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The Politics of National Security: A Wake-up Call

The First Democracy Corps-Third Way National Security Survey Shows Erosion in Public's Trust of Democrats on National Security – and Shows How to Reverse the Trend

A new Democracy Corps-Third Way survey¹ provides a wake-up call for President Obama, his party, and progressives on national security. This is the first of what will be a series of jointly conducted, in-depth analyses by Democracy Corps and Third Way of the public's views on national security, and the results are sobering.

Although the public continues to give the president strong ratings on a range of national security issues – indeed, above his overall approval rating – there is evidence of rising public concern about the president's handling of these issues. Historical doubts about the Democratic Party on national security show signs of reviving and many voters worry the president and his administration are not dealing forcefully enough with terrorist suspects. Additionally, the troubled economy is driving down public perceptions of America's strength and standing in the world.

Yet the survey also points to several specific ways that the president and his progressive supporters can strengthen public support for their handling of national security issues, including:

- ***Place the debate over terrorism suspects into the broader context of tough actions and significant results.*** Republicans have too easily put Democrats and progressives on the defensive with charges of lenient or risky handling of terrorist suspects. It is a losing public strategy to argue this on grounds of constitutional principles, or to insist that the Bush administration followed similar procedures. Instead, Democrats and progressives need to place this entire debate in the broader context of the Obama administration's successful efforts over the past year to take the fight to the terrorists, including a significantly increased pace of attacks on al Qaeda operatives and affiliates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen. And in the cases in which the administration opts to use the civilian justice system, they should stress that system's high terrorist conviction rates and the unblemished record of security that its supermax prisons have established.
- ***Continue to bring the public along on Afghanistan and Iraq.*** One of the more remarkable findings in this survey is the strong support the president continues to receive on his conduct of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. While voters like the tough approach he has taken in Afghanistan and the broader fight against terrorism, as well as his smart wind-down

¹ The survey was based on telephone interviews with 1,001 2008 voters, conducted between February 20-24, 2010. The survey included interviews with 851 respondents who are likely voters for the 2010 elections, and all figures in this report refer to the "likely voter" results unless otherwise noted. The margin of sampling error is approximately +/-3.1 percent for results from the full sample, and approximately +/- 3.4 percent for results from likely voters.

in Iraq, there is still a risk that a negative event in either conflict could drive down popular support for his overall leadership on national security. The president and his allies should therefore invest sufficient time and effort to ensure the public fully understands the status of each conflict and the case for continuing American involvement.

- ***Strengthen bonds with the military.*** To a large and increasing degree, the public continues to doubt that the Democratic Party is committed to ensuring the country has a strong military. This is a significant and stubborn part of the party's trust gap on national security issues. To fully close their gap on national security issues, Democrats will need to pursue new steps to forge a closer bond with the military institutions and culture.
- ***Speak to the economic dimensions of raising America's standing in the world.*** Even though most Americans feel President Obama is doing a good job of improving America's standing in the world, a majority also feel the US is *less* respected today than two years ago. To a significant degree, that is now driven by public worries that the country's shaky economy and growing debts make America vulnerable to other nations, particularly China. To revive American confidence about our standing in the world, it will be necessary not only to ensure military strength and show responsible use of our power – such as by ending torture and closing Guantanamo – but also to highlight steps that strengthen our economy in the global arena, such as reducing our debts and our dependence on foreign oil.

