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Assessing Evidence of Public-Opinion Responsiveness During the Gaza War The United States, Germany, and South Africa

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Article

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Abstract

When does public opinion constitute evidence of democratic responsiveness in foreign policy? This article develops a comparative procedure and applies it to the United States, Germany, and South Africa during the Gaza war (7 October 2023–31 December 2024). Drawing on research on democratic responsiveness, foreign-policy decision making, and process tracing, it distinguishes five elements: policy-specific opinion, public salience, political transmission, a matched policy outcome, and process evidence linking transmission to a decision while considering rival explanations. The procedure is a bounded methodological contribution, not a new causal theory or an estimate of opinion's effect. Published surveys and selected official records provide uneven evidence. In the United States, opinion shifts and a munitions pause co-occurred without a demonstrated decision link. German preferences and official positions are not consistently matched by policy domain. South Africa's survey does not measure support for the earlier ICJ filing. The cases show why responsiveness cannot be inferred from congruence or timing alone.

1. Introduction

Foreign-policy decisions are made under strategic, institutional, and international constraints, so a correspondence between public preferences and government policy does not by itself show democratic responsiveness. Opinion may shape electoral incentives or elite calculations; alternatively, policy may move for legal, strategic, alliance, or operational reasons. The political-science problem addressed here is how to distinguish these explanations when researchers observe public surveys and policy records but cannot see private deliberations (Iyrot, 2026).

The Gaza war offers a consequential setting for examining that inferential problem. Since 7 October 2023, governments have faced domestic and international debate over military assistance, humanitarian protection, ceasefire diplomacy, international law, and relations with Israel. The three cases examined here differ in institutions and policy actions, and their survey evidence is uneven (Aqtam,2026). They are therefore useful for studying how the strength of a responsiveness claim depends on the evidence available, but they do not provide equivalent measures for ranking countries. The consequences of the war extended beyond immediate military and diplomatic developments. Research on Gaza's higher-education sector documents extensive damage to educational infrastructure, disruption of academic continuity, and psychological and economic burdens on students and faculty members (Noairat et al., 2026).

The article asks: What evidence is required to distinguish policy–opinion congruence from foreign-policy responsiveness during an international crisis? It compares the United States, Germany, and South Africa from 7 October 2023 to 31 December 2024. The unit of analysis is a candidate opinion–policy episode: a policy-specific public-opinion measure considered alongside a related political process and a government action or position. The cases are contexts for applying the same inference procedure, not observations in a statistical test.

The theoretical starting point is democratic responsiveness: public preferences can affect policy when political actors register them and can translate them into available choices. Foreign-policy research shows that this process is mediated by elite decision-making, institutions, strategic commitments, and information. The article contributes a bounded evidentiary procedure for assessing when public records justify a responsiveness inference; it does not claim a new general theory of foreign-policy behavior.

The central proposition is that responsiveness is not established by opinion change, political salience, or policy adjustment considered separately. It becomes empirically defensible only when the opinion measure is relevant to the policy decision, a transmission channel is evidenced, the policy outcome is defined at the same level, and process evidence connects the channel to the decision while credible alternatives are assessed. Applying this standard yields a differentiated result: the public record supports descriptive claims in all three cases, but does not establish that public opinion caused the U.S. shipment pause, a German policy decision, or South Africa's ICJ filing.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 synthesizes research on democratic responsiveness and foreign-policy decision making. Section 3 states the theoretical proposition and its observable implications. Section 4 explains the comparative design, evidence, and limits. Section 5 applies the procedure in each case. Section 6 assesses what the cases support about responsiveness claims, and Sections 7–8 discuss limitations and implications.

2. Public Opinion, Foreign Policy, and Responsiveness

2.1 From public attitudes to foreign-policy decisions

Research on public opinion and foreign policy has moved beyond the claim that citizens' views are invariably unstable or irrelevant. Classic accounts raised concerns about public knowledge and the structure of foreign-affairs attitudes (Lippmann, 1922; Almond, 1950). Later aggregate-level studies found that shifts in public preferences can correspond with policy change, particularly when preferences are substantial and sustained (Page & Shapiro, 1983, 1992). Research on war and electoral politics examines how perceived costs, electoral incentives, and public support can shape leaders' choices (Aldrich et al., 2006; Gelpi et al., 2009). These findings establish plausible relationships, but aggregate correspondence alone does not identify how a preference entered a specific decision.

