PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Americans on the U.S. Role in the World

A STUDY OF U.S. PUBLIC ATTITUDES

Conducted by the Program for Public Consultation, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland

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INTRODUCTION

With the transition to a new administration, numerous questions are being debated about the proper role for the United States in the world. Many of these questions were also debated during the 2016 presidential election. Among the factors that have entered into these debates have been assumptions about American public opinion. The aim of this study is to test these assumptions and to give the American public a greater voice in these debates.

It is common to assume that the views expressed by the winning candidate are reflective of general public opinion. However, this is a problematic assumption. Foreign policy is only one small factor influencing voting. And in the case of the 2016 election there is further ambiguity because one candidate won the Electoral College, while the other won the popular vote.

A more reliable method is to ask the public directly. In the current study we have also emphasized trend line questions (i.e., questions that have been asked in previous polls) to determine if there have been shifts in US public opinion.

Perhaps the most central debate has been whether the US should reduce its engagement in world affairs. A widespread assertion is that the American public is going through an isolationist phase of wanting to substantially disengage.

More precisely, there have been debates about the nature of US engagement. For many decades there have been debates about how much the US should act unilaterally on the world stage, or embed its activities in cooperative forms and multilateral institutions. Because the US is so much more powerful than all other nations, the prospect of cooperative forms of engagement, while offering the possibility of burden sharing, also raises the possibility of constraints being imposed on America's freedom of action.

Another key debate has been about the priority that the US has placed on collective security agreements. Most prominent of these has been NATO. In light of Russia's growing assertiveness, questions have arisen about whether the US should or would be ready to defend NATO allies, especially newer ones, from possible Russian aggression. A widely repeated assumption is that, with the Cold War fading into history, the American public would not be ready to stomach committing US military assets to such an effort.

Beyond NATO, there are other alliance commitments the US has made. And more generally, by being a member of the United Nations, the US has committed itself to a broader post-World War II international order built on the principle of collective security, which calls for nations to defend other members from aggression. As these postwar arrangements become older, the question arises of whether the American public still stands behind them.

These issues also point to the question of what kind of military capabilities the US should have. Historically, the US has sized its capabilities on the assumption that it should be able to meet its alliance commitments on its own. However, some have argued that the US can relax this requirement in favor of the assumption that the US would be participating in a multilateral effort. Finally, there is a debate about to what degree the US should have a global orientation, and how much it should focus more narrowly on its own national interests. To some extent, this debate is about the question of whether a global orientation is the best way to serve US interests. But there is also a debate about whether the US has a moral obligation to try to improve conditions in the world, whether or not this serves US interests.

METHODOLOGY

To bring the public's voice into these debates, the Program for Public Consultation has conducted a series of three surveys. Most of the questions discussed in this report were from the survey conducted December 22-28, with a representative sample of 2,980 adult Americans (margin of error +/- 1.8%). The survey was fielded online by Nielsen Scarborough, drawing from its probability-based national panel, which was recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of households.

In addition, several questions were drawn from the two other surveys conducted earlier in the month with

samples of 1,630 and 1,633. These too were fielded by Nielsen Scarborough.

KEY FINDINGS

Contrary to recurring themes in the recent presidential campaign, this study found no evidence that the American public has tired of international engagement and is going through a phase of isolationism. There was no majority support for reducing US engagement in the world, or criticism of the level of engagement on the part of the Obama administration. However, there was support for greater emphasis on cooperative and multilateral forms of international engagement and significant dissatisfaction arising from the perception that the US plays a dominant and disproportionate role in world affairs.

As the Cold War has receded into history, there have been many concerns about whether the American public still has the stomach to sustain its military alliance commitments, especially to NATO, and will uphold the collective security system based in the United Nations. However, it appears that support for participation in NATO, including the commitment to protect allies from aggression, is still quite strong. There has been no recent softening of the unfavorable views of Russia and little readiness to accept Russia's annexation of Crimea. Support for participation in the UN-based international collective security system is also strong.

Americans support having US military capacities commensurate with these commitments to help protect countries, but want the requirements for US capacities limited to what is needed to act multilaterally. Overwhelming majorities think other countries rely too much on US capacities and want allies to increase their contributions so that the US can reduce its capacities.

Another key question that emerged in the 2016 campaign was whether US foreign policy should be guided by global considerations or should be strictly guided by US national interests. Most Americans say that global considerations should play a major role and see the questions as a false choice, responding favorably to the idea that doing what's best for the world will ultimately serve US interests. Overwhelming majorities agree that US foreign policy should take into account the views and interests of other nations, and that building cooperative relationships serves US interests, over the view that the US should simply focus on its interests.

Americans also go further and advocate having a globally altruistic dimension to US foreign policy. Very large majorities favor providing humanitarian aid and development assistance, and say that aid should not be limited to areas of the world where the US has security interests. Americans' sphere of concern does not accord sharply with national boundaries, as concern for suffering abroad is only slightly lower than it is for suffering within the United States.

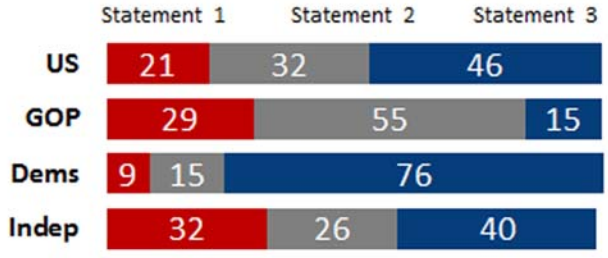
US ENGAGEMENT IN WORLD AFFAIRS

Contrary to recurring themes in the recent presidential campaign, this study found no evidence that the American public has tired of international engagement and is going through a phase of isolationism. There was no majority support for reducing US engagement in the world, or criticism of the level of engagement on the part of the Obama administration. However, there was support for greater emphasis on cooperative and multilateral forms of international engagement and significant dissatisfaction arising from the perception that the US plays a dominant and disproportionate role in world affairs.

