

World Publics Say Governments Should Be More Responsive to the Will of the People

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Governments Widely Seen as Serving Big Interests, Not the People

[Country-by-Country Summaries \(PDF\)](#)

[Questionnaire/methodology \(PDF\)](#)

[Press Release \(PDF\)](#)

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A WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 19 nations conducted around the world finds that, in every nation polled, publics support the principles of democracy. At the same time, in nearly every nation, majorities are dissatisfied with how responsive their government is to the will of the people.

In all 19 nations polled majorities agree with the democratic principle that "the will of the people should be the basis for the authority of government"--a principle enunciated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose 60th anniversary is being celebrated this year. On average 85 percent agree--52 percent strongly. Across the 19 nations, 74 percent say that the "will of the people" should have more influence than it currently does.

(Photo: United Nations)

"The perception that governments are not responsive to the popular will appears to be contributing to the low levels of confidence in government found around the world," comments Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org. Kull adds: "Most see their governments as primarily serving big interests rather than the people as a whole."

The poll of 17,525 respondents across 19 nations was conducted between November 29 and March 20, 2008 by WorldPublicOpinion.org, a collaborative research project involving research centers from around the world and managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland. The primary funder of the study was the Oak Foundation.

Those nations interviewed include most of the world's largest nations--China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia--as well as Argentina, Azerbaijan, Britain, Egypt, France, Iran, Jordan, Mexico, Poland, South Korea, Turkey, Ukraine, and the Palestinian Territories. These nations represent 59 percent of the world population. In three nations not all questions were asked. Margins of error range from +/-3 to 4 percent.

Strong Support for Democratic Principles

In all 19 nations polled majorities agree with the democratic principle that "the will of the people should be the basis for the authority of government." On average 85 percent agree--52 percent "strongly."

Interestingly, the most robust support for this principle does not come from the western democracies. The largest percentages saying that they strongly agree with this principle are found in Ukraine (77%), Nigeria (75%), Turkey (70%), and Indonesia (72%)

Among western democracies the numbers in strong agreement are more modest: France (34%), the United States (44%), and Great Britain (55%). However, only very small numbers in these nations disagree (12-21%).

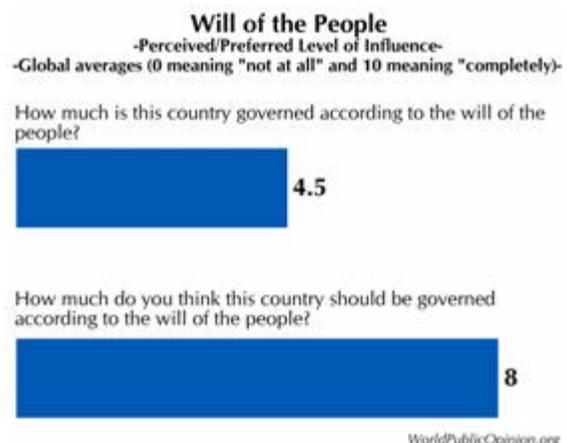
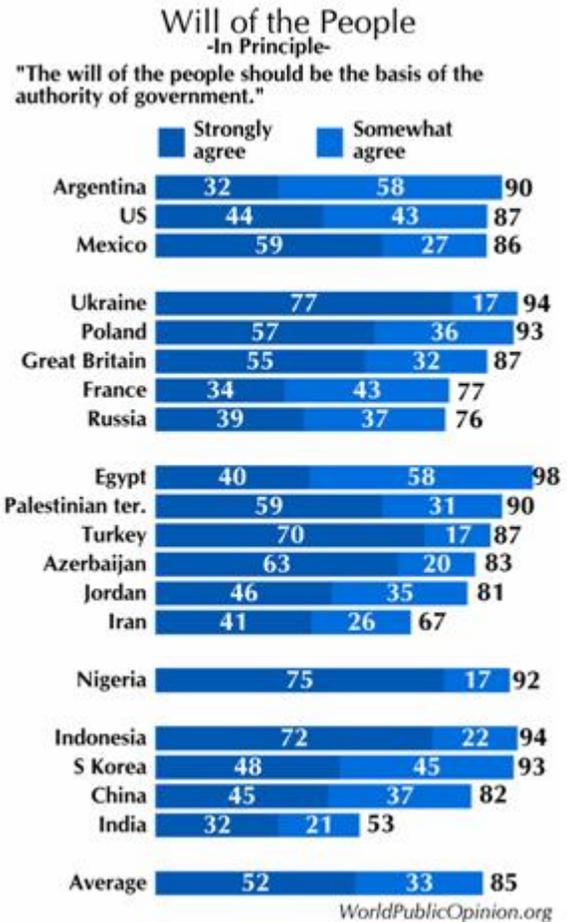
Asked how much their nation "should be governed according to the will of the people" (on a scale with 0 meaning "not at all" and 10 meaning "completely"), the mean response for all nations is well above 5 and in only two does the mean dip below 7: India (6.2), and Jordan (6.6). On average, the mean across all nations is 8.0.

