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Public Opinion and Foreign Aid: A Review Essay

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The study of public opinion and foreign policy has a long history (Almond 1950; Converse 1964; Lippmann 1955). This history includes a long-standing debate over the utility of studying public opinion when considering international affairs (Holsti 1992; Mueller 1971; Page and Shapiro 1983, 1992; Wittkopf 1986). The dismissal of the importance of public opinion stems

from the concern that the mass public knows little about foreign policy. Prominent theories about foreign policy and international relations give no role to publics (Krasner 1978; Mearsheimer 2001; Waltz 1979). Very few theoretical perspectives in international relations give any weight to public attitudes; neorealism, neoliberalism, and institutionalism provide very little space for the mass public to affect foreign policy.

Over time, this view has begun to change slowly. In two areas especially have the attitudes and beliefs of the public become salient to international relations theory. First, audience cost arguments about the sources and outcomes of conflict have revitalized interest in public opinion (Fearon 1994; Reiter and Stam 2002; Schultz 2001; Slantchev 2006; Trager and Vavreck 2011). The second area where public opinion has become more salient as an explanatory factor in international relations is in studies of cooperation. Increasingly, scholars attribute leaders' compliance with cooperative agreements and commitments, such as treaties, to domestic publics and their dislike for leaders who violate international agreements (Dai 2007; Mansfield and Milner 2012; McGillivray and Smith 2005; Simmons 2009; Tomz 2007). In each case the public exercises an influence through its approval or disapproval of the president and his actions. The theories surrounding these claims assume that the president understands this influence and responds to—or anticipates—it.

The literature on foreign aid and public opinion is even thinner than that on public opinion and foreign policy generally or in relations to particular policy areas like trade and immigration. There is very little research on attitudes toward aid in recipient countries and only limited work on public opinion toward aid in donors (Milner 2006; Milner and Tingley forthcoming; Paxton and Knack 2012; Stern 1998). We explore several key issues in the study of foreign aid and public opinion using mostly our own research on the United States. We think attitudes toward aid are more consistent and structured than many scholars do. We show that they appear to be structured by both material and ideological influences. And we suggest ways in which they might affect aid policy and policymakers. We end with a brief discussion of attitudes toward aid in recipient countries. Finally, we mention several areas for future research.

PUBLIC OPINION: DOES IT EXIST? DOES IT MATTER?

When we speak or write about public opinion about foreign aid we regularly hear that the public knows virtually nothing about foreign aid and what they do know is wrong, for instance, that the US foreign aid budget is a large percentage of the total US budget. A second common refrain is that public opinion about foreign aid does not matter. These views exactly

parallel the common rationales for dismissing public opinion about foreign policy discussed in the previous section. We dissect each claim and evaluate its merits.

What does the public know about foreign aid? One approach is to ask individuals about the size of the US foreign aid budget. A common result is that respondents state that foreign aid is a very substantial percentage of the US federal budget. In a 2010 WorldPublicOpinion survey, the median respondent estimated that foreign aid takes up 27% of the US federal budget (WorldPublicOpinion 2010). Earlier work suggests that these erroneous beliefs are linked to opposition to foreign aid (Gilens 2001).

Unfortunately, these same surveys do not also ask what percentage of the US government budget is spent on other programs. That is, from a comparative perspective, we do not know whether these false beliefs are symptomatic of beliefs about the size of many small programs, or if estimates are biased upward because people are not reminded that there are many other programs that the US government funds. One study in 2011 elicited foreign aid budget estimates alongside those for many other programs.¹ Responses were more reasonable, though still biased up, with the median at 10%. Unfortunately, no study that we are aware of asks individuals to assign percentages to an array of government programs, with a mandatory limit at 100%. In the 2011 study the sum of the medians was 137%. Before taking these responses as indicative of low knowledge, we feel it is important to consider alternative explanations, such as innumeracy with low percentages and alternative survey frames.