Only one in five said that under the Obama administration the US has been too engaged in world affairs, while one in three (and a slight majority of Republicans) think it has not been engaged enough. The most common view, held by nearly half, is that the level of engagement has been about right.

Overall, would you say that under the Obama administration the US has been:

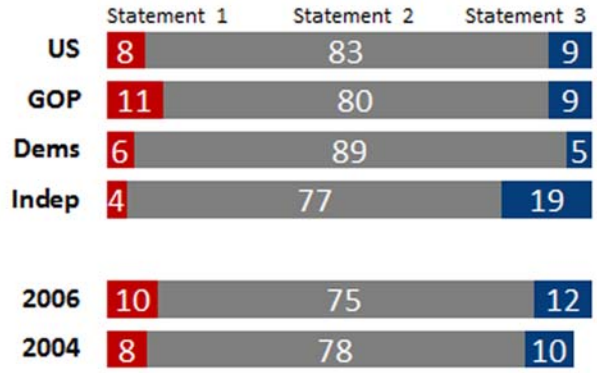
1. Too engaged in world affairs
2. Not engaged enough in world affairs
3. Engaged about the right amount in world affairs



Asked a broader trend line question about what role the US should play role in solving international problems, less than one in ten want the US to withdraw from most efforts to solve international problems. Yet only one in ten favor the US being the preeminent world leader in solving international issues. Rather, overwhelming and bipartisan majorities favor the US participating in cooperative efforts to solve international problems.

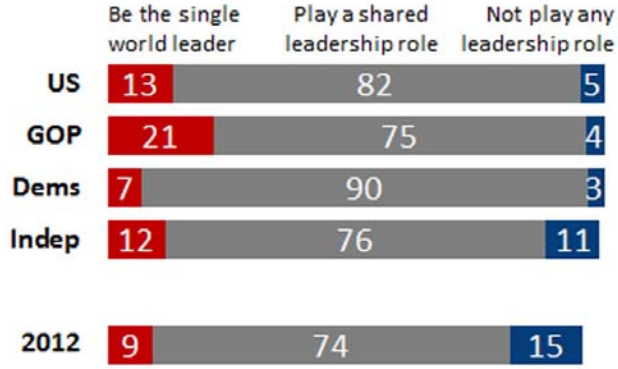
Which statement comes closest to your position?

1. As the sole remaining superpower, the U.S. should continue to be the preeminent world leader in solving international problems
2. The US should do its share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries
3. The US should withdraw from most efforts to solve international problems.



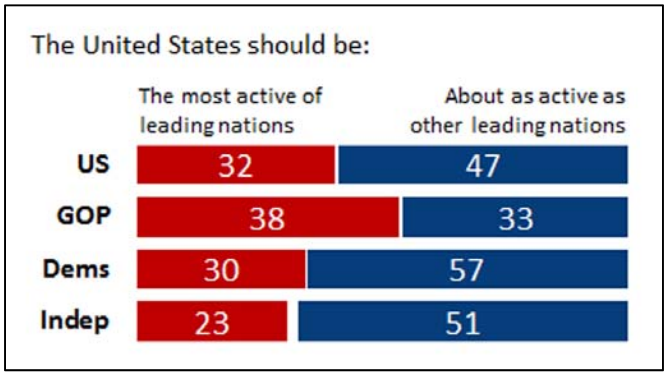
Similarly, when asked what kind of leadership role the US should play, less than one in ten said that the US should play no leadership role. Just above one in ten said the US should be the single world leader, while eight in ten said the US should play a shared leadership role.

What kind of leadership role should the United States play in the world? Should it:



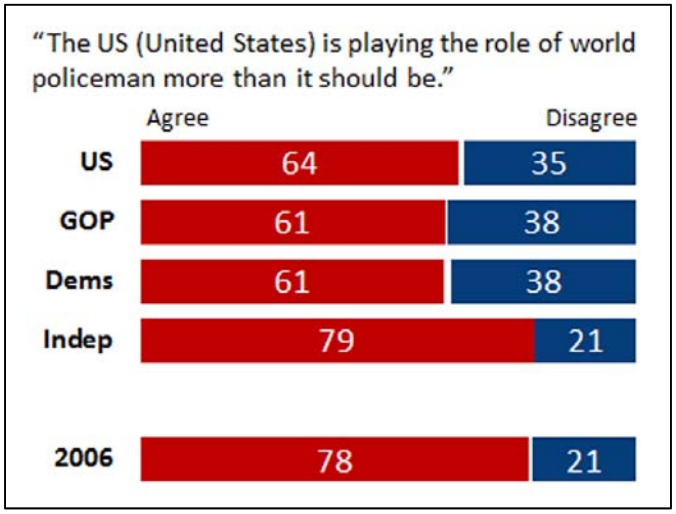
Those who said the US should play a shared leadership role were also asked to choose between two more specific options. Just a third of the full sample said the US should be the most active of leading nations, while nearly half said the US should be about as active as

other leading nations.