At the same time, relatively few say that the people should have complete control over the government's decisions. On average only 31 percent give the answer of 10. However majorities in two nations give an answer of 10: Ukraine (52%), and Indonesia (51%). Russia also has a large percentage (49%) endorsing complete control by the people.

Majorities in all nations also endorse the democratic principle that "government leaders should be selected through elections in which all citizens can vote," another principle enunciated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On average 84 percent agree with this view, while 12 percent say that government leaders should be selected "some other way." In only one nation is support for democratic elections below 7 in 10: India (54%). Thirty-three percent in India say leaders should be selected in some other way.

Dissatisfaction with Democratic Responsiveness

All publics polled show substantial dissatisfaction with the level of democratic responsiveness of



their governments. When comparing how much influence the will of the people has on their government to how much it should have, the mean perceived level is well below the preferred level in every nation polled. On average the mean perceived level of government responsiveness is 4.5 (on a 0-10 scale)--well below the mean preferred level of 8.0.

Looking at individual responses to these two questions, overwhelming majorities in most nations give a preferred level of government responsiveness that is higher than the perceived level. On average 74 percent of responses show such a gap and in all but two nations the ratio is 6 in 10 or higher. The two exceptions are India (46%) and Jordan (44%), where a plurality express a desire for more responsiveness.

The highest levels of dissatisfaction in government responsiveness are found in Egypt (97%) and Nigeria (88%). However, high levels of dissatisfaction are also found in long-established western liberal democracies, including the United States (83%), Great Britain (77%), and France (73%).

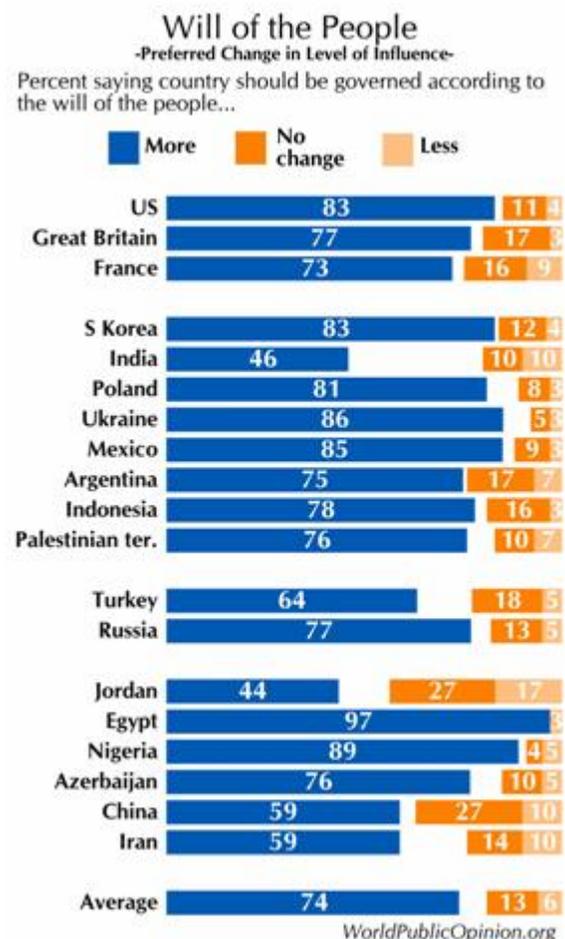
Overall dissatisfaction with government democratic responsiveness tends to rise with greater education. For the sample as a whole, among those with less than a high school education, 71 percent favor more government responsiveness to the will of the people, while among those with a bachelors degree or higher, 82 percent favor more responsiveness.

