



The Associated Press-NORC  
Center for Public Affairs Research

# GLOBAL ISSUES: AMERICANS' FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES

The American public favors diplomatic and economic strategies over most military involvement and questions whether or not the United States should be the world's chief problem solver, even as a myriad of troubles across the globe are identified as important for the next president to address.

The latest Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll found a public overwhelmingly in support of diplomatic efforts to resolve different types of global crises and a substantial number are also positive about the appropriateness of economic measures. However, many people question the wisdom of some military interventions by the United States.

The nationwide poll of 1,167 adults collected data from June 25 to July 7 using AmeriSpeak, the probability-based panel of NORC at the University of Chicago. Interviews were conducted online and using landlines and cellphones.

Some of the poll's key findings include:

- Only about a quarter of the public would like to see the United States take a bigger role in resolving problems around the world; most would prefer the United States be less active or maintain its current level of involvement.
- At the same time, large numbers support the use of military force to protect the United States from terrorism, halt nuclear proliferation, or help defend allies under attack. However, most people oppose military action to promote democracy, defend human rights abroad, or safeguard American economic interests.
- While most Americans do not think military intervention is the right response to threats to American financial interests overseas or human rights issues in other countries, economic pressure is supported as a method to deal with these problems. The public also supports economic pressure to deal with international terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and aggression against an ally.
- Furthermore, large majorities consider diplomacy a resource to deal with all these issues: international terrorism, nuclear



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## Three Things You Should Know

From The AP-NORC Center's  
Foreign Policy Poll

Among all American Adults

- 1) Only 27 percent say the United States should be more involved in dealing with various troubles facing the world; 38 percent would rather the United States reduce its involvement.
- 2) Terrorism is the most frequently cited foreign policy problem and 91 percent favor military action to protect the country from an attack.
- 3) The public is selective about when military intervention is appropriate, while strongly supporting diplomatic and economic approaches to handle most global issues.

proliferation, defending allies, protecting economic interests abroad, and international human rights, as well promoting democracy.

- Terrorism and the Islamic State were most frequently named as one of the top foreign policy issues facing the next president. More than half of those surveyed said it was extremely important to know how the next president plans to deal with these issues.

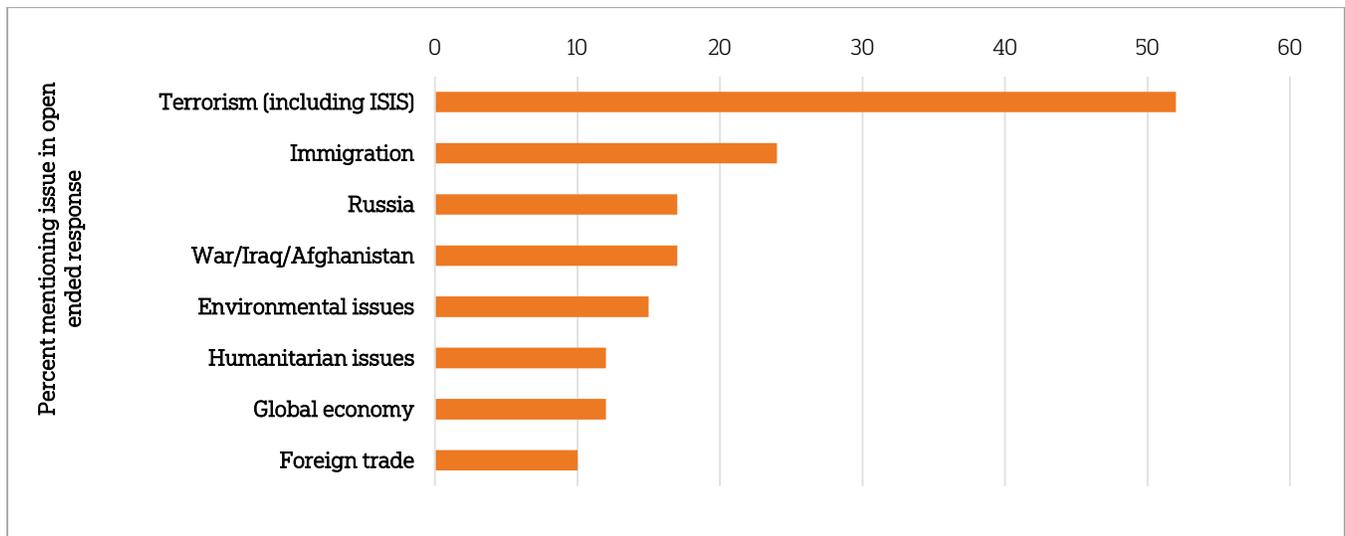
**AMERICANS SEE TERRORISM, ISIS, AND IMMIGRATION AS THE NEXT PRESIDENT’S BIGGEST FOREIGN CHALLENGES.**

