

THE TIPPING POINTS

Public Agenda Chairman Dan Yankelovich analyzes the data of the Confidence in U.S. Foreign Policy Index

[Daniel Yankelovich](#)

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FROM BAD TO WORSE

Terrorism and the war in Iraq are not the only sources of the American public's anxiety about U.S. foreign policy. Americans are also concerned about their country's dependence on foreign energy supplies, U.S. jobs moving overseas, Washington's seeming inability to stop illegal immigration, and a wide range of other issues. The public's support for promoting democracy abroad has also seriously eroded.

These are a few of the highlights from the second in a continuing series of surveys monitoring Americans' confidence in U.S. foreign policy conducted by the nonprofit research organization Public Agenda (with support from the Ford Foundation), of which I am chair. The first survey, conducted in June of last year, found that only the war in Iraq had reached the "tipping point" -- the moment at which a large portion of the public begins to demand that the government address its concerns. According to this follow-on survey, conducted among a representative sample of 1,000 American adults in mid-January 2006, a second issue has reached that status. The U.S. public has grown impatient with U.S. dependence on foreign countries for oil, and its impatience could soon translate into a powerful demand that Washington change its policies.

Overall, the public's confidence in U.S. foreign policy has drifted downward since the first survey. On no issue did the government's policy receive an improved rating from the public in January's survey, and on a few the ratings changed for the worse. The public has become less confident in Washington's ability to achieve its goals in Iraq and Afghanistan, hunt down terrorists, protect U.S. borders, and safeguard U.S. jobs. Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed said they think that U.S. relations with the rest of the world are on the wrong track (compared to 37 percent who think the opposite), and 51 percent said they are disappointed by the country's relations with other countries (compared to 42 percent who are proud of them).

As for the goal of spreading democracy to other countries, only 20 percent of respondents identified it as "very important" -- the lowest support noted for any goal asked about in the survey. Even among Republicans, only three out of ten favored pursuing it strongly. In fact, most of the erosion in confidence in the policy of spreading democracy abroad has occurred among Republicans, especially the more religious wing of the party. People who frequently attend religious services have been among the most ardent supporters of the government's policies, but one of the recent survey's most striking findings is that although these people continue to maintain a high level of trust in the president and his administration, their support for the government's Iraq policy and for the policy of exporting democracy has cooled.

2006 Confidence in U.S. Foreign Policy Index
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WHAT MATTERS, AND WHY

A question always hovers in the background whenever public attitudes on foreign policy are reported: What influence do shifts in such attitudes have on the actual day-to-day conduct of foreign policy? Unlike for domestic policy, where it is clear that public opinion is always relevant, for foreign policy it is often difficult to understand whether changes in public opinion lead to changes on the ground.

The reason for this murkiness is that the public grants the president and Congress far more authority for decision-making on foreign policy than on domestic affairs. Americans assume that the president and his advisers have special information about international relations to which they are not privy. Some Americans may also lack confidence in their ability to judge the wisdom of particular foreign policies. All of this translates into a good deal of leeway for policymakers. Still, the public puts limits on this freedom and sometimes takes it away abruptly. Under certain conditions, public opinion can have a decisive influence. The trick is understanding what those conditions are.

In mid-2005, we found that in addition to the war in Iraq, three other issues were moving toward the tipping point, where public opinion would become strong enough to influence policy. These issues were the outsourcing of jobs to other countries, illegal immigration, and the United States' deteriorating relations with the Muslim world. Based on the January survey, concern over outsourcing and illegal immigration has grown a bit more intense, and the worry about the growing hatred of the United States in Muslim countries has modestly receded. On the other hand, U.S. dependence on foreign energy sources, which was not an urgent issue in mid-2005, has leapt to the forefront of the public's consciousness.

In studies that track attitudes, there are always more views that do not change than views that do. This survey is no exception. It is a striking -- and encouraging -- illustration of the public's thoughtfulness and consistency. Respondents still awarded the government high marks (an A or a B) on its performance in achieving foreign policy goals such as helping other nations when natural disasters strike and making sure the United States has a strong and well-supplied military. Respondents continued to believe that the government deserves intermediate ratings on its efforts to make peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians and help improve the lives of people in the developing world. And respondents still gave the government failing grades on issues such as stopping the importation of illegal drugs. This context of overall stability makes any changes in opinion that the survey did find all the more striking and significant.