Low Trust in Government

Most publics express low levels of trust in their government to do what is right and this low trust appears to be related to the perception that governments are not being responsive to the will of the people.

When people are asked how much of the time they "trust" their national government to "do the right thing," in eleven of the seventeen countries clear majorities say "only some of the time" or "never." On average 48 percent say they trust their government to do the right thing only some of the time and 6 percent volunteered "never." Thirty-two percent say they trust their government "most of the time" and 12 percent say "just about always."

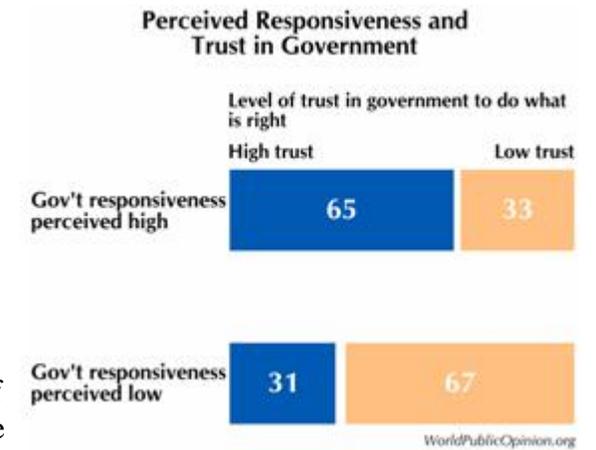
Only five publics have a majority expressing confidence that they can trust their government most of the time: Egypt (84%), China (83%), Russia (64%), the Palestinian Territories (55%), and Jordan (54%).



Interestingly, publics give their governments poor ratings in all of the western democracies.

Majorities say they trust their government only some of the time or never in Britain (67%), France (64%), and the United States (60%).

Trust in government appears to be highly related to how much people perceive the government as being responsive to the will of the people. For the entire sample, among those who give high ratings of their governments' responsiveness to the will of the people (a rating of 6 to 10 on a 10 points scale 64 percent say they trust their government to do the right thing most of the time or just about always. However among those who give their government low ratings (0-4), less than half as many (31 %) express substantial levels of trust in their government.



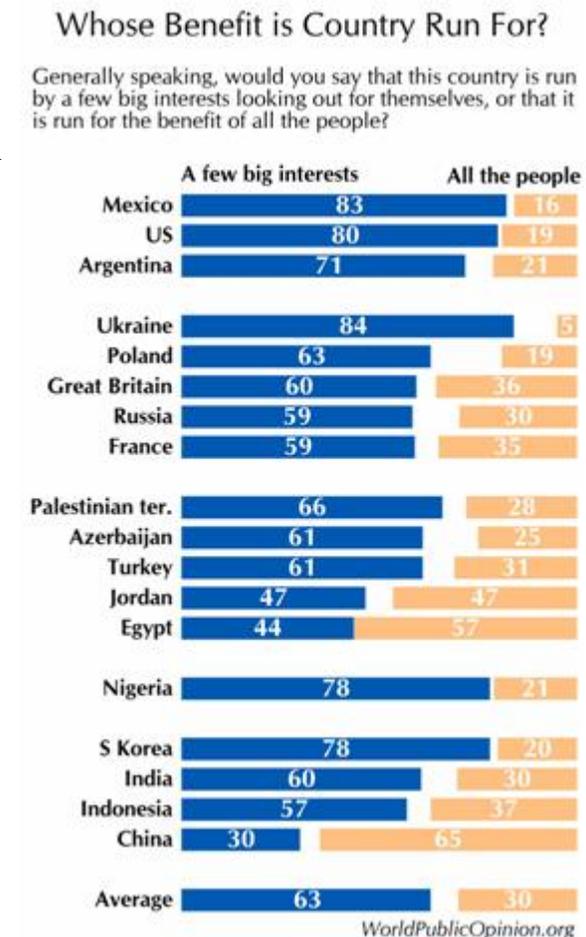
Trust in government is negatively related to education. Overall, among those without a high school diploma, 47 percent say they can trust the government only some of the time or never. This rises to 57 percent among those with some college education.

