



DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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NATO-Relevant Public Opinion

The following is a roundup of poll results that may be of interest in terms of your NATO tour.

Specific Questions on NATO

Recent American polls are remarkable for their lack of specific reference to NATO. The only recent mention of NATO is in a more general question Roper asked last summer:

"I'll name some major events in our history. I'd like to know for each whether you think what this country did was the right thing or the wrong thing--or somewhere in between?"

Table with 5 columns: Question, Right Thing, Wrong Thing, U.S. Did Somewhere in between, Don't know. Rows include: Fighting World War II, Deciding to help form and join the U.N., Deciding to help form and become a member of NATO, Deciding to help reconstruct Japan, Deciding to help reconstruct Europe with the Marshall Plan, Fighting the Korean War, Fighting the war in Vietnam.

Although the question is posed in historical terms, the responses have to be considered as statements of current attitudes rather than as retrospective evaluations. NATO, therefore, did pretty



well, considering it has not recently been a newsworthy issue for the general public. Most notably, there's a quite low level of public disapproval of NATO (9 percent).

Although 55 percent of the general public said getting involved with NATO was the "right thing," far higher approval came from college graduates (73 percent) and executives and professionals (71 percent):

Before Roper's 1975 question, the most recent national poll involving attitudes toward NATO goes back to a Harris poll of 1966, when DeGaulle announced his intended withdrawal from NATO. At that time Harris asked:

"After World War II, the Western countries joined together to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). A major purpose of NATO was to build a common military defense against possible Russian Communist attack in Western Europe. Compared to ten years ago, do you think the need for NATO is greater, about the same or less necessary today?"

Greater today	29 percent
Just as great today	38
Less need	12
Not sure	21

Because of the difference in questions, it's extremely difficult to compare Roper's 1975 data and Harris's 1966 data. Still, it's noteworthy that clearly negative views of NATO were expressed by only 9 percent (in 1975) and 12 percent (in 1966) and the no-opinion response was 21 percent in both cases. One could probably say that, at the least, NATO is supported with varying degrees of enthusiasm by a majority of the public.

Defense Spending

Public support for defense spending has increased to the highest point recorded by Gallup in the last seven years.

In February, 1976, Gallup found that slightly more than half the public (54 percent) thinks the defense budget is either at the right level or should be even higher. Only somewhat more than one-third of the public (36 percent) thought the defense budget should be lower.

Since 1969, Gallup has asked this question:



"There is much discussion as to the amount of money the government in Washington should spend for national defense and military purposes. How do you feel about this: Do you think we are spending too little, too much, or about the right amount?"

	<u>Too Much</u>	<u>Too Little</u>	<u>About Right</u>	<u>No Opinion</u>
1976 (Feb.)	36%	22%	32%	10%
1974	44	12	32	12
1973 (Sept.)	46	13	30	11
1973 (Feb.)	42	8	40	10
1971	49	11	31	9
1969	52	8	31	9

One of the sharpest--and perhaps most significant--changes in attitude toward defense spending has occurred among the college educated, historically a category among the most critical of the defense budget. The percentage of college-educated respondents who felt military spending was excessive dropped from 55 percent in 1974 to 38 percent in 1976, hardly higher than the national average.

The group most likely to think the defense budget is too high are those under 30 years of age. Almost half the respondents under 30 (49 percent) say the defense budget is too high, only 17 percent say it is too low. This group's views have hardly changed over the past two years.

Attitudes toward defense spending are not related to perceptions of how much is actually spent on defense. Virtually the same percentages of respondents who grossly underestimate or grossly overestimate the percentage of the federal budget spent for defense share the same attitudes toward defense spending.

In fact, 70 percent of the respondents admit they have no idea how much is spent on defense. Only 7 percent can come close to the actual figure.

Military Intervention

During the early 1970's, there was a definite decline of American willingness to send troops to Europe to counter Soviet aggression. Given the recently heightened approval of defense spending, attitudes toward intervention may now also be changing. However, except for Canada, Mexico, and England, there was more support for sending supplies than troops when Gallup asked this



question in 1975 (and, overall, less support for sending troops or supplies than in 1971):

"In the event a nation is attacked by Communist-backed forces, there are several things the U.S. can do about it. As I read the name of each country, tell me what action you would want to see us take if that nation is actually attacked-- send American troops or send military supplies but not troops, or refuse to get involved.

