

The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don't Get

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University of Chicago Press
Publication date: October 1, 2006

What sort of foreign policy should the United States pursue? This book looks for answers in a surprising place: the opinions of the American people themselves. It shows that – contrary to a good deal of conventional wisdom – public opinion about foreign policy is not dangerously ignorant, unstable, or erratic. Instead, evidence from many surveys over a thirty year period demonstrates that the collective foreign policy preferences of Americans are generally durable, coherent, and sensible; they are based on unexpectedly strong, logically organized, “purposive belief systems” held by individuals. But U.S. officials often ignore what large majorities of Americans want. The book argues that U.S. foreign policy would be more effective and more sustainable if decision makers paid more, rather than less, attention to public opinion.

Uniquely comprehensive data from a series of national surveys conducted for the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations are used to show that the preferences of foreign policy decision makers often diverge markedly from what ordinary Americans want. Often these “gaps” – perhaps amounting to a “disconnect” – result from differing interests and values rather than from any superior expertise enjoyed by officials. Contrary to policy-makers’ single-minded focus on physical security from attack, for example, the public gives equal priority to security of domestic well-being, including protecting Americans’ jobs and incomes. And the public favors substantial pursuit of international justice, including humanitarian (but not strategic) foreign aid. In stark contrast to some officials’ impulses toward unilateralism, the public consistently and overwhelmingly favors cooperative, multilateral policy means, including support for international organizations like the United Nations, joint decision making with other countries, and participation in treaties and agreements – concerning global warming, the International Criminal Court, a comprehensive nuclear test ban, and other matters – that U.S. officials have rejected. The American public is not enthusiastic about costly efforts to promote democracy abroad. It opposes major uses of military force without support from allies and the United Nations. Differences in opinion based on religion, ethnicity, party affiliation and the like are generally small; majorities of virtually all social, ideological, and partisan groups seek a foreign policy that pursues the goals of security and justice through cooperative means.

The book is intended for policy makers, general readers, scholarly specialists, college students and others who are interested in dilemmas of U.S. foreign policy; the nature and dynamics of collective public opinion; democratic theory and practice; and the structure of individuals’ political attitudes. It is written in a reader-friendly fashion, with technical issues relegated to endnotes and an appendix. Nothing beyond familiarity with percentages is required to understand the arguments, and readers are invited to focus on what interests them most. The central aim of the book is to bring a new voice, the voice of the American public, into debates about U.S. foreign policy.