The Benefit of the People

Similar to the low levels of trust in governments to do the right thing, majorities in most nations perceive their government as serving powerful special interests rather than the interests of the people as a whole. This view is also highly related to the perception that governments are not responsive to the will of the people.

Asked whether their nation is "run by a few big interests looking out for themselves" or whether it is run "for the benefit of all people," in 15 of the 18 nations asked, respondents say that it is run by big interests. On average 63 percent say it is run by big interests and only 30 percent say it is run for the benefit of all people.

The three exceptions include two nations where a majority says the government is run for the benefit of the people--China (65%) and Egypt (57%). Views in Jordan are divided.



Once again, established western democracies give their governments poor ratings. Majorities say that their government is run by and for big interests in the United States (80%), Britain (60%), and France (59%).

The highest percentages saying their nation is run by big interests are found in Mexico (83%), the United States (80%), Nigeria (78%), and South Korea (78%).

The perception that the government is run for the benefit of all people is positively related to the perception that it is responsive to the will of the people. For the entire sample, among those who give their government a high rating for democratic responsiveness (6-10), a majority (53%) say that their government is run for the benefit of all the people. Among those who give their government low ratings (0-4) for democratic responsiveness, the numbers saying the government is run for the benefit of the people is 38 points lower--a mere 15 percent.

Conversely, those who perceive low levels of government responsiveness to the will of the people are twice as likely as those who perceive high levels (80% to 41%) to say that their government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.

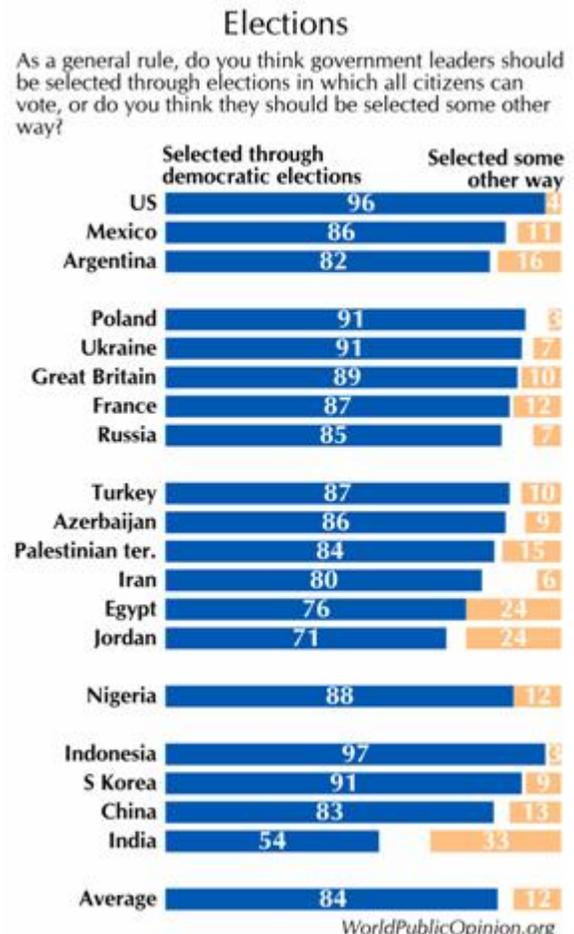
Overall the perception that the nation is run by a few big interests rises with education. For the sample as a whole, among those with less than a high school diploma, 59 percent hold this view, rising to 67 percent among those with a bachelors degree or more education.

However there are some variations between nations. The perception that big interests run the country rises sharply with education in Argentina, Azerbaijan, China, Egypt, South Korea, Turkey, and Ukraine. However the opposite is true in France, Great Britain, Nigeria, Poland, and Russia.