An alternative approach to studying what members of the public know about foreign aid is to ask whether they have ever heard of major foreign aid institutions. In a 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES),² we asked individuals whether they have ever heard of 5 major foreign affairs organizations.³ The percent of respondents saying they have heard of the organization is listed in Table 1.

How should we interpret these numbers? For starters, the fact that nearly 70% of the US public has heard of the World Bank, the premier multilateral aid agency, is impressive. And this value is only 8% less than NATO. Conversely, it is clear that USAID has an image—or lack thereof—problem. Only 29% of the US public has heard of them. While this goes up to 54% for those with a 4-year college degree, this does display limited knowledge in the specifics of foreign aid. Of course, there could be many different ways to

¹<http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2011/images/03/31/rel4m.pdf>; <http://blogs.cgdev.org/mca-monitor/2011/08/lies-damn-lies-and-surveys-about-foreign-aid.php>.

²<http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/>.

³Question text: We would like to know if you have ever heard of these organizations. Please check all that you have heard of before. For some you may have only heard of the abbreviation.

TABLE 1 Knowledge of International Organizations

| Agency | All Respondents | 4-Year College Degree |
|--|-----------------|-----------------------|
| International Monetary Fund (IMF) | 44.5% | 71.5% |
| United States Agency for International Development (USAID) | 29.3% | 54.1% |
| World Bank | 68.9% | 88.2% |
| North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) | 76.9% | 96.3% |
| United Nations (UN) | 89.6% | 99.3% |
| World Trade Organization (WTO) | 80.7% | 94.4% |

measure knowledge about foreign aid, and our point is that much more study is necessary before concluding that publics are ignorant about foreign aid.

The second objection we hear about studying public opinion about foreign aid is that public opinion has no impact on actual policy. We find this perspective surprising in light of the empirical record. First, some data do suggest that across countries those with higher levels of public support for aid spend more on aid. Stern's (1998) figure 1 shows that aid budgets rise with increases in public support for aid. This seems especially true at the higher end of support. Second, the popularity or unpopularity of foreign aid is something aid organizations like USAID care about (ACVFA 2008; USAID 2012:56). And relative to domestic programs foreign aid is unpopular. In the 2008 American National Election Study, 44% of respondents wanted foreign aid cut, while 79% wanted funding for public schools to expand. Public support for aid in other donor countries tends to be stronger. In the United Kingdom, for instance, where support for aid is stronger among the public (Paxton and Knack 2012; Stern 1998), during the recent financial and economic crises the British government has chosen to "ringfence" the aid budget and protect it from cuts made to all other sectors.⁴

This critique of public opinion has been made with respect to foreign policy in general. Guisinger argues that even for higher salience policies like trade, voters do not know enough to hold politicians accountable (2009). Others present evidence that disagrees with this position when it comes to foreign affairs more broadly (Aldrich et al. 1989). Finally, some scholars argue that public opinion on foreign policy is heavily driven by elite cues (Berinsky 2007). Our view is that there is likely to be two-way interactions: public opinion constrains leaders as they do not want to get too far out of step, but elite attitudes and actions help shape public beliefs (Canes-Wrone et al. 2002). We do not deny that elite opinion may in part drive public opinion, including on foreign aid, but elites nevertheless say that public

⁴<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/e1980f0c-f906-11e1-8d92-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2B53RuNHx>.

opinion is very relevant to their decision making on foreign policy (Milner and Tingley forthcoming).

DRIVERS OF PUBLIC OPINION: ECONOMIC, IDEOLOGICAL, AND CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS

Another way to consider whether the public has opinions about foreign aid is to ask how stable and structured they are (Chanley 1999; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987). One way to do this is to ask whether there are consistent cleavages on foreign aid, as well as whether these cleavages can be theoretically explained. Thus we see an important area of work on foreign aid as the study of what determines preferences for foreign aid. If there are no stable determinants of opinion, then perhaps there is no politics around the issue; people may simply answer idiosyncratically because they do not know anything about foreign aid and do not have any preferences.

