Does the Public Get What it Wants? The UK Government's Response to Terrorism

Recent trends in (critical) security studies have sought to foreground the voices and experiences of "ordinary" people (Jarvis 2019; Vaughan Williams and Stevens 2017; Jarvis and Lister 2013; Gillespie and O'Loughlin 2009; Gillespie 2007). These studies, often but not always framed around "vernacular security", have identified the diverse ways in which security is understood, expressed and discussed in the experiences and practices of citizens and publics. This represents a shift away from security studies' traditional focus on elites, with securitization and its focus on elite speech acts perhaps the paradigmatic example of such an approach. But where do these discourses of "ordinary" people fit within broader dynamics of security politics? Are they marginal to the core *outcomes* of security politics, which continue to be elite-led? Or do they play a more substantial role? Put slightly differently, do public views about security shape security politics? And/or, to what extent are public views shaped by elite actors and processes? In sum: is public opinion an important aspect of security politics? And if it is, what kind of role does it play?

This short article explores these questions by looking at counterterrorism policy and politics in the UK and is based on my book *Public Opinion and Counterterrorism: Security and Politics in the UK* (Routledge, 2023). The first thing to note is that with a few exceptions, the question of the position and role of public views in security politics has received relatively little attention. As noted above, this relates to the traditional focus of security studies, in both mainstream and more critical variants, on the actions and discourses of elite actors. In Buzan et al.'s (1998, 29) famous dictum, securitization represents efforts to 'present an issue as urgent and existential, so important that it should not be exposed to the normal haggling of politics but should be dealt with decisively by top leaders prior to other issues'. This reference to 'normal haggling of politics' has produced a schism between "normal" politics, which is an arena of contestation and debate, and security politics which is closed and elite-driven. Under this view, security politics has little space for public debates or public views (although the role of the audience in securitization theory does offer one route. See Balzacq et al. 2016; Côté 2016; McDonald 2008; Salter 2008).

More recently, though, attempts have been made to dismantle, or transcend, this normal/exceptional divide. Andrew Neal (2019) has written about 'security *as* politics', arguing that whilst securitization theory might have been a useful way of thinking about security politics twenty years ago, that dynamics have changed and that security is now a much more crowded arena, with a multiplicity of actors beyond narrowly defined elites. The ways in which those associated with the Paris School (Bigo 2008) have pointed to the significance of security professionals and 'little security nothings' (Huysmans 2011) also connects to this broadening out of security politics. Yet, at least in terms of an area of security politics like counterterrorism, there remains little research which explores the position and significance of public views or public opinion.

Before expanding on how the public opinion literature analyses the relationship between public views and policy outcomes, it's worth pausing briefly to note the complexity of the term "public opinion". As Price (1992) notes, the source of this complexity and confusion is the tension between the fact that opinions are held by individuals, yet a public is a collective entity. Thus, much of the ambiguity around the term centres on this tension between whether we view public opinion as the property of a mass of individuals or something more organic, social and collective. The political science literature generally, generally, has worked with an equivalence between opinion polls and public opinion. Since the invention of mass opinion polling in the 1930s, political science has explored not only what the

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public think, but the ways in which this links to policy outcomes. This is, in many ways a fundamental question for democratic politics. As Key (1961, 7) puts it 'Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense'.

Studies which examine whether public opinion shapes policy find mixed results, perhaps encapsulated by Burstein's (2003, 29) comment that 'No one believes that public opinion always determines public policy; few believe it never does'. There are broadly three positions in this debate. The first, that public policy is responsive, argues that elections provide strong incentives for rationally self-interested politicians to cleave closely to public opinion. Interestingly, this literature often finds that it is in high profile policy areas – and specifically things like defence policy – that this link appears strongest (Soroka and Wlezien's 2010, 2005; Page and Shapiro 1992, 1983; Bartels 1991). This is the case, it is argued, because public opinion is clearest and loudest on such high-profile issues. This sits somewhat in tension with the contentions of the securitization literature, which tends to frame the "high" politics of security as something divorced from public inputs. The second position is that politicians seek to implement the policy preferences and interests of their own and their supporters, and either work to shift public opinion to support these, or, if this doesn't work, hide and obfuscate such policies (compare Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Hay 1999; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Hall 2021 [1979]). A third body of thought argues politicians are not responsive, not due to their own interests, but rather because "public opinion" is inchoate and ephemeral (Domhoff 1998; Bourdieu 1979; Converse 1964). Such views, it is held, are either too incoherent to drive policy or weakly held and thus susceptible to manipulation by politicians.

