

## Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1987

**Editor's note.** The following has been extracted with permission from the *Great Decisions '87 National Opinion Ballot Report* published in August 1987 by the national, nonpartisan Foreign Policy Association, 729 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. The Foreign Policy Association annually publishes a briefing book, entitled *Great Decisions (year)*, which is used by public discussion groups throughout the U.S. In what is reported as "the largest citizen education program of its kind in the country," over 250,000 Americans participated in 1987 in study and discussion groups of *Great Decisions '87*. This briefing book covers eight foreign policy topics (only six are reported below), and includes public opinion ballots for each topic (plus an addressed envelope).

Completed ballots are returned to the Foreign Policy Association where they are then tabulated under the supervision of Esther Fleischman, former Vice President of Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., and subsequently published as a *National Opinion Ballot Report*. Although a random sampling technique was used in tabulating the ballots (a total of 25,258 of the 53,259 ballots cast were tabulated), this does not represent a scientific, random sample of American public opinion. Rather, the report which follows reflects an opinion survey of a select group of Americans who are interested in the study of U.S. foreign policy and participated in special study/discussion groups of the subject, and were sufficiently motivated to complete the opinion ballots and return them to the polling agency. A profile of the characteristics of the respondent group is found at the end of this report.

### TOPIC 1: The Constitution and Foreign Policy

**Issue A: Public opinion plays an important role in the struggle for power to make foreign policy. In your opinion, what changes should take place?**

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
	%	%	%	%
a. The present balance of power between the President and Congress in making foreign policy is about right.	22	41	26	11
b. Congress should play a more active role in foreign-policy making.	28	40	22	10
c. The President should have a freer hand to make foreign policy.	8	20	37	35

(Ballots Tabulated: 2,743)

### **Discussion:**

The Constitution provides for power to be shared by the executive and legislative branches of government in the making of foreign policy. The question put to participants in the 1987 Great Decision program was, in effect, about the proper balance between the two branches of government in the execution of foreign policy. In answering the question, respondents gave

conflicting signals. By a margin of almost three to one, respondents indicated that the President should *not* have a freer hand to make foreign policy. On the other hand, respondents, by margins of roughly two to one, agreed *both* that Congress should play a more active role in foreign-policy making (68%) and that the present balance of power between the President and Congress in making foreign policy was about right (63%).

The effect of outside events has always been a problem for public opinion analysts because it is difficult to assess and measure the impact of such events on public opinion and risky to attribute the expression of particular attitudes to certain happenings. In the case of the Iran-contra affair, however, one can safely assume that participants were aware of the events as they unfolded almost daily in the media throughout most of the balloting period, January through May, 1987.

**Issue B: With regard to the role of international law in foreign policy, the U.S. should:**

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
	%	%	%	%
a. Obey international law, however, imperfect, because the alternative is to promote international lawlessness.	39	39	16	6
b. Obey international law in order to provide an example for other countries to follow.	39	47	10	4
c. Obey international law when it advances U.S. national interests.	27	30	24	20
d. Consider international law irrelevant to U.S. foreign policy, as most of the important issues cannot be resolved by means of law.	5	14	26	55

(Ballots Tabulated: 2,743)

**Discussion:**

Respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement on four aspects of the role of international law in foreign-policy making. Responses clearly indicated a preference for a U.S. foreign policy that obeys international law, however imperfect that law may be.

Strong majorities, 86% and 78% respectively, favored obeying international law as a matter of principle: to provide an example to other countries, and because the alternative is to promote international lawlessness. When adherence to international law was put in more pragmatic terms, that is, when adherence to international law was tied to advancing U.S. national interests, the majority in favor fell to 57%.

Only 19% agreed that international law was irrelevant to U.S. foreign policy because law cannot resolve most important issues.