Responsiveness is a process claim, not merely a description of matching preferences and policy. Public preferences may affect voting, elite calculations, and the political costs of action, while executive discretion, secrecy, alliance commitments, and bargaining constrain direct control (Baum & Potter, 2008, 2015; Jacobs & Page, 2005). The policy process is also reciprocal: elites and media shape the information through which citizens form views, and public preferences may in turn affect elite incentives (Baum & Potter, 2008; Ahrens, 2024). Evidence that an opinion is present or politically salient is therefore analytically distinct from evidence that a decision-maker received and used it.

However, the informational role of media should not be treated as institutionally neutral. Research on Palestinian journalism shows that public reliance on media can intensify during conflict while media institutions remain exposed to structural constraints, political control, and institutional vulnerability (Iyrot, 2026).

Foreign-policy studies help specify the intervening process. Knecht and Weatherford (2006) examine stages of presidential decision making, while Baum and Potter (2008, 2015) situate mass opinion within elite, media, and institutional relationships. Experimental work by Peez and Bethke (2025) shows that information about public preferences can affect foreign-policy elites' stated preferences in a particular research setting. That finding demonstrates that transmission can be studied; it does not establish that officials changed or implemented policy in the three episodes examined here.

2.2 Responsiveness, congruence, and causal evidence

Research on policy responsiveness reinforces the distinction between association and demonstrated response. Wlezien (2026) reviews evidence that policy often correlates with public preferences while identifying conditions that affect whether demand is perceived and supplied. For this article, the implication is not that foreign policy should mechanically mirror majority opinion. Rather, a claim that policy responded to public demand requires evidence about the pathway from preferences to decision, along with the institutional and strategic conditions that enable or constrain it.

The analysis distinguishes four concepts. Opinion change is a measured change in an attitude or preference. Congruence is correspondence between a public preference and a government position or action. Political transmission is observable engagement by actors or institutions with a relevant public preference. Responsiveness is the causal inference that policy changed, at least in part, because political actors registered and acted on that preference. Congruence can occur without responsiveness; a government can also respond partially without fully adopting the public's preferred policy (Burstein, 2003; Canes-Wrone & Shotts, 2004; Wlezien, 2026).

This distinction yields an empirical chain: a policy-specific preference is measured; political actors receive, invoke, or otherwise register it; a related policy decision is observable; and evidence connects the transmission process to that decision. A poll about a ceasefire cannot be treated as equivalent to a statement about humanitarian access, and neither by itself establishes the cause of a later decision. The design therefore requires domain matching and treats missing links as limits on inference, not as proof that influence did not occur.

Evidence of elite attention to survey findings, explicit references to constituency or electoral pressure, or a traceable decision sequence can strengthen a responsiveness inference. Such evidence should be evaluated alongside plausible rival explanations. Process-tracing scholarship provides tools for assessing how observations bear on causal arguments (Beach & Pedersen, 2019); the present study uses those principles conservatively and does not claim full process tracing, because it lacks access to private deliberations and a systematic body of internal records.

2.3 Political and institutional conditions

Electoral incentives may make foreign-policy issues more consequential when voters or party constituencies treat them as salient. Yet the presence of an election does not show that a specific policy choice was adopted in response to public opinion. Voters weigh multiple issues, and the political importance of an issue must be established rather than assumed (Aldrich et al., 2006; Gadarian, 2010).

Party competition can make public preferences more actionable when political actors offer distinct positions, but partisan disagreement is evidence of political context, not proof of decision influence. Institutional rules distribute authority and create routes for action or blockage; their effects depend on the instrument under study (Druckman et al., 2013; Haggard & McCubbins, 2001; Tsebelis, 2002). These conditions guide the search for observable transmission and policy evidence; they are not treated as measured causes in this study.

Historical commitments, norms, and political frames can shape which policies leaders regard as legitimate or feasible. They may constrain or facilitate adjustment, but a public justification does not transparently reveal private motivation or establish that public preferences caused a decision. The analysis therefore treats these factors as rival or conditioning explanations to examine against the record, rather than as stand-alone causal findings (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Hudson, 2005).