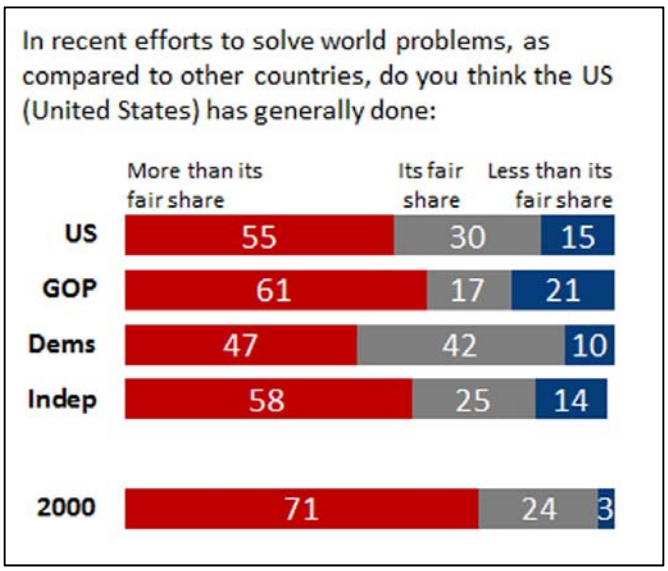


Reservations about US Playing Dominant and Disproportionate Role

While supporting international engagement, large majorities also express reservations about how much the US plays a dominant or hegemonic role. Nearly two-thirds agreed that the US plays the role of world policeman more than it should--a view held by more than six in ten Republicans and Democrats, and 8 in 10 independents. This view though has declined 12 points since it was last asked in 2012.



A majority also said that in recent efforts to solve international problems, the US has done more than its fair share, with Republicans holding this view substantially more than Democrats. Here again, this perception is substantially lower than when previously asked in 2000, the last year of the Clinton administration.



US PARTICIPATION IN COLLECTIVE SECURITY AGREEMENTS

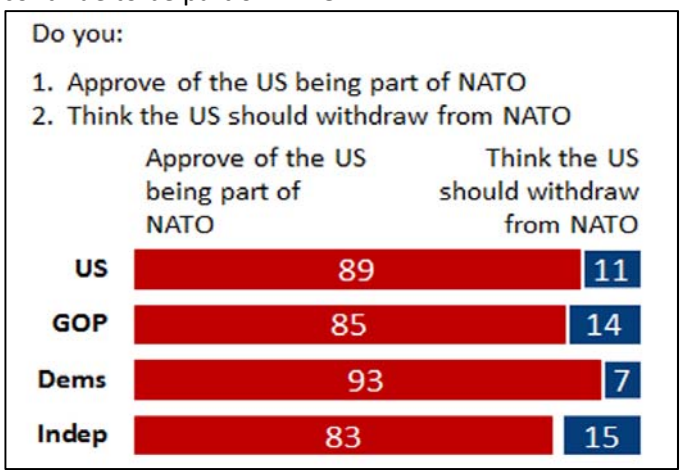
As the Cold War has receded into history, there have been many concerns about whether the American public still has the stomach to sustain its military alliance commitments, especially to NATO, and will uphold the collective security system based in the United Nations. However, it appears that support for participation in NATO, including the commitment to protect allies from aggression, is still quite strong. There has been no recent softening of the unfavorable views of Russia and little readiness to accept Russia's annexation of Crimea. Support for participation in the UN-based international collective security system is also strong.

Americans support having US military capacities commensurate with these commitments to help protect countries, but want the requirements for US capacities limited to what is needed to act multilaterally. Overwhelming majorities think other countries rely too much on US capacities and want allies to increase their contributions so that the US can reduce its capacities.

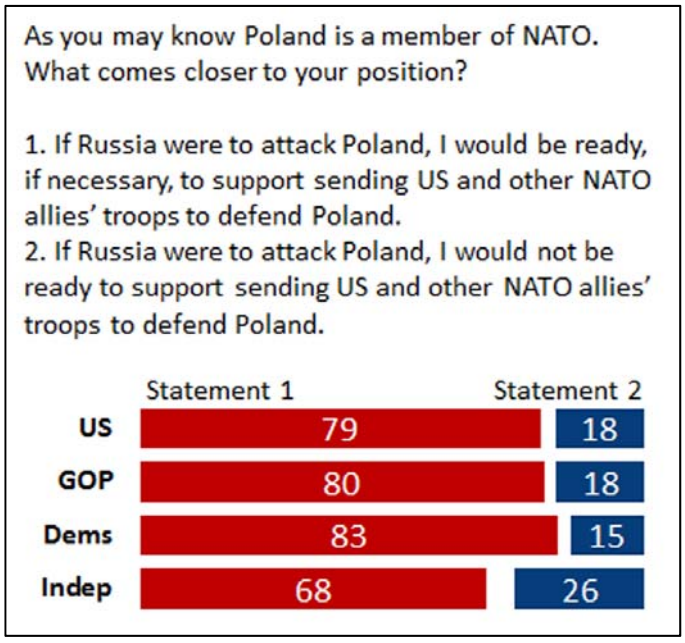
US Participation in NATO

When respondents were reminded that being part of the NATO military alliance means that "if any outside country, such as Russia, were to attack any member of NATO, all NATO members, including the US, would be obliged to contribute military forces to help defend the

member attacked," eight in ten said that the US should continue to be part of NATO.