## TOPIC 2: Defense and the Federal Deficit

**Issue:** In setting Federal spending levels, the U.S. should:

	<u>%</u>
1. Spend as much on defense as the Administration considers necessary for security and reduce the Federal deficit by making cuts in nondefense areas.	8
2. Hold defense spending to current levels, adjusting for inflation, and tailor U.S. strategy and commitments to match available resources.	26
3. Reduce the Federal deficit by making across-the-board budget cuts, including defense.	19
4. Cut the defense budget and reorder defense priorities.	39
5. Other.	6

(Ballots Tabulated: 3,166)

### **Discussion:**

Respondents were presented with a range of four options for dealing with the Federal deficit. All options focused on levels of defense spending--from spending as much as the Administration thinks is necessary for maintaining security, to cutting the defense budget and reordering defense priorities. The largest number, 39%, chose the last-mentioned option, while only 8% were prepared to give the Administration a free hand on matters of defense spending. Intermediate positions of holding defense spending to current levels or making across-the-board budget cuts, including spending for defense, were taken by 26% and 19% respectively.

## TOPIC 3: Egypt and the United States

**Issue A:** The U.S. should:

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
	%	%	%	%
a. Strengthen ties to Egypt even if it means distancing itself from Israel.	19	43	27	12
b. Reduce Egypt's debt burden.	17	51	24	8
c. Reduce pressure on Egypt to conform to U.S. policies.	25	50	20	5
d. Seek Egypt's continued military cooperation.	42	46	10	3
e. Tie U.S. aid to Egypt's improving relations with Israel.	16	39	33	12
f. Distance itself from Egypt, recognizing that Egypt's priority is to improve relations with its Arab neighbors.	5	21	38	37

(Ballots Tabulated: 3,590)

## Discussion:

Egypt was perceived as a valuable ally of the United States by a strong majority of respondents, both in strategic and economic terms.

By a strong majority (88%), respondents favored the United States seeking continued military cooperation with Egypt; 75% favored reducing pressure on Egypt to conform to U.S. policies, and 68% favored reducing Egypt's debt burden.

When strengthening relations with Egypt was made conditional upon the United States distancing itself from Israel, support for such a policy dropped to 61%. When it was suggested that U.S. aid to Egypt be tied to Egypt's improving relations with Israel, support for such a policy dropped still further, to a slim majority of 55%.

The suggestion that the United States distance itself from Egypt in recognition of Egypt's need to improve relations with its Arab neighbors received only scant agreement: 26% of the respondents.

### Issue B: U.S. aid to Egypt should be:

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
	%	%	%	%
a. Given on a cash grant basis (rather than for projects designated by the U.S.) in recognition of Egypt's need for aid and its regional importance.	18	42	26	14
b. Given only for projects approved by AID.	11	34	40	15
c. Tied to Egypt's adopting a sound program of economic reforms.	36	51	11	2
d. Tied to Egypt's improving relations with Israel.	14	43	32	10
e. Substantially reduced.	8	26	44	23
f. Increased for economic, not military, projects.	35	44	16	6

(Ballots Tabulated: 3,590)

## Discussion:

Respondents who viewed Egypt as a valuable U.S. ally were prepared to back up their support in tangible ways. Only 34% agreed that U.S. aid to Egypt should be substantially reduced. The largest majority, 87%, were in favor of tying aid to Egypt's adopting a sound program of economic reforms; 79% were in favor of increased aid for economic but not military projects; and 60% were in favor of aid on a cash grant basis. The latter runs counter to U.S. Policy and would bring aid more in line with the aid program for Israel. When it was suggested that aid to Egypt be made conditional upon Egypt's improving relations with Israel, support dropped off (57%). Less than half (45%) agreed that aid should be given only for projects approved by the Agency for International Development (AID).

**TOPIC 4: The Pacific Basin: Alliances, Trade, and Bases**

**Issue A: How would you rate the following policies in terms of their effectiveness in strengthening the U.S. role in the Pacific Basin? The U.S. should:**

	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Very Effective
	%	%	%
a. Maintain the present policy of not disclosing whether a ship is carrying nuclear weapons.	31	33	36
b. Press Japan to assume a greater share of the defense of the Pacific.	34	44	22
c. Make concessions to New Zealand to repair the ANZUS alliance.	32	40	28
d. Negotiate force reductions of Pacific fleets with the Soviet Union.	37	38	26
e. Support a nuclear-free zone in the Pacific.	47	28	25
f. Support the democratic opposition in countries with authoritarian leaders.	25	46	28
g. Support governments that share U.S. strategic goals, regardless of their politics.	26	39	35

