
Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1990

[Editor's note. The following has been extracted with the permission of the Foreign Policy Association from its *National Opinion Ballot Report*, September 1990. The national Foreign Policy Association (729 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019) annually publishes a non-partisan briefing book on international issues entitled, *Great Decisions (year)*, which is used by public discussion groups throughout the United States. In what has been described as "the largest citizen education program of its kind in the country," over 250,000 Americans participated in study and discussion groups of *Great Decisions 1990*. This 96-page briefing book covers eight foreign policy topics, and includes public opinion ballots for each topic (plus an addressed return envelope for the ballots).

Completed ballots were returned to the Foreign Policy Association where they were tabulated by the Calcologic Corporation of New York City and then analyzed by Dr. Helmut Norpoth, a public opinion expert and professor of political science at the State University of New York at Stony Brook who was formerly a consultant to the New York Times/CBS News Poll. The tabulated results and Dr. Norpoth's analyses were subsequently published as a *National Opinion Ballot Report*, which is presented herein. It should be noted that this report does not represent a scientific cross-sectional sample of American public opinion. Rather, it reflects an opinion survey of a select and varied group of Americans who are interested in the study of U.S. foreign policy, who participated in special non-partisan study/discussion groups, and who were sufficiently motivated to complete the opinion ballots and return them to the polling agency. A total of 39,409 opinion ballots were submitted by 5,006 individual participants and were tabulated for this report. A profile and analysis of the characteristics of the respondent group is found at the end of this article. The tabulated response total for the items identified below, which are provided in terms of percentages, may not equal 100% because of rounding or because of missing responses.]

OPINION SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

Western economic aid is considered essential to keep Soviet and East European liberalization from collapsing, but the majority favors tying aid to free-market reforms and cuts in defense spending.

In Cambodia, the majority favors a U.S. hands-off policy; only 8 percent would support Hun Sen; 20 percent, a coalition that excluded the Khmer Rouge.

An independent Palestinian state rather than Palestinian autonomy or annexation by Israel is favored by a majority as a solution to the Palestinian question.

The U.S. should give the United Nations higher priority, even though a majority rates the U.N. as not very effective in settling security issues.

Global warming is seen as a threat by a strong majority; only 12 percent support wait-and-see policy before U.S. takes action. Respondents are sharply divided over nuclear power as a means to counter warming; 64 percent support a gas tax hike.

A majority lacks confidence in the present state of the U.S. economy, but is divided over the future, with 49 percent expecting growth, and 46 percent decline.

TOPIC 1: U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe

The pace of political change in much of the Communist world since last summer has been nothing short of breathtaking, with the West happily applauding the moves toward freedom and democracy. At the same time, decades of socialist management have saddled those countries with staggering economic problems that may bedevil the efforts of democratic reformers. Are they doomed without Western aid? The Opinion Ballot challenged participants to state a prognosis regarding the success of liberalization efforts in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe without Western economic aid. Their prognosis was not unanimous. Most expressed the fear that those efforts would collapse without economic aid from the West, but a sizeable minority was hopeful that this would not happen.

Asked whether the U.S. should offer the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe substantial loans and favorable trade terms, only a few favored the extreme positions of giving aid without any conditions or giving no aid at all. Yet some of those respondents appended their ballot with vocal comments. "Why should we attach conditions when they are making the reforms on their own," said one, while another felt that "aid would prolong the agony of all concerned." The vast majority of participants favored aid if both of two conditions were met: free-market reforms and cuts in defense spending. Some saw this as a golden opportunity to urge the U.S. to cut its own defense as well. Others noted that cuts had been made already in parts of Eastern Europe.

Issue A. Do you think that without Western economic aid the liberalization efforts in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe will collapse?

Yes	56%
No	42%

Issue B. Should the U.S. offer the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe substantial loans and favorable trade terms?

Without any conditions	9%
Only if free-market reforms are adopted	9%
Only if defense spending is cut	8%
Only if free-market reforms are adopted and defense spending is cut	65%
Not at all	5%

TOPIC 2: THE U.S., EUROPE AND JAPAN

Turning to matters at home, participants were invited to offer their diagnosis and prognosis regarding the state of the U.S. economy. A clear majority pronounced the American economy in bad health, moving one participant to compare it unfavorably with the Soviet economy: "The U.S.S.R. has long gone broke; the U.S. is in debt." The sense that all is no longer well with the

American economy has also been found by surveys of the general public. A poll cited by *The New York Times* (July 22, 1990, E5) showed that Americans who felt the economy had gotten worse compared to a year ago outnumbered those who felt it had gotten better by four to one. As for the future, participants were sharply divided in their economic outlook. Optimists and pessimists were almost evenly matched in numbers, if not intensity or certainty, when it came to predicting whether over the next few years the U.S. economy would grow or decline.

