

THE OVERCONFIDENCE PROBLEM IN FOREIGN POLICY

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The results of recent Foreign Affairs polls on questions of foreign policy reveal a systemic problem of overconfidence in foreign policymaking. As a data scientist, it is easy to see in these polls that the community of experts has an issue with properly measuring their confidence in their own judgments. This threatens the credibility of foreign policy expertise, stymies effective communication, and likely leads to worse policy making outcomes.

Foreign policy experts were asked in the [June 22, 2021, Foreign Affairs Ask the Experts poll, “Is Washington right to leave Afghanistan?”](#). The answer to this question relies principally on two aspects that have inherently large variance: the metric of assessment, and future outcomes. This variance is arguably reflected in the broad and relatively balanced distribution of responses covering the gamut from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’, Figure 1 Left. So, it is inconceivable that a fair consideration of the question that accounts for this inherent uncertainty should produce a high confidence assessment. Thus, it is concerning that 33% of the respondents were able to answer with the maximum confidence level of 10, and a majority (59%) responded with confidence level 9 or higher. While only 4% responded with confidence level lower than 6, Figure 1 Right. It is often a sign of unaccounted bias (e.g., model or assumption bias) when the uncertainty associated with individual estimates is much smaller than the variance of the ensemble data set.

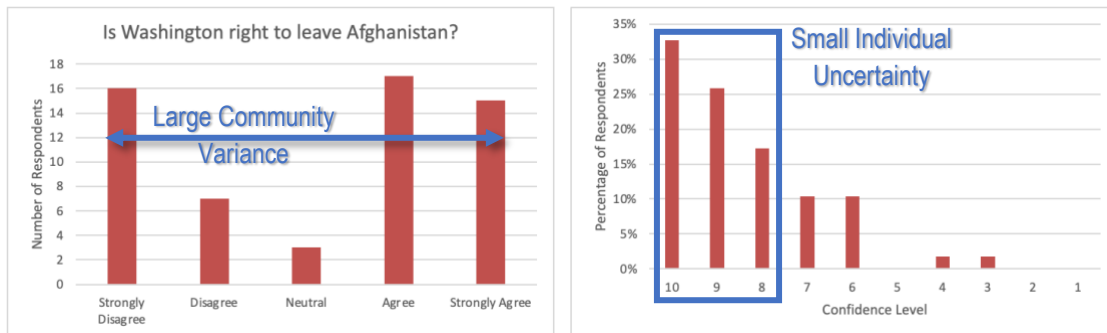


Figure 1: Distribution of results from the Foreign Affairs poll: “Is Washington right to leave Afghanistan?”

Similar overconfidence is present in other Foreign Affairs foreign policy polls, even those that do not have Manichean terms such as “right” that can sometimes be polarizing. The [Foreign Affairs Ask the Experts poll “Should U.S. Foreign Policy Focus on Great-Power Competition?”](#),

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showed 83% of respondents had a confidence ≥ 8 , albeit with slightly less community variance. Fundamentally, data with incorrect uncertainty assigned to it can be worse than no data at all (i.e., you can reach the wrong conclusion with high confidence).

To bring the symptom into higher contrast, juxtapose the above results with the [August 12, 2020, Foreign Affairs poll: “Is the worst of Covid-19 yet to come?”](#), Figure 2. The average confidence level of respondents from the health field was much lower at 6, even though the variance of the ensemble was much smaller with a majority (56%) of respondents ‘agreeing’ with the proposition (an indication of less individual bias compared to the Afghanistan poll). Furthermore, consider that these health professionals have more data, a simpler model, and were required to forecast a much shorter time into the future than the foreign policy professionals in the Afghanistan poll.