2.4 Analytical Problem and Contribution

Recent case-focused studies provide relevant context but address different questions and periods. Binzel and Richter (2025) analyze German views using an August 2025 survey, after this study's observation period. Chipkin (2025) interprets South Africa's ICJ decision through ANC political dynamics. Liu (2026) analyzes U.S. Google Trends data through March 2025, which measures online search attention rather than survey preferences. These studies help identify alternative explanations and related measures; they are not pooled with the article's 2023–2024 evidence.

The unresolved analytical problem is how to make a defensible responsiveness inference when survey questions differ, policy outcomes occur at different levels, and public records reveal official positions more readily than private decision processes. The article addresses this problem by making the evidentiary links underlying a responsiveness inference explicit and by distinguishing evidence of public preference, political transmission, policy adjustment, and decision linkage. The procedure is designed for transparent claim calibration in bounded public records, not for estimating a general causal effect or replacing established process-tracing methods.

The article offers a limited conceptual and methodological contribution: it separates evidence of public preference, political salience, political transmission, policy adjustment, and decision linkage when researchers assess responsiveness claims. Its contribution is to make the inferential steps explicit and to show how the same procedure can be applied to cases with uneven surveys and different policy

outcomes. The framework is an aid to claim calibration, not a validated causal model or replacement for process tracing.

3. Analytical Framework and Propositions

The theoretical framework combines democratic-responsiveness research with foreign-policy decision-process analysis. The causal premise is that public preference can affect a foreign-policy decision only if relevant political actors register that preference and have an opportunity to translate it into an available policy choice. Institutions, strategic commitments, and rival pressures condition each link. This premise generates one central proposition and four observable implications rather than a set of untested causal hypotheses.

Opinion evidence: the survey must identify the population, field period, question wording, response options, and policy domain. A preference on one instrument is not generalized to the government's entire foreign policy.

Public salience: public debate, protest, or issue visibility establishes the political context in which an opinion signal may matter. It does not, by itself, show that decision-makers registered a policy-specific preference.

Transmission evidence: the record must show political actors engaging with the relevant preference or constituency. General public debate, protest, or issue salience does not alone establish transmission to decision-makers.

Policy evidence: the analysis identifies an observable decision, action, or continuity in the same or a clearly related policy domain and specifies whether it is rhetorical, instrumental, or strategic.

The central proposition is: a public record warrants a responsiveness claim only when it contains policy-relevant evidence of public preference, evidence of political transmission, a matched policy decision, and process evidence linking transmission to the decision, with credible rival explanations considered. This proposition defines an evidentiary standard; the three cases assess its application, not its universal causal validity.

Implication 1: a measured opinion change, without evidence of political transmission and policy linkage, supports a descriptive claim about attitudes only.

Implication 2: political salience or elite discussion can establish a plausible transmission context, but not that the opinion signal altered a decision.

Implication 3: policy adjustment must be matched to the preference domain and level; a change in rhetoric cannot be treated as a change in an instrument or strategic orientation.

Implication 4: where more than one explanation fits the observed policy action and the record cannot discriminate among them, the appropriate finding is that responsiveness remains unresolved.

These implications guide the evidence search and the case analyses below. As summarized in Table 1, the analytical framework specifies the evidence components required to assess public-opinion responsiveness, the inferences each component permits, and the limits of what it can establish independently. Given the absence of internal records, interviews, and harmonized repeated surveys, the analysis evaluates what can be inferred from the bounded public record rather than testing the central proposition through a complete causal process study.

Table 1
Evidence components and the inferences they permit

Public salience	**Is the issue visible in public debate or politically salient?**	**Context in which opinion may become politically relevant**	**That decision-makers registered a policy-specific preference**
Evidence component	Empirical question	What the evidence can establish	What it cannot establish alone
Policy-specific opinion	What preference is measured, among whom, when, and with what question?	Distribution or change in a defined preference	That officials received or acted on it
Political transmission	Did relevant actors register, invoke, or respond to that preference?	A documented channel or political engagement	That the channel altered a decision
Matched policy outcome	Did policy change or remain stable in the same domain and at the same level?	An observable adjustment or continuity	That public opinion caused it
Decision linkage and alternatives	Does process evidence connect transmission to the decision and distinguish rivals?	A calibrated responsiveness inference, with uncertainty stated	That all alternative explanations are eliminated

