

US Public Opinion: How “Obamacare” Matters for the Interim Deal

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A careful examination of the polling data on American public opinion regarding the interim deal on Iran’s nuclear program reveals a counterintuitive yet telling dynamic about the wider foreign policy debate in the United States. When all relevant factors are taken into account, it appears that the single best predictor of how the average American feels about the Iran deal is not his or her educational level, age, gender, income, religion, or even party identification. Rather, it is what the respondent thinks about “Obamacare” (a.k.a. the Affordable Care Act, President Obama’s signature health insurance reform).¹ Indeed, how one feels about Obamacare is even more strongly correlated with feelings about the interim deal than whether that same person is a foreign policy hawk or dove, or how knowledgeable he or she is about the Iran negotiations.

The following essay surveys and attempts to explain this surprising dynamic. It offers a demographic breakdown of public opinion toward the interim deal and concludes with a brief assessment of implications for Israeli policymakers.

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Connecting the Dots: The Interim Deal and President Obama's Approval Rating

Weeks after the signing of the deal with Iran, the Pew Research Center conducted a poll to gauge reactions in US public opinion toward the interim deal.² Overall, the poll found that 43 percent of Americans disapproved of the agreement, 32 percent approved, and 26 percent said they did not know or had no opinion.³ Some 62 percent of respondents said Iran's leaders were "not serious" about addressing the nuclear concerns of the international community, with only 29 percent viewing them as "serious."⁴ Views on Iranian leaders' intentions had changed little from those given in response to a similar question one month earlier.

This snapshot of public opinion is important in itself, demonstrating an initial wariness toward the interim deal. Does that skepticism, if not disapproval, reflect a broader foreign policy outlook? In Israel and across the region, policymakers must also wonder to what degree attitudes regarding the interim deal signal broader trends in attitudes toward foreign policy and the Middle East. Specifically, is there a connection between a respondent's opinion of the interim deal and that respondent's identity as "hawkish" or "dovish" on foreign policy?

The Pew polling results in fact suggest a connection between the agreement and the wider debate (figure 1). As would be expected, respondents who answer that military force is better than diplomacy at ensuring peace are far less likely to support the agreement. Controlling for a host of other factors,⁵ these "hawks" opposed the agreement by 51 to 30 percent. A plurality of "doves" (i.e., those who hold that diplomacy is better than military force) supported the agreement, but notably only by a thin margin (41 percent to 38 percent).

Yet the poll results reveal that respondents' stances are more strongly affected by a different factor: one's opinion of President Obama (figure 2). Controlling for other factors, those with favorable opinions of Obama were far more likely to support the agreement than those with unfavorable opinions. Those who strongly approve of Obama's performance supported the interim deal by a margin of 52 to 28 percent. Obama's fiercest critics – those who strongly disapprove of his performance – were similarly opposed to the agreement (59 to 21 percent).

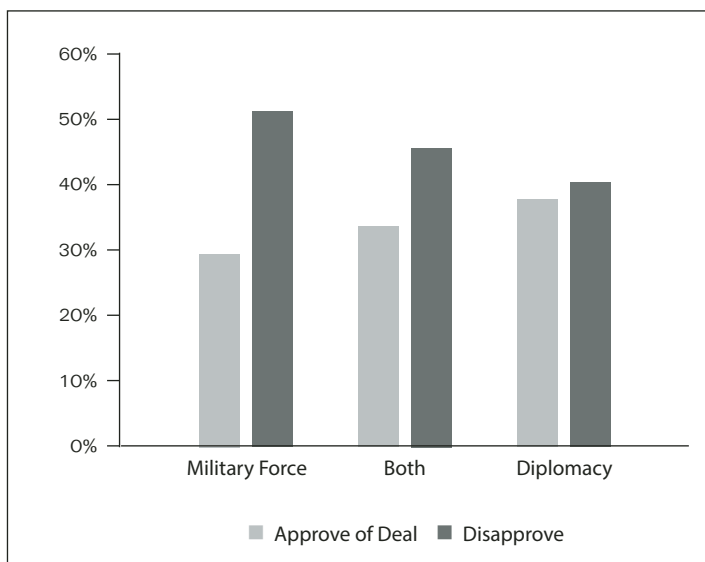


Figure 1. “Hawks” vs. “Doves” and Support for the Interim Deal (controlling for other factors)

