

# Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Age of Social Media

**Matthew A. Baum**, Harvard University  
**Philip B. K. Potter**, University of Virginia

Democratic publics have always struggled to constrain their elected leaders' foreign policy actions. By its nature, foreign policy creates information asymmetries that disadvantage citizens in favor of leaders. But has this disadvantage deepened with the advent of the Internet and the resulting fundamental changes in the media and politics? We argue that it has. The current information and political environments erode constraint by inclining constituents to reflexively and durably back "their" leaders and disapprove of opposition. These changes make it harder for citizens to informationally "catch up" with and constrain leaders because views that contradict citizens' beliefs are less likely to break through when media are fragmented and siloed. These changes have important implications for theories concerning the democratic peace, audience costs, rally effects, and diversionary war. They may also contribute to instability in foreign policy by contributing to sudden and destabilizing changes in public opinion that undercut commitments abroad.

The information environment has fundamentally shifted over the past two decades, but scholarship has failed to keep pace. We know a great deal about the relationships among media, public opinion, and foreign policy in a paradigm dominated by newspapers, broadcast television, and the postwar consensus. However, existing models break down in the context of fragmented, Internet-driven information and highly polarized public opinion. For years, scholars (ourselves included) have failed to fully grapple with the implications of these changes, falling back on the arguments that most news on the Internet was still produced by traditional media and that most people still obtained their information from traditional sources. Time has rendered these defenses increasingly untenable. Our goal here is to set an agenda for reappraising these relationships in the context of the current technological and political landscapes.

Many of these changes are causally intertwined. Along with the shifting media environment have come inequality, populism, and rising nationalism in many Western democracies. These transformations pose major questions for leadership accountability in foreign policy. When satellite and Internet technology first emerged many hoped that the

resulting volume, democratization, and accessibility of information would lead to a new media golden age and a more engaged and informed public. Over time, this optimistic vision has given way to fears that information silos and misinformation make it ever harder for citizens to productively engage in democratic politics in general and the foreign policy process in particular. We ask then, is foreign policy today more (or less) constrained than it was in the prior media, information, and public opinion environment?

While additional research is needed, we argue that the preponderance of evidence points to an overall decline in democratic constraint on foreign policy. The current information and political environments, which lack significant moderation—by prominent voices from a neutral media or popular engagement with opposing viewpoints—incline constituents to reflexively back "their" leaders and disapprove of opposition leaders. These effects become particularly stark in two-party, majoritarian systems, such as that of the United States where a polarizing public sorts into just two baskets: "us" and "them." Prior work models a disengaged and uniformed public that begins ill equipped to constrain leadership's foreign policy but can, under certain circumstances, catch up by

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Matthew A. Baum, Marvin Kalb Professor of Global Communications, Harvard University. Philip B. K. Potter pbp2s@virginia.edu, associate professor, University of Virginia.

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drawing on heuristics such as casualties or elite discord. The current media and political climates short-circuit this updating process. Contrary views less frequently break through when media are fragmented and siloed, the little that does is easily dismissed as “fake news,” and polarization makes elite discord within these silos ever more rare.

This, however, does not necessarily mean that leaders get whatever they want all the time. Mechanisms that hold public support in place past the point when they might otherwise shift can contribute to sudden and destabilizing changes in public opinion on the relatively rare occasions when they do occur. Public opinion, which has always been fickle when it comes to foreign policy, therefore becomes even more susceptible to sudden cascades of change that undercut foreign policy commitments. Put differently, leaders may enjoy greater “elasticity of reality” under present conditions, but nothing stretches infinitely (Baum and Potter 2008). When something that is stretched very far reaches its breaking point, the consequences can be dramatic.

These changes have profound implications. If citizens cannot or do not obtain the information required to accurately appraise leaders’ performance, citizens cannot then reliably hold their leaders to account. Democratic constraint on foreign policy then recedes, and many of the mechanisms that distinguish democracies when it comes to foreign policy come into question. There is less reason to believe that democracies will behave peacefully toward each other, that they will have greater credibility than their autocratic counterparts, that they will be selective in the fights that they engage in and consequently are more likely to win, or that publics will reliably rally in support of their leaders in the face of conflict. In other words, these changes require a wholesale reappraisal of what we think we know about how democracies conduct their foreign policy.

