



EXECUTIVE MEMORANDUM

To: Whom It May Concern
From: Chris Anderson, Daron Shaw, & Andrew Schwartz
Date: June 20, 2023
Subject: Results from the Reagan Institute Summer Survey

Overview

From May 30-June 6, 2023, the Ronald Reagan Institute sponsored a national poll to assess the priorities and opinions of Americans across a wide array of foreign policy issues. The Summer 2023 poll draws on previous data and instrumentation developed by the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute's annual defense surveys but is more focused on broader foreign policy attitudes. The purpose of the poll is to provide politicians, policymakers, and experts timely information about what Americans want their leaders to do on key foreign policy issues.

Over those 8 days, the bi-partisan team of Beacon Research (D) and Shaw & Company Research (R) interviewed more than 1,250 adults from across the United States. The poll gauged opinions on a variety of issues ranging from America's global leadership and U.S. defense spending to specific questions regarding China, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Iran, and immigration.

Foreign Policy and Spending Priorities

Americans are Willing to Spend More to Address Defense and Foreign Policy Issues

As per usual, support for increased military and foreign policy spending is substantial but lags domestic issues. Support for increased spending is above 50% for the military (71% support, 46% strongly) and border security (68% support, 43% strongly). It is below 50% for promoting freedom abroad (49% support, 21% strongly) and foreign aid (37% support, 10% strongly). By contrast, support for increased spending is higher for Social Security (83%), infrastructure (82%), education (82%), and health care (81%).

Support for spending to promote freedom abroad and to provide foreign aid has dropped sharply in the past year. Support for both measures hit high-water marks in November 2022. Since then, we have seen a 13-point decrease in support for more spending in promoting freedom abroad, and a 16-point decrease in support for increased foreign aid. While most of the attention has been focused on dissent within Republican ranks, this attitude shift has occurred across partisan groups: -18 points among Republicans, -17 among independents, and -15 among Democrats.

Majority Oppose Cutting Defense to Reduce the Deficit

A second battery of items examines the willingness of Americans to cut military, foreign policy, and domestic policies to reduce the federal deficit. Solid majorities oppose spending cuts to the military (58% oppose), border security (58% oppose), infrastructure (67% oppose), and entitlement programs (72% oppose). Opposition to cuts in the military's budget is especially prevalent within the GOP, as 70% of Republicans oppose the move. By comparison, about half the U.S. public says they favor cutting foreign military aid (51% favor) or foreign humanitarian aid (51% favor) to reduce the deficit.

U.S. Foreign Policy Philosophy & Goals

We asked respondents to use a 0-10 scale to rate their attitudes on whether the U.S. should take a strong leadership role and engage with the world's issues (10) or not engage and let other countries lead on the world's issues. Overall, Americans tilted towards leadership and engagement, with an average score of 7.5 on the 0-10 scale.

Some demographic differences stand out. Seniors (8.2 on the scale) were more likely to opt for leadership and engagement than younger people (7.3). Post-graduates (8.1) were more likely to opt for leadership and engagement than non-college (7.3) or college graduates (7.5). Democrats (8.0) scored higher than Republicans (7.2), while independents trailed (6.8) partisans.

How do Americans view political parties on this key philosophical question? Using the same 0-10 scale, they place the Democrats at 6.8 and the Republicans at 6.6—both below the average personal rating of 7.5. The ideological wings of the parties are viewed as even less willing to lead and engage: progressive Democrats are rated at 6.2 and MAGA Republicans are at 5.4.

Interestingly, partisans rate the *other party* as much less willing to lead and engage on the world stage. For example, the average self-rating for a Democrat is 8.0; these Democrats rate their own party at 8.6 and the Republican Party at 5.1. They also rate progressive Democrats at 7.9 and MAGA Republicans at 3.8. The average self-rating for a Republican is 7.2; these Republicans rate their own party at 8.2 and the Democratic Party at 5.1. They also rate MAGA Republicans at 7.2 and progressive Democrats at 4.5.

In other words, two important dynamics are at work here. First, partisans on both sides of the aisle prefer strong leadership and engagement and place their own party near their preferred position on U.S. leadership and foreign policy, while simultaneously pushing the other party's placement towards the opposite side of the policy spectrum.

Republicans: Republicans > Democrats.

Democrats: Democrats > Republicans.

Second, partisans see their party's mainstream as more likely than its ideologues to support U.S. leadership and engagement in the world, but rate themselves as closer to the ideologues.

Republicans: Republicans > Democrats, but MAGA > Mainstream Republicans.

Democrats: Democrats > Republicans, but Progressive Democrats > Mainstream Democrats.

