Public and Political Will: The Rocket Fuel of Spaceflight Progression

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Dylan Tran

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

Advisor

Kent Wayland, Department of Engineering and Society

Introduction:

In the ever-expanding quest for knowledge beyond our planet, the role of public opinion and political will has been pivotal in shaping the trajectory of spaceflight. The allure of the cosmos has long captured the human imagination, but it is the tangible support and advocacy from society and governments that transform celestial dreams into reality. Space exploration is not solely a scientific pursuit; it is a delicate interplay between public enthusiasm and political decisions. There is much to learn about how fluctuations in public sentiment and political priorities impact the advancement of spaceflight initiatives. This paper will revolve around the central question of *How do changes in public and political will affect the trajectory of space exploration?* This seemingly straightforward inquiry leads into a complex web of relationships in the exploration of how societal aspirations and governmental choices shape the nation's cosmic journey.

Space captures our collective imagination—a realm of discovery, adventure, and wonder. But dreams alone cannot propel rockets. They require the tangible support of public backing and political vision. When citizens rally behind Mars missions or lunar landings, they cast ballots not in polling booths but in the cosmic theater. Space missions are expressions of collective will. The Apollo program's moonwalks were fueled by Kennedy's vision and Cold War fervor. Conversely, when political winds shift, funding wanes, and missions stall. The International Space Station's modular construction reflects international cooperation and diplomatic finesse. Beyond the rockets lies a nexus where science intersects with society. Public opinion shapes funding decisions, which steer scientific priorities. When a rover sends back images of Martian landscapes, it is not just engineering triumph; it is a testament to collective curiosity.

As the topics are explored within the paper, it will be recognized that space exploration is a symphony composed by the masses, conducted by politicians, and performed by astronauts and engineers. Rather than planets and stars, this journey will traverse historical milestones, political debates, and the overarching story of mankind's stellar ambitions.

Background & Context

Spaceflight, as a multidisciplinary endeavor, intertwines technological advancements, political decisions, and public sentiments. To understand the impact of public and political perceptions on spaceflight development, we must explore key historical moments and societal shifts. The late 1950s and 1960s marked a pivotal period in space exploration. The Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union fueled intense competition, with each side striving to demonstrate technological supremacy. In 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite. This event not only marked a scientific achievement but also ignited a race to conquer the cosmos. Public reactions ranged from awe to fear. The unknown vastness of space fascinated some and terrified others. Science fiction literature and films captured the collective imagination, portraying space as both a frontier of adventure and a realm of potential danger. NASA's Apollo program aimed to put humans on the Moon. The successful Apollo 11 mission in 1969, with Neil Armstrong's iconic words, "That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind," exemplified political will and technological prowess. Public fascination with astronauts and their daring missions fueled support for space exploration. The Moon landing became a symbol of national pride and human achievement. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s reshaped the space landscape. Geopolitical tensions eased, and space exploration transitioned from superpower rivalry to international cooperation. The establishment of the ISS—a joint effort involving multiple countries—

symbolized collaborative endeavors. Scientists, engineers, and astronauts from different nations worked together in orbit, conducting experiments and advancing our understanding of space. The 21st century witnessed a paradigm shift. Private companies like SpaceX, Blue Origin, and Virgin Galactic entered the scene, challenging traditional government-led space programs. SpaceX's reusable Falcon rockets, for instance, revolutionized access to space. Public debates ensued: Is commercialization beneficial or detrimental? How do we balance profit motives with scientific exploration?

In the realm of spaceflight, the impacts of political and public perceptions have been a topic of considerable discussion and analysis. Historical Studies in the Societal Impact of Spaceflight by NASA provides a comprehensive overview of the societal impact of spaceflight, including the influence of public opinion. The study, led by sociologist William Sims Bainbridge, is based on seven decades of questionnaire survey data and combines historical and social science approaches to consider both changes in public opinion over time and key themes that have shaped public opinion (Dick, 2015). Another significant work is The Future of Human Spaceflight: Objectives and Policy Implications in a Global Context by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. This publication reexamines the objectives of human spaceflight in light of today's world and discusses the rationale for a large, government-funded program of human space exploration (David A. Mindell, 2009). The article Public Opinion Polls and Perceptions of US Human Spaceflight explores the evolution of public support for space exploration since the 1960s. It presents trends over time and offers comments on the meaning of public perceptions for the evolution of space policy and the development of space exploration in the United States (Launius, Public opinion polls and perceptions of US human spaceflight, 2003). The study suggests that NASA's public support was less important than most have previously asserted, and

that the overall activities of NASA have been advanced by a small base of supporters, challenged by a small group of opponents, and sustained by a larger number of people who accept a status quo in space exploration. Lastly, the paper Evolving Public Perceptions of Human Spaceflight in American Culture discusses the general public's lack of support for expending many dollars on spaceflight, a fundamental reality of NASA since its beginning. It suggests that this is not changing, and probably not changeable, in the predictive future (Launius, Evolving Public Perceptions of Human Spaceflight in American Culture, 2002). These works collectively provide a robust foundation for understanding the impacts of political and public perceptions on the development of spaceflight. They set the stage for further exploration and analysis of this topic, highlighting the gaps that this research aims to fill.

