

# The U.S. Role in the World—A Report on Student Views

January 2005 • Choices Education Program • Watson Institute for International Studies • Brown University • www.choices.edu

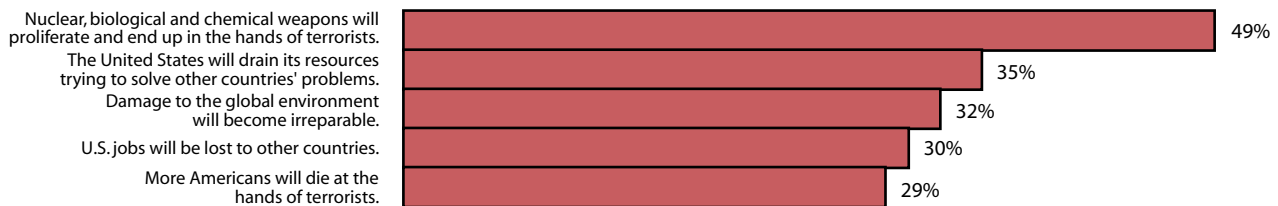
## What is tomorrow's electorate thinking today?

In programs taking place during the run up to the 2004 presidential election, students across the country place proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons at the top of their list of international concerns. Most students support international cooperation as a guiding principle of U.S. foreign policy but also demonstrate concern about problems here at home.

In 2004, high school students across the country wrestled with the question of our nation's role in the world. Participating students studied and discussed a wide range of current international issues both in class and in extracurricular programs. At the core of students' deliberations was a framework of four divergent policy directions. In order to make their views known beyond the classroom more than 8,200 students participated in an online ballot focused on questions of U.S. foreign policy.

When considering a wide range of international issues in the context of discussing America's role in the world, students place the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons on the top of their list of concerns. Almost half (49%) select the statement that "nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons will proliferate and end up in the hands of terrorists" as one of their three top concerns out of a list of thirteen. More than a third (35%) of those participating worry that "the United States will drain its resources trying to solve other countries' problems." Almost as many (32%) are concerned that "damage to the global environment will become irreparable." Students were considerably less concerned with issues such as border control, increasing immigration, access to oil, or negative aspects of participating in international organizations.

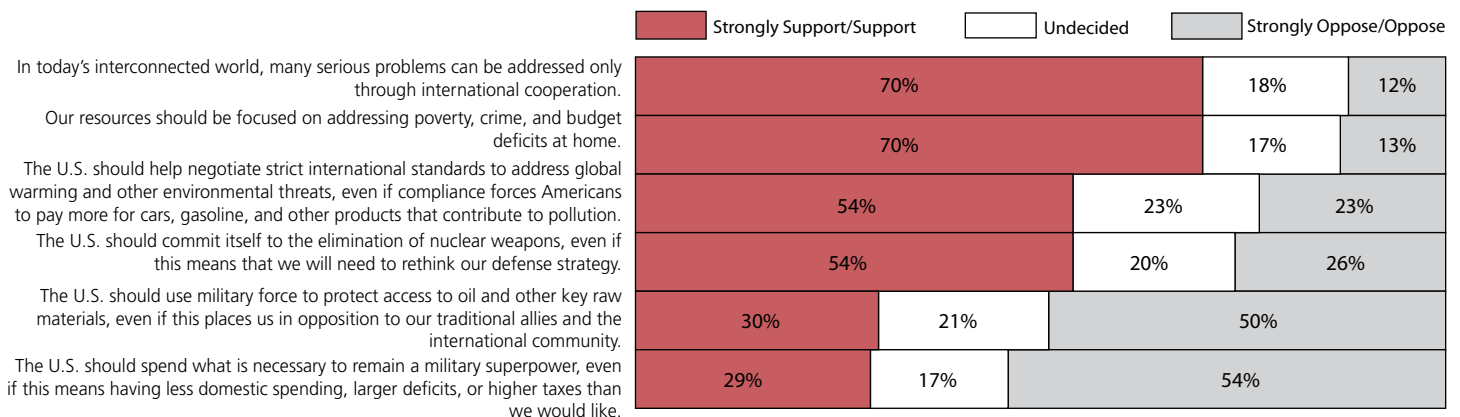
### TOP CONCERNS



Students select three concerns from a list of thirteen.