Source: Authors’ analysis of data provided by the PEW Research Center

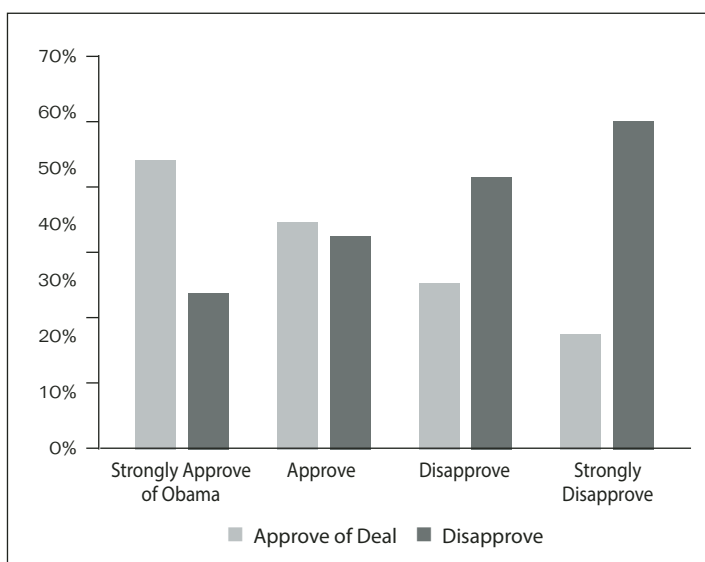


Figure 2. Approval of Obama’s Performance and Support for the Interim Deal (controlling for other factors)

Source: Authors’ analysis of data provided by the PEW Research Center

What is so striking is the degree to which foreign policy is connected to the President's approval rating. For instance, while party identification still matters – i.e., those who identify as supporting the Democratic Party were far more supportive of the interim deal than were Republicans – we find here that opinions about Obama matter more. In fact, we find opinions about Obama have about twice the impact of party identification (on average, 44 vs. 22 percent).⁶

Enter Obamacare: on its policy merits, support for the Affordable Care Act should lack any connection with the interim or a final agreement on Iran's nuclear program. Yet an American's opinion of that law is strongly correlated with his or her views on the interim deal. Even when controlling for other factors, supporters of Obamacare were more than twice as likely to support the agreement with Iran (50 percent supported the Iran deal vs. 23 percent against), while Obamacare's critics were more than twice as likely to oppose it (55 percent for the Iran deal vs. 21 percent against).⁷ Amazingly, this correlation is stronger than that of almost any of the many other factors tested – even stronger than that of the respondent's basic foreign policy attitudes (hawk or dove), which logic suggests would be far more closely related.

We find that opinions about Obamacare are such impressive predictors of opinions on Iran because, to a very large degree, Obamacare is a proxy for what the average American thinks of Obama.⁸ Consequently, those who like Obama support his policies while those who dislike him oppose his policies, even when taking party affiliation into account. Tracing the correlation between opinion on the interim deal and Obamacare is important and underscores just how much that personal approval factor affects the level of the interim deal's public support.

Although counterintuitive, this finding is consistent with broad academic literature on public opinion.⁹ On complex or unfamiliar policy questions, the American public (and publics worldwide as well) tends to rely on a heuristic method in the form of an intellectual shortcut for forming an opinion. Familiarity with the nuances of the Iran agreement, or even Obamacare, requires an investment of time and resources. Much of the public, however, has little incentive to make that investment. Instead, these respondents take their cue on many issues by looking at opinion leaders about whom they do have an opinion. In this case, it is President Obama.

On Being Older and Wiser: Age, Knowledge, and the Interim Deal

Several other factors play an important role in affecting American public opinion regarding the interim deal. In particular, knowledge plays a crucial role in determining a respondent's attitude toward the interim deal and Iran.

While Pew found that a plurality of respondents disapproved of the interim deal – and this holds true regardless of how much a respondent says he or she knows about the negotiations – a closer analysis of the data reveals a different picture. Controlling for other factors, the more a respondent knows about the negotiations, the more likely the respondent is to approve of the deal.¹⁰ In fact, very knowledgeable Democrats are almost four times more likely to approve of the agreement than Democrats who say they know nothing (64 vs. 17 percent). For Republicans, the highly informed are nearly five times more likely to support the agreement than those who know nothing (28 vs. 6 percent).¹¹

This is why generational affiliation matters. Younger respondents tend to know less about the negotiations. Among both Millennials and Generation X'ers, 32 percent report knowing “nothing at all” about the negotiations with Iran, compared to only 18 percent of Baby Boomers and 9 percent among the Silent Generation (figure 3).¹²

