

U.S. Public Rejects Using Military Force to Promote Democracy

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Rejects Democratization as Rationale for Iraq War

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[Questionnaire](#)

A new poll finds that a majority of Americans reject the idea of using military force to promote democracy. Only 35% favored using military force to overthrow dictators. Less than one in five favored the US threatening to use military force if countries do not institute democratic reforms.

The effort to promote democracy in Iraq is generating little enthusiasm. Seventy-four percent (including 60% of Republicans) said that the goal of overthrowing Iraq's authoritarian government and establishing a democracy was not a good enough reason to go to war. Seventy-two percent said that the experience there has made them feel worse about the possibility of using military force to bring about democracy in the future. Sixty-four percent (65% of Republicans) are ready to accept an Iraqi constitution that does not fully meet democratic standards and once the constitution is ratified 57% want to start withdrawing troops.

Steven Kull, director of PIPA comments, "More broadly most Americans do not appear to have been persuaded by President Bush's State of the Union argument that promoting democracy is a critical means for fighting terrorism and making the world safer." Only 26% agreed that when there are more democracies the world is safer and only 45% agreed that people in democracies are less likely to support terrorist groups. Even the view, popular among political scientists that democracies are less likely to go to war with each other was only endorsed by 46%. Republicans showed a bit more support for the benefits of democracy, but only by a few percentage points.

Americans are also not confident that democratic governments will be friendlier to the US. Only 42% assumed that when countries become more democratic they will be more likely to agree with US policies and only 26% assumed that if Saudi Arabia were to hold free elections the elected government would be friendlier to the US.

Some of these reservations seem to be derived from doubts about whether all countries are ready for democracy. While 78% said that democracy is the best form of government only 50% said that it is the best for all countries and only 28% believe that nearly all countries will become democracies.

Christopher Whitney, Director for Studies of the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, comments, "While Americans generally support the goal of promoting democracy, they take the pragmatic approach of not making it a top priority in all cases." Fifty-four

percent would refrain from pressing for greater democracy if there was a high likelihood elections would lead to an Islamic fundamentalist government.

The poll, a joint project of the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and the Program on International Policy Attitudes, was conducted by Knowledge Networks September 15-21 with a nationwide sample of 808 respondents (margin of error +/-3.5-4%).

Americans do favor the US promoting democracy through diplomatic and cooperative methods. Seventy-four percent favored helping emerging democracies with aid and technical assistance in conducting elections. Sixty-six percent favored sending monitors to certify that elections are conducted fairly and honestly. Nearly six in ten favor bringing student, journalists and political leaders from a variety of countries to the US to educate them on how democracy works.

Support is also strong for working multilaterally. Sixty-eight percent said that, when working to promote democracy, it is better to work through the UN because such efforts will be seen as more legitimate, while 25% said it is better for the US to act on its own because the US can act more decisively and effectively.

However support softens when it comes to using punitive or assertive methods for promoting democracy. Only about half favored pressuring various governments with economic sanctions such as reducing trade, with respondents divided on whether such sanction do more harm or more good. Just 36% thought that supporting dissidents in a non-democratic country does more good than harm and 35% favored the US supporting the pro-democracy movement in China. Thirty-nine percent favored putting greater pressure on countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt to become more democratic. Forty percent favored pressuring the Musharraf government of Pakistan to hold elections.

Support for using aid as a reward was much higher than withholding it as a punishment. Sixty-eight percent favored giving more aid to countries that are becoming more democratic, while just 44% favored withholding aid from a government that is not democratic or moving toward becoming democratic.

However, Americans do seem to favor taking a more assertive position when it comes to human rights. Asked about Burma, China, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, in every case about seven out of ten said the US should "put diplomatic pressure on the government to respect human rights, speak out against its human rights abuses, and encourage other countries to do the same."

Some of the reservations about pressing countries to become more democratic may also be derived from a lack of confidence that the US is an ideal democracy. Asked to rate "how democratic do you think the government of the US is on a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 meaning that it is not all democratic and 10 meaning that it is completely democratic" the mean response was 6.2. This was a bit lower than ratings for Canada (7.1) and Britain (6.8).

More dramatically, Americans are clearly not satisfied with the level of government responsiveness to the public. Asked how much influence they think "the views of the majority have on the decisions of elected officials in Washington" on a scale of 0 to 10, the mean response was 4.5. Asked how much influence the views of the majority should have, the mean response was 8.0.