The United States is faced with a diverse set of foreign policy problems, and the American public expects political leaders to address these issues. In order to capture the full range and complexity of foreign policy issues the public finds relevant, respondents were asked for the five most important foreign policy problems facing the next president.

Terrorism is a primary problem for the next president to address as 52 percent of Americans<sup>1</sup> name it as one of the top foreign policy issues facing the next president, including 31 percent who specifically mention the Islamic State Group (also known as ISIS).

Nearly a quarter of Americans (24 percent) say that immigration will be one of the most important issues facing the next president. Other popular issues of concern include Russia (17 percent), wars such as Iraq and Afghanistan (17 percent), environmental issues such as climate change (15 percent), humanitarian issues such as world hunger and human rights (12 percent), the global economy (12 percent), and foreign trade (10 percent).

**More than half of Americans name terrorism as one of the top foreign policy problems facing the next president.<sup>2</sup>**



Question: Thinking about the foreign policy problems facing the United States today, which issues do you think will be the most important ones facing the next President of the United States? [Respondents allowed up to five open ended responses, which were later coded into categories.]

Significantly more Republicans than Democrats mention immigration (31 percent vs. 19 percent), but Democrats are more than twice as likely to list humanitarian issues (17 percent vs. 7 percent).

<sup>1</sup> Reported proportions are among the 75 percent of Americans who provided at least one valid response to the questions. Respondents who did not answer or who provided only domestic issues are not included.

<sup>2</sup> Chart only includes categories mentioned by at least 10 percent.

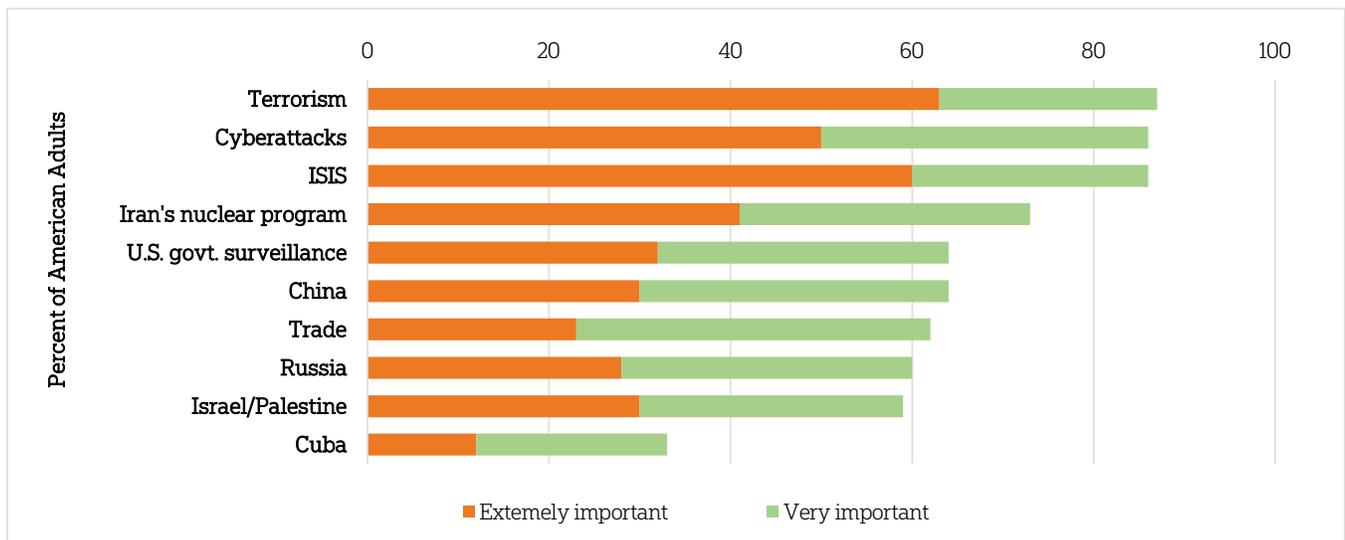
Not surprisingly, after identifying priorities for the next president's foreign policy agenda, Americans display considerable interest in knowing what his or her plan will be for addressing these problems. Over three-quarters of those who mention the following issues report that it is extremely or very important to know details of a presidential candidate's plan, including dealing with environmental issues (84 percent), terrorism (77 percent), humanitarian issues (76 percent), and war (75 percent). Slightly smaller majorities say the same about immigration (72 percent), Russia (70 percent), the world economy (69 percent), and foreign trade (64 percent).

**PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW WHERE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES STAND ON CRUCIAL FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES, ESPECIALLY TERRORISM AND CYBERATTACKS.**

In addition to listing their foreign policy concerns, respondents were asked about the importance of the next president communicating his or her approach to a list of foreign policy issues that are likely to be consequential for the next administration.

Americans tend to report very high levels of interest in knowing presidential candidates' plans for foreign policy issues. Nearly 9 in 10 say that it is extremely or very important to know candidates' agendas about terrorism (87 percent), cyberattacks on American computer systems (87 percent), and the Islamic State Group or ISIS (86 percent). Interest is lower when it comes to Iran's nuclear program (73 percent), China (64 percent), the United States government's surveillance program (64 percent), trade with other countries (63 percent), Russia (60 percent), Israel and Palestine (59 percent), and Cuba (34 percent).

**Americans want to know what presidential candidates plan for foreign policy.**



Question: Here is a list of foreign policy issues that some people have mentioned as ones that will be important for the next president of the United States. How important is it to you that you know what the next president's plan will be for dealing with each of the following?

Again, there are differences based on political party affiliation. While concern about many of these issues is high among most Americans, some issues are particularly important to Republicans. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say that it is extremely or very important to know the next president's plans regarding terrorism (93 percent vs. 84 percent), ISIS (92 percent vs. 83 percent), Iran's nuclear program (83 percent vs. 72 percent), Russia (70 percent vs. 57 percent), and Israel and Palestine (70 percent vs. 57 percent).

