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Little Change in Isolationist Sentiment Among Americans

Nearly half prefer isolationist approach

by Jeffrey M. Jones

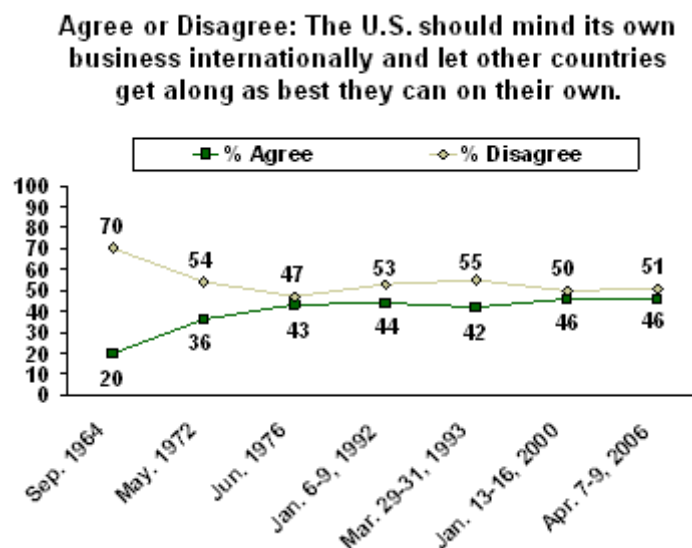
PRINCETON, NJ -- The threat of terrorism, the war in Iraq, foreign ownership of U.S. properties, U.S. dependence on foreign oil, and illegal immigration underscore the extent to which the United States is enmeshed in the international landscape. Gallup polling shows a majority of Americans have been dissatisfied with the United States' position in the world since 2004. An Apr. 7-9, 2006 *USA Today*/Gallup poll explored the possibility that this increasing dissatisfaction is promoting a more isolationist view among the American public.

Americans' preference for an isolationist approach to foreign policy -- that is, wanting the United States stay out of international affairs -- is not much different than it has been in recent decades. However, by comparison with earlier years (1964-1972), Americans are more likely to not want the United States to get involved. There is also a strong public sentiment for the United States to devote more attention than it does to domestic problems. Those with consistent isolationist views outnumber those with consistent internationalist views by nearly two-to-one, with non-whites, Democrats, and lower educated Americans most likely to be classified as isolationists.

Should the United States Mind Its Own Business?

Gallup's historical trend question designed to measure isolationist sentiment was first asked in 1964. It asks the respondents whether they agree or disagree that "the U.S. should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along as best as they can on their own." Currently, 46% of Americans agree and favor an isolationist perspective while 51% disagree.

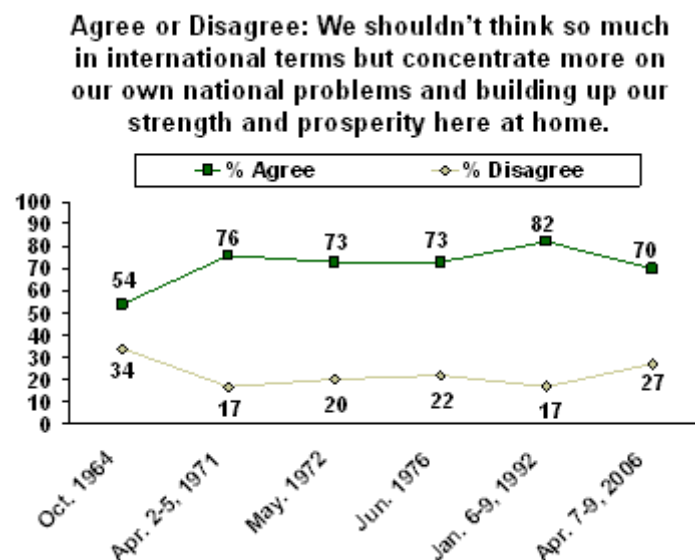
The percentage taking the isolationist view is higher now than in the 1960s and 1970s, but is about the same that Gallup measured from 1992-2000.



Several Pew Research Center polls fill in the gap in the Gallup trend line between 2000 and 2006, a notable period given the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States. The Pew polls, which asked the same Gallup trend question, find a shift away from an isolationist stance shortly after the attacks. In December 2002, just 30% of Americans agreed with the isolationist point of view; in March 2003, 33% did. However, by October 2005, a Pew poll found sentiment shifting back toward isolationism, with 42% agreeing that the United States should let other countries get along on their own.