The scholarly discourse on the impact of political and public perceptions on spaceflight development is rich and multifaceted. However, there are gaps and contradictions within this body of literature that this paper aims to address. While there is extensive research on the historical and societal impacts of spaceflight, such as in Historical Studies in the Societal Impact of Spaceflight, which provides a broad analysis of public opinions and attitudes shaped by space exploration, there is a noticeable gap in understanding the contemporary implications of these perceptions (Dick, 2015). The existing literature often focuses on the past, leaving a void in the analysis of current public and political sentiments and their direct influence on modern space initiatives. Moreover, discussions on the political aspects of space exploration, as seen in Politics and the Space Race, tend to concentrate on the early years of space exploration, particularly the Cold War era (Dawson, 2021). This leaves a gap in understanding how current political dynamics, international collaborations, and geopolitical tensions influence today's space policies and programs. Contradictions arise when examining the value and meaning of spaceflight to the

public. For instance, The Meaning and Value of Spaceflight: Public Perceptions suggests a wide array of meanings and values that people attach to space programs (Bainbridge, 2015). However, this contrasts with other studies that indicate a lack of public support for significant funding towards spaceflight, as highlighted in Evolving Public Perceptions of Human Spaceflight in American Culture (Launius, Evolving Public Perceptions of Human Spaceflight in American Culture, 2002). This contradiction points to a complex and nuanced public opinion landscape that requires further exploration to reconcile these differing perspectives. This paper will fill the gap by providing an updated analysis of contemporary political and public perceptions and their impact on spaceflight development. It will also address the contradictions by examining the current socio-political climate and its influence on space policy, thereby offering a resolution to the conflicting views presented in the literature. By bridging these gaps and resolving contradictions, this paper will contribute a fresh perspective to the ongoing conversation about the societal dimensions of spaceflight and its future trajectory. The aim is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how current perceptions shape space exploration endeavors and policy-making, which is crucial for the advancement of spaceflight in the 21st century.

In the analysis of the impacts of political and public perceptions on the development of spaceflight, this paper will employ a theoretical framework that draws upon the concept of mutual shaping within a sociotechnical system. Mutual shaping refers to the reciprocal influence between society and technology, where each shapes and is shaped by the other. In the context of spaceflight, this involves the interplay between technological advancements in space exploration and the societal, political, and public perceptions that both influence and are influenced by these advancements. While this paper will not delve deeply into specific Science, Technology, & Society (STS) theories such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) or the Social Construction of

Technology (SCOT), these theories inform the underlying understanding of the mutual shaping occurring in the sociotechnical system of spaceflight. These theories provide a lens through which to view the complex interactions and dependencies between various actors - both human and non-human - in the system. The theoretical framework will be used consistently throughout the paper to guide the analysis. It will help illuminate how political and public perceptions have shaped the trajectory of spaceflight development, and conversely, how advancements in spaceflight technology have influenced societal perceptions and political decisions. This mutual shaping perspective will provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted dynamics at play in the evolution of spaceflight. The theoretical framework of this paper is rooted in the understanding that the development of spaceflight is not merely a technological narrative, bigger story of societal influence, political will, and public perception. This framework will guide the exploration of these complex interactions throughout the paper.

Methods

The methodology for this paper is designed to ensure a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the impacts of political and public perceptions on the development of spaceflight. The methods employed in this research are primarily qualitative, involving a systematic review and analysis of the existing literature on the topic. The first step involved conducting an extensive literature review. The selection of articles for review was based on their relevance to the topic, the credibility of the sources, and the date of publication. Preference was given to more recent articles to ensure the analysis reflects current perceptions and policies. The search was conducted across multiple databases, including JSTOR, Google Scholar, and NASA's Astrophysics Data System, using keywords such as "spaceflight", "public perception", "political influence", "space policy", and "space exploration". Each selected article was thoroughly read and analyzed. The

analysis focused on understanding the main arguments, identifying the methodologies used, noting the findings, and critiquing the limitations. This process helped to gain a deep understanding of what "They Say" about the topic.