KEY INSIGHTS AND TRENDS

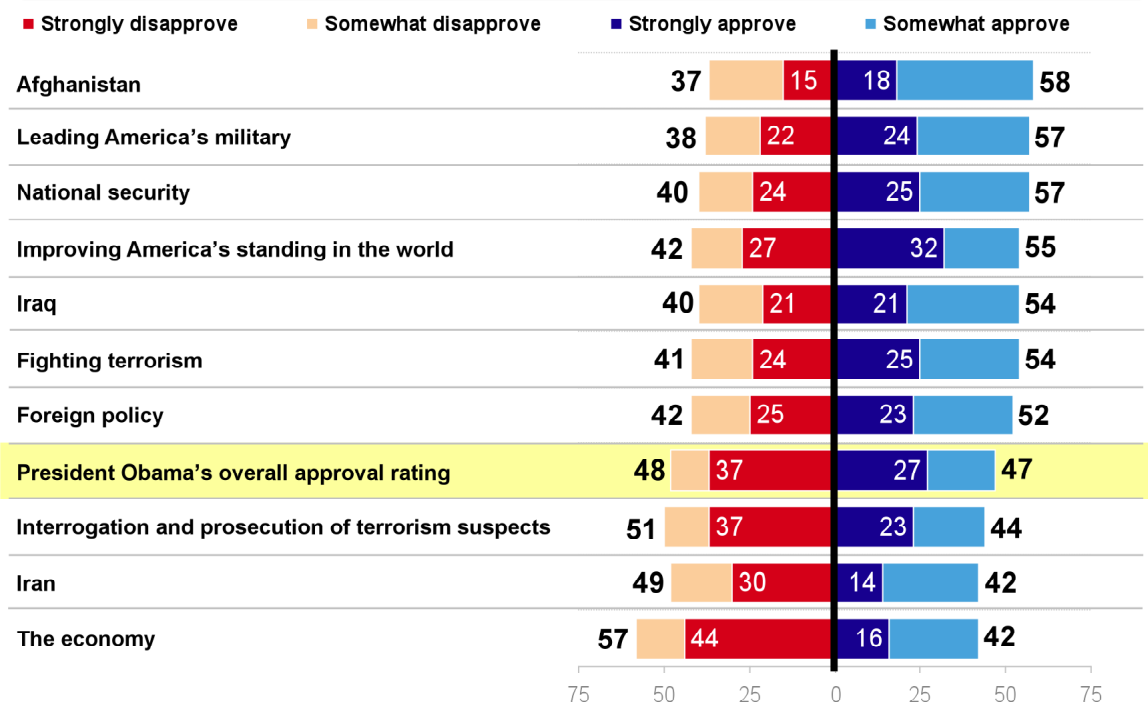
1. Despite Dropping Ratings, Obama Gets Some Solid Marks on National Security

The backdrop for perceptions of the president's handling of national security is an economic and political landscape that continues to tilt away from him. The national mood continues to sour, with the share who see the country headed in the wrong direction moving up 4 points since mid-January, up to 62 percent, the highest mark in a year. The survey also shows concerns about the economy continuing to grow. And even though the Republican brand remains badly damaged, with no improvement in favorable ratings for their party, the GOP continues to gain ground in a named congressional ballot, with the Democratic House candidate now narrowly lagging by 47 to 44 percent. The movement away from Democrats is especially strong among independents, and independent women in particular.

Given that general political undertow, the president's ratings on national security are remarkably buoyant. While his overall approval rating stands at 47 percent (down 1 point from Democracy Corps' January survey), more than half of all likely voters approve of the president's handling of Afghanistan (58 percent), national security (57 percent), "leading America's military" (57 percent), "improving America's standing in the world" (55 percent), fighting terrorism (54 percent), and Iraq (54 percent). These are strong figures at a time when America is fighting two wars abroad and continuing to face an active terrorist threat.

Most approve of Obama on security issues, low marks on economy

Now I'm going to read you a list of issues. For each one, I would like you to tell me if you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job on that issue.



Moreover, the public resists accusations by former Vice President Dick Cheney and other Republicans that President Obama and his policies have made the country less secure. Even at a moment when likely voters lean toward Republicans by 3 points in a congressional ballot, they favor President Obama's handling of national security by 5 points: by 38 to 33 percent, more say that President Obama is doing better, rather than worse, than President Bush on national security. And by 4 points (37 to 33 percent), a similar plurality says Obama is doing better than Bush on "combating terrorism and handling terrorism suspects." Likely voters split about evenly, 41 to 44 percent (within the margin of error) on whether the country is more or less safe from foreign threats and dangers than two years ago.