Social science is just beginning to meaningfully grapple with the trends that are driving foreign policy in the age of Trump, and, building on that work, our contention is that much of what is commonly treated as idiosyncratic at the present political moment is, in fact, systematic. The consequences for public constraint on foreign policy are therefore predictable. Personalities may exaggerate some of these trends in the immediate term, but they are not likely to disappear after the next presidential election. Our hope is that by rebuilding the models of media, public opinion, and foreign policy constraint that we developed a decade ago we can reorient the discussion in a more productive direction.

### THE WORLD AS IT WAS

The literature on public opinion equates foreign policy knowledge with foreign policy engagement (Delli Carpini, Keeter,

and Webb 1997; Holsti 2004; Ostrom and Job 1986). The common holding is that, in normal times, typical Americans know little (and care less) about foreign policy. They therefore generally do not engage with it unless they receive some signal that their attention is warranted—typically in the form of casualties or loud elite disagreement (Holsti and Rosenau 1984; Mueller 1973; Zaller 1994). This informational asymmetry and corresponding inattentiveness gives leaders a relatively free hand in the day-to-day conduct of foreign affairs, absent some media whistle-blowing that activates public engagement (Rosenau 1961).

Crucially, the action in this model comes from a traditional media that is beholden to elites (particularly those within the executive) for authoritative information but also responsive to the public as the market for its product. As long as the public was unengaged, the media remained a lapdog (to elites) for fear of alienating its suppliers. Once the public became activated, however, the media became a watchdog for fear of losing its customers (Baum and Potter 2008).<sup>1</sup>

The result was a world in which leaders had a broad informational advantage (and corresponding discretion) at the outset of a typical foreign policy initiative. If, however, the initiative was or became relatively high in salience, like a military conflict, this gap narrowed over time as the media and the public became more informed and effectively “caught up” to leaders (Baum and Potter 2015). The same process unfolded for other areas of foreign policy, like trade negotiations, albeit typically more slowly.

Figure 1 illustrates this dynamic by tracing the typical path of the foreign policy informational advantage enjoyed by leaders, relative to the public (i.e., the information gap). In our view, this gap limits democratic constraint on foreign policy, giving leaders a relatively free hand. As the primary traders of information in the marketplace—simultaneously beholden to leaders for their supply of this key commodity and to the public for demand—the traditional media played a central role in narrowing this gap over time.

As we have noted, in most periods public attention to foreign policy (and as a direct corollary, demand for foreign policy news) is and has been very low, resulting in an equi-

1. We spend much of this article describing the negative consequences for democratic constraint on foreign policy that emerge from changes to this “traditional” media arrangement that prevailed for approximately four decades after World War II. It should, however, be acknowledged that this “golden age” was certainly not perfect on all dimensions. In the days of Walter Cronkite, news was biased with regard to gender, race, and class. It also tended to be resistant to alternative (but sometimes very accurate) perspectives in favor of the relatively monolithic elite opinion that prevailed on many issues in that period.

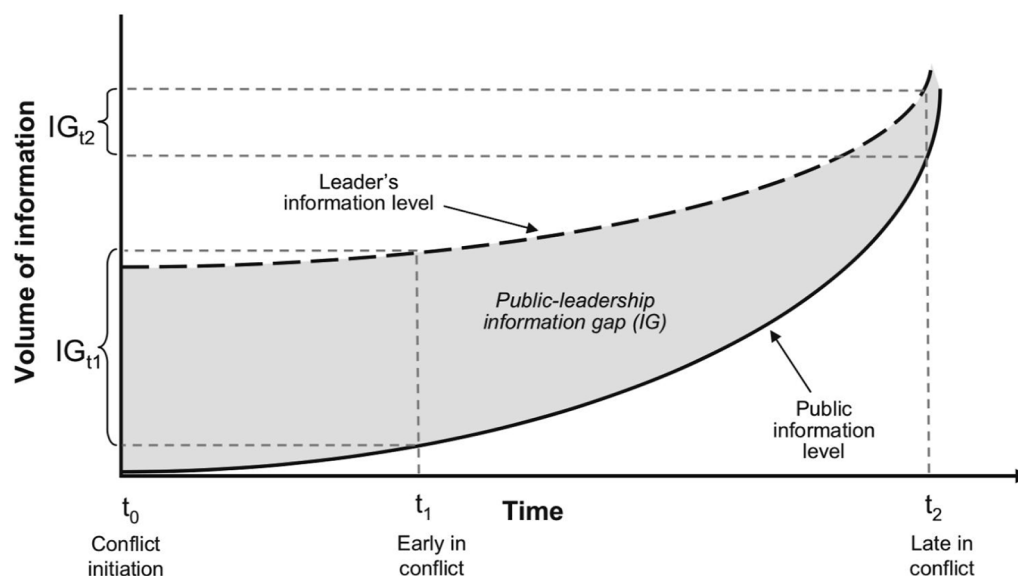


Figure 1. Closing the information gap. Source: Baum and Potter (2008)