Without much doubt the persisting deficits in the Federal budget and the U.S. trade balance loomed large as threats to the nation's health. With rare unanimity, participants expressed the opinion that those deficits posed major problems. Many who predicted growth qualified their assessment with write-in comments and many who saw decline ahead added gloomy remarks criticizing American bad habits. "As a nation, we are extravagant, wasteful, and imprudent," bemoaned one outspoken participant. Another predicted that "the U.S. will decline as Rome did due to hypocrisy and greed."

Concerning U.S. trade and investment policies, the vast majority of participants leaned toward free trade rather than protectionism or retaliation. Again, some vocal comments accompanied minority views. "The U.S. needs to quit being the nice guy all the time," was one remark. Others singled out Japan and pressed for "requiring freer trade from Japan, Inc." In addition to the options provided on the ballot, participants also advocated remedies of a non-economic sort. "The U.S. must rebuild its ability to lead in education, work habits, and savings."

Issue A. At present, is the U.S. economy in good shape or in bad shape?

Good Shape	36%
Bad shape	60%

Issue B. In the next few years, will the U.S. economy grow or decline?

Will grow	49%
Will decline	46%

Issue C. Do budget and trade deficits pose major problems for the nation's health?

Yes	94%
No	5%

Issue D. With regard to U.S. trade and investment policy, which of the following statements comes closest to your thinking?

The U.S. should take steps to protect itself from foreign competition	4%
The U.S. should restrict investment from and trade with those countries that place restrictions on U.S. investors and exporters	19%
The U.S. should continue to work for more-open trade and investment policies worldwide	74%

TOPIC 3: NICARAGUA AND EL SALVADOR

The promotion of economic and social development and human rights rated highest on the ladder of importance. As one participant put it, "after having destroyed their economy, it is our obligation to help." Close behind was concern with strengthening democratic institutions. Taking a cue from the showcase of democracy in the region, one respondent urged to "help Costa Rica 'export' its democratic system to other Latin American countries." Throughout the 1980s, Nicaragua and El Salvador marked two places where the Reagan Administration was determined to roll back communism or at least contain it. Earlier this year, the Sandinistas were toppled, not by U.S. backed contras but to the surprise of many, by ballots cast in a free election. Perhaps because of that, participants rated the goal of "toppling the Sandinista government in Nicaragua" as lowest in importance among various goals that the U.S. ought to be achieving in Central America. Second lowest in importance was the goal of "stopping the spread of communism," a much less salient problem in 1990 than in 1980. One participant noted that "communism seems to have been effectively defanged." Even Castro no longer seemed enough of a threat to warrant U.S. action.

As for actions the U.S. should be taking at present in Central America, hardly anyone favored a heavier dose of military support. But increasing economic aid was not endorsed by a majority either. The majority felt it was best for the U.S. to assist Central American governments in settling conflicts peacefully, along the model set by the Arias plan. A considerable minority, on the other hand, urged a hands-off stance, as expressed by the view that "the U.S. has to let go as a parent lets go of a teenage child—let them make a few mistakes."

Issue A. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is low in importance and 10 is high, how important is it to you that the U.S. achieve each of the following in Central America?

	Mean Rating
Stop the spread of communism	4.5
Topple Nicaragua's Sandinista government	4.2
Promote Economic and social development	8.4
Strengthen democratic institutions	7.8
Promote respect for human rights	8.4
Protect U.S. investments	5.6
Keep the Soviets and/or the Cubans out	4.9

Issue B. With respect to Central America, the U.S. should give highest priority to:

Increasing economic aid to the region	14%
Working more closely with governments in the region to settle conflicts peacefully	59%
Providing more military support	1 %
Reducing the U.S. role in Central America across the board	23%

TOPIC 4: VIETNAM, CAMBODIA AND THE U.S.

U.S. policy toward Vietnam has rarely elicited uniform support from the American public. Almost two decades after the American withdrawal, the issue of U.S. relations with Vietnam remains controversial, even among Great Decisions participants. Roughly four in ten favored normal relations without preconditions while almost as many preferred to wait until there is a comprehensive settlement in Cambodia, currently ruled by a Vietnam-backed government. The remainder wished to see first the replacement of the present government in Vietnam by a democratic one. One respondent in that group added, "they were the winners, we owe them nothing." On the other end, participants in favor of normalizing relations without preconditions expressed the sentiment that the U.S. must "help undo the harm it did."