One place where Democrats do not appear vulnerable to opponent attacks, however, involves the president's decision to work for the repeal of the "Don't Ask/Don't Tell" law regarding gays and lesbians in the military. A 51 to 37 percent majority of likely voters approve of repealing the law (other public surveys have found even stronger support), and a 52 to 33 percent majority says they feel more favorable about President Obama because he initiated this process. In addition to solid support from his own party on this issue, Obama receives the support of an outright majority of independents.

Still, the president's broad security numbers have slipped since May 2009, when Democracy Corps last looked in depth at public attitudes on national security.² Then, the president's approval

² In this and the upcoming national security surveys by Democracy Corps and Third Way, we are including a set of questions that will form the basis for a "Security Confidence Index," which we will compute and publish after each of these polls. The index will be calculated as follows: we will start with the average percentage of the approval levels for the president's job performance on four indicators – "national security," "foreign policy," "fighting terrorism," and "improving America's standing in the world"; then we will add or subtract the average of two net percentages – the net percentage who feel America is more-minus-less safe than two years ago; and the net percentage who feel America is more-minus-less respected in the world than it was two years ago. Given these inputs, the resulting single-number metric will combine perceptions of America's current performance on

ratings on most aspects of national security were in the 60s, whereas now they have mostly dropped into the 50s. And while Americans now rate Obama as better than Bush on national security by 5 points, back in May they felt that way by a much stronger 48 to 26 percent margin.

2. Some Attacks in Specific Policy Areas have Taken a Toll

The decline in both the presidential and Democratic approval ratings on security issues has been driven, at least in part, by strong Republican attacks on some specific policies and actions:

The Christmas Bomber: The administration's response to the Christmas Day terrorist attempt has contributed to the erosion. While public polling showed that initial approval of Obama's response above 50 percent,³ two months of Republican criticism have taken a toll – now, a narrow 46 to 42 percent plurality of likely voters say they feel less confident about the administration's handling of national security because of how it responded to the incident, with views splitting largely along partisan lines. And when phrased as a partisan attack, a 60 percent majority of likely voters feels more confident about the Republicans on national security in response to this message:

Republicans say: "Democrats are insisting that terrorists be treated like American citizens, with full legal protections, like Miranda rights. But we should put the safety of Americans before the rights of terrorists, and we should be using all our toughest interrogation techniques to fight back against these terrorists who are trying to kill us."

Detention/Prosecution of Terrorists: Whereas a majority of the public approves of the job President Obama is doing in most aspects of national security, a 51 to 44 percent majority of likely voters disapproves of his efforts on the "prosecution and interrogation of terrorism suspects."

Iran: There is also public concern about developments in Iran. In the wake of continued intransigence by Tehran about its nuclear program, as well as protests by the Iranian opposition, a 49 to 42 percent plurality of America's likely voters express disapproval of the way the president is handling security issues related to Iran.

