

## Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy

Editor's note. The following has been extracted from the *Great Decisions '86 National Opinion Ballot Report* published in August 1986 by the nonpartisan Foreign Policy Association, 205 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10016. The Foreign Policy Association annually publishes a briefing book, *Great Decisions*, which is used by public discussion groups throughout the U.S. Over 300,000 Americans are reported to have participated in such study groups in 1986. The briefing book covers eight topics (only five 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 Ester Fleishman, 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 (only 29,298 of the 61,615 ballots cast were tabulated), this does not represent a scientific, random sample of American public opinion. Rather, the report which follows reflects the opinions of a selective group of Americans who are interested in the study of U.S. foreign policy, and are sufficiently motivated to complete the ballots and return them to the polling agency. A profile of the characteristics of the respondent group is found at the end of the report.

### TOPIC 1: Third World Development: Old Problem. New Strategies.

Issue: In its relations with the Third World, the U.S. should:

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
	%	%	%	%
a. Increase development assistance.	37	43	15	6
b. Increase military assistance.	2	13	33	52
c. Maintain present level of foreign aid, but spend more on development, less on military aid.	47	40	10	4
d. Maintain present level of foreign aid, but spend more on military aid, less on development.	1	6	25	68
e. Maintain present level and distribution of foreign aid.	8	35	37	20
f. Channel more aid through multilateral organizations.	31	39	20	11
g. Channel more aid through bilateral programs.	13	39	35	13
h. Leave foreign aid to private voluntary organizations.	11	26	33	30

(Ballots Tabulated: 3,949)

## Discussion:

This question seeks agreement or disagreement with a number of policy options on relations with the Third World. Half the items deal with types and levels of foreign aid assistance, while the remainder deal with the manner of distribution of foreign aid.

In regard to types and levels of foreign aid, respondents are nearly unanimous in their lack of enthusiasm for providing military assistance to Third World countries, either in the form of maintaining present levels of foreign aid but shifting funds away from development and increasing military aid (7%), or by increasing military aid, which is favored by only 15%. Respondents are not against foreign aid as such, provided it is spent on development and not on military assistance: 80% agree that development assistance should be increased, and 87% agree that where foreign aid is already being provided, present levels should be maintained but shifted away from military aid and toward development.

On the manner of distribution of foreign aid, opinion varies widely. Channeling more aid through multilateral organizations is endorsed by 70% of respondents, and 52% favor channeling more aid through bilateral programs. Maintaining present levels and distribution of foreign aid is preferred by 43%, and leaving foreign aid to private voluntary organizations, the least popular option, is favored by 37%.

## TOPIC 2: Israel and the U.S.: Friendship and Discord.

**Issue A: In its economic and military policy toward Israel, the U. S. should:**

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
	%	%	%	%
a. Increase aid to Israel in order to help it through its economic crisis.	12	27	33	28
b. Continue present level of aid.	16	36	32	16
c. Cut back on aid because high aid levels increase Israel's dependence on the U.S.	20	33	30	18
d. Attach additional conditions to U.S. aid to assure its use for defensive purposes.	39	33	15	13

(Ballots Tabulated: 3,290)

## Discussion:

Because the phrasing of the question links economic and military policy, the term *aid to Israel* here must be understood to include both types of aid.

A solid majority (61%) rejects increasing aid to Israel in order to help it through its economic crisis, but a slim majority (52%) is in favor of continuing the present level of aid.

When it is suggested that high levels of aid increase Israel's dependence on the United States, a majority (53%) favor cutting back on aid to Israel. When it is suggested that additional conditions to U.S. aid be attached to assure its use for defensive purposes, a strong majority (72%) registers support.

**Issue B: In its diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East, the U.S. should:**

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
	%	%	%	%
a. Remain actively involved as a mediator in the peace-seeking process and pressure both Arabs and Israelis to make concessions.	60	29	7	4
b. Drop insistence on West Bank autonomy.	14	37	28	21
c. Refrain from attempts to mediate the Arab-Israeli conflict since neither side is prepared to make compromises necessary for reaching an agreement.	11	20	30	40

(Ballots Tabulated: 3,290)

**Discussion:**

In its diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East, respondents strongly (89%) favor the United States remaining actively involved as a mediator in the peace-seeking process and pressuring both Arabs and Israelis to make concessions. By a somewhat smaller margin (70%), they disagree that the United States refrain from attempts to mediate the Arab-Israeli conflict since neither side is prepared to make the concessions that are necessary for reaching agreement. Stated differently, respondents want the United States to be a major actor in the Middle East conflict, regardless of the obstacles.

