

Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the Obama Era

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INTRODUCTION

Barack Obama began his term as President of the United States with public approval ratings that were very high by historical standards, and approval of his handling of foreign policy was particularly high. In the early months of his administration, 60 to 70% of the public approved of his handling of foreign policy, international affairs and relations with other countries, and a similarly high percentage approved of his handling of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As late as October 2009, after a summer of divisive partisan conflict, 60% of the public believed that Obama will “Increase respect for the United States abroad ¹.”

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1. http://pollingreport.com/obama_ad.htm

During his first year in office, President Obama undertook a number of foreign policy initiatives, including new approaches to Iran and to climate change negotiations, and he has made two major shifts in policy in the war in Afghanistan. Given the central importance of foreign policy both to the President's success as a candidate and to his governing agenda, it is useful to ask just how much consensus these policies enjoy and to speculate about the degree of agreement that is likely to greet future decisions. In this article, I describe the foreign policy preferences of American citizens and assess the overall level of public support for Obama's policies and the degree of polarization that characterizes public opinion. The central conclusion of the article is that, despite substantial partisan polarization on foreign policy issues, the President's persuasive talents and the unpopularity of the opposition provide him with substantial room for maneuver in foreign affairs.

PRIORITIES

What priority do the American people place on foreign policy compared to domestic issues, and what do they expect from President Obama specifically in the realm of foreign policy? Not surprisingly given the depth of the economic crisis of the last year, economic concerns are at the top of citizen priority lists in virtually every survey reported: at the end of 2009, from 50 to 60% of citizens placed the economy and related issues at the top of their agendas. Equally unsurprising is the fact that the fiscal and healthcare policy initiatives of the past year have increased the public's concern: depending on the particular survey, anywhere from 15 to 20% consider health care policy or the budget deficit the most important issue facing the country. Concern about the budget deficit has grown in particular. Put simply, for the vast majority of Americans in 2009, the economy and domestic policy issues were the most important issue facing the country ².

Nonetheless, over the same time period, the importance of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – and especially Afghanistan – has also increased in the public mind. Whereas the wars

2. <http://pollingreport.com/prioriti.htm>

were considered most important by only a small percentage toward the beginning of the Obama presidency, by the fall of 2009 the figure had grown to 10% or more in some surveys. Indeed, in surveys in October and November for USA Today/ Gallup, the wars were essentially tied with the healthcare issue that had so dominated American politics during the second half of 2009 ³.

As Table 1 shows, the economy also represents the public's first priority for international action to be taken by European and American leaders, although combating international terrorism continues to be a high priority as well. What is most notable in the table are the differing priorities across political parties. In 2009, Democrats and Independents

Table 1. Which among the following tasks should be the top priority for the American President and European leaders? (June 2009)

	Democrats (%)	Republicans (%)	Independents (%)	Total (%)
Managing international economic problems	27	24	34	28
Fighting international terrorism	18	38	25	25
Working to ease tensions in the Middle East	13	12	9	11
Stabilizing Afghanistan	11	8	6	8
Managing relations with Iran	6	8	6	7
Fighting climate change	7	1	6	6
Managing relations with Russia	4	1	0	2
Total	100	100	100	100

Source : German Marshall Fund of the United States, Transatlantic Trends 2009, www.transatlantictrends.org

3. <http://pollingreport.com/prioriti.htm>

considered the international economy the first priority, whereas Republicans clearly place the fight against terrorism first. Other differences across parties are more muted, with one exception: Democrats and Independents place some priority on the task of fighting climate change, whereas Republicans place almost no importance on it. Thus, while it is true that climate change is a far lesser priority than the economy or terrorism for adherents of all parties, Democrats and Independents place at least some importance on it (the same figures for 2008 suggested that this priority is even higher in the absence of economic crisis)⁴. Equally important, the data show that, for Republicans, the national security issue of terrorism is consistently a singular priority, while Democrats and Independents place some priority on nonmilitary issues.

