

## **Hall of Mirrors: Perceptions and Misperceptions in the US Congressional Foreign Policy Process**

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**On Many Foreign Policy Issues US Leaders and Public Agree,  
But Congress Votes to the Contrary**

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A new joint study of the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR) and the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland finds that the American public and American leaders—including senior Congressional staffers, administration officials, and leaders in business, labor, media and other areas—agree on many key foreign policy issues, but that Congress frequently votes contrary to this consensus.

The study found American leaders misperceive the public position on these issues, especially when it comes to multilateral initiatives. Congressional staffers similarly misread their own constituents. At the same time, most Americans mistakenly believe that Congress as a whole and their own representative, vote consistent with their preferences.

Steven Kull, director of PIPA comments, “What we have found are serious gaps in the democratic process when it comes to Congressional foreign policy.” This study is based primarily on surveys of 1,195 American adults and 450 American leaders by CCFR, and 959 American adults by PIPA, all conducted from July through September 2004.

Both public surveys were conducted by Knowledge Networks, and the survey of foreign policy leaders was conducted by Ipsos-Reid. The survey of leaders included Congressional staffers and administration officials as well as leaders in business, labor, the media, education, religion, foreign policy research, special interest groups, and education. Surveys of the public and leaders conducted by CCFR and PIPA in 2002 were also included in the analysis.

The most consistent disconnect between public/leader consensus and Congressional voting was on multilateral agreements and actions. Leaders and the public showed strong support for multilateralism in principle, with large majorities specifically supporting the United States generally making foreign policy decisions within the UN, US participation in the Kyoto Treaty on climate change, US participation in the International Criminal Court, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and the treaty banning land mines—all of which Congress has not supported. In addition, large majorities of leaders and the public opposed increasing defense spending and in 2002 opposed proceeding to build a missile

defense system—both of which Congress has done. Congress has also passed resolutions expressing strong solidarity with Israel and criticizing the Palestinians, while a strong majority of both leaders and the public favors taking neither side in the conflict. In 2002 majorities of the public and leaders favored the United States only going to war with Iraq with UN approval, while both houses of Congress voted down legislation endorsing such a position.

In some cases a majority of Republican staffers' attitudes did diverge from the general leader/public consensus, but the majority of Congressional staffers overall and administration officials did not, except a bare majority (52%) of Congressional staffers overall opposed ICC.

The study has also found that leaders, including Congressional staffers, are unaware of the public's position on many of these issues. When the 450 leaders were asked what the majority public position on these issues would be, only a minority answered correctly on seven of the nine issues widely endorsed by the leaders and the public.

The American public is also apparently unaware that Congress as a whole is voting in ways that are inconsistent with its preferences, thus undermining public motivation to put pressure on Congress. When Americans were asked how they think Congress is voting on these issues, they tended to assume, in most cases incorrectly, that Congress as a whole was voting consistent with their preferences.

In addition to asking leaders overall about the public's position on various issues, Congressional staffers were also asked specifically what their own constituents' position would be. In most cases, only minorities of staffers correctly perceived what the majority attitude was in their districts. Curiously, staffers whose views were actually in accord with their constituents tended to assume this was not the case, while the minority of staffers whose views were at odds with the majority of their constituents showed a strong bias toward assuming, incorrectly, that their constituents agreed with them.

Members of the public were also asked how they thought their Congressional member would vote on a number of issues. For purposes of comparison, respondents were divided into two groups: those whose member voted for the legislation in question and those whose member voted against it. Naturally, if the public were informed about their member's position, the prediction of the majority in one group about the vote would be the opposite of the other group, in line with the actual member's vote. However, this was never the case. Strikingly, there was only a very modest difference between the perceptions of respondents whose member voted for the legislation in question and respondents whose member voted against it. This variation did tend to be in the correct direction, suggesting that at least a little information about members' positions is getting through to the public. But overall it appears that assumptions about how one's own member votes are being influenced very little by how members do, in fact, vote.

Once again respondents' assumptions about how their member voted were highly correlated with respondents' own policy preferences. In short it appears that, in the

absence of information to the contrary, Americans tend to assume that Congress overall and their own member vote in ways that are consistent with the way that they would like Congress and their member to vote. For the foreign policy issues explored, in most cases, this was a misperception.