While respondents strongly endorse the mediator role for the United States in the Middle East, they are widely split on one of the important issues in that conflict, autonomy for the West Bank. By a narrow margin of 51% to 49% respondents agree that the United States should drop its insistence on West Bank autonomy.

**TOPIC 3: U.S. Policy and Central America.**

**Issue: The most important goal of U.S. policy toward Central America is to:**

1. Prevent Communist expansion by any means necessary, including military force.	16
2. Prevent Communist expansion by any means necessary, except military force.	13
3. Promote democracy by withholding support from governments that violate political and human rights.	25
4. Promote economic and social development by increasing U.S. economic aid and trade.	41
5. Other.	4

(Ballots Tabulated: 3,019)

**Discussion:**

This question assesses how respondents view U.S. policy toward Central America. Given four policy goals, respondents were asked to select the one that they view as the most important.

While four distinct goals were offered, there is a dichotomy between the first set of two and the second set. The first set focuses on prevention of Communist expansion, while the second focuses on promotion of democracy and economic development.

Two thirds (66%) identify promotion of democracy and economic and social development as primary goals, while only 29% view prevention of Communist expansion as the most important goal of U.S. policy toward Central America.

Of those who view preventing Communist expansion as the most important goal, 16% would include the use of military force, while 13% would exclude military force.

Whereas one-fourth (25%) view promoting democracy by withholding support from governments that violate political and human rights as the most important goal of U.S. policy toward Central America, 41% regard promoting economic and social development by increasing U.S. economic aid and trade as the primary goal.

When this question appeared on the *Great Decisions '85* Opinion Ballot, the same percentage of respondents (66%) identified promotion of democracy and development as primary goals, although a slightly higher number (43%) favored an unconditional increase in U.S. aid and trade. Of the 28% who viewed preventing Communist expansion as the most important goal, respondents were split evenly in 1985 between those who would or would not use military force to achieve the goal.

#### **TOPIC 4: Democracy in Latin America.**

**Issue A: In its policy toward the Latin American debt crisis, the U.S. should:**

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
	%	%	%	%
a. Let Latin American countries work out their own solutions with the IMF and banks.	28	45	20	7
b. Press the IMF and banks to work out lenient terms with Latin American debtors.	26	49	20	6
c. Offer assistance to Latin American countries that undertake austerity programs.	27	48	19	6
d. Lessen emphasis on austerity and make new loans designed to promote growth.	15	33	31	22
e. Reduce tariffs and eliminate quotas on imports from Latin America to help debtors earn foreign exchange to repay debts.	25	45	23	8
f. Initiate a new Alliance for Progress with Latin America.	42	41	12	5

(Ballots Tabulated: 4,161)

## Discussion:

Respondents were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement with six policies that the United States might adopt in regard to helping solve the Latin American debt crisis.

A large majority of respondents, ranging from 70% to 83%, expressed agreement with five of the six proposals. Only the proposal to "lessen emphasis on austerity and make new loans designed to promote growth" finds agreement by less than a majority (48%).

While agreement with most proposals is wide, it lacks depth in that respondents by nearly two to one only *agreed somewhat* with the proposals offered. Only the statement that the United States should initiate a new Alliance for Progress with Latin America, which is favored by 83%, is agreed with strongly (42%) and agreed with somewhat (41%) about equally. The overall results tend to paint a picture of respondents in agreement that the Latin American debt crisis needs to be addressed, but not really quite certain that the proposed measures will work, and taking exception to the one measure that implies a degree of indulgence toward the debtors.

