Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy

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This article examines relationships between media content, public opinion, and foreign policy in the United States and the United Kingdom. The investigation proceeds in two stages. First, an agenda-setting analysis demonstrates a strong connection between the salience of foreign affairs in the media and the salience of foreign affairs for the public. Second, two potential effects of varying issue salience on foreign policymaking are examined: (1) issue priming and (2) policymakers' reactions to issue salience. Analyses rely on a combination of U.S. and U.K. commercial polling data and the American National Election Study. Results point to the importance of mass media and issue salience in the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy.

There is a considerable body of work in the United States on both the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy and on the nature of public opinion on foreign affairs. While early research suggested that the effects of public opinion on foreign policy were slight, recent studies indicate that public opinion often has a measurable impact on U.S. foreign policy (e.g., Hartley and Russett 1992; Hill 1998; Sobel 2001; Wlezien 1996). Similarly, while initial studies indicated that public opinion was volatile and incoherent (Almond 1950; Converse 1964; Miller 1967), work since the 1970s supports the conclusion that public opinion on foreign affairs is often stable, sensibly structured, and rational (Caspary 1970; Mueller 1973; Page and Shapiro 1992; Wittkopf 1990).

Although we have a reasonable understanding of the *nature* of public opinion about foreign affairs, we know much less about the *sources* of this opinion. Holsti's (1996) chapter on the "Sources of Foreign Policy Attitudes"—emblematic of the majority of enquiries on the matter—focuses on partisanship, ideology, and demographics. These attributes account for a considerable amount of cross-sectional variance in foreign policy attitudes, but they tell us little about how and why these attitudes might change over time.

Mass media content is the most likely source of over-time changes in individuals' foreign policy preferences. On one hand, the mass media are the primary conduit between the public and policymakers. Policymakers follow media reports on public opinion, and the media are the public's chief source of information on what policymakers are doing. In addition, the media are the principal means by which the vast majority of individuals receive information about foreign affairs, an issue for which personal experience is unlikely to provide much useful information.

If foreign policymakers respond to the public and the public responds to the media, studying the nature and degree of media influence on public opinion is crucial. Page et al. (1987) note, "It would be premature to celebrate the triumph of democracy before knowing how and by whom the public is itself influenced" (p. 23). With similar concerns in mind, a limited number of studies have examined media effects on public opinion about foreign policy issues. Several authors investigate media effects on individuals' policy preferences during the Gulf War, for instance, Mueller (1994), Pan and Kosicki (1994), and Sigelman et al. (1993).[1] Little research examines connections between media content, public opinion, and foreign policy over an extended period, however.

The current work represents one effort at exploring these relationships, using a two-stage research design. The following section examines connections between the salience of foreign affairs for the mass media and the salience of foreign affairs for the public. This *agenda-setting* analysis is based on time-series data from both the United States and the United Kingdom, affording more comparative and generalizable results than past U.S.-centered research. In addition, the analysis addresses the value of issue salience, as measured by the most important problem (MIP) question, in studies of foreign policy. That the media effects investigated here are related primarily to the salience of foreign affairs is critical—most past work on foreign affairs has avoided the subject of issue salience and in doing so has missed an important part of the media-public-policy relationship.

Media effects on the salience of foreign affairs are only half of the story, so subsequent sections explore two potential effects of changes in issue salience on foreign policy. *Issue priming* hypotheses are examined using individual-level data from the American National Election Studies, and the potential effects of changing issue salience on defense policymaking in the United States and the United Kingdom are explored in a second aggregate-level time-series analysis. In sum, results point to the advantages of considering media content, public opinion, and foreign policy concurrently, and to the potential significance of both the mass media and issue salience in the public opinion–foreign policy relationship.

Media Content and Issue Salience

Research on foreign policymaking relies to a considerable extent on work by Bernard Cohen (1963,1973,1995). Cohen's (1963) *The Press and Foreign Policy* makes an important contribution outside the foreign policy field, however. His statement that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p. 13) remains the clearest (and most frequently cited) annunciation of the public agenda-setting hypothesis.

Following in large part from Cohen's thesis, empirical agenda-setting research has demonstrated powerful links between media content and public concern across a wide variety of issues.[2] Agenda-setting analysis and foreign policy research have only intermittently crossed paths, however. Public agenda-setting scholars have given limited attention to foreign policy (e.g., Gonzenbach 1992; Huegel et al. 1989; Iyengar and Simon 1993; Wanta and Hu 1993). The foreign policy literature, however, has steered clear of the open-ended public opinion measure central to agenda-setting analysis: "What do you think is the most important problem facing our country today?"

This aversion to the MIP question is likely a product of Caspary's (1970) treatise on its misuse in early studies of U.S. public opinion on foreign policy. Based on considerable variation in MIP responses, Almond (1950) suggests that U.S. attitudes on foreign affairs are unstable and superficial. In reaction to this finding, Caspary asserts that MIP responses are a poor indication of individuals' policy preferences. Based on results from the question, "Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs, or if we stay out of world affairs?" Caspary shows that public opinion is much more coherent and stable than Almond suggests.

Both Almond (1950) and Caspary (1970) fail to distinguish between issue salience and issue opinions, however. The latter has to do with individuals' policy *preferences*, such as whether defense spending should be increased, or whether the United States should get involved in a foreign conflict. In contrast, the former has to do with the relative significance of an issue to an actor—the degree to which individuals are *attentive* to foreign affairs issues, for instance, relative to all other issues.[3] Caspary is entirely correct in believing that the MIP question is a poor indication of individual's policy preferences. Particularly at the aggregate level, however, the MIP question offers an opportunity to gauge the relative salience of issues. To paraphrase Cohen (1963), the MIP question tells us very little about what people think about foreign affairs, but a great deal about whether or not people are thinking about foreign affairs.