librium favorable to leaders at the outset of an engagement. This relatively large information gap at time  $t_1$  is represented by  $IG_{t_1}$ . However, several factors—including casualties, elite discord, and evidence that leaders have “spun” the facts beyond credulity (a concept we term the “elasticity of reality” and will return to)—can prompt the public to increase its demand for information from the media, thereby narrowing the information gap. At least historically, this became more likely as an engagement dragged on (represented by the smaller information gap of  $IG_{t_2}$  at time  $t_2$ ). The traditional media played a crucial role by producing this dynamism. Absent some third actor controlling the flow of information (or if such an actor were merely a passive conveyor belt), leaders would have no incentive to respond to changes in the public’s demand for information. Similarly, the public would receive few or no signals that they should increase their demand for information.

### WHAT HAS CHANGED?

The short answer is that the media changed in ways that make it harder for this process of information convergence to take place. This is, in a sense, a disappointing outcome. The fundamentally altered media landscape that we now face was, in the early days of its emergence and evolution, heralded as a democratic advance that held promise for a more informed and engaged public in general and with respect to matters of foreign policy in particular. This was, for example, the notion underpinning arguments about the “CNN effect”—the idea that public opinion, driven by dramatic video images of human suffering from 24-hour satellite news, would pressure governments to take military or humanitar-

ian action abroad that they would otherwise avoid (Jacobson 2007; Mermin 1997; Sobel 2001). While the tenor of that literature was often negative, as scholars viewed that public attentiveness as potentially driving policy in suboptimal directions, the process was undeniably democratic.

The relative merits or downsides of the CNN effect for the quality of foreign policy were, however, inconsequential, as the phenomenon itself mostly failed to materialize. With the exception of some anecdotal accounts of the US-led intervention in Somalia in 1992 (e.g., Maren 1994; Sharkey 1993), most studies found no consistent evidence that CNN and its ilk were contributing meaningfully to either public knowledge or engagement. The explanation likely stems, at least in part, to a basic miscalculation with regard to what media would do with the extra hours at their disposal. To appeal to audiences (and advertisers) and control costs in the face of mounting competition, they filled the time with opinion, “infotainment,” and repetition, rather than digging deeper in hard news. Independent news-gathering capacity actually withered, especially when it came to costly foreign correspondents and bureaus. This hollowing out of overseas reporting further empowered leaders as sources of foreign policy news.

Cable and satellite television are generally credited with pushing news providers to differentiate their offerings in order to appeal to consumers with distinct tastes and preferences (Baum and Kernell 1999; Prior 2005). But they turned out to be only the very beginning of a much deeper process of media fragmentation. The emergence of the Internet and later social media shifted the information system into an entirely new paradigm.

In the news ecosystem, the result has been the ongoing proliferation of so-called soft news—a blending of news and entertainment—and partisan news outlets (Baum and Groeling 2010b). Partisan news, in particular, has weakened the information commons that had prevailed in the roughly four decades since World War II, whereby typical individuals shared mostly overlapping information streams and, hence, a common understanding of the problems facing the nation and the world (if not necessarily agreeing on the solutions).

By allowing news consumers to self-select into ideologically friendly news environments, cable and later satellite TV eroded this information commons, while also making it more difficult for leaders to reach beyond their partisan bases to persuade citizens to support their policies. The Internet accelerated these trends by greatly lowering the costs of production and distribution. This allowed many more information niches to emerge, making it easier for consumers to select into information streams that more perfectly matched their personal preferences, largely walled off from dissonant messages that might appear in competing information streams. The Internet thereby initiated an evolution from an era of fragmentation to one of hyperfragmentation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the promise and reality of social media followed a similar arc to that of cable and satellite television. The initial hope was that social media could counter this hyperfragmentation. After all, most people—who are not, after all, political ideologues (Converse 1964)—build their social media news feeds around shared interests or prior relationships that have little to do with politics. This opened up the possibility of incidental exposure to alternative viewpoints. People who became Facebook friends out of, say, a shared sports interest would occasionally encounter contrary political perspectives among their virtual friends, whose political orientations might be orthogonal to their sports preferences. While such incidental exposure happens, it turns out to be more the exception than the rule. Instead, information distribution patterns on social media have evolved in ways that exacerbate rather than mitigate hyperfragmentation (Stroud 2011).

