

Public Opinion in India and America

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Indians Have Positive Views of U.S. and Bush

Indians More Positive Than Americans on China

By Angela Stephens

As President George W. Bush arrives in India on his first visit to the world's second most populous country, he is encountering a population that consistently has had more positive views of the United States and the president himself than most countries.

In a nationwide poll of Indians conducted by the Indian polling organization C-Voter for BBC World Service in November, 44 percent said their view of U.S. influence in the world was mainly positive, while just 17 percent said it was mainly negative (the remaining 39 percent said neither, it depends or did not answer). Indians' view of the United States was more positive than the average of 33 nations asked that question, which was 40 percent positive, 41 percent negative.

In a December 2004 BBC World Service poll (this time limited to urban populations), 54 percent said the U.S. influence in the world was mainly positive, while 30 percent said it was mainly negative.

Indian views were even more favorable when they were asked about the United States per se (as distinguished from the US role in the world). A Pew Global Attitudes survey of Indians (also limited to urban populations) last May found 71 percent said they had a favorable view of the United States, while 17 percent had an unfavorable view. Indians' view of the United States was the most favorable of all 17 countries surveyed except the United States itself. Indians' favorable view of the United States was up from 2002, when 54 percent said in a Pew poll that they viewed the United States favorably.

Most Indians believe the United States considers the interests of countries like India in making international policy decisions—a view held by relatively few countries. A Pew Global Attitudes survey of Indians last May found that 63 percent felt the United States takes into account the interests of countries like theirs (42% a fair amount, 21% a great deal). A quarter (26%) said the United States does not take such interests into account (16% not too much, 10% not much at all). This represents a positive shift from 2002, when 38 percent said the United States takes such interests into account (25% a fair amount, 13% a great deal), and 31 percent said it does not (17% not too much, 14% not much at all).

At the same time, most Indians do not want the United States to remain the sole military superpower in the world. When asked in the Pew poll if it would be better if Europe,

China or another country became as powerful as the United States, 81 percent said yes. Only 15 percent wanted the United States to remain the sole military superpower.

Indian Views of President Bush

President Bush also gets relatively high marks from Indians. In the May 2005 Pew poll, 54 percent of Indians said they have “a lot” or “some” confidence in Bush “to do the right thing regarding world affairs”—a higher rating than all other countries except the United States itself.

In July 2004, GlobeScan and the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) asked Indians who they would prefer to win the presidential election and they were evenly divided—Bush 33 percent, Kerry 34 percent (urban only). This set India apart from most other countries polled—30 of 35 countries favored Kerry.

Once Bush was elected, views became even more positive. In December 2004, a BBC World Service poll asked Indians how they felt about Bush being reelected (urban only) and 62 percent said they felt it was positive for peace and security in the world, with 27 percent saying it was negative.

Americans’ Views of India

When asked whether India is having a positive or negative influence in the world, the U.S. public leans slightly to a positive view. The November 2005 poll for BBC World Service found 39 percent saying that India is having a positive influence, while 35 percent said it is having a negative influence.

However, when asked whether they have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of India per se, American views are more definitely positive. When Gallup asked this question in February 2006, 66 percent said they had a favorable view and just 23 percent said they had a negative view. Over the last five years, favorable views have grown. In 2000, only 47 percent had a favorable view, while 38 percent had a negative view.

Americans also perceive relations with India as being friendly. When Harris in August 2005 asked respondents to characterize India’s relations with the United States, a robust 62 percent rated India as friendly (42%) or a close ally (20%). Just 23 percent rated India as not friendly (20%) or an enemy (3%).

Naturally the question arises why views of India in terms of favorability and its relations with the United States are so much more positive than views of India’s influence in the world. Questions that ask about favorability often draw on a wider range of factors than a country’s foreign policy and India has long held a certain fascination for Americans. Relations between the United States and India are also quite friendly right now. But when asked to consider India’s influence in the world, these positive attitudes may be muted by memories of India’s acquisition of nuclear weapons and its confrontations with Pakistan.

Indian and American Views of China

Like most countries, Indians are quite positive about China, in contrast to Americans' unusually negative views. In the November 2005 BBC poll, 44 percent of Indians said China's influence in the world is mainly positive (15% negative), similar to the average among the 35 countries polled—45 percent positive, 27 percent negative. On the other hand, 53 percent of Americans said China's influence is mainly negative, while just 35 percent positive said it was mainly positive.

India and the United States also differ on their assessment of China's potential military power. While 78 percent of Americans polled by Pew in May 2005 think it would be a bad thing if China becomes militarily as strong as the US (13% good), Indians are divided on the question (45% good, 45% bad).

Both Indians and Americans tend to believe their country could benefit from China's economic growth, however. A majority of 53 percent in India said it would be good (36% bad), and a plurality of 49 percent in the United States said it would be good (40% bad).

Indian and American Views of the United Nations

Both Indians and Americans view the United Nations' influence in the world as more positive than negative, and majorities of both populations would see the U.N. becoming significantly more powerful in the world as a mainly positive change.

A majority of Americans (52%) said in the BBC poll in November 2005 that the U.N.'s influence is mainly positive, while 36 percent said it is mainly negative. A plurality of Indians in the same poll, 44 percent, said the U.N. influence is mainly positive, while just 12 percent said it is mainly negative.

Majorities of Indians and Americans believe it would be a mainly positive change if the U.N. becomes significantly more powerful in world affairs. Fifty-nine percent of Americans and 55 percent of Indians said in the December 2004 BBC poll that this would be mainly positive (37% of Americans, 23% of Indians said it would be mainly negative).

Indians are more likely than Americans to support reform in the membership of the U.N. Security Council, where the United States has a permanent seat and India does not, and an end to permanent members' veto power. Nor surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of Indians, 88 percent, favor adding India as a permanent member to the council, while a slight majority of Americans, 51 percent, support that (19% of Americans and 1% of Indians oppose).

Three in four Indians (77%) favor ending veto power of U.N. Security Council permanent members when the other four permanent members support a decision, as do 57 percent of Americans (13% of Indians and 34% of Americans oppose it).