This distinction between issue salience and issue opinions has been highlighted in agenda-setting research, and—while keeping in mind the limitations of the MIP question—this literature has been remarkably successful at demonstrating the strong link between media content and public attention to issues. As a first step in the current investigation, then, an agenda-setting analysis is used to examine the degree to which public attention to foreign affairs reflects media content.

Our measure of the public agenda is the percentage of individuals citing foreign affairs issues in response to the MIP question. Results for the United States are gathered from CBS, Gallup, Harris, the *Los Angeles Times*, Pew, and Yankelovich to make a monthly time series; a similar series for the United Kingdom uses MORI and Gallup results.[4] Media agenda measures are based on content analyses of the *New York Times* (*NYT*) and *The Times* (London) in Lexis-Nexis. For *NYT*, the measure is the number of articles published by the Foreign Desk in Section 1/A, monthly, since January 1981. For *The Times*, the measure is the number of articles published in "Overseas News," monthly, since January 1990.[5]

Monthly media and public opinion time series are displayed in Figure 1. The relationship between the two is very strong in both countries. Indeed, the degree to which the two series move together is remarkable in light of the fact that MIP responses are affected not only by the changing salience of the issue at hand but also by the changing salience of all other issues. (For a valuable discussion of this aspect of the MIP question, see Wlezien 2001.)

As a more rigorous analysis of the link between media content and public attention to foreign affairs, Table 1 presents results from a time-series model of the relationship. The equation takes the form of an autoregressive distributed lag (ADL) model,[6]

$$MIP_t = \alpha + \beta_1 MIP_{t-1} + \beta_2 News_t + \beta_3 News_{t-1} + \beta_4 \Delta Unemp_t + \beta_5 \Delta Unemp_{t-1} + \beta_6 \Delta Unemp_{t-2},$$

where *MIP* is the public agenda and *News* is the number of foreign affairs articles. Media content (*News*) is included at t and $t-1$ because preliminary tests suggest that media effects most often occur within a one-month period. The model also includes changes in the unemployment rate ($\Delta Unemp$), with the expectation that attention to foreign affairs is comparatively low when the domestic economy is in trouble. Preliminary tests indicated that unemployment effects are distributed over t, $t-1$, and $t-2$. In sum, the model suggests that current public concern about foreign affairs is a function of past public concern about foreign affairs, current and past media content, and current and past changes in the unemployment rate.

Past work suggests that articles involving respondents' own country should have a stronger effect than articles that do not (Lent 1977; Wanta and Hu 1993).
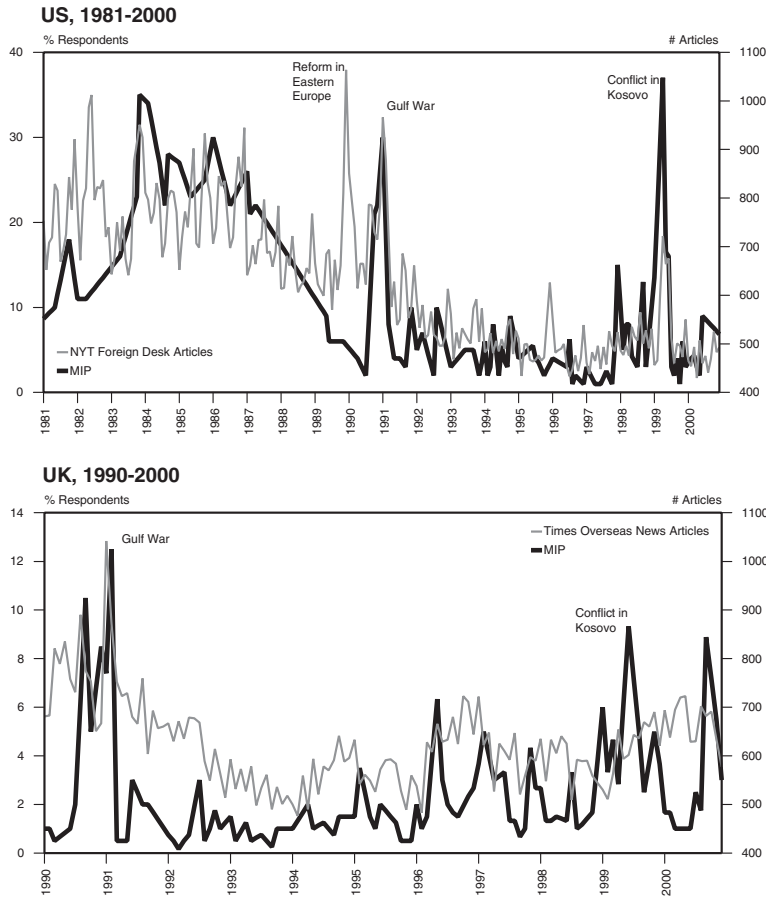
US, 1981-2000

UK, 1990-2000

Figure 1
The Salience of Foreign Affairs

An article on China and the United States, for instance, should have a stronger effect on U.S. respondents than an article that deals only with China. Accordingly, two models are estimated: The first uses all *NYT* (for U.S. analyses) or *The Times* (for U.K. analyses) articles together, and the second separates articles that include mentions of the United States (in the *NYT*, for U.S. analyses) or the United Kingdom (in *The Times*, for U.K. analyses) in the first few paragraphs (based on "hlead" in Lexis-Nexis).

