

# Making Sense of Isolationism: Foreign Policy Mood as a Multilevel Phenomenon

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*Political scientists have long been interested in the American public's foreign policy mood, but have typically separated the micro-level question (who's more likely to support isolationism?) from the macro-level one (when does isolationism's popularity increase?), even though public opinion is inherently a multilevel phenomenon, as the answers to these two questions interact. Showing how multilevel models can deal with the effects of time rather than just space, I find that both guns and butter drive foreign policy mood, but in different ways. When economic assessments sour, the public's appetite for isolationism increases, but the impact of these individual-level perceptions is constrained by aggregate economic conditions, which are sufficiently salient that they are accessible irrespective of knowledge. The nature of the international security environment, however, predominantly affects foreign policy mood amongst high-knowledge individuals, thereby suggesting that low and high-knowledge individuals' foreign policy views are shaped by different situational cues.*

Foreign policy mood is a multilevel phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The public's attitude towards how large a role the United States should play in the world — what Pollins and Schweller (1999) call “the oldest debate in American foreign policy” — is a function of both micro- and macro-level variables, both individual characteristics and contextual factors. Ever since Almond (1950, 232) argued that the American public's response to international events “has no depth and no structure,” political scientists have been fascinated by the question of what drives foreign policy preferences (Holsti, 2004; Rathbun, 2007), but their answers have typically focused on only one level of analysis at a time, with half looking predominantly at the beliefs, perceptions, and attributes that make some individuals more likely to support introverted foreign policies than others, and the other half investigating foreign policy “mood swings,” or the circumstances in which inward-looking foreign policies are more or less popular (Klingberg, 1952; Rieselbach, 1960; Holmes, 1985; Schlesinger, 1986). Yet if public opinion is shaped both by individual characteristics *and* by the environment the public is

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facing, we not only need to take both sets of factors into account, but also acknowledge causal complexity, using statistical techniques that allow us to model these “man-milieu” interactions ([Sprout and Sprout, 1957](#)) directly. I therefore employ multilevel modeling on 14 waves of ANES data to analyze the impact of both micro- and macro-level determinants of the American public’s support for isolationism from 1980-2008. At the micro-level, I find that the distinction between foreign and domestic policy preferences is often overstated, in that foreign policy views are shaped by the same economic assessments that scholars of political behavior have long understood to be a major determinant of candidate evaluation and voting behavior: when national economic assessments worsen, citizens turn inwards, and the public appetite for “extroverted” foreign policies decreases. Politics may stop at the water’s edge, but the economic evaluations that shape public opinion do not.

Extending the analysis to the macro-level, I find that the impact of these subjective perceptions on foreign policy mood is constrained by economic realities on the ground. In this sense, foreign policy is not just a multilevel phenomenon in that it is forged by factors at multiple levels of analysis, but also in that it displays causal complexity, as micro- and macro-level variables interact. Moreover, since contextual phenomena can only influence the foreign policy preferences of citizens who are aware of them in the first place, I find evidence that low- and high-knowledge individuals rely on different sets of cues when forming their foreign policy views: the international security environment predominantly impacts foreign policy mood amongst knowledgeable citizens, whereas domestic economic conditions are sufficiently salient that they are accessible to all individuals, and constrain subjective economic assessments accordingly. Both guns and butter affect foreign policy mood, then, but the latter’s effect is consistent, whereas the former’s effect is contingent.

## Foreign policy mood as a multilevel phenomenon

Policymakers and political scientists in the United States have largely been interested in foreign policy mood for two very different reasons, so it is not surprising that the extant academic literature reflects two very different methodological approaches. Because there is nearly unanimous agreement amongst foreign policy elites that the country should pursue a major role in world politics ([Page and Barabas, 2000](#)), the re-emergence of isolationism has long terrified policy-makers, even if its actual role in the history of US foreign policy is overstated ([Braumoeller, 2010](#)). Just as one of the major mandates of the Council on Foreign Relations in the 1940s was to “enlighten” the American public by mobilizing internationalist sentiment ([Parmar, 1999](#)), neoconservative think tanks like the Project for a New American Century were formed in the late 1990s precisely to prevent conservatives from veering towards “neo-isolationism.” One strand of the political science research on foreign policy mood has thus focused on a micro-level approach, using individual-level polling data

to investigate who is more or less likely to support isolationist or inward-looking foreign policies: men versus women, Republicans versus Democrats, Midwesterners versus Northeasterners, and so on (e.g. [Rieselbach, 1960](#); [Holsti, 2004](#); [Urbatsch, 2010](#)).

A separate body of work has explored foreign policy mood with a macro-level approach, using aggregate data collected over time — public opinion trends, content analyses of Presidential speeches, etc. — to study isolationism in the context of foreign policy mood swings, examining the circumstances under which inward-looking foreign policies are more or less popular ([Klingberg, 1952](#); [Holmes, 1985](#); [Schlesinger, 1986](#); [Pollins and Schweller, 1999](#)). In 2010 both former President George W. Bush and Senator John McCain expressed concern about isolationism's increasing popularity ([McKenzie, 2010](#); [Thiessen, 2011](#)), so this longitudinal question is as relevant today as it was after the Second World War, when critics like Gabriel Almond and George Kennan argued that the volatility of public opinion — oscillating from isolationism to interventionism and back again — constituted the major threat to the viability of democratically-governed foreign policy ([Holsti, 2004](#)). Although subsequent research has painted a far more flattering picture of the public ([Jentleson, 1992](#)), this second tradition tries to model this volatility by exploring the conditions in which aggregate support for extroverted foreign policies waxes and wanes ([Page and Shapiro, 1992](#); [Nincic, 1997](#)), as in thermostatic models of public opinion ([Wlezien, 1995](#)).