The argument of this article, and of the wider book on which it is based, seeks to combine these three positions. It argues that public opinion is an important part of the counterterrorism policy space – the politics of counterterrorism – but also that elites play important roles in shaping, constructing even, that very public opinion. The complexity of "public opinion" is an important factor here (Herbst 1993). A wide range of literature argues that any simple equivalence between opinion polls and public opinion is problematic (see Perrin and McFarland 2011 for an overview). Polls may construct public opinion as much as they capture it, with question ordering, and question wording strongly influencing the kinds of responses that people give. Further issues such as "non attitudes" (Sturgis and Smith 2010; Converse 1964), where respondents give opinions on non-existent policies or fictional events complicate even further any straightforward link between polls and "public opinion". Some scholars, therefore, see polls less as the accessing of pre-existing opinions as much as the creation or construction of such opinion through the act of polling (Osbourne and Rose 1999). Specifically in terms of security politics, a recent report argues that opinion polls on security issues limit the scope of public views about security debates, offering narrow ranges of responses which reflect the priorities of elites. Thus public views and voices about security issues are constrained and shaped by such polling techniques themselves (Fearnley 2023). Such arguments – that public opinion is a social construction – raise profound questions about democratic politics. If people cannot be assumed to have stable and coherent preferences and/or we can't easily know these, then how can mass democratic engagement and representation occur?

This article, taking seriously the notion of public opinion as a social construction, outlines a different framing, which argues that such a conception invites us to consider different research questions than "does opinion shape policy?". If public opinion is constructed and opinion polls are less accurate representations, than they are constructions of it, this article argues that we should think less about "does public opinion shape policy?" and think a little more about how does "public opinion" come into being? What happens when "public opinion" is invoked? Whose voices count as "public opinion"? Why are some voices included and others excluded? How do political actors understand "public opinion"? Such questions have been taken forward by scholars such as Susan Herbst (1998), who studied how state-level politicians in the US came to understand what public opinion was and which sources of information about public opinion they drew upon. Her findings – that political elites tended to rely on personal contacts and engagements to discern public opinion, rather than relying on more formal means such as polling – have recently been echoed by Walgrave and Soontjens (2023). Although studies also suggest that political elites systematically misrepresent public views (at least as represented in polls), indicating that political elites are not particularly good at knowing what the public wants (Pereira 2021).

In my book *Public Opinion and Counterterrorism: Security and Politics in the UK* , the ways in which public opinion is

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invoked, understood and constructed is examined in a range of different contexts, including in the UK Parliament and amongst security professionals. Here, I report on interview data with political elites, including former senior ministers and civil servants, responsible for counterterrorism policy in the UK between 2001 and 2011. Analysis of these interviews finds that political elites articulate a somewhat paradoxical view about the relationship between public opinion and counterterrorism. For nearly all the respondents, public opinion is seen to be a vital part of counterterrorism policymaking. Against some versions of securitization theory which might see security politics as closed and elite driven, a number of the respondents articulated a sense in which it was *more* important to be responsive to public opinion on something like counterterrorism. This was because, one respondent argued, that issues of (counter)terrorism concerned everyone, not a particular subset of the population:

Just by the nature of it being universal and instinctive, as opposed to a particular issue affecting a particular cohort of the population […] I think the weight of public opinion subliminally, is greater with counterterrorism […] In our inner responses, we are more affected by something that has a direct physical wellbeing or wider impact on the nation as a whole, than we do when we are arguing about a particular cohort [where] it's about policy as opposed to survival.

Another respondent pushed this argument forward in a slightly different way, suggesting that public opinion mattered for counterterrorism policy in a more narrowly *political* way, namely that counterterrorism was a high-profile issue and that political reputations were at stake. This former minister stated:

If they [the government] were very considerably out of tune with public opinion that would have been incredibly damaging for the political party. Assume that we completely and irredeemable f**ked up the reform of [another policy] […] it wouldn't have made any impact on our political standing because it was neither a salient issue in the sense that it was at the top of people's concerns, nor was it an issue that people thought would define the competence of the government […] Public opinion, the need to reassure, the sense that you have to be legitimately seen to be doing things, the need all the time to be constantly exploring ways of making people safer is, in this particular area [counterterrorism], a huge driver.

Yet despite its seeming centrality, many political elites also expressed a view that (for a range of reasons) it is difficult to know what public opinion is. One stated 'When it comes to the whole question of public opinion, there isn't of course, in this area, a single public opinion'; another averred 'I think it's very difficult to say what public opinion is… there's a climate of opinion more than public opinion'. This appears to raise a problem – of public opinion being both vitally important to counterterrorism policy, yet difficult to discern. This slight paradox informs the ways in which these political elites construct public opinion. Spurred by a sense of its importance, yet hampered by not knowing it, political elites fill this void with their own constructions of public opinion. Often these are what the book terms "indirect" constructions, where political elites deploy their political experience and sensitivies (and in many cases, their connection to a particular constituency as an MP) to discern what it is that the public wants. Often, but not always, these constructions seem closer to "hunches", rather than systematic assessments of public opinion.

