

White House rhetoric is important in forming foreign policy opinions

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Cooper Drury is an associate professor of political science in the College of Arts and Science and editor-in-chief of *Foreign Policy Analysis*. Credit: Photo by Pinar Istek

Surveys have shown that the public pays little attention to foreign policy, but politicians regularly cite the importance of public support for military actions overseas. Now, a new study has found that these responses may be heavily influenced by White House rhetoric. University of Missouri researchers have found that foreign policy explanations from presidential administrations that are plainly stated and easier to understand are likely to receive public support, while policy explanations that are complicated and convoluted are likely to face

greater public skepticism.

"Many analyses have shown that the public pays little attention to foreign policy," said Cooper Drury, associate professor of [political science](#) in the College of Arts and Science and editor-in-chief of Foreign Policy Analysis. "While well-informed citizens are likely to evaluate the policy for what it is, a majority of Americans will buy what the White House sells them. If the president is able to define an intervention in simple, compelling terms, he is likely to get considerably more support from the public."

In the study, researchers distributed four different mock news stories that were formatted to look like a New York Times article printed from the internet and surveyed participants' opinions of the policy. The articles described a conflict between two fictitious countries in Latin America. In simple terms, the first article described a policy that aimed to stop aggression, and the second article described the same policy in complex terms. The third article described a policy of "nation building" in simple terms, and the fourth article described that policy in complex terms.

The results of the study demonstrated that Americans who pay attention to the news are better able to prudently evaluate a [foreign policy](#), while those Americans who tend to ignore political news are heavily swayed by what the [White House](#) tells them. Reading or watching the news allows citizens to evaluate what the president says rather than just accept the bill of goods, Drury said.

"Presidents have a great deal of power to shape public opinion of policy goals that require military action if they have the ability to manipulate the type of language that is used," Drury said. "The public needs to pay attention to the political world around them so that they can cut through the White House's rhetoric and truly evaluate policy."

More information: The study, "'Pretty Prudent' or Rhetorically Responsive? The American Public's Support for Military Action," was published in the *Political Research Quarterly*.

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