In reminding us that the public neither acts as a homogenous whole nor forms its foreign policy preferences in a vacuum, these two research traditions have made vast contributions to the study of the American public's foreign policy mood, but largely in isolation from one another. As a result, we've come to treat "who's more likely to support isolationism?" and "when does isolationism's popularity increase?" as independent questions, even though the answer to one is likely to affect the other. In this sense, even if we typically study micro- and macro-opinion separately ([Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson, 2002](#)), public opinion is inherently a multi-level phenomenon ([McLeod, Pan and Rucinski, 1995](#)). If the public's mood is shaped both by individual-level attributes and the broader climate the public is collectively reacting to, studies that focus only on factors at a single level of analysis — or incorporate variables at both levels but do not let them systematically interact — will mask causal heterogeneity ([Western, 1998](#)), ignoring what the early foreign policy analysis literature used to call "man-milieu" interactions ([Sprout and Sprout, 1957](#)); the extent to which contextual determinants of foreign policy mood are in fact conditional upon individual-level factors, and vice versa. Indeed, we have theoretical reasons to believe that support for isolationism is determined by factors crossing multiple levels of analysis, such that foreign policy mood is best studied with statistical techniques explicitly designed to capture these cross-level interactions, thereby revealing the more complex dynamics through which preferences are shaped. In the discus-

sion below, I argue that foreign policy mood is driven by three factors: individual-level economic perceptions, the objective economic climate the country faces, and the nature of the international security environment.

### Economic considerations

In his analysis of foreign policy mood swings, Almond (1950, 65) raised the possibility that the public's mood was driven by economic factors, a relationship operating at two different levels of analysis. First, at the micro-level, a large literature in political behavior shows that our economic assessments have major impacts on policy preferences (Fiorina, 1978; Kinder, 1981; Feldman, 1982). The state of the national economy is highly salient, such that economic perceptions affect everything from attitudes towards immigration (Citrin et al., 1997), to trust in government (Mishler and Rose, 2001), but their impact has yet to be tested in the foreign policy domain. Second, at the macro-level, a large IR literature ranging from Kondratieff cycles (Goldstein, 1985) to “war chest” theories (Blainey, 1973) links the state of the national economy to the likelihood of a country embarking on outsized military adventures, as reflected in the classical idea of *pecunia nervus belli* — “money is the sinew of war.”

I therefore argue that the public appetite for extroverted foreign policies is driven at the micro-level by perceptions of the state of the national economy (such that individuals who perceive the economy as faring poorly will look less favorably upon an outward-looking foreign policy), and at the macro-level by the actual economy itself (such that the public as a whole will display less foreign policy extroversion when the economy sours). The logic at both levels of analysis is the same, reflected in the fact that global activism is expensive: hegemonic stability theorists compare the United States to Goliath (Mandelbaum, 2005) precisely because maintaining your vision of the international system doesn't come cheap. SIPRI estimates American military expenditures in 2010 reached \$698 billion; the Department of Defense's 2010 Base Structure Report states that DoD currently occupies over 300,000 buildings around the world, stretching out over 2.2 billion square feet. Carrots may be cheaper than sticks, but nation-building and humanitarian aid still involve opportunity costs, as money spent on hospitals and schools abroad comes at the expense of hospitals and schools at home. Advocates of an outward-looking foreign policy may argue that the costs and consequences of retrenchment exceed those of maintaining the status quo (Muravchik, 1996), but this only reinforces the point that extroverted foreign policies involve paying costs in the first place, which implies that when the economy weakens, the opportunity costs of an outward-looking foreign policy increase (Nincic, 1997), and the American public will be less interested in footing the bill.

H1. Micro-level: positive economic assessments are associated with greater support for an extroverted foreign policy, while negative economic assessments are associated with greater support for the United States “staying home.”

H2. Macro-level: positive economic conditions — as measured by low inflation and unemployment rates — are associated with greater support for an extroverted foreign policy, while negative economic conditions — as measured by high inflation and unemployment rates — are associated with greater support for an introverted foreign policy.

In a complete information model of rational choice, it would be redundant to test both the micro- and macro-level hypotheses, since subjective assessments of the health of the economy should be identical to conclusions reached from actual economic data (such as information about inflation, unemployment, and so on). Given limited knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996) and motivated reasoning (Lebo and Cassino, 2007), however, it is likely that there is an “elasticity of reality” (Baum and Groeling, 2010), whereby subjective assessments and objective indicators will often diverge. Thus, there are two additional conclusions we can draw about the impact of economic perceptions on foreign policy mood. First, individual-level assessments should still exert a statistically and substantively significant impact on foreign policy mood even when objective or macro-level economic conditions are controlled for— that is, we will still find support for H1 even in a hierarchical model that also tests for H2. Second, although economic perceptions may be distorted by partisanship and other individual-level characteristics (Duch, Palmer and Anderson, 2000), they should on the whole be tethered to actual facts on the ground. Thus, the impact of micro-level assessments on foreign policy mood is likely to be conditional on macro-level economic circumstances: when economic times are good, micro-level assessments should exert a large impact on foreign policy mood, with respondents with favorable economic perceptions being more likely to advocate an outward looking foreign policy than those with unfavorable assessments. When economic times are bad, however, a “reality constraint” should kick in, and individual-level perceptions should cease to display a statistically significant effect on foreign policy mood. Subjective economic assessments may have important effects, but not unconditional ones.

H3. Cross-level: the impact of positive economic assessments on foreign policy mood is conditional on the presence of positive economic conditions (and thus, there exists a significant interaction effect between subjective and objective economic indicators).

## War and knowledge

The third type of factor affecting foreign policy mood is the nature of the international security environment, which “third-image” accounts in IR emphasize, as do [Krasner \(1978, 342-346\)](#) and [Nincic \(1988\)](#) in their discussions of foreign policy mood swings. The IR literature on public opinion paints two competing pictures of the public. The image depicted by the “rally around the flag” effect, in which external threats cause the public to stand behind the President and support the use of force ([Mueller, 1971](#)), implies that a more conflictual international environment should boost foreign policy extroversion. Rallies, however, are by definition short-lived phenomena, and in the long run the public appears to be highly sensitive to the costs of war ([Valentino, Huth and Croco, 2010](#)), such that IR scholars have found that the advantages of democracy in war decline over time ([Bennett and Stam, 1998](#)). If the public is less likely to support extroverted foreign policies when economic circumstances sour, an increasingly belligerent international system is likely to have a similarly discouraging effect in the long run, deterring support for highly active foreign policies by rendering the costs of internationalism more salient. We can operationalize this in a number of ways: not just by the number of disputes the US finds itself involved in, but also their intensity, with higher levels of hostilities, or greater number of casualties, associated with an introverted foreign policy mood. Outcomes should also matter: although the public may be willing to pay the costs of an extroverted foreign policy when it sees signs that the country is successful at it, a string of defeats should have the same effect as an economic downturn, causing the public to turn inwards and focus on problems at home.