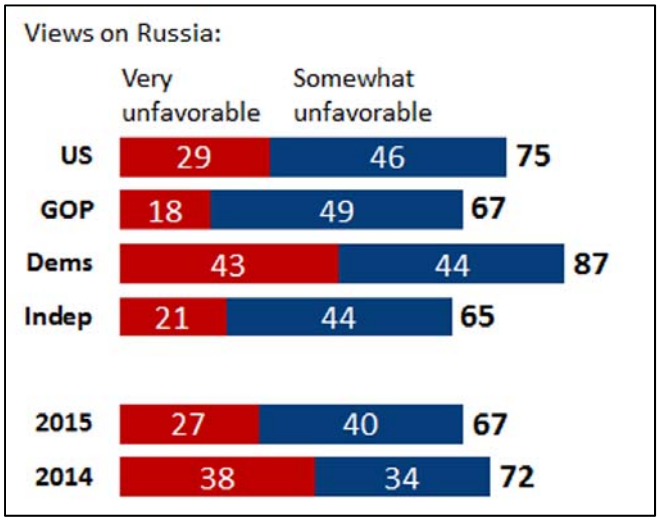


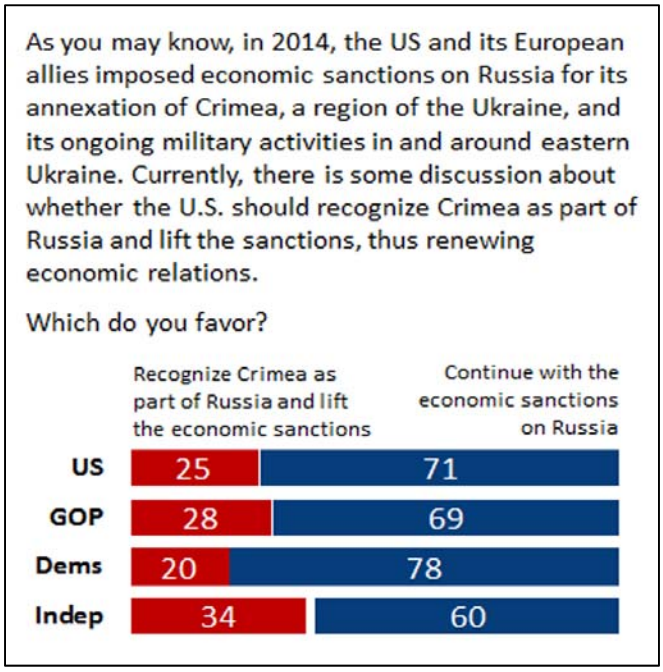
Presented a scenario in which Russia were to attack Poland, 79% said they would be ready, if necessary, "to support sending US and other NATO allies' troops to defend Poland."



Continuing Negative Views of Russia

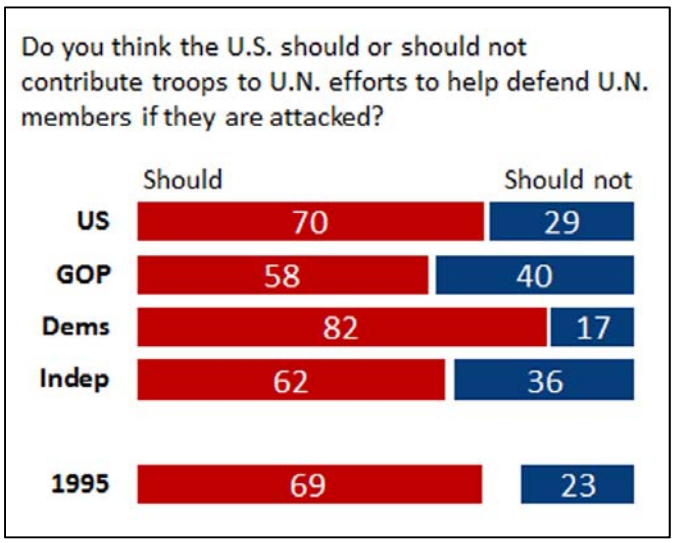
Few Americans have responded to the warming signals between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. Three quarters continue to have an unfavorable view of Russia. Only one in four favor recognizing Crimea as part of Russia and lifting economic sanctions imposed in response to Russia's annexation, while seven in ten favor continuing the sanctions.





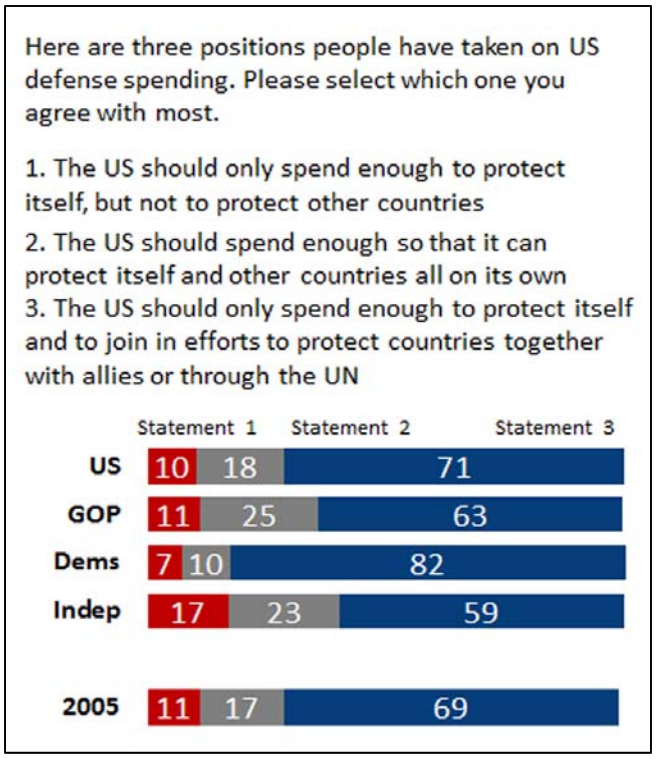
UN-Based International Collective Security System

More broadly, Americans continue to support the international collective security system based in the UN. Respondents were told that the UN was established on the principle of collective security, which calls for members to come to the defense of another member when attacked. Though they were also presented the argument that the US should not contribute troops to such defense efforts because this would put US troops at risk and the effort would not necessarily be related to US interests, a large majority said the US should contribute troops to such UN efforts.

