policy makes it more difficult for the president to rally and maintain public support for particular policies. Opinion leaders with different foreign policy views now compete with each other for public support. This helps to explain why President Reagan was unsuccessful in persuading no more than 40 percent of Americans to support his anticommunist policies in Central America.²⁴

In sum, the influence of public opinion on the foreign policy process is more complex than the traditional wisdom concludes. For many issues, public opinion has little, if any, immediate and direct impact on the policymaking process. However, for other issues, especially highly salient ones, public opinion has an immediate and direct effect on policymakers within the government, including the president and members of Congress. The common denominator in these two contradictory patterns is often the level of success or failure perceived among a public that tends to be very pragmatic and impatient. When the public feels things are going well in their lives and for the country, they tend to support the status quo and approve the president's performance. However, if the public perceives problems, such as a foreign policy fiasco or an economic recession, most people will want changes and the president's approval rating will drop. Public perception and satisfaction levels help to explain whether public opinion supports or constrains the president's ability to govern foreign policy. These contradictory public opinion patterns for foreign policy operated during the Persian Gulf crisis, affecting President Bush and the making of U.S. foreign policy. (See essay 11.1 on public opinion and the Persian Gulf crisis.)

The discussion above should help clarify the more "indirect and longer-term" influence of public opinion in domestic politics and on the policymaking process. First, the public elects major governmental officials. It matters little how interested or informed most Americans are concerning foreign policy or whether their vote has anything to do with foreign policy issues. The fact remains that the public, especially the mass public, makes the final decision as to who becomes president and who runs Congress; it chooses the political leadership responsible for making U.S. foreign policy. Furthermore, with the collapse of a foreign policy consensus since the Vietnam War, the public's indirect impact on foreign policy through elections has increased, as different elected officials are now more likely to support different foreign policies. Second, the ability of political leaders to influence the policymaking process during their tenure is heavily a function of their public prestige. As figure 2.2 in chapter 2 clearly illustrated, not only does public approval of presidential performance fluctuate dramatically with time, public approval also tends to move downward over time for each president. This accounts for the presidential life cycle where the president tends to enter office with high approval in public opinion only to see it diminish with time weakening his ability to govern. Finally, public opinion often sets the boundaries of legitimate political discourse and domestic politics, limiting the kinds of decisions considered by policymakers. Although public opinion is erratic, it tends to fluctuate within a certain range of ideological and cultural beliefs that prevail throughout American society. It is to these more indirect and longer-term influences of the public to which we now turn by examining the role of, first, political ideology and, then, political culture.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

A key to understanding how the public affects American politics and U.S. foreign policy is to examine the evolution of the ideological views of Americans. **Political**