COMPLICATED COALITIONS: EUROPE, IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN

Priorities are rather general things; the more interesting question is the degree to which the public supports the President as he seeks to deal with these priorities. Table 2 shows responses from the German Marshall Fund's *Transatlantic Trends* survey, one of the most comprehensive available on foreign policy issues. At the end of June 2009, Obama enjoyed overwhelming approval of his international policies generally among Democrats and fairly strong support among Independents, despite reports that his support within the latter group was slipping at this time⁵. Republicans largely rejected his international policies. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that a larger percentage of citizens within all political parties expressed confidence in Obama's ability to handle the international priority that they considered most important (from the list shown in Table 1). Thus, although only 26% of Republicans approved of Obama's international

4. See German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Transatlantic Trends* 2008, www.transatlantictrends.org

5. As late as November 2009, Obama's general job approval among independents remained at 50%, essentially equal to his standing among the entire population, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/politics.aspx>

policies generally, 41% expressed confidence in his ability to handle the issue they considered most important! Although it involves speculation, it seems plausible that citizens (especially Republicans) are making a separation between their purely partisan evaluations (withholding generalized approval of an opposing President's international policies), while nonetheless believing that the President demonstrates competence in policy areas that they deem important. This ability of Obama to convince even his skeptics in public opinion is a pattern that we will see elsewhere. When the subject turns to specific policies and the President's actions, however, partisan differences reemerge. For example, among the very first policy initiatives undertaken by the new administration was the signal that the President would move to improve relations with European allies, which had deteriorated grievously during the debate over the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Only two weeks after the inauguration, Vice President Biden traveled to Europe to emphasize this priority and declared: "Our partnership benefits us all. This is the time to renew it ⁶."

As Table 2 shows, this is an initiative that enjoys only mixed support. True, the longstanding commitment to the NATO Alliance has broad support, but this consensus may be more a function of the national security consciousness of Republicans than a reflection of enthusiasm for Europe more generally. In fact, on a variety of questions dealing with Europe, Republicans are skeptical.

For example, 75% of Democrats have a favorable opinion of the European Union, versus 47% of Republicans. On the question of seeking a "closer" security partnership with Europe, only Democrats reply in the majority. Most notable is the very low percentage of Republicans who favor a closer *economic* partnership with Europe – only 27%. While it is true that the dominant sentiment of Republicans (and Independents) is to keep the partnership "the same" as it is now – hardly a

6. Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden at the 45th Munich Conference. On Security Policy, February 7, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/

Table 2. Views on Foreign Policy Issues by Party Identification (June 2009)

	Democrats (%)	Republicans (%)	Independents (%)	Total (%)
Approve President Obama handling of international policies	86	26	54	57
Confidence in Obama ability to handle top international priority	90	41	65	67
Relations with Europe				
Percent with favorable opinion of European Union	75	47	58	59
NATO Alliance is essential	64	62	58	59
Security partnership with Europe: should be closer	53	42	42	47
Economic partnership with Europe: should be closer	57	27	36	42
National Security Issues				
Agree economic power is more important than military power	70	50	62	61
Increase troops in Afghanistan	18	35	27	26
Reduce or withdraw troops from Afghanistan	46	22	44	39
Increase pressure on Iran, but rule out military force	37	28	22	28
Increase pressure on Iran, but maintain military option	36	57	49	46
Climate Change				
Percent concerned about climate change	85	47	66	67
Agree climate change can only be addressed effectively at international level	67	42	58	54
US should fight climate change even if economic growth is slowed	58	28	45	44
Economic Crisis				
Government spending to counter crisis is "too much"	29	73	60	53
U.S. should remain open to trade	83	77	77	78
Agree U.S. should focus on solving our own problems first	92	94	92	92

Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Transatlantic Trends 2009*, www.transatlantictrends.org

position of opposition to partnership – it appears nonetheless that strengthening collaboration with Europeans is a proposal that evokes far greater warmth among adherents of the President’s party than among others.

