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EUROPE

# How Europe Sees America

Our Survey on Attitudes About U.S. Cultural and Political Influence

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Ask people what they think of America's cultural and political influence in the wider world and you're sure to get a mixed response, even from Americans.

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## WHAT THEY SAID

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- See highlights from the survey.
-  See the full results of the survey

One thing is clear: Most Europeans think America's political influence in the world was negative over the past five years, but say it has taken a sharply positive turn since Barack Obama's election as U.S. president.

When it comes to culture, Europeans' view of America's contributions is more complex. Some aspects are loathed, others are loved. Large numbers of Europeans say they detest American food, but cite films and television shows as the country's best exports.

To study this issue and broader questions about what the world thinks of America and what Americans think of themselves, The Wall Street Journal asked market-research firm GfK to poll more than 18,000 people in 18 countries -- 16 European nations, plus the U.S. and Russia. GfK polled respondents about the facets of American culture they admire and those they dislike and asked them whether they viewed U.S. political influence in a positive or negative light.



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Some of the results fit well-established stereotypes. For example, French respondents didn't like the Bush years and voiced a stronger distaste for American cuisine than any other country surveyed. But other features of the poll proved surprising, particularly when Americans were asked how they view their own country's role in the world and its contribution to global culture.

"The views of American political influence show a very, very positive change with the election of Obama," said Mark Hofmans, a managing director in GfK's Brussels office, who analyzed the survey results. "Attitudes toward American cultural influence are far more nuanced."

GfK asked respondents to rate, in broad terms, America's cultural influence in the world. It then identified several categories -- movies and television, fashion, food, sports, music, architecture and literature -- and asked respondents to identify the best and worst aspects of U.S. cultural influence in the world. Respondents were also given the option to say "other" or "nothing."

In total, more respondents (39%) said America's cultural influence in the world was negative than those who said it was positive (22%). Among European respondents, 32% said U.S. cultural influence was negative, compared to 26% who gave a positive response. Americans were slightly more downbeat than average, with 46% of those surveyed saying their country has a negative cultural influence in the world, compared with 33% who describe it as positive.

Several countries surveyed had more positive than negative votes. In Italy, 39% of respondents had a positive impression of U.S. cultural influence, compared with 25% who gave a negative answer. The U.K. (38% to 31%), Poland (32% to 24%), Bulgaria (29%



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to 25%) and Romania (29% to 26%) also logged more positive than negative responses.

Luigi Mattiolo, an Italian civil servant in Rome, said it isn't specifically books or movies that he likes most about American culture, but the country's ethic of initiative and free enterprise.

The American "way of thinking makes it possible for the people who really believe in something to achieve their goals. At least [in the U.S.] it happens more frequently than in Europe," Mr. Mattiolo said.

The most negative impressions of U.S. cultural influence were found in Greece, where 58% criticized America's cultural influence. Americans were the second-most critical group, followed by Russia (45%) and Hungary (40%).

In the breakdown of what people like best about

American culture, a total of 30% of those surveyed cited movies and television shows, making this by far the most popular category. Among Europeans, the number was even higher: 40% said movies and TV were the best American cultural export. Sports (12%) and music (11%) were the only other categories that received high marks (each was the choice of 13% of Europeans). American fashion, literature and food each were given positive marks by only 4% of all respondents, while 21% of those surveyed said "nothing" or "I don't know" when asked about the best American contribution to world culture.



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Greeks, who gave American political and cultural influence some of the most negative reviews in the survey, were the most enthusiastic admirers of American movies and television, with 52% citing these as America's best exports. Hungarian (51%) and Dutch (50%) respondents, who also gave U.S. political and cultural influence negative scores, also professed admiration for Hollywood.

Surprisingly, when asked to identify America's worst contribution to world culture, 32% of Americans pointed to film and television, a far higher proportion than in any other country and the single most popular response among U.S. respondents. It turns out Americans see their films and TV shows, which broadly are admired around the world, as having a negative cultural influence.

Still, 18% of American respondents cited films and television shows as the country's best contribution to world culture, followed closely by food (11%) and sports (10%). The most popular response, however, was "other," showing that Americans likely have a far more nuanced view of their country's cultural worth than others around the globe.

