



Australian Public Opinion, Defence and Foreign Policy

Attitudes and Trends
Since 1945

DANIELLE CHUBB
IAN MCALLISTER

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PREFACE

Public policy is shaped by many forces, from the views of politicians, interest groups and the public service, to international conditions and one-off events. While the balance of these forces varies by the policy in question, one common factor is public opinion. In a liberal democracy, it is at election time that political elites are held to account for the actions they take while in government. Voters choose to either reward or punish the incumbent party based on their record in government. This relationship is well recognised in taxation or social welfare policy, for example; it is less well understood in the areas of defence and foreign policy. This is surprising since in Australia, defence and foreign affairs combined are the third highest area of government spending. In this book we seek to shed light on this neglected area.

This book examines Australian public opinion towards defence and foreign policy from the mid-twentieth century to the present day. Our aims are two-fold. First, by analysing attitudes towards defence and foreign policy in depth and over an extended period we aim to uncover the drivers behind public opinion and explain how and why they change. Some of these drivers are structural, such as long-term changes in the social structure or the economy; others are political, such as the actions of political elites; and others again are caused by specific and usually unforeseen events. Second, we aim to understand how, when and why government policy has either responded to this opinion, or overlooked or circumvented it. How and under what circumstances will a government

take notice of public opinion? These are the questions we seek to answer in this book.

In achieving these goals we have a rich body of survey data to draw on. While Australia does not have the large field of opinion data that can be found in the U.S. (see, for example, Holsti 2004) or Britain (see, for example, Clements 2018) there is nevertheless much survey data that can be used, starting as far back as 1941. For the 1940s through to the 1960s, we rely on commercial opinion poll data. In 1967 the first academic survey of political behaviour was conducted by Don Aitkin, and repeated in 1969 and 1979 (Aitkin 1982). From 1987 the Australian Election Study (AES), conducted at each federal election, fills an important gap (McAllister 2011). And finally, the excellent Lowy Polls, conducted annually from 2005, are a key source of evidence about public opinion. Taken together and supplemented by other surveys, these data sources provide a rich vein of evidence of changing public opinion towards defence and foreign affairs over eight decades.

The Australian Election Study has been almost continuously funded by the Australian Research Council and The Australian National University. Ian McAllister is grateful to his many colleagues on the project over the years, most recently Clive Bean, Juliet Pietsch, Rachel Gibson, Jill Sheppard and Toni Makkai. We acknowledge the continuing and generous support provided to us by Alex Oliver and Natasha Kassam in making the Lowy Polls available for analysis as quickly as possible after they are collected. The Lowy Polls are a major innovation for Australia and a key resource for academics, policy makers and students. Finally, many of the surveys are deposited in the Australian Data Archive at The Australian National University and we thank Steve McEachern and the archive staff for their ongoing support of the project.

Support for writing this book has been provided to Danielle Chubb by Deakin University and the Alfred Deakin Institute. We are also grateful to the scholarly generosity of many people who have provided advice and encouragement over the years this book has been in progress. For their advice and expertise, we would like to thank Chris Waters, Andrew Carr, Murray Goot and Jacob Dreyer. We benefited greatly from the collaborative environment and feedback provided on chapter drafts by the Deakin SHSS Writing Group convened by Andrew Singleton as well as from the 2019 Women in Political Leadership Workshop convened by Renee Jeffrey, Maria Rost Rublee and Sarah Percy.

We are most deeply indebted to our families. As we finish writing this book from our houses during a global pandemic, there is no escape for our loved ones from the writing process. Danielle Chubb thanks her two young children, Jarrah and Karri, who are always ready to offer their own very honest opinions about how the world should work, and her husband, Bret Harper, without whose patience and support perhaps no words would ever be written. Ian McAllister thanks his partner, Toni Makkai, for her good humour and sage advice as the book took shape.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 delineates the empirical, conceptual and methodological contours of the case studies that follow. In particular, the chapter outlines the prior research which has examined the role of public attitudes towards the institutions of defence and foreign affairs. Chapter 2 looks specifically at what survey data can tell us about levels of public confidence in these institutions and their personnel, as well as the correlation between these confidence levels and the willingness of the public to pay more for defence at specific historical junctures. The chapter also considers the cultural role played by the Australian Defence Force in society.