Division also characterizes public opinion on other issues, in particular the questions of how to handle Iran and reactions to the situation in Afghanistan. Concerning Iran, President Obama’s policy has differed most distinctly from former President Bush in his willingness to negotiate directly with the Iranians. As Vice President Biden also said during his European trip: “Our administration is reviewing policy toward Iran, but this much I can say: We are willing to talk ⁷.” And in fact, during the late summer and into the fall of 2009, direct diplomatic contact with Iran was undertaken. Although this willingness to negotiate directly with Iran was contentious among candidates in both the primary and general election campaigns of 2008, many polls show that a majority of Americans are supportive. In fact, 60 to 70% approved of direct negotiations with Iran during 2009 ⁸.

However, on the question of what should be done should negotiations fail, there is some basis for a consensus, but it is a complicated one. President Obama, like President Bush, has stated that “all options are on the table”, which presumably means that military force remains an ultimate option should all diplomatic efforts fail. The German Marshall Fund survey shown in Table 2 reveals that this position was supported by a plurality of all Americans in June 2009 (46%). A military option enjoys majority support among Republicans and a near majority of Independents, but members of President Obama’s own party show little enthusiasm – Democrats are evenly divided between support for a military threat and ruling it out altogether. In summary, the President enjoys deep and broad support for his negotiating initiatives, but should the option of military threats or action against Iran ever become more than a hypothetical, it is likely to expose divisions within

7. Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden at the 45th Munich Conference.

8. <http://pollingreport.com/iran.htm>

his own party, and based on polls in late 2009, it is likely to polarize the American public ⁹.

A similar pattern characterizes opinions of the war in Afghanistan and the President's actions with respect to that conflict. Early in his administration, President Obama faced a public that was already divided, a state of affairs that represented substantial erosion in public support compared to the earliest years of the war. At one time the war was approved nearly unanimously by the American public, but as early as 2006 support had dropped to a bare majority, and by the end of 2009 opposition to the war continued to grow above 50%. Questioned in the abstract, public opinion was evenly divided on whether to increase, decrease, or stabilize troop levels, and when questioned bluntly whether they favored an increase or decrease, troop reductions received majority support ¹⁰.

One of President Obama's first decisions (in February 2009) was nonetheless *to increase* the number of US troops in Afghanistan by 17,000, although his new strategic concept gave equal prominence to nonmilitary efforts in Afghanistan ¹¹. Given the erosion in support for the war noted above, it is surprising that substantial majorities of 50 to 60% of the public nonetheless approved this decision ¹². Once again we see an apparent distinction in the public mind: although divided in their assessment of the policy options on Afghanistan, the public seemed inclined to place confidence in Obama's decisions.

However, as we can see in Table 2, partisan divisions on Afghanistan remain. As early as June 2009, a substantial plurality of Democrats and Independents (approaching a majority) favored reducing or withdrawing troops altogether

9. When surveys bluntly ask if military action should be taken against Iran if it attempts to acquire nuclear weapons, support averages just slightly over 50%. Economic sanctions, in contrast, are broadly supported, <http://pollingreport.com/iran.htm>

10. <http://pollingreport.com/afghan.htm>

11. Remarks by the President Barack Obama on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, March 27, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/

12. <http://pollingreport.com/afghan.htm>

(the plurality of Republicans – not shown in the Table – preferred to keep US troops at their current level). Polls in October and November 2009 showed precisely the same pattern as the President once again reviewed his options in Afghanistan and prepared his response to a request from his commanders that he substantially increase troop levels. In fact, in the midst of his review in November, the public was perfectly divided: the Gallup poll reported that a majority of Democrats preferred reducing troops in Afghanistan, and a matching majority of Republicans preferred increasing them (Independents were in between but closer to Democrats on the question)¹³. When the President announced in December that he intended to once again increase troops in Afghanistan, an average of 57% *approved* of the decision, despite their increasing gloominess about the war, and once again it was a coalition of all three parties that combined to produce this approval¹⁴.