Elections Alone Not Seen as Adequate

As discussed, majorities in all nations polled endorse the democratic principle that "government leaders should be selected through elections in which all citizens can vote." However, most do not think that input from the public should be limited to elections. In other words, few subscribe to the view of the British philosopher and legislator Edmund Burke, that the influence of the public should be limited to occasional elections.

Respondents were asked whether they thought that "elections are the only time when the views of the people should have influence, or that also between elections leaders should consider the views of the people as they make decisions." Majorities in 14 out of 17 nations asked this



question say that leaders should pay attention to the views of the people between elections.

On average 74 percent endorse the view that the public should have ongoing influence and 22 percent hold the "Burkian" view that elections are the only time the public should have a say in the government's decisions.

In just one country do a majority favor the view that elections are the only time the public should have influence: 53 percent of Turks. In India a plurality favor this view and in the Palestinian Territories views are divided.

A modest majority (55%) is supportive of ongoing public influence in Indonesia. In all other nations support ranges from 72 to 94 percent.

Overall, support for leaders giving ongoing attention to the views of the public rises with education. Among those who have not graduated from high school, 65 percent approve of paying attention to the public's views, rising to 80 percent among those with a bachelors degree or more education.

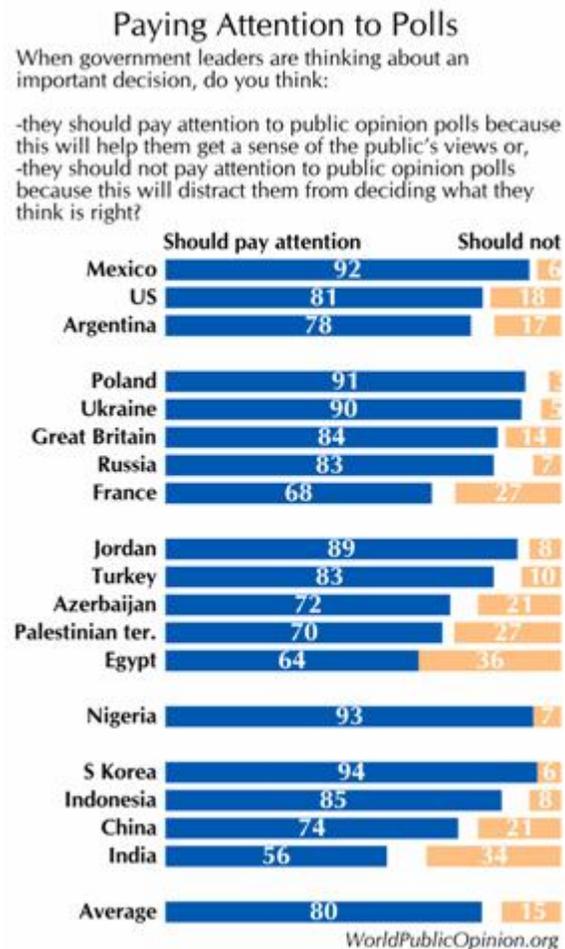
Paying Attention to Polls

Consistent with their support for the government giving ongoing attention to the views of the public even larger majorities say that leaders should pay attention to public opinion polls.

Respondents were presented a common argument that "when government leaders are thinking about an important decision" they "should not pay attention to public opinion polls because this will distract them from deciding what they think is right." They also heard the argument that government leaders "should pay attention to public opinion polls because this will help them get a sense of the public's views."

The public response was remarkably unequivocal--in all 18 nations polled a majority says that government leaders should pay attention to polls. On average 8 in 10 opt for this view while just 15 percent endorse the view that lawmakers should not heed the polls.

Even in the United States--where some elected leaders assert proudly that they do not pay attention to polls--81 percent say that they should (including 70% of Republicans and 88% of



Democrats).

There are only two nations where less than 7 in 10 respondents endorse polls: India (56%) and Egypt (64%). In these two nations more than 3 in 10 reject polls (34% and 36% respectively).