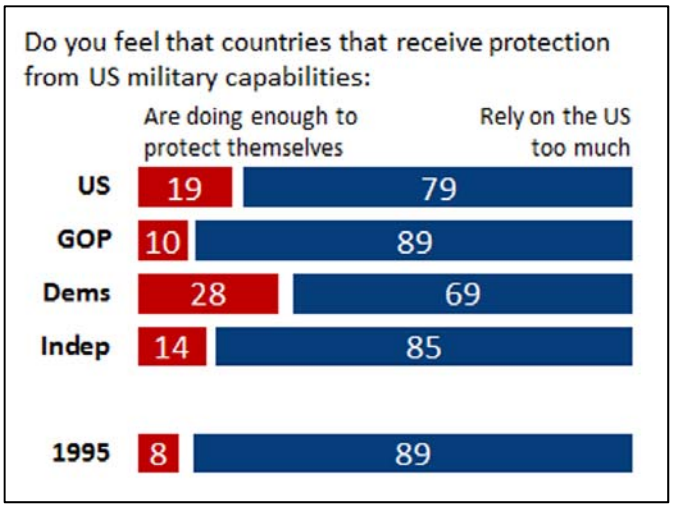


US Military Capacities in Support of Collective Security Commitments

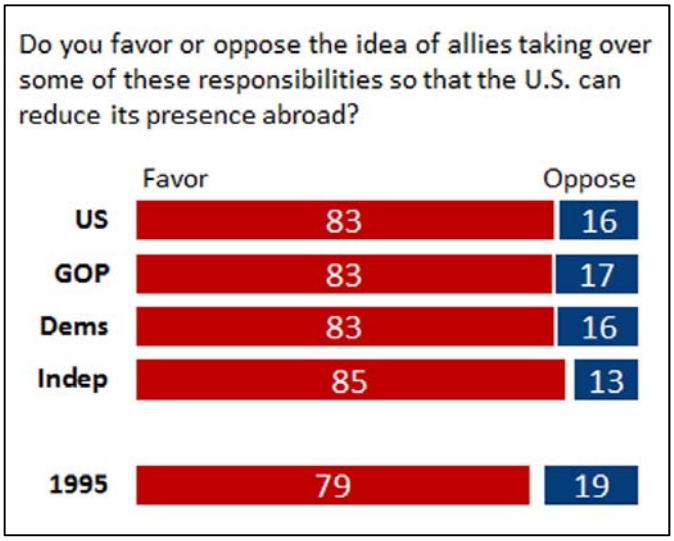
Consistent with these commitments, Americans support the US having a robust military capacity that goes well beyond self-defense. Only one in ten say that US defense capabilities should be sized to just protect the US. On the other hand, only one in five think US military capabilities should be sized to the requirement that the US be capable of protecting allies on its own. Rather, seven in ten say that the US should have the capabilities to join in collective efforts to protect countries from aggression.



In this context Americans are not satisfied that other countries are keeping up their end of the collective security arrangement. Eight in ten complain that the countries that receive US military protection rely too much on the US.



Perhaps most significant, 83% favor allies taking over more responsibilities so that the US can reduce its presence abroad.



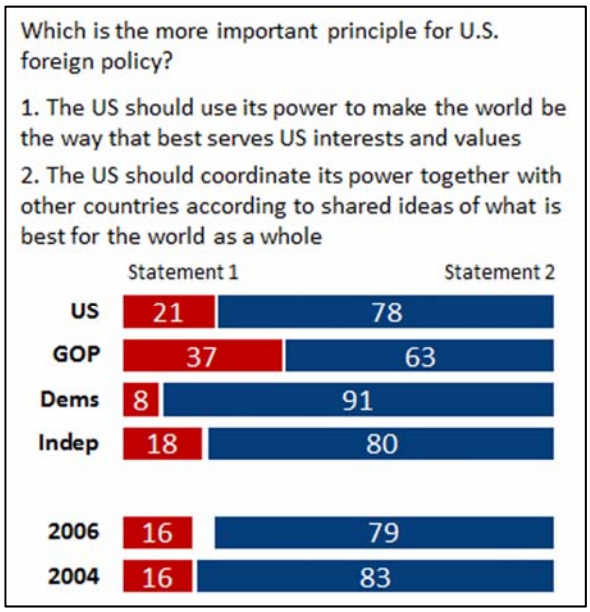
SUPPORT FOR GLOBAL ORIENTATION

Another key question that emerged in the 2016 campaign was whether US foreign policy should be guided by global considerations or should be strictly guided by US national interests. Most Americans say that global considerations should play a major role and see the questions as a false choice, responding favorably to the idea that doing what's best for the world will ultimately serve US interests.

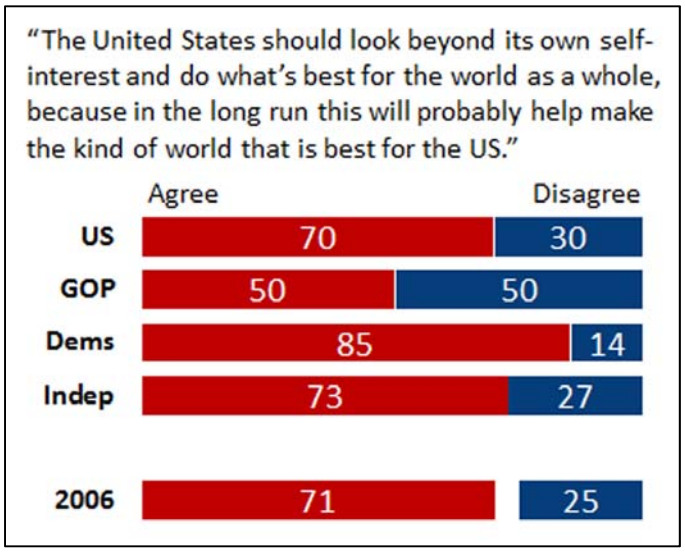
Overwhelming majorities agree that US foreign policy should take into account the views and interests of other nations, and that building cooperative relationships serves US interests, over the view that the US should simply focus on its interests.