Moreover, the algorithms developed by social media platforms are designed to keep eyeballs locked in place by buffering against exposure to alternative viewpoints. The demand-driven (individual preference based) self-selection of the late twentieth century has increasingly been married to a supply-driven (platform algorithm based) narrowing of content exposure. As platforms learn what we most like to consume, they become increasingly adept at serving it up to the exclusion of contrary information that might induce us to look elsewhere. The end result is a public that is more fragmented and polarized than ever and so more difficult than ever for leaders to reach with their messages. The paradox is that too much in-

formation, when combined with fragmentation, can contribute to a less informed public.

These changes fuel political polarization. Social media's primary tendency has been to create informational silos rather than crosscutting linkages, but these services also increase polarization by feeding consumers ever more extreme versions of their own preferences (Tufekci 2018). These are, of course, profit-seeking enterprises, so it is unsurprising that consumers contribute to this dynamic in that they prefer more extreme content (as indicated by their behavior if not their reported preferences) and contribute more extreme content themselves (Bigley and Leonhardt 2018).

This polarization manifests in foreign policy, where it can have pernicious effects (Jeong and Quirk 2017). Schultz (2018) notes four ways in which it makes foreign policy harder: (1) it is more difficult to get bipartisan support for ambitious or risky undertakings, particularly the use of military force and the conclusion of treaties; (2) it is hard to agree across parties on the lessons of foreign policy failure, complicating efforts to learn and adapt; (3) the risk of dramatic policy swings from one administration to another of the opposite party complicates long-term commitments to allies and adversaries; and (4) the vulnerability of our political system to foreign intervention is heightened.

The consequence of these overlapping changes is the collapse of the information commons, hyperfragmentation, and the erosion of the media's role as neutral arbiter. There simply is no figure in the contemporary era analogous to famed CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, once regarded as the most trusted person in America. Today, Americans increasingly view any information inconsistent with their preexisting beliefs as suspect, while uncritically accepting as truthful any consonant information, particularly if the source shares their partisan preferences (Baum and Groeling 2010a). This makes it easier for actual misinformation to enter the system, as was evident in Russia's successful efforts to disrupt the US presidential election in 2016, as well as in the proliferation of so-called fake news, particularly online, during and after the election. It also makes it far more difficult for typical individuals to discern truth from fiction and, hence, for leaders to persuade any but their devoted supporters.

This represents a fundamental departure from the media's traditional gatekeeper role. In a highly competitive, hyperfragmented environment in which traditional journalists must compete for attention with overtly partisan media, amateur journalism, and social media, the traditional arbiters of information quality are no longer able to play their role. There are simply too many access points for alternative sources to reach the market (citizens). And even when they do succeed in gaining attention, they are no longer trusted to

convey truthful information. A consequence is that journalists are less able to hold politicians to account. Voters who oppose a given president will do so regardless of media messages, while the president's supporters are largely immune to influence by unflattering information about "their" president.

### REASSESSING THE "ELASTICITY OF REALITY"

Combined, these systemic changes have profoundly influenced what we termed a decade ago the *elasticity of reality*, that is, the extent to which elites are able to successfully frame foreign policy events independently from the actual content of those events (Baum and Potter 2008). Whereas elites traditionally enjoyed a great deal of latitude, especially in the early stages of foreign policy events, the changing environment summarized above appears to have altered the relationships between the three key actors in the model—citizens, elites, and the media—with important implications for the capacity of citizens to constrain their leaders in foreign policy.

The current constellation of disruptive forces acting on the elasticity of reality might usefully be collapsed into two broad categories: centripetal and centrifugal. Centripetal forces are those that tend toward collapsing the elasticity of reality. Among the most noteworthy centripetal forces are citizen journalism and social media, on the one hand, and polarization and media (hyper)fragmentation on the other. The first two facilitate more rapid capacity of citizens and journalists to gain information independent from the government. The second two inhibit leaders from reaching citizens with their preferred policy frames.

Social media sometimes can, we argue, narrow the elasticity of reality and potentially speed up its collapse by pushing more information into the information marketplace more rapidly than was possible in the traditional media environment. Whereas journalists once depended on briefings and interviews with policy makers, and citizens, in turn, depended on the curated representation of events offered by those journalists, today citizens learn about unfolding events in real time, often directly from the source. In the context of a military conflict, this might entail Twitter messages from people on the ground in an overseas war zone. At the same time, amateur journalists and bloggers compete with their professional counterparts to break major stories about a conflict and frequently to challenge official versions of events.

