

Discussion Article

Shaping Security: The Rising Influence of Public Attitudes on Defence Policies

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Abstract

The main purpose of this discussion article is to provide insight into and highlight the growing importance of citizen attitudes on security policy related issues, a largely neglected area in both public opinion and international relations research. In this article, we reflect on the role of public opinion in decision making regarding security issues and the important role it plays in policy formation in democratic states. We believe that the discussion around security attitudes is imperative not only for one's own national defence, but also for increasing our knowledge of how solidarity can be sustained within Western democracies. This discussion article takes up some of these issues and reflects on where they might be leading, not only for Finland and Sweden, but also for Nordic cooperation and NATO in the near future.

Keywords

Defence, public opinion, security attitudes, solidarity

Introduction

As new members of NATO, Finland and Sweden must reevaluate and adapt to a range of new security policies. Previously, both nations upheld a policy of military non-alignment, characterised by an absence of direct commitments to defend other states. Therefore, integrating into NATO's ethos of collective defence mandates substantial policy shifts for these Nordic countries. The development of these new security policies is expected to significantly involve public consultation, reflecting the democratic fabric of both societies.

Conventional International Relations theories have a limited capacity to effectively analyse the increasing importance of public attitudes in the formulation of foreign policy. This is problematic, as political science scholars often argue that public policies tend to reflect public opinion, especially in Western democracies where there is a compelling incentive for political elites to align with public sentiments (e.g., Stimson et al., 1995). The influence of public opinion on foreign policy decision-making has been a persistent and ongoing topic of debate in academic research. Recent literature indicates that political elites actively seek to understand public opinion, often trying to align their actions with these popular sentiments (Walgrave and Soontjens, 2023). Furthermore, government decisions and policies are profoundly influenced and shaped by public opinion (Monroe, 1998). As a result, public sentiment is a key factor in the decision-making process, making it unsustainable for foreign policy to deviate markedly from public opinion over extended periods.

In this context, it is particularly noteworthy that research on security policy attitudes suggests it is not the elites who shape public opinion. Instead, individuals formulate their viewpoints based on their environmental, personal, and social contexts (Kerzer and Zeitzoff, 2017). This dynamic, recognised in public opinion research as the 'bottom-up' approach, signifies that public sentiment shapes foreign policy attitudes independently of actions taken by the political elite. Conversely, the need to examine the determinants of security policy attitudes through causal research is becoming increasingly evident. We argue that previous studies have overlooked a vital component: the factors shaping citizens' attitudes, which significantly impact foreign policy decisions, even during wartime (De Mesquita et al., 1999). In the context of European security, scholars have highlighted the pivotal role of public opinion in shaping a cohesive European foreign and security policy (Gravelle et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the most significant policy transformation accompanying NATO membership for Finland and Sweden pertains directly to Article 5, the collective defence clause. This foundational principle mandates that all member states must assist one another in the event of an attack. Consequently, Finland and Sweden must determine their contributions should an ally be targeted by a hostile actor. Similarly, other member states must establish the extent of their commitments if a conflict arises in the Nordic or Baltic regions. The ongoing security situation in Europe, exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has elevated security concerns not only in Finland and Sweden but also across numerous nations, placing them at the forefront of political discourse. Russia's aggressive stance has particularly ignited security discussions in Finland, given its extensive border with Russia. The sequence and timing of events leading to Finland's application for NATO membership revealed that the decision by both Finland and Sweden to join the alliance was not solely a reaction to the heightened threat from Russia. A pivotal shift in public opinion, marking the first instance where a majority of Finnish citizens expressed favourable views towards joining the defence alliance, was observed in this process (Weckman, 2023) (Forsberg, 2024). These observations highlight the critical need to comprehend the factors influencing these sentiments. A fundamental question arises, for

example, regarding why a significant number of citizens were opposed to joining NATO despite the prolonged and evident threat from Russia.

Finland's accession to NATO culminated after years of navigating and carefully balancing its ties between the Western and Eastern spheres. Similarly, Sweden transitioned from a longstanding tradition of pronounced neutrality spanning centuries. In both instances, the influence of public opinion on these processes was profound. This was particularly evident in Finland, where the political elite appeared to adjust their stance in response to a significant surge in NATO support reflected in public opinion polls. While it remains speculative whether the elite would have pursued membership without robust public backing, it is reasonable to argue that such a path would have presented considerably greater challenges. Ultimately, it is accurate to conclude that public opinion exerted a critical influence on the membership application process. The push for applying for NATO membership was notably set in motion by President Niinistö, spurred by poll results showing majority support among the populace (Forsberg, 2023). Consequently, we firmly hold that public opinion influences security policy decisions and warrants more comprehensive study using the more robust methods.