The war in Iraq, already at the tipping point in mid-2005, remains the primary foreign policy issue on which public pressure continues to mount. Although illegal immigration and outsourcing moved closer to the tipping point in the January 2006 poll, neither has actually reached it. In contrast, the public's concern over U.S. relations with the Muslim world moved slightly away from the tipping point. And the issue of energy dependence, which had ranked far down the list, leapfrogged ahead to move into tipping-point territory.

No change is more striking than that relating to the public's opinion of U.S. dependence on foreign oil. Americans have grown much more worried that problems abroad may affect the price of oil. The proportion of those who said they "worry a lot" about this occurring has increased from 42 percent to 55 percent. Nearly nine out of ten Americans asked were worried about the problem -- putting oil dependence at the top of our 18-issue "worry scale." Virtually all Americans surveyed (90 percent) said they see the United States' lack of energy independence as jeopardizing the country's security, 88 percent said they believe that problems abroad could endanger the United States' supply of oil and so raise prices for U.S. consumers, and 85 percent said they believe that the U.S. government would be capable of doing something about the problem if it tried. This last belief may be the reason that only 20 percent of those surveyed gave the government an A or a B on this issue; three-quarters assigned the government's performance a C, a D, or an F.

The oil-dependency issue now meets all the criteria for having reached the tipping point: an overwhelming majority expresses concern about the issue, the intensity of the public's unease has reached significant levels, and the public believes the government is capable of addressing the issue far more effectively than it has until now. Should the price of gasoline drop over the coming months, this issue may temporarily lose some of its political weight. But with supplies of oil tight and geopolitical tensions high, public pressure is likely to grow.

The only other issue that has reached the tipping point is the war in Iraq. It continues to be the foreign policy issue foremost in the public's mind, and respondents consistently deem the war (along with the threat of terrorism) to be the most important problem facing the United States in its dealings with the rest of the world. Concern about mounting U.S. casualties in Iraq is particularly widespread -- 82 percent of respondents to the June 2005 survey said they cared deeply about the issue; in January 2006, 83 percent said they did. Although the level and intensity of concern about Iraq has remained fairly stable, the public's appraisal of how well the United States is meeting its objectives there has eroded slightly. Last summer, 39 percent of respondents gave the government high marks on this issue; 33 percent did in January. The erosion, moreover, comes almost entirely from Republicans: 61 percent gave the government an A or a B on Iraq in the first survey, but only 53 percent did in the second. Confidence in U.S. policy on Iraq is also down significantly among those who regularly attend religious services, who also show rising levels of concern about casualties.

One reason for the downward trend is skepticism about how truthful Washington has been about the reasons for invading Iraq. Fifty percent of respondents said they feel that they were misled -- the highest level of mistrust measured in the survey. Another source of skepticism may be more troublesome for the government: only 22 percent of Americans surveyed said they feel that their government has the ability to create a democracy in Iraq.

WHAT'S ON DECK

Three other issues are approaching the tipping point but have not yet reached it: the outsourcing of jobs, illegal immigration, and U.S. relations with the rest of the world, and especially Muslim countries.

An impressive 87 percent of respondents expressed some degree of concern about outsourcing, 52 percent said they "worry a lot" about it, and 81 percent of respondents gave the government poor grades (a C, a D, or an F) on its handling of the issue. Thus, outsourcing now meets two of the three criteria for reaching the tipping point. But it falls short on the third criterion, the ability of the government to take effective action on the issue. Most Americans surveyed (74 percent) felt that it was unlikely that U.S. companies would keep jobs in the country when labor is cheaper elsewhere. And 52 percent of respondents believed it was unrealistic to think that the government could do anything to stop corporations from sending jobs abroad. On the other hand, a large plurality (44 percent) said they believe the U.S. government could do a lot to prevent jobs from moving overseas if it really tried. Should this plurality become a majority -- which we suspect will happen during 2006 -- outsourcing will have reached the tipping point.

Concern about illegal immigration has also grown. Two out of five Americans surveyed (41 percent) said they "worry a lot" about this issue, and half (50 percent) said they believe that tighter controls on immigration would greatly enhance U.S. security. Almost half (48 percent) also said they believe the government could do a lot to slow illegal immigration, and respondents gave Washington even lower grades on protecting U.S. borders in the most recent survey than they did in mid-2005.