	<u>Send Troops</u>	<u>Send Supplies</u>	<u>Not Get Involved</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>
Canada 1975	57%	19%	14%	10%
1971	--	--	--	--
Mexico 1975	42	25	23	10
1971	45	26	19	10
England 1975	37%	30	24	9
1971	37	33	19	11
West				
Germany 1975	27	32	33	8
1971	28	41	22	9
Turkey 1975	9	29	49	13
1971	10	36	37	17

Recalling the response to the Soviet-Cuban presence in Angola, it seems likely that the public remains reluctant to support American interventions abroad--so long as a clear danger to the United States is not perceived.

Isolationism, Interventionism, Internationalism

There has been a tendency to speak of the increased isolationism manifested in recent years by the American public. Undoubtedly, there has been increased preoccupation with domestic concerns, brought on by recession and the relief of finally exiting from Vietnam. Rather than speaking of isolationism, however, it may be more useful to think in terms of a decline in interventionism and an increased disapproval of unilateral commitment of American resources.

Thus, while the public remains anti-communist it is less vehemently anti-communist. It seems difficult to describe a



public that accepts the opening toward China as more isolationist than a public that opposed any relationship with mainland China.

The public appears to be basically internationalist in terms of recognizing our interdependence with other countries. For example, despite the substantial public displeasure with the UN's recent performance, there has not been any ground swell of feeling for getting out of the U.N.

Regarding support for U.N. membership, Roper asked in late March: "Are you strongly in favor of the United States being a member of the United Nations, or moderately in favor of it, or not very much in favor of it, or not at all in favor of it?" Overall, 77 percent favored membership and 15 percent opposed membership. The specific responses were:

Strongly in favor	-	47 percent
Moderately in favor	-	30
Not very much in favor	-	8
Not at all in favor	-	7
Don't know	-	8

Certainly, the public has less sense of boundless possibilities than, say, at the beginning of the 1960's. It is, therefore, warier of unbounded commitments. Echoing the report we heard from Florence Skelly of the Yankelovich organization, about the public's growing sense of limits, is the following data from the most recent Roper poll, issued in May.

Half the public believes consumption must be cut back while only one-third of the public thinks we can go on consuming as in the past. Roper asked, "How do you feel--that times have changed and we must cut way back on the amount and kind of things we use, or that we should continue with the kind of production and consumption that have brought us to where we are today?"

Cut way back	51 percent
Keep using at same rate	34
Don't know	15

Roper also reports another indication of the public's recognition of limitation and interdependence: 48 percent of the public now says the U.S. cannot get along without imported oil during the next five years, up 13 points in a year. Only 37 percent say we could be self-sustaining within five years if we conserved and used other energy sources, down from 50 percent a year ago.

The most recent data on the public's basic attitudes of isolationism or internationalism come from the pre-Town Meeting



polls in five cities. Respondents were asked if they agree or disagreed with this statement: "This country would be better off if we stayed home and did not concern ourselves with problems in other parts of the world."

	Pittsburgh	Portland	San Francisco	Minneapolis	Milwaukee
Disagree	65%	62%	67%	67%	52%
Agree	28	31	27	28	45
No Opinion	7	7	6	5	3

The five-city average was 63 percent disagreeing, and thus taking an "internationalist" position, and 32 percent agreeing, thus taking an "isolationist" position.

To think in terms of whether or not the American public is isolationist, or not, distorts how the public currently views foreign affairs. When isolationism was a burning issue, foreign policy was a high-priority concern because the public was worried about war and peace. Today, foreign affairs are a relatively low priority concern, largely because the public is not worried about the threat of war. But it would be an error to confuse low priority with isolationism.

It may be useful to quote from the summary we prepared last summer of the testimony offered before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by some leading pollsters.

Daniel Yankelovich: "The public has decidedly not grown isolationist. It has, however, grown more cautious and more insistent that our foreign involvements be judged by more stringent criteria of how they meet (or fail to meet) American interests."
(Note how this gibes with what we heard at the Town Meetings.)

George Gallup, Jr.: "We are less strident in our internationalism than we were, say, in the 1950's. The desire to be number one is not quite so compelling."