Americans were also asked about different elements of U.S. foreign policy engagement. The strongest agreement was registered for the notion that a strong U.S. military is essential for

maintaining peace and prosperity at home and abroad (85% agree), followed by leadership and engagement being essential for promoting trade and boosting our economy (76% agree), and standing up for human rights and democracy whenever possible in international affairs (74% agree). These concepts engendered agreement across party lines, with Republicans being particularly inclined to agree with the U.S. military being essential to peace (92% agree) and Democrats being particularly supportive of the need to promote trade for prosperity at home (83% agree) and standing up for human rights (84% agree).

Yet respondents were also supportive—though somewhat less so—of the argument that the U.S. is better served by withdrawing and focusing more attention on problems at home (65% agree). Most Democrats (53%) and three-quarters of Republicans (75%) agree with this claim. In our view, these results are unsurprising. Most Americans think the U.S. should be engaged and lead on major international issues, but they also want our leaders to deal more effectively with domestic problems. That Americans hold competing—and occasionally contradictory—opinions on policy priorities is not a finding unique to this poll; rather, there is a long record of research indicating that political leadership and messaging is the key ingredient that helps voters understand the connections and trade-offs between foreign and domestic policy priorities.

When asked to rate the salience of different foreign policy priorities, the top answers were for protecting U.S. jobs and companies and fighting terrorist networks. Seventy-seven percent rated protecting U.S. jobs and companies as a “major” focus of U.S. foreign policy, while 70% gave this rating to fighting terrorist networks. The next top priorities are negotiating favorable trade deals (58% major priority), preventing countries that do not have nuclear weapons from acquiring them (57%), countering Chinese military power (54%), and pushing for nuclear disarmament (53%). Following these are countering Russian military power (49%), countering Chinese economic power (44%), working to limit climate change (43%), protecting human rights (32%), and promoting freedom and democracy in authoritarian countries (29%).

While top-tier priorities (protecting U.S. jobs and companies and fighting terrorist networks) scored at the top of both Democratic and Republican respondents’ lists, second-tier priorities showed partisan differences. Most notably, Democrats see climate change (66% “major focus”) and nuclear disarmament (60%) as important, whereas Republicans see countering Chinese military (62% “major focus”) and economic power (59%) as high-end foreign policy issues.

One final yet important result in this battery is that although protecting human rights and promoting freedom and democracy in authoritarian countries is not thought to be a “major” focus of U.S. foreign policy, these priorities are still considered important. Eight-two percent say that protecting human rights should be a focus of U.S. policy (32% major, 50% minor), and 71% say the same about promoting freedom and democracy in authoritarian countries (29% major, 42% minor). Support is highest among seniors (38% said “major” focus) and liberals (36% major focus). Conversely, those under 30 years of age (27% major focus) and conservatives (24% major focus) were relatively less enthused.

The relevance of advocating for freedom is perhaps even more evident when we ask about specific countries. When queried about advocating for freedom in Cuba, Iran, Venezuela, China, Sudan, and Russia, between two-thirds to three-fourths of Americans express at least some support. The level of support for freedom advocacy does not vary much by country—and never drops below 65%—despite differences across these authoritarian regimes.

Ukraine

Seventy-five percent of Americans think it is important to the U.S. that Ukraine win the war against Russia, and 46% say it is “very” important. Furthermore, 59% believe the U.S. should be sending military aid to Ukraine. As we see with more general questions of foreign engagement, older, more educated, and more partisan people are the most likely to prefer the U.S. take a strong stand in assisting the Ukrainians. Opposition and support are split—or even negative—only among independents (39% support, 39% oppose) and those who plan to support Trump in the GOP primary (41% support, 53% oppose).

When those opposing U.S. military aid to Ukraine are asked why they oppose it, by far the dominant response (57%) is that we have too many unmet needs at home to send billions of dollars in aid to Ukraine. This knocks the wind out of the argument that the main reason for opposing the aid is that it is being wasted by corrupt Ukrainian officials: only 11% choose this response option. Moreover, an assurance that auditing measures will be taken to reduce or eliminate corruption and embezzlement makes only 27% more supportive of U.S. military aid (56% say it makes no difference and 12% volunteered that it made them less supportive). Part of the opposition also might be rooted in the persistent belief that our European allies should be doing more: 56% say this is the case.

On the other side of the ledger, those supporting aid to Ukraine are split when asked why. Thirty-seven percent say standing up to Russian aggression will discourage Russia from invading other neighboring countries, while another 30% say it is important to protect freedom and sovereignty whenever we can, 17% say it sends a message to other countries like China, and 13% say it will degrade Russia’s war-making power.

At the same time, respondents are unsure who is winning on the battlefield: 31% say Ukraine, 27% say Russia, 25% say neither and 17% say they are not sure. There is also some ambivalence about whether our aid has been worth the cost—50% say yes, while 35% say no.

