



Don't Listen to the Polls: Why Obama Has More Room For Foreign Activism Than Polls Suggest

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It's become a truism that Americans have turned so far inward that they will not tolerate national security initiatives that carry a risk of major costs or casualties. War-weary after Iraq and Afghanistan and reeling financially from The Great Recession, the public wants U.S. leaders to focus more at home and shoulder far fewer burdens abroad—and certainly no more American “boots on the ground.”

It's the dominant media narrative, and it's mostly wrong. Recent shifts in public opinion on national security don't mean President Obama needs to retreat from America's global leadership responsibilities. Public opinion on national security works differently than on domestic issues, where average citizens have distinct and vote-motivating preferences about things like tax rates and health care plans. On national security, voters mostly just want policies that *work*—which they mostly judge *after* the fact. Indeed, with voters mainly focused on events at home rather than foreign affairs, the White House in many ways has *more* latitude to act abroad.

It may sound odd coming from a professional pollster, but what this means is that, on national security, we should all pay less attention to the polls.

This goes especially for political reporters and commentators. Last August, as Obama considered military action against the Assad regime in Syria after it used chemical weapons against its own people, *Politico* wrote that “Americans have little patience for anything but clean-cut military victories in apparently clear-cut conflicts.”

The next month, ABC news argued that a lack of public and congressional support would constitute “a major obstacle” to the President launching such a strike.

And just this June, John Judis, writing in the *New Republic* about the Administration's deployment of advisers to Iraq, said: “[Obama] is suffering from political cross pressures [since] there is next to zero public support for any military intervention in Iraq or anywhere else.”

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Unfortunately, this conventional wisdom shapes the thinking of elected officials, policy makers, outside experts, and the media—and therefore ends up shaping the policy options that the White House, Pentagon, and State Department view as viable.

For example, it quite possibly influenced Obama’s abrupt decision in August 2013 to seek congressional approval for a military strike against Assad—a strike that then never occurred, in part, because Congress appeared unwilling to provide its approval.

To be sure, recent shifts in public opinion polls suggest Americans have become more wary and weary of the burdens of global leadership.

A [Pew Research Center poll](#) late last year found that 52% of the voters now agree the United States should “mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own.” As many poll-watchers noted, that is the highest level ever recorded in 50 years of asking this question, and the first time an outright majority agreed with the statement. Even in the mid-1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, only 41% agreed.

A full 80% now agree the United States should “concentrate more on our own national problems and on building up our strength and prosperity here at home.” Again, that’s the highest level ever.

The public also seems less confident about our global power. A 53-17% majority now says the United States is less important and powerful than 10 years ago. Yet just 10 years ago, it was flipped, with a 45-20% plurality saying the United States had become more important and powerful in preceding years.

All this helps explain much of the congressional and electoral politics we see around national security—whether it is stronger pressures to cut defense spending, or the quasi-isolationism of GOP Presidential hopeful Rand Paul.

Yet these shifts in public opinion do not matter a great deal to most of our national security options—and they should not matter very much to the President and those in the executive branch who make our national security policies. Here’s why.

First, while it is true that public opinion can have a particularly big influence on Congress, few of the things we need to do in the world require congressional approval. Obama did not need congressional approval to send military advisers back to Iraq or (I and many others would argue) to launch a missile strike against Assad’s military infrastructure in Syria.

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Ultimately every military or diplomatic initiative requires some degree of funding, which does require congressional approval. Yet presidents have great leeway in shifting national security funds across accounts to support urgent actions, and in making use of security assets (like the missiles Obama would have fired into Syria) that have already been funded.

The big exception is when the United States sends its troops into a war, like Iraq or Afghanistan. Then public opinion really does matter—both because wars are uniquely visible and sensitive to the public, and because Congress does have to approve extended U.S. military engagements. Even leaving aside the question of authorization and the disputed 1973 War Powers Resolution, presidents need Congress to regularly appropriate funds to sustain a war effort.

The President is right not to send American combat forces back into Iraq at this point, in part because of overwhelming public and congressional opposition to doing so. But Obama has already shown he has the latitude to do most things short of re-entering that war: he has already deployed hundreds of military advisers, to help prod Iraq's leaders to create a broader, multi-confessional government, and to help prevent ISIS from turning large portions of the country into a permanent haven for violent extremists.

Another exception, along with the limits on a president's ability to send the nation to war, is enacting new free trade agreements. These require congressional approval, and immediately touch corporate and labor interests, so public opinion comes much more into play.

But leaving aside hot wars and trade agreements, presidents have enormous latitude—even to put “boots on the ground.”