H4a. Macro-level: the more belligerent the international system — as measured by the number and intensity of the militarized interstate disputes in which the US has been involved — the less the public will favor an outward-looking foreign policy.

H4b. Macro-level: the more disputes the United States fails to win, the less supportive the public will be of an outward-looking foreign policy.

Yet as [Rosenau \(1965\)](#) reminds us, although a few prominent international events consume an enormous amount of the public’s attention, foreign policy issues on the whole tend to be less salient than their domestic counterparts. High-profile foreign policy events may affect voting behavior ([Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida, 1989](#)), but most foreign policy issues are seen as “hard” issues rather than “easy” ones ([Carmines and Stimson, 1980](#)), far removed from most Americans’ daily lives ([Moisy, 1997](#)). Positing that the public will respond in the manner predicted by H4a assumes that citizens are aware of these events in the first place, when in fact higher-knowledge individuals — or members of foreign policy “issue publics” — are far more likely to be exposed to information about

the dynamics of the international security environment than their lower-knowledge counterparts (Zaller, 1992). Compared to most events on the world stage, domestic economic conditions are far more accessible: as Enns and Kellstedt (2008) argue, one need not be an economist to have a basic sense of how well the economy is performing, since inflation and unemployment have sufficiently stark effects on the daily lives of ordinary citizens that the knowledgeable and ignorant alike will be aware of the state of the national economy at some level, even if their judgments are sometimes distorted. If the international security environment is more likely to be accessible to high-knowledge individuals than low-knowledge ones, we can refine H4a by offering two conditional hypotheses, in which the impact of conflict in the international system predominantly affects the foreign policy mood of high-knowledge citizens.

H4c: Cross-level: The more belligerent the international system — as measured by the number and intensity of the militarized interstate disputes in which the US has been involved — the less highly-knowledgeable individuals will favor an outward-looking foreign policy.

H4d. Cross-level: The more militarized interstate disputes the US fails to prevail in, the less highly-knowledgeable individuals will favor an outward-looking foreign policy.

## Data and variables

Data for this study are chiefly drawn from fourteen waves of the American National Election Studies (ANES) conducted biannually from 1980-2008 — apart from 2006, when no ANES time series study was conducted. ANES data are ideal for our purposes because they repeat the same questions over a series of nationally representative samples, allowing us to investigate the joint impact of micro- and macro-determinants of foreign policy mood, testing hypotheses that could not be studied with aggregate data alone.

## Dependent variable

Since foreign policy mood represents a general posture that constrains more specific policy preferences (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987), it is best measured by questions fielded repeatedly that tap into broader isolationist sentiments, rather than narrower questions measuring attitudes towards specific conflicts or policies. The ANES includes a measure of isolationism — “This country would be better off if we just stayed home and did not concern ourselves with problems in other parts of the world” — that serves as a relatively parsimonious measure of foreign policy extroversion, recoded 0 for respondents who agreed with the statement (and thus support an introverted or inward-looking

foreign policy), and 1 for respondents who disagree (who thus call for an extroverted or outward-looking foreign policy). To establish convergent validity, a series of ordered probit and OLS models was estimated to ensure that the isolationism measure adequately predicts more specific foreign policy preferences. Even when controlling for party ID, political ideology, and a host of demographic variables, foreign policy extroverts were substantially more likely to support a wide series of specific foreign policy priorities — ranging from fighting terrorism to combatting hunger, preventing nuclear proliferation to promoting human rights — thereby confirming that our general measure of foreign policy mood accurately predicts support for specific extroverted foreign policies, regardless of whether they are hawkish or dovish in nature.<sup>2</sup>

### Micro-level independent variables

The ANES asks respondents to provide a series of economic evaluations, including a *retrospective sociotropic* evaluation, indicating whether “the nation’s economy has gotten better, stayed about the same or gotten worse,” and a *prospective sociotropic* assessment measuring whether respondents expect the economy to get better, stay the same, or get worse for the next 12 months.<sup>3</sup> I use these questions to produce two independent variables, measuring subjective retrospective, and prospective economic assessments, respectively, scaled so that higher values correspond with more negative assessments.

### Micro-level control variables

In addition to the economic assessments, I include a number of control variables. First, it is plausible that foreign policy mood is affected by an evaluation of the American position in the international system. Just as scholars of political behavior study “internal political efficacy” (Niemi, Craig and Mattei, 1991) — a concept that measures individuals’ beliefs about their own abilities to engage with and participate in political life — one can imagine such a thing as “state efficacy,” a construct that measures individuals’ beliefs about their state’s performance on the world stage. The Carter administration’s turn towards a less muscular foreign policy, for example, largely reflects a reaction to the events in Vietnam, and social psychologists in the past several decades have shown increased interest in beliefs in “collective efficacy” as a source of behavior (Bandura, 2000). The ANES also asks respondents to assess the American position in the world, measuring whether they felt that during the previous year, the United States’ position had become weaker, stronger, or stayed the

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<sup>2</sup> See §2 of the online appendix. Since public opinion scholars often distinguish between a number of different faces of internationalism (Holsti, 2004), it is notable that our measure predicts support for both militant and cooperative internationalism.

<sup>3</sup> For results with personal economic evaluations, see §8 of the online appendix.

same — a question I use as a measure of state efficacy, coding those participants who believed the American position had strengthened as being higher in state efficacy. Because of the conceptual connections between personal efficacy and collective efficacy, and because early political behavior research indicated that political efficacy and self-esteem were related to internationalism (Campbell et al., 1960; Sniderman and Citrin, 1971), I also measure personal efficacy with an additive scale drawn from the standard internal political efficacy NES items (“Public officials don’t care much what people like me think,” “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does,” and “Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on”).

Additionally, I include a dichotomous variable measuring whether respondents indicated that economic issues were the most important problem the country is facing, since the impact of economic assessments on foreign policy mood may depend on how salient these concerns are. For political knowledge, I use the interviewer’s post-questionnaire assessment of the respondent’s general level of information about politics, commonly used in political behavior research and found to perform similarly to factual-recall based questionnaires (Zaller, 1992, 338).<sup>4</sup> For partisanship, I use the standard seven-point measure of party identification (from strong Democrat to strong Republican), as well as a dichotomous “Inpartisan” variable measuring whether respondents’ partisan identification is that of the party of the sitting President. I also use a variety of standard demographic variables, controlling for political ideology (from strong liberal to strong conservative), gender, age, income, and level of education.

