



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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The State of the Union is Wrong

How Washington Left the Public Behind on Foreign Policy

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As President Barack Obama's State of the Union address provokes the standard exchange of press releases and talking points, it's worth remembering that the partisan foreign policy debate is almost always shallow. The real gap is not between Democratic and Republican leaders but between the political class and the broader public. Consider the Pew Research Center poll [1] late last year that demonstrated that the U.S. public is less interested than the U.S. foreign policy elite in trying to manage foreign affairs. This set off a predictable debate about whether [2] the public [3] was becoming isolationist [4].

But hardly anyone pointed out that the results were nothing new: The American public, at least in recent memory, has always wanted a more restrained foreign policy than the one on offer from Washington. Understanding this gap requires looking beyond the latest election cycle and considering instead the factors that shape the U.S. foreign policy status quo.

The first factor is the public's apathy toward foreign policy. As many studies have showed, people's foreign policy preferences rarely determine their decisions when it comes to national elections. So political leaders -- those in Congress and those vying for the White House -- can [5] generally buck the public on foreign policy without losing votes. It is not that politicians entirely ignore voters' foreign policy views. But, at least compared with tax and entitlement issues, politicians have considerable rope to pursue their own agendas. Only in rare circumstances, such as very unpopular wars, do voters hold politicians to account on foreign policy.