

Comprehensive Analysis of Polls Reveals Americans' Attitudes on US Role in the World

August 3, 2007

Many people have the impression that polls produce highly discrepant findings that simply do not add up. However scholars of public opinion have found that by organizing public opinion research across studies and carefully reading the wording of questions there is actually a coherent pattern of majority opinion behind numerous poll results—including ones which on the surface may appear contradictory.

WPO is pleased to announce the completion of a comprehensive analysis, or 'digest,' of [polling on Americans' attitudes on the US role in the world](#). This draws on virtually all public domain polls conducted in recent years. The digest includes footnotes with the actual question wordings as well.

This digest reveals that, indeed, there is a coherent, complex, and subtle order in the pattern of majority US opinion on the US role in the world.

This digest also provides a kind of road map or framework for some of the digests of US opinion that have already been posted on WorldPublicOpinion.org dealing with numerous specific topics ranging from climate change to US relations with Russia.

Below is a summary of the main findings of the analysis with links to those sections of the digest where the poll findings are examined.

[General International Engagement](#)

A very strong majority supports US engagement in the world and rejects the idea that the US should take a more isolationist stance. However strong and growing majorities show dissatisfaction with key aspects of the current US role in the world and see it as destabilizing. A majority supports US military bases on the soil of traditional US allies, though support for US military presence in the Middle East has become quite soft.

[Rejection of Hegemonic Role](#)

A large majority is opposed to the way it perceives the US playing the role of hegemon or dominant world leader. Americans express surprisingly modest concern for preserving the US role as the sole superpower.

[Multilateral Cooperation and International Institutions](#)

A very strong majority favors a US role in the world that puts a greater emphasis on US participation in multilateral efforts to deal with international problems and on a cooperative approach wherein the US is quite attentive to the views of other countries, not just US interests. Very strong majorities favor the US working through international

institutions (especially the United Nations) and support making international institutions more powerful. Strong majorities favor international law and strengthening international judicial institutions. Americans support US participation in collective security structures and are reluctant to use military force except as part of multilateral efforts. A large majority favors the US using multilateral approaches for dealing with terrorism, addressing international environmental issues, and giving aid for economic development.

[Altruism, the Global Interest, and the National Interest](#)

A large majority of Americans feel that US foreign policy should at times serve altruistic purposes independent of US national interests. Americans also feel that US foreign policy should be oriented to the global interest not just the national interest and are highly responsive to arguments that serving the global interest ultimately serves the national interest. Americans show substantial concern for global conditions in a wide range of areas.

[Concerns US is Doing Disproportionate Amount Internationally](#)

Support for US international engagement is dampened and obscured by widespread feelings that the US is doing more than its fair share in efforts to address international problems relative to other countries, and spending too much on international programs relative to domestic programs. However, in many cases this attitude seems to rest on substantial overestimations of the levels of US contributions relative to other countries and international spending as a portion of the federal budget. Asked to set their own preferred levels for foreign aid, most Americans usually set them higher than the actual levels.

[Americans' Assessments of World Public Opinion on the United States](#)

Large majorities believe that the US is viewed negatively by people in other countries and see this as derived primarily from the current US foreign policy not American values. Most see goodwill towards the United States as important for US national security. Most Americans believe that people around the world are growing more afraid that the US will use force against them and that this diminishes US national security and increases the likelihood that countries will pursue WMDs.

[Promoting Democracy and Human Rights](#)

Americans have complex attitudes about the idea of promoting democracy. A majority thinks that promoting democracy should be a goal of US foreign policy. However there is a reluctance to make democracy promotion a central theme in US foreign policy and an opposition to using military force or the threat of military force to that end. At the same time Americans do feel a moral obligation to promote democracy and there is substantial support for cooperative methods for promoting democracy and for working through the United Nations. A modest majority favors promoting democracy in friendly authoritarian

countries even if it may lead to unfriendly governments; large majorities do favor putting diplomatic and public pressure on governments to respect human rights.