

# Visiting national leaders shown to sways public opinion in host countries

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When a head of state or government official travels to another country to meet with his/her counterpart, the high-level visit often entails a range of public diplomacy activities, which aim to increase public support in the

host country. These activities often include events such as hosting a joint press conference, attending a reception or dinner, visiting a historic site, or attending a social or sports event. A new study finds that public diplomacy accompanying a high-level visit by a national leader increases public approval in the host country. The findings are published in the *American Political Science Review*.

"Bilateral meetings provide [world leaders](#) with a forum to talk about the real issues; yet, a visiting national leader will also often spend a significant amount of time on image building, as the visiting country strives to improve its image around the world," says co-author Yusaku Horiuchi, a professor of government and the Mitsui Professor of Japanese Studies at Dartmouth.

"The simple fact that time and money is allocated for image-building activities as part of these high-level visits suggests that many countries actually think that these [public diplomacy](#) campaigns matter. Yet, until now, there has been little, if any, well-identified causal evidence," says Horiuchi. "Our study is the first to show the effectiveness of public diplomacy and how it can shape foreign public opinion."

For the study, political scientists from Dartmouth, the Australian National University and Florida State University examined data on high-level visits by 15 leaders from 9 countries over 11 years (from 2008 to 2018). Eighty-six visits by nine major countries—Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, the U.K., and the U.S.—were analyzed. The team obtained data on the high-level visits and combined it with Gallup World Poll data to examine how public opinion of a visiting leader changes from five days before the visit to five days after the visit.

Through a [statistical analysis](#), the results show that public approval of a visiting leader's job performance increases on average by 2.3 percentage points when the leader visits a foreign country. As the researchers

explain, the effect on public opinion does not fade immediately, as it lasts up to two and a half weeks and is especially strong when public diplomacy events are covered by the news media. This effect is also especially large when a new leader visits another country during their first year in office, a phenomenon that the researchers call the "soft-power honeymoon" effect. When a new leader visits another country, the effect on the public's approval rating of the leader is double that of a leader who has been in office for five years or more.

The researchers found that the effect on public opinion is much stronger for the visiting leader rather than for the host leader, illustrating that there was no "coattail" effect: host leaders do not leverage popular visitors to boost their own approval ratings.

"Our results suggest that 'soft power,' a term coined by Joseph Nye referring to a country's ability to influence international outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than by coercion or payment, can impact foreign public opinion," says Horiuchi.

As part of the analysis, the researchers examined the power ratios between the visiting and host countries based on data from the Correlates of War Project. The data shows that public diplomacy's effect on public approval in a host country is not conditional on the balance of military power, also known as "hard power," between the two countries. The findings provide evidence that soft power is independent of hard power and as the researchers conclude, public diplomacy should not be dismissed as merely a performance.

**More information:** Benjamin E. Goldsmith et al, Does Public Diplomacy Sway Foreign Public Opinion? Identifying the Effect of High-Level Visits, *American Political Science Review* (2021). [DOI: 10.1017/S0003055421000393](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000393)

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