A central issue in the study of media effects is being able to distinguish between effects that are truly media driven and effects that are simply the product of real-world indicators. If the media are only reflecting real-world circumstances, what may appear as a media effect is more appropriately viewed as a real-world effect. In short, "media effects" lie somewhere in the gap that exists between media content and reality.

Table 1

Media content and the salience of foreign affairs

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable: U.S. MIP_t			Dependent Variable: U.K. MIP_t		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
MIP_{t-1}	.055 (.135)	.036 (.135)	−.020 (.316)	.628*** (.070)	.583*** (.073)	.147 (.137)
$\Sigma News^A_{t,t-1}$	.017*** (.004)	—	—	.005*** (.002)	—	—
$\Sigma News^B_{t,t-1}$	—	.039*** (.013)	.083** (.038)	—	.031*** (.009)	.063*** (.014)
$\Sigma News^C_{t,t-1}$	—	.006 (.007)	.008 (.030)	—	.000 (.002)	−.001 (.003)
$\Sigma RW^B_{t,t-1}$	—	—	−.002 (.008)	—	—	−.005 (.008)
$\Sigma RW^C_{t,t-1}$	—	—	.001 (.003)	—	—	−.000 (.001)
$\Sigma\Delta Unemp_{t,t-1,t-2}$	−11.488**(4.560)	−7.159 (5.125)	−16.161 (13.962)	−2.627** (1.004)	−2.048** (.988)	−.148 (1.419)
N	75	75	35	129	129	63
Time period	1981-2000	1981-2000	1984-1995	1990-2000	1990-2000	1990-1995
R^2/adjusted R^2	.331/.272	.363/.286	.389/.056	.491/.466	.535/.505	.638/.551

Note: Cells contain ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Breusch-Godfrey Lagrange multiplier tests were used to ensure that residuals are not serially correlated. *MIP* is the percentage of respondents citing foreign affairs as the most important problem; *News*[A] is the number of foreign affairs articles in the *New York Times* or *The Times* (London); *News*[B] is the number of foreign affairs articles with domestic content; *News*[C] is the number of foreign affairs articles without domestic content; *RW*[B] is the number foreign affairs events involving the United States/United Kingdom; *RW*[C] is the number foreign affairs events not involving the United States/United Kingdom.

**p < .05. ***p < .01.

For public agenda-setting models of domestic economic issues, the solution is relatively simple. Models of media effects on the public salience of unemployment, for instance, can include the unemployment rate as a control. Media effects, above and beyond the effects of the unemployment rate, are more convincingly attributed to the media (e.g., Behr and Iyengar 1985; Soroka 2002a, 2002b).

The problem is slightly more complicated for foreign policy issues since no obvious, accurate measure of real-world indicators exists. Foreign affairs events data sets might provide a reasonable proxy, however. Accordingly, a final estimation includes real-world measures based on Protocol for the Assessment of Nonviolent Direct Action (PANDA) events data. The source of PANDA data is the Lexis-Nexis index of Reuter's news leads—a search engine scans news leads, identifies foreign policy events, and categorizes them based on the countries involved and type of event (among other variables).[7] The resulting data are used here to create a monthly measure of the number of foreign affairs events, where each Reuter's story captured in the PANDA data set represents an event. As with media content, two series are included—foreign affairs events dealing with the United States or United Kingdom, and all other foreign affairs events.

Results are presented in Table 1. The significance of the MIP_{t-1} coefficient in every case indicates that the current month's value for MIP is indeed affected by the past month's values. More important, news stories about foreign affairs ($News^A$) have a positive influence on public concern about foreign affairs. In the basic model (column 1), ten additional foreign affairs articles at t and $t-1$ lead to an average increase of .17 in the U.S. MIP measure. A one standard deviation increase in the number of foreign affairs articles (143, with mean of 635) at t and $t-1$ leads to an average increase of ~2.4. Results are similar for the U.K. model, although less dramatic. Ten additional articles lead to an average increase of .05 in the MIP measure; a one standard deviation increase in the number of foreign affairs articles (89, with a mean of 624) leads to an average increase of ~.7 in the MIP measure.

As expected, unemployment has a significant and negative effect. A 1-percent increase in unemployment leads to an eleven-point drop in the percentage of U.S. respondents citing foreign affairs as the MIP, while the same increase leads to a three-point decrease in the U.K. MIP measure. (The difference in magnitude is partly a function of the smaller variance in the U.K. MIP measure; see Figure 1.)

When articles mentioning the United States/United Kingdom are separated from those that do not (column 2), the new measure ($News^B$) has a more powerful effect on MIP responses than does the original measure ($News^A$). The effect of each additional foreign affairs article doubles in the United States and is six times greater in the United Kingdom. Ten additional news articles at t and $t-1$ now lead to an average increase of about .39 in the U.S. MIP series and .31 in the U.K.

series. In line with previous evidence, there is no significant effect of articles not mentioning the United States/United Kingdom (*News^c*).

It is worth noting that coverage of foreign affairs is higher in the *NYT* and *The Times* than in most other U.S./U.K. papers, and it is likely that the stories appearing in smaller papers are the ones with U.S./U.K. content. As a result, the finding that articles mentioning the United States/United Kingdom have a greater effect is likely the product of both (1) greater public interest in these articles and (2) greater visibility of these stories via other newspapers and television news programs.

