



## Public opinion and foreign policy: The effects of celebrity endorsements

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 29 October 2009

Received in revised form

24 November 2010

Accepted 6 December 2010

Available online 9 April 2011

#### Keywords:

Public opinion

Celebrities

Political communication

Foreign policy

### ABSTRACT

Celebrities often use their popularity to advance international causes, but do they have an effect on public opinion regarding foreign policy? This study uses an experimental method to test whether a statement by Bono of the rock band U2 regarding a fictional foreign policy crisis influences public opinion more than a traditional political elite. Experimental participants were less likely to support the specific position advocated and less likely to be interested in following the crisis in the news when the statement came from Bono, though the results are dependent on party identification and how the scenario was framed.

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It has never been particularly uncommon for celebrities from the television, music, or film industry to take political stances or make political statements. From John Wayne's stance against communism, to Jane Fonda's visit to Vietnam, to Bono's humanitarian crusades, celebrities have used their popularity to proclaim (sometimes loudly) their political views—particularly in the realm of foreign policy. From a normative perspective, many media pundits have lamented the fact that persons such as celebrities, who are not necessarily knowledgeable about political situations, may have an influence on the population. Citizens themselves have at times expressed reservations about celebrities making political statements, with some celebrities facing negative reactions as a result of their stances (see, for example, Fox News, 2008 or St. John, 2003). The participation of celebrities in the political arena seems to be on the rise on multiple fronts, including encouraging turnout (Vanishing Voter Project, 2004), campaigning for individual candidates (Payne, Hanlon, & Twomey, 2007;

Pease & Brewer, 2008; Wood & Herbst, 2007), and advocating specific policy positions (Thrall et al., 2008). What is not well understood, however, is the exact effect celebrities may have on influencing public opinion, particularly in comparison to the effect traditional elites have on influencing public opinion. While some studies have begun to answer the question of the general effects of celebrities on public opinion (Jackson & Darrow, 2005; Pease & Brewer, 2008; Wood & Herbst, 2007), this study focuses specifically on the influence of celebrities and foreign policy in comparison to other elites: do celebrities shape and influence Americans' opinions regarding foreign policy more than other elites, and does the influence depend on partisanship?

For the purposes of this study, celebrities are defined as those individuals who have achieved some level of fame in the entertainment industry, such as in film, television, or professional sports. Although celebrities are not traditional participants in the political arena (e.g., political elites or the news media), celebrities behave in a manner similar to traditional actors by presenting information to the public. Celebrities, like other elites or the media, may function as a heuristic for citizens, reducing the amount of information

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necessary for the public to form an opinion, or act as cues for the public to signal that they should pay attention to a particular issue. Celebrities may even frame a policy in a certain way as to increase the likelihood that the public will agree or disagree with the policy. In short, celebrities, by virtue of being celebrities, may influence public opinion on foreign policy.

To examine these relationships, this project employs an experimental method. Using undergraduate college students, the experiment tests both whether respondents are more likely to agree with a foreign policy position advanced by a celebrity than a position advanced by a traditional elite, as well as whether a crisis is presented as a national security threat or as a humanitarian mission affects a person's opinion. These questions are tested by presenting the experimental participants with a scenario involving an international crisis in a fictional foreign country. The scenario includes comments made during a press conference regarding the crisis, and will vary whether the person giving the press conference is a government official or a celebrity. Responses to a post-experimental questionnaire are used to determine the impact of the key independent variables.

## 1. Public opinion formation

To understand the extent to which celebrities can influence public opinion regarding foreign policy (and, by extension, the influence celebrities can have on foreign policy itself), we must first understand the mechanism by which any high-profile person can influence public opinion, as public opinion itself has a definite effect on foreign policy decision-making. Political elites take public opinion into account when making foreign policy decisions, and public opinion acts to either constrain the actors or push them toward action (Sobel, 2001). The public is more likely to support the use of military force by the government when the objective is either to restrain the actions of a hostile state or to provide humanitarian relief, and is likely to be unsupportive of uses of force that are seen as interfering in the internal politics of another state (Jentleson & Britton, 1998). Public opinion therefore plays a role in foreign policy decision-making in either propelling or constraining the government; whether it propels or constrains is determined by the foreign policy objectives.

Celebrities attempt to influence public opinion for the same reason politicians, campaigns, or commentators attempt to influence public opinion: they have some cause or policy they believe the public (A) should be paying attention to and (B) should adopt the same position on as the celebrity. The primary argument of this study is that citizens use celebrities as information shortcuts. With a multitude of information descending on citizens at any one point in time, citizens take cues from celebrities, just as they do from other elites, helping the citizens determine both what to pay attention to and also influencing what to think about an issue. This behavior is completely rational: when presented with a wide variety of information, people will naturally seek to simplify the flow of information and reduce the overall cost of obtaining information (Downs, 1957). Citizens tend not to seek out information

themselves but instead rely on cues from others to signal to them that something is important and should be paid attention to. Popkin provides the classic description of this activity: citizens do not patrol the government looking for problems, but rather they pay attention to people who will signal problems to them, just as firefighters become alerted to fires by fire alarms (1991). The elites who signal the existence of a problem is thus the information shortcuts referred to by Downs. Shortcuts used by citizens may include the general impression of a politician associated with a policy (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Mondak, 1993) or specific information about a policy the citizen has received from an outside source (Lupia, 1994). These “endorsements” are but one type of heuristic used by citizens to facilitate their decision-making regarding a candidate or policy, particularly when the citizen otherwise does not know much about a specific policy or candidate (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001).

Where the citizen receives new information from, as well as the context under which the citizen receives new information, both matter for understanding the effects of celebrity endorsements on foreign policy public opinion. Foremost, the source of the information is an important determinant as to whether a person will accept and agree with the new information. Citizens make judgments about sources in order to determine whether to accept or reject new information. For instance, in Mondak's analysis, reaction to the name “Reagan” helps determine whether a person will support a policy or not. When respondents in Mondak's study were told Ronald Reagan's position on a policy, the likelihood the respondent would agree with the policy was largely dependent on the respondent's opinion of President Reagan (1993). Lau and Redlawsk identify respected sources as being one of the cognitive heuristics commonly employed by citizens (2001). Whether a respondent is considered respected, and thus used as a heuristic, is a function of the perceived knowledge of the speaker: when citizens view the source of information as being knowledgeable about a subject they are more likely to accept the information than they would be otherwise (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). In this analysis, then, whether a celebrity can have an effect on foreign policy public opinion is dependent on how citizens view the celebrity. If the celebrity is viewed as a respected, knowledgeable source of information then statements by a celebrity should be used as an information shortcut by citizens just as statements from any elites would.

Second, party identification also influences whether a person accepts and agrees with new information. Of course, party identification is a heuristic itself, particularly if information is scarce (Rahn, 1993; Schaffner & Streb, 2002). However, party identification may also affect the use of other heuristics. Not only must new sources of information, in this case celebrities, be viewed as knowledgeable and respected sources, but in order for a person to accept the new information the person must perceive some sort of shared interest or shared values between herself and the source (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Zaller, 1991). In other words, a person must view the source of information as being “like them” in order to accept the information. The most common evaluation of this type is a compari-

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