4. Research Design and Evidence

4.1 Comparative design and case selection

The study uses a structured, focused comparison of three countries exposed to the same broad international crisis. The theoretical problem determines the comparison: each case is assessed for the same links between policy-specific opinion, political transmission, policy adjustment, and decision linkage. The design is not a most-different-systems test, a statistical comparison, or a ranking of national responsiveness. Cases differ in institutions, strategic relationships, the availability of surveys, and the form of policy action; those differences are reported rather than treated as controlled variation.

The United States offers repeated opinion measures and a clearly documented, limited assistance decision. Germany offers several policy-specific preference measures and official positions, but the selected record does not consistently match those preferences to decisions in the same domains. South Africa offers consequential legal action but no survey measuring public support for that action before it occurred. These cases were selected for evidentiary contrast. The South African case therefore tests the limits of available inference, not public support for the ICJ filing.

4.2 Period, Surveys, and Documentary Evidence

The observation period is 7 October 2023–31 December 2024. It provides a common temporal boundary around the crisis and the published evidence assembled for comparison; it does not imply that all relevant decision records through that date were collected. Survey results are drawn from published sources and reported separately because their questions, populations, field dates, and response options differ. They are not combined into a cross-national scale. The procedure is applied retrospectively to public records, and an unlocated public trace is treated as an evidentiary limit rather than proof of absent influence.

Table 2 summarizes the public-opinion sources used in the three cases, specifying their field periods, the policy preferences measured, and the inferential limits that constrain cross-national comparison and claims about policy responsiveness.

Table 2
Public-Opinion Sources and What They Measure

Case	Source and field period	Measure used	Inferential limit
United States	Gallup, November 2023 and March 2024 (Gallup, 2024)	Approval or disapproval of Israel's military action in Gaza	One issue-specific attitude; not a measure of support for every U.S. policy instrument
United States	Pew Research Center, 13–25 February 2024; 12,693 adults (Pew Research Center, 2024b)	Military assistance, humanitarian assistance, and desired U.S. diplomatic role	Separate cross-sectional policy preferences; not a unified position
United States	Pew Research Center, 16–22 September 2024; 9,680 adults (Pew Research Center, 2024a)	Desired U.S. diplomatic role, among other attitudes	Comparable diplomatic-role question to February; does not establish policy influence
Germany	YouGov EuroTrack, Germany waves 1–6 December 2023 (n = 2,119) and 14–19 June 2024 (n = 2,115), reported July (YouGov, 2023, 2024b, 2024c)	Relative sympathy toward Israelis and Palestinians; views on selected policy questions	Repeated cross-national polling, but not every question forms a consistent time series
Germany	YouGov/PIPD, 11–18 March 2024; 2,086 adults (YouGov & Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy, 2024)	Perceived government stance and preferred government stance on Gaza	A cross-sectional survey; perceptions and preferences are distinct measures
Germany	YouGov, 31 May–5 June 2024 (YouGov, 2024a)	Recognition of Palestinian statehood and support for potential EU sanctions	Question-specific preferences, not an overall foreign-policy mandate
South Africa	Social Research Foundation, September 2024; 1,204 registered voters (Social Research Foundation, 2024)	Likelihood of voting for parties adopting hypothetical positions on the conflict	Does not measure support for the government's ICJ proceedings or a trend in public attitudes

Documentary evidence is limited to the official records listed in Table 3: U.S. State and Defense Department briefings in May 2024; German Federal Government statements; South African government statements; the ICJ application; and the Court's three provisional-measures orders. The Defense Department briefing confirms that one shipment of 1,800 2,000-pound bombs and 1,700 500-pound bombs was paused, with no final decision then announced (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). Biden's conditional warning about weapons for a major Rafah operation was made in a CNN interview and is cited to that interview (CNN, 2024). The documents establish public positions, announced actions, and legal events; they do not independently establish private motivation.

