

THE RISE OF GLOBAL PUBLIC OPINION

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Summary

With the growth of the internet and other new communications technologies, people have more opportunities than ever before to engage in regular international communication about public policy. This development has led more analysts to discuss the emergence of “global public opinion.” While most discussions of public opinion focus on surveys of individual attitudes, this chapter focuses on how organizations foster communication that shapes global public opinion and translate it into political influence. A long history of transnational organizing continues to influence contemporary notions of human rights, international law, ecological sustainability, and social justice. Also, global institutions, such as the United Nations, affect the possibilities for people to come together across national boundaries to reflect upon common preferences and policy challenges.

Popular organizations have long been working, both within and outside the United Nations framework, to promote a vision of world order that privileges human rights. Their work has helped shape global opinion by cultivating awareness and support for multilateral solutions to global problems, generating popular constituencies for multilateralism, and by relating national struggles to international norms and institutions. At the same time, groups emphasizing the globalization of markets or opposing notions of global integration compete for public support for their own particular visions of how the world should be organized. This chapter explores the organizational foundations that have contributed to and that support the development of global public opinion in support of human interests, broadly defined. It also considers how these organizations and the ideas they have fostered contribute to the contemporary World Social Forum process, which is arguably the fullest expression of globalized public opinion in history.

1. Introduction

On February 15, 2003, an estimated 12 million protesters gathered in over 700 cities in 60 countries to protest U.S. plans to invade Iraq. In many major cities, these protests were the largest ever recorded. Although the world's governments working together could not dissuade the U.S. from war, the world's people, acting together, helped undermine the legitimacy of Bush's actions and to deny the U.S. government the international support it sought. The action was so successful that a *New York Times* editorial referred to global public opinion as the "second superpower." This chapter explores the processes and institutions that have contributed to the formation of a public opinion that transcends national boundaries and supports ideas of world society and global citizenship even against overwhelming opposition from the world's sole military superpower.

With the growth of the internet and other new communications technologies, people have more opportunities than ever before engage in regular international communication about public policy. This development has led more analysts to discuss the emergence of a "global public sphere," "global civil society," and "global public opinion." Surveys of popular attitudes about issues of global relevance have become more common, and the World Values Survey and the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes (www.worldpublicopinion.org/), the Pew Global Attitudes Project (<http://pewglobal.org/>), and the World Values Survey (www.worldvaluessurvey.org/) represent important attempts to track popular attitudes internationally. While these surveys are certainly helpful to politicians and analysts seeking to understand public preferences, most surveys continue to be framed in national terms. Thus, while they are helpful in identifying common attitudes and changing preferences across nations, they fail to ask how people's attitudes are affected by their participation in transnational organizations, movements, and institutions.

Attitudes and opinions must be embodied in some individual or collectivity, and thus the idea of global public opinion implies the presence of a global civil society. Kaldor defines global civil society as "the sphere of ideas, values, organisations, networks, and individuals located primarily outside the institutional complexes of family, market, and state, and beyond the confines of national societies, polities, and economies." It is the sphere in which people come together, across national borders, to develop, articulate, and promote shared identities and goals. In other words, it is where global public opinion takes shape. As global civil society gains depth and strength—i.e., as its organizational infrastructure and network density expands—the potential relevance of global public opinion for global policy is enhanced.

It is also important to emphasize that when thinking about public opinion we must not simply account for the attitudes individuals express when asked to respond to a survey, but we must also consider the institutional mechanisms through which these attitudes or preferences come to be expressed publicly and translated into political influence. In democracies, electoral rules and political party systems are designed to mobilize voters and channel citizen input into policy processes. Most of these systems are imperfect at fully reflecting democratic preferences, but they at least help connect public opinion with policy in a somewhat systemic way. Also, the internet and new communications

technologies increase the frequency and intensity of transnational communication, but we must recall that these technologies build upon an important history of transnational organizing that has long shaped public attitudes about human rights, development, and other facets of public policy.

In addition to formal electoral and party structures, contemporary societies tend to have rather elaborate social movement sectors that mobilize constituents around particular issues and preferences. Pippa Norris argues, for instance, that social movements and protest politics are helping to “reinvent” democratic participation at a time when confidence in established representative democracies is waning. Because parties tend to take general positions on a wide range of issues, and because they tend to avoid some of the most contentious questions altogether, voters are generally not able to use their votes to indicate specific policy preferences. Thus, many citizens join social movement organizations to press for the types of social policies they prefer. Social movement organizations are therefore found in most democratic and non-democratic polities, including the emergent global polity. They work to educate and influence public opinion and channel it into various forms of political pressure.

The global polity is an emergent one, becoming more elaborated as intergovernmental institutions like the United Nations and World Trade Organization expand their memberships, jurisdictions, and capacities and as their policies have growing impacts on more people around the world. Social movement actors have contributed to the development of global institutions, often seeking to create structures above the state that could defend peace and human rights against nationalism and militarism. Citizens organized to promote particular interests have helped democratize both national and international institutions, contributing to the spread of democracy around the world.

However, despite the proliferation of democratic states over recent decades, the global polity is not democratic. We lack mechanisms for transnational citizen participation and for government accountability in global political arenas. This may help explain the failure of the February 15 marches in 2003 to stop the Iraq war. Yet what is most exciting about the current era is that we can see some important new developments that can contribute to a more democratic global polity. These developments helped generate such attention and enthusiasm around global public opinion in early 2003. Nevertheless, the work to cultivate a truly global and mobilized public opinion has been going on quietly for many decades if not centuries. Contemporary social movements build upon the ideas, identities, and organizational lessons of many previous movements as they work to develop new and democratic forms of global politics that might make a different sort of world possible.

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Biographical Sketch

Jackie Smith is associate professor of sociology and peace studies at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame (USA). She is author of *Social Movements for Global Democracy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), and co-author of *Global Democracy and the World Social Forums* (Paradigm Publishers, 2008). She has co-edited three books on transnational activism, including *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics: Solidarity Beyond the State* (1997), *Globalization and Resistance: Transnational Dimensions of Social Movements* (2002), and *Coalitions Across Borders: Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order* (2005).