Regarding Cambodia, U.S. policy until the recent accord reached between Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d and his Soviet counterpart Eduard A. Shevardnadze in July this year has been support for the coalition of opposition forces headed by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, a coalition that includes the dreaded Khmer Rouge. This is certainly not an alternative endorsed by many

participants. Yet even if the Khmer Rouge were to be excluded from a future government by Prince Sihanouk, only one in five participants would favor such a solution. Least popular, however, was support for the Vietnam-backed government of Hun Sen, the alternative toward which U.S. policy has recently swung. With none of those alternatives being particularly palatable, most participants preferred a hands-off policy, urging the U.S. to withhold support from both the present government and the opposition groups. As one of those respondents put it, "Haven't we learned not to interfere after our lack of success in Vietnam? We can't democratize the world."

Issue A. With regard to U.S. policy toward Vietnam, the U.S. should:	
Normalize relations without preconditions	42%
Normalize relations only after there is a comprehensive settlement in Cambodia	39%
Normalize relations with Vietnam only after the present government is replaced by a democratic one	15%

Issue B. With regard to U.S. policy toward Cambodia, the U.S. should:	
Support a coalition government headed by Prince Sihanouk even if the Khmer Rouge are included	13%
Support a coalition government headed by Prince Sihanouk provided the Khmer Rouge are not included	20%
Support the Vietnam-backed Hun Sen government	8%
Adopt a hands-off policy withholding U.S support from the present government and opposition groups	51%

TOPIC 5: THIRD WORLD ARMS BAZZAR

Participants expressed wide support for each of the policy options aiming to curb, in one form or another, the spread of arms to or in the Third World. Though extremely worrisome, this is not an issue provoking controversy among the participants. "Arms sales are worse than drugs," was a telling comment. Most participants not only endorsed each of the options, but did so "strongly," no more than a handful voiced strong opposition to any, and few were without opinion. The option concerning a comprehensive nuclear test ban registered the strongest support. Three of four respondents said they strongly favored a test ban for what are the deadliest weapons. By contrast, the more technical option of extending restrictions on the transfer of missile technology to more countries enjoyed strong support from only one in two.

Issue. For each of the policy options listed below, indicate whether you favor it strongly, favor it, oppose it strongly, oppose it, or have no opinion.

	Strongly Favor
Resume conventional arms transfer talks with the Soviet Union	60%
Expand conventional arms transfer talks to include other countries	59%
Tighten restrictions on the transfer of missile technology	51%
Extend restrictions on the transfer of missile technology to more countries	47%
Unilaterally tighten U.S. restrictions on weapons and weapons-technology transfers	51%
Stop production of binary chemical weapons	68%
Pursue a comprehensive nuclear test ban	74%

TOPIC 6: UNITED NATIONS

Not unlike efforts to curb the spread of arms, the role of the UN is an issue where dreams and everyday experience clash sharply. By a three-to-one margin participants wanted the U.S. to give the UN a higher priority in its foreign policy; the margin was even bigger for making the UN the principal forum for conflict resolution and keeping the peace. Dissent was scant on those questions among the participants. Strong support for the UN has been a reliable watermark of Great Decisions balloting over the years. The participants placed high hopes in the UN, even though few were impressed by its ability to settle issues of global security. Two of three rated the UN's performance in this domain as "not very effective." One reason for its ineffectiveness, as one participant noted, may be that the "U.S. rarely thinks of using the UN." Greater U.S. willingness to work with and through the UN would help, but participants were aware of obstacles. As most participants saw it, the UN is not an institution where the interests of the U.S. coincide with those of the majority on most international questions.

Issue A. Should the U.S. give the UN a higher priority in its foreign policy than it does at present?

Yes	75%
No	23%

Issue B. Should the U.S., in conjunction with the Soviet Union, make the UN the principal forum for resolving conflicts and keeping the peace?

Should	80%
Should not	18%

Issue C. How effective, in your opinion, is the UN in settling issues of global security?

Effective	21%
Not very effective	67%
Ineffective	9%

Issue D. Would you say that on most international questions the interests of the U.S. coincide with those of the majority of member states?