The documentary sources used in the analysis are summarized in Table 3, which identifies the bounded set of official statements, government briefings, and legal records examined in each case and specifies

their analytical relevance. These sources document publicly stated positions, announced policy actions, and legal developments, but do not independently establish private motivations or demonstrate that public opinion caused a particular decision.

Table 3
Bounded documentary record

Case	Record	Analytical use
United States	U.S. Department of State press briefings, 8 and 9 May 2024; Department of Defense press briefing, 9 May 2024	Public positions on Rafah and humanitarian access; direct confirmation that one bomb shipment was paused pending review
Germany	Federal Government policy statement, 12 October 2023; Chancellor Scholz's government statement, 20 March 2024	Publicly stated security commitment and humanitarian policy framing
South Africa	ICJ application, 29 December 2023; ICJ orders, 26 January, 28 March, and 24 May 2024	Filing and provisional measures as documented legal and diplomatic actions
South Africa	President Ramaphosa's statement, 26 January 2024; Minister Pandor's briefing, 31 January 2024	Government's public description and justification of the proceedings
United States	President Biden's CNN interview, 8 May 2024 (CNN, 2024)	Public conditional warning concerning weapons for a major Rafah operation

The documentary set is purposive and bounded, not exhaustive. Sources were included when they directly reported a survey measure used in the article or documented an official position, action, or legal step relevant to a candidate episode. The source inventory in Supplementary Appendix Table S1 gives source identifiers and direct locators; Tables S2–S4 show how those sources were classified and applied. No systematic search strings or archive-by-archive retrieval log were retained, so neither the article nor the appendix claims exhaustive coverage or a fully reproducible search process. The coding procedure is reproducible for the listed sources, but the discovery process is not documented as a systematic search.

4.3 Analysis and evidentiary thresholds

For each candidate episode, the analysis asks: what preference does the survey actually measure; how visible or politically salient is the issue; is there evidence that relevant political actors registered or invoked that preference; what policy action or position in the same domain is documented; is there process evidence linking the two; and which rival explanations remain plausible? Findings are coded separately as descriptive evidence, public salience, political transmission, policy adjustment, decision-link evidence, and rival explanations. These categories describe different evidentiary components, not cumulative levels. The study has no second coder and therefore makes no claim of inter-coder reliability. It also does not claim full process tracing or causal identification.

Rhetoric, instruments, and strategy are treated as distinct outcome levels. Rhetorical adaptation is a change in official language; instrumental adaptation is a discrete action such as a change in assistance or a diplomatic initiative; strategic adaptation is a broader orientation change. Opinion evidence is compared only with a decision in the same or a clearly related domain. South Africa's legal action, U.S. arms decision, and German official statements are not commensurate outcomes; cross-case conclusions concern the auditability and strength of claims, not a common responsiveness score.

The source-to-episode crosswalk and coding rules are reported in Supplementary Appendix Tables S1–S4.

4.4 Alternative explanations and inferential limits

Public opinion is one possible source of political influence. For every observed adjustment or continuity, the analysis asks whether other explanations are consistent with the evidence and whether the public record can distinguish among them.

Strategic interests and alliance commitments may help explain continuity in the U.S. security relationship with Israel despite changing attitudes. The study treats these as plausible alternatives, not as empirically measured variables, and does not infer that they independently caused continuity.

Humanitarian, legal, and operational considerations may explain adjustments related to civilian protection, aid, or access independently of opinion. Their presence means that temporal co-occurrence between public attitudes and policy cannot establish responsiveness without decision-process evidence.

In South Africa, international legal commitments, diplomatic strategy, domestic party politics, and historical or normative considerations may explain the ICJ action. The September 2024 survey postdates the December 2023 filing and does not measure prior public support for it; therefore it cannot adjudicate among these explanations.

Electoral and partisan incentives may provide transmission channels where actors explicitly engage with public preferences. Yet the existence of an election, partisan disagreement, or public debate establishes context or salience, not decision causation. Evidence of the relevant actors' engagement must be tied to the particular policy episode.

These alternatives are not statistically controlled. The study lacks original panel surveys, elite interviews, internal memoranda, or other records needed to estimate competing causal effects. It uses them as explicit rival explanations and retains an unresolved classification where the public evidence does not discriminate among them.

