

US image abroad: It's the message not the messenger

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Today's political climate in the U.S. is often peppered with animosity

from the U.S. president towards other countries but how has the U.S. image fared? A Dartmouth study finds that the U.S. image abroad appears to be influenced more by policy content than by the person delivering the message, even if it is the U.S. president. The results are published in *Political Behavior*.

Conducted in Japan, the study gauges how U.S. [policy](#) messages impact foreign public opinion and is among the first to analyze the effects of a message's various elements.

"Our study reveals that Japanese public opinion of the U.S. depends largely on whether a policy message is cooperative or uncooperative in nature, rather than on who makes that statement," says co-author [Yusaku Horiuchi](#), professor of government and the Mitsui Professor of Japanese Studies at Dartmouth. "Only when the message is uncooperative and attributed to U.S. President Donald Trump does it have a significant effect on changing attitudes, illustrating how Trump's influence on foreign public opinion appears to be conditional on policy [content](#)," adds Horiuchi.

To evaluate foreign public opinion of the U.S., the researchers administered a randomized survey experiment in April—May 2017 to more than 3,000 Japanese citizens of voting age. The messages presented varied by source cue, policy content and issue salience. Policy statements were attributed to either "U.S. President Donald Trump" or "an anonymous U.S. Congressman." The policy content presented was either cooperative or uncooperative in tone and drew on issues facing U.S. - Japan relations, which varied by importance: security (highly salient) and educational/cultural exchange programs (low salience).

For example, respondents were presented with varying statements regarding U.S. defense spending for the protection of Japan: one message attributed to an anonymous U.S. Congressman underscored

defense cooperation while the other attributed to President Trump reflected the position that the U.S. should not get involved in Japan's defense policy.

The policy messages used in the study were mostly based on statements made either by Trump during his presidential campaign or by his administration during budget proposals. Following each policy message, respondents were asked to indicate if they had a favorable or unfavorable view of the U.S., Americans, U.S. [foreign policy](#) or Donald Trump.

The researchers analyzed the [survey data](#) to examine how the source cue, policy content and issue salience impact foreign public [opinion](#) as a whole in addition to analyzing the interactions between these factors. Regardless of the types of respondents (e.g., with high vs. low education, with high vs. low interest in politics), the effect of the policy content outweighs the source cue effect.

"If our case of Japan is any indication, Trump's damaging effect on the U.S. international image might not be as irreparable as many in and outside the U.S. believe it to be," explained the co-authors.

More information: Alexander Agadjanian et al. Has Trump Damaged the U.S. Image Abroad? Decomposing the Effects of Policy Messages on Foreign Public Opinion, *Political Behavior* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s11109-018-9511-3](#)

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