Paying Attention to World Public Opinion

When developing foreign policy, how much should government leaders pay attention to public opinion outside the country? On one hand it may be argued that world public opinion is irrelevant to the interests of the nation. On the other hand there may be pragmatic concerns about a nation's public diplomacy. There may also be a normative response: the democratic belief that the will of the people is a proper source of legitimacy for domestic policies can flow logically into the belief that foreign policies that are supported by the will of the people globally also have greater legitimacy.

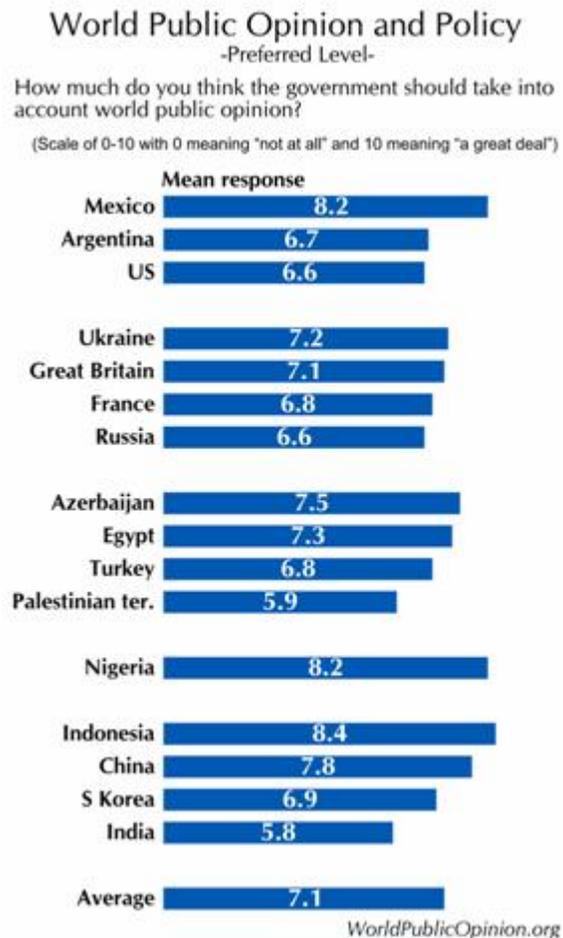
Asked, how much "the government should take into account world public opinion" when "developing its foreign policy," on a 0-10 scale (with 0 meaning "not at all" and 10 meaning "a great deal,") the mean response is above 5 in every nation polled. The average across all 16 nations is 7.1--only slightly lower than the average preferred level for government responsiveness to public opinion at home (8.0).

The lowest levels of support for world public opinion are found in India (5.8), the Palestinian Territories (5.9), the United States (6.6), and Russia (6.6). The highest are found in Indonesia (8.4), Mexico (8.2), and Nigeria (8.2).

When asked how much attention their government does pay attention to world public opinion, using the same 0-10 scale, the mean assessment is lower than the preferred level in every nation polled. Across the 16 nations asked, the mean assessment is 5.1.

The lowest mean estimates of government responsiveness to world public opinion are found in the United States (3.9), Egypt (4.1), and Ukraine (4.5). The highest are found in China (6.6), Indonesia (6.6), and South Korea (5.9).

Interestingly, estimates of government responsiveness to world public opinion tend to be higher than the estimates of responsiveness to public opinion at home--5.1 as compared to 4.5.



Looking at individual responses on the two questions, majorities or pluralities in all nations give a preferred level of government responsiveness to world public opinion that is higher than the perceived level. On average 57 percent favor greater responsiveness.

The highest majorities are in Nigeria (78%), Mexico (77%), and Egypt (72%). In the United States--which has received substantial criticism by world public opinion in recent years--65 percent say that the government should be more responsive.

Pluralities favor greater responsiveness in China (49%) and India (34%) and it is the most commonly held belief in the Palestinian Territories (47%), Turkey (42%), and Russia (36%).

Overall, support for greater government responsiveness to world public opinion rises with education. Among those with less than a high school education, 53 percent favor greater responsiveness, as compared to 61 percent among those with a bachelors degree or more education.