

## PUBLIC OPINION AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Public attitudes toward American foreign policy are in flux. After years of war in the Middle East, polling in 2013 and 2014 recorded historically low support for global engagement, and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 led many in Washington to worry about whether the American public was turning inward. It turns out that American internationalism is not dead, but simply evolving.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Mind the gap.** Many in Washington think that foreign policy is for experts to determine and the public to support. The result today is a dangerous chasm between what Washington thinks America's national interests are and the public's priorities.
- **Align U.S. foreign policy with American public opinion.** In the long run, U.S. foreign policy will be more effective if it has the support of a large majority of the public.
- **Pay attention to young people.** Younger Americans (Millennials and Gen Z) have a very different pattern of foreign policy attitudes than their predecessors and are already starting to shape polling results.

### BACKGROUND

The rise of the Millennial Generation and sagging public support for traditional American foreign policy are connected. Relative to their elders, Millennials perceive the world to be significantly less threatening, are much less supportive of the use of military force (although equally supportive of international cooperation of various kinds), and in general are more supportive of a less ambitious approach to American global leadership.

Yet while Millennials' views are starting to influence polls in a measurable way, they are not solely responsible for the evolution of public attitudes on foreign policy. The United States has been undergoing a slow changing of the guard since World War II as successive generations of Americans have come of age during conditions less conducive to the embrace of expansive foreign policy goals and the frequent use of military force. The changing conditions have led to a slow but steady decrease in American support for international engagement from generation to generation, especially in the form of military intervention.

Since the peak of American global power around 1950, the economic position of the United States relative to the rest of the world has declined significantly. World War II was also the last popular war Americans fought. Since then, military force has failed, quite visibly, to achieve U.S. objectives in Korea, Vietnam, and the "War on Terror." In addition, Americans born since the 1980s have come of age unencumbered by Cold War mindsets, which helped motivate and justify a good deal of American foreign policy for their elders.

Average Americans are not foreign-policy experts, but given America's history and current situation, public preferences on foreign policy are stable, clear, and prudent. Americans want a less ambitious and less aggressive foreign policy than the United States has pursued since the end of the Cold War, and especially over the past 18 years. Policymakers should embrace these attitudes and create a new foreign policy worthy of public support.



# Foreign Policy

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

["Worlds Apart: U.S. Foreign Policy and American Public Opinion"](#) by Mark Hannah, Eurasia Group Foundation, February 2019.

["America Engaged: American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy"](#) by Dina Smeltz et al, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2018.

["Millennials and U.S. Foreign Policy"](#) by Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner, Cato Institute White Paper, June 16, 2015.