5. Country Analyses

5.1 United States

Public opinion

Gallup reported that U.S. approval of Israel's military action in Gaza declined from 50% in November 2023 to 36% in March 2024, while disapproval reached 55% in March (Gallup, 2024). This is evidence of change in a specific attitude toward Israel's military action. It is not, by itself, evidence of a corresponding preference on military aid, ceasefire diplomacy, or the U.S.–Israel relationship as a whole.

Pew's February 2024 survey of 12,693 U.S. adults recorded divided views on military assistance to Israel: 36% favored it and 34% opposed it. Half favored humanitarian aid for Palestinian civilians in Gaza, and 55% wanted the United States to play some diplomatic role in ending the war. The report also documented partisan differences, including higher Democratic support for humanitarian aid and a major diplomatic role, and higher Republican support for military aid to Israel (Pew Research Center, 2024b). These findings show that the public did not express one undifferentiated policy preference.

A September Pew survey found that 61% wanted the United States to play a role in diplomatically resolving the conflict, compared with 55% in February. The September poll interviewed 9,680 adults from 16 to 22 September 2024 (Pew Research Center, 2024a). The increase is modest and question-specific. It does not show that the administration changed its policy because of the shift.

Political transmission and policy response

The 2024 presidential election and the partisan differences reported by Pew created a context in which Gaza-related concerns could have electoral relevance. The selected sources do not show that administration officials received or used a particular poll result. Electoral and partisan context is therefore treated as political salience, not as evidence of transmission to decision-makers.

The public record documents one instrumental adjustment. On 9 May 2024, the Department of Defense confirmed that one shipment—1,800 2,000-pound bombs and 1,700 500-pound bombs—had been paused during a review and that no final disposition had been determined (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). In a CNN interview on 8 May, President Biden separately warned that certain weapons would not be supplied for a major Rafah operation (CNN, 2024). The records establish a pause and a conditional public warning, but do not connect either decision to public-opinion signals. The broader security relationship continued during the period examined.

The U.S. evidence therefore supports claims about opinion change, partisan differentiation, and a limited policy adjustment. It does not establish a decision link between the measured preferences and the shipment pause or conditional warning. The result is compatible with responsiveness, but also with humanitarian, operational, strategic, and legal explanations.

5.2 Germany

Public opinion

YouGov's late-2023 polling found that more respondents in Germany sympathized with Israel than with Palestinians, while substantial shares sympathized with both sides or were unsure. In the July 2024 survey, the share expressing greater sympathy for Israel had fallen by ten percentage points since the December 2023 wave to 19%; the share expressing greater sympathy for Palestinians had risen by three points to 15% (YouGov, 2023, 2024b, 2024c). These measures indicate movement in relative sympathy, but they do not amount to a single, stable measure of support for a policy program.

A YouGov/PIPD survey conducted from 11 to 18 March 2024 among 2,086 adults found that 44% perceived the German government as more supportive of Israel. When asked what position the government should take, 37% preferred a balanced stance, 12% wanted greater support for Palestine, and 9% considered the government's current position to be right (YouGov & Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy, 2024). The results distinguish perceptions of existing policy from preferences about what policy should be.

In June 2024, a YouGov survey found that 40% of eligible voters supported German recognition of Palestine as a state, 27% opposed it, and 33% were unsure. In the question context reported by YouGov, 51% supported potential EU economic sanctions against Israel (YouGov, 2024a). These are preferences on particular instruments. They should not be read as evidence that a majority supported a comprehensive realignment of German foreign policy.

Political transmission and policy response

German public debate took place within a political environment in which leaders repeatedly linked Israel's security to Germany's historical responsibility. The Federal Government's October 2023 statement expressed solidarity with Israel while also referring to humanitarian assistance for Gaza (Federal Government of Germany, 2023). Subsequent statements continued to call for humanitarian access and compliance with international humanitarian law. These records show the government's publicly stated position and the coexistence of security and humanitarian frames.

The selected evidence does not establish a direct transmission from the March or June survey results to a specific German government decision. The surveys ask about distinct instruments, including state recognition and possible EU sanctions; the official statements document broader security and humanitarian positions rather than a matched decision on each instrument. The defensible finding is therefore that these preferences are documented, while the available record cannot determine whether they influenced the relevant government decisions. It does not establish general opinion–policy divergence across German foreign policy.