Security attitudes

The investigation into public opinion regarding security issues has traditionally received limited focus from comparative political scientists, especially outside the United States. Despite nearly eight decades of academic research, our understanding of the causal mechanisms behind attitudes towards security policy remains significantly underdeveloped. Moreover, an abundance of survey data on national security matters exists in both Finland and Sweden, highlighting the gap in scholarly examination. This is particularly notable when compared to the extensive quantitative research performed in the broader area of political behaviour, which encompasses thousands of studies. The oversight of citizen values, attitudes, and behaviours within security policy research starkly contrasts with the wider field of political science, especially given the readily accessible data.

The existing body of literature on security has predominantly focused on qualitative analyses centring on international relations (IR) policy, often overlooking the crucial role of public opinion. Scholars in international relations and security policy analysis have traditionally positioned states at the forefront, given their direct impact on critical issues such as war and peace. A key question within international relations scholarship revolves around why states engage in war to begin with. Within this scholarly domain, well-established theoretical frameworks such as neo-realism, liberalism, and social constructivism have been predominant. However, these theories mainly concentrate on the actions of states or significant non-state actors such as NGOs, neglecting the perspectives of the electorate. To fully grasp the dynamics of how democracies function in times of war, it is imperative to consider the views and thoughts of the electorate, rather than solely focusing on the power dynamics of countries. This is not to say that these theories lack relevance in understanding global state interactions, but aspects such as war, peace, and strategic decisions are ultimately government policy. Hence, a challenge arises when the principle of electoral accountability comes into play, requiring elected officials to remain responsive to the electorate. Such accountability, therefore, affects the decision-making of democratic leaders in times of war.

A review of history underscores the importance of past events: The military involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq imposed considerable financial strains on the United States, accelerating the decision to withdraw troops. The imperative of economic sustainability necessitated shifts in strategic priorities, as evidenced by the diminished U.S. engagement in NATO during the Trump administration.

Such shifts reflect a declining commitment among certain segments of the population to maintain the rule-based international order. Currently, U.S. leadership exhibits fluctuating stances characterised by isolationist tendencies and a pro-Russia orientation within certain Republican circles, indicating a possible decline in American backing for European defence. The once steadfast U.S. support for Ukraine has waned following alterations in congressional leadership, and recent developments have revealed fissures in European solidarity as well.

The political opposition in Poland, in pursuit of domestic favour, is signalling a potential reduction in assistance to Ukraine. Similarly, Slovakia's gravitation towards a pro-Russian viewpoint and Hungary's ambiguous stance further exacerbates these concerns. Most pressing, however, is the significant decline in public backing within the EU for Ukrainian aid since the conflict's inception. Therefore, the cohesion that binds Western nations is susceptible to disruption, with public opinion playing a pivotal role in shaping support and solidarity within the democratic community. Amidst declining solidarity, smaller Western states are compelled to devise strategies to rally their populations against the challenges posed by authoritarian regimes, notably Russia. Smaller democracies must find ways to strengthen their cooperation and prepare for a world order where support from former allies, such as the U.S., is in decline. The historical lesson here is to understand how public sentiments around security questions are shaped.

Extensive research in political behaviour has highlighted the profound impact of socio-economic and demographic factors on political attitudes and behaviour in general (Dalton et al., 2007). These insights underscore the necessity of integrating individual-level attributes into security studies, as these attributes significantly influence citizen attitudes and behaviours in varied contexts. Kerzer and Zeitzoff (2017) contended that foreign policy attitudes are not solely dictated by political elites; rather, they are formulated based on an individual's personal experiences, environmental factors, and social context, echoing broader findings in the field of political behaviour. Consequently, we argue that to address the clear gap in understanding how security policy attitudes and behaviours are formed, scholars need to focus on micro-level characteristics. Despite some existing research, there is a need for further comprehensive and comparative studies, given the evolving nature of the security landscape and the inadequacies in current methodologies, data, and analytical frameworks. Our research has pinpointed two areas within the sphere of security policy attitudes and perceptions where knowledge is particularly lagging: the inclination to resist foreign military aggression, referred to as defence will, and the readiness to support allied nations in the event of an attack, a concept comparable to citizen military solidarity.

