

Confidence in U.S. Foreign Policy Index

Volume 7, Spring 2010

Americans Less Anxious About U.S. Foreign Policy Now than in Past Four Years

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In cooperation with



Americans Less Anxious About U.S. Foreign Policy than in Past Four Years

But Republicans Have Grown Much More Anxious; Democrats and Independents Much Less So

The American public is less anxious about foreign policy than it's been for four years, partly because they believe our global image has improved, and partly because the troubled economy and other domestic concerns are pushing foreign policy worries aside, according to Public Agenda's Confidence in U.S. Foreign Policy Index.

The Foreign Policy Anxiety Indicator stands at 122, a 10-point drop since 2008 and the lowest level since Public Agenda introduced this measure in 2006. The Confidence in Foreign Policy Index, produced by Public Agenda in collaboration with Foreign Affairs, uses a set of tracking questions to measure Americans' comfort level with the nation's foreign policy, much the same way the Consumer Confidence Index measures the public's satisfaction with the economy.

The Anxiety Indicator is measured on a 200-point scale, with 100 serving as a neutral midpoint, neither anxious nor confident. A score of 50 or below would indicate a period of complacency. Above the "redline" of 150 would be anxiety shading into real fear and a withdrawal of public confidence in U.S. policy.

"Two years ago, Iraq was seen as the 'number one' problem facing the nation in its dealings with the rest of the world," said Daniel Yankelovich, the noted social scientist and Public Agenda's chairman. "Now, neither Iraq nor Afghanistan is cited as one of the five most important foreign policy problems we face. But most Americans still see the world as a treacherous, often hostile place, and that concern certainly hasn't gone away."

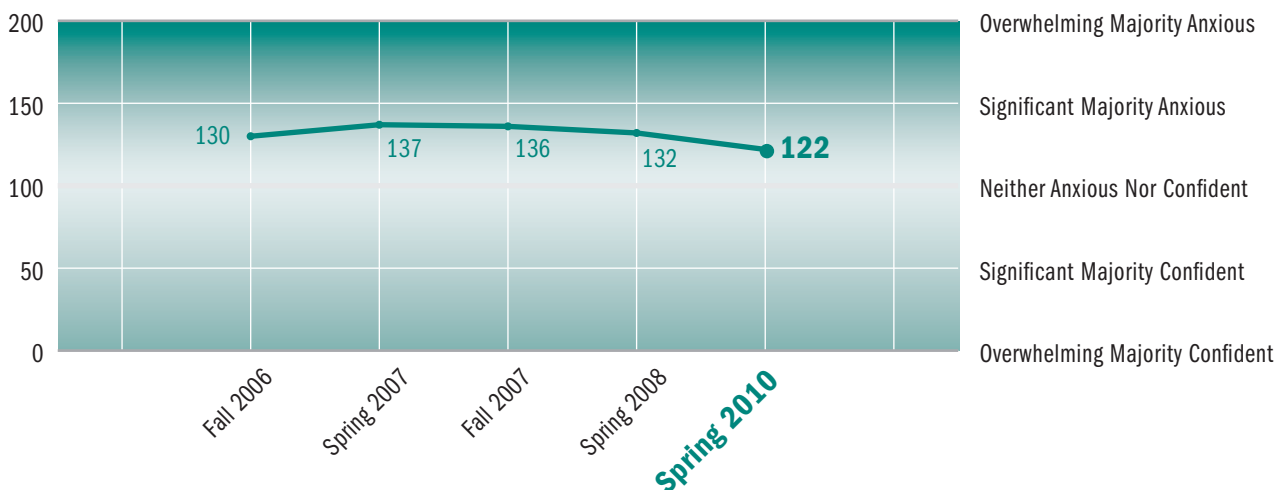
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Previous Editions of the Foreign Policy Index

<http://www.publicagenda.org/reports/foreign-policy-index-2010>

Anxiety over U.S. foreign policy has declined to its lowest level.