### Macro-level variables

Finally, I include a set of contextual variables to model changes in the economic and security environment across each year of the study. To capture the macro-level economic climate, I include measures of the national inflation and unemployment rates.<sup>5</sup> I also include the index of consumer sentiment (ICS), which, while not an objective measure of the state of the economy (DeBoef and Kellstedt, 2004) is nonetheless useful as a macro-level indicator of the aggregate economic environment in which individuals are formulating their foreign policy views.

To control for the security environment, data from the MID3 data set (Ghosn, Palmer and Bremer, 2004) were used to produce four indicators. First, since the ANES is conducted biannually,

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<sup>4</sup> In 1988, the post-questionnaire knowledge assessment was not included, whereupon I rely on a pre-questionnaire knowledge measure instead.

<sup>5</sup> The data were derived from the Current Population Survey and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Since the ANES data are collected over a four month period, the average unemployment and inflation levels for this September-December period were used.

the first variable measures the number of militarized interstate disputes (MIDS) in which the US has participated in the previous two year period. Second, because not all conflicts exact an equal toll, the level of hostilities incurred in all of the conflicts in the two year period is summed to produce a measure of the intensity of the disputes. A similar procedure is used to measure the level of casualties the US sustained in the disputes, which serves as another indicator of conflict intensity. Fourth, since it is also likely that the disputes' outcomes will affect the public's mood (Eichenberg, 2005), an additional measure tallies the number of disputes in which the United States failed to win, under the assumption that defeats or stalemates will loom larger than victories.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, because not all of the individual-level variables of interest were included in ANES studies in each year, rather than employ listwise deletion and throw out large amounts of information, multiple imputation was conducted using Amelia II (Honaker, King and Blackwell, 2009), producing ten imputed datasets, described in further detail in §3 of the online appendix.

## Results: a multilevel analysis

As pooled cross-sectional data, the biannual ANES results are likely to display temporal heterogeneity: domestic politics, economic conditions, and the international security environment all change over time, and statistical models that do not account for these dynamics produce biased estimates. There are a number of different ways political scientists control for the effects of time, most frequently with year fixed-effects, or splines (Beck, Katz and Tucker, 1998; Keele, 2008). The limitation of these approaches is twofold. First, they treat the effects of time as a statistical nuisance to be corrected, rather than a feature of our data we should try to explain: they tell us that years differ without telling us why. Second, they relegate the effects of time to the intercept, assuming all our other coefficients have constant effects over time — a premise that should be tested rather than assumed. Hierarchical linear, or multilevel, models, can avoid both of these pitfalls, and thus offer a new way of addressing an old problem. Multilevel models are frequently used in political science to study the impact of context on actors' behavior, but usually the context is understood in spatially-differentiated terms: students nested in schools, voters nested in states, survey respondents nested in countries, and so on (e.g. Hutchison and Gibler, 2007). Yet time is no less a contextual variable than space, so we can also use multilevel models to provide a more theoretically satisfying way to deal with temporal heterogeneity in pooled public opinion data. Unlike fixed effect models, which allow intercepts to vary for each year but also assume constant effect sizes, a multilevel approach allows for both slopes and intercepts to vary, avoiding effect heterogeneity bias while letting macro-

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<sup>6</sup> Failure to win is a better indicator than merely tallying losses, since outright defeats during this period are extremely rare; the US is coded as only having lost 3 of the 91 MIDS it engaged in between 1978 and 2001.

level phenomena explain why the effect of micro-level variables vary across time.<sup>7</sup> Thus, a series of multilevel models are presented in two stages: first, employing a random coefficient model to focus on the role of individual-level predictors like subjective economic assessments, and then using a set of full hierarchical linear models to examine how these individual-level predictors interact with the domestic economic and international security contexts.

Before conducting the analyses, however, it is important to note that although the multilevel nature of the data — with over twenty-five thousand respondents taking part in a total of 14 waves — allows for the simultaneous study of both micro- and macro-level determinants of foreign policy mood, its asymmetric structure (with a large number of respondents nested in a small number of waves) produces asymmetric leverage for questions of statistical inference (Snijders, 2005), even though, as Anderson and Singer (2008) note, multilevel models borrow across lower-level units in making their estimates, such that a multilevel logistic model on 12 level-two groupings with nearly 2000 level-one units in each is still more precisely estimated than an ordinary logistic regression conducted with an  $N$  of 12. To mitigate statistical power issues I adopt two modeling strategies. First, to preserve degrees of freedom for the macro-level analyses I restrict the number of contextual factors included in the model at any given time. Second, I adopt different standards of statistical significance for each level of analysis. Given the large number of respondents in the study, the chief risk with the micro-level analyses is a Type I error, so I impose stringent standards of statistical significance when analyzing the impact of individual-level variables, adopting a threshold of  $p < 0.001$ . However, because of the small number of years under investigation, the foremost concern with the macro-level analyses is a Type II error, so I accept lower standards of statistical significance for macro-level variables than for individual-level ones, lowering the threshold to  $p < 0.10$  to avoid missing effects that are substantively large but imprecisely measured due to data limitations (Ziliak and McCloskey, 2008).

### **Individual-level predictors of foreign policy mood**

To establish a baseline for the analyses, I estimate a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with year random effects, simply to determine how much of the variation in foreign policy mood is due to differences over time, rather than across individuals. The results show that the public is less volatile than critics like Kennan believed, as there is over twelve times as much variation in foreign policy mood *within* each wave of the data as there are *between* them; there is far more division within the

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<sup>7</sup> See §1 of the online appendix for a further discussion of the merits of a hierarchical approach, visual tests for heterogeneity, as well as the econometric specifications for all the types of multilevel models presented below.

public in 1992, say, than between the public in 1988 and the public in 2002.<sup>8</sup> Since the variation within time periods cannot be explained by contextual factors that are largely constant within each wave, the model shows that most of the variation in foreign policy preferences is due to individual-level rather than contextual-level factors. Accounts of foreign policy mood that rely largely on aggregate time series data (e.g. [Page and Shapiro, 1992](#)) thus appear to overlook an important part of the story.