Yes	34%
No	58%

TOPIC 7: PALESTINIAN QUESTION

Few international problems have proved as intractable as the Palestinian question. Yet, participants agreed to a considerable degree in their choice of the best solution: an independent Palestinian state. A solid majority favored this option. Palestinian autonomy, be it under Jordanian or Israeli rule, enjoyed only minority support. Only a few favored Israeli annexation of occupied territory. Supporters of a Palestinian state, however, now and then expressed concerns with this option by raising the question, "But where?" Other participants seemed in a quandary about checking any of the options, with one conceding that "none of the solutions will be acceptable to both parties." In the words of another, "there is no practical solution to this problem," or, to cite an even gloomier prospect, "nothing short of war." In contrast to many other issues of international conflict in Great Decisions balloting, the Palestinian question provoked strong demands among participants for an active U.S. role. No hands-off or wait-and-see attitude prevailed in this instance. By margins of roughly two to one, participants favored a leading role for the U.S. in settling the conflict. However, they advocated that pressure be put on the Israelis to make concessions, and on the PLO to prove its good intentions. Impatience with Israel surfaced in some comments demanding a cutoff of military aid. Nonetheless, a considerable number of participants expressed discomfort with the policy options available. A tone of resignation colored numerous comments like this one: "None [of the options are] effective. Keep out." Or: "It's a tragic situation."

Issue A. Which form of political structure would best resolve the Palestinian question?

An independent Palestinian state	58%
Palestinian autonomy under Jordanian rule	19%
Palestinian autonomy under Israeli rule	13%
Israeli annexation of occupied territories	4%

Issue B. In order to advance the peace process, the U.S. should:

	Yes	No
Assume leadership in seeking a negotiated settlement	55%	29%
Wait for a regional consensus to develop before pursuing a negotiated settlement	37%	43%
Pressure Israel to make concessions	65%	20%
Pressure the PLO to prove its policy changes are bona fide	67%	15%

TOPIC 8: GLOBAL WARMING

There is little doubt among participants that global warming is a real threat. Only one in eight agreed with the statement that we should wait until there is more conclusive proof before taking specific actions to counter global warming. Nonetheless the unconvinced minority frequently raised questions about the evidence. "Don't rely on doomsday sources," one of them warned. Even so, hardly anyone opposed measures like a mandate for cleaner fuel in automobiles or an international convention to reduce CO₂ emissions. These measures apparently enjoy widespread support for reasons other than their possible effect on global warming.

Less popular were the proposals to increase taxes in order to increase conservation ("waste not, want not"), endorsed by two in three, or to rely on nuclear power. Still, what may be most surprising is that among Great Decisions participants, supporters of nuclear energy held a slight edge over opponents. Could it be that the fear of global warming is displacing the anxieties about nuclear power?

Finally, in an age dominated by television it is understandable that one participant urged the "use of TV shows (not news) that people watch regularly" as an additional measure in the fight against global warming. After all, "people believe actors more than politicians."

Issue. What actions should the U.S. government take to counter global warming?

	Yes	No
Mandate cleaner fuel in automobiles	93%	4%
Increase the gas tax to encourage conservation	64%	30%
Support nuclear power	47%	43%
Make foreign aid contingent on sound environmental policies	74%	18%
Support an international convention to reduce CO ₂ emissions	93%	4%
Wait until there is more conclusive proof of global warming	12%	82%

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

The 5,006 participants who mailed in their ballots are not a cross section of the general public. Female participants out-numbered males by a 3 to 2 margin. The majority is over 60 years old. The states with the largest number of respondents are (in order): California, Florida, Oregon, Virginia, Washington, Illinois, and New York. Two thirds hold college degrees, with advanced degrees quite common. Many would be considered "opinion leaders": one in seven indicated they were often asked for their opinions on foreign policy, and half said this happened sometimes. A majority of the participants had been abroad during the past four years. And more participants indicated that participation in the *Great Decisions* program had changed their opinions than those who indicated that it did not.

A. How many years have you participated in the *Great Decisions Program* (that is, attended one or more discussion sessions)?

This is the first year I have participated	33%
I participated in one previous year	13%
I participated in more than one previous year	46%

B. Age

17 or under	5%
18-30	7%
31-45	6%
46-60	12%
61 or over	63%

C. Sex

Female	55%
Male	36%

D. Have you been abroad during the last four years?

Yes	51%
No	40%

E. What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?

Some high school	6%
High School degree	7%
Some college	16%
College graduate	29%
Advanced degree	34%

F. How often are you asked for your opinion on foreign policy matters?

Often	14%
Sometimes	48%
Hardly ever	29%

G. Would you say you have or have not changed your opinion in a fairly significant way as a result of taking part in the *Great Decisions* program?

Have changed	40%
Have not changed	29%
Uncertain	21%