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WSJ/NBC Poll: Americans Want Less Interventionist Foreign Policy

By John Glaser

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This morning's *Wall Street Journal* has the following headline on the front page: "Americans Want to Pull Back From World Stage, Poll Finds ^[1]."

Americans in large numbers want the U.S. to reduce its role in world affairs even as a showdown with Russia over Ukraine preoccupies Washington, a Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll finds.

In a marked change from past decades, nearly half of those surveyed want the U.S. to be less active on the global stage, with fewer than one-fifth calling for more active engagement—an anti-interventionist current that sweeps across party lines.

...The poll findings, combined with the results of prior Journal/NBC surveys this year, portray a public weary of foreign entanglements and disenchanted with a U.S. economic system that many believe is stacked against them. The 47% of respondents who called for a less-active role in world affairs marked a larger share than in similar polling in 2001, 1997 and 1995.

You can tell from the way the reporter frames the poll's findings that she's unhappy about what she calls "anti-interventionist" sentiment. She is shocked such sentiments can be so popular even as (in her words) Russia defies U.S.-EU sanctions and Ukraine continues to unravel.

But she must have missed the YouGov poll ^[2] conducted last month finding that only 14 percent of Americans said the U.S. has “any responsibility” to get involved in Ukraine, and only 18 percent think the U.S. “has any responsibility to protect Ukraine if Russia were to invade.”

“Americans are more likely than not to say that the United States has no responsibility to get involved in Ukraine even under extreme circumstances, the new survey shows,” the Huffington Post reports ^[3]. “Pluralities of Democrats, Republicans and independents agreed that the U.S. does not have a responsibility to protect Ukraine.”

The Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll is consistent as well with the Pew poll from back in December ^[4] that found a majority of Americans – more than ever before in Pew’s 50-year history of polling this question – think the U.S. “should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along as best they can on their own.”

It will be interesting to see how these popular sentiments shape the upcoming 2016 presidential elections. One thing we can expect is a lot of vitriol for these kinds of opinions by Republican and Democratic standard-bearers. Typically, pro-war sentiments are taken to be very serious, while non-interventionist sentiments are condemned as either dangerously isolationist or naive.

It’s worth noting though that the poll numbers themselves have disproven the isolationist charge: most Americans (77%) think increased trade and business ties with the rest of the world is a good thing, while only 18% think its negative. So, quite explicitly, Americans *don’t* like greater involvement in the world by the U.S. government and they *do* like greater economic involvement in general.