### Issue B: In its relations with Latin American countries, the U.S. should:

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
	%	%	%	%
a. Give priority to improving relations with democratic governments.	61	33	5	1
b. Give priority to assisting countries where U.S. interests are threatened.	24	49	21	7
c. Give priority to improving relations with governments that support U.S. policies, regardless of whether they are democratic or authoritarian.	16	36	28	21
d. Follow a policy of benign neglect toward those countries in which the U.S. has no major interests.	6	19	35	40

(Ballots Tabulated: 4,161)

## Discussion:

In its relations with Latin American countries, respondents were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement with four policy positions. Strongest agreement (94%) is expressed for giving priority to improving relations with democratic governments, followed by giving priority to assisting countries where U.S. interests are threatened (73%). Consistent with these positions, strong disagreement is registered for following a policy of benign neglect toward those countries in which the United States has no major interests (75%). The only policy option that produced real variance was to give priority to improving relations with governments that support U.S. policies, regardless of whether they are democratic or authoritarian, with 52% in agreement and 49% in disagreement.

Overall, respondents seem to be saying that the United States has responsibilities where Latin America is concerned, even in those countries in which it has no major interests. Consensus,

however, breaks down once the issue of supporting governments regardless of their democratic or authoritarian character is introduced.

**TOPIC 5: International Terrorism: In Search of a Response.**

**Issue: How would you rate the following steps in terms of their effectiveness in fighting international terrorism?**

	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Very Effective
	%	%	%
a. Tighten airport security.	54	41	4
b. Station U.S. sky marshals on flights.	20	45	35
c. Boycott unsafe airports.	46	37	17
d. Tighten security at embassies.	48	46	6
e. Improve intelligence capabilities.	68	28	4
f. Pressure countries that sponsor terrorism.	45	39	16
g. Attack terrorist bases before they can be used to launch attacks.	23	27	50
h. Improve international cooperation to catch and prosecute terrorists.	73	23	4
i. Give priority to eliminating the causes of terrorism.	57	29	14
j. Negotiate for the release of hostages.	27	43	30
k. Retaliate against terrorist groups that attack U.S. citizens or property.	33	35	33
l. Limit media coverage of terrorist actions.	43	39	18

(Ballots Tabulated: 4,081)

**Discussion:**

Presented with 12 methods by which to fight international terrorism, respondents were asked to rate each in terms of its effectiveness. Heading the list and following a close second, are the two methods that most clearly focus on the international aspect of terrorism: 73% consider as very effective improving international cooperation to catch and prosecute terrorists, and 68% think improving intelligence capabilities very effective. Also considered as very effective by more than a majority of respondents are: giving priority to eliminating the causes of terrorism (57%) and tightening airport security (54%). Only one position, attacking terrorist bases before they can be used to launch attacks, is considered as not very effective by at least half the respondents (50%).

If one were to combine the scores of each method rated as either very effective or somewhat effective, the result would show that a large majority of respondents are in agreement that indeed all methods would be effective, with the single exception of preemptive strikes against terrorist bases, which was considered very effective by less than a majority, but even that method was favored by 50%.

## 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. (Ballots tabulated: 3,969.)

• <b>Age:</b>	%
•• 17 or under	3
•• 18 to 30	23
•• 31 to 45	11
•• 46 to 60	17
•• 61 or over	47
• <b>Sex:</b>	%
•• Male	62
•• Female	39
• <b>Highest level of formal education completed:</b>	%
•• Some high school	4
•• High school graduate	6
•• Some college	30
•• College graduate	31
•• Advanced degree	30
• <b>Frequency of individual being asked to provide personal opinion on foreign policy matters:</b>	%
•• Often	14
•• Sometimes	48
•• Hardly ever	38

### Discussion:

This year, high school students made up 4% of the participants in the program, and college students 21%. All but 10% of the participants had some college education and 61% had a baccalaureate or an advanced degree. This year, 26% of the participants were 30 or under and 47% were 61 or over. Women outnumbered men almost three to two. A very high percentage of the group qualify 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 (48%).

Because participants were asked to indicate the first three digits of their zip code on each ballot, it is possible to tell what states contributed most heavily to the tabulated results. The greatest number of ballots were received from Oregon, California, Illinois, Florida, Ohio, Colorado, New York, Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina, in that order. Zip code information was missing from less than 1 percent of the tabulated ballots.