An approach used in the study of preferences in other policy areas, such as trade policy, considers the role of ideological and material explanations. Here ideology is conceptualized as being about the role of government intervention in the economy. The theoretical basis for thinking about material explanations stems from economic models about preferences for open economic engagement with the international system. Specifically, the Stolper-Samuelson theorem has been extended by us and others beyond trade, to account for support for non-trade, foreign policy engagement (Broz 2005; Milner and Tingley 2010, 2011).

When it comes to economic foreign aid, such as that used for development, there is a consistent divide between liberals and conservatives in many of the public opinion polls that we have looked at in donor countries. This makes sense. Foreign aid is government intervention into the (international) marketplace. Republicans in the United States are much less likely to support the use of economic aid than are Democrats. This finding reverses when we talk about military aid. Not surprisingly, similar partisan divides are present in elite-level studies as well as in cross-national work (Noel and Therien 2008; Therien and Noel 2000; Tingley 2010). Paxton and Knack (2012), for instance, find strong evidence of a partisan divide in their sample of roughly 20 donor countries.

The role of material factors is substantially more complicated in our view. Generally, we find that individuals in rich donor countries with greater endowments of capital, like high skills or education, are more likely to support aid, while those with less education, and hence fewer gains from international engagement, are less supportive. Often this holds controlling for other factors, such as cultural ones. Paxton and Knack (2012) find similar results looking within and across countries. Workers in professional sectors and those with higher incomes favor more aid, which is consistent with

views stressing the role of economic endowments in explaining preferences. Of course, this engages a larger debate on other issue areas, like trade, about whether education is a good proxy for capital endowments (Fordham and Kleinberg 2012; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2006; Mansfield and Mutz 2009).

Unfortunately, neither those who see theoretical primacy in material factors nor those who emphasize cultural variables have clearly identified the role of material or cultural explanations. We suspect that better causal identification of material versus cultural factors in driving attitudes toward aid will be best obtained from a sustained experimental agenda that includes survey experiments. We are aware of two unpublished studies. A chapter from Tingley's (2012) dissertation examined the sociotropic benefits of aid to the US economy. When people were reminded of the benefits to the US economy of foreign aid, they become more supportive of foreign aid. However, these manipulations do not address the role of individual, or more local, economic benefits or the role of cultural attitudes.

One interesting experimental investigation of cultural factors is a working paper by Baker and Fitzgerald (2012), who examine the effects of recipient racial characteristics on support for aid. They find that white Americans support aid to black Africans more than white Eastern Europeans, holding constant the actual need of the recipient groups. They connect these findings to theories of racial paternalism. We see this as an important area of future research, both in public opinion about aid but also in other issues like trade and immigration.

Our research, however, does suggest that publics in donor countries in the aggregate may have fairly stable preferences about aid and that these are driven by both material and cultural factors. This finding is similar to those concerning attitudes toward other foreign economic issues like international trade and immigration. It implies that publics might indeed have fairly consistent opinions about aid that could shape policymakers' choices.

MOVING BEYOND "OPINION ON FOREIGN AID"

Up to this point we have focused on questions about knowledge and what drives preferences for foreign aid in general. However, foreign aid is not some single quantity. First, there are different types of foreign aid. Development aid, military aid, and humanitarian or disaster aid are examples. Second, individuals can have different preferences over what countries should receive (how much) aid. Finally, individuals can have preferences over how aid is delivered. Just as the immigration literature has disaggregated different types of immigration policy (Milner and Tingley 2013) and preferences over different types of immigrants (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Tingley 2013), we believe the study of foreign aid can be made similarly more nuanced.

Here we focus on evidence about preferences over different types of recipients and delivery channel. In the same 2010 CCES survey discussed above we asked the following question:

The US has decided to give foreign economic aid to two countries, country A and country B. They are both small, are democracies, and about the same distance away from the US.