Both social media and citizen journalism represent primarily, albeit not exclusively, "bottom up" channels of influence, empowering citizens relative to journalists and elites. They can potentially narrow the elasticity of reality by challenging elites' preferred frames on events or pushing com-

peting frames into the market. Once a competing frame enters the market, it may be picked up and thereby magnified by traditional media. This process, when it occurs—and if the information emanating from bottom-up sources is reliable—shrinks the elasticity of reality, thereby constraining leaders' capacities to control the framing of events. These processes therefore appear to empower citizens relative to elites, while at the same time weakening the intermediary: journalists.

A polarized citizenry within a hyperfragmented media environment, in turn, limits the efficacy of leaders' rhetorical appeals. It is simply more difficult to sell frames to distrustful citizens who can easily opt out of receiving leaders' messages if those leaders are not fellow partisans. Instead, competing frames offered by partisans from both sides resonate within each sides' preferred media ecosystem while gaining little traction beyond its own niche. This, in turn, makes it harder for leaders to affect public opinion. Virtually any information is contested as false and unreliable by one or the other side of the political spectrum.<sup>2</sup> Those contestations delegitimize the entire media, even if one side may be more inclined to disbelieve a particular story. This delegitimization process seems likely to further undermine the media's role as intermediary between citizens and leaders. The proliferation of misinformation via social media exacerbates this undermining of the media's traditional role by reducing public confidence in the veracity of media reporting.

Turning to centrifugal forces, here we describe factors that increase the elasticity of reality. Many of the same factors described above—social media, media hyperfragmentation, partisan polarization, misinformation—paradoxically contribute to this latter tendency as well. They do so by introducing more noise into the market, making it more difficult for citizens to figure out what is actually happening, thereby advantaging leaders' framing of events. With partisans from both sides and their sympathetic media sources offering competing narratives that may tend to cancel each other out, and social media offering numerous perspectives of uncertain reliability, leadership, thanks to the bully pulpit, is best situated to rise above the din and be heard. After all, while the traditional media has lost the near limitless, broad-based access to the public it once commanded, it still far outstrips competing partisan niche media, in terms of its ability to reach many millions of people with a single report. This advantages leaders' preferred frames, relative to any plausible

2. Brody's (1984) rally-round-the-flag theory, which we implicitly accepted and on which some of our framework rests, holds that elite consensus leads to opinion rallies, whereas elite discord leads to their absence. Arguably, we are heading toward a world in which elite consensus becomes rare, and consequently opinion rallies become rare events.



competing frames, thereby expanding the elasticity of reality and reducing democratic constraint.

The net effect on the elasticity of reality of these competing centripetal and centrifugal forces remains somewhat ambiguous pending further research. Also uncertain is whether the net effect is disproportionately to weaken the public vis-à-vis leaders or to weaken the capacity of leaders to frame public debates. The answer seems likely to vary with circumstances. However, on balance, centrifugal forces that expand elasticity (and erode democratic constraint) seem to be more powerful. The public has a poor historical track record of taking up and using fragmented and independently generated news content. So, even if leaders are unable to reach large segments of the public to actively “spin” a foreign policy engagement, they remain likely to be able to operate freely without substantial or sustained public engagement. As we will see, other forces—notably the rise of extreme partisan polarization and right-wing populism—appear to have further tipped the balance toward expanding rather than eroding the elasticity of reality, thereby, in the net, reducing democratic constraint.

#### WHEN REALITY BECOMES TOO ELASTIC

Much of the recent work on opinion emphasizes the key role of copartisans and other conveyors of unexpected (i.e., costly) and therefore credible resistance to presidential messaging as having outsized power. This general trend is likely amplified in a world of partisan echo chambers. To an increasing extent, typical individuals inoculate themselves—or are unknowingly inoculated by platform algorithms—from dissonant messages. However, when a credible messenger emerges with a dissonant message that cannot be readily discounted, the effect of the echo chamber can be to heighten the resonance of the message. This may, for instance, explain why President Trump expends a great deal of rhetorical effort to undermine the credibility of fellow Republicans who criticize his policies. Fellow partisans like John McCain and Jeff Flake are more likely to persuade the President’s Republican supporters, and so are a greater threat to his political support base, than Democratic critics, who Republicans easily dismiss as unreliable.