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Republican Anxiety Grows, While Worries Subside for Democrats, Independents

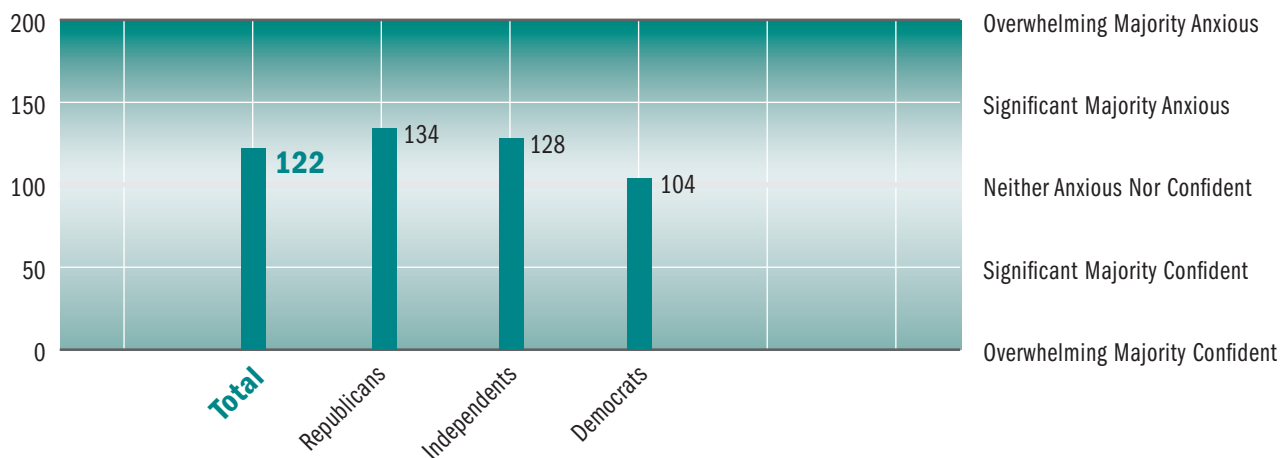
There are striking differences by party, however, with anxiety about foreign affairs skyrocketing among Republicans, even as Democrats and independents report their worries are declining. When the Anxiety Indicator is calculated by party, Republican worries have soared from a relatively low level of 108 in 2008 to 134 today. By contrast, Democratic anxiety—which was 142 in 2008—has now fallen to relatively calm 104. Independents were at 140 in 2008 and are still fairly anxious at 128, but that’s a notable decline.

In a Dangerous, Unfriendly World, Fewer Say Foreign Relations Are On the Wrong Track

The Anxiety Indicator score is a composite reading based on five questions that Public Agenda developed to explore the emotional terrain of how Americans view the world. The five questions themselves provide an intriguing look at the public’s concerns:

- The single largest change is in the number of Americans who say U.S. relations with the rest of the world are “off on the wrong track,” which dropped 15 points in two years. Still, half of the public (50 percent) say that relations with the rest of the world are “off on the wrong track,” while 39 percent say things are moving in the right direction. At the same time, fewer people say they worry “a lot” about the way things are going for the United States in world affairs, down 12 points from 39 percent in 2008 to 27 percent today.

Anxiety indicator by party.