Interestingly, the public's feelings on a third issue have moved in the opposite direction. This issue is the intangible but important question of U.S. relations with the rest of the

world, and specifically with Muslim countries. During the period between the two surveys, the U.S. public grew marginally less worried about anti-Americanism in the Muslim world and elsewhere. The number of respondents who said they "worry a lot" about growing hatred of the United States in the Muslim world decreased from 40 percent to 34 percent, and the share of those who were deeply concerned about losing the trust of people in other countries declined from 40 percent to 29 percent, one of the larger changes in the survey. The reasons for these changes are not self-evident. The sense of shame about the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, so strong in 2005, seems to have receded with the passage of time.

Only about a third of Americans surveyed (35 percent) said they think the U.S. government could do a lot to establish good relations with moderate Muslims -- but almost two-thirds (64 percent) nevertheless gave the government poor marks because of its failure to do so. We expect opinions on this issue to be volatile in the future. Nearly a third of respondents said they "worry a lot" about the rise of Islamic extremism around the world (31 percent) and the possibility that U.S. actions in the Middle East have aided the recruitment of terrorists (33 percent). Almost half (45 percent) said they believe that Islam encourages violence, and survey respondents estimated that about half or more of all Muslims in the world are anti-American. But a clear majority (56 percent) continued to have confidence that improved communications with the Muslim world would reduce hatred of the United States.

Americans may also be getting used to the once-shocking notion that they are not well loved abroad. A majority of respondents (65 percent) have realized that the rest of the world sees the United States in a negative light. When Americans are asked to describe the image of the United States in other countries, the results show a great deal of ambivalence and confusion. Even though a majority said they believe the United States is seen negatively, large majorities ascribed positive elements to the country's image abroad. Four out of five respondents said they think the United States is seen as "a free and democratic country" (81 percent) and "a country of opportunity for everyone" (80 percent). Nearly as many said they believe the United States is seen as generous to other countries (72 percent) and as a strong leader (69 percent). But equal numbers said the United States is seen as "arrogant" (74 percent), "pampered and spoiled" (73 percent), "a bully" (63 percent), and a "country to be feared" (63 percent).

UNITY AND DIVISION

The U.S. public holds a strikingly clear view of what Washington's foreign policy priorities should be. The goals the public highlights range widely. Those that receive the most public support are helping other nations when they are struck by natural disasters (71 percent), cooperating with other countries on problems such as the environment and disease control (70 percent), and supporting UN peacekeeping (69 percent). A surprisingly high level of support shows up for goals that represent the United States' humanitarian (as distinct from its political) ideals, such as improving the treatment of women in other countries (57 percent), helping people in poor countries get an education (51 percent), and helping countries move out of poverty (40 percent). Receiving less support are goals such as encouraging U.S. businesses to invest in poor countries (22 percent). And receiving the least support is "actively creating democracies in other countries" (20 percent).

Not surprisingly, there are partisan differences over what the United States' goals should be. The largest gap between Republicans and Democrats relates to "initiating military force only when we have the support of our allies." Almost two-thirds of Democrats surveyed (64 percent) endorsed this multilateralist principle, in contrast to slightly more than a third of Republicans (36 percent). There are no significant differences between Republicans and Democrats on humanitarian ideals. The parties do differ, however, on the desirability of promoting democracy in other countries (30 percent of Republicans surveyed supported

this goal, compared to only 16 percent of Democrats). But even a majority of Republicans have little stomach for this priority of the Bush administration.

This last point merits some elaboration. A majority of the U.S. public supports the ideal of spreading democracy (53 percent of respondents said they believe that "when more countries become democratic there will be less conflict"), but Americans are skeptical that an activist U.S. policy can contribute much to this outcome. A majority of those surveyed (58 percent) said they feel that "democracy is something that countries only come to on their own." As such skepticism grows, support for trying to create democracies abroad declines. In the 2005 survey, 50 percent of respondents thought that the United States was doing well at that task; in the more recent survey, the number fell to 46 percent, and only 22 percent said they believe that Washington can do a lot to build a democratic Iraq.