I therefore begin the multivariate analyses by focusing on the role of individual-level factors. Model 1 of Table 1 estimates a random coefficient logistic regression model that controls for a series of micro-level predictors: sociotropic economic assessments, state efficacy, political knowledge, partisan identification, inpartisanship, whether the economy was deemed the most important issue, and a range of demographic characteristics (age, gender, income, education), along with a random effect on personal efficacy, which allows its relationship with foreign policy mood to vary across time.<sup>9</sup> Retrospective economic evaluations display the significant relationship with foreign policy mood predicted by H1: respondents who reported that the economy was better in the past year are 4.6% more likely to favor an outward-looking foreign policy than respondents who said the economy was worse. Prospective economic assessments, on the other hand, are not significant; when it comes to foreign policy mood, Americans are evidently peasants rather than bankers ([MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson, 1992](#)), basing their preferences upon an assessment of how the economy has performed in the past, rather than expectations of future performance. Importantly, the effect of retrospective economic assessments exceeds that of partisanship; although Republicans generally favor an extroverted foreign policy more than Democrats, in a multivariate context, strong Republicans were only 3.2% more likely to espouse foreign policy extroversion than strong Democrats, indicating a relatively strong bipartisan consensus on foreign policy mood. At the same time, the significant effect of the inpartisan dummy variable means that partisans were 2.5% more likely to endorse extroverted foreign policies when the President came from their own political party, offering some support for [Urbatsch's \(2010\)](#) conclusion that measures of isolationism also capture partisan opposition to the President. In general, though, partisanship's effects are relatively weak and stable across time when compared to the other predictors in the model, creating an image of "parallel publics" moving in tandem ([Page and Shapiro, 1992](#)).

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<sup>8</sup> The intraclass correlation ( $\rho$ ) indicates that 7.3% of the variation in foreign policy preferences come from variation across years; 95% CIs around the intercept suggest that the average level of foreign policy extroversion falls within a 21.6% range in 95% of the cases. Because the models are estimated using a penalized quasi-likelihood, likelihood ratio tests cannot be used to adjudicate model fit, so these statistics serve as baselines for subsequent analyses: in general, the smaller the intraclass correlation and tighter the CIs around the intercept, the better-fitting the model.

<sup>9</sup> Alternative model specifications with random effects on other predictors failed to improve model fit; see Table 1 of the online appendix for details.

Table 1: Multi-level determinants of foreign policy mood, 1980-2008 (I)

	Micro-level		Economic context	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Intercept	-1.412*** (0.139)	-1.203*** (0.359)	-1.314 (0.433)	-1.861 (0.772)
Retro. Sociotropic	-0.120*** (0.030)	-0.206*** (0.059)	-0.280 (0.111)	0.177 (0.244)
Pro. Sociotropic	-0.024 (0.031)	-0.007 (0.031)	-0.006 (0.031)	-0.008 (0.031)
State Efficacy	0.165*** (0.024)	0.161*** (0.027)	0.161*** (0.027)	0.160*** (0.027)
Personal Efficacy	0.479*** (0.055)	0.470*** (0.063)	0.469*** (0.064)	0.471*** (0.064)
Party ID	0.028*** (0.009)	0.025 (0.009)	0.027 (0.009)	0.026 (0.009)
Ideology	0.011 (0.017)	0.014 (0.017)	0.014 (0.017)	0.015 (0.017)
Age	-0.006 (0.011)	-0.011 (0.012)	-0.012 (0.012)	-0.012 (0.012)
Male	0.036 (0.036)	0.071 (0.038)	0.071 (0.038)	0.071 (0.038)
Income	0.101*** (0.019)	0.099*** (0.019)	0.100*** (0.019)	0.099*** (0.019)
Education	0.172*** (0.014)	0.169*** (0.015)	0.169*** (0.015)	0.169*** (0.015)
Knowledge	0.211*** (0.026)	0.22*** (0.028)	0.219*** (0.028)	0.219*** (0.028)
Economy Salient	0.025 (0.043)	0.018 (0.045)	0.020 (0.045)	0.017 (0.045)
Inpartisan	0.137*** (0.036)	0.137*** (0.038)	0.137*** (0.038)	0.135*** (0.038)
<i>Macro-level</i>				
Inflation		-0.043 (0.038)		
Unemployment			-0.038 (0.063)	
Consumer sentiment				0.003 (0.008)
Inflation x Retro. Soc.		0.022† (0.013)		
Unemployment x Retro. Soc.			0.026† (0.019)	
Consumer sentiment x Retro. Soc.				-0.003 (0.003)
Security environment		-0.145 (0.420)	0.163 (0.453)	0.300 (0.427)
<i>Random effects</i>				
Intercept	(0.088)	(0.133)	(0.064)	(0.049)
Personal Efficacy	(0.161)	(0.171)	(0.175)	(0.177)
$\sigma^2$	0.994	0.995	0.995	0.995
$\rho$	0.013	0.023	0.007	0.003
N	25612	22078	22078	22078
Years	14	12	12	12

Micro-level: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  Macro-level: †  $p < 0.10$

Although age, gender and liberal-conservative ideology lacked statistically significant effects, two other demographic characteristics — income and education — did not, with the wealthiest respondents 7.7% more likely to be foreign policy extroverts than the poorest, and the most educated 17.0% more likely to be foreign policy extroverts than the least educated, an effect that holds even when controlling for knowledge (which itself is associated with an 8.1% jump in foreign policy extroversion when the highest-knowledge respondents are compared with their low-knowledge counterparts). The two efficacy variables also have substantively and statistically significant effects. Those who believed the American position in the world had strengthened in the past year and who thus should be high in state efficacy were 6.3% less likely to call for the US to stay home, while interestingly, those high in personal efficacy were 17.7% less likely to do so, suggesting that assessments about the US position in the world help shape foreign policy mood, but less so than beliefs about one's own capacity to exert political influence.

### **Macro-level predictors of foreign policy mood**

The question remains, however, whether contextual-level factors also have an effect, such that rather than merely controlling for heterogeneity, we can explain it with substantive predictors — and do so more efficiently and systematically than if macro- and micro-level variables were included in a pooled model. Economic assessments play a role in driving foreign policy mood, but to what extent is their effect contingent on aggregate economic indicators like inflation and unemployment? And what role do events in the international security environment play?