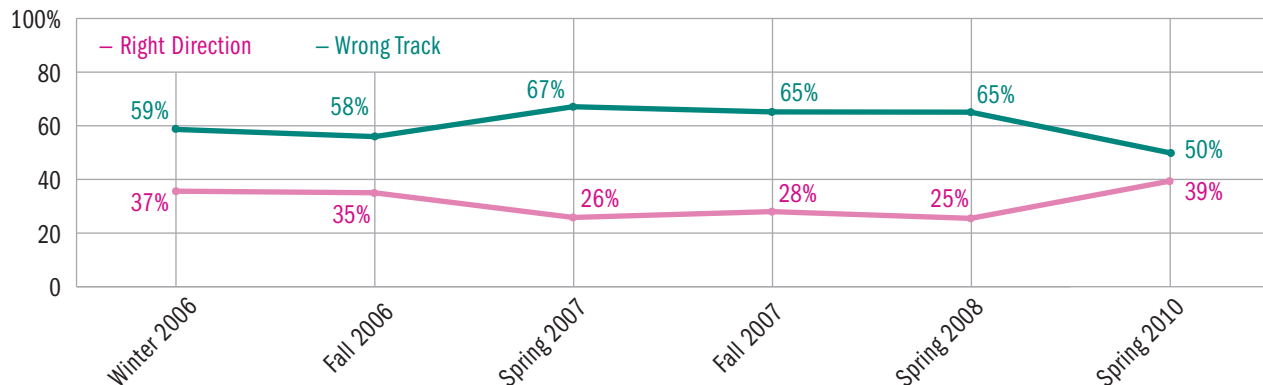
Americans Less Anxious About U.S. Foreign Policy than in Past Four Years

- And Americans are feeling better about our world image. While a majority of Americans (56 percent) still say that the world sees the United States in a negative light, this is a significant improvement from 2008, when nearly two-thirds of Americans (63 percent) held this view.
- Americans still see the world as a dangerous place for the United States and its interests. The number who say the world is becoming “more dangerous for the United States and the American people” is virtually the same as it was two years ago: 72 percent, compared with 73 percent in 2008.
- Only 30 percent give the United States “excellent” or “good” ratings “as a leader in creating a more peaceful and prosperous world.” Again, that’s essentially unchanged from two years ago.

The most dramatic example of the partisan divide shows up in answer to the question about whether the country is moving in the right direction or on the wrong track in foreign affairs. In 2008, only 20 percent of Democrats said the country was going in the right direction, compared with 45 percent of Republicans. Now the Democrats’ view has shifted a staggering 41 points, to 61 percent who think the country is going in the right direction, while Republicans’ rating has dropped to only one-quarter (26 percent). Independents are far less enthusiastic than Democrats are, but their “right direction” number has doubled from 16 percent to 32 percent.

Afghanistan is more clearly tied to the threat of terrorism than Iraq was. Some 40 percent say, “America’s safety from terrorism depends on our success in Afghanistan.” That’s somewhat higher than we found when we asked a similar question about Iraq in 2008, when only 34 percent said our safety from terrorism depended on success there.

Thinking about recent U.S. relations with the rest of the world, would you say things are heading in the right direction, or are they off on the wrong track?



Americans Less Anxious About U.S. Foreign Policy than in Past Four Years

The questions in the Foreign Policy Index were fielded between March 18 and March 21, 2010. The survey was in the field right after Congress passed a jobs bill and during the final debate and passage of a health care bill by the House of Representatives. During this period, there was also coverage of continued drug violence in Mexico and tensions between Israel and the United States. But this was well before the nuclear arms agreement made between the United States and Russia and the uprising in Kyrgyzstan. Other surveys show news about health care was by far the most closely followed by the public that week.

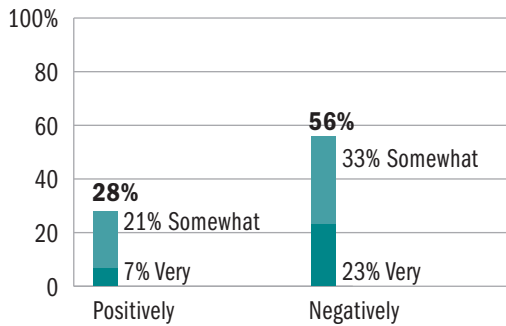
“Generally speaking, Americans don’t know as much about foreign policy as they do about domestic problems, and they’re usually willing to leave the nuts and bolts to the experts—unless they feel things are seriously off track,” said Scott Bittle, Public Agenda’s director of public issue analysis. “The Foreign Policy Index was designed to give political leaders an important tool by providing an overall sense of public’s ‘comfort level,’ rather than flash responses to specific crises.”