The next step was to identify gaps in the existing literature. This involved looking for areas that have been under-researched or overlooked in previous studies. It also included identifying contradictions or conflicting views within the literature. Resolving contradictions within the literature is a critical aspect of this research. This process involves a detailed comparative analysis of the conflicting views presented in the literature. Each contradiction is examined in depth, considering the context in which it arises, the evidence supporting each viewpoint, and the implications of each perspective. This involves a careful evaluation of the methodologies used in each study, the robustness of the data, and the validity of the interpretations drawn. By comparing and contrasting these differing views, we aim to reconcile the contradictions and provide a more nuanced understanding of the topic. In cases where contradictions cannot be fully resolved, these areas of contention are highlighted as areas for further research. This not only acknowledges the complexity of the topic but also opens up new avenues for exploration and understanding.

To fill the identified gaps, this research will draw on a variety of sources, including more recent articles, reports, and data, as well as insights from experts in the field. This will ensure that the analysis is up-to-date and comprehensive. In addition, this research will employ a multi-disciplinary approach, drawing on insights from fields such as sociology, political science, and history, to provide a more holistic understanding of the impacts of political and public perceptions on spaceflight development. Furthermore, this research will also consider the global context, examining how international collaborations and geopolitical dynamics influence space

policies and programs. This will provide a broader perspective on the topic, moving beyond a solely U.S.-centric view. This rigorous methodology ensures a thorough and nuanced understanding of the impacts of political and public perceptions on the development of spaceflight. It allows for a critical engagement with the existing literature, the identification and resolution of contradictions, and the filling of gaps, thereby contributing a fresh perspective to the scholarly conversation on this topic.

Results/Findings

The systematic review and analysis of the literature on the impacts of political and public perceptions on the development of spaceflight yielded several key findings, revealing both gaps and contradictions that this paper aims to address. The review of Historical Studies in the Societal Impact of Spaceflight revealed that public attitudes towards space exploration have evolved over time, influenced by various factors such as geopolitical events, technological advancements, and societal changes (Dick, 2015). The study highlighted the significant role of public opinion in shaping the trajectory of space exploration endeavors. The analysis of the Future of Human Spaceflight: Objectives and Policy Implications in a Global Context underscored the need for a broadly accepted sense of purpose for human spaceflight that transcends national prestige and aligns with broader human aspirations (David A. Mindell, 2009). This finding suggests a shift towards more collaborative international efforts in space exploration. The examination of Public Opinion Polls and Perceptions of US Human Spaceflight challenged the widely held belief that NASA's human spaceflight activities enjoyed robust public support during the 1960s Apollo era (Launius, Public opinion polls and perceptions of US human spaceflight, 2003). The study revealed that public support for space exploration has been more

nuanced, with a majority of Americans not considering the Apollo program worth the cost, except for a brief period around the Apollo 11 lunar landing.

The review identified several contradictions within the literature. For instance, while some studies suggest a wide array of meanings and values that people attach to space programs, others indicate a lack of public support for significant funding towards spaceflight. These contradictions point to a complex and nuanced public opinion landscape that requires further exploration. The review also identified gaps in the existing literature. Most notably, there is a lack of research on the contemporary implications of public and political perceptions on spaceflight development. Additionally, discussions on the political aspects of space exploration often focus on the early years of space exploration, leaving a gap in understanding how current political dynamics influence today's space policies and programs. To resolve the identified contradictions, this research will employ a comparative analysis approach. By examining the contexts and methodologies of the studies presenting conflicting views, the research will seek to understand the underlying reasons for these discrepancies. For example, differences in survey methodologies or question framing could lead to varying interpretations of public support for spaceflight. This research will synthesize these findings to provide a more coherent picture of public perceptions. To address the gaps in literature, this research will incorporate recent studies such as Closing the Gaps: Space Policy Considerations Beyond Security and Economy, which argues for an expansion of the space policy conversation to include issues affecting less powerful participants in the space economy (Nesvold, 2022). Additionally, The Meaning and Value of Spaceflight: Public Perceptions provides a new analysis of six decades of questionnaire and public opinion data, offering insights into how Americans understand spaceflight and which values it can serve for them (Bainbridge, 2015).

