

Why Republicans Will Stay Hawkish

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My [op-ed](#) in the *Philadelphia*

Inquirer pushes back against the [idea](#) that the tea-party is mellowing Republican militarism. I argue that, [unfortunately](#), John McCain's bogeyman—a new isolationist wing of the GOP—doesn't exist. This post elaborates a bit on that conclusion.

The op-ed is based on research I conducted, with Cato intern Matt Fay doing the heavy lifting. I recorded positions for the Republicans on two issues: defense spending and the war in Afghanistan. I wanted to see first how much support for getting out of Afghanistan and cutting defense there was, and second whether that support was centered among new Republicans. I figured that if the tea-party was changing the GOP, the freshmen would look different from the incumbents.

We categorized the members on defense spending as: for cuts, against cuts, ambiguously for, ambiguously against, or just ambiguous. On Afghanistan, they were either for continuing the war, against it, skeptical about it, or had no position.

Here are the three conclusions from the article:

There is no "isolationist" wing of the GOP. Of the Republicans' 47 senators and 242 representatives, only 5 percent (15 members) expressed support for cutting defense spending. Adding those in the "ambiguously for" category makes it 13 percent. Forty-one percent are against cutting defense spending; with those ambiguously against, it's 60 percent.

Only 10 Republicans, or 4 percent, are against the war in Afghanistan, and none are senators. Including the skeptical members, 10 percent are somewhat antiwar. Eighty percent support the war.

The tea party is not mellowing Republican militarism. If it were, freshman Republicans, who mostly proclaim allegiance to the movement, should be more dovish than the rest. That's not the case. Five of the 101 Republican freshmen and 10 of the 184 who aren't newcomers support cutting defense spending. That's about 5 percent of each group.

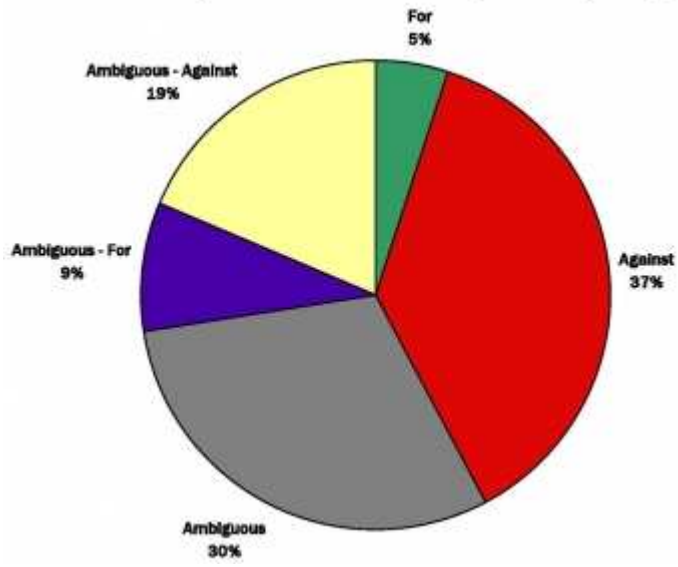
No new Republican opposes the war in Afghanistan outright. Including skeptics, 9 percent of freshmen and 11 percent of the rest are against the war.

Fewer new Republicans have defined positions on these issues. Veteran Republicans are more likely to be in the clearly "against cuts" and "for the war" categories; freshmen are more likely to be ambiguous or have no position. This ambiguity is a silver lining for advocates of military restraint: Many tea-party Republicans were elected without saying much about foreign policy and may yet emerge as non-interventionists.

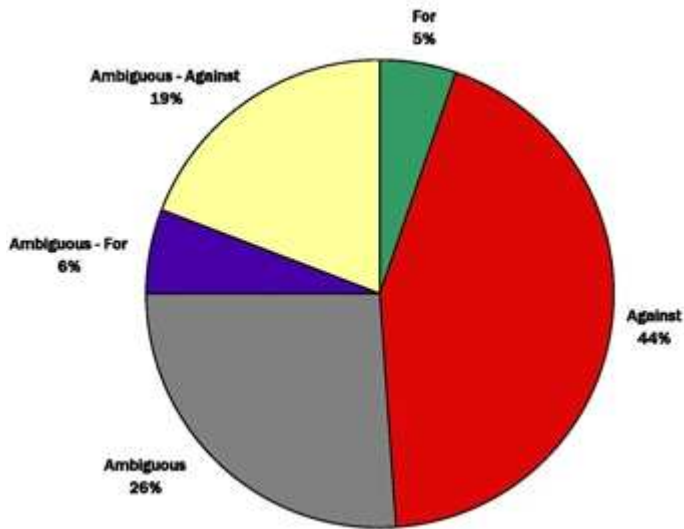
I didn't have room in the op-ed to note that the analysis does not measure how Congressional Republicans are changing over time. In recent months, the minority of them willing to cut defense has risen a bit—and that position now has the tepid support of GOP leaders, including Eric Cantor and Mitch McConnell. Still that rising support was not enough to get the Republicans to include security programs in their efforts to pare discretionary spending back to 2008 levels, as I noted [here](#) the other day.

