

U.S. Public Perceptions of Foreign Policy Positions of Presidential Candidates

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Bush Supporters Misread Many of His Foreign Policy Positions

[Full Report](#)
[Questionnaire](#)

As the nation prepares to watch the presidential candidates debate foreign policy issues, a new PIPA-Knowledge Networks poll finds that Americans who plan to vote for President Bush have many incorrect assumptions about his foreign policy positions. Kerry supporters, on the other hand, are largely accurate in their assessments. The uncommitted also tend to misperceive Bush's positions, though to a smaller extent than Bush supporters, and to perceive Kerry's positions correctly.

Steven Kull, director of PIPA, comments: "What is striking is that even after nearly four years President Bush's foreign policy positions are so widely misread, while Senator Kerry, who is relatively new to the public and reputed to be unclear about his positions, is read correctly."

Majorities of Bush supporters incorrectly assumed that Bush favors including labor and environmental standards in trade agreements (84%), and the US being part of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (69%), the International Criminal Court (66%), the treaty banning land mines (72%), and the Kyoto Treaty on global warming (51%). They were divided between those who knew that Bush favors building a new missile defense system now (44%) and those who incorrectly believe he wishes to do more research until its capabilities are proven (41%). However, majorities were correct that Bush favors increased defense spending (57%) and wants the US, not the UN, to take the stronger role in developing Iraq's new government (70%).

Kerry supporters were much more accurate in assessing their candidate's positions on all these issues. Majorities knew that Kerry favors including labor and environmental standards in trade agreements (90%); the US being part of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (77%); the International Criminal Court (59%); the land mines treaty (79%); and the Kyoto Treaty on climate change (74%). They also knew that he favors continuing research on missile defense without deploying a system now (68%), and wants the UN, not the US, to take the stronger role in developing Iraq's new government (80%). A plurality of 43% was correct that Kerry favors keeping defense spending the same, with 35% assuming he wants to cut it and 18% to expand it.

Many of the uncommitted (those who say they are not very sure which candidate they will vote for) also misread Bush's position on most issues, though in most cases this was

a plurality, not a majority. The uncommitted incorrectly believed that Bush favors including labor and environmental standards in trade agreements (69%), the US being part of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (51%), the International Criminal Court (47% to 31%), the land mines treaty (50%), and the Kyoto treaty on global warming (45% to 37%). Only 35% knew that Bush favors building a new missile defense system now, while 36% incorrectly believed he wishes to do more research until its capabilities are proven, and 22% did not give an answer. Only 41% knew that Bush favors increased defense spending, while 49% incorrectly assumed he wants to keep it the same (29%) or cut it (20%). A plurality of 46% was correct that Bush wants the US, rather than the UN, to take the stronger role in developing Iraq's new government (37% assumed the UN).

The uncommitted were much more accurate in assessing Kerry's positions. Majorities knew that Kerry favors including labor and environmental standards in trade agreements (75%), and the US being part of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (60%), the land mines treaty (57%), and the Kyoto Treaty on global warming (54%), and wants the US, not the UN, to take the lead in developing Iraq's new government (71%). Pluralities correctly assumed that Kerry favors US participation in the International Criminal Court (49 to 30%) and that he favors doing more research until its effectiveness is proven (46%), with 26% assuming he does not want to build a system at all). Thirty-nine percent correctly assumed that he wants to keep defense spending the same, but 36% assumed that he wants to cut it.

PIPA selected these questions from those asked in polls by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations which dealt with issues on which the presidential candidates have taken clear and documented positions.

Two other issues, on which neither candidate's position can be definitively established, were also explored. One was in regard to how the US should deal with the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Bush supporters were divided about whether Bush favored taking Israel's side (43%) or taking neither side (45%), while the uncommitted leaned toward the view that Bush favored taking neither side (47%) more than taking Israel's side (30%). Kerry voters mostly assumed that Kerry favored taking neither side (68%), as did swing voters (58%).

On the question of whether, as a general rule, the US should contribute troops to UN peacekeeping operations, Bush supporters assumed that Bush would favor doing so (78%) as did Kerry supporters (58%) and a majority of the uncommitted (60%). Kerry supporters (73%) also assume that he would favor contributing to peacekeeping as do a bare majority of the uncommitted (51%). However, a plurality of Bush supporters (48%) assumes that Kerry would prefer to leave the job to other countries.

The poll was conducted with a nationwide sample of 959 respondents over September 8-12. The margin of error was plus or minus 3.2-4.0%, depending on whether the question was administered to two-thirds or the entire sample.

The poll was fielded by Knowledge Networks using its nationwide panel, which is randomly selected from the entire adult population and subsequently provided Internet access. For more information about this methodology, go to www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp.

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