3. Rising Doubts Threaten to Re-open Democratic Deficit on National Security

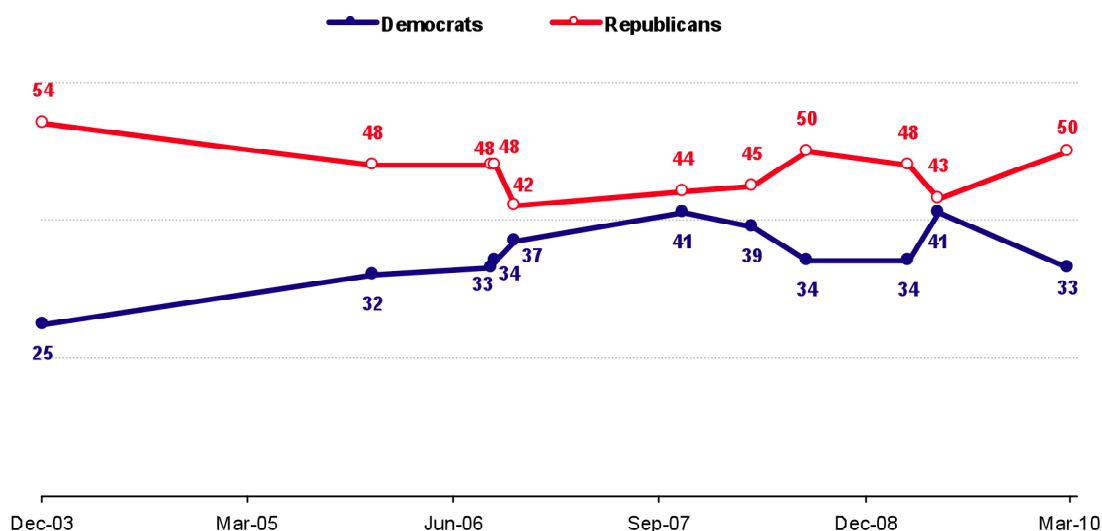
While ratings for the president may be softening, his party is facing an even more troubling trend. When the questions move beyond the president to Democrats generally, we see that the public once again has real and rising doubts about the Democrats' handling of national security issues, as compared to their faith in Republicans. This security gap, which has roots stretching back to Vietnam, was as wide as 29 points earlier in the decade. The deficit began to close in 2006, with the Bush administration's catastrophic mismanagement of Iraq and other national security challenges. As public hopes about the Obama presidency rose and peaked, the gap all but vanished. Last May, Democracy Corps found Democrats essentially tied with Republicans (41 to 43 percent) on the question of which party would do a better job on national security.

But now the gap shows signs of re-opening, with Democrats trailing by 17 points, 33 to 50 percent on which party likely voters think would do the better job on national security. The erosion since May is especially strong among women, and among independents, who now favor Republicans on this question by a 56 to 20 percent margin.

security issues with its relative performance compared to two years earlier; and it will combine perceptions of both the country's "hard power" (terrorism, national security) and "soft power" (America's standing in the world). Using this formula, the Security Confidence Index for February 2010 stands at 48.0 for likely voters.

³ See, e.g., CNN Opinion Research, Jan. 8-10, 2010, finding 57-39 percent approval of the president's response.

Gap re-opening on which party better on “national security”



There are some bright spots for the Democratic Party. They remain significantly more trusted than Republicans on “improving global respect for America,” 47 to 34 percent. And they have narrowed the gap since May on which party voters trust more on “combating terrorism” – Democrats now trail by 12 points, 35 to 47 percent, whereas they lagged by 19 points in July 2008.

But in more cases the Democrats’ gap on national security has widened:

- **“Keeping America safe”**: Democrats now trail by 14 points (34 to 47 percent); the gap was only 5 points in July 2008;
- **“Ensuring a strong military”**: Democrats trail by a very large 31 points (27 to 58 percent);
- **“Making America safer from nuclear threats”**: Democrats trail by 11 points (34 to 45 percent), despite the president’s strong actions and speeches on steps to reduce nuclear dangers.

These Democratic deficits may partly result from a sense among voters that they know more about the Republican approach to security than they do about the Democratic approach. A 55 to 41 percent majority say they “have a pretty good idea what the Democrats’ national security agenda is” (rejecting the alternative statement, “I do not really know what the Democrats stand for on national security”). But the sense of clarity is much stronger about the Republicans’ national security agenda, 63 to 32 percent.

Of course, much of the deterioration in Democrats’ standing on national security reflects the party’s broader political problems and voter frustrations over the weak economy. But this should be a wake-up call for the president and his party that they need to strengthen their standing on the country’s national security challenges, even as they work to create jobs, enact health care reform, and address other vital domestic priorities.

