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Why Americans Are Less Hawkish than Their Leaders

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American leaders are reliably more hawkish than Americans. That gap marks a failure in democratic decision-making. Under some circumstances, the free marketplace of ideas not only fails to produce good policy but actually thwarts it.

That problem underlies a new joint [study](#) published by the Stimson Center. Based on a survey of 665 Americans, the study shows that when presented with arguments for and against cutting the defense budget, Americans want to cut it, a lot. Respondents rated general arguments for and against cutting total defense spending, finding most arguments convincing but dovish arguments generally more so. They preferred cutting defense spending to raising taxes or cutting other spending (though Republicans somewhat preferred cutting other spending). Asked to set a defense spending level for next year, nine-tenths of Democrats and two thirds of Republicans cut it. The survey then listed defense spending categories, gave standard pro and con arguments for each, and asked respondents for their recommendation on each. Their biggest cuts, by percentage, came from the war in Afghanistan and nuclear weapons. The average total cut amounted to about eighteen percent of the non-war defense budget.

The study is a useful exposition of what we knew: that Americans are less enthusiastic about war and military spending than U.S. policy on these matters suggests. As Christopher Preble [points out](#), polls show that majorities of Americans will gladly slash defense spending to reduce the deficit, are against the war in Afghanistan, and remain lukewarm about global policing and current alliances. But the American political system [offers](#) only historically modest defense cuts, an endless, albeit [reduced](#), military presence in Afghanistan, and [preservation](#) of our globocop strategy. Republican voters' growing opposition to [war](#) of late (which, incidentally, tea-party supporters seem to be [hindering](#), not [leading](#)) has [not](#) translated into many anti-war positions among Republican leaders. As Ari Berman's recently [noted](#) in the *Nation*, Mitt Romney's foreign policy advisors are

almost entirely neoconservative Bush Administration retreads. Democratic voters, of course, are [disappointed](#) by the Obama Administration's [hawkishness](#), though it shouldn't have been [surprising](#).

This gap is not new. Historically, according to [Gallup](#), substantially more Americans say that we spend too much on defense than say we spend too little. Dan Drezner [finds](#) that Americans are traditionally more realist in their foreign policy views—thus less inclined to support military adventure—than American elites. In the latest edition of *Political Science Quarterly*, Joshua Busby and Jonathan Monten [show](#) that Republican elites have long been more prone than Republican voters to favor high defense spending and long-term alliances.

One explanation for this democracy deficit is what Busby and Monten call “dual slack,” the absence of restraint that either voters or international politics put on U.S. defense policy. Foreign policy issues tend to rank low among voters' concerns and to contribute little to their voting decisions. So politicians have little incentive to cater to voters' foreign policy views. They are relatively free to adopt principled (undemocratic) stances. And with few rivals restricting U.S. military deployments, foreign-policy makers can [indulge](#) ideological ambition and fancy.

Relative power causes the two sources of slack. Power lets the United States run amok abroad while insulating citizens from the consequences. For most Americans, even the war in Iraq brought little [worse](#) than marginally higher tax rates and unsettling TV images. Americans don't much care about foreign policy because it is usually inconsequential to their welfare.

Slack is a permissive condition. It explains why foreign policy makers can ignore the public, not why they do. Understanding their motives means considering how power [changed](#) interests and ideology. As in other public policy areas, minorities with concentrated interests [rule over](#) less interested majorities. The Cold War [required](#) organized interests in government and beyond that benefit from high defense spending. Foreign policy elites may not directly work for the [iron triangle](#), but those interests [dominate](#) conventional wisdom in both parties. Those seeking political appointment, government funding, or credentials as an establishment big-wig can't safely buck it.

Exercising power abroad also required changing the United States foreign policy ideology to suit activism. Where once the dominant idea was that preserving liberalism meant staying out of foreign military fights, the [new ethos](#)—call it [Wilsonianism](#)—said that liberalism's success required participating in those fights. Advocates of that view included both the narrow interests mentioned above and most others eager to overcome isolationist sentiment and keep the United States military abroad. By further [limiting](#) restraints and thus increasing the policies that Wilsonianism had to justify, the Soviet Union's collapse accelerated that shift. Variants of Wilsonianism are now the operational code of party's foreign policy elite, while realism has been cast aside. The public remains relatively realist because it gets less Wilsonian education and socialization.

The public-elite opinion gap on foreign policy is likely to shrink if these issues get more salient, as [Trevor Thrall](#) will tell you. As voters get more interested in issues, they gather information about them from sources consistent with their [partisan predispositions](#) and should increasingly [reflect](#) elite views. From my perspective, that's ironic: the more Americans learn about foreign policy, the worse their opinions become. Democracy is not the culprit really—elite rule would be worse—but it hardly helps.

This analysis suggests that good U.S. foreign policy requires bad events. As Justin Logan and I [discuss](#) in the latest *Orbis*, if the economy stays flat and deficits further mount, maintaining military costs will increasingly require sacrificing entitlements or low tax rates. Although the public might then become more informed and partisan, the nature of partisanship might shift. That fight should catalyze anti-defense interests that slowly move elites towards the realist, public view. Likewise, another brutal [war](#) or mounting threats should increase the popularity of restraint and realpolitik among elites. Because none of those conditions are worth rooting for, the public-elite opinion gap is. It's a bad consequence of good fortune.