Should the United States Take Care of Its Problems First?

A second question in the recent Gallup Poll asked Americans whether they agree that the United States "shouldn't think so much in international terms but concentrate more on our own national problems and building up our strength and prosperity at home." Seventy percent agree with the statement while 27% disagree. The majority of Americans have always taken this view, though it was more widely held in January of 1992 as the economy was struggling (82%), and less widely held in 1964 shortly after Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution that gave President Lyndon Johnson authority to send U.S. troops to Vietnam (54%).



The Dec. 2002 Pew Center poll showed movement in favor of an international approach on this question as well, with 65% agreeing and 31% disagreeing at that time.

Isolationist Sentiment in the United States

Responses to the two questions can be combined to get a sense of how many Americans hold consistent isolationist views and how many hold consistent internationalist views. The analysis shows that 43% of Americans can be considered isolationist -- they agree the U.S. should let other countries get along on their own and agree that the U.S. should concentrate more on domestic problems. In contrast, 24% can be considered internationalist because they disagree with both statements. The remaining 33% hold mixed views.

In 1992, 41% of Americans could be classified as isolationists, 14% as internationalists, and 45% had mixed views. So in the last 15 years, isolationist sentiment in the United States has held fairly steady, while internationalist sentiment has grown.

Non-whites, those with less formal education, and Democrats are among the groups most likely to be classified as isolationists today. Even though non-whites and those with lower education tend to be Democratic, those characteristics are still associated with a more isolationist viewpoint when party affiliation is taken into account.

Americans' Perspective on the U.S. Role in International Affairs by Subgroup

	Isolationist	Mixed	Inter-nationalist
	%	%	%
All Americans	43	33	24
Men	40	34	27
Women	45	34	21
White	38	35	27
Non-white	60	28	12
18 to 29 years old	51	19	29
30 to 49 years old	42	34	24
50 to 64 years old	36	37	27
65 years and older	48	37	15
East	45	30	26
Midwest	39	41	20
South	45	32	24
West	42	32	26
Urban	44	34	22
Suburban	39	34	27
Rural	52	30	18
High school or less	54	31	15
Some college	42	35	23
College graduate	29	36	35
Post-graduate	29	34	37
Less than \$30,000	58	26	17
\$30,000-less than \$75,000	44	34	21
\$75,000 or more	27	38	35
Democrat	57	27	16
Independent	41	42	17
Republican	28	31	41
Liberal	51	32	17
Moderate	44	36	20
Conservative	37	32	31

Survey Methods

These results are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,004 adults, 18 years and older, conducted Apr. 7-9, 2006. For results based on this sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum error attributable to sampling and other random effects is ± 3 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

6. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: [RANDOM ORDER]

A. The U.S. should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along as best they can on their own.

Agree Disagree No

			opinion
	%	%	%
2006 Apr 7-9	46	51	2
2000 Jan 13-16	46	50	4
1993 Mar 29-31	42	55	3
1992 Jan 6-9	44	53	3
1976 Jun	43	47	10
1972 May	36	54	10
1964 Sep	20	70	10

B. We shouldn't think so much in international terms but concentrate more on our own national problems and building up our strength and prosperity here at home

	Agree	Disagree	No opinion
2006 Apr 7-9	70	27	2
1992 Jan 6-9	82	17	1
1976 Jun	73	22	5
1972 May	73	20	7
1971 Apr 2-5	76	17	7
1964 Oct	54	34	12

7. When it comes to making decisions on treaties and other policies about the role of the U.S. in the world today, do you think President Bush [ROTATED: should pay more attention (or) should pay less attention] to the views of other countries?

	Pay more attention	Pay less attention	Paying right amount (vol.)	No opinion
	%	%	%	%
2006 Apr 7-9	56	38	3	3
(Vol.) Volunteered response				

8. Do you believe increased trade between the United States and other countries mostly helps or mostly hurts -- [ITEMS ROTATED]?

A. American workers

	Mostly helps	Mostly hurts	No opinion
	%	%	%
2006 Apr 7-9	30	65	6
1999 Nov 18-21 ^	35	59	6
^ Asked of a half sample			

B. American companies

	Mostly helps	Mostly hurts	No opinion
	%	%	%
2006 Apr 7-9	44	50	6
1999 Nov 18-21 ^	56	39	5
^ Asked of a half sample			

