

# War on Terrorism: Public Opinion & Attitudes

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## Introduction: Defining the Scope and Context

The study of attitudes toward the **War on Terrorism (WoT)** constitutes a crucial area within political psychology and social science, reflecting complex interactions between perceived threat, national identity, political socialization, and moral reasoning. Following the events of September 11, 2001, the concept of the WoT became a central organizing principle for global foreign policy and domestic security measures, necessitating a deep examination of public support or opposition. Attitudes are not monolithic; they vary dramatically based on the specific policy instruments employed--such as military intervention, surveillance programs, or economic sanctions--and are subject to rapid shifts dictated by current events and governmental rhetoric. Understanding these attitudes requires moving beyond simple approval ratings to dissect the underlying psychological mechanisms that drive individuals to either endorse aggressive counter-terrorism measures or advocate for diplomatic and structural solutions.

Attitudinal research in this domain often focuses on several key theoretical constructs, including risk perception and the perceived efficacy of military action. High levels of perceived personal or national threat generally correlate strongly with increased support for proactive, often aggressive, counter-terrorism policies, driven by a fundamental psychological need for security and closure. Conversely, opposition often stems from concerns related to civil liberties erosion, the moral costs of conflict, or skepticism regarding the long-term effectiveness of military solutions in addressing the root causes of extremism. This psychological landscape is further complicated by the inherent asymmetry of the conflict, where traditional metrics of success or failure are often elusive, leading to sustained public anxiety and fluctuating levels of trust in government institutions tasked with prosecuting the war. Furthermore, the framing of the WoT as a necessary defense of Western values against an existential threat significantly mobilizes emotional resources, reinforcing supportive attitudes among populations.

Crucially, attitudes toward the WoT must be analyzed within their specific geopolitical and temporal context. Early attitudes, immediately following the initial attacks, were characterized by high levels of national unity, collective grief, and a strong punitive drive, often referred to as the "**rally 'round the flag**" effect. During this initial phase, critical scrutiny of governmental action was largely suspended in favor of collective security. Over time, however, as the conflict broadened and prolonged itself--encompassing invasions, targeted drone warfare, and domestic security legislation like the PATRIOT Act--public consensus fractured. The initial, unified attitude structure evolved into a multifaceted spectrum of opinions influenced by policy outcomes, economic costs, and mounting evidence regarding the consequences for civilian populations in conflict zones. Therefore, any comprehensive psychological analysis must account for this historical evolution and the differential impact of various phases of the ongoing conflict, recognizing that sustained support requires ongoing justification beyond the initial shock.

## Psychological Dimensions of Support and Opposition

Support for the War on Terrorism is heavily underpinned by mechanisms described in **Terror Management Theory (TMT)**, which posits that reminding individuals of their own mortality leads to a heightened defense of their cultural worldview and increased hostility toward out-groups. In the context of the WoT, salient reminders of terrorist threats, whether through media coverage or official warnings, can trigger mortality salience, thereby boosting support for political leaders and policies perceived as protecting the established social order. This psychological defense mechanism translates directly into greater endorsement of aggressive military responses and less tolerance for dissent, as these actions reinforce the stability and perceived superiority of the in-group's value system against existential threats. The need to maintain symbolic immortality through cultural institutions makes individuals particularly vulnerable to rhetoric that frames the conflict as a defense of core national identity.

Furthermore, the **System Justification Theory (SJT)** provides significant insight into why individuals, even those potentially disadvantaged by certain policies enacted under the WoT banner, may still support the overarching framework. SJT suggests a general tendency to defend and bolster the status quo, especially during times of crisis, because maintaining faith in the legitimacy of political and social institutions provides psychological comfort and reduces uncertainty. When the nation is framed as being under attack, the perceived need to maintain systemic stability often overrides potential ideological opposition, leading to the acceptance of policies--such as expanded surveillance or restrictions on civil liberties--that might otherwise be viewed as problematic. This justification is frequently mediated by strong feelings of patriotism and the internalization of official narratives emphasizing necessary sacrifice for collective security, even when such sacrifice disproportionately affects certain demographic groups.

Conversely, opposition to the WoT frequently involves elevated levels of **moral universalism** and skepticism regarding the effectiveness of violence as a primary tool of foreign policy. Individuals opposing the war often display stronger affective empathy toward foreign populations affected by military action and prioritize adherence to international law and human rights over nationalistic security imperatives. This psychological profile is often associated with higher cognitive complexity, allowing individuals to process ambiguous information and resist simplistic, good-versus-evil narratives prevalent in war rhetoric. The decision to oppose military action, therefore, is often a result of a complex moral calculation where the perceived harm inflicted by the counter-terrorism measures--including unintended civilian casualties and destabilization--outweighs the perceived benefit of enhanced domestic security, leading to a strong preference for diplomatic and economic engagement.