Finally, media effects do not disappear with the addition of real-world variables (column 3). In fact, the measures of real-world foreign affairs events appear to have no effect whatsoever on public opinion.[8] (The same is true for newspaper content—real-world events are insignificant when newspaper content is modeled as a function of past newspaper content and current real-world events.) This is not to say that the significant media coefficients in Table 1 are attributable to content totally unrelated to real-world events, of course. It is more likely that we require a more accurate measure of real-world foreign affairs events. In the absence of a perfect real-world indicator, the media coefficient likely reflects both media effects—effects that are the product of the filtering and focusing, or the distortion, inherent in media coverage of real-world events—and effects that are more appropriately attributed to real-world events themselves.

Results in Table 1 confirm that media content affects public attention to foreign affairs in the United States and United Kingdom. This is not an unexpected finding, admittedly—it would be arresting to find that media content does *not* drive public attention to foreign affairs. That said, this investigation into media effects serves as a first step in an effort to link media, public opinion, and foreign policy. Having established a connection between media content and the salience of foreign affairs for the public, the following sections consider the implications of variations in issue salience for foreign policymaking.

Issue Salience and Foreign Policy

Foreign policymakers may respond to issue salience in two ways. First, they may react indirectly to issue salience by responding to or anticipating changes in the public's evaluations of politicians via issue priming. Second, they may react directly to variations in issue salience, adjusting defense spending, for example, based in part on the recent salience of foreign affairs. Both of these possibilities are examined below. In each case, evidence suggests that changes in the salience of foreign affairs are significant to the study of public opinion and foreign policy.

Issue Priming

Following almost directly from the agenda-setting hypothesis, research on priming suggests that "by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television [or print] news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged" (Iyengar and Kinder 1987:63). A number of studies, both experimental and survey based, indicate strong priming effects for domestic and foreign policy issues. The significance of different issues in individuals' assessments of U.S. presidents is found to vary over time based on the changing salience of those issues, for instance (e.g., Edwards and Mitchell 1995; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Rabinowitz et al. 1982). There are also several examples related directly to foreign affairs: Assessments of Reagan's job performance are more clearly connected with U.S. intervention in Central America after the Iran-Contra affair (Krosnick and Kinder 1990), for example, while performance in the Gulf War dominates respondents' assessments of George Bush after the crisis (Iyengar and Simon 1993; Krosnick and Brannon 1993).

Adapted in large part from past models of priming effects (esp. Krosnick and Brannon 1993), this section examines the effects of issue salience on U.S. presidential evaluations, using American National Election Study data from the 1984, 1988, and 1992 elections.[9] Unfortunately, the British Election Study does not include the necessary variables. This analysis relies on U.S. data only, then, and the following relatively simple logit regression models:

$$Ap = \alpha + \beta_1 Th + \beta_2 Ap^E + \beta_3 Ap^{FA}, \text{ and}$$
$$Ap = \alpha + \beta_1 Th + \beta_2 Ap^E + \beta_3 Ap^{FA} + \beta_4 Ap^{FA} * MIP + \beta_5 Ap^{FA} * [MIP\% \, / \, News],$$

where Ap is a binary variable indicating respondents' approval of the president's job performance, Th is a presidential thermometer rating (rescaled from 0 to 1), Ap^E is a binary variable indicating respondents' approval of the president's handling of the economy, and Ap^{FA} is a binary variable indicating respondents' approval of the president's handling of foreign affairs.[10] The first model tests the significance of the independent variables, with the expectation that each plays a role in presidential evaluations. The second includes tests for priming effects:

(A) an interaction between foreign affairs job approval and whether the respondent named foreign affairs as the MIP ($Ap^{FA} * MIP$), and

(B1) an interaction between foreign affairs job approval and the proportion of respondents naming foreign affairs as the MIP ($Ap^{FA} * MIP\%$) in the current election year, or

(B2) an interaction between foreign affairs job approval and the number of foreign affairs articles in the *NYT* involving the United States from September to November of the current election year.

In the first case (A), the expectation is that respondents who are more concerned with foreign affairs will give greater consideration to the president's performance on this issue. The second interaction (B1, B2) suggests a slightly different dynamic: Increased aggregate salience of foreign affairs leads all respondents to give greater weight to foreign affairs issues.

There are two possible measures of aggregate salience tested here. As the aggregate equivalent of the individual-level salience measure, the proportion of respondents naming foreign affairs as the MIP (B1) is intuitively appealing. MIP responses vary with the salience of *all* issues (Wlezien 2001), however, so an MIP foreign affairs series may contain too much variation generated by changes in the salience of unrelated issues. The number of newspaper articles may be less prone to this kind of error; accordingly, the number of foreign affairs articles involving the United States in the current election year (B2) is also used as a measure of the aggregate salience of foreign affairs.

Results are presented in Table 2. Because logit coefficients are not readily interpretable, odds ratios are also listed (in italics). As expected, and in line with past research, all three variables in the first model are statistically significant (column 1). An increase of one point on the thermometer rating is associated with a .07 increase in the odds that a respondent will approve of the president. Approving of his handling of the economy is associated with the average respondent being about thirteen times more likely to approve of the way he is handling his job a president. Approving of the way he is handling foreign affairs is associated with the average respondent being about three times more likely to approve of the way he is handling his job as president.

In the second model (column 2), all variables are significant except for the first interaction ($Ap^{FA} * MIP$). It does not appear as though citing foreign affairs as the MIP indicates that individuals will give greater weight to foreign affairs in presidential evaluations. Because MIP responses reflect competition between every possible issue, it is unlikely that individual responses will reflect substantial consistency—this may be the cause of the insignificance of this individual-level priming variable.