By a margin of seven-to-one of those expressing a view, students say that they believe that "many serious problems can be addressed only through international cooperation." (70% support or strongly support this statement, 12% oppose it.) Yet an equal number believe that "our resources should be focused on addressing poverty, crime, and budget deficits at home." (70% support or strongly support this statement, 13% oppose it.) More than twice as many students support policies of "negotiat[ing] strict international standards to address global warming and other environmental threats" and "commit[ting ourselves] to the elimination of nuclear weapons" as oppose them. By a significant margin students oppose "spend[ing] what is necessary to remain a military superpower" (nearly a two-to-one margin), and "us[ing] military force to protect access to oil and other key resources."

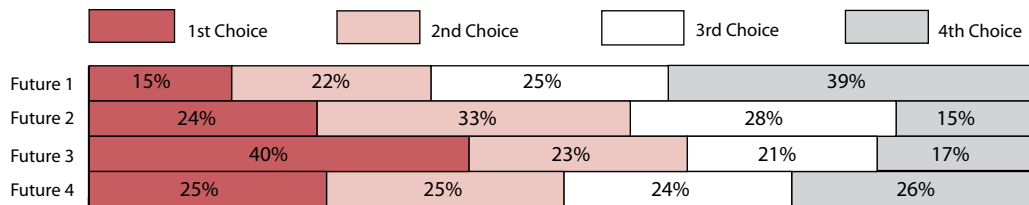
### BELIEFS AND POLICY PREFERENCES



## FOUR FUTURES: CONSIDERING ALTERNATIVE POLICY DIRECTIONS

A framework of four divergent policy directions—or Futures—formed the core of student deliberations. Among the four Futures, “Future 3: Build a More Cooperative World” received significantly more support than any other Future. Of more than 8,200 students polled nationwide, more than forty percent identified Future 3 as their first choice. “Future 4: Protect the U.S. Homeland” and “Future 2: Protect U.S. Global Interests” were chosen first by 25 percent and 24 percent respectively. However, Future 2 was significantly more popular than Future 4 as a second choice. The least supported Future was “Future 1: Lead the World to Democracy” which was ranked first by only 15 percent and placed last by 39 percent.

### FUTURES RANKINGS



### THE FUTURES IN BRIEF

**Future 1: Lead the World to Democracy** The United States is the most powerful nation in the world. The world depends on us to maintain peace and order and to support liberal democratic principles. Today's international system was built around American ideals and power. Neither collective security nor the United Nations can be counted on to deal with the threats to this system. We must devote the necessary resources to build an international moral order and a vigorous international economy grounded in American political and economic principles and we must protect this international system from any threats, even if pressuring other governments to adopt American democratic principles may spark international criticism that the United States is ushering in a “Pax Americana.”

**Future 2: Protect U.S. Global Interests** We live in a dangerously unstable world. U.S. foreign policy must strive for order and security. International terrorism, chaos in the Middle East, rising poverty in the developing world, and global economic competition have created an international minefield for U.S. leaders. We need to focus our energies on protecting our own security, cultivating our key trade relationships, ensuring our access to crucial raw materials, and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons to unfriendly nations or to terrorist networks. We must be selective in our involvement in international affairs, but we must be prepared to protect ourselves—at home and abroad—against any threats to our security and prosperity, even if this policy may breed resentment and lead to an angry backlash against us.

**Future 3: Build a More Cooperative World** We live today in an interdependent and interconnected world. We cannot stand alone. National boundaries can no longer halt the spread of AIDS, international drug trafficking, terrorism, and other global scourges. We must take the initiative to bring the nations of the world together and play a leadership role in strengthening the UN's role in maintaining international security and responding to other global problems such as environmental pollution, financial crises, refugees, and AIDS. We must be willing to give up a portion of our independent authority, or sovereignty, to the UN and offer our military, intelligence, and economic support to UN-led initiatives, even if this may limit our ability to use military force unilaterally outside of North America.