Americans also go further and advocate having a globally altruistic dimension to US foreign policy. Very large majorities favor providing humanitarian aid and development assistance, and say that aid should not be limited to areas of the world where the US has security interests. Americans' sphere of concern does not accord sharply with national boundaries, as concern for suffering abroad is only slightly lower than it is for suffering within the United States.

When asked to choose between the propositions that US foreign policy should be primarily driven by national interests and values, or that it should be coordinated with other nations according to shared ideas about what is best for the world as a whole, the latter is selected by an overwhelming majority.

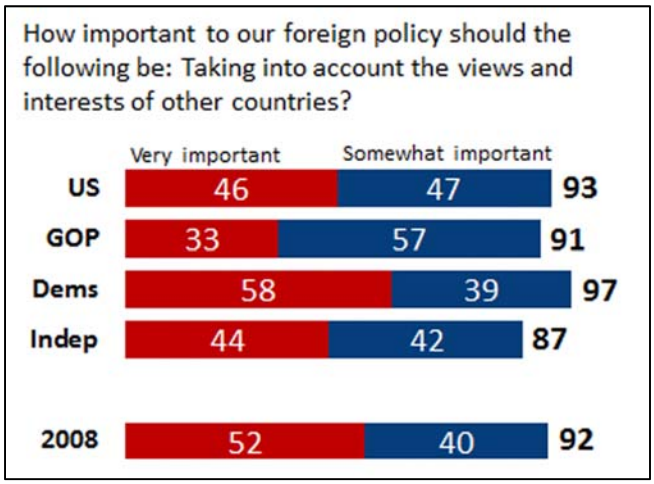


A large majority, though a lesser one, also agrees with the argument that the US should seek to do what is best for the world as a whole because this will likely result in the kind of world that is best for the US. Republicans, though, are divided on the question.

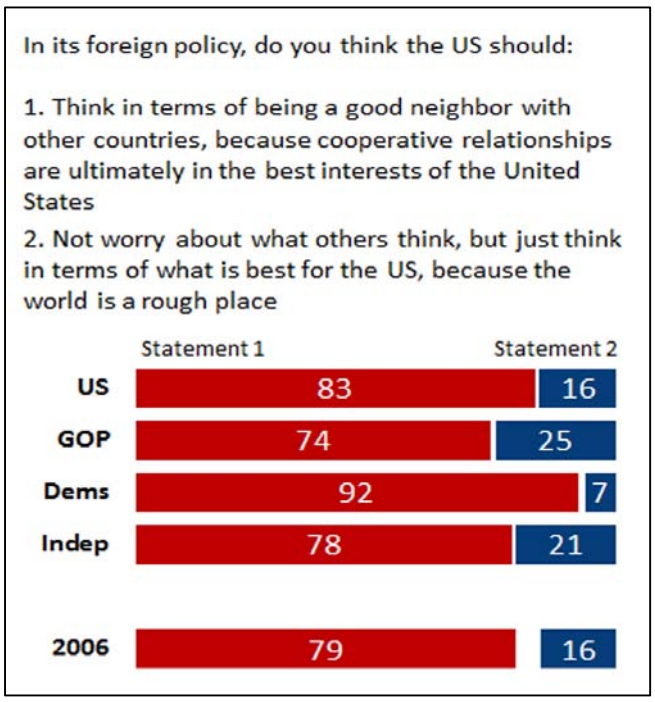


Being Responsive to Other Countries

Overwhelming majorities say it is important for US foreign policy to take into account the views and interests of other countries, with nearly half saying it is very important.

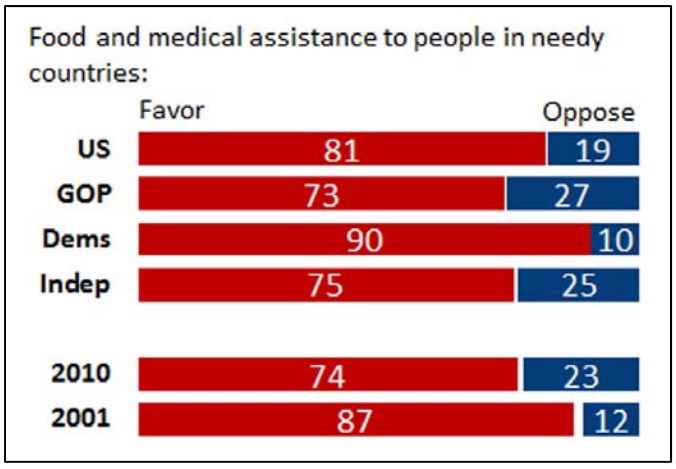


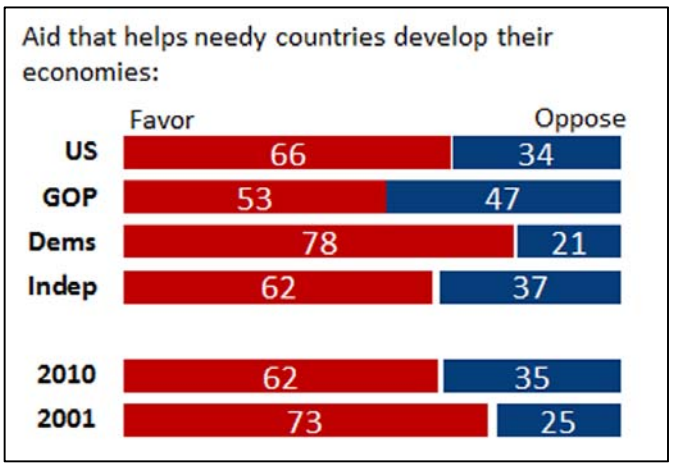
When presented a pair of opposed arguments on the topic, overwhelming majorities rejected the argument that in its foreign policy, the US should not worry about what others think and only think about US interests--in favor of the argument that cooperative relationships are ultimately in the best interests of the US.