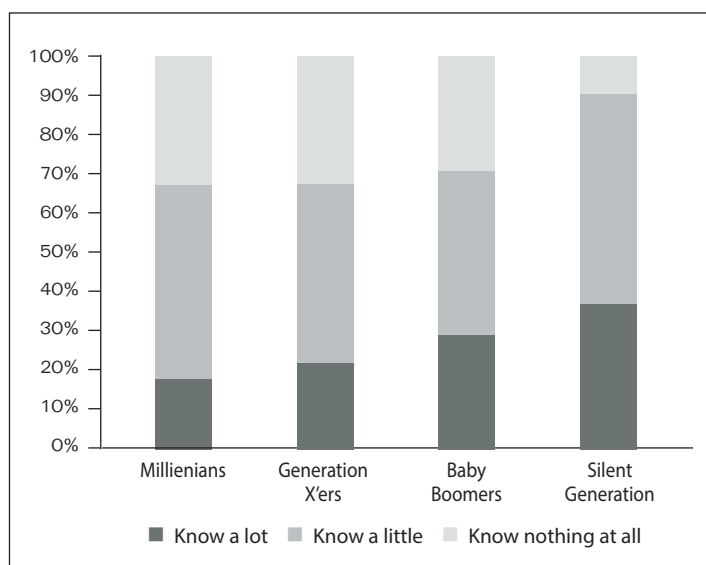


Figure 3. Knowledge about Negotiations with Iran, by Generation

Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the PEW Research Center

At the same time, Pew found that Millennials and Generation X'ers are not significantly less likely to approve of the deal than are older generations. Yet if knowledge of the interim deal makes a person more likely to approve of it, why are members of the younger generation not more strongly opposed? One reason is that Millennials are far more dovish than older cohorts. Nearly 70 percent of Millennials believe that diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace, ten points higher than Generation X'ers and nearly 20 points higher than that for the Silent Generation. Second, both Millennials and members of Generation X are also more supportive of Obama than other generations, even if their support may be lessening over time.

In addition, Millennials are more likely to believe Iran is serious in its willingness to negotiate, as compared to their older counterparts. Thirty-four percent of this group believe the Iranians are "serious about addressing international concerns about their country's nuclear enrichment program."¹³ Only 29 percent of Baby Boomers and 25 percent of the Silent Generation, on the other hand, perceive Iran as serious. It may be that their opposition to using force prompts Millennials to want to believe that Iran is serious, although in fact this may be a case of wishful thinking.

And What About Israel?

Although overall the Pew poll indicates that Americans oppose the interim deal with Iran, some nuances should be kept in mind. First, opinion on the interim deal is linked to opinion of President Obama. Second, although most oppose the agreement, knowledge makes people more likely to approve of the deal. Lastly, younger generations (and Millennials in particular), are more dovish than their elders and more likely to believe Iran is serious about negotiating.

So what does this mean for Israel? Since the negotiations started in 2013, the government of Israel has made an effort to influence US public opinion, repeatedly arguing that the interim deal is a bad deal. The findings put forward by this article suggest that an Israeli public campaign against the agreement may, at a minimum, be ineffective, and perhaps could even be counterproductive. The reason for this skepticism is that US public opinion on this issue is so heavily influenced by the opinion of President Obama. Americans have formed their opinions of the interim deal based largely on the heuristic of attitudes toward Obama, not only through forming foreign policy worldviews and applying them to the Iran case. Israeli public diplomacy

efforts designed to operate on foreign policy predilections therefore seem to have limited utility.

Moreover, given that knowledge about the negotiations is linked to higher levels of support for the interim deal, educating the public might even lead to greater support for the deal. This correlation between more knowledge and more support for the agreement applies both to Democrats (who presumably get information from liberal-leaning sources) and Republicans (who presumably get information from conservative-leaning ones). For that reason, it appears that the link between knowledge and attitudes is independent of the type of information received. This will be critical for Israeli decision makers to keep in mind should the interim deal be extended further or should a final agreement be reached, as Israeli investment in US public diplomacy might yield only limited returns.

Notes

- 1 Referred to here is the impact, i.e., “economic significance,” not the level of statistical significance. While extremely high ($p < 0.0001$), it is slightly less statistically significant than party affiliation.
- 2 Several polls were taken on this question of public support for the interim deal. Although the overall Pew results were slightly different from other polls, we believe that the question asked was the least leading, was the least likely to suffer from “framing effects,” and provided the most additional data to help our analysis. We wish to thank the Pew Center for graciously providing us with a copy of the full dataset. Unless otherwise noted, all results reported are from our regressions (run as multinomial logit). Full regression tables are available from the authors upon request.
- 3 Pew Research Center, “Limited Support for Iran Nuclear Agreement: Iran’s Leaders Seen as ‘Not Serious’ in Addressing Nuclear Concerns,” December 9, 2013, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/09/limited-support-for-iran-nuclear-agreement/>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 All regression results reported here included respondents’ level of support for Obama, party affiliation, level of knowledge about the negotiations with Iran, whether one is a “hawk” or “dove,” respondents’ gender, income, religious affiliation, generational affiliation, and educational attainment.
- 6 We also find that support for Obama is about twice as statistically significant as is party identification.
- 7 Due to collinearity, we dropped support for Obama from regressions where we include opinions on Obamacare.
- 8 In separate regressions we ran on respondents’ feelings regarding Obamacare, we found that what one thought about President Obama’s performance in office is the most substantial and significant predictive factor.

- 9 Two of the most seminal works in this regard are Samuel Popkin's *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), and Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 10 Here we controlled for party affiliation, support of Obama, hawkishness, generational affiliation, education, gender, and income.
- 11 For Republicans, the gap is actually between those who know "nothing" and "a little/some" about the negotiations. Between those Republicans who report knowing "a little/some" or "a lot" there is no significant difference regarding their stance on the agreement.
- 12 These are commonly used demographic terms to delineate generational affiliation. "Millennials" were born between 1980-2000, Generation X'ers between 1965-79, "Baby Boomers" were born in the period after World War II (1946-64), and the "Silent Generation" was born between 1925-45.
- 13 The question looked only to respondents who declared that they know "a lot" or "a little" about the negotiations. When holding all for other variables, the percent of people who believe Iran is not serious stayed constant with age (62-63 percent).