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How Elites and the Public See U.S. Foreign Policy

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Many observers of U.S. foreign policy have long been concerned about the gap between the policy preferences of the public and the actions of the country's leaders. Over time, this disconnect may undermine Washington's ability to project power and confidence internationally, while creating democratic accountability issues at home. As Benjamin Page and Marshall Bouton warned in *The Foreign Policy Disconnect*, a "lack of public support for official foreign policy can send bad signals to international adversaries, constrain policy choices, upset policy continuity, and destabilize political leadership." Two recent surveys by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs shed new light on the potential gap in foreign policy attitudes between the elite and the public. The [first](#) ^[1] polled average U.S. citizens, and the [second](#) ^[2] surveyed foreign policy leaders from government, academic institutions, media organizations, think tanks, and interest groups. The ambitious project marks the first major survey of its kind in over a decade.

These surveys reveal significant overlap and differences in the foreign policy opinion of these two groups. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and two costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the public's overall support for an active U.S. role in global affairs has weakened even as U.S. foreign policy elites continue to prefer active international engagement. At the same time, there remain important areas of agreement that could help build a sustainable global role for the United States in the future.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

Although many headlines this past year argued that the United States is in decline, U.S. public and foreign policy leaders agree that the nation is still the most influential in the world today, and that strong U.S. leadership in the world is at least somewhat desirable. The public rated the United States an 8.6 out of 10 in terms of its influence, compared to a 9.1 out of 10 among foreign policy leaders. Both groups also agreed on the most important goals for U.S. foreign policy: to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, secure energy supplies, and combat international terrorism. Majorities

of both groups describe international terrorism as a “critical” threat, and both groups favored drone strikes, assassinations of individual terrorist leaders, and air strikes against training camps and facilities as means of fighting terrorism.

When it comes to dealing with threats to international security, there is limited enthusiasm in either group for the use of force in the Syria and Ukraine conflicts, outside of peacekeeping efforts. Only 17 percent of the public, and less than ten percent of leaders, support sending U.S. troops to Syria. At the time the survey was conducted, Russia had already annexed Crimea, but fighting in eastern Ukraine had not yet escalated. Only about 30 percent of both the public and elites favored sending U.S. troops to defend Ukraine if Russia invaded additional Ukrainian territory. A minority of respondents from both surveys perceived Russia’s territorial ambitions as a “critical” threat.

Foreign policy leaders and the public also hold similar views on the value of many key international institutions and agreements. About 60 percent of elites and the public believe that the United States should be more willing to make decisions within the United Nations, even if this means that outcomes may sometimes go against the Washington’s first choice for action. In this regard, there is a considerable partisan split, however, with Republicans being less supportive of UN decision-making. More than 80 percent of elites on both sides of the aisle favored preserving or increasing the U.S. commitment to NATO. Support was nearly as strong among the general public.

There is also broad support among the public and foreign policy leaders on trade and globalization. Despite the consequences of the 2008 economic crisis, two-thirds of the overall public and an even larger majority of elites say that globalization is “mostly good” for the United States. The Trans-Pacific Partnership and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership both enjoy explicit support across both groups, as well as international trade agreements more broadly. Going a step further, many in the U.S. support building trade ties with Asia and cooperating with a rising China. Both surveys found that the United States perceives China as a significant challenge for U.S. foreign policy, but advocated engagement and friendly cooperation instead of hostility.

AGREEING TO DISAGREE

Although the public and elites might agree in key areas, there are still important gaps in their foreign policy views. Most notably, leaders see more benefit to the United States taking an active part in world affairs than the public. Only 58 percent of average citizens believe that more global engagement is best for the future of the country, compared to 93 percent of leaders. This is the lowest reading for the general public on the question of U.S. international engagement in any Chicago Council public survey since 1982.

On balance, the public is more concerned than leaders about economic security issues, such as protecting jobs, reducing U.S. dependence on foreign oil, and curbing immigration. Only a few leaders, for example, consider controlling and limiting U.S. immigration as a “very important” foreign policy goal regardless of their party affiliation, whereas about half of the public does.

The survey also reveals important differences over when the United States should use military force. Elites generally supported the use of force to defend Asian and European allies if attacked, but less than half of the public agreed. Two-thirds or more of all leaders favor using U.S. troops to defend South Korea if North Korea attacks it or to defend NATO’s Baltic allies in the event of an attack from Russia. In contrast, the public is more hawkish on using military force to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

On other national security issues, the public is more supportive than leaders of intrusive intelligence surveillance methods. About three-fifths of leaders think that greater restrictions should be placed on the National Security Agency, but only about a third of the public supports such restrictions. Despite revelations by Edward Snowden about the National Security Agency’s data collection program, the

public has remained largely supportive of surveillance efforts to keep the country safe. Similar to past Chicago Council survey results, foreign policy opinion leaders are also more likely than the general public to see the benefits of economic aid to other nations: three in four leaders favor maintaining or expanding foreign economic programs, compared to just a third of the overall public.

THE PERSISTENT DIVIDE

Divergent opinions between elites and the public are overlaid by partisan politics, as well. There is strong bipartisan agreement for that United States remaining actively engaged in international affairs, but the surveys suggest deepening partisan disagreement over what form this engagement should take. Republican and Democratic leaders are sharply divided over whether defense spending should be expanded, and whether maintaining international military superiority should be an important U.S. foreign policy goal. Republican leaders are largely opposed to signing new international agreements such as the UN Arms Trade Treaty and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, while Democratic leaders are largely in favor of them. Most striking, over 97 percent of Democratic leaders support a new international agreement on climate change, compared to just 43 percent of Republican leaders.

Foreign policy leaders within each party also diverge from their own party bases on a number of issues. For example, a majority of Republican leaders hold the view that the wars in Iraq (53 percent) and Afghanistan (77 percent) were worth the costs, a view that is far out of step with the rest of opinion data for both leaders at-large the public. This view is out of step with the Republican Party base as well: only a minority of rank-and-file Republicans agrees that these wars were worth their costs. Eighty-four percent of Democratic leaders believe that limiting climate change should be a very important foreign policy goal, compared to 54 percent of self-described Democrats within the public.

LOOKING AHEAD

The events of the recent past, including persistent economic stress and over a decade of military conflicts, have eroded public support for a robust internationalist strategy, if not professional support. Compared to the outlook of U.S. leaders, public support for international engagement is increasingly qualified by a desire to avoid costly new commitments and military interventions that involve high risks to U.S. soldiers. Yet despite the finding a record low number of U.S. citizens expressing a desire to play an active part in world affairs, the public continues to support the core foreign policy tools of international engagement. Public support for an expansive international role, however, can no longer be taken for granted.

Foreign policy is also likely to play a complex role in the 2016 elections. Some see a looming foreign policy election given the improved state of the US economy and ongoing concerns in the Middle East over ISIS. These estimates come on the heels of exit poll data suggesting that foreign policy concerns were the top issue for 13 percent of the electorate during the 2014 midterm elections, up from 5 percent in 2012. If foreign policy does not steal the spotlight again in 2016, leaders will have more latitude to pursue policies and priorities that diverge from the public's interest. However, if dramatic events occur that vault foreign policy back in to the spotlight, leaders will be driven to demonstrate results that keep the country safe and shore up America's economy. Under such circumstances, we can expect partisan political entrepreneurs to exploit differences for electoral gain. Whether or not that political angling helps the United States on the global stage remains to be seen. A strong economy will make jockeying over foreign policy positions an engaging display during debates, even if the majority of the public remains focused on issues at home.

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[1] <http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/survey/2014/>

[2] <http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/united-goals-divided-means>