5.3 South Africa

Public opinion and policy action

South Africa's survey evidence is not comparable to the repeated U.S. and German measures. The Social Research Foundation's September 2024 survey of 1,204 registered voters asked whether respondents

would be more or less likely to vote for a party adopting hypothetical pro-Israeli, pro-Hamas, or neutral positions (Social Research Foundation, 2024). It does not measure support for the government's ICJ proceedings, prior opinion at the time of filing, or change over time.

The government instituted proceedings against Israel at the International Court of Justice on 29 December 2023 under the Genocide Convention. The Court issued provisional-measures orders on 26 January, 28 March, and 24 May 2024 (International Court of Justice, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). These are consequential and directly documented legal and diplomatic actions. The Court's provisional-measures orders were not a final determination on the merits of South Africa's allegations; the article treats them as evidence of state action, not as a judgment establishing the ultimate legal claim.

South African officials publicly justified the proceedings through international law, human rights, and historical experience. President Cyril Ramaphosa's statement after the January order and Minister Naledi Pandor's January briefing document public justifications and official accounts (Ramaphosa, 2024; South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 2024). These statements do not show that public opinion caused the filing. Because the filing preceded the September survey, that survey cannot establish prior public support or influence.

This case documents consequential legal action and its official justification, while leaving the opinion–policy link unadjudicated. It is evidence about the limits of the available survey record, not evidence that public preferences and government policy converged.

6. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

6.1 What the comparison establishes

The cases provide different evidentiary configurations. In the United States, repeated polling shows changes in selected attitudes, and a limited assistance pause is documented; the decision link is absent. In Germany, surveys identify preferences on selected policy instruments, while the official record used here does not consistently document matched decisions or transmission. In South Africa, the state action is clear, but the available survey is later and asks about hypothetical party positions rather than support for the filing.

The cross-case comparison is summarized in Table 4, which brings together the available public-opinion evidence, observable policy records, and the conclusions that can be supported about responsiveness in each case.

Table 4
Evidence and limits across the three cases

Case	Measured opinion evidence	Observable policy record	What can be concluded about responsiveness
United States	Gallup trend; Pew February and September surveys; pronounced partisan differences on selected questions	One shipment of munitions was paused pending review; broad strategic relationship continued	Opinion change and a specific policy adjustment coexisted; evidence does not establish that public opinion caused the pause
Germany	YouGov measures of sympathy and policy preferences; March survey distinguishes perceived from preferred government position	Continued official commitment to Israel's security alongside public humanitarian statements	Preferences on selected instruments are documented, but matching policy decisions and a direct transmission process are not established
South Africa	One September 2024 survey of hypothetical voter reactions to party positions	ICJ proceedings and related diplomatic action from December 2023 onward	The legal action is documented; the available survey cannot establish public support for or influence on that action

The comparison cannot rank countries by responsiveness. The policy outcomes differ in kind and level, and the evidence is unequal. Instead, the comparison shows how claims should be calibrated to the links observable in each record: the specificity of the preference measure, evidence of political engagement, a matched policy outcome, and evidence connecting the process to that outcome.

6.2 Implications for the mechanisms

Electoral incentives were present in all three contexts, but the evidence does not establish that they caused the decisions considered. In the United States, the presidential election and partisan differences created plausible political pressures, but the record does not show how those concerns shaped the assistance decision. In Germany, the European election was part of the context, but the selected evidence does not link survey preferences to a matched decision. In South Africa, the national election does not explain the December 2023 filing on the basis of the later hypothetical survey.

Partisan competition similarly varies across cases. U.S. surveys document partisan differences; they do not show that those differences entered the specific executive decision. In Germany, coalition politics may condition available policy alternatives, but this study does not trace a preference-to-decision path. In South Africa, the survey concerns hypothetical party positions, not retrospective approval of government policy. Partisan competition is therefore a mechanism for investigation rather than an established explanation here.

Institutions and strategic relationships shape the routes through which foreign policy can change. The U.S. executive can pause a particular assistance shipment while maintaining wider cooperation. Germany's parliamentary and coalition arrangements structure policy authority. South Africa used the

ICJ as a legal and diplomatic channel. These institutional facts identify possible pathways; they do not establish why the relevant choices were made.