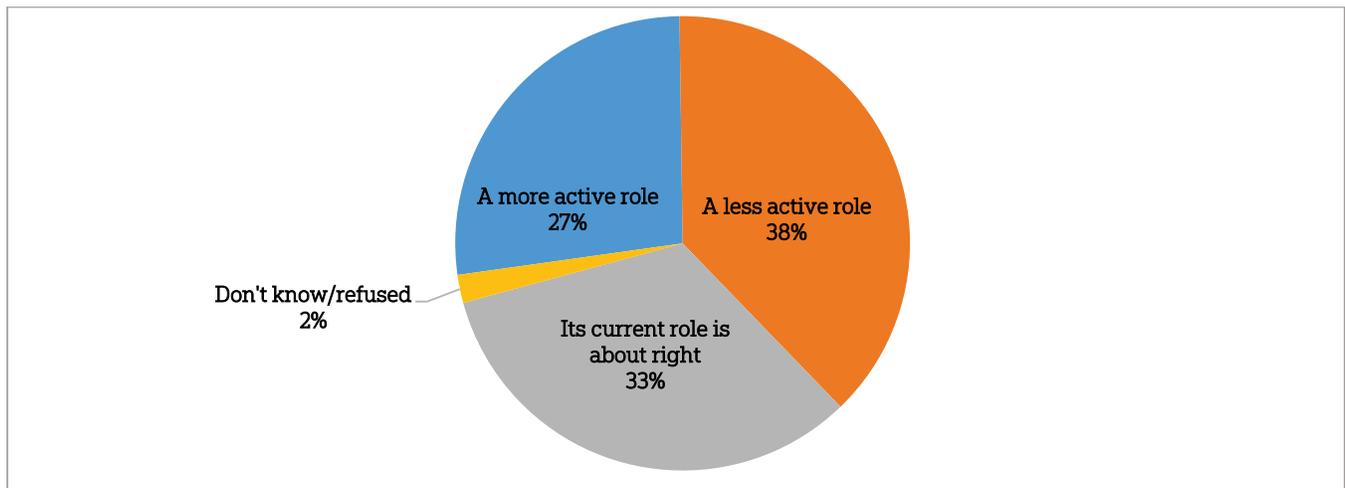
Republicans and Democrats were equally interested, or uninterested, in other issues. For example, 90 percent of Republicans say it is extremely or very important to know what the next administration would do about

cyberattacks from overseas, as do 86 percent of Democrats. Cuba is lower on everyone's agenda: only 31 percent of Republicans and 34 percent of Democrats are extremely or very concerned about what the next president might do with Cuba.

### **MOST AMERICANS DO NOT WANT TO SEE THE UNITED STATES BECOME MORE INVOLVED IN DEALING WITH PROBLEMS AROUND THE GLOBE.**

Although Americans identify a number of important foreign policy issues for the next president to address, the public is not eager to see the United States' role in world affairs expand. While 27 percent of Americans say they think the country should take a more active role in solving the world's problems, 33 percent say the United States should not change its current role and another 38 percent say the nation should reduce its role in solving the world's problems.

**Most do not want the United States to take a more active role in global affairs.**



Question: Do you think the United States should take a more or less active role solving the world's problems or is its current role about right?

There are few demographic differences when it comes to the question of what role the United States should play in addressing world affairs. Hispanics are more likely than whites to say they want the United States to play a more active role in world affairs (40 percent vs. 24 percent). Among African-Americans, 27 percent would like to see the United States be more involved in dealing with the world's problems.

More than a third of Republicans (37 percent) say the United States should take a more active role in solving the world's problems, compared with 23 percent of Democrats and 23 percent of independents.

### **WHEN IT COMES TO SOLVING FOREIGN POLICY PROBLEMS, THERE IS STRONG SUPPORT FOR DIPLOMACY AND ECONOMIC SANCTIONS, BUT THE PUBLIC IS MORE SELECTIVE ABOUT WHEN TO USE MILITARY FORCE.**