For example, the rapid explosion of bipartisan public opposition to the president’s policy of family separations along the US Southern border, fueled in part by a chorus of critical comments from both Democratic and Republican elites, illustrates the political risks posed by opposition to the president’s policies from within his own party. The upshot is that leaders may be less constrained overall but are susceptible to sudden and complete breakdowns in support. The result is a model of opinion change that potentially looks more like a phase transition than a gradual erosion of support.

The media changes we have outlined erode democratic constraint on foreign policy—in other words, they make democracies less democratic when it comes to foreign affairs. This is potentially important given the extent of international relations scholarship predicated on the finding that democracies have historically stood apart from nondemocracies with regard to the most important facets of international affairs. That is, they rarely, if ever, fight one another (Doyle 1986; Maoz and Russett 1993; Russett and Oneal 2001), are more credible when they make threats (Fearon 1994; Potter and Baum 2010; Schultz 2001), and win more when they do fight (Reiter and Stam 2002). An erosion of democratic constraint calls all this into question.

If constrained by an informed and publicly active public, democratic leaders contemplating a military activity abroad have good reason to weigh the potential domestic political costs and benefits of doing so. Leaders who fail abroad pay a substantial electoral price at home when the public is paying attention (Buono de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Downs and Rocke 1994; Smith 1996). Since the domestic political risks associated with foreign policy failure tend to exceed the potential benefit given success (Baum 2004), democratic leaders typically have more to lose than to gain by engaging in risky foreign conflicts if they think that the public is in a position to observe and understand their failures. If, however, they have reason to believe that they are not (and will not), this entire mechanism underpinning the democratic peace comes apart. Democratically elected leaders then have no less reason to initiate conflict than their autocratic counterparts.

An erosion of the public’s capacity to impose democratic constraint has a similar impact on the audience cost arguments and, more broadly, on our understandings of democratic credibility and conflict reciprocation. International relations scholars generally agree that leaders usually feel some pressure to actually carry out the threats and promises that they make in the international system. This might be because they care about their reputation with other leaders, but the usual argument is that democracies are more likely than autocracies to follow through on threats because they have domestic audiences who will hold them to account if they fail to do so (Fearon 1994; Schultz 2001). Polarization undermines that linkage, thereby potentially undermining the democratic advantage in foreign crisis negotiations and, ultimately, making war more likely. The tribal element of polarized politics means that followers are unlikely to hold their leader to account. Opposition, in turn, is unlikely to give the president any credit regardless of the policy. Thus, while traditional versions of audience cost theory assumed that in democracies domestic audiences would judge a vac-

illating leader harshly, such accountability is less likely to emerge in a polarized environment.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, polarization thus causes democratic leaders to more closely resemble their autocratic counterparts.

As we have noted, even in the information environment that preceded cable, satellite, and the Internet, the public had a low baseline of attentiveness. But voters were able to use heuristics to help them determine both when to engage with foreign policy issues and what to think about them when they did (Popkin 1991; Sniderman et al. 1991). This was accomplished primarily through reliance on partisan elites (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). However, opposition and disaffected copartisans have no meaningful access to the public in a polarized and fragmented media ecosystem. Elite whistle-blowing will only inhibit leaders when there is a credible threat that the public will hear the whistle being blown, but the audience cost mechanism relies on precisely this hand-tying process. If it breaks down there is no reason for democratically elected leaders to fear punishment for backing down on their threats and commitments and therefore no boost to their credibility when they make commitments.

The polarized and fragmental information environment also has corrosive effects on the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon, at least with regard to how it has been widely understood to date. Since approval rallies for presidents following uses of force abroad were traditionally located primarily among opposition partisans, partisan tribalism seems likely to result in smaller and less frequent rallies. For instance, when President Obama drew a “red line” with Syria over President Assad’s use of chemical weapons against civilians, he faced widespread criticism from Republicans in Congress and low marks from the public over his handling of the crisis. At the same time, public support for intervening in Syria remained low, arguably complicating Obama’s efforts to credibly communicate America’s resolve to Assad.