Models 2-4 of Table 1 seek to answer the first question by presenting a series of analyses in which inflation, the unemployment rate, and the consumer confidence index are interacted with retrospective sociotropic economic evaluations. In order to control for the security context while still preserving degrees of freedom, I include a composite measure of the security environment, since all four security variables are highly intercorrelated ( $\alpha = 0.812$ ). Supporting H<sub>3</sub>, all three interactions with economic assessments are statistically significant ( $p < 0.051$ ,  $p < 0.083$ , and  $p < 0.101$  for the interactions with inflation, unemployment, and consumer confidence, respectively), and predicted probabilities for the interactions are depicted in Figure 1(a). The y-axis of the top row of panels in Figure 1(a) plots the predicted probability of an extroverted foreign policy mood, while the x-axis depicts the range between the minimum and maximum values of each macro-level indicator, and the thickness of the lines indicates the valence of sociotropic economic evaluations, with the thinner line referring to favorable assessments, and the thicker line denoting less favorable ones.

In all three cases, the effect of the interaction between the macro-level economic indicator and

micro-level economic assessments is the same: the “worse” the national economic indicators are,<sup>10</sup> the less impact the subjective economic assessments have on an individual’s foreign policy mood. The dotted vertical line indicates the point on the x-axis where the impact of subjective assessments is no longer statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level, corresponding to the p-values from joint hypothesis tests displayed in the bottom panel and described in detail in §6 of the online appendix. When inflation sits slightly above 1%, respondents who suggested the economy had gotten much better were 6.9% more likely to advocate extroverted foreign policy preferences than those who suggested the economy had gotten much worse; once inflation passes 6%, however, we can no longer conclude with 95% certainty that subjective assessments have any effect whatsoever on foreign policy mood — evidence of a “reality constraint” (Baum and Groeling, 2010) that is also apparent with unemployment and consumer confidence. Indeed, the lower the unemployment rate, or higher the consumer confidence index, the greater the effect sociotropic assessments have on foreign policy mood; as the dotted vertical lines show, as unemployment approaches 7.88% or the ICS sinks below 76, the impact of subjective economic assessments evaporates. Additional analyses presented in §4 of the online appendix offer further evidence of this reality constraint, showing that subjective micro-level assessments converge when the objective economy sours, thereby demonstrating how subjective economic assessments significantly impact foreign policy mood even controlling for objective economic conditions when times are good, but not when times are bad.<sup>11</sup>

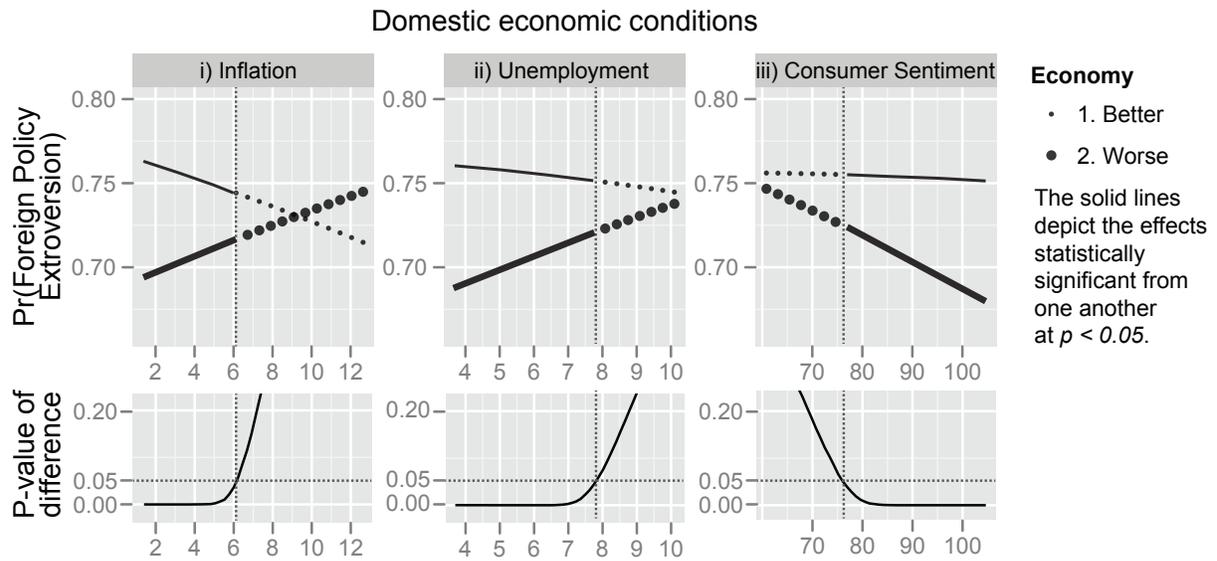
Two points are worth noting here. First, supporting H3, the economic context acts as a conditionally-activated reality constraint: the worse inflation, unemployment and consumer confidence get, the less impact individual subjective assessments have. Second, supplementary analyses in §8 of the online appendix find that these conditional effects are largely independent of political sophistication: although unemployment’s impact on foreign policy mood varies slightly with political knowledge, neither inflation nor consumer sentiment display this effect. Like Enns and Kellstedt, I therefore find that political knowledge plays only a minor role in moderating the impact of objective economic circumstances. However, I also suggest that the impact of economic indicators is contingent upon subjective economic assessments; unless these indicators are high, subjective evaluations of the economy do more of the heavy lifting.