Public frames also provide evidence of justification, not direct access to private motivation. German officials invoked historical responsibility and humanitarian concerns; South African officials emphasized international law and historical experience; U.S. debate included security and humanitarian frames. To establish these as causal mechanisms would require evidence connecting the frames to deliberation and choice.

6.3 Theoretical implications

The case analyses illustrate the value of separating evidence components: surveys establish reported attitudes, public statements establish what actors said, and policy records establish actions. None alone shows that officials received, interpreted, and acted on a public preference. Because no episode contains a documented opinion-to-decision link in the selected record, the analysis illustrates the procedure but does not validate it as a general causal model.

The empirical analysis does not test a general causal theory or estimate an independent effect of opinion. Its theoretical consequence is narrower: it refines how democratic responsiveness should be operationalized in foreign-policy studies that rely on heterogeneous surveys and public records. The framework is most useful when private decision processes are inaccessible and should not substitute for interviews, archival evidence, or stronger process-tracing designs where those sources are available.

7. Limitations

The study uses published secondary surveys and public documents. It includes no original survey, interviews, internal memoranda, or direct access to decision-makers. It cannot observe private deliberation or establish consistently whether officials received, discussed, or acted on public-opinion information. Official statements are analyzed as public positions and justifications, not transparent records of private motives.

Survey questions, field periods, samples, and response options differ. Not all U.S. and German questions form repeated time series, and South Africa's survey does not measure approval of the ICJ filing. The policy outcomes also differ in level and type. These limitations preclude pooled estimates, a common cross-national opinion scale, and a ranking of responsiveness. Survey-method details should be reported for each source to the extent published by the survey organizations.

The documentary set is purposive and bounded. The supplementary appendix now identifies the cited empirical sources and provides direct source locators, episode classifications, and coding rules. It does not supply a systematic search log: search strings, archive-by-archive retrieval dates, and a record of all screened documents were not retained. This limits claims about coverage and means that the appendix supports verification of the included evidence, not replication of an exhaustive search. A stronger causal

study would add systematic legislative and party records, contemporaneous decision-maker statements, internal documents where accessible, and interviews.

8. Conclusion

This article asked what evidence is required to distinguish public-opinion congruence from foreign-policy responsiveness during an international crisis. A comparison of the United States, Germany, and South Africa shows that measured opinion, political salience, policy adjustment, and causal responsiveness are separate empirical claims. The available evidence does not establish that public opinion independently determined the policies examined.

The article's contribution is a bounded refinement in how foreign-policy studies operationalize responsiveness claims: a defensible inference requires a policy-relevant preference, evidence that relevant actors registered it, a matched policy outcome, and process evidence linking transmission to the decision, with rival explanations considered. Applying this standard, the U.S. opinion shifts and shipment pause co-occurred without a demonstrated decision link; German preferences were not matched to decisions in the same policy domains; and South Africa's later hypothetical survey cannot establish support for or influence on the earlier ICJ filing.

The procedure is an aid to claim calibration, not a validated general theory or a substitute for stronger causal research. Its scope is bounded public-record analysis of foreign-policy episodes during crisis. Future work can test and refine the procedure with systematic process-tracing evidence, harmonized survey measures, and matched policy episodes across cases.

Declarations

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent

Not applicable. This study is based exclusively on publicly available secondary data, published survey results, and official documentary sources. No participants were directly recruited or contacted by the author.

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Author Contribution

I.I. was solely responsible for the conceptualization of the study, development of the analytical framework, methodology, investigation, collection and analysis of empirical evidence, interpretation of findings, and writing, reviewing, and editing of the manuscript. I.I. also prepared the supplementary materials, read and approved the final version of the manuscript, and assumes full responsibility for its content.

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Data Availability

The data and materials supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available secondary sources, including published public-opinion surveys, official government statements, and judicial records. The Supplementary Appendix and accompanying Evidence Workbook provide detailed source inventories, direct source links, extracted survey measures, documentary evidence, coding procedures, and case-level assessments to support transparency and reproducibility. No primary survey data or individual-level participant data were collected or generated by the author. The original third-party materials remain accessible through their respective providers, subject to applicable access conditions..

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