That said, while we may observe smaller and less frequent spikes in presidential approval ratings as a consequence of heightened polarization, a different sort of rally effect may become more common. That is, the intensity of support for and opposition to the president might spike among his supporters or opponents in the immediate aftermath of a crisis event. A case in point is President Trump’s recent sounding of the alarm over a Central American migrant caravan during the run-up to the 2018 midterm election. Notwithstanding the assertions of many pundits, there is little evidence that President Trump succeeded in increasing overall support for

Republicans by characterizing the migrant caravan as an invasion. Trump first tweeted about the caravan on October 18, 2018. According to data on *fivethirtyeight.com*, Democrats led Republicans by 8.4 percentage points in the generic ballot during October 1–18. The Democratic lead from October 19 through election day was 8.3 points, or basically unchanged. Indeed, one postelection analysis (Winston Group 2018) concluded that late-deciding voters broke toward the Democrats by 12 points and cited the emphasis on the migrant caravan, which crowded out good news on the economy, as a key causal factor. However, among Republicans, concern over illegal immigration measurably increased with Trump’s caravan-related tweets. It is entirely possible, albeit uncertain, that Republican turnout in some states consequently rose, thereby improving the performance of Republican candidates in close elections, such as the Senate race in Florida and the gubernatorial race in Georgia. Since Democrats were already at historic levels of intensity leading up to the election, such a spike could have produced a net benefit for Republican candidates. The implication is that prior concerns about “diversionary” conflict were overblown because the types of conflicts that a leader might initiate for such a purpose were precisely those most likely to collapse the elasticity of reality (making the risk greater than the potential reward). However, in a highly polarized environment where the electoral battle is more about mobilizing supporters than convincing the undecided there may be much more incentive for leaders to engage in this potentially destructive behavior.

Taken together, these changes to our existing models of democratic foreign policy lead to the inevitable conclusion that if publics are not in a position to render democratically elected leaders more selective in the conflicts that they engage with, then “democracies at war” are not going to behave in ways meaningfully different from nondemocracies, or at least not as differently as it was when this selectivity was more carefully enforced by a comparatively more attentive public (Reiter and Stam 2002). This raises an important point. The changes that we are discussing are a matter of degree rather than absolutes. The current information environment with its fragmentation and polarization makes the job of democratic constraint on elected leaders, which was always hard and sporadic, even harder. It does not, however, make it impossible. The “elasticity of reality” can also be conceived of as a description of exactly how hard this process of imposed constraint is at any given time in the course of a foreign policy engagement. One can conceive of the media changes we have outlined as making the process of convergence that figure 1 outlines more drawn out—the signals to voters need to be louder, and the malfeasance or malpractice by leaders must be more egregious.

3. This insight relates closely to the linkages among the extent of opposition, media access, and credibility (Potter and Baum 2013).

This has important implications for the now rarer moments when the public does engage and impose constraint on leaders. Under the prior informational paradigm, the consequences when the broader public did take notice were often substantial—rapid decline in support of a conflict or initiative or the loss of office. The seriousness of these consequences kept leaders somewhat chastened and responsive to latent public opinion and was a direct consequence of the extent of the “elasticity” that leaders enjoyed. If the elastic snapped, leaders found themselves exposed while executing a policy that was a good deal away from median public opinion. The alterations to the basic model that accompany the current changes to the information environment mean that the elastic can stretch further but that leaders and US foreign policy will be even further out of step with the public and even less accustomed to engaging the public on these issues on the rarer but still inevitable occasions when they exceed acceptable bounds.

### TRUMP AND THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

To this point we have ignored the proverbial 800 pound gorilla in this conversation—Donald Trump. We have saved this discussion for last because our view is that while Trump exaggerates and exacerbates many of the trends that we have described, he is more a consequence than a cause of them. Trump’s political success derives from his capacity to navigate a media and public opinion landscape that has dramatically shifted over the course of the past decade. Trump has leveraged recent trends in media hyperfragmentation and emergent social media distribution channels to break down long-standing patterns. We identify three particularly consequential changes. First, it is increasingly “easy” for individuals to become aware and opinionated without becoming informed. Second, the traditional media have less incentive to function as lapdogs for elites. And third, the traditional media’s role as gatekeeper has collapsed, and as a result, it is more difficult for citizens to discern reality from fiction, while foreign actors can directly access the public.

Regarding the first change, Twitter allows the president to directly engage followers on foreign policy issues without the prerequisite that they become informed. In other words, it is no longer necessary to listen to reports or read news stories to find out what policies the president supports. Instead, the president can communicate his views to his millions of followers in 240-character bursts. A consequence is increasingly strident public views on policies, often based in part on misinformation, at the same time that public (truthful) knowledge about those policies has declined.