- Country A has a *low income level* and *imports very little* from the US.
- Country B has a *medium income level* and *imports a large amount* from the US.

Using the sliding scale, indicate how you would like economic aid between these countries to be divided.

Respondents were then asked to place their preferred share, ranging from giving everything to country A (a 0 on the scale) and everything to country B (a 100 on the scale). We then broke out responses by political party. The average value for Democrats was 48, showing a slight preference for country A. For Republicans the average value was 54, showing a slight preference for country B. The difference between the two groups was statistically significant in a difference-in-means test ($p < .01$). This difference between the groups widens considerably when we consider the proportion of individuals from each party that said that over 75% should be given to country B. This finding suggests that more conservative voters respond more positively when aid is helpful to the US economy, and more liberal voters respond more favorably to aid when it targets the neediest groups abroad. Of course, this survey question is just one way to investigate preferences over who gets US foreign aid and for what purposes. For example, one can easily examine the role of geostrategic factors as well, which parallels the observational literature.

A second “new” way to examine preferences over foreign aid explores the delivery channel, and the politics this entails. In a recent paper we explore preferences for delivering aid bilaterally versus multilaterally (Milner and Tingley forthcoming). Drawing on previous work (Hawkins et al. 2006), we utilize principal-agent theory to explain preferences for multilateral versus bilateral delivery. One must consider the extent to which preferences of the agent distributing aid diverge from the principal. The choice between multilateral aid and bilateral aid can be thought of in terms of a tradeoff: national control over how aid is used declines with multilateral delivery, but greater burden sharing among donors in the international community rises with it.

In our study we examine public opinion directly on this issue, as well as elite opinion. We find fairly close congruence between the two. Not surprisingly, we find greater support for multilateral delivery among Democrats than Republicans. We argue that the multilateral forums like the World Bank prefer to send aid to countries and projects closer to those preferred by Democrats, but further from those appealing to Republicans. We asked a follow up question about the reasons people hold for their preferences over delivery type to see if they would use the principal-agent logic we sketched out. And indeed they did: For those who favored bilateral delivery, control over how the aid was used was the leading rationale.

This research again suggests that publics do have fairly consistent attitudes about foreign aid and that these attitudes might matter. Publics may constrain elites, and they may reflect elite views. Separating out these two causal paths is extremely difficult. But partisan debates in the United States over the role of aid match the overall preferences evinced by the public. The giving of aid thus seems to reflect public attitudes. The other side of the coin is to ask what recipients think of aid.

MOVING BEYOND THE DONORS: PUBLIC OPINION IN RECIPIENT COUNTRIES

Government programs tend to work best when the beneficiaries can provide information to, and make demands of, the agencies undertaking the design and implementation of foreign aid funds. This feedback loop from agencies administering programs to citizens and back to elected leaders is a key mechanism for maintaining accountability and enhancing public policy effectiveness. In foreign aid this feedback loop is presumed to be broken, and prominent work argues that this accounts for a good deal of the problems in making aid effective. How recipients view foreign aid is important because it likely influences aid effectiveness. Here public attitudes are very important for evaluating aid.

However, aid must be compared with alternative mechanisms for producing development before it is judged to be effective or not. Thus, while overlooking recipient opinions, participants in the aid debate likewise have neglected comparing it to the leading alternative, which is government action. Another relevant point of comparison involves differences among aid donors themselves. In terms of donor type, we specifically examine bilateral versus multilateral donors.

In one of the few studies, perhaps the only one, Milner, Nielson, and Findley (2012) address these questions with what, to the best of our knowledge, is the first nationally representative, large- n ($n = 3,582$) study of aid recipients in a developing country. They conducted a randomized field experiment on citizens throughout Uganda to learn their willingness

to undertake actions involving personal costs to support foreign aid. They accompanied the experiment with an extensive survey to probe causal mechanisms and to enable robustness analysis using covariates. Uganda is a very poor country with high levels of aid flows and thus is a good candidate for a study of recipients' reactions to aid.