(Ballots Tabulated: 3,502)

**Discussion:**

In a series of seven policy options rating the effectiveness of strengthening the U.S. role in the Pacific Basin, no single option was rated as very effective by even a majority. The proposition favoring U.S. support of a nuclear-free zone in the Pacific, which is contrary to current U.S. policy, received the highest percentage rating (47%). The next largest plurality (37%) rated as very effective U.S. negotiation of force reductions of Pacific fleets with the Soviet Union. Opinion on all policy options was highly diffuse, each option being rated very, somewhat, or not very effective by roughly one third of respondents.

The items that respondents were asked to rate were highly specific: Should the United States press Japan to assume a greater share of the defense of the Pacific? Make concessions to New Zealand to repair the ANZUS alliance? Support the democratic opposition in countries with authoritarian leaders?

Attitudes regarding the U.S. role in the Pacific Basin are not crystallized, and perhaps lack the salience for respondents that issues regarding the Middle East, Central Asia, or South Africa have in shaping foreign policy.

**Issue B: For the following trade issues, please indicate your reaction by checking one column for every policy option listed.**

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
	%	%	%	%
a. The U.S. should protect its industries against foreign competition since other countries protect theirs.	18	38	28	16
b. The U.S. should wait and see whether Japan and other countries open their markets wider to U.S. exports before imposing protectionist measures.	33	44	16	7
c. The U.S. should adhere to a policy of reciprocal free trade.	49	38	11	2
d. The U.S. should not impose protectionist policies because they will not solve the problem of the trade deficit.	40	35	20	5
e. The U.S. should seek ways to make U.S. goods and services more competitive in international trade.	83	15	2	1

(Ballots Tabulated: 3,502)

### Discussion:

While positions were weakly held on strategic questions in the Pacific Basin, they were strongly felt on economic issues.

Strongest agreement was expressed for two propositions that place the responsibility for its economic well-being on the United States. One called on the United States to make its own goods and services more competitive in international trade (98%), and the other called for the United States to adhere to a policy of reciprocal free trade (87%).

Very strong support was expressed for two other propositions that said, on the one hand, let's wait and see whether Japan and other countries open their markets wider before imposing protectionist policies (77%) and, on the other hand, the United States should not impose protectionist policies at all, because they will not solve the trade deficit problem (75%). Only 56% opted for protecting U.S. industries against foreign competition in retaliation against other countries that protect their industries.

While positions were not always consistent--with strong majorities both pro-and anti-protectionist--respondents forcefully registered their sentiments. They said, in effect, that it matters less what steps the United States takes than that it does everything possible to solve what are perceived as very serious problems.

## TOPIC 5: Pakistan and Afghanistan

**Issue: In its relations with Pakistan, the U.S.:**

	<u>%</u>
1. Should continue to support the Zia government.	10
2. Should continue giving aid in recognition of Pakistan's support for U.S. policy toward Afghanistan.	46
3. Should reduce or cut off aid unless Pakistan curbs its nuclear program.	15
4. Should reduce or cut off aid unless Pakistan improves human rights.	12
5. Should disassociate itself from the Zia government.	5
6. Should ally itself with India instead of Pakistan.	5
7. Other.	7

(Ballots Tabulated: 2,809)

### **Discussion:**

Out of six policy options that the United States might adopt in its relations with Pakistan, respondents were asked to choose the one that came closest to their own opinion.

Embedded in the policy statements was a hierarchy of levels of U.S. support for the Zia government, from continued support of Pakistan, to abandoning Pakistan and allying itself with India. The one proposal that received substantial support (46%) was that the United States should continue giving aid in recognition of Pakistan's support for U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan. Support for this proposal, however, could also be interpreted as a vote for the Afghan resistance to Soviet occupation.

Policies that supported punitive measures toward Pakistan unless Pakistan curbed its nuclear program or improved human rights received only 15% and 12% of the votes respectively.