MIP responses display more consistency in the aggregate, however, and may be a valuable indication of public issue salience. The significance of the other interaction ($Ap^{FA} * MIP\%$) supports both this notion and the second priming hypothesis: Respondents give greater weight to foreign affairs in their assessments of presidential job performance during periods of increased aggregate issue salience. Substituting media content ($Ap^{FA} * News$) for MIP responses leads to similar results (column 3). The fact that the *News* coefficient is much smaller in

Table 2

Issue salience and presidential evaluations: United States

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable: Presidential Job Approval (binary)					
	(1)		(2)		(3)	
Th	.067***	(.003)	.067***	(.003)	.067***	(.003)
	1.069		*1.069*		*1.069*	
Ap^{E}	2.572***	(.104)	2.502***	(.107)	2.49***	(.109)
	13.096		*12.210*		*12.044*	
Ap^{FA}	1.161***	(.090)	.977***	(.102)	.259	(.315)
	3.192		*2.657*		*1.296*	
$Ap^{FA} * MIP$	—		.343	(.247)	.364	(.245)
			1.409		*1.439*	
$Ap^{FA} * MIP\%$	—		2.170***	(.716)	—	
			8.755			
$Ap^{FA} * News$	—		—		.001***	(.000)
					1.001	
Constant	−5.200***	(.181)	−5.161**	(.181)	−5.166**	(.181)
N	5,380		5,380		5,380	
Log likelihood	−1704.653		−1697.371		−1697.956	
Pseudo R^2	.543		.545		.545	

Note: Cells contain logit regression coefficients with robust standard errors (in parentheses) and odds ratios (in italics). *Th* is a presidential thermometer rating (rescaled from 0 to 1); AP^{E} is (binary) approval of the president's handling of the economy; AP^{FA} is (binary) approval of the president's handling of foreign affairs; *MIP* is a (binary) variable indicating whether the respondent cited foreign affairs as the most important problem; *MIP%* is the percentage of respondents that year citing foreign affairs as the most important problem; *News* is the number of *New York Times* Foreign Desk articles from September to November in the current election year.
**p < .05. ***p < .01.

magnitude than the *MIP%* coefficient is the product of changing the unit of analysis from percent MIP responses to the number of foreign affairs articles. The statistically significant coefficient suggests a similar dynamic, however.

Logit coefficients make it difficult to both assess the cumulative effects of the Ap^{FA} variable and its various interactions and to judge the comparative strengths of the *MIP%* and *News* interactions. A more readily understandable interpretation of Table 1 is as follows. In the sample used here, roughly 50 percent of respondents approve of the president's handling of his job. The probability that respondents will approve of the president's handling of his job increases by about 28 percent for respondents approving of his handling of foreign affairs, holding all other variables at their mean values. When the *MIP* and the *MIP%* interactions are included, again holding all other variables at their mean values, the probability that respondents will approve of the president's handling of his job increases by about 31 percent if they approve of his handling of foreign affairs. The same is true for the *News* interaction—the probability increases by about 31 percent.[11]

So while the interactions add some predictive (and analytic) power to the model, there is no obvious difference in the strength of the *MIP%* and *News* models. Indeed, the fact that *MIP%* and *News* interactions perform equally well fits with the strong longitudinal relationship between media and public issue salience demonstrated in the preceding agenda-setting analysis.

Evidence of issue priming points toward the significance of the variations in media content and MIP responses explored in the preceding section. Changes in the salience of foreign affairs can affect the degree to which governments or politicians are assessed based on their foreign policies, and foreign policy may change as a result. Individuals' voting decisions—and consequently, electoral outcomes and subsequent foreign policy decisions—may change due to variations in issue salience. Alternatively, governments and/or politicians may alter foreign policies in anticipation or reaction to increasing public attentiveness to foreign affairs.

Policymakers' Response to Changes in Issue Salience

Jones (1994) proposes another hypothesis regarding the effect of issue salience on public policy:

> It is not enough simply to measure mass preferences. Attentiveness to situations that activate those preferences is also critical. . . . When citizens become aware of a context, in this case, a particular problem, their preferences become activated. So it may be that democratic governments are more responsive to changes in attentiveness to problems than they are to the particular distribution of opinion on a problem. (Jones 1994:125)[12]

Using data from 1965 to 1990, Jones finds evidence that changes in U.S. defense spending are (1) more closely related to changes in attentiveness than preferences and (2) quite strongly related to an interaction between attentiveness and preferences.

The Jones (1994) model highlights the importance of issue salience in the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. Considered along with previous results, it points to the potential significance of the media effects on issue salience. Wlezien's (2001) test of Jones's model leads to different results, however: Using U.S. data from 1974 to 1993, Wlezien finds that U.S. defense spending responds to changes in preferences and that attentiveness has little effect either on its own or as part of an interaction with preferences.

It is not clear that we should expect the salience of foreign affairs to have a strong effect on policymaker's decisions about defense spending. This should be the case only if the salience of foreign affairs is the product of events or issues that are related to defense. One does not have to search long to find a foreign affairs issue that has only a very tenuous link with defense spending, however. Should

the increased salience of foreign affairs brought on by the Elian Gonzalez incident have any bearing on individuals' or policymakers' opinions about defense spending? It is not clear that it should.

Moreover, the MIP measure tells us nothing about the direction of opinion. Increased salience could indicate a desire for increased *or* decreased involvement in or spending on foreign affairs. Each can be true at different times, of course. And if this is the case—as it almost certainly is in the United States—issue salience should not have a consistent effect on foreign policy over time even when preferences are taken into account.

