

Background Study: Foreign Policy Attitudes Now Driven by 9/11 and Iraq

By [Pew Research Center](#)

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In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

Editors Note

We bring to the attention of our readers a study published by the Pew Research Center, in collaboration with the Council on Foreign Relations.

While the CRG does not share the focus and conclusions of this report, the results of the various opinion surveys are useful in addressing the issue of State propaganda and media disinformation.

Below you will find the Overview of the report, with hyperlinks to the original document published by the Pew Research Center.

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Overview

For the first time since the Vietnam era, foreign affairs and national security issues are looming larger than economic concerns in a presidential election. The Sept. 11 attacks and the two wars that followed not only have raised the stakes for voters as they consider their choice for president, but also have created deep divisions and conflicting sentiments over U.S. foreign policy in a troubled time.

 Dissatisfaction with Iraq is shaping opinions about foreign policy as much, if not more than, Americans' continuing concerns over terrorism. Both attitudes now inform the public's point of view of the U.S. role in the world. Tellingly, the poll finds about as many

respondents favoring a decisive foreign policy (62%) as supporting a cautious approach (66%). And reflecting an ever-widening partisan gap on foreign policy issues, Republicans assign higher priority to decisiveness than to caution, while Democrats do just the opposite.

Americans are acutely aware of and worried about the loss of international respect for the United States given disillusionment over Iraq. Two-thirds say the U.S. is less respected by other countries than in the past, and this opinion is particularly prevalent among opponents of the Iraq war. Nearly nine-in-ten (87%) of those who think the war was the wrong decision say the U.S. is less respected internationally, compared with 53% who say the war was the right decision. And by roughly two-to-one, this loss of respect is viewed as a major not minor problem for the U.S.

✘ Yet it also is clear that the constant threat of terrorism continues to influence public attitudes toward the use of force in the post-Sept. 11 era. Fully 88% of Americans rate “taking measures to protect the U.S. from terrorist attacks” as a top foreign policy priority. And while the public has deep reservations about the war in Iraq, there is sustained support for the doctrine of preemption. A 60% majority believes that the use of military force can at least be sometimes justified against countries that may seriously threaten the U.S., but have not attacked. This is only a slight decline from the 67% that expressed that view in May 2003, when most Americans judged the war in Iraq a success.

Nonetheless, the public supports a cooperative stance toward America’s allies. Overall, a majority of Americans and nearly half of Republicans rate improving relations with U.S. allies as a top foreign policy priority. The nationwide survey of foreign policy attitudes by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, conducted in association with the Council on Foreign Relations, also finds that by 49%-37%, the public believes that the nation’s foreign policy should strongly take into account the interests of U.S. allies, rather than be based mostly on the national interests of the United States.

Continuing discontent with the way things are going in Iraq underlies public criticism of the Bush administration’s overall approach to national security. The survey of foreign policy attitudes, conducted July 8-18 among 2,009 adults nationwide, finds a solid 59% majority faulting the Bush administration for being too quick to use force rather than trying hard enough to reach diplomatic solutions. A growing minority (37%) believes the administration pays too little attention to the interests and views of U.S. allies in conducting foreign policy, while 15% say it pays too much attention and 38% say the administration pays the right amount of attention to allied interests.

Moreover, evaluations of President Bush’s handling of Iraq itself remain critical. An update of public opinion on Iraq, conducted August 5-10 among 1,512 adults, shows that more than a month after the transfer of sovereignty to the new Iraqi government, 52% disapprove of the way Bush is managing that situation. And almost six-in-ten (58%) continue to say that the president does not have a clear plan for bringing the situation in Iraq to a successful conclusion.

At the same time, there are also expressions of support for hardline antiterrorism measures both domestically and overseas. By a significant margin (49%-29%), more Americans are concerned that the government has not gone far enough to protect the country than are concerned that the government has gone too far in restricting civil liberties. The poll also finds that while a narrow majority of Americans (53%) believe that torture should rarely or

never be used to gain important information from suspected terrorists, a sizable minority (43%) thinks torture can at least sometimes be justified.

✘ Republicans and Democrats now hold sharply divergent views on a range of foreign policy attitudes, including the use of torture, the proper balance between fighting terrorism and protecting civil liberties, and even the root causes of the 9/11 attacks. Since late September 2001, a growing number of Democrats (51%) and independents (45%) believe that U.S. wrongdoing in dealings with other countries might have motivated the 9/11 attacks. Republicans reject that view even more decisively than three years ago (76% now, 65% in late September 2001).

Nowhere is the partisan divide more evident than in views of America's global standing. Fully 80% of Democrats and 74% of independents say the U.S. is less respected by other countries than in the past. Only about half of Republicans (47%) believe the U.S. has lost respect. At the same time, an increasing number of Republicans and independents but not Democrats believe the United States is more powerful than it was a decade ago. Democratic perceptions of U.S. power have not changed at all from a survey conducted just prior to the 9/11 attacks: 32% of Democrats saw the U.S. growing in power then, and the same number do so today.

Partisan gaps also are seen in differing visions of the nation's long-term foreign policy goals. Democrats rate protecting the jobs of American workers and combating terrorism as about equal in importance, and at the top of their scale of foreign policy priorities (89% cite jobs, 86% terrorism). For Republicans, by comparison, combating terrorism is by far the most important policy objective. Beyond that, many more Republicans than Democrats view preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction as a top priority, while Democrats attach greater urgency to strengthening the U.N., dealing with world hunger and reducing the spread of AIDS and other infectious diseases.

✘ The public's overall priorities are significantly different now than they were in October 2001. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, concern over many objectives unrelated to terrorism especially reducing the spread of AIDS and dealing with hunger fell sharply. But those concerns have rebounded in the current survey, in some cases to pre-9/11 levels.

By contrast, the public attaches somewhat less importance than it has in the past to finding a solution to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. Overall, the public sympathies in that conflict still lie with Israel rather than the Palestinians (by 40%-13%). Yet there has been a sharp decline in the percentage of Americans who regard U.S. policies in the Middle East as fair 35% say they are fair, down from 47% in May 2003. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has barely been mentioned in the presidential campaign, public opinion about the region has become more polarized as well, with Democrats increasingly skeptical that the U.S. is fair in its policies.

Public opinion on other international issues unrelated to terrorism and Iraq such as China and the impact of NAFTA and other trade agreements has been fairly stable in recent years. On balance, a plurality of Americans (40%) characterize China as "a serious problem, but not an adversary," while 36% think China "is not much of a problem." The latter figure is little changed from two years ago (33%). Prior to the Sept. 11 attacks, just 23% thought that China was not much of a problem for the U.S.

Finally, the public remains divided over the impact of free trade. A 47% plurality believes

NAFTA and other free trade agreements have been a good thing for the United States, while 34% say they have been a bad thing. Yet Americans are far less positive about the personal impact of such trade deals 34% say their financial situation has been helped, compared with 41% who say they have been hurt by free trade agreements. Further, protecting jobs now ranks as highly as a foreign policy priority as it did in the early 1990s.

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