## The Role of Political Ideology and Partisanship

Political ideology serves as one of the most robust predictors of attitudes toward the War on Terrorism, creating deep divisions in public opinion regarding policy efficacy and moral legitimacy. Generally, individuals identifying as politically **conservative** tend to exhibit significantly higher levels of support for aggressive military action, increased defense spending, and expansive domestic security measures. This inclination is often rooted in core conservative values emphasizing tradition, order, and the perceived necessity of strong external defenses against perceived threats. Conservatism is frequently correlated with higher levels of Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), psychological traits that predispose individuals to adhere strictly to established authorities and accept hierarchical structures, making them highly receptive to governmental calls for unified action against external enemies and resistant to narratives questioning official justifications for conflict.

In contrast, **liberal** ideologies are typically associated with greater skepticism toward the use of military force, heightened concern for civil liberties, and a preference for multilateral, diplomatic approaches to conflict resolution. Liberals often prioritize understanding the contextual and socioeconomic factors that contribute to terrorism, advocating for solutions that address root causes rather than relying solely on punitive military measures. This ideological divergence is amplified by partisan alignment, where attitudes become strongly correlated with the stances taken by preferred political leaders and parties. In highly polarized political environments, attitudes toward specific policies, such as the use of drone strikes, the detention of suspects, or the allocation of foreign aid, often function less as genuine assessments of efficacy and more as markers of party loyalty, creating a significant barrier to bipartisan agreement on security strategy.

The concept of **partisan motivated reasoning** further explains the entrenchment of these divergent attitudes. Citizens often selectively seek out and interpret information in ways that reinforce their existing political beliefs and party identification, leading to divergent realities regarding the success and moral standing of the WoT. For instance, supporters of a specific administration prosecuting the war are more likely to accept official success narratives and dismiss reports of negative outcomes or casualties, whereas opponents are more likely to focus exclusively on failures and moral compromises, viewing the conflict through a lens of systemic critique. This process of motivated reasoning makes cross-ideological consensus exceedingly difficult to achieve and ensures that attitudes toward the WoT remain deeply polarized, long after the initial crisis has subsided, often transforming complex foreign policy issues into domestic political footballs.

## Impact of Media Framing and Propaganda

The media plays a pivotal, often controlling, role in shaping attitudes toward the War on Terrorism through the strategic deployment of **framing effects**. Media outlets, particularly in the immediate

aftermath of major attacks, often adopt frames that emphasize threat, victimhood, and the necessity of immediate, forceful retaliation, effectively mobilizing public support for aggressive governmental responses. The "war" metaphor itself is a powerful cognitive frame, activating schema related to urgency, sacrifice, and the suspension of normal rules, thereby reducing critical scrutiny of policy decisions. When terrorism is framed as an existential military conflict requiring immediate victory, public opinion tends to coalesce around supportive attitudes; conversely, framing it as a complex criminal, political, or socioeconomic issue tends to foster more nuanced, critical opinions that demand accountability and diplomatic solutions.

Furthermore, government and media narratives frequently utilize **propaganda techniques** to manage public perception and sustain support over extended periods, particularly when the conflict lacks clear milestones. These techniques often involve the consistent portrayal of the enemy as fundamentally irrational, evil, and non-negotiable--a process of dehumanization that psychologically facilitates support for aggressive action by reducing moral inhibition. The strategic release or suppression of information concerning casualties, financial costs, and policy failures also serves to maintain favorable attitudes. When the human and financial costs of the conflict are consistently downplayed or obscured, often through the use of sanitized language like "collateral damage," the public's willingness to endorse the continuation of the war remains higher, demonstrating the fragility of supportive attitudes when exposed to comprehensive, unfiltered information regarding consequences.

The rise of digital media and the fragmentation of traditional news sources have introduced new complexities to attitudinal formation. While cable news and mainstream print media historically exerted broad, shared influence, the proliferation of partisan online news sources and social media echo chambers means that individuals are increasingly exposed only to frames that validate their pre-existing ideological stance. This phenomenon contributes to the **reinforcement effect**, where supportive attitudes are continually bolstered by curated content that confirms the necessity of the WoT, while critical attitudes are similarly strengthened by counter-narratives emphasizing policy failure and moral overreach. This segmented information environment makes the formation of a unified national attitude highly improbable and ensures that media consumption patterns are themselves strong predictors of individual attitudes toward counter-terrorism policies, often leading to stark differences in perceived reality among the populace.

## Emotional Responses and Cognitive Biases

Emotional responses, particularly **fear and anger**, are paramount determinants of attitudes toward the War on Terrorism, often overriding rational deliberation. Fear of future attacks drives individuals toward extreme risk aversion regarding security, leading them to endorse policies that promise maximum protection, often irrespective of the associated costs to civil liberties or international relations. Anger, typically directed toward the perceived perpetrators of terrorism and their

supporting entities, fuels a desire for retribution and punitive justice, strongly correlating with support for aggressive military retaliation. These intense negative emotions tend to suppress deliberative cognitive processing, resulting in a reliance on heuristic shortcuts and simplistic policy evaluations, making complex diplomatic solutions appear weak or inadequate.