Defence will and collective defence solidarity

The significance of resistance in military conflicts is paramount, yet research into the motivations driving individual participation in defence efforts remains insufficiently explored. Our understanding of the factors that inspire individuals to undertake sacrifices in times of conflict is not fully developed. Notably, the existing literature, which is sparse, predominantly examines individuals' willingness to engage in combat or support military actions, essentially assessing their preparedness to sacrifice their lives for their nation (Anderson et al. 2020; Inglehart et al, 2015). These studies, however, tend to overlook the broader concept of resistance against foreign aggression, focusing instead on a narrow interpretation of combat readiness or support for militaristic measures. Such approaches are deeply rooted in traditional international relations theories, like neorealism, which emphasise the importance of physical state assets, including military hardware and personnel. Yet, resistance is a complex and layered phenomenon that extends beyond mere participation in combat, suggesting a

need for a more nuanced understanding of what drives individuals to resist.

The conceptualisation of ‘support for the use of force’ introduces potential complexities in its operationalisation, highlighting that the predisposition towards military engagement can be influenced by a myriad of contextual elements. Contemporary research frequently examines economic conditions and characteristics as pivotal factors influencing security-political behaviour. This trend aligns with the broad recognition of economic factors as significant determinants of shifts in values, as evidenced by extensive literature on the subject. The inclination towards participation in warfare is similarly subject to the influence of various contextual considerations. Among these, economic attributes have been identified as critical in shaping attitudes towards security and defence. Such insights are hardly surprising, given the well-documented impact of economic variables on value transformation across multiple domains. Our forthcoming research, particularly within the Finnish context, indicates a notable association between substantial personal assets and an increased readiness to counter foreign aggression or defend the nation (Weckman and Brännlund, 2024).

Moreover, a significant predictor of security attitudes is the evident gender-based discrepancies. Research consistently shows that gender plays a crucial role in shaping views on matters such as defence budget allocations, with men generally favouring higher defence spending than women. This variance in perspective spans various aspects of security, including support for military coalitions like NATO, and is evident across diverse geographical contexts such as Europe, North America, and Israel. Additionally, the literature on engagement in military activities mirrors this divergence, where women display a lesser propensity towards combat roles and a heightened awareness of the human consequences of warfare compared to men.

However, the participation of women in conflict situations is further nuanced by intricate cultural factors. For instance, the Yugoslav Wars saw women being intentionally targeted for systematic violence, whereas during the Vietnam War, women played essential support roles within the North Vietnamese military framework. The conflict in El Salvador further exemplifies the adaptability of gender roles within war settings, with both genders participating actively (see Skjelsbæk, 2001). This illustrates the complex interplay between gender and security attitudes, underscoring the necessity to consider these dynamics in analysing security policy and engagement in conflict. More precisely, questions regarding the willingness to fight in wars might miss the defence willingness of women in certain contexts, given that many critical activities can take place far from the battlefield.

Another aspect insufficiently addressed in the existing literature is the notion of solidarity among citizens in democratic nations and their readiness to support allies facing adversity. While it may appear self-evident that individuals unite over shared interests, discerning the origins of these interests presents complex challenges. Neo-realists emphasise national interests such as survival within an anarchic international system, positing that political decision-makers often evaluate the advantages and drawbacks of actions based on outcome-oriented logic. However, it is unlikely that the average person’s sense of solidarity is derived from such calculated considerations, particularly given the difficulty of predicting the consequences of war without expert insight. In contrast, social constructivism emphasises the role of identities, beliefs, and norms in shaping human behaviour (Guzzini, 2022), with Jepperson et al. (1996) arguing that these factors are fundamental in establishing interests from the outset. This perspective regards ideas as variables subject to causal analysis, implying that individuals’ actions are motivated by intrinsic reasons stemming from these ideas. Understanding solidarity, therefore, requires examining the underlying identities, beliefs, and norms that drive individuals to support their allies, highlighting the importance of these factors in shaping

security attitudes and behaviours.

The hypothesis that wartime solidarity within democracies is rooted in value-based reasoning assumes that individuals' actions are informed by moral principles rather than tactical considerations. This theory posits that individuals are more likely to offer support when such actions align with their ethical beliefs, emphasising the importance of moral integrity over the assessment of potential consequences. This concept is supported by evidence indicating that political and cultural values play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards foreign policy (e.g., Holsti, 2004). Understanding this dynamic is key to comprehending the propensity of citizens in democratic settings to aid those with whom they share common values in times of conflict. Furthermore, social constructivist theories highlight the process of European integration as a catalyst for transforming allegiance from the national to the European level, thereby nurturing a shared sense of identity among EU citizens. Research within the realm of European Union studies has illuminated the ideational underpinnings of European solidarity, encompassing both its obstacles and achievements. The existence of a collective European identity plays a pivotal role in shaping the response of communities to wartime challenges, with a tendency towards safeguarding shared norms and values against external threats. However, further studies are needed to understand how wartime solidarity is actually formed.