Interestingly, whilst these assessments of what the public wants on counterterrorism were not fictions, and broadly comported with the data in opinion polls (namely that majorities of people were in favour of "more security"), they also perhaps simplified what polls suggested. Depending on the specific timing and wording of opinion polls around the time these elites were in office, reasonably significant minorities – or even majorities – of the public expressed concerns or reservations about many of the proposed counterterrorism measures. Such concerns, where they were considered by elites, were dismissed as coming from liberal lawyers and pressure groups – the "usual suspects" – rather than from the "British public". However, for instance, in a YouGov (2008) poll, 54% of respondents thought the government were trying to introduce expansive counterterrorism powers to look "tough on terror". Even immediately following the 7/7 attacks, an ICM (2005) poll found that 17% of people thought it wrong to lose civil liberties to improve security, or about 1 in 6 people. These represent rather large numbers of the British public – around 10 million people. Here, some of the elisions or mischaracterisations of public views (at least as represented in polling data) may come down to slippages in the term "public opinion" which can be taken to mean the *majority* position on any given issue or the *totality* of public views; or, on occasions, moving between both. These findings suggest further support for Pereira's (2021) conclusions that political elites consistently mis-estimate public opinion.

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On some occasions, though, the political elites interviewed described much more "direct" constructions of public opinion, where they participated in outreach and engagement activities with the public, to better understand and appreciate their views on counterterrorism policy. Political elites from both Conservative and Labour parties characterised significant outreach efforts that they made to engage with public views. These mainly centred around better understanding the views of Muslim communities in the UK, seen as a particular lacunae after the 7/7 attacks in London in 2005. Yet such outreach activities do not represent "neutral" engagements. Rather the decisions about who to speak with, and what to speak to them about, were informed by the political elites own political values and dispositions. Thus, one former minister stated described how they refused to engage with certain Muslim groups unless women and young people were represented. They then went on to outline how such engagements – which included women and young people – led to certain views being expressed:

When I met a lot of the [Muslim] women, they said, very often, our young people are being radicalized on the internet. And they had no internet skills at all […] And so they were very fearful that they weren't, if you like, doing their duty as mums or sisters, in protecting, particularly their young men from this exposure, or at least being able to have a discussion about "is it a good idea that you keep watching these violent videos?" And so one of the things in the Prevent program was to set up programs for women to be able to look at internet use to have the tools themselves for simply monitoring and controlling and moderating and their families use, for them to look out for the first signs of radicalization, and then to have routes through and people to go and see the Prevent coordinators in every borough […] So that that was a direct read across from talking to the public. I probably did more, you know, listening to people in that year, on a particular policy issue than probably anything else I've done.

The point here is that the former minister's choices about who was to speak/be present at these dialogues generated the above-mentioned discourse of Muslim women concerned about their sons and husbands and wanting, needing, help with information technology. Here the Prevent programme is positioned as being responsive to the wishes and needs of (elements of) Muslim public opinion. Yet the opinion to which the minister's policies are responding is generated by and through decisions made by the minister. One doesn't need to push the argument as far as suggesting that political elites are cynically constructing a public opinion which is sympathetic to and compatible with their wider political goals and values (although it's not precluded). By actively deciding who to talk with – and who not to talk with – political elites are shaping the very public opinion which they argue is crucially important to counterterrorism policy.

Thus, the argument is that the relationship between public opinion and counterterrorism policy is complex and mutually constitutive. Elites argue that public opinion matters in counterterrorism policy, primarily because it is such a high-profile issue that concerns so many people. And this is born out by the efforts they expend to engage with it. If public opinion is of no concern or importance for counterterrorism, political elites are unlikely to devote that rare commodity – time – to it. At the same time, the interviewees also make clear that political elites do not simply follow public opinion (indeed, some of the participants expressly argue against a simple kind of responsiveness – 'populist campaigns are a very bad way to proceed that's why we have the Parliamentary system' said one former minister). In projecting their sense of what the public thinks and wants on counterterrorism – whilst simultaneously expressing doubts about the fine grain of what public opinion is on this issue – they are constructing a representation, or in Saward's (2006) terms a 'representative claim', of the very public opinion which they claim is important to consider.

The implications of this argument – that public opinion is an important feature of security politics like counterterrorism – are significant. They further support the "security as politics" literature (Neal 2019) which suggests that, against some versions of securitization theory, contemporary security politics is not solely the preserve of political elites. Yet, this relationship is not one of simple responsiveness, where political elites discern public opinion and blindly follow it. Instead, I argue, public opinion and counterterrorism policy are in a complex, mutually instantiating, relationship where one informs the other. Political elites feel that public opinion on high profile issues like counterterrorism must be an important, central, even, consideration. But at the same time, as important, powerful, political actors they have the capacity to shape that very opinion to which they respond.

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