With these caveats in mind, this final section provides a re-estimation of the Jones (1994) model, testing the possibility that policymakers in the United States and United Kingdom react to issue salience as well as defense spending preferences. The current analysis has the advantage of another few years of U.S. data and the addition of comparative data from the United Kingdom. A number of authors discuss potential differences in defense policymaking across nations, and the resulting body of evidence suggests that the effects of public opinion may be smaller in the United Kingdom than in the United States. Risse-Kappen (1991) suggests that a decentralized political system and society-dominated policy networks result in a U.S. foreign policymaking process that is likely to be affected by changes in public opinion. Descriptions of the British foreign policy process suggest a system less prone to public influence.[13]

The current analysis uses data from FY1965 to FY2000 for the United States and FY1978 to FY1995 for the United Kingdom.[14] A relatively simple autoregressive distributed lag model is typical of the literature on defense spending (Hartley and Russett 1992; Jones 1994; Wlezien 1996), in which changes in government spending react to levels of public spending preferences. Table 3 presents results from variations on the following model:

$$\Delta Sp_t = \alpha + \beta_1 P^{Pref}_{t-1} + \beta_2 P^{Att}_{t-1} + \beta_3 P^{Pref \, * \, Att}_{t-1},$$

where *Sp* is government spending on defense in constant 1996 dollars or 1995 pounds.[15] While spending measures are highly autocorrelated, the problem is resolved somewhat by using their first differences ($\Delta Sp_t = Sp_t - Sp_{t-1}$). In addition, results are based on a Prais-Winsten estimation, correcting for serially correlated errors.

P^{Att} (attentiveness) is the proportion of respondents citing foreign affairs as the MIP based on (fiscal) yearly averages of the same data used in the preceding monthly analysis. P^{Pref} (preferences) is based on questions similar to the following: "There is much discussion as to the amount of money the government in Washington should spend for national defense and military purposes. How do you feel about this? Do you think we are spending too little, too much, or about the right amount?" The proportion of "too much" responses is subtracted from the

Table 3

Defense spending, public preferences, and public issue salience

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable: U.S. ΔSp				Dependent Variable: United Kingdom ΔSp			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
P_{t-1}^{Pref}	.386*** (.130)	.369*** (.128)	.311 (.272)	.274** (.132)	.027** (.011)	.038** (.013)	.042* (.020)	.040*** (.011)
P_{t-1}^{Att}		.054 (.466)	.173 (.700)	.513 (.509)	—	.157* (.076)	.047 (.287)	.246** (.081)
$P_{t-1}^{Pref*Att}$	—	—	.008 (.033)	.516* (.274)	—	—	−.003 (.008)	.023* (.011)[a]
President (Dem)	−.490 (4.956)	−.320 (4.828)	−.081 (5.010)	1.860 (4.763)				
Congress (%Dem)	−56.017 (46.169)	−50.978 (46.270)	−50.736 (47.528)	−60.463 (46.072)				
Vietnam	43.567*** (9.136)	43.842*** (9.070)	44.093*** (9.257)	41.601*** (8.943)				
Gulf	42.530*** (7.677)	42.775*** (7.458)	43.476*** (7.973)	43.348*** (6.912)				
Govt (Labour)					.170 (1.525)	.261 (.889)	.212 (.936)	.339 (.837)
Constant	29.253 (25.689)	25.875 (26.441)	24.834 (27.090)	27.039 (26.073)	.519 (.742)	.113 (.493)	.268 (.663)	−.100 (.464)
Rho	.729	.762	.775	.828	.883	.588	.625	.676
N	34	33	33	33	14	14	14	14
Time period	1965-2000	1965-2000	1965-2000	1965-2000	1975-1995	1975-1995	1975-1995	1975-1995
R^2/adjusted R^2	.709/.657	.736/.675	.738/.666	.777/.714	.339/.229	.512/.380	.515/.321	.651/.512

Note: Cells contain Prais-Winsten ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ΔSp is defense spending in constant dollars or pounds; P^{Pref} (preferences) is net support for additional defense spending; P^{Att} (attention) is percentage of most important problem responses.

a. P^{Att} in interaction is 0/1 dummy, equal to one when issue salience is above the seventy-fifth percentile.

p < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01.

proportion of "too little" responses to create a measure of net support for defense spending (as in Wlezien 1996). For the United States, yearly results for 1965 to 1990 are drawn from Hartley and Russett (1992). Results from 1991 onward are based on an extension of these data using (fiscal) yearly averages of results from Gallup (incl. Chicago Council for Foreign Relations polls), Harris, and NORC (incl. General Social Surveys).[16] For the United Kingdom, all results are from Gallup polls as reported in King (2001). $P^{Pref} * {}^{Att}$ is an interaction between the two public opinion series, included with the expectation that the effect of preferences will be enhanced during periods of increased issue salience.

U.S. estimations also include controls for the party of the president (where 1 = Democrat), the average percentage of Democratic seats in the House and Senate, and dummy variables representing the Vietnam and Gulf wars.[17] U.K. estimations include a control for the party in government (where 1 = Labour). Dummy variables for the Falklands and Gulf wars are not statistically significant in the U.K. estimations and so are excluded from the analysis.

Estimates for both countries are presented in Table 3. The first model examines the effect of preferences alone (column 1). In the U.S. model, both war dummies are positive and statistically significant. Government variables are insignificant but negative, as expected, suggesting that Democratic presidents and congresses spend less on defense. (The sign of the president variable changes in subsequent estimations, but neither government variable is ever statistically significant.) In the U.K. model, the government variable is not significant.

