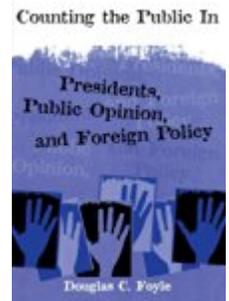


Douglas C. Foyle. *Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. xiii + 379 pp. \$32.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-11069-3.



Reviewed by Melvin Small

Published on H-Diplo (July, 2000)

In his revised dissertation, political scientist Douglas C. Foyle makes a valiant attempt to answer a question that continues to confound students of the American political system -- What role do the people play in the formation and execution of foreign policy? Most diplomatic historians have dealt with the problem in one way or another in their studies of specific crises and wars, but, as the political scientists say, they go about their task in an alarmingly anecdotal, "pre-operational" fashion. Foyle, who studied under the distinguished scholar of American foreign policy, Ole R. Holsti, has some interesting if complicated ideas about how to tackle the problem.

In a bit of an oversimplification, he contends that most analysts tend to view a president's relationship to the public in terms of one of two models, the realist and the Wilsonian. Foyle's contribution to the debate is a third model that he contends is a more powerful predictor of behavior, the belief systems presidents bring with them to office. Borrowing from the theoretical literature in his field, Foyle suggests that presidents fall into one of four categories in terms of their views of

the role of public opinion in the foreign-policy process. Moving along a continuum from Wilsonianism to realism, they may be "delegates," "executors," pragmatists," or "guardians."

The bulk of the book involves identifying the belief systems of President Dwight David Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, and then examining their behavior in four case studies. The last part of the book briefly examines the belief systems of all the Cold War presidents and demonstrates how the author's hypotheses play out in a limited group of crises. Although he used a qualitative content analysis to identify belief systems, which is pretty much what historians have traditionally done, Foyle points out that he first looked at materials for those systems before he examined presidential behavior. For Eisenhower and Dulles, he emphasized comments found in their personal papers, as well as in their public statements; for the others he relied on public statements, secondary accounts, and memoirs. Dulles is the only secretary of state under scrutiny in this book, a product apparently of the original dissertation research design.

After determining that both Eisenhower and Dulles fit the pragmatist model, Foyle looked at four diplomatic "contexts": the "crisis context" of the offshore islands controversy with China in the fall of 1954; the "reflexive context" that involved decision making over Dienbienphu; the "innovative context" of reactions to Sputnik in 1957; and the "deliberative context" dealing with the New Look policy. He selected his cases in a way that Eisenhower's decisions would not be directly confounded by their impact on an upcoming presidential election. To complicate matters, Foyle made his predictions about whether, based on their belief systems, the president and his secretary would follow, be constrained by, lead, or ignore the public at five different points in time beginning with setting the agenda, and moving on to defining the situation, generating options, selecting a policy, and implementing that policy. Whew! At this point, many historians will not only discard the book but this review as well. But that would be a shame since there is much of interest here.

In all four situations, Eisenhower and Dulles behaved as predicted as pragmatists who hoped to ignore public opinion or lead it if necessary. During the Formosa and Dienbienphu crises, public opinion did serve as a constraint since both leaders knew that Americans did not want to engage militarily over those issues. Of course, that has almost always been the case in American history at the beginning of any diplomatic adventure. In addition, Foyle shows, as have other scholars, that Congress served as a major constraint throughout the Dienbienphu crisis. Here one encounters a bit of confusion because Congress responds to and reflects public opinion. Foyle also points out that in all of his cases, the anticipation of what the public might do, not then-current public preferences (which often did not exist), helped determine the outlines of the emerging policy response.

As for the other presidents, whose beliefs Foyle outlines briefly and not always convincingly, Truman is a guardian, Kennedy a pragmatist, Johnson a guardian, Nixon a pragmatist, Ford a pragmatist, Carter an executor, Reagan a guardian, Bush a pragmatist, and Clinton a delegate. He then again briefly examines four crises; Carter and Afghanistan, Reagan and Lebanon, Bush and the Gulf War, and Clinton and Somalia, and four deliberative matters, Carter and Panama, Reagan and SDI, Bush and German unification, and Clinton and Bosnia. He finds that in virtually all cases, these presidents reacted toward public opinion as predicted by their belief systems. For example, Reagan ignored the public when it came to SDI and Clinton was consumed by public responses at all stages of the Somalian debacle. Foyle did not include cases involving Truman, Johnson, or Nixon to test his hypothesis nor did he employ his other two categories of diplomatic activities, the innovative and reflexive contexts, in this brief section. That omission is regrettable since Johnson and Nixon may have been outliers. Although the author maintains that their belief systems (guardian and pragmatist) did not assign public opinion much of a role in decision making, both were almost pathologically obsessed with the interaction among the media, polls, and the public at all stages of their diplomatic activities.

One wonders as well whether we can ever learn much about decision making from presidents' and their advisors' own explanations of how they came to certain conclusions. Few of them would admit that the prospect of the public's political retributions or rewards ever influenced their national security decisions. One cannot find much mention of the 1972 election in any of Nixon's private deliberations about Vietnam policy but there is no doubt, like all first-term presidents, he began thinking in 1969 about the impact of his major policies on his reelection. He did not want to be the presidential candidate who "lost" Vietnam. At bottom, most presidents, de-

spite what they say before entering office, during their tenure, and after leaving office, are pragmatists when it comes to public opinion and foreign policy. Most of the time, they will do what they think is in the national interest unless oppositional public opinion might undermine their policies through Congress or the ballot box. Then, if they are unable to lead the public toward their policies, they will generally refrain from undertaking a perceived unpopular policy, unless, of course, the decision time in a crisis is so brief that there is no opportunity to take the public pulse. But with the web, palmpilots, and pagers, a wired population will soon be able to respond almost immediately to such crises.

Most presidents turn out to be pragmatists or perhaps agnostics on the issue of public opinion and foreign policy because of their experiences with the unique and unwieldy American political system. Those who are not pragmatists at the start may not explicitly change their stated belief systems but certainly act as if they had changed them. The prime example is the "founder" of one of the classic approaches to the issue, Woodrow Wilson himself. He may have believed in "Wilsonianism" to the day that he died, but he frequently ignored its tenets when confronted by real-life diplomatic crises. All the same, Douglas Foyle's attempt to discover the impact of presidential belief systems on diplomatic behavior, particularly for Eisenhower and Dulles, is a useful contribution to the debate about how one goes about *Counting the Public In* in American foreign relations.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu or H-Diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Melvin Small. Review of Foyle, Douglas C. *Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4343>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.