Other countries all singled out American food as the country's worst contribution to global culture. Sixty-five percent of French respondents gave this answer, the highest in the group. Swiss (56%) and German (52%) respondents were close behind.

The French numbers are interesting, considering that McDonald's is virtually ubiquitous in the country and another U.S. edible export, Starbucks, has been spreading around Paris over the past few years.

"I think that in France we are not influenced by American food," said Amaury de Saint-Ours, a business consultant in Paris. "We don't have a good opinion of it. We think of McDonald's hamburgers." He explained that people go to McDonald's in France because it is cheap and quick, not because the food is good. "We are lucky in France. We have great cheese, great meats and great wine."



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When it comes to politics, almost two-thirds of those surveyed said the U.S. was a negative influence in the world over the past five years. The most downbeat country was Greece, where 88% of respondents said U.S. political influence was either "negative" or "very negative." Other countries, including the Netherlands (80%), Switzerland (80%) and Belgium (78%) also had predominantly negative views of American political influence.

Maybe this result isn't surprising, given that over the past five years the U.S. presence in Iraq -- never popular in Europe -- has continued, with regular reports of violence. But some of the sharply negative views are colored by other factors, including history.

In Greece, for example, the U.S. backed a military junta between 1967 and 1974 that curbed civil liberties and used harsh tactics against dissenters. U.S. President Bill Clinton later expressed regret for U.S. involvement in this era of Greek history, but suspicion and anger still linger.

"There is a very strong and common belief in Greece, especially among young people, that the USA, being the leading capitalistic country, has a detrimental impact on every affair or situation it tries to solve or influence," said Yannis Loizos, a lawyer in Athens.



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None of the countries included in the survey gave U.S. political influence more positive than negative marks for the past five years. But some countries were less negative than others. Thirty-two percent of Romanian respondents said U.S. political influence was negative, the lowest level in the survey. Bulgaria (40%) and Poland (41%) were close behind.

The largest share of positive votes in this category was in Poland where a total of 22% of respondents gave the U.S. "positive" or "very positive" marks. Romania (19%) and the U.K. (19%) trailed in the category, but still were more complimentary than the Americans polled. Only 18% of U.S. respondents praised their country's political influence in the world over the past five years.

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe have tended to be more pro-American than other parts of the globe in recent years. Many cite the U.S. as a positive force against a resurgent Russia, which shrouded the region under Communist rule only a generation ago.

"During the cultural gulag and oppression [of the Soviet years], America was a beacon of hope and light to Romanians. America symbolized the land of the free," said Eugen Babau, a Romanian who until recently worked for an energy company. Many Romanians, he said, "still aspire to America as the promised land."

Even though the U.S. war in Iraq continues and President Obama has promised to send more U.S. troops to Afghanistan, the survey respondents were clear: The Obama era marks an about-face for U.S. political influence in the world.

Europeans are even more optimistic about Mr. Obama's presidency than Americans. In Belgium and Sweden, 84% of respondents believe America's political influence in the world will change in a "positive" or "very positive" way as a result of Mr. Obama's election. In Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, 82% of respondents gave the same answer. In the U.S., 61% of those surveyed gave a "positive" or "very positive" reply.

Elsewhere in Western Europe, Greece (59%), Spain (63%) and France (68%) gave the same reply about U.S. political influence since Mr. Obama's election, showing that while

most of the world sees the new U.S. president in a positive light, countries aren't uniformly elated.

Many of the countries that had a less negative view of U.S. political influence over the past five years were among the least enthused about Mr. Obama's presidency. In Poland, 45% of those surveyed said Mr. Obama's election marked a "positive" or "very positive" change in U.S. political influence. Romania (47%) and Bulgaria (48%) were close behind.

Russia led this category, with only 27% saying Mr. Obama's election marked a "positive" or "very positive" change. This result could be skewed, however, since 32% of Russians surveyed gave no answer to the question, by far the highest level among the countries polled.

"In Central and Eastern European countries, the response to Obama has been a little less positive, but on the whole, the 'Obama effect' is very noticeable," Gfk's Mr. Hofmans said. "I hadn't expected such overwhelmingly positive figures."

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