In summary, despite some signs that the public has given Obama the benefit of the doubt in the short-term, the decline in overall support for the war in Afghanistan and the tepid support for increased troop levels suggest a fragile basis of support for Obama's policies in Afghanistan. Depending on the President's ability to pass important domestic legislation – which could provide some solace to Democrats – the prospect for conflict within the President's own party on Afghanistan appears very real.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

If policy toward Iran and Afghanistan evokes coalitions that are not wholly partisan in their composition (many Republicans support the President's policies on Iran and Afghanistan), the same cannot be said of opinions on the issue of climate change and the question of how to manage the global economic crisis. Concerning the former, Obama campaigned

13. As reported in <http://pollingreport.com/afghan.htm>

14. <http://pollingreport.com/afghan.htm> and <http://www.gallup.com/video/124583/Americans-React-Obama-Afghanistan-Strategy.aspx>

on promises to seek legislation to combat climate change, principally by committing the US to a cap on greenhouse gas emissions and to a new international agreement on climate change that was to be negotiated in December 2009. He has strongly supported legislation to pursue these goals that was passed by the House of Representatives in June 2009, and he has supported similar legislation in the US Senate. As Table 2 shows, Democrats (enthusiastically) and Independents (for the most part) support these goals, and they even support by a surprising margin the proposition that climate change policies should be pursued even at the risk of slowing economic growth. Republicans' views are in stark contrast. Less than half of Republicans are concerned about climate change at all; not surprisingly, very few would sacrifice economic growth to combat climate change. Further, Republicans are not convinced that international agreements are the most effective way to address climate issues. In almost all its elements then, Obama's positions and proposals on climate change are opposed by Republicans. Unlike the issues reviewed above, therefore, there seems little prospect for engaging the support of Republicans in pursuit of the Copenhagen goals or US legislation on climate change. Quite the opposite, the polarization of views on climate issues resembles those that have come to characterize the debate over economic policy and healthcare legislation during 2009, and the legislative battle on climate change is likely to be equally divisive. The difference, of course, is that the lack of consensus on climate change is likely to complicate the President's efforts to commit the United States to international agreements.

President Obama took office facing the worst economic downturn in seventy years. Perhaps because the origins of the crisis in the US are widely seen as the result of practices within the US banking system, it has been framed largely as a domestic issue. Politically, the pattern of public reactions to the President's attempts to deal with the crisis became clear from the beginning. As Table 3 shows, a Gallup poll in February 2009 showed broad support for spending to stimulate the economy and job growth, but there was substantial alienation with the large financial rescue packages

Table 3. Approval of Economic Recovery Policies

As you may know, the federal government has taken many steps to deal with problems in the economy in recent months. Please tell me whether, in general, you favor or oppose the government doing each of the following. How about?

	Favor (%)	Oppose (%)	No opinion (%)
Funding new government programs to help create jobs	83	17	1
Giving aid to state governments in serious financial trouble	67	30	3
Giving aid to homeowners who are in danger of losing their homes to foreclosure	64	33	3
Giving aid to U.S. automakers who are in danger of going bankrupt	41	58	1
Giving aid to U.S. banks and financial companies in danger of failing	39	59	2

Source: Frank Newport, "Views on Government Aid Depend on the Program", The Gallup Poll, 24 février 2009, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116083/Views-Government-Aid-Depend-Program.aspx>

provided to the banking and auto industries. As noted earlier, as the year progressed, concern for the federal budget deficit grew substantially, so that by the end of the year a majority of Americans disapproved of Obama's handling of the budget deficit, and the prospective cost of healthcare reform added to the worry¹⁵. In effect, the related phenomena of "spending fatigue" and "bailout fatigue" are now prominent features of current public opinion and are likely to limit the President's options in the immediate short term. The President's limited room for maneuver could prove important in the event the global economy does not recover and calls are heard for more coordinated global action. Certainly there is little enthusiasm for additional stimulus spending, and the passage of expensive health reform legislation is likely to reduce support for spending even further. The intensity of this sentiment is revealed in Table 2. Despite the severity of the economic crisis and the wording of a survey question that inquires about government "spending to deal with our economic problems", a majority of the public responded that the government had spent "too

15. <http://pollingreport.com/budget.htm>

much". Republicans (overwhelmingly) and Independents (substantially) are very negative about stimulus spending. In summary, should President Obama find it necessary to consider additional government spending to revive a faltering economy, there seems little prospect that he will find much enthusiasm in public opinion.