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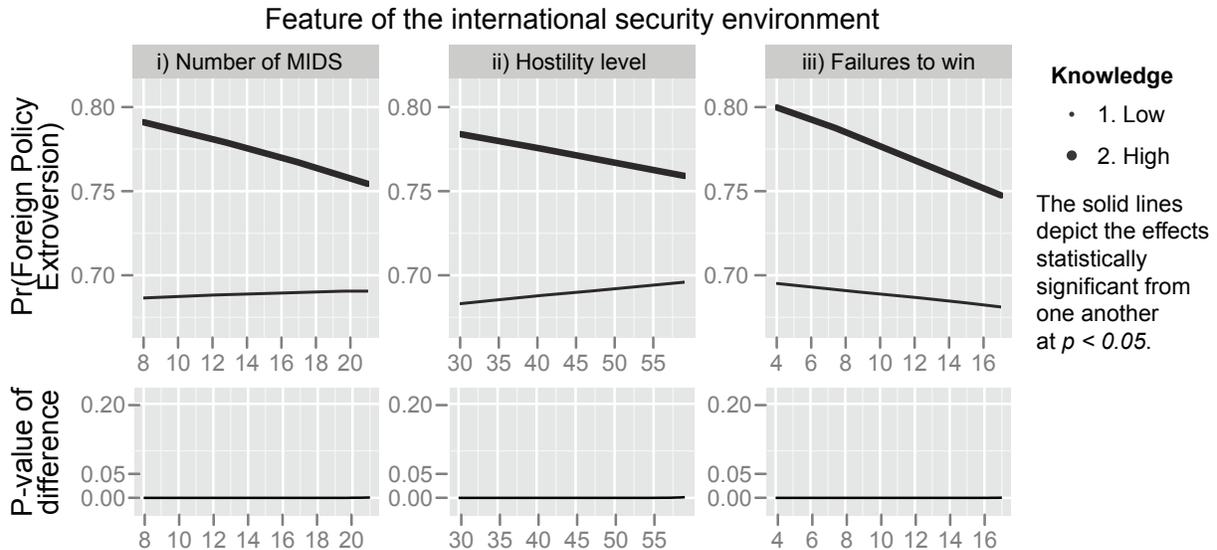
<sup>10</sup> I use “worse” here to indicate high levels of unemployment and inflation and low levels of consumer confidence, but deflation (which did not occur in this time period) would also be problematic.

<sup>11</sup> The relationship between macro-conditions, micro-assessments, and mood can also be reconceptualized as a mediation model, but given stringent identification assumptions (Imai et al., 2011) and the small number of L2 units in the model, I focus here on a simpler moderated approach.

Figure 1: Macro-level economic and security determinants of foreign policy mood



(a) When (i) inflation and (ii) unemployment rates are low or (iii) consumer confidence is high, subjective readings about the economy have a statistically significant effect on foreign policy mood. Once these objective economic indicators pass a certain threshold, though, a “reality constraint” kicks in, and subjective economic evaluations lose their impact; in each panel, the dotted line indicates the point at which we can no longer be certain with 95% probability that foreign policy mood differs across levels of economic assessments, corresponding to the p-values from the joint hypothesis tests in the bottom series of panels.



(b) Low-knowledge individuals are generally unaffected by the international security environment, while higher-knowledge counterparts are less likely to advocate an extroverted foreign policy as the environment becomes more conflictual, as measured both by (i) the number of militarized disputes the US is involved in during each period, and (ii) the level of escalation of the disputes. Information about (iii) failures to win, however, trickles down even to those low in political knowledge, although they react less sharply to these defeats and stalemates than high-knowledge individuals. The p-values plotted in the bottom series of panels show that unlike in Figure 1(a), we can be certain with 99% probability that the effects differ across the full range of values on the x-axis.

The question remains whether the external security environment displays the same mechanisms at work. I therefore use data on militarized interstate disputes (MIDS) from the MID3 dataset to examine whether the number and nature of disputes taking place in the previous two year period affect foreign policy mood, focusing on four criteria in particular: the number of disputes the US participated in, the overall level of escalation of the disputes, the overall level of fatalities the US endured, and the number of disputes the US failed to win. Against H4a and H4b, none of the security variables exert significant main effects on foreign policy mood (see §8 of the online appendix), but Table 2 interacts each of the variables with political knowledge in sequence, controlling for unemployment as a measure of the domestic economic climate.<sup>12</sup> The interaction between knowledge and casualties fails even generous standards of statistical significance, but the other three interactions are depicted in Figure 1(b).

Although the interaction terms fall just outside the  $p < 0.10$  threshold ( $p < 0.118$  for the number of MIDS,  $p < 0.133$  for hostility levels, and  $p < 0.107$  for failures to win), the results are highly sensible, and offer preliminary support for H4c and H4d: the international security environment tends to be further removed from the daily realities of domestic economic conditions, so low-knowledge individuals are predominantly unaffected by the dynamics of American militarized interstate disputes. Higher-knowledge individuals, on the other hand, respond to a greater number of disputes, or disputes marked by higher levels of escalation — since these are the disputes likely to receive higher attention — by professing a reduced likelihood of support for an outward-looking foreign policy. Thus, although knowledge seems not to affect the impact of domestic economic indicators, it does heighten the impact of the security context. Regardless of what kind of impact “third image” factors have on US foreign policy, their effect on the mood of the US public seems to be limited, detectable only amongst the most knowledgeable. The notable exception concerns failures to win: although the most-knowledgeable respond to defeats and stalemates by reducing their support for outward-looking foreign policies at the greatest rate (by about 5.3%), news of the absence of victory trickles down to the lowest-knowledgeable as well, who respond with around a 1.4% drop in foreign policy extroversion.<sup>13</sup> Although the relatively small number of years under investigation suggests some caution should be taken with the contextual results, the above analyses all paint a similar picture: the more the public is reminded of the costs of outward-looking foreign policies, the more it wants to turn inwards.

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<sup>12</sup> The analyses in Table 2 use unemployment as an economic control variable, but the results are robust to whether inflation or consumer sentiment is used instead. See §8 of the online appendix for details.

<sup>13</sup> Supplementary analyses in §7 of the online appendix operationalize the international security environment differently by focusing on the subset of international conflicts and crises salient enough to be classified as “rally events” (Newman and Forcehimes, 2010).