So it looks to me that the whole of the party is changing its tune a bit on defense spending, but the impetus is not coming from the tea-party or new members that claim to represent it. The charts below illustrate the absence of difference between new Republicans and old.

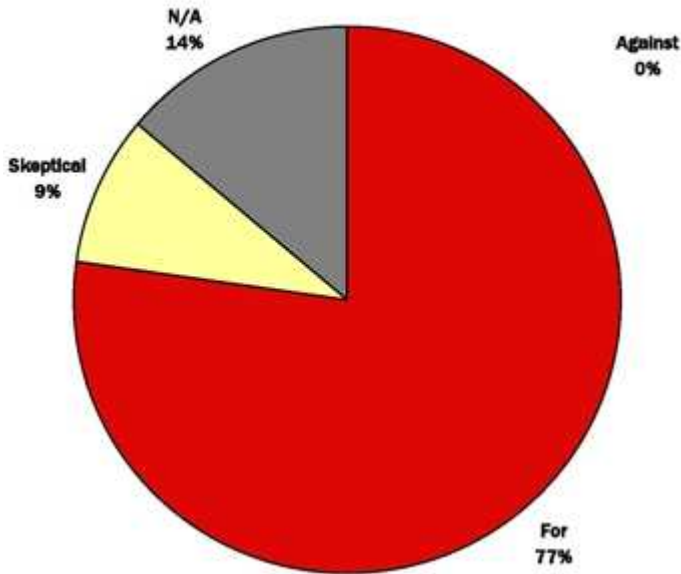
Freshman Republican Positions on Cutting Defense Spending



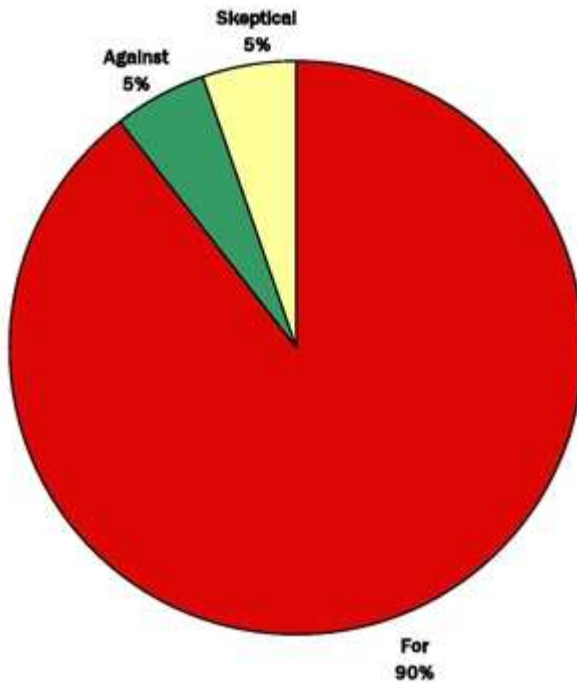
Incumbent Republican Positions on Cutting Defense Spending



Freshman Republican Positions on the War in Afghanistan



Incumbent Republican Positions on the War in Afghanistan



I also couldn't explain in the op-ed why the Republicans are likely to stay hawkish, even amid concerns about deficits that make some rethink the costs and benefits of liberal empire. The GOP has been in the habit, probably since the 1970s, of out-hawking the Democrats and equating military aggressiveness with support for the military and American virtue. Whether that is winning political strategy I'm not sure (yes in 2004, no in 2008), but it is at least a powerful habit, reinforced by decades of neoconservative warbling, whose authors are now ensconced in the nation's most prominent [oped pages](#) and [think tanks](#).

Beyond that, military spending bestows its munificence in many districts, generating bipartisan support. But, on the left, the prospect of spending caps creates countervailing interests. Caps force defenders of other domestic spending to be dovish on defense. Health care's cost competes with the Navy's, especially under budget caps. That's not as issue on the right.

The most important force keeping Republican fond of military adventure, however, is common to Democrats: international opportunity. We have expansive foreign policies because we can. [Balancing](#) is weak. The costs of adventurism are few and diffuse. For Europeans alive 100 years ago, foreign policy failures could bring conquest and mass death. Even successful wars would kill many sons and consume a considerable portion of societal wealth. For most Americans, especially since the draft ended, foreign policy disasters bring marginally higher tax rates. Ideologies justifying expansive policies—liberal internationalism on the left, neoconservatism on the right—grow popular because they justify the behavior this structure allows.

Doves say that the United States cannot afford its foreign policy. The problem is that it can, even when recessions make the load a bit harder to bear. Unsustainable things end. The United States can afford to do all sorts of foolish things.