Domestic Issues Trump Everything

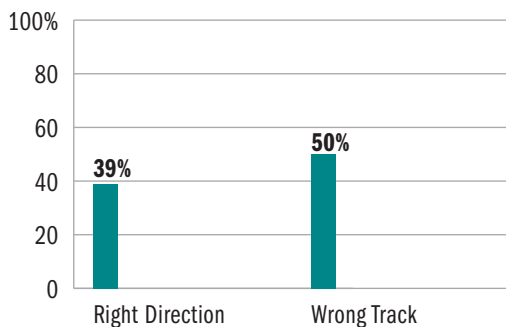
Multiple surveys from many organizations show that the economy is the public’s biggest concern by wide margins, and that certainly had an impact on the Anxiety Indicator. When asked about “the most important problem facing the US in its dealings with the rest of the world,” 1 in 4 (26 percent) either volunteered answers that had to do with the United States economy or domestic issues rather than international ones, including 10 percent who explicitly stated that the United States should focus more on domestic matters, less on international ones. Iraq, which was the prime issue in 2006 and cited by 22 percent, is now mentioned by only 5 percent. Foreign policy is simply less pressing to much of the public than it was three or four years ago.

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How do you think the rest of the world sees the United States? Positively or negatively?



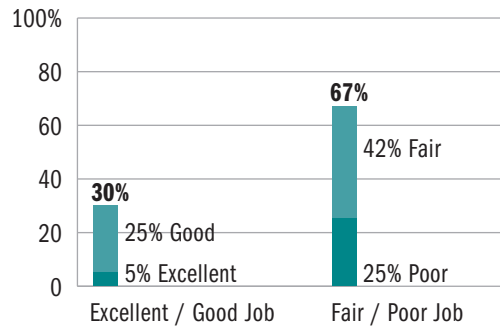
Thinking about recent U.S. relations with the rest of the world, would you say things are heading in the right direction, or are they off on the wrong track?



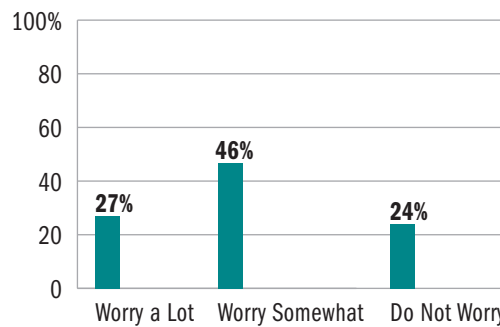
The Anxiety Indicator is designed to provide a measure of Americans' comfort level with the nation's foreign policy, much the same way the Consumer Confidence Index measures the public's satisfaction with the economy. Our indicator scale is divided into zones, with 100 serving as a neutral midpoint. We don't anticipate the indicator ever being at either the 0 or the 200 level, but a score of 50 or below would indicate a period of calm, perhaps even complacency. Above the "redline" of 150 would be anxiety shading into real fear and a withdrawal of public confidence in U.S. policy.

Note: Question wording in charts might be edited for space. Percentages may not equal 100 percent due to rounding or the omission of some answer choices.

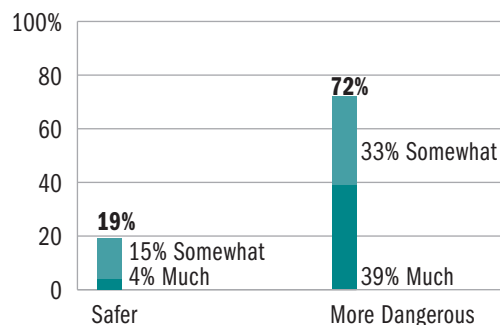
How good a job is the United States doing these days in creating a more peaceful and prosperous world? Excellent, good, only fair or poor?



