

Ratings of US Foreign Policy Rise Sharply In Nearly Every Area

Apparently Due to “Rally Effect”

Dealings With UN Only Area to Go Down

In the March 22-25 PIPA-Knowledge Networks poll, the public’s ratings of US foreign policy rose sharply in nearly every area. Given that these surges appeared in a wide range of areas—most of which have not had any new significant developments—it appears that they are likely part of the “rally” effect that often accompanies new military action, in which the public tends to suppress its criticism of US leaders and policies. This effect has also been mirrored in the jump in the President’s approval rating found in other polls.

In response to the question of “how the US government is dealing with the following international problems and issues,” net ratings (the percentage giving a positive rating minus the percentage giving a negative rating) showed a turnaround from substantial declines in ratings over the previous two months.

Not surprisingly “The situation with Iraq” is now given a net rating of +48, up from +13 in February, after declining from +27 in November 2002.

Some of the other dramatic movements are also arguably related to Iraq war:

- “The spread of nuclear weapons” rose to +21 from +9 in February, after declining from +17 in November 2002.
- “Promoting and defending human rights in other countries” is now rated +28, up from a -2 rating in February, after descending from +7 in November 2002.
- “Homeland security from terrorism” received a net rating of +50, up from +32 in February.
- “International terrorism” rose to +42 from +25.

The sole area in which ratings went down was for “making the UN more effective”—also presumably related to the Iraq war inasmuch as the US proceeded with taking action despite its failure to get approval from the UN Security Council. For this category the net rating was -9, down from -5 in February.

The overall ratings suggest, however, that the large increases in positive assessments on most issues could be driven as much by suppression of criticism as by change in attitudes. Dramatic rises in areas that have not had any new major developments over the last month and are unrelated to international security concerns suggest an across-the-board reluctance to criticize rather than a response to new information or policy developments. These include for example international trade (+28 from +18), international drug trafficking (+7 from -15), the world AIDS epidemic (+18 from -6), world hunger (+19 from 0) and global warming (-3 from -21).

Interestingly, the public continued to rate negatively “the situation with North Korea,” which rose only modestly to -2 from -9 . This new rating is about the same as those given in November and January.

Moreover, while the public has reacted to the onset of hostilities by expressing more support of US foreign policy, perceptions of the views of US policy in other countries remain consistently negative. Asked about how people in “the rest of the world, on average” would rate how well the US is managing its foreign policy, net ratings were -26 in March, up slightly from -31 in February. A majority of 52% assumes a negative rating. When asked to assess how the publics of “European allies” would rate US foreign policy, the net perception was -21 , statistically unchanged from -20 in February.

Perhaps due to this continuing perception of negative ratings in Europe, Americans’ ratings of US policy in relationship to European allies resisted the general upward movement—staying at a net rating of $+21\%$, unchanged from February after having dropped from $+46\%$ in November.