



Advancing a Progressive Internationalist Vision on U.S. Foreign Policy

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The Center for American Progress and GBAO recently conducted a comprehensive examination of public attitudes about contemporary foreign policy issues, priorities, and approaches for keeping America safe and strong in the world. The research included interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,200 registered voters conducted July 10 to 14, 2019. This survey is a companion project to CAP’s earlier landscape study of foreign policy attitudes, described at length in the report “America Adrift: How the U.S. Foreign Policy Debate Misses What Voters Really Want,” released in May of this year.¹

Investments at home and alliances are needed to address global threats

Share of respondents



Source: Center for American Progress and GBAO, “Foreign Policy Research – Phase III” (Washington: 2019), available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2019/07/29142002/FP-condensed.pdf>.

The results of the current study are presented in a series of fact sheets outlining the major findings in key thematic areas, from war and military action to diplomacy and terrorism to global economic policy and climate change, as well public views on specific regional issues in areas such as China, Iran, Afghanistan, and Israel.

The major storylines from this latest round of research include the following takeaways:

American voters strongly desire a steadier hand, greater cooperation with U.S. allies, and less of a unilateral approach to U.S. foreign policy. Voters clearly desire greater cooperation with the United States' allies and more coordinated efforts with other nations to tackle problems, such as terrorism, climate change, and migration, that cross domestic borders. The vast majority of voters are opposed to continued unilateral disruption and erosion of international norms and treaties. American voters desperately want a national economic investment plan to help the United States compete in the world.

- China is clearly the biggest competitor in the eyes of Americans. But two-thirds, or 67 percent, of Americans see strong alliances—not trade wars—as the best way to counter unfair Chinese trade practices and government subsidies.
- Virtually all American voters—94 percent—believe that the United States must take new steps to build alliances in Europe and Asia in order to help respond to China's rise. Similar unanimity, at 93 percent, exists when it comes to working with allies to address shared global challenges such as terrorism and climate change.
- However, conservative nationalist rhetoric about foreigners taking advantage of the United States retains strong support among Republicans, at 83 percent, and a majority (58 percent) of independents—although more than half of Millennials, at 55 percent, disagree with this ideological perspective.

Voters want a national plan for the United States to better compete in the world by investing at home and going clean and green. Most American voters see a link between America's strength at home and its ability to compete successfully against rivals abroad. One strong pathway with political support is transforming America's economy toward new energy sources and technologies to compete with countries such as China.

- Nearly all voters—95 percent—in the survey agreed with the idea that the United States needs to invest more in its workers and stay true to its values at home in order to remain strong and competitive in the world.
- An additional two-thirds, or 68 percent, of American voters say that the United States should invest more in renewable and clean energy sources to combat climate change regardless of other nations' actions, rather than further exploit America's fossil fuel resources.

- Two-thirds, or 67 percent, of voters see increased domestic investment that creates good jobs at home as the best way to deal with unfair Chinese trade practices and to successfully compete with Beijing.

Voters want to balance military overreach in recent decades with concrete options for keeping the United States safe from attacks. American voters remain pragmatic when it comes to the use of military force. Although most voters express a desire to end America’s military interventions in the Middle East, they remain open to the use of military force in specific situations tied primarily to the fight against groups such as al-Qaida and the Islamic State group (ISIS).

- Military force remains an acceptable U.S. foreign policy tool under certain conditions. Three-quarters, or 74 percent, of American voters say that military force is an acceptable way for the United States to accomplish its foreign policy goals, while roughly one-quarter, or 26 percent, feel that the United States is not the world’s police and should not use force to pursue its interests overseas.
- Voters are against preventive strikes on Iran but support retaliation. A majority of American voters, at 55 percent, oppose a preventive strike against Iran’s nuclear program, but nearly three-quarters, or 73 percent, support military action if Iran attacks U.S. troops or civilians.

Voters want U.S. leaders to remain vigilant on fighting terrorism globally and to treat domestic white supremacist terrorism as an equal threat. Terrorism remains voters’ dominant foreign policy concern. Many American voters rank protecting the country from terrorism as one of the most important or a very important issue facing the country, but their perception of terrorism includes both international and domestic threats.

- Eight in 10, or 80 percent of, American voters say that protecting the country from terrorism is a very important priority, ranking this issue higher than any other foreign policy priority tested.
- Almost all American voters—93 percent—agree with a counterterrorism approach that takes a hard line with Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, just two-thirds, or 66 percent, favor addressing economic “root causes” or using law enforcement and intelligence rather than military force (64 percent).
- Nearly 9 in 10 voters, or 87 percent, believe that “terrorist threats from white supremacists and other extremist actors who are being radicalized inside the United States are just as important to focus on as threats from foreign terrorist groups.”

Voters prefer progressive approaches to immigration and climate change over the more divisive policy options offered by conservative nationalists. Harsh takes on border control and the exploitation of domestic fossil fuels over clean energy solutions fail to win over most voters.

- On immigration, nearly two-thirds, or 64 percent, of Americans favor comprehensive immigration reform with a safe, legal, and managed path to citizenship over an alternative approach centered on a massive border wall and financial penalties imposed on Mexico if it doesn't reduce migration. This includes more than 8 in 10 Democrats and two-thirds of independents, as well as 6 in 10 Republicans. Likewise, more than 8 in 10 (83 percent) Democrats, two-thirds (66 percent) of Millennials, and a majority (51 percent) of independents favor aid to Central American nations as a way to reduce migration over the more hard-line approach.
- On climate change, more than 8 in 10 (83 percent) Democrats and three-quarters (74 percent) of independents favor more investment in clean energy over exploitation of fossil fuels, while Republicans split evenly at 50 percent between the two options. Seven in 10 (71 percent) Millennials see climate change as a critical issue facing the country.

Most American voters are searching for an alternative foreign policy. In substance, they prefer a progressive internationalist world view—but conservative nationalist themes still resonate with certain segments of the population. Progressive internationalists have an opportunity to seize the moment if they offer a clear, coherent, and compelling foreign policy message.

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This information is based on a national poll of 1,200 registered voters conducted July 10 to 14, 2019, by the Center for American Progress and GBAO. Polling results are on file with the authors.

Endnotes

¹ John Halpin and others, "America Adrift: How the U.S. Foreign Policy Debate Misses What Voters Really Want" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/05/05/469218/america-adrift/>.