The remainder of the book provides a series of analyses which explore the link between opinion and policy. In his influential work on public opinion and U.S. foreign policy, Holsti (2004: 300–301) argues that three key variables are important for the successful execution of case studies: the stage of the policy process; the context in which decisions are being made; and the beliefs and values of individual policymakers. The case studies in Chapters 3 to 8 shed light on all these variables by combining in-depth analyses of the survey data with broad-ranging qualitative research that draws on both primary and secondary material across the span of the case study's life. These range from parliamentary debates, media commentary, opinion pieces and policy speeches, to scholarly and journalistic inquiries into the political context against which foreign policy was being made.

Chapter 3 begins with an examination of public and political sentiment at the time of the signing of the ANZUS treaty, with a specific focus on the positions taken by various key figures within the major political parties. The evolving nature of public opinion towards Australia's security alliance with the U.S. is then explored with reference to key

points of tension in the relationship: the Vietnam War, nuclear disarmament, the MX missile crisis, the 9/11 terror attacks and the Trump presidency. Recent work on generational shifts in support for ANZUS is used to develop a comprehensive picture of contemporary attitudes towards ANZUS.

Continuing the previous chapter's discussion of the U.S. alliance, Chapters 4 and 5 consider the changing nature of public opinion with regard to what Australia's contribution to this relationship should be, with a specific focus on the ADF's overseas deployments. In Chapter 4, Australia's most significant Cold War combat deployments are first examined with an overview of public opinion towards Australia's involvement in the wars in Korea and Vietnam, with Chapter 5 turning its attention to the post-Vietnam deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both chapters seek to understand the ways in which these broader public debates have been reflected in democratic processes, such as elections and parliamentary debates. The chapters also examine the question of peacekeeping operations. Drawing on the public opinion data discussed in Chapter 2, Australian perceptions of peacekeeping operations are examined and contrasted with attitudes towards more traditional military adventures.

The refocusing of Australia's diplomatic, trade and security priorities towards Asia has been the subject of much public and scholarly interest. Chapter 6 first canvasses Australian responses to Britain's attempts to join the European Economic Community. This event fostered a sense of betrayal that framed Australia's refocusing of its economic priorities towards Asia. The chapter then examines the relationship between public views of trade and economic security, and how these views influenced public response to political debate regarding Australia's shifting relationship with Asia during the Hawke and Keating governments.

Chapter 7 examines the public's responses to the increased threat of terrorism as a foreign policy priority. The chapter examines the public discourse that arose following Australia's most significant terrorist attack: the 1978 bombing outside Sydney's Hilton Hotel during a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. The ideas that figured in this debate, as well as the way in which it was conducted, is contrasted with contemporary public attitudes towards terrorism and the level of support extended towards government responses, especially following the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S. and the Bali bombings. These responses include the deployment of military personnel abroad and the curtailing of a range of civil and political liberties.

The book's final case study in Chapter 8 explores the central issues around the broader theme of how liberal values are incorporated into foreign policy; this is sometimes characterised as Australia's quest to be a 'good international citizen'. First, the chapter examines Australia's contribution to multilateral institution building via the United Nations. Parliamentary debate and public opinion towards Australia's historical involvement in the UN is examined and is compared with debate and opinion surrounding the bid for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council and the ways in which Australia subsequently engaged with this role. Analysis then turns to the question of foreign aid and the ways in which foreign aid priorities have been discussed, challenged and justified in public discourse.

Finally, Chapter 9 summarises the conclusions developed in the case study chapters and discusses their analytical and normative implications. This discussion seeks to answer the book's central research questions, namely the degree to which successive Australian governments have been responsive to public opinion and under what circumstances. We conclude with a reflection on the ways in which public opinion and elite interests interact in the quest to develop responsible foreign and defence policy and, ultimately, a progressive and stable security environment.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACFID	Australian Council for International Development
ACFOA	Australian Council for Overseas Aid
ADAA	Australian Development Assistance Agency
ADAB	Australian Development Assistance Bureau
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AES	Australian Election Study
AFP	Australian Federal Police
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ANPAS	Australian National Political Attitudes Survey
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
ANZUS	Australian, New Zealand, United States Alliance
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum
APOP	Australian Public Opinion Polls
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organization
AuSSA	Australian Survey of Social Attitudes
CSCE	Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe
EEC	European Economic Community
EU	European Union
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISSP	International Social Science Program
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands

SAS	Special Air Service
SEATO	Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNSC	United Nations is the Security Council
USIS	U.S. Information Service
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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CHAPTER 1

Defence, Foreign Affairs and Public Opinion

For most of the twentieth century, with the exception of the two world wars, defence and foreign affairs were rarely the subject of vigorous political contestation. This has resulted in a long-running bipartisanship in Australian politics, which in practice has excluded these policy areas from robust political discussion or scrutiny. Such bipartisanship has sustained relatively low public interest in foreign and defence issues, and the public has for the most part possessed limited knowledge about the strategic options available and has expressed few firm views on defence policy, especially views that might stray from the orthodoxy. The principal postwar exception to this pattern was the Vietnam War and the eventual decision to withdraw troops in 1972. This event was at least partly due to political divisions over Australia's support for the U.S.-led action.

The period since 2001 has seen a change in both the Australian public's engagement with defence and foreign affairs issues, as well as how they are debated by political elites. A number of shifts in the strategic environment have contributed to this transformation, catalysed by a series of by now familiar events. The 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S., followed in October 2002 by the Bali bombings which claimed the lives of 88 Australians, catapulted foreign affairs (and international terrorism) into mainstream political discourse. Australia's military commitment to the Iraq War also raised the profile of defence policy, with major party divisions emerging over the government's decision to support the 2003 U.S.

intervention. This created a heightened public awareness of a policy area that usually attracts a great deal of bipartisanship.¹ Alongside these major intervening events, globalisation has continued apace, bringing with it the overlapping of economic and trade considerations with defence and foreign policy and accordingly further increasing public interest in defence and foreign policy as it becomes more directly related to the everyday lives of Australians.

In parallel with these changes, advances in public opinion polling on issues related to foreign and defence policy have opened up opportunities to gain a stronger understanding of Australian attitudes. Prior to the late 1980s, defence and foreign affairs topics were rarely included in commercial polls. When they were, coverage was sporadic and the survey questions were often not repeated. This meant that any tracking of public opinion over an extended period was impossible. Since 1987 and the introduction of the Australian Election Study survey, and since 2005 and the introduction of the annual Lowy Institute survey on foreign affairs, such a database on public opinion has now become available for secondary analysis. For the first time, the systematic study of longitudinal trends in public opinion on defence and foreign affairs is possible.

This book utilises this wealth of public opinion poll data to examine ordinary Australians' views about defence and foreign affairs in-depth, and over an extended period. The chapters that follow delve into the parliamentary debates, elite and public attitudes and media coverage of key moments in Australia's foreign policy history. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the domestic imperatives that underpin defence and foreign policy decision-making in Australia and how they relate to public opinion. The analysis centres on three central questions: how has Australian public opinion towards defence and foreign policy evolved since 1945?; how responsive have successive governments been to public opinion?; and, finally, when and under what circumstances has public opinion shaped defence and foreign policy?

FOREIGN POLICY AND PUBLIC OPINION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

What the public thinks about foreign affairs, and whether foreign, defence or security policy is, or should be, shaped by public opinion, are questions that have been debated for many decades in the political science and international relations literature. Foreign policy realists, committed to

foreign and defence policy that is shaped around material power considerations, tend to view public opinion as capricious and unpredictable, albeit potentially significant as a source of support for governments in their international pursuits (Morgenthau 1950: 100–104). For this group, public opinion is at best a distraction and at worst an impediment to effective policymaking.

In contrast, liberal perspectives place value in the potential for greater accountability and democracy to help create a more peaceful world, with public opinion playing a core role in this process. More recently, debate over the democratic peace grants gives explicit recognition to the link between public opinion and foreign policy outcomes (e.g. Owen 1994: 100–101). The idea that public opinion can place limits on the narrow pursuit of national interests is also found within liberal institutionalist strands of thought. Keohane and Nye (2001: 224) argue, for example, that the role played by the media in focusing the attentions of the public on certain human rights issues has influenced the responses of leaders, causing them to respond to one conflict rather than another.