American attitudes toward the global dimensions of the crisis are somewhat surprising. In the fall of 2008 and into early 2009, many observers expressed the worry that the downturn would lead to a turn inward, to a protectionism that might interrupt or even reverse the liberalization of the global trading system. Yet, in the United States at least, such fears appear unfounded. Indeed, as Table 2 shows, American attitudes toward the global dimensions of the crisis are surprisingly relaxed. True, a very large percentage of Americans agree that "at times like these, it is important that the United States focus on solving its own economic problems", but that is a view that could mean many things (for example that the country's economic and financial systems require reform). Fewer citizens agreed that "in times like these, we should buy more American goods and not worry about our economic partners", although the percentage (70% overall) will be seen as worrisomely high by those who fear protectionist sentiment.

Yet, in an apparent contradiction, an equally high percentage – over 75% of adherents of all parties – agree that "it is important for the United States to remain open to international trade to keep prices low". Given the depth of the recession and the loss of household wealth that accompanied the fall of the stock market in 2008, this endorsement of economic openness is surprisingly high. Equally surprising, while it is usually the Democrats who are considered the skeptics in matters of free trade, note that in this survey that it is Democrats who are *more* supportive of open trade (and less likely to endorse the view that "we should buy more American goods...") As I noted above, it is also Republicans who are least supportive of a "closer" economic partnership with Europe. Given the generally high levels of support for

open trade among all the parties, perhaps these differences should be discounted. Nonetheless, given the evolution of the Republicans toward a more culturally conservative (and Southern) party, it may be that the more globalist economic thinking that is characteristic of the Wall Street wing of the party has declined. In effect, although the evidence is only suggestive at this point, it may be that a less globalist and more nationalist Republican Party on international economic issues is emerging. Surprisingly, the survey evidence on trade issues has been sparse during the recent crisis, so this is clearly a question on which additional research is highly desirable.

CONCLUSIONS

President Obama has experienced the fate of all presidents: he began with high approval ratings in both domestic and foreign affairs but saw them drop as his policy decisions polarized the parties and the difficult circumstances of the economy and the war in Afghanistan exerted an additional negative effect. The lower approval ratings and the divisions that they represent certainly limit the options that he can consider and the policy measures that he is likely to pass successfully.

Nonetheless, there are indications in public opinion to suggest that Obama may have more success than his lowered ratings might suggest. In the first place, we have seen that the public, although divided in their approval of the President, nonetheless profess higher confidence in his ability to deal with policy issues. He also continues to enjoy very high public assessments of his leadership abilities¹⁶. Second, perhaps for this reason, the President's decisions and actions – particularly on Afghanistan – demonstrate an ability to convince an otherwise skeptical public to at least tolerate his decisions in the short term. Finally, despite an erosion in his own support, the President remains more popular –

16. http://pollingreport.com/obama_ad.htm

and trusted – than the opposition¹⁷. For all of these reasons, President Obama remains a formidable political presence whose ability to succeed is often underestimated. Of course, some divisions defy persuasion, and this is likely to be the case on the issues of climate change and macroeconomic policy, where the level and intensity of partisan opposition is very high. To the extent that these decisions hamper the ability of the President to collaborate with global partners, there is therefore every chance that the partisan polarization of American politics will have important international implications.

17. On healthcare, see for example <http://www.gallup.com/poll/123917/on-healthcare-americans-trust-obama-more-than-congress.aspx>. On the economy and the budget, see <http://www.pollingreport.com/budget.htm>