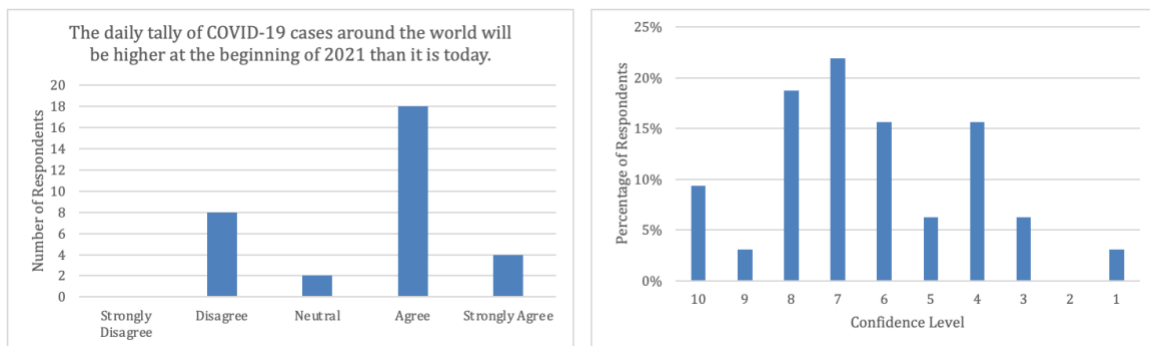


Figure 2: Distributions of responses and their confidence levels to the Foreign Affairs August 2020 poll: “The daily tally of COVID-19 cases around the world will be higher at the beginning of 2021 than it is today.”

This is not intended to be a critique of any of the specific individuals who participated in the Foreign Affairs polls, nor is this a critique of the Foreign Affairs polls themselves. After all our world leaders should be able to ask straightforward questions. On the contrary, the fact this overconfidence is displayed by such a large majority of respondents and across different surveys is indicative of a systemic problem in the field of foreign policy.

It seems possible that this is an intrinsic systematic in the overconfident individuals themselves due to psychological tendencies to overweight one’s past successes and underweight their past failures, as [İmran Demir](#) suggests. The other possibility is that this systematic is due to extrinsic forces that drive one to overconfidence. For example, if accurate assessments aren’t rewarded, or worse yet, if overconfident assessments are rewarded (perhaps because the decision makers and sponsors of the policy experts [prefer certainty in their assessments](#)), then the systematic tendency towards overconfidence would be completely understandable. Especially since the individual policy expert is often insulated from the consequences of bad policy by the complexity of the environment, difficulty quantifying metrics of policy performance, and time. Regardless of whether the intrinsic or the extrinsic drivers dominate, it suffices that either one could solely be responsible, thus they both must be remedied if the overconfidence problem is to be resolved.

If our leaders cannot depend on an accurate - even if uncertain - assessment to straightforward questions from the world's leading experts, what good is their expertise? So, this overconfidence problem must be addressed, but what can be done?

To combat the intrinsic systematic drivers of overconfidence one of the best proven methods is a formulaic [evidence-based approach](#), such as the scientific method. Policy experts should learn from their compatriots in other fields who are more practiced at identifying and dealing with such overconfidence bias. For example, even outside of the physical sciences, the intelligence community has for years required carefully considered confidence statements that accompany major judgment on issues of policy relevance. We should demand the same of our policy experts, in an effort to bring clarity and consistency to their craft.

However, it is important to acknowledge the human's limitation in processing information, formulating an optimal policy, and forecasting, and there is no doubt that evidence-based policy making requires more resources than the status quo. While evidence-based policy making is a requisite for simultaneously accurate and precise policy, which is a worthy goal, we can make significant progress towards the milestone of solving the overconfidence problem with far less effort. For example, even just changing one's mindset to ["think of all claims as hypotheses that require testing rather than as conclusions that need defending"](#). This then sets one up to ask themselves whether it is even possible to develop a confident assessment given the inherent variance of the dependent variables (as was done in the opening of this article considering the Afghanistan question; a task that required almost no effort, just the right mindset).

For the extrinsic systematic forces, it seems as though it will be necessary for the foreign policy sponsors to demand, fund, and reward something like evidence-based policy assessments. Congress' [Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018](#), and the Biden administration's [Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking](#) are both promising starts, but neither explicitly addresses the overconfidence problem directly.

It will also require decision makers who rely on foreign policy assessments to acknowledge that there will be times when the uncertainty and a hard decision will have to be made. But that this is better on average (e.g., because it promotes the development of contingent responses for other possibilities), than it is to make the easy decision based on an overconfident assessment. As Walter Lippman [details](#), reliable expertise is essential to a functioning democracy. However, he also notes the importance of uncertainty in these expert assessments:

"The study of error is not only in the highest degree prophylactic, but it serves as a stimulating introduction to the study of truth. We see vividly, as normally we should not, the enormous mischief and casual cruelty of our prejudices. And the destruction of a prejudice, though painful



at first, because of its connection with our self-respect, gives an immense relief and a fine pride when it is successfully done.”

We must cure this overconfidence ailment that further threatens the death of expertise by destroying expert credibility. Our democracy demands better.



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