Conclusions

The endurance of Ukraine's independence, democratic values, and cultural heritage has heavily relied on the unwavering resolve and sacrifices of its people on the front lines. Much like in numerous historical conflicts, the resilience of Ukrainian resistance is contingent upon widespread voluntary support from its populace. Therefore, Ukraine's defence efforts are intrinsically linked to the collective will of its citizens. Beyond this strong will to defend, it is evident that international economic and military assistance plays an indispensable role in enabling Ukraine to withstand opposition from a significantly more formidable military force. Although certain factors shaping security policy attitudes may be universally applicable, the critical role of context—encompassing the historical, cultural, and geographical specificities unique to each country—cannot be emphasised enough. These distinct national characteristics significantly influence individual attitudes, thereby affecting positions on security-related matters. This phenomenon is particularly pivotal in shaping the determination to defend one's nation and the willingness to support other countries in distress. We call for more causal studies in these areas to understand how smaller countries can cooperate and survive in a more hostile environment.

Moreover, in the evolving security landscape of Europe, the induction of Finland and Sweden into NATO marks a pivotal transition from their long-standing positions of military non-alignment to embracing the alliance's ethos of collective defence. This transformation necessitates a re-evaluation of security policies, significantly influenced by public sentiment in these democracies. Research and historical precedence underscore the influence of public opinion in shaping foreign and security policies, suggesting a 'bottom-up' approach where policies reflect the populace's will rather than being merely elite-driven mandates. This dynamic is particularly relevant given the backdrop of Russia's aggressive posture in Ukraine, which has heightened security concerns across Europe and catalysed a shift in public opinion within Finland and Sweden towards NATO membership. The collective defence commitment, encapsulated in NATO's Article 5, introduces new considerations for Finland and Sweden. Both nations now grapple with the imperative of contributing to mutual defence while calibrating their commitments to align with public expectations and the broader European security framework. The public's role in this recalibration cannot be overstated. In the long run, security commitments will be shaped not only by political leaders but also by the solidarity of

the electorate.

The choices and interests of everyday citizens are frequently discussed but rarely examined empirically in this type of research, as there often exists an assumption that the perspectives of ordinary citizens are not as consequential as those of powerful state actors. This oversight is peculiar, given that the essence of what citizens think forms the cornerstone of democratic decision-making, including decisions pertaining to national security. Politicians typically hesitate to significantly diverge from the preferences of their electorate; opposing a clear public consensus can be seen as a risky endeavour. Consequently, in functioning democracies, deviations between foreign or public policy and the popular will can only be temporary, not sustained over long periods.

An examination of the literature on security attitudes beyond the American context reveals studies that have analysed survey data on security issues within both Central and Eastern European contexts. Yet, when shifting focus to the Nordic countries, a notable gap in research becomes apparent. The majority of studies within this Nordic framework adopt a broad policy approach, characterised by a qualitative methodological focus. While some studies have ventured into examining security attitudes, their analysis often remains superficial, lacking depth in uncovering the foundational elements and motivators that shape these attitudes. This trend is compounded by a research emphasis that prioritises entities other than the general public in the domain of foreign and security policy, thereby widening the existing research gap. An important inquiry arises concerning the pivotal role of context in the study of public opinion.

Hence, the future security discourse should extend beyond traditional state-centric paradigms, incorporating a broader understanding of how democratic societies perceive threats and their responsibilities towards collective defence. The growing interest in security attitudes within democratic contexts, notably outside the American purview, highlights a critical gap in our understanding of the public's influence on security policies in smaller democracies. This gap is particularly evident in the Nordic context, where limited research exists on public attitudes towards defence and collective security. The case of Finland and Sweden's NATO membership illustrates the decisive role of public sentiment, shaped by a complex interplay of individual experiences, socio-economic factors, and collective identities. These factors collectively influence national and European security policies, highlighting the indispensable role of democratic engagement in addressing contemporary security challenges. The imperative for further research is clear: to deepen our understanding of how public attitudes towards defence and solidarity in times of conflict are formed and how these attitudes influence national and international security policies. As Finland and Sweden navigate their new roles within NATO, insights from public opinion research will be invaluable in crafting policies that not only strengthen collective defence but also resonate with the democratic values and aspirations of their citizens.

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