Their results indicate that recipients in Uganda tend to be very strong supporters of development aid. For both behavioral outcomes and on many dimensions of the survey their support of foreign assistance is more positive than for domestic programs. Although public behavior and perceptions cannot tell us directly if aid works, they can provide a view of how recipients think about aid. Presumably, some of their preferences are shaped by the success or failure of aid. Ugandans also evince some preference for multilateral assistance to bilateral aid, which is apparent in both experimental outcomes and survey measures. This creates a link with attitudes toward aid in donor countries, where some research shows that public opinion affects the choice between multilateral and bilateral aid (Milner 2006).

Why do citizens have these preferences? Milner et al. (2012) asked a series of follow-up questions about the reasons for their preferences. Their data suggest that they believe their government is more politicized and corrupt than foreign aid agencies, and that bilateral agencies are somewhat more politicized than multilateral ones. They feel that foreign donors more effectively implement projects than the domestic government (local or central). As such, they are more supportive of projects that are funded by foreign aid agencies than by their domestic government. Thus they are more willing to take action to show support for those projects. And they feel somewhat similarly about multilateral as compared to bilateral aid agencies.

This research suggests that publics in developing countries that receive aid may also have consistent and informative attitudes toward aid. We do not think that leaders in many developing countries know what their citizens think of aid, and surely this is even more true of governments in donor countries. Learning about these opinions may help improve how aid is delivered and thus improve development prospects for poor countries.

CONCLUSION

This brief essay has tried to show how the small literature on foreign aid and public opinion has developed. In many ways it is following the path of other public opinion studies of foreign policy issues. From general surveys of attitudes, research has deepened by asking about different aspects of the issue and trying to explore the factors shaping preferences. These steps are important to show that attitudes toward aid have some underlying structure and hence an ability to affect policy.

In our review we identified several new ways to think about and study public opinion and foreign aid. One way was to identify different types of foreign aid and think about the preferences underlying each type. This involves considering the content of the aid, the characteristics of recipients, and delivery mechanism. A second new way to study public opinion on foreign aid that we think will bear much fruit is to examine opinion in recipient countries. While the theoretical motivations might be different, and even tap in to important debates about studying domestic politics in these countries, we see this as an important avenue for work in this area.

As for other areas of public opinion research, there are increasing opportunities to collect and generate data about attitudes toward aid all around the world. Survey experiments may prove even more fruitful for understanding the sources of preferences toward aid and how elites can affect those preferences. Making progress on understanding the elite-mass linkages on aid attitudes and policy choices is a critical step, as it is in other issue areas. Less research has addressed the question of whether attitudes toward aid affect policy. This should be an area for future research. Bringing theory to bear on the topic is also of great importance. We have a good deal of data about elite and mass attitudes on aid, but we need to connect these more with theory.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that large changes in the international aid regime may be coming in the near future. Many new donors have appeared on the scene from private actors to new public ones. Emerging market countries, like China, India, and Brazil, are starting to play bigger roles in the aid regime (Woods 2008). Private donors have grown in strength as well (Bütthe et al. 2012). The recent financial and economic crisis among the Western donors has reduced their willingness to fund aid programs. With the emergence of new donors, there will be more competition within the donor community and more choice for recipient countries about whom they should work with. Countries like Egypt now face a new situation where Western aid is not the main, or surely sole, source of external assistance that they can turn to for help. This set of changes will have an impact on world politics and is likely to have ramifications for aid policy in the traditional donors like the United States. Will public opinion on aid change as it becomes clearer that new actors, with potentially divergent policy preferences, are giving foreign aid to countries that previously received most aid from the United States and her allies in Europe? We think public opinion about donor and recipient aid policies will remain an important part of the aid story.

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