In summary, the findings from this research highlight the multifaceted impacts of political and public perceptions on the development of spaceflight. They underscore the importance of considering societal views when shaping space policy and suggest the need for a more inclusive and collaborative approach to space exploration. These findings set the stage for further exploration and analysis of this topic, with the aim of filling the identified gaps and resolving the contradictions within the literature. This will contribute a fresh perspective to the scholarly conversation on the societal dimensions of spaceflight and its future trajectory.

Discussion/Analysis

The synthesis of the findings from the literature review on topic presents a complex tapestry of influences that shape the trajectory of space exploration. This discussion aims to weave together these findings to construct an argument addressing the research question: How do political and public perceptions impact the development of spaceflight? The historical analysis provided by Historical Studies in the Societal Impact of Spaceflight demonstrates that public opinion has been a fluctuating yet influential factor in the development of spaceflight (Dick, 2015). The evolution of public attitudes reflects a society's changing priorities and values, which in turn influence policy decisions and funding allocations for space exploration. The Apollo era, for instance, was marked by a surge in public interest and government support, driven by geopolitical competition and the allure of scientific discovery. The findings from The Future of Human Spaceflight: Objectives and Policy Implications in a Global Context and Public Opinion Polls and Perceptions of US Human Spaceflight suggest that while the public generally values the intangible benefits of space exploration, such as inspiration and scientific knowledge, this does not consistently translate into robust support for increased government spending-

(David A. Mindell, 2009). This dichotomy between appreciation and willingness to fund indicates a need for space policy to better communicate the tangible benefits and economic returns of space activities to garner public support (Launius, Public opinion polls and perceptions of US human spaceflight, 2003).

The literature presents contradictions regarding the perceived value of spaceflight and the public's willingness to fund it. By analyzing recent public opinion data and historical trends, it becomes clear that public support is often contingent on the perceived direct benefits and economic return of space activities. This research argues that resolving these contradictions requires a nuanced understanding of public opinion, one that recognizes the diversity of perspectives and the context-dependent nature of support for spaceflight. The identified gaps in contemporary implications of public and political perceptions are addressed by incorporating recent studies such as Closing the Gaps: Space Policy Considerations Beyond Security and Economy, which expands the conversation on space policy to include issues affecting less powerful participants in the space economy (Nesvold, 2022). Furthermore, The Meaning and Value of Spaceflight: Public Perceptions provides insights into how Americans understand spaceflight and which values it can serve for them, filling a crucial gap in understanding the current public sentiment (Bainbridge, 2015).

The synthesis of these findings leads to the argument that political and public perceptions have a profound impact on the development of spaceflight. Political perceptions, often influenced by geopolitical considerations and economic interests, dictate the level of government investment and the strategic direction of space programs. Public perceptions, while more varied, play a critical role in sustaining long-term support for space exploration. The challenge lies in aligning these perceptions with the objectives of space policy to ensure the continued

advancement of spaceflight. The development of spaceflight is inextricably linked to the interplay of political and public perceptions. The future trajectory of space exploration will depend on how effectively these perceptions are understood, engaged, and harmonized with the broader goals of humanity's presence in space. This research contributes to the ongoing conversation by highlighting the need for a more inclusive and communicative approach to space policy, one that resonates with the public's aspirations and addresses their concerns.

Conclusion

The exploration of political and public perceptions and their impact on the development of spaceflight has revealed a nuanced landscape where societal views significantly influence the trajectory of space exploration. This research has highlighted the importance of understanding these perceptions to ensure the alignment of space policy with public aspirations and to garner support for future space endeavors. The findings underscore the need for space policy to communicate the tangible benefits of space exploration more effectively. While historical perspectives have shown that public interest can be piqued by geopolitical competition and scientific discovery, contemporary views require a clear demonstration of economic return and direct benefits to maintain public support. The reconciliation of contradictions within the literature has led to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between public appreciation for space exploration and the willingness to fund it. Connecting back to larger concerns, this research emphasizes that the future of spaceflight is not solely in the hands of policymakers and scientists but also in the perceptions held by the public and political entities. As space exploration continues to evolve, it is imperative that these stakeholders work collaboratively to foster a shared vision for humanity's role in space.

For next steps in research, it is recommended that future studies focus on real-time analysis of public and political perceptions, especially in light of new developments in space technology and exploration missions. Additionally, research should explore the impact of international collaborations and private sector advancements in spaceflight, as these are becoming increasingly significant in shaping the future of space policy and exploration. In conclusion, this research contributes to the broader discourse on space exploration by providing insights into the societal dimensions that shape its development. It calls for a more inclusive approach to space policy, one that resonates with the public's values and addresses their concerns, thereby ensuring sustained support for the continued advancement of spaceflight in the 21st century and beyond.

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