In both cases, public preferences have a positive and significant effect on defense spending. In the United States, a one-point increase in the net preferences measures in year $t - 1$ is associated with an average increase of 386 million (1996) dollars; in the United Kingdom, a one-point increase is associated with an increase of 27 million (1995) pounds. For the sake of comparison, both values are about .002 percent of the range in defense spending over the period used here and about .001 percent of the average yearly spending for the period. Comparatively speaking, it is not clear that the U.S. defense spending is more responsive to public preferences than U.K. defense spending.

The second model allows for additive effects of both attentiveness and preferences (column 2). Since attentiveness indicates little about the direction of public concern (for or against current defense policies), we do not necessarily expect the attentiveness measure to have any significant effect. Nevertheless, issue salience appears to have a positive and significant effect on spending in the United Kingdom. The same is not true for the United States.

Columns 3 and 4 contain results from models including an interactive effect between preferences and attentiveness. In the first model, only the preferences measure is significant in the United Kingdom; no public opinion measure is significant in the United States. It does not appear here as though policymakers pay more attention to public preferences when issue salience is high. The interaction

used in this model is premised on the assumption that the interactive effect is linear, however—it assumes that the effect of preferences increases linearly as issue salience increases. This may not be true. It may be that there is a threshold, for instance, and that governments pay particularly close attention to public preferences when issue salience exceeds this threshold.

As an initial test of this hypothesis, the full model was retested using a relatively simple adjustment to the interaction term: The salience measure was altered so that it is equal to one when MIP responses are above a certain threshold and equal to zero otherwise. Three thresholds were tested, at the twenty-fifth, fiftieth, and seventy-fifth percentiles. Results changed little for the first two thresholds, but the latter led to quite different results. Coefficients from this model are presented in column 4.

In the United States, both the preferences measure and the interaction are statistically significant and positive. The attentiveness measure is positive but not significant. When salience is below the seventy-fifth percentile, a one-point increase in the preferences measure is associated with an average increase in spending of about 274 million (1996) dollars. When salience is above that threshold, the same increase in preferences is associated with a spending increase of about 790 million. U.K. results are relatively similar. All opinion measures are positive and statistically significant. When salience is below the threshold, a one-point increase in the preferences measure is associated with an increase in spending of about 40 million (1995) pounds; when salience is above that threshold, spending increases by about 63 million.

Results in column 4 by no means provide an exhaustive test of the ways in which issue salience and preferences may interact—there are many other ways in which the basic salience measure might be transformed. It is likely, after all, that the true effect of salience in the interaction is curvilinear and that the threshold model tested here just happens to capture a critical difference in the effects of preferences as issue salience rises. Nevertheless, this initial test suggests the value of this line of inquiry. Moreover, it highlights the potential importance of issue salience in models of policy representation.[18]

With relatively few cases, conclusions should be rather cautious. Nevertheless, evidence based on all available data suggests that (1) public spending preferences have an effect on defense spending, (2) issue salience may in some cases have a direct effect on foreign policymaking, and (3) the effect of public preferences on defense spending may be enhanced during periods of high issue salience.

Review and Conclusions

The mass media necessarily play a significant role in determining public attention to foreign affairs. Foreign affairs events most often take place beyond the

realm of personal experience—if we learn about these events, it is almost surely the product of media coverage. Understanding the nature and magnitude of media effects on foreign affairs issues is an important endeavor, then, particularly in light of evidence suggesting that public opinion affects foreign policymaking. The media have nevertheless played a relatively small part in the literature concerned with linking foreign policy and public opinion. Accordingly, the current work has taken a first step toward understanding the media's role in the opinion–foreign policy relationship.

The preceding agenda-setting analysis illustrates the remarkably powerful effect of media content on the salience of foreign affairs for the public, even when (admittedly imperfect) measures of real-world events are included in the model. Subsequent analyses then suggest two ways in which issue salience might affect foreign policy. The weight issues have in individuals' assessments of governments and politicians varies with issue salience. In the United States, individuals give greater weight to foreign affairs in their presidential evaluations when issue salience is high, and foreign policy may change in response to or expectation of these changing evaluations. As Jones (1994) suggests, governments may also react directly to issue salience. Evidence above indicates that defense spending in the United States and United Kingdom may respond to a combination of public preference and foreign affairs issue salience. Discerning the exact relationship between salience and defense spending will require further work, however.

The preceding analyses suggest several additional opportunities for further study. One pressing improvement is a more accurate means of specifying real-world foreign affairs events and consequently having a more direct consideration of the size and nature of the gap between media content and real-world foreign affairs. The tone of past work examining the nature of foreign affairs news has generally been negative—the bulk has dealt with the U.S. media, emphasizing the generally poor coverage of foreign affairs (Lang and Lang 1994; Markham 1961) and the tendency to present "knee-jerk, crisis-oriented, context-free, U.S. interest–oriented coverage of international news and foreign policy issues" (Paraschos 1988:203; see also Bagdikian 1987; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Winter 1997). Whether there is a systematic bias among reporters is unclear (see, for instance, Altheide 1984). It seems fair to assume that there is a gap between real-world foreign affairs and news content, however, and past work suggests a number of gaps in particular. As in studies of U.S. media, for instance, Peterson (1981) finds that "news involving Great Britain is highly favored for publication" in *The Times* (p. 154). In addition, and in line with the body of research suggesting that mass media overemphasize the prevalence of violent crime (e.g., Altheide 1997; Davie and Lee 1995; Smith 1984), past work suggests that events involving conflict receive a greater degree of media attention (Shoemaker et al. 1991). If it is true that the media affect public opinion, as the

preceding evidence suggests, further consideration of the gap between media content and real-world events is critical.