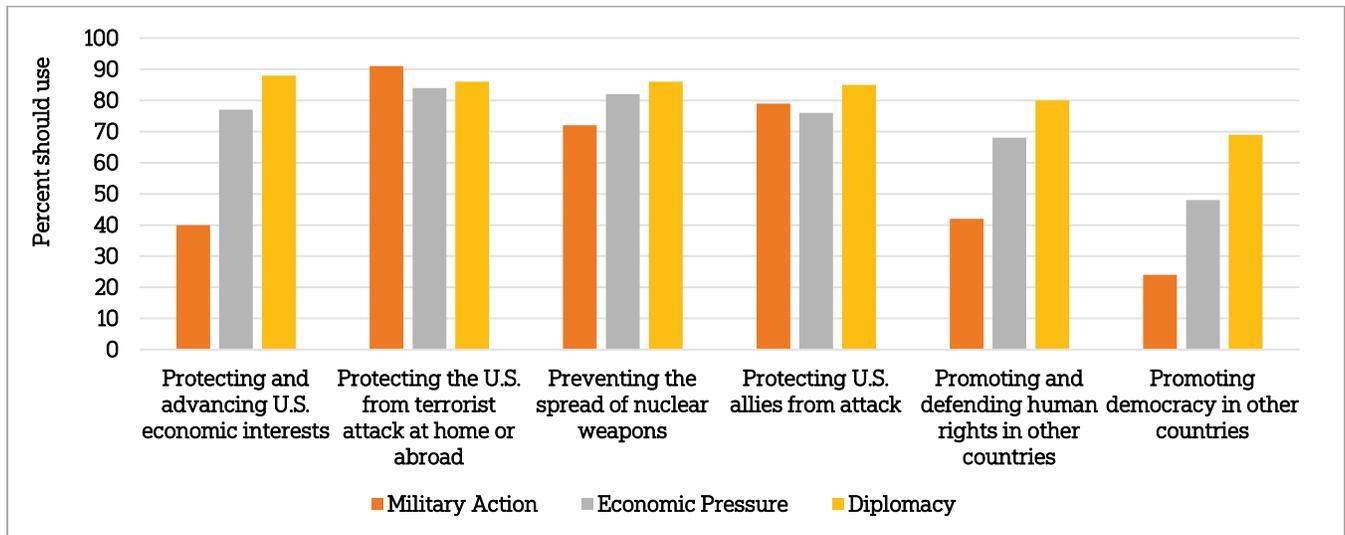
Large majorities of Americans support diplomacy as a means of handling foreign policy issues. At least 4 in 5 Americans say the United States should use diplomacy to protect and advance its economic interests (88 percent), protect the United States from terrorist attacks (86 percent), prevent the spread of nuclear weapons (86 percent), protect allies from experiencing an attack (85 percent), and defend human rights in other countries (80 percent). Fewer, but still a majority, support the use of diplomatic negotiations in promoting democracy in other countries (69 percent).

The use of economic pressure to address problems abroad also has widespread support among Americans. At least three-quarters of Americans say the United States should use economic pressure to protect the United

States from terrorist attacks (84 percent), prevent the spread of nuclear weapons (82 percent), protect and advance American economic interests (77 percent), and protect allies from an attack (76 percent). Sixty-eight percent say economic pressure should be used to promote and defend human rights in other countries. Just under half of Americans (48 percent) say the United States should use economic pressure to promote democracy in other countries.

Americans are more discriminating about the use of military action to address foreign policy issues. When it comes to protecting the United States from terrorism, an overwhelming 91 percent of Americans say the country should use military action. Another 79 percent of Americans say the military should be used to protect allies from attack and 72 percent say it should be used to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. For the other issues the survey asked about, Americans are more resistant to military intervention. Forty-two percent of Americans say the United States should use military force to promote and defend human rights in other countries, 40 percent say military force should be used to protect and advance American economic interests abroad, and just 24 percent say the military should be used to promote democracy in other countries.

**The use of economic pressure and diplomacy is often preferred over military action.**



Questions: Do you think the United States should or should not use military action to address each of the following issues? Do you think the United States should or should not use economic pressure to address each of the following issues? Do you think the United States should or should not use diplomacy to address each of the following issues?

Educational background is related to preferences for methods of addressing foreign policy issues. On 3 of 6 issues surveyed, college graduates are less likely than those without a college degree to support military action to address the issues. College graduates are more likely than those without college degrees to support using economic pressure to address 4 of the 6 foreign policy issues tested.