Part of this ambivalence may be due to the failure of those supporting U.S. aid to make an affirmative case. We tested whether mentioning key facts about the scope and impact of the aid affects support. Noting the relative cost of the aid (3% of the U.S. military budget), Ukraine’s successful resistance (they retain control of 83% of their own territory), and the effect on Russia (degradation of military capacity and ability to threaten NATO) increases support from 50% to 64%. That includes a 12-point increase in support among Democrats and an 18-point increase in support among Republicans.

China

The survey asked a number of questions about the nature of U.S. relations with China. As noted earlier, 54% said countering Chinese military power should be a “major” focus of U.S. foreign policy, while 44% said this about countering Chinese economic power.

One manifestation of this focus is support—though not overwhelming support—for deterring Chinese aggression against Taiwan. Fifty-six percent say the U.S. should increase its military presence near Taiwan, which is down 5 points from November 2022. Similarly, 52% say we should increase arms sales to Taiwan, down from 58% in November. This decrease is driven primarily by Democrats, whose support has dropped by 8- and 10-points, respectively.

When asked whether American leaders who met with Taiwanese government officials should have done so after China strongly voiced its opposition to these appearances, 61% said “it was the right thing to do” because it showed support for a threatened democracy while 21% said “it was the wrong thing to do” because it risked provoking China.”

Beyond the thorny issue of Taiwan, American concern regarding China is evident in attitudes towards the social media giant, TikTok. Recent reports estimate that roughly 150 million Americans use TikTok. Still, 40% of our respondents say it should be banned in the U.S. (44% say it should not be banned). Seniors (54% support a ban) and Republicans (52% support) are the most prone to call for such action, while young people are the most likely to oppose it (73% oppose a ban).

Iran

Policy preferences towards Iran and its developing nuclear program tend towards the assertive. When asked what the U.S. should do in the face of Iran re-starting its nuclear programs, 71% favor using U.S. cyber capabilities to impede them, while 64% favor instituting new economic sanctions and 45% favor using U.S. military force. Only 21% favor doing nothing at all.

Immigration

In addition to the threats posed by specific countries, Americans see more general foreign policy threats as well. Most notably, 48% see illegal immigration as a “major” threat and another 39% see it as a “minor” threat. Only 11% say it is no security threat at all. The percent saying illegal immigration is no threat at all is down from 29% in 2018.

People are remarkably discerning when asked about which aspects or ramifications of illegal immigration constitute the most significant threat. A full 77% say the influx of drugs associated with illegal immigration constitutes a “major” threat, followed by Mexican cartels extending their operations into the U.S. (69%), terrorists entering the country undetected (63%), an influx of illegal guns and weapons (63%), and foreign spies entering the country undetected (55%).

When we asked about increasing the number of highly skilled immigrants admitted into the country, we found staunch support: 75%, including 83% of Democrats and 70% of Republicans. Interestingly, framing this as a national security matter decreased support. We asked whether they supported or opposed increasing highly skilled immigrants if the respondent knew that the U.S. military and companies in the defense sector believed that more skilled immigrants were needed to fill high-tech national security jobs, and support dropped to 62% (76% for Democrats and 51% for Republicans).

International Trade

Trade deals appear to be somewhat of a sleeper issue for U.S. foreign policy. Earlier, we showed that 77% of Americans think that protecting U.S. jobs and companies should be a “major” focus of our foreign policy. Fifty-eight percent think that negotiating favorable trade deals should be a “major” focus of U.S. foreign policy. These sentiments hold in roughly equal proportion across all major social and political groups.

The problem, of course, is that Americans are extraordinarily ambivalent about whether free trade has been a good thing or a bad thing for the country. We asked two questions to gauge this ambivalence: one agree/disagree item stating that trade agreements have been good because they

lower the costs of goods and open markets abroad for U.S. products, and another agree/disagree item stating that trade deals have been bad because they have led to unfair competition and cost Americans jobs. The public agrees with both. Seventy-two percent agree that free trade has lowered costs and opened markets, and 62% agree that it has produced unfair competition and cost Americans jobs.

Despite this ambivalence about the virtues of trade, the power of trade agreements on economies—foreign and domestic—is not lost on the American public: Fifty-seven percent support a trade agreement designed to counter China.

Methodology

This survey was conducted from May 30-June 6, 2023. It features a mixed-mode design, with 494 responses collected by live telephone interviewers and another 760 responses gathered online. The telephone portion of the survey is a probability sample, relying on a multi-stage cluster design. Forty-nine percent of the calls were completed via landline and 51 percent were completed via cell phone. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. To ensure that results accurately reflect the demographics of the country, they were weighted by age/gender, race/region, and education targets drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2021 American Community Survey. The probability sample was then used to calibrate the non-probability online sample (conducted over the same dates) by key demographic and attitudinal variables. For the full sample of 1,254 respondents, the estimated margin of error is +/- 2.8 percentage points. Some questions were asked of half the respondents, with an associated margin of error of +/- 3.9 points. The margin of error for sub-groups is larger.