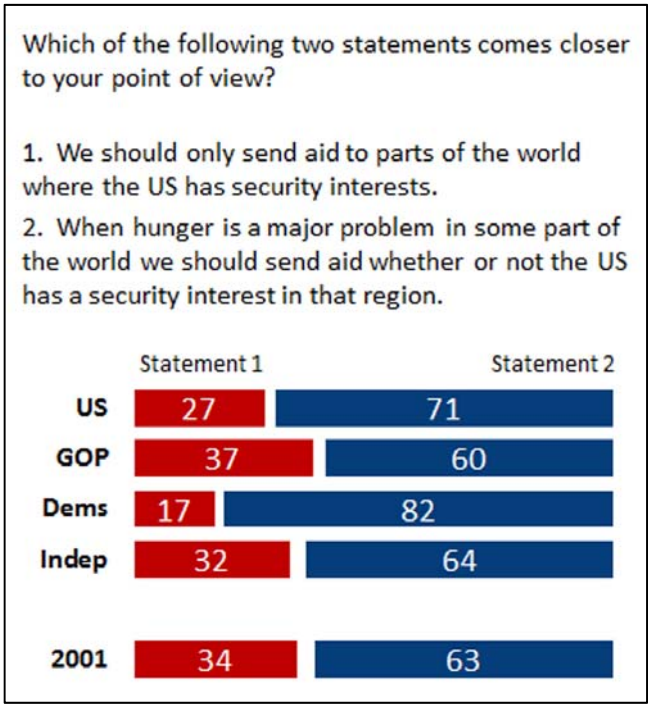
Giving Foreign Aid

Over and above being oriented to global considerations and the view of other nations, Americans also advocate having a globally altruistic dimension to US foreign policy. Overwhelming majorities favor the US giving humanitarian aid to people in needy countries. Meanwhile, a large majority of Americans, though a much smaller majority of Republicans, favor providing development assistance.



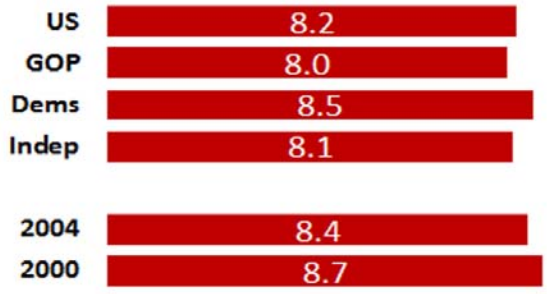


A large majority affirmed that US aid should not be limited to areas of the world where the US has security interests. This majority has grown since this question was last asked in 2000.



Americans' sphere of concern does not accord sharply with national boundaries. When asked how much it troubles them to hear that children are hungry in some part of the US, their level of concern was only a bit higher than it was when asked about hungry children *outside* the US.

When you hear that children are hungry in some part of the U.S., how much does this trouble you? Please answer on the scale below (0-10).



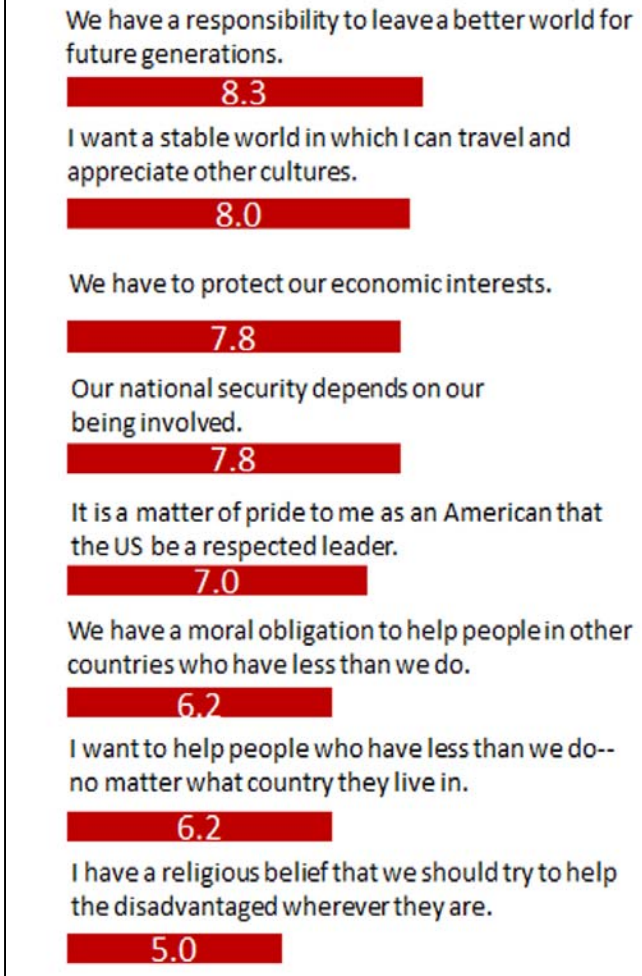
When you hear that children are hungry in some part of the world, outside of the US, how much does that trouble you? Please answer on the scale below (0-10).

Two-thirds agree with the statement "I regard myself as a citizen of the world as well as a citizen of the United States."

Finally, when asked why the US should be active in world affairs and given a list of possible reasons, Americans respond favorably to altruistic and globally-oriented reasons as well as ones based on national interests.