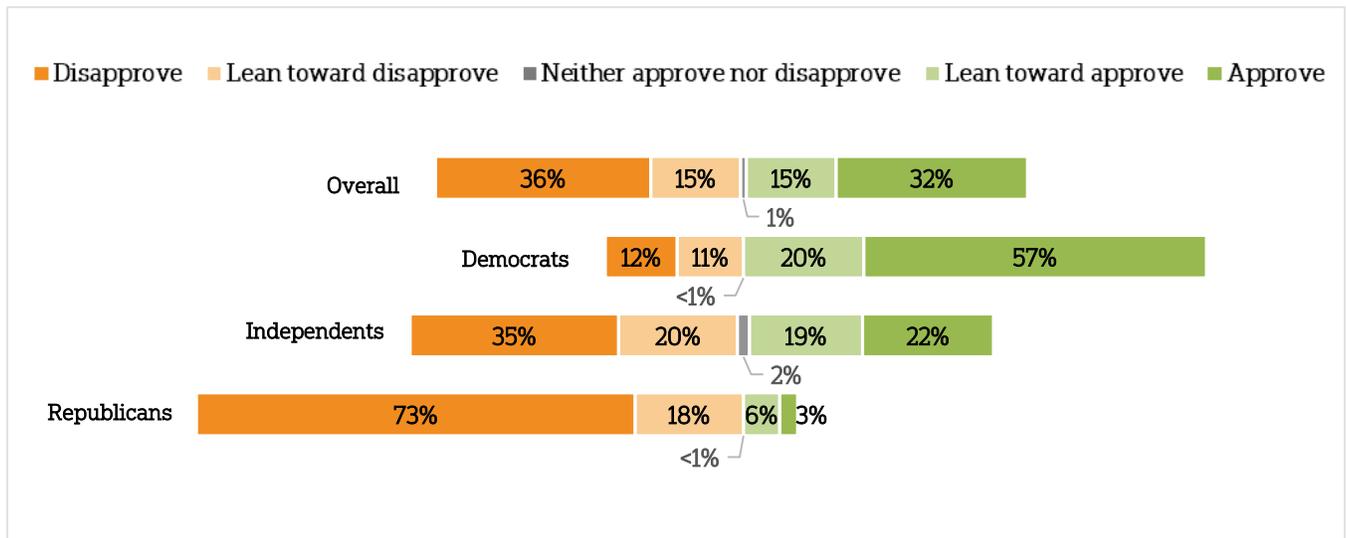
**THE PUBLIC IS DIVIDED ON PRESIDENT OBAMA'S HANDLING OF THE COUNTRY'S ROLE IN WORLD AFFAIRS.**

Forty-eight percent of Americans say they approve (32 percent) or lean toward approving (16 percent) the way President Obama is handling the United States' role in world affairs, and 52 percent say they disapprove (37 percent) or lean toward disapproving (15 percent). Just 1 percent say they neither approve nor disapprove.

Strong partisan divisions continue to be characteristic of any evaluation of President Obama. Seventy-seven percent of Democrats approve or lean toward approving the President's handling of foreign policy, compared with 41 percent of independents and just 9 percent of Republicans. Nearly all Republicans (91 percent)

disapprove or lean toward disapproving of how President Obama has handled the United States' role in world affairs.

**Deep partisan splits over President Obama's handling of foreign policy.**



Question: Overall, do you approve, disapprove, or neither approve nor disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling the U.S. role in world affairs?

**ABOUT THE STUDY**

**Survey Methodology**

This survey was conducted by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and with funding from NORC at the University of Chicago. Data were collected using AmeriSpeak®, which is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected US households are sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame, and then contacted by US mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face to face).

Interviews for this survey were conducted between June 25 and July 7, 2015, with adults age 18 and over from the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak®, and 1,167 completed the survey—966 via the web and 201 via telephone. The final stage completion rate is 31.2 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 7.8 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 99.8 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 2.4 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.5 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Results from the open-ended most important foreign policy issue question are reported among the 75 percent of respondents who provided a valid response to at least one of the five open-ends (n=936).

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data has been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any non-coverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study-specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, census division, race/ethnicity, and household phone status. The weighted data, which reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over, were used for all analyses.

All analyses were conducted using STATA (version 14), which allows for adjustment of standard errors for complex sample designs. All differences reported between subgroups of the U.S. population are at the 95 percent level of statistical significance, meaning that there is only a 5 percent (or lower) probability that the observed differences could be attributed to chance variation in sampling. A comprehensive listing of all study questions, complete with tabulations of top-level results for each question, is available on the AP-NORC Center website: [www.apnorc.org](http://www.apnorc.org).

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