**Issue B: How would you rate the following policies in terms of their effectiveness in furthering a settlement in Afghanistan?**

	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Very Effective
	%	%	%
a. The U.S. should increase arms aid to the mujahideen.	24	45	30
b. The U.S. should recognize an Afghan government in exile.	15	34	51
c. The U.S. should seek to have the mujahideen included in the UN-sponsored peace negotiations.	45	43	13
d. The U.S. should acquiesce in Soviet control if the Soviets make significant concessions to the U.S. in another region.	7	24	69
e. The U.S. should make significant concessions in another region if the Soviets pull out of Afghanistan.	15	31	53

(Ballots Tabulated: 2,809)

## Discussion:

When respondents rated five policy options in terms of their probable effectiveness in furthering a settlement in Afghanistan, they seemed much surer of what would *not* be effective than what would be.

The largest percentage taking any position at all were 69% who regarded as not very effective the United States acquiescing in Soviet control of Afghanistan in return for Soviet concessions to the United States in another region. Bare majorities, 53% and 51% respectively, thought it was not very effective for the United States to make concessions in another region if the Soviets pull out of Afghanistan or for the United States to recognize an Afghan government in exile.

The one statement that drew more than token support as very effective (45%) was the proposition that the United States seek to have the mujahideen included in the UN-sponsored peace negotiations.

## Topic 6: Dealing with Revolution

**Issue:** In dealing with revolutions in other countries, the U.S. should:

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
	%	%	%	%
a. Stay out of the domestic affairs of other countries to avoid breeding resentment and because there are limits to U.S. influence.	36	43	16	5
b. Maintain "cool and correct" relations with existing governments, urge reforms where needed and keep lines open to moderate opposition groups.	53	41	5	1
c. Support revolutions that claim to aspire to freedom and human rights, because the U.S. should be a leader in opposing tyranny.	17	41	27	14
d. Support anti-Communist governments, regardless of their political systems, because that is the best way to counter Soviet expansionist aims.	6	18	26	50

(Ballots Tabulated: 2,888)

## Discussion:

The framework for considering the issues in this question was the recent revolutions in Iran, Nicaragua and the Philippines. In two of these countries, Iran and Nicaragua, the revolutions have brought to power governments hostile to the United States. It is in this light that the reactions to the policy options must be judged.

Respondents were virtually unanimous (94%) in saying that in dealing with revolutions in other countries the United States should maintain "cool and correct" relations with existing governments, urge reforms where needed, and keep lines open to moderate opposition groups; 79% agreed that there were limits to U.S. influence and that the United States should stay out of the domestic affairs of other countries to avoid breeding resentment; and only 24% agreed that the United States should support anti-Communist governments, regardless of their political systems, because that is the best way to counter Soviet expansionist aims. Only one policy option drew some agreement for supporting revolutions (58%)--when revolutions claim to aspire to freedom and human rights.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

The opinion ballots employed in this report included a brief questionnaire which permits the identification of certain characteristics of the respondent group, as shown below.

A.	Age:	%
	1. 17 or under	3
	2. 18 to 30	15
	3. 31 to 45	9
	4. 46 to 60	18
	5. 60 or over	56
B.	Sex:	
	1. Female	61
	2. Male	39
C.	Highest level of formal education completed:	
	1. Some high school	4
	2. High school graduate	6
	3. Some college	24
	4. College graduate	31
	5. Advanced degree	34
D.	Frequency of individual being asked to provide personal opinion on foreign policy matters.	
	1. Often	14
	2. Sometimes	47
	3. Hardly ever	39

### Discussion:

All but 10% of the participants in the 1987 poll had some college education; 65% had a baccalaureate or an advanced degree. More than half (56%) were aged 61 or over; only 18% were 30 or under. A very high percentage of the group qualifies as foreign policy "opinion leaders" in the sense that they say they are asked for their opinion on foreign policy matters often (14%) or sometimes (47%).

Based on zip code identification, the greatest number of ballots in 1987 were received from Oregon, California, Illinois, New York, Colorado, Ohio, Virginia, Arizona, Florida, and Pennsylvania, in that order.