Reasons for Engagement

How important is each of the following to you personally as a reason for the United States to be active in world affairs? (0-10 scale used, with 0 meaning not at all important to 10 meaning very important. Mean scores reported.)



Assessing the Iran Nuclear Deal

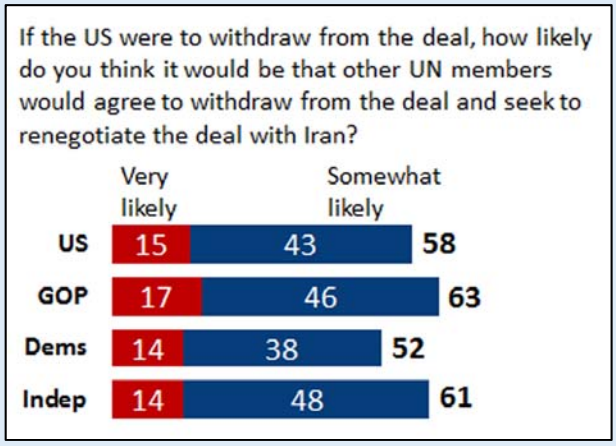
President-elect Donald Trump has proposed that the US withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran and seek to renegotiate a deal with better terms. Because this is the kind of topic for which many Americans do not have enough information to give a meaningful response, respondents went through a 'policymaking simulation' – a survey method that gives the respondent enough information to put themselves in the shoes of a policymaker and come to judgment on the issue.

Respondents were first presented the main terms of the deal that was negotiated between the UN Security Council (plus Germany) and Iran over its nuclear program, and asked to evaluate an argument for and against withdrawing and an argument for continuing with the deal.

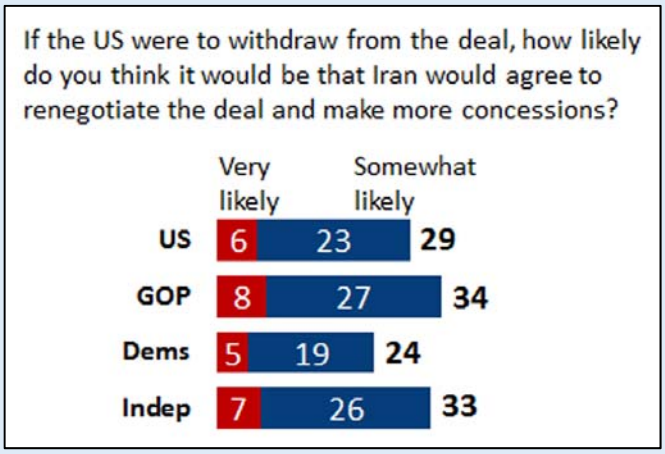
The argument in favor of withdrawing from the deal emphasized that the deal still allows Iran to enrich uranium and only limits this enrichment for 10-15 years, leaving it in a position to break out of the deal and seek to acquire a nuclear weapon. Thus it would make sense to pull out of the deal and seek to negotiate terms that put greater limits on Iran. This argument was found convincing by 52%, including 73% of Republicans and 34% of Democrats.

The argument in favor of continuing with the deal emphasized that it does place limits on Iran, preventing it from acquiring a nuclear weapon, and that other countries are not likely to follow the US lead if it pulls out and seeks to renegotiate. This argument was found convincing by 63%, including 47% of Republicans and 79% of Democrats.

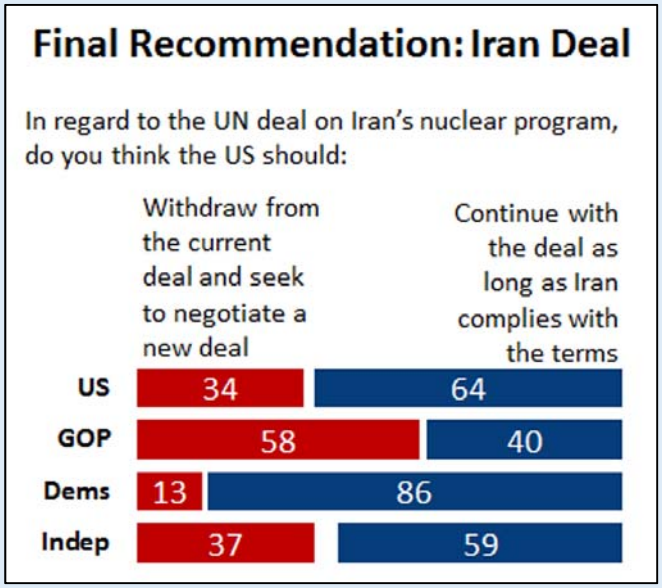
Respondents were asked how optimistic they were that other UN members could be persuaded to join in the effort to renegotiate. Overall 58% thought it was likely.



They were then asked how likely it was that Iran would agree to renegotiate the deal and make more concessions. In this case nearly seven in ten were pessimistic. This was a bipartisan perspective that included 64% of Republicans as well as 75% of Democrats.



When asked for their final recommendation, 64 percent recommended continuing with the deal as long as Iran continues to comply with the terms, while 34 percent opted for withdrawing and seeking to negotiate a better deal.



Interestingly, a majority of Republicans (58%) supported seeking renegotiation, though even among those who favored renegotiation 60% said it was unlikely that the negotiations would succeed.

PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

The **Program for Public Consultation** seeks to improve democratic governance by consulting the citizenry on key public policy issues governments face. It has developed innovative survey methods that simulate the process that policymakers go through—getting a briefing, hearing arguments, dealing with tradeoffs—before coming to their conclusion. It also uses surveys to help find common ground between conflicting parties. The Program for Public Consultation is part of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland.

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