

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## *Exploring Voter Attitudes toward U.S. Foreign and Defense Policy*

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This Wednesday, the Cato Institute [is hosting an event](#) with pollster Scott Rasmussen. I had a chance to read a bit of his new book, [The People's Money: How Voters Will Balance the Budget and Eliminate the Federal Debt](#), and I selfishly focused on the chapter "How Voters Would Fix Defense." It is this chapter that will likely be of most interest to regular Skeptics readers.

Rasmussen finds that voters are deeply skeptical of the conventional wisdom in Washington—Rasmussen sets up the book as a conflict between The Public vs. the Political Class—but this divide is particularly wide and deep with respect to U.S foreign policy.

Americans are quite concerned about the nation's deficit: 82 percent believe the nation's economic challenges are a bigger concern than our military challenges. Voters have different ideas for how to solve this problem, but only 35 percent of voters would exempt the Pentagon from spending cuts, [as Rep. Paul Ryan's \(R-WI\) plan does](#) (actually, the Ryan plan increases military spending slightly, while cutting nearly everything else). There is some support for cutting military spending despite the fact that 81 percent of voters have a favorable opinion of the military.

These views are not as inconsistent as they appear. Americans believe in supporting the troops, but do not reflexively believe that this requires them to support the wars that Washington chooses for them to fight. For example, a majority (51 percent) believe it was a mistake to have gone into Iraq, and nearly 6 in 10 (59 percent) believe U.S. troops should be withdrawn from Afghanistan within a year. More recent Rasmussen polls find even more support for ending the military mission in Afghanistan within a year ([67](#)

[percent](#)) and [53 percent favor](#) “an immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops” from that country.

Americans are even more skeptical of military missions that do not engage vital U.S. interests. Three of four (75 percent) believe U.S. troops should be deployed abroad only when national security is at stake, which helps explain why so few (20 percent) supported military action in Libya before President Obama chose to initiate it. And the rally-around-the-flag effect was particularly weak in this case: support peaked at 41 percent even after Qaddafi was killed. Rasmussen characterizes the foreign policy favored by American voters as “Protect America First” whereas Washington practices a policy of “Send Americans First.”

There is also considerable skepticism about how the Political Class defines the U.S. role in the world. Voters reject isolationism, but they wish to remain engaged in the world without having to be in charge of it. Thus, a mere 11 percent embrace our role as global policeman.

This is particularly true when it comes to paying for the security of other countries. Nearly eight of ten voters (79 percent) think we spend too much defending others whereas only four percent think we don’t spend enough. (For more on this, [see my latest](#) at the Cato blog). Less than half (49 percent) believe the U.S. should remain in NATO. By a two-to-one margin (55 to 28), voters would withdraw U.S. troops from Europe.

Rasmussen freely admits that U.S. foreign policy should not be conducted according to polls, but he raises an important caution for those who think that public sentiment exists either to be manipulated or ignored. Hawks on both the left and right who like to lecture other governments about listening to the wishes of their people are throwing stones in a house of glass. It would be far better to practice what they preach. Rasmussen writes:

aligning our military strategy and spending with public opinion would strengthen the most important values of the nation by reaffirming that ‘governments derive their only just authority from the consent of the governed.’ The people are sovereign and the politicians are to serve them. We want to display this attitude for the entire world.

He concludes the chapter with a challenge to the Political Class:

if you don’t like the Protect America First strategy, go to the boss, the American people. This is the strategy they support today. It might be different if there was a vigorous debate, but there’s not telling whether the difference would be more or less to the liking of the Political Class. Still, if there are arguments to be made for a wider US engagement and for interventions in places such as Libya, make them. If there are reasons to leave US troops in Europe forever, state them. If we need to spend more, build support for the taxes needed to finance that spending. Don’t sacrifice America’s greatest asset—our commitment to self-governance—to pursue a more aggressive military strategy than the American people are willing to support.