**Future 4: Protect the U.S. Homeland** The attacks of September 11, 2001 have made us feel a vulnerability not felt in more than fifty years. We have spent hundreds of billions of dollars a year defending our allies in Western Europe and East Asia and distributed tens of billions more in foreign aid to countries throughout the developing world. These high-profile foreign policy programs have only bred resentment against us and made us enemies. It is time to sharply scale back our foreign involvement and turn our attention to the real threats facing Americans: a sagging economy, decaying schools, a shaky health care system, and inadequate resources to protect against terrorism, even if this may upset the worldwide balance of power and cause insecure countries to seek nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

The Futures are available in full from the Choices Program web site at <[www.choices.edu/USrole.cfm](http://www.choices.edu/USrole.cfm)>. The Futures are designed to help students think about a range of possible policy directions. Each Future includes a set of policies on specific issues, an overview of the beliefs that underlie it, some arguments in support of the position, and some criticisms of it. After analysis of the four Futures, students are expected to frame their own “Future Five” reflecting their views on the topic.

A full curriculum unit, *The U.S. Role in a Changing World*, was published in February 2004. The Futures are at the heart of the unit. Background readings examine pressing issues facing the United States and the world today, including the economy, human health and the environment, politics, culture and values, and security concerns. A teacher's guide provides suggested lesson plans. An online lesson plan focused on the Futures is available from the Choices Program web site at <[www.choices.edu/USroleballot](http://www.choices.edu/USroleballot)>.

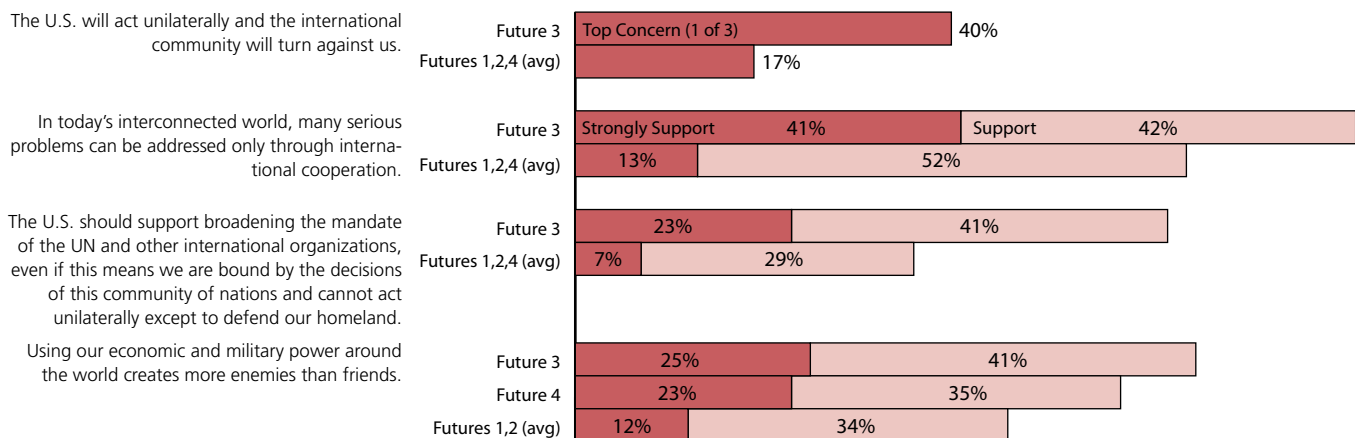
## A CLOSER LOOK

A closer look into how students' concerns, beliefs, and policy positions align with the Futures they favor reveals a surprising degree of consistency indicating that most students grasp the divergent nature of the Futures as they are framed and understand their implications for policy.

### DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF FUTURE 3 SUPPORTERS

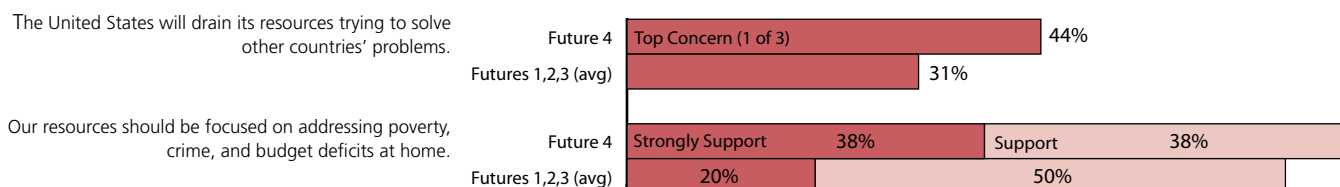
Supporters of “Future 3: Build a More Cooperative World,” the most popular Future, are twice as likely as their peers to express concern that we will “act unilaterally and the international community will turn against us.” Forty percent of Future 3 supporters identify this as one of their top three concerns compared to 19 percent of their peers. They are also more concerned about environmental destruction, conflict and instability precipitated by a clash of ideologies, and the effects of an increasing gulf between the developed and developing worlds. They stand out in their belief that “in today’s interconnected world, many serious problems can be addressed only through international cooperation.” More than 40 percent “strongly support” this view. An equal number “support” it. Fewer than a third as many of those supporting other Futures (13%) strongly support this view.

Future 3 supporters also stand out for their support for “broadening the mandate of the UN and other international organizations.” More than sixty percent (63%) “strongly support” or “support” this policy. However, their support for this position is more tempered than is their belief in international cooperation. Twenty-three percent “strongly support” broadening the mandate of international organizations compared to 7 percent of peers. Future 3 supporters are also more likely than their peers to believe that “using our economic and military power around the world creates more enemies than friends.” Sixty-six percent of Future 3 proponents “strongly support” or “support” this statement compared to 46 percent of “Future 1: Lead the World To Democracy” or “Future 2: Protect U.S. Interests” supporters and 57 percent of “Future 4: Protect the U.S. Homeland” supporters.



### DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF FUTURE 4 SUPPORTERS

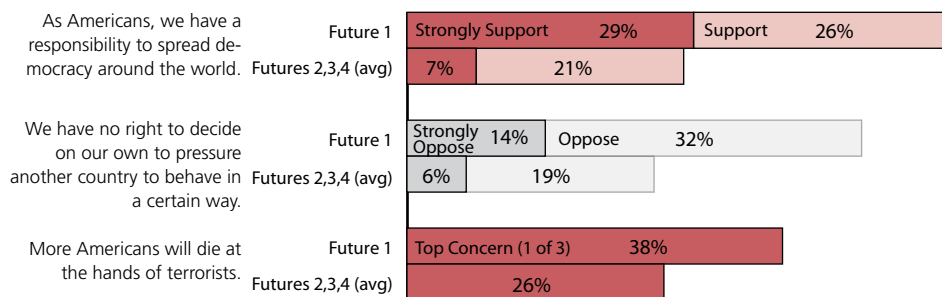
The driving concern that distinguishes students supporting “Future 4: Protect the U.S. Homeland” from students supporting other Futures is that we will “drain [our] resources trying to solve other countries’ problems.” Almost 45 percent (44%) of Future 4 supporters select this concern as one of their top three compared with 31 percent of students supporting other Futures. Additionally, 38 percent of students supporting this Future strongly support a statement that “our resources should be focused on addressing poverty, crime, and budget deficits at home.” Only 20 percent of their peers from the other three Futures strongly support this statement. However, when all students expressing “support” as well as “strongly support” are considered, proponents of all four Futures show significant overall support for this belief.



## DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF FUTURE 1 SUPPORTERS

“Future 1: Lead the World To Democracy” supporters—a significantly smaller group than others—separate themselves from their peers by their belief that “as Americans, we have a responsibility to spread democracy around the world.” Future 1 proponents strongly support this view by a margin of more than four to one over their peers supporting other Futures (29% of Future 1 supporters compared to 7% of their peers). They do not support the statement that “we have no right to decide on our own to pressure another country to behave in a certain way.” Almost half (46%) oppose this statement compared to 25 percent of their peers supporting other Futures.

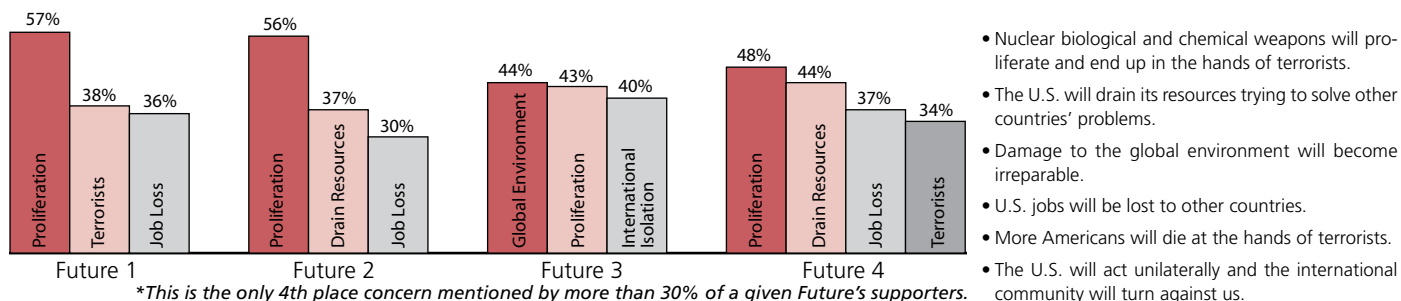
Future 1 supporters are more concerned than those supporting other Futures that “more Americans will die at the hands of terrorists.”



## AREAS OF COMMON CONCERN

Supporters of all four Futures rate as a primary concern (first or, for Future 3 supporters, a close second) that “nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons will proliferate and end up in the hands of terrorists.” Between 43 percent and 57 percent of each Future’s supporters rated this as one of their top three concerns.

Of nine distinct policy statements, a statement that “the U.S. should help negotiate strict international standards to address global warming and other environmental threats, even if compliance forces Americans to pay more for cars, gasoline, and other products that contribute to pollution” received the highest support overall (54% strongly support or support). Future 3 supporters show the greatest support (66% compared to 48% of their peers). Only 16 percent of Future 3 supporters and 30 percent of Futures 1, 2, and 4 supporters oppose it.



## HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The data in this report is based on 8,225 completed student ballots. Usually students participating in the student ballot had used the Choices curriculum unit, *The U.S. Role in a Changing World*, in class, as part of their participation in the Choices Program’s Capitol Forum on America’s Future, or in Youth Circles sponsored by The People Speak. An online ballot was developed to provide an opportunity for students to register their views on key international issues and then to have those views presented to elected officials at the start of the new administration in January 2005. It is important to understand that no one Future as it was framed reflects the views of any one political party or organization. Ballots were entered online between March 1, 2004 and January 7, 2005. For information on this ballot and additional data, see [www.choices.edu/usroleballot/report.cfm](http://www.choices.edu/usroleballot/report.cfm).

## About the Choices Program and Teaching with the News

The **Choices for the 21st Century Education Program** is an educational program of the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. The program incorporates cutting-edge scholarship into curriculum resources on a range of current and historical international topics, provides professional development for teachers, and organizes educational programs for students. More than twenty-five topics are currently available. Resources are used in 7,500 secondary schools nationwide. Information on all resources is available online at [www.choices.edu](http://www.choices.edu).

**Teaching with the News** is a project of the Choices Program. Teaching with the News provides online teaching resources that connect the classroom with world events and engage students in responsible deliberation on the news of the day. Resources are updated frequently.

## THE CHOICES PROGRAM

*Explore the Past... Shape the Future*

*History and Current Issues for the Classroom*