Table 2: Multi-level determinants of foreign policy mood, 1980-2008 (II)

	Security context			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Intercept	-1.691*** (0.392)	-1.783*** (0.473)	-1.593*** (0.251)	-1.583*** (0.339)
Retro. Sociotropic	-0.129*** (0.032)	-0.128*** (0.033)	-0.130*** (0.032)	-0.127*** (0.032)
Pro. Sociotropic	-0.006 (0.032)	-0.006 (0.032)	(0.007) (0.032)	-0.005 (0.031)
State Efficacy	0.157*** (0.025)	0.157*** (0.025)	0.157*** (0.025)	0.160*** (0.027)
Personal Efficacy	0.467*** (0.063)	0.466*** (0.063)	0.470*** (0.065)	0.471*** (0.062)
Party ID	0.025 (0.009)	0.025 (0.009)	0.025 (0.009)	0.025 (0.009)
Ideology	0.013 (0.017)	0.013 (0.017)	0.013 (0.017)	0.014 (0.017)
Age	-0.012 (0.012)	-0.012 (0.012)	(0.012) (0.012)	-0.012 (0.012)
Male	0.069 (0.038)	0.069 (0.038)	0.069 (0.038)	0.071 (0.038)
Income	0.101*** (0.019)	0.101*** (0.019)	0.101*** (0.020)	0.100*** (0.019)
Education	0.168*** (0.015)	0.168*** (0.015)	0.169*** (0.015)	0.169*** (0.015)
Knowledge	0.346*** (0.104)	0.366** (0.127)	0.190*** (0.042)	0.319*** (0.08)
Economy Salient	0.022 (0.042)	0.022 (0.042)	0.020 (0.042)	0.018 (0.045)
Inpartisan	0.140*** (0.038)	0.139*** (0.038)	0.139*** (0.038)	0.139*** (0.038)
<i>Macro-level</i>				
MIDS	0.010 (0.020)			
Hostility levels		0.006 (0.008)		
Casualties			0.004 (0.043)	
Failures to win				0.004 (0.020)
MIDS x Knowledge	-0.009 (0.007)			
Hostility x Knowledge		-0.003 (0.003)		
Casualties x Knowledge			0.017 (0.016)	
Failures x Knowledge				-0.009 (0.007)
Unemployment	0.023 (0.039)	0.024 (0.041)	0.030 (0.036)	0.017 (0.039)
<i>Random effects</i>				
Intercept	(0.103)	(0.09)	(0.073)	(0.105)
Personal Efficacy	(0.176)	(0.175)	(0.183)	(0.167)
$\sigma^2$	0.995	0.995	0.995	0.995
$\rho$	0.013 <sup>18</sup>	0.012	0.007	0.015
N	22078	22078	22078	22078
Years	12	12	12	12

Micro-level: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  Macro-level: † $p < 0.10$

## Conclusion

Political scientists have long been interested in what drives the American public's foreign policy mood, but have usually gone about addressing only half of the question at a time, either focusing on the individual-level factors that make certain members of the public more likely to advocate isolationist views, or using aggregate time series data to look at the contextual-level factors that make isolationism more popular during certain periods. Yet given that foreign policy mood is inherently a multilevel phenomenon, we need to look at how both micro- and macro-level factors interact in structuring foreign policy preferences. In this respect, the study has methodological ramifications beyond the foreign policy realm: political scientists are by now familiar with many of the advantages of multilevel modeling, but have used them almost exclusively to deal with the effects of space rather than those of time. Public opinion scholars can gain additional traction by integrating both micro- and macro-opinion into one larger analytic framework, not just controlling for temporal heterogeneity, but modeling it theoretically to show how the two levels interact.

Substantively, the analyses presented above counter Almond and Kennan's premise of a sharp divide between domestic and foreign policy issues, suggesting that foreign policy mood is also shaped by the economic assessments that figure so prominently in domestic politics: the more negative the economic evaluations, the less supportive Americans are of pursuing an extroverted foreign policy. That said, the domestic realm's impact on public opinion differs from that of its international counterpart in one key respect: as Rosenau argued in the 1960s, what sets foreign policy issues apart is the extent to which they are removed from daily life. Thus, although I find that both contextual economic and security factors matter, they do so in very different ways: economic conditions like unemployment, inflation and consumer confidence are salient and accessible to everyone, and as such, are less likely to depend on political sophistication in order to affect foreign policy preferences. Most interstate disputes, on the other hand, are less prominent, and predominantly affect the foreign policy preferences of higher knowledge individuals.

In light of the Almond-Lippmann consensus and the pessimism that continues to pervade the literature on public opinion and foreign policy, the implications here for policy-makers are interesting. First, domestic economic considerations exert a stronger impact on foreign policy mood than does the dynamics of the international security environment, to which — in most cases — only the most knowledgeable seem to respond. Second, knowledge is a double-edged sword. After decades of having been taught the dangers of isolationism (Parmar, 1999), the educated and knowledgeable public is far more likely to be supportive of an outward-looking foreign policy, but they are also more likely to be aware of negative developments on the world stage, and thus more likely to turn inwards in response. The interesting exception to the public's general indifference

towards international affairs concerns failures to win, which affect even the low-knowledge group. The results presented here thus extend [Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler's \(2009\)](#) findings of the public as “defeat phobic” to include not just defeats in battle, but also failures to prevail in disputes that fall short of all-out war. Third, the public’s reactions do not reveal a sterling realist temperament: if the US has a compelling interest in an outward-looking foreign policy, presumably this interest should remain invariant to domestic economic considerations. The results presented above portray an image of a public that, once the “rally around the flag effect” subsides, responds to conflict by disengaging rather than standing firm, decreasing its support for outward-looking foreign policies when outcomes occur that reinforce their cost.

Finally, the foreign policy establishment has routinely expressed concern about the specter of isolationism reemerging amongst the American people. The above analyses suggest that much of this pessimism is unwarranted: most of the variation in foreign policy mood occurs within time periods rather than between them, suggesting that policymakers should be more concerned about polarization than “mood swings” across time. Indeed, the popularity of outward-looking foreign policies is noteworthy, given the number of transformative moments in US foreign policy that took place in the study’s time-frame: the fall of *détente* and renewal of tensions during the Reagan administration, the end of the Cold War and emergence of a new multilateral security environment in the 1990s, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and so on. Although the last wave of the study was conducted before the rise of the Tea Party sparked concerns about the return of isolationism, the persistent popularity of outward-looking foreign policies — at minimum, individuals advocating extroverted foreign policies outnumber their introverted peers by a ratio of two to one — suggests that at least up until late 2008, a fairly large and supportive base existed for American involvement on the international stage, in line with arguments that American exceptionalism is alive and well. Policymakers may have to work to sell specific missions or interventions to a skeptical public, and deep divisions may exist on issues like multilateralism, but the Jeffersonian sentiments that characterized much of early American foreign policy discourse seem to have fallen by the wayside. Colin Gray’s assessment that “America’s style encompasses oscillations between extremes, and both extremes are quintessentially American” ([Gray, 1981](#), 44) may be true when it comes to how the country conducts its foreign policy, but does not describe the public’s foreign policy mood over the past three decades, as the demand for internationalism largely continues to hold.

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