Several cognitive biases significantly shape the public's assessment of the WoT's necessity and effectiveness. The **availability heuristic**, for instance, leads individuals to drastically overestimate the likelihood of terrorist attacks because dramatic, high-profile events are highly memorable, emotionally charged, and widely publicized by the media. This overestimation of risk sustains the sense of crisis and legitimizes the continuation of extensive, often costly, security measures long after the immediate threat has subsided. Similarly, **confirmation bias** ensures that individuals preferentially seek out and interpret evidence that confirms their existing belief structure--whether that belief is that the war is necessary and successful, or that it is misguided and destructive--thereby creating resilience against contradictory evidence and policy critique.

The concept of **loss aversion** and the sunk cost fallacy also play critical roles in sustaining support for prolonged conflicts. Once significant resources, including national treasure, military lives, and political capital, have been invested in the WoT, the psychological pain of admitting failure or withdrawing prematurely often outweighs the perceived future cost of continuing the effort. This sunk cost effect compels policymakers and the public alike to maintain supportive attitudes, rationalizing past expenditures by insisting that the mission must be completed to honor prior sacrifices. This bias is powerfully reinforced by political rhetoric that frames withdrawal as dishonorable or as "losing" to the enemy, thereby tapping into deep-seated nationalistic pride and fear of reputational damage, making exit strategies politically and psychologically difficult to execute.

## Demographic and Sociocultural Predictors of Attitudes

Demographic variables provide consistent, though not absolute, predictive power regarding attitudes toward the WoT, reflecting differing life experiences and socialization patterns. **Age** is a significant factor, with older generations often exhibiting higher levels of support for military intervention and traditional security measures, potentially reflecting a greater reliance on established, hierarchical authority structures and different historical memories concerning national conflict. Younger generations, having come of age during the prolonged period of conflict and exposed to greater complexity and critique in digital media, often display more critical and nuanced attitudes, coupled with greater skepticism toward government narratives and foreign policy interventions, prioritizing multilateralism over unilateral force.

**Educational attainment** typically correlates inversely with unwavering, unconditional support for aggressive counter-terrorism measures. Higher levels of education are often associated with

increased capacity for critical thinking, greater exposure to diverse viewpoints, and a deeper understanding of historical conflict precedents, leading to more complex, cost-benefit evaluations of the WoT. Individuals with advanced degrees are generally more likely to oppose policies that infringe upon civil liberties or those perceived as violating international norms, favoring instead diplomatic engagement, development aid, and structural reform. Conversely, lower education levels are sometimes correlated with greater reliance on easily digestible, emotionally appealing, nationalistic narratives provided by mainstream political figures, simplifying the complex conflict into a clear good-versus-evil struggle.

Sociocultural factors, including **religion and geographic location**, also influence attitudes profoundly. In countries directly involved in prosecuting the WoT, those who identify strongly with a specific religious tradition often show higher levels of support, particularly when the conflict is framed in moral or religious terms, providing a sacred justification for military action. Furthermore, proximity to major centers of power or historical targets of attack can heighten perceived threat levels, leading residents of those regions to endorse stricter security measures more readily than those in more geographically isolated areas. These localized differences highlight how the perceived immediacy of the threat fundamentally shapes psychological preparedness and attitudinal alignment, reinforcing the idea that attitudes are deeply rooted in personal and communal experiences of vulnerability.

## Long-Term Shifts and Policy Implications

Over the two decades following its inception, public attitudes toward the War on Terrorism have undergone substantial long-term shifts, moving from initial widespread endorsement to increasing ambivalence, skepticism, and fatigue. The initial high levels of trust in government and military leadership have eroded significantly, driven by policy failures, prolonged engagements without clear victory, and revelations concerning controversial practices such as torture or mass surveillance. This decline in institutional trust has broadened the base of opposition, moving it beyond traditional liberal and academic circles into mainstream political discourse, demanding greater accountability for counter-terrorism expenditures and actions and questioning the sustainability of permanent war footing.

The implications of these shifting attitudes for future policy are profound. As the public becomes less tolerant of open-ended, costly military engagements, policymakers are increasingly pressured to adopt strategies that minimize visible risk and maximize perceived efficiency, often favoring technologies like drone warfare, cyber operations, or specialized clandestine operations over large-scale troop deployments. However, this shift presents a unique psychological challenge: while minimizing domestic casualties maintains public support, the resulting detachment from the human cost of conflict can lead to a moral hazard, where the threshold for intervention is lowered due to the perceived ease of execution and the lack of visible public sacrifice.

Ultimately, the psychological study of attitudes toward the WoT suggests that sustained public support hinges on three critical factors: the maintenance of perceived threat salience, the consistent articulation of a clear and achievable goal, and high levels of trust in the institutions responsible for execution. As the nature of global conflict evolves, understanding these attitudinal drivers remains essential for democratic accountability. Policy must continually navigate the tension between the public's inherent psychological need for security and the ethical demands of maintaining civil liberties and international moral standards, a dynamic tension that will continue to define the psychological landscape of security policy for decades to come, demanding sophisticated communication strategies to manage public expectations and anxiety.

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