These debates, interrogating as they do paradigmatic perspectives on the conduct of international relations, tell us very little about the *nature* of the opinion-policy link. The question of whether public opinion really matters in the formulation of foreign policy is one that is starting to attract some interest in the fields of international relations and Australian foreign policy, but has nonetheless received little systematic attention. The first section of this introductory chapter explores existing theories about public opinion and foreign policy, with a focus on competing explanations regarding the directionality of the opinion-policy relationship. Since this scholarship has been largely conducted within the scope of U.S. foreign policy, the second section turns the chapter's attention to the question of how Australia fits into this picture, providing an overview of the politics of foreign policymaking in Australia and existing understandings about whether and how attitudinal factors are significant in the context of Australian defence and foreign policy.

UNDERSTANDING THE FOREIGN POLICY-OPINION RELATIONSHIP

What drives public opinion on foreign affairs? Is it inchoate, uninformed and unpredictable? Is the public mindset easily susceptible to elite views, or to partisan attachments? Do events drive opinion, which has a tendency

to migrate towards outcomes that promise victory? Or do latent beliefs, values and principles form a strong basis from which public opinion towards foreign affairs is formed, similar to the processes that are seen to underpin opinion in the domestic policy space? Models of the role that public opinion plays in the foreign policy process tend to focus on either top-down or bottom-up explanations of the opinion-policy relationship.

In the decades following the Second World War, what has become known as the ‘Almond-Lippman consensus’ was widely accepted as self-evident: that public opinion on foreign policy is ill-informed, incoherent and as a result unlikely to exert significant influence over the foreign policymaking process (Holsti 1992: 443–445). This interpretation had its origins in more general postwar survey research which found that the public had little knowledge of politics, and had distinctly authoritarian tendencies. This led to the theory of democratic elitism, by which citizens should be permitted only to choose between competing political elites at regular elections. These elites would be the ‘carriers of the democratic creed’ and charged with defending minority rights and freedoms in the face of an intolerant mass public (Stouffer 1955; McCloskey 1964).

This consensus was seriously challenged during the Vietnam War and led, as discussed below, to the development of pluralist models of public opinion and foreign policy. The advent of sophisticated polling techniques also led to a refinement of new elite-driven understandings of the opinion-policy link. In these models, public opinion was now understood as mature (rather than inchoate), but was understood to find its substance in elite cues. This top-down understanding of public opinion puts events in the context of the information environment in which the public actually operates (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017: 545). Scholars such as Zaller (1990: 125, 200) argue that political awareness is an important element in the formation of public opinion and involves a process of socialisation, whereby elite cues and partisan loyalties help citizens who are politically aware translate information into various opinions. This top-down interpretation of public opinion finds predictability in the tendency of the public to interpret political debates through frames provided to them in the public sphere.

The first serious challenge to the elitist model of foreign policy and public opinion emerged with the Vietnam War, which served as a turning point for understanding the interaction between foreign policy decision-making and domestic political imperatives (Hudson 2008: 23): as the prospect of victory became ever more elusive, as casualties mounted, and

as live footage from the battle was transmitted to televisions in households across the United States, public support for the war waned, and the U.S. government sought to disentangle itself from the conflict (Burstein and Freudenburg 1978). Influential works emerged to challenge the image of the public as both irrational and insignificant and have examined in detail the influence of elite and public opinion on the foreign policymaking process in the U.S., as well as decision making and outcomes (see, for example, Holsti 1992; Sobel 2001).

Out of these new pluralist models emerged work that acted as an optimistic rejoinder to the postwar cynicism of early thinkers (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017: 544). Here, data-driven political science underpinned by extensive survey research served as a counterpoint to received wisdom around public opinion (Holsti 1992: 445). Research found that, in fact, the public reacts in a predictable and logical way to world events, rather than with emotion and irrationality as was earlier assumed. The new research found different explanations for how and why the public formed particular views (e.g. Parker 1995). What these approaches shared was a ‘sense that public opinion about foreign policy is characterized by order rather than chaos, and that the source of this order can be derived from within the public itself’ (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017: 544).

The top-down (or elite) position views foreign policy as the domain of the few charged with pursuing a nation’s security interests. The bottom-up (or pluralist) position stresses the role played by broad societal interests in helping to shape the types of policies that both define and achieve the national interest. Both positions operate at an analytical and at a normative level. The elite view of foreign policy seeks to describe not only how policy is made, but maintains that the incorporation of pluralism into the foreign policymaking process is dangerous and can lead to incoherent and dangerous policy. The pluralist position likewise refers not only to a growing body of literature that seeks to disprove the idea that public opinion plays no role in foreign policymaking (see, for example, Cheeseman and McAllister 1994; Miller 2015a; Han and Rane 2013); it also takes the normative position—derived from classical Wilsonian liberal ideas—that policymakers have an obligation to open up foreign policy to domestic debate (Mulherin and Isakhan 2019).