The 2005 survey described the huge gap that divided Republicans and Democrats on most aspects of foreign policy. The most recent survey found that partisan differences remain pronounced. The gap between the parties is at its widest with regard to how the United States is doing in its foreign policy and how much the Bush administration can be trusted. The most striking difference is in the expression of pride in the nation's foreign policy, with a whopping 58-point spread between the percentage of Republicans and the percentage of Democrats who believe that there is "plenty to be proud of" in U.S. dealings with the world. Essentially, Republicans think the country is doing well in foreign policy, whereas Democrats think it is failing miserably.

But digging into the numbers reveals that although Republicans generally endorse the country's current foreign policy, they share with Democrats a critical appraisal on a number of specific issues. Both groups are reluctant to give an A or a B to the government for its efforts to stop illegal immigration, achieve energy independence, block drugs from entering the country, limit the extent of foreign debt, or negotiate beneficial trade agreements.

BACK TO THE FOLD?

The first survey showed a remarkable parallel between the views of Republican respondents and the views of those respondents who said they frequently attend religious services. (By "religious services," we mean services of any kind -- in churches, synagogues, mosques, or elsewhere.) The second survey showed reduced enthusiasm for some of the administration's policies among devoted service attendees, especially regarding the war in Iraq. In fact, most of the erosion in confidence in the government's foreign policy in the seven months between the two surveys came from this source. Although there are still striking differences between the views of Americans who do not attend religious services frequently and the views of those who do, the gap has started to narrow, suggesting reduced polarization on the basis of religion.

In the first survey, a minority of frequent attendees at religious services (45 percent) expressed serious worry about casualties in Iraq, compared to 56 percent of the total sample. Now that number has increased to 52 percent, closer to the proportion of the population as a whole, which has remained at 56 percent. Although people who frequently attend religious services are still the respondents most supportive of U.S. policy in Iraq, fewer of them (41 percent of those surveyed) gave a high grade to the government on meeting U.S. objectives there than did seven months earlier (46 percent). In the first survey, 32 percent of those who frequently attend religious services said they worried a lot that the war in Iraq was taking up too much money and attention; in January, 40 percent did. Almost half of those surveyed in June 2005 (48 percent) said they believed that the United States could help other countries become democracies; in January, that number had dropped to 37 percent, in line with the 36 percent of the general population. And in the more recent surveys only 46 percent agreed that the United States was "generally doing the right thing" in its relations with the rest of the world, down from 52 percent in the earlier survey.

These are not big changes, but they follow a consistent pattern, suggesting that the most actively religious Americans are starting to react more like the rest of the public. This conclusion is supported by the results of the broad overview question asking whether U.S. foreign policy is going in the right or the wrong direction: 57 percent of those who frequently attend religious services said the latter in January, matching the 58 percent of the rest of the population who said this. Still, despite the mounting reservations of actively religious Americans about some policies, a majority (54 percent) continue to trust the government to tell them the truth about the country's relations with others, in contrast to the 37 percent of respondents who do not frequently attend religious services.

A recent survey of public opinion in Arab countries, conducted in late 2005 by Zogby International and University of Maryland Professor Shibley Telhami, showed results that are dismaying from the United States' point of view, with large majorities believing that the war with Iraq will make Iraqis worse off and the region less peaceful, breed more terrorism, and worsen the prospects for settling the Arab-Israeli dispute. Comparably large majorities said they consider U.S. foreign policies to be driven not by a desire to spread democracy, but by oil, a quest to dominate the Middle East, the goal of protecting Israel, or a desire to weaken the Muslim world.

Nevertheless, one ray of light shines through. Asked what the primary motivation for Bush's Middle East policy is, only 13 percent of those Arabs surveyed in the Zogby/Telhami poll cited "the need to spread ... Christian religious convictions"; most (61 percent) chose instead "the pursuit of [the United States'] national interest." Why does this offer grounds for hope? Because our most recent survey showed that the religious divide over U.S. foreign policy seems to be narrowing, and the Zogby/Telhami survey revealed a similar finding: that the Arab world sees secular, rather than religious, motivations as crucial to U.S. foreign policy. However difficult differences rooted in interests might be to solve, and however long it might take to solve them, clashes rooted in identity and religion are even more problematic and take far longer to surmount.