In the meantime, this work offers empirical evidence of Cohen's (1963) hypothesis that the mass media play a significant role in driving public attention to foreign affairs. Contrary to Caspary (1970), it also suggests that the MIP question can be a useful indicator in studies of public opinion and foreign affairs. Most important, the preceding analysis explores links between media content, public opinion, *and* foreign policy. Evidence suggests that the changing salience of foreign affairs for the public is in large part reflective of media content and that changes in issue salience can have both indirect and direct consequences for foreign policymaking. It follows that mass media and issue salience play a particularly important—and, as yet, only partially explored—role in the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. For similar work on domestic issues, see Graber (1993: chap. 6), Hall Jamieson and Cappella (1998), Negrine (1996: chap. 5), and Page et al. (1987).
2. The seminal work on public agenda setting is McCombs and Shaw (1972). Many have followed; for reviews of the literature, see Dearing and Rogers (1996), McCombs and Shaw (1993), or Soroka (2002a, 2002b).
3. The contrast between attentiveness and preferences is drawn from Jones (1994).
4. Gallup U.K. results are reported in King (2001). Most-important-problem (MIP) series were constructed using (1) only polls with single responses and (2) all polls, where the percentage of responses is used in place of the percentage of respondents. The number of months covered is larger with the latter series, and since results do not change substantively, analyses presented here use the series with all polls.
5. Dates reflect the period for which data are available. The different search routines reflect differences in the structure of the two newspapers, as well as in the way each is recorded in Lexis-Nexis. Newspapers are used rather than television because no television archive is available in the United Kingdom and because a more detailed content analysis is more easily performed using the Lexis-Nexis search engine.
6. Figure 1 suggests that the relationship between public opinion and media content might be better depicted as an error correction model (ECM). Statistically speaking, an ECM can

accommodate cointegrated time series, and these series look as though they may be cointegrated. (Monthly variations in both ensure that unit root tests are negative, however.) Results do not change significantly when the media-policy relationship is modeled as an ECM (for the most part, only the levels of media content are significant). For the sake of brevity, only the distributed lag models are presented here.

7. Protocol for the Assessment of Nonviolent Direct Action (PANDA) data are available from the Program on Nonviolent Sanctions and Cultural Survival at Harvard University, in collaboration with the Kansas Event Data System program and the University of Kansas at Lawrence. For further information on foreign affairs events data sets, see Schrodt (1994, 2001) and Thomas (2000). For detailed information on the PANDA data, see Bond and Bond (1998).

8. The increase in the $News^B$ coefficient in both the United States and United Kingdom is not the product of controlling for real-world indicators. PANDA data are currently available only from 1984 to 1995, and so this final analysis uses a shorter time period. Dropping the real-world variables from this model has no significant effect on the media coefficients.

9. These are the election studies in which the necessary variables are available. National Election Studies data are available from the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan, via the online National Election Studies archive (http://www.umich.edu/~nes/).

10. Survey questions are as follows: Ap: "Do you approve of the way that [the president] is handling his job as president?"; Ap^E: "Do you approve of the way that [the president] is handling the economy?"; Ap^{FA}: "Do you approve of the way that [the president] is handling our [affairs/relations] with foreign countries?"; MIP: "What do you think are the most important problems facing this country? [If more than one problem] Of all you've told me, what would you say is the single most important problem the country faces?"

11. These results were calculated using King et al.'s (2000) *Clarify* routine in STATA. The routine uses statistical simulations based on point estimates of the coefficients and the variance-covariance matrix of the estimates to estimate quantities of interest—in this case, the net effect of foreign affairs approval on presidential job approval, taking into account direct and interactive effects.

12. Other authors have pointed toward similar hypotheses. Bartels (1991), for instance, suggests that the likelihood of good representation for defense issues was relatively high in the early 1980s since foreign policy was salient at that time.

13. Cohen's (1995) U.S.-Netherlands comparison comes to a similar conclusion as Risse-Kappen (1991) regarding the United States. For detailed descriptions of foreign policymaking processes in both countries, see Cox and Kirby (1986) and Dillon (1988).

14. Dates reflect the period for which data are available. There was no question on U.S. defense spending preferences in 1997. Data on U.K. defense spending preferences exist as far back as 1961; with only four years of data previous to 1975, however, this analysis uses the 1975 to 1995 time period. Even so, data are missing for 1981, 1984, 1987, 1989, and 1994. Note that fiscal years for the two countries are different: The U.S. fiscal year begins in October of the previous year, while the U.K. fiscal year begins in April of the current year.

15. The U.S. spending measure is based on outlays, taken from the historical tables in the 2002-03 budget. The U.K. spending measure is based on total managed expenditure, drawn from HM Treasury's *Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses*.

16. Fiscal yearly averages are likely not as accurate a measure of preferences, when the aim is to connect preferences with policy, as are measures taken at the same time each year—preferably at the time at which the next year's budget is being made. Data are not available at the same time for all years, however, particularly in the United Kingdom.

17. Both dummy variables are equal to one for the years in which the wars led to significant increases in U.S. defense spending. The Vietnam dummy variable is equal to one from 1966 to 1968; the Gulf War dummy is equal to one in 1992.
18. As in the priming analysis, these models could be repeated using media content as a measure of aggregate issue salience. These results are not presented here for two reasons. First, media data are only available from 1981 (*New York Times*) and 1990 (*The Times*). Second, the causal story is more complicated for the media—if they are reporting activities by policymakers, media may be responding to policymaking in year $t-1$, the results of which appear in the spending measure at year t. So media may appear to be leading policy when in fact they are following.

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