4. New Worries about US Global Standing – Now, Driven by Economic Anxieties

Moreover, beyond attitudes toward “hard security” issues, there are signs of resurgent doubts regarding America’s standing in the world. Even though voters are about evenly split on whether the country is more or less safe today, a 51 to 41 percent majority says the U.S. is *less respected* in the world than two years ago. This is surprising, given the global acclaim – and Nobel peace

prize – that flowed to the new president after he took office. Yet a regression analysis shows that this sentiment is driven even more strongly by perceptions of Obama’s performance on *the economy* – and America’s relative economic weakness – than by his handling of security issues.

In recent focus groups, we hear voters express concerns that mounting debts are diminishing America’s influence and ceding control to our foreign creditors, especially China. The new survey shows how dramatically those feelings undermine confidence in the country’s standing. By a huge 64 to 32 percent margin, likely voters now say that in the face of such economic trends, the US is losing the economic race to China and no longer “remains the strongest and most influential country.” Notably, GOP voters are *most likely* to believe that the U.S. is no longer the world’s strongest and most influential country – raising the possibility that Republicans have become the “New Declinists” in conversations about America’s global standing.

<i>America is losing its global leadership as China and other developing countries grow their economies and hold more of our debt.</i>	64%
<i>America remains the world’s strongest and most influential country due to our combination of economic strength, military power, and political freedom</i>	32%

CREATING A STRONGER DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE ON SECURITY

The president’s and Democrats’ standing on national security depends, above all else, on sensible policy and good results; polling does not identify the actions that will make America safer. But the new survey does provide important insights on ways the president, Democrats, and progressives can better communicate their plans and progress on national security.

Developing a stronger narrative on terrorism. As noted above, Republicans have too easily put the president and Democrats on the defensive over their handling of the Christmas Day bomber and terrorism generally.

Progressives can and must push back aggressively against this narrative. The survey tests several ways to frame this argument, and it highlights what works and what does not:

Stress Toughness and Results

- ***Fighting Terrorism:*** Obama has stepped up the fight and, using Predator plane attacks and Special Forces, we have captured or killed hundreds of al Qaeda and their allies since Obama took office
- ***Interrogation of Terrorists:*** Proven FBI interrogation techniques got the Christmas bomber to provide actionable intelligence that reportedly already led to overseas arrests of at least ten terrorists.
- ***Detention of Terrorists:*** In those cases sent to the civilian courts, there is an effective process for bringing terrorists to swift justice, including more than 300 terrorists currently held in federal supermax prisons. No one has ever escaped from a supermax.

Avoid Comparisons

- **Bush and Richard Reid:** Voters resist the argument that the Obama administration simply handled the Christmas bomber in the same way the Bush administration handled the “shoe bomber” case; this sounds political, and produces a weak response.
- **Civilian vs. Military Trials:** Similarly, progressives should not make this a question of whether to use “civilian” versus military procedures; the public tends to be drawn to “military.” Each may have their place; but this is about getting results.

Above all, even as they directly address questions about terrorist detention and trials, progressives need to elevate this debate onto an entirely different level. They stand on the strongest ground when they place such questions within the context of how the Obama administration is successfully taking the fight to terrorists globally. A 69 percent majority – 9 points stronger than the strongest Republican narrative on terrorism – feels more confident about Democrats on national security as a result of this message:

Democrats say: “Since the day Obama took office, we’ve stepped up the fight against terrorists. Using our Special Forces and Predator planes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen, we captured or killed hundreds of al Qaeda’s fighters and affiliates in 2009, far more than in 2008. Just last week, US forces helped capture the Taliban’s top military commander.”

This argument wins over a 61 percent majority of independents, even though this block is leaning Republican at this point and tend to be skeptical of President Obama and the Democrats on national security. It also produces an exceptionally strong response from “national security opinion formers” – college-educated voters who say they follow international affairs “very closely”; 73 percent of these influential national security observers say this results-oriented message makes them more confident about the Democrats on national security.