AUSTRALIA AND THE MAKING OF FOREIGN POLICY

The bipartisan nature of foreign policy in Australia is often blamed for the stymying of the democratic process around foreign policy (Carr 2017; Mulherin and Isakhan 2019). The major political parties, by way of example, have been reluctant to bring decisions over troop deployments into parliament and to make them contingent on parliamentary approval. In 2014 the Australian Greens lost a motion to force debate over plans to engage military personnel in the Iraq conflict, with representatives from both major parties stressing the importance of leaving such decisions in government hands. And yet, while there is indeed a distinct lack of robust partisan debate around key foreign policy issues, both sides of politics have experienced shifts in position over time. This book's examination of government and opposition rhetoric on key issues, alongside survey results and major media coverage, helps us to develop a better understanding of the parameters of debate over foreign policy in Australia, and the ways in which this may or may not be reflected in policy.

Australia's foreign policy options and choices have changed greatly in the decades since 1945. Concomitantly, Australia's socio-cultural composition has also changed dramatically. Australia is a vastly different place, viewed both from the outside and the inside, from what it was in the immediate postwar years. Viewed externally, it is no longer a dependent ally tied to the fortunes of the British Commonwealth. Instead, it is a country with foreign policy choices, a trusted ally of the United States, and a state that increasingly seeks relevance—both economic and political—in its immediate region. Since the early 2000s, Australia has signed a wide range of free trade agreements, with the U.S. in 2004, Japan and Korea in 2014, China in 2015, Hong Kong in 2018, and Indonesia in 2019. These are in addition to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership which was signed in 2018. Australia has been a member of the United Nations Security Council on five occasions since its foundation, including the first session in 1946 over which it presided.

From the inside, Australia's demographics no longer reflect the results of a policy that encouraged the migration of white Europeans. As Castles argues, international migration is a dynamic social process that has significant consequences for policymakers (2015: 9–10). In Australia in 2018, 29% of the population had been born overseas, a level that is exceeded among the liberal democracies only by Israel. In total, almost half of the

population has been born overseas or has one or both parents who were born overseas.

Even more important than the aggregate level of migration is the changing ethnic composition of immigrants. The proportion of European migrants to Australia has dropped from 52% in 2001 to 40%, in 2018, while the proportion of those migrants born in Asia had increased in the same time period from 24 to 33% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Such an increase in ethnic diversity within a relatively short period of time cannot fail to have an impact on foreign policy attitudes, as it does on other political attitudes and aspects of political behaviour. Pietsch and Aarons (2012) demonstrate that Australia's political engagement with Asia has been accompanied by closer personal (social, cultural and economic) ties between Australian and Asian society. How the changing social nature of the Australian political landscape has translated into domestic debates about foreign policy is a topic that we examine later in the book.

At the level of the Australian political elite, bipartisanship has been a common feature of foreign policy for much of its history, despite rhetoric to the contrary (see Carr 2017). Australia's centre right political parties (Liberal and National) adopt language that stresses the importance of continuity in foreign policy, emphasising the close relationship Australia enjoys with the United States and the value of this alliance for combatting traditional threat scenarios, as well as the importance of regional relationships for these same reasons. On the centre left, the Labor party tends to speak a language of change: investment in diplomacy and dialogue, as well as the importance of Australia's relations—both economic and political—with its immediate Asian region, seeing the latter as more than simply a realisation of traditional security assurances. At face value, the rhetoric suggests very divergent policy values and goals.

In contrast to the rhetoric, in practice the behaviour of the major parties once in government is instructive. In a recent example, during the 2013 election campaign, the Liberal party, under the leadership of Tony Abbott, derided the incumbent Labor government for its significant financial investment in securing a temporary seat on the United Nations Security Council and committed an Abbott government to advancing a foreign policy that would be more focused on Asia. Yet the aplomb with which the newly elected Liberal-National government approached Australia's role on the Security Council, once in power, was remarkable