Consider the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia. In March, [Pew](#) found that by a 2:1 margin the public did not want the United States to get very involved in Ukraine. Yet, in the months since, President Obama has sent two warships to the Black Sea, deployed a dozen U.S. F16s to fly reconnaissance on the Russian border, and put over 500 U.S. troops on the ground in Poland and the three Baltic countries—and there has been no public outcry of any kind about this.

Like most other aspects of our national security policies, the actions were not salient to the public—even though they involved U.S. troops—and no congressional vote was required. Inward-focused public opinion created no real impediment to presidential action and leadership.

The second reason recent changes in public attitudes do not much constrain presidential action is that these shifts are more about apathy than antipathy. Yes, there are record levels among the public saying they do not want America to get involved abroad. But this is less of a rallying cry, and more of a big yawn. If there are any congressional campaigns this year where national security is the domi-

nant issue (leaving aside immigration, which is more of a domestic issue), I haven't heard about them. If national security issues are playing virtually no role in congressional elections, then a president has little reason in most cases to feel constrained by public or congressional opposition to a particular national security policy.

Of course, these issues are not always yawners. Opposition to the Iraq war was a big issue in the 2006 and 2008 elections, and intense and focused enough to make some members of Congress lose their jobs. That electoral impact virtually ensured a change of policy.

But that is not the case with the public's current pull-back from world affairs. Voters are now mostly just tuned out. And in that kind of opinion environment, presidents have tremendous leeway to act (as long as their actions are relatively successful—a point I return to below).

Third, even if the American public as a whole is pulling back from support for engagement abroad, it is not clear that American foreign policy *elites* are following suit—and they are the ones who drive much of the national security discussion. Pew's most recent study of members of the Council on Foreign Relations shows these elites give Obama much stronger support than the public does for his administration's internationalist policies. Indeed, even at a time when the public by a 3:1 margin says the United States is doing too much abroad, these elites mostly say the United States is doing *too little* abroad.

All three points highlight a fundamental problem with relying on public polls to assess what the public wants on national security.

There is real value in having a “democratic foreign policy”—one that has the public's support and reflects its values. Progressives should want that.

But public opinion polls are the wrong instrument for evaluating such support. Voters evaluate national security differently than things like tax rate changes and school bonds—issues for which they have a pretty good intuitive feel. On national security, voters defer much more to experts, like scholars, diplomats and generals. What voters mostly want on national security is policies that *work*.

The public largely determines what has “worked” on national security after the fact. And their verdict is usually not ideological. Many Republicans will hate Obamacare, even if it proves successful at covering most of the uninsured and bending the health cost curve. By contrast, if you talk to many Americans who are averse to the use of force, on a unilateral basis, without congressional approval, over the objection of a country on whose soil the mission would take place—not many of them objected after the fact to the raid on Osama bin Laden.

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But it’s not just the visible successes in national security, like the bin Laden raid, that the public endorses. In most cases, the public feels that national security policies “work” acceptably if they remain out of view—that is, if our policies don’t get linked to U.S. casualties (e.g., Iraq), high fiscal costs (the bailout for Mexico in the mid-1990s), disturbing scenes of humanitarian suffering (e.g., Syria), or diplomatic eruptions (e.g., the current spying rift with Germany).

Thus, in most cases, using polling questions to determine whether voters will support a national security policy a priori is a bit like polling computer buyers on whether they prefer the video card in their next laptop to be ‘integrated’ or ‘discrete.’ If asked, many such consumers might venture an opinion; but in truth most would simply want their laptop to work well.

Indeed, focus groups we have conducted over the years with swing voters show that many of them worry that Democratic leaders listen to public opinion *too much*, and seem too reluctant to do what may be needed to protect America’s interests.

All this means that President Obama has extensive public latitude on national security initiatives, even at a time when more of the public is saying they do not want the United States to bear the burdens of global leadership. And he should use it.

Too often, however, Obama seems to avoid sharp-edged actions abroad partly out of a fear that the American public will not support him. That certainly seemed the case with his decision to seek advance congressional approval for a military strike on Syria. But such deference to public anxieties was politically unnecessary and strategically costly. It made the United States look uncertain and timid, and as a result depleted Obama’s political capital at home and abroad. By contrast, Obama’s deployments to reinforce NATO allies on the periphery of the Ukraine conflict showed what stronger leadership can accomplish—and also how little the public pushes back.

Without such prudent risk-taking and decisive presidential leadership, U.S. influence around the world will wane, a host of global problems will grow more intractable, and the chances of a major national security crisis—the kind voters really do pay attention to—will grow. But President Obama and his successors will find that if they make the bold moves needed to advance America’s security interests, even an inward-focused public will approve.

About the Author

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