Is "the way things are going for the United States in world affairs" something that you worry about? Do you worry a lot, somewhat or do you not worry.



Thinking about current U.S. relations with the rest of the world, would you say that the world is becoming safer or more dangerous for the United States and the American people?



Methodology

Survey Methodology

The “Public Agenda Confidence in Foreign Policy Index, Vol. 7” is designed to capture the public’s opinions regarding the state of foreign affairs in the United States. The report is part of a larger tracking study on foreign policy, of which this is the seventh wave. Findings are based on a survey that included a selection of items from previous iterations of the survey and a single new question. Survey items made up part of the Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI) March 2010 omnibus telephone survey conducted from March 18 – 21, 2010.

The omnibus included questions on a wide variety of topics, including the foreign policy items listed asked for this project. These questions were asked first, before any other survey topics in the omnibus, and the questions were asked in the order shown in the full questionnaire results at <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/foreign-policy-index-2010>.

The survey includes a nationally representative sample of 1,002 adults living in the continental United States. A combination of landline and cellular random digit dial (RDD) samples was used to represent all adults in the continental United States who have access to either a landline or cellular telephone. Results were weighted to correct known demographic discrepancies. The margin of error for the survey is plus or minus 3.6 percentage points. However, it is higher when comparing subgroups or question items that were not asked of all respondents.

Anxiety Indicator Methodology

The Anxiety Indicator is a figure on a scale from 0 to 200, with the neutral value being 100, and is derived by comparing the positive and negative responses to five key questions while disregarding non-responses (such as “not sure” or “no answer”).

The Five Questions:

Thinking about recent U.S. relations with the rest of the world, would you say things are heading in the right direction, or are they off on the wrong track?

How do you think the rest of the world sees the United States? Would you say they see the United States positively or negatively?

Thinking about current U.S. relations with the rest of the world, would you say that the world is becoming safer or more dangerous for the United States and the American people?

How good a job is the United States doing these days as a leader in creating a more peaceful and prosperous world?

Would you say you worry about the way things are going in world affairs a lot, somewhat or do you not worry about them?

Methodology

Continued from previous page

These numbers are calculated in the following way:

1. If the question assumes either one positive or one negative response (right track or wrong direction, yes or no), the following formula is used to calculate this question index component:

$$K = 100 + (p(-) - p(+))$$

Where $p(+)$ is the percent that answered positively,
 $p(-)$ is the percent that answered negatively.

2. If the question allows a choice from two positive or two negative responses (very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied), the following formula is used to calculate this question index component:

$$K = 100 + (p1(-) - p1(+)) + 0.5*(p2(-) - p2(+))$$

Where $p1(+)$ is the percent that answered strongly positive,
 $p1(-)$ is the percent that answered strongly negative, $p2(+)$ is the percent that answered moderately positive, and $p2(-)$ is the percent that answered moderately negative.

The index question components are then averaged to calculate the index.

When the index level is more than 100, the number giving a negative response is more than the number giving a positive response. When all answers are strongly positive, the index is 0. When all answers are strongly negative, the index is 200.

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Credits

About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and public engagement organization. We work to ensure that the public has the best possible conditions and opportunities to engage thoughtfully in public life and that decision-making by leaders is well-informed by people's values, ideas and aspirations. Our programs aim to inform public policy, strengthen communities and empower citizens. Visit us at www.PublicAgenda.org. You can also keep in touch by becoming a fan on Facebook or by following us on Twitter @PublicAgenda.

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About Foreign Affairs

Since its founding in 1922, Foreign Affairs has been the leading forum for serious discussion of American foreign policy and international affairs. It is published by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a non-profit and nonpartisan membership organization dedicated to improving the understanding of U.S. foreign policy and international affairs through the free exchange of ideas.

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