As to the second change, the traditional media, for its part, is less deferential to official sources because they have

other points of access to information. Elites compete with one another for public attention via social media; citizen journalists upload videos direct from the scenes of foreign policy events before the executive is able to gather its own intelligence, let alone formulate its preferred framing of events for journalists. Foreign actors can gain access to this system where it was once closed to them, sometimes by masquerading as domestic sources, sometimes even without such pretenses.

Finally, arguably as a culmination of four decades of deliberate attack by hostile elites, the collapse in public trust in the traditional media as a neutral arbiter frees leaders, to at least some extent, from the constraint of watchdog journalism. Even as news outlets invest more heavily in investigative reporting designed to hold the government to account, their reporting is less likely to reach, let alone influence, Americans who derive their news diet from alternative partisan information ecosystems. The collapse of the media’s gatekeeper function also leaves the gates unguarded against potential invaders, like foreign adversaries seeking to undermine democratic institutions, as, again, occurred during the 2016 US presidential election.

Thus, the rise of the right-wing populism that gave rise to Trump, but is also apparent throughout the Western democracies, is arguably both a cause and an effect of the changing information market. Populist antimedia rhetoric feeds distrust both in mainstream politicians and in the media’s reliability as an intermediary between citizens and politicians. The Internet and social media break the traditional media’s dependence on elites for credible information. Alternative information ecosystems rise up to fill the void left by a citizenry that is less inclined to believe what the traditional media report. Populist political entrepreneurs, who, thanks to social media, no longer need the traditional media to distribute their messages, deliberately undermine the media’s messenger role in order to inoculate themselves against potential critical reporting. Such actors largely confine their communications to their core supporters, who they reach directly through closed social media ecosystems.

The net effect is a fragmented information market driven, in significant measure, by the aforementioned hyperfragmentation of the media landscape, in interaction with polarized and distrustful citizens, as well as politicians whose optimal strategies for maintaining power have shifted from the increasingly intractable goal of appealing to the median voter to the more achievable one of appealing to the median party member. In an environment where it is increasingly difficult for typical individuals to differentiate fake news from reality, it is unclear how the elasticity of reality will shrink. Stated differently, and notwithstanding the opposing, citizen-empowering forces of instantaneous global distribution of information, as



well as citizen journalism and the like, the net effect of these intersecting forces seems likely to be less, more often than more, constraint on foreign policy.

## CONCLUSION

The digital revolution has brought vastly more information to the fingertips of typical individuals than ever before in human history. An unanticipated consequence has been the emergence of a range of potential challenges to the capacities of individuals to learn what they need to know to function as effective democratic citizens. Indeed, some evidence suggests that despite virtually limitless access to the entire universe of human knowledge, typical Americans today know less about public affairs than at any time since World War II.

This is not, however, an entirely new concern. The dangers of an ill-informed citizenry have bothered America's leaders since the founding of the Republic. In a 1789 letter to Richard Price, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "wherever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government." John Adams in turn wrote, "Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people." Indeed, the principle that an informed citizenry is essential for a well-functioning democracy is enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution, justifying its guarantee of a free press.

There may, however, be a particularly pernicious effect when one combines this lack of quality information with the high levels of engagement facilitated by digital connectivity. Many twentieth-century democratic theorists, scholars, and practitioners, from Walter Lippman to Gabriel Almond, shared James Madison's belief, articulated in *Federalist* 62, that policy making must be insulated from the public's tendency to "yield to the impulse of sudden and violent passions, and to be seduced by factious leaders into intemperate and pernicious resolutions" ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed62.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed62.asp)). According to this view, our representative democracy was designed to make possible informed governance in the interests of the people yet insulated from ill-informed popular passions.

Some of the old lessons and insights on this puzzle may help us confront the new challenges we face. The tension between the desire to insulate government from popular passions, while, at the same time, setting in place the institutions necessary to produce responsible democratic citizens who are sufficiently knowledgeable to succeed in self-government, has created an underlying tension in America's democratic experiment. Recent trends toward reduced public knowledge and rising extreme populist passions have arguably brought to fruition the founders' concerns. This seemingly perfect storm of heightened popular passions and reduced public knowledge

raises the question of how much democratic constraint a polarized and ill-informed public ought to exercise, while at the same time, the rise of leaders who flirt with populist extremism raises the question whether democracy can survive absent such constraint. The implication is that democratic foreign policy faces a crisis in which the long-standing, twentieth-century equilibrium has broken down, yet the characteristics of a new equilibrium that may emerge remain unclear. What is clear is that democratic constraint, and with it democratic foreign policy, is currently out of equilibrium and treading a fraught path.

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