All of this underscores the need for Democrats and progressives to get out front in defining their purpose and progress on terrorism in tough terms. Given the public’s long-held doubts about the Democratic Party on these issues, and the risk of a growing gap in perceptions of the two parties on national security, Democrats and progressives must be bold and proactive in stressing the overall progress they are making in waging the long-term fight against terrorism.

Bringing the public along on Afghanistan and Iraq. The way in which wartime presidents prosecute their wars comes to define their leadership on national security. At this point, one of President Obama’s greatest strengths on national security is that he has, to a remarkable degree, managed to inspire and sustain broad public support for his policies and war efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq. As noted, well over half the public approves of the job he is doing on each (58 percent on Afghanistan, 54 percent on Iraq). Although Republicans now give him negative approval ratings on both, the president has managed to bring along solid majorities of his own party and most independents in support of these military engagements.

There are undoubtedly hard moments to come in both conflicts, and those moments will pose some of the greatest risks to the president’s standing on national security. Current levels of public support will not continue without continued effort to define the missions, rally the troops and communicate clearly to the public. While the president has given a number of seminal speeches on these topics, he devoted scarcely a half dozen sentences to each of these conflicts in his State of the Union address. He and his party will need to keep the spotlight on those efforts, and others in his party will need to invest more time and words in order to keep the country unified behind these wars.

Strengthening ties with the military. The survey also highlights the need for Democrats to strengthen their ties to the military, as both an institution and a culture. It is hard for the public to invest full trust in Democrats on national security when only 27 percent of the electorate believes Democrats would do a better job of “ensuring a strong military.”

As we noted after the Democracy Corps survey last May, Obama may have unique opportunities to make gains in this area. His selection of a strong and bipartisan national security team; his bold decision to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan; the personal focus he and the first lady have put on the well being of armed services personnel and their families – all these help explain why the president himself now earns a strong 57 percent approval rating on “leading America’s military.”

Yet there continue to be signs that Democrats are alienated from the military. Even though roughly comparable shares of Democrats and Republicans say that they or someone in their household has served in the military (34 percent of Democrats, 43 percent of Republicans) or have close friends who have been in active duty in the past three years (59 percent of Democrats, 63 percent of Republicans), there is a big difference on how each group views military service itself. Among Republicans, a 55 to 33 percent majority say they would recommend service in the military to their own children or to a young relative deciding on a career path; but among Democrats, a 58 to 32 percent majority would *discourage* pursuing military service.

There are obviously many factors, beyond people’s respect for the institution of the military, that could shape such conclusions, such as relative perceptions of their children’s economic opportunities; for example, the likelihood of recommending a career in the military is lower among upper educated and upper income respondents, apart from partisan affiliation. It is also true there has been evidence of closer bonds between the military and Democrats in recent years, such as a rising share of military personnel who identify themselves as Democrats.

Yet the survey underscores for the president, Democrats, and progressives that they need to do even more. They should continue to recruit congressional candidates from the ranks of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, and should continue to show their strong support of the military’s work in those war zones and elsewhere. That means making military affairs a focus of speeches, events, and all forms of communications.

Addressing the economic dimensions of global leadership. Finally, President Obama and Democrats campaigned in 2008 on the promise to restore America’s standing in the world. Most Americans do not believe they are delivering on that goal.

To turn these perceptions around, Democrats and progressives need to understand more clearly how the public thinks about America’s global standing. Many Democrats seem to assume that the key to America’s standing in the world lies in actions that project our values, such as ending American use of torture, or shutting the prison at Guantanamo. As important as those efforts are, the new survey, along with recent focus groups, suggest that voters view America’s standing in the world through much more of an economic lens. They find it hard to think of America as strong and respected in the world when we must rely so heavily on other countries to finance our debts, manufacture our products, and supply our oil.

Given the economic overlay on these issues, the public’s perceptions of America’s standing in the world may well improve as the recession gives way to recovery. Yet Democrats and progressives may be able to hasten that improvement by adopting a lexicon that links domestic revival with international economic leadership and shows a recognition that our global respect partly begins at home.