

# A poll suggesting that many Americans condone brutal interrogation techniques is misleading and wrong, professor says

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Does the American public condone torture when the goal is to prevent terrorist attacks? News headlines reporting the results of a Pew Research Center poll released on Dec. 9 indicate more than half of Americans do. But that finding isn't necessarily valid, says Richard Eichenberg, an associate professor of political science at Tufts, who argues that the poll is flawed because it is based on a faulty premise.

Pew [reported](#) on its poll about using [torture](#) to fight terrorism on the same day that the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released an executive summary [[PDF](#)] of its report on the Central Intelligence Agency's detention and brutal interrogation program implemented after the 9/11 attacks.

The Senate findings, writes committee chair Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., "are highly critical of the CIA's actions, and rightfully so."

The Pew poll, conducted in August 2011, is one of those cases where paying careful attention to the wording of survey questions is important for really understanding public opinion about an issue, Eichenberg says. The Pew survey found that 53 percent of Americans believed torture could often or sometimes be justified, while 42 percent said it could only rarely be justified or is never warranted at all.

But the reason for these results, Eichenberg says, may lie in the Pew

poll's slanted question: "Do you think the use of torture against suspected terrorists in order to gain important information can often be justified, sometimes be justified, rarely be justified or never be justified?"

"First, the poll is based on a false premise, in that it says to the survey respondent that torture is used to get important information, while we now know from the [Senate's report on the CIA program] that most of what you get is false information," Eichenberg says. "Second, the Pew poll offers just four responses, three of which endorse torture, at least in part. So basically you are stacking the cards in favor of torture by three to one."

While this may seem like methodology details in which only students of polling would be interested, Eichenberg argues that such distinctions are important because poll respondents can only respond to a question as it is posed. "If the question is flawed, then the answer is going to be flawed," he says.

A more accurate picture of the nation's attitude can be found in responses to polls conducted by Pew, Gallup and other news organizations and analyzed in a 2010 report. These surveys explained in graphic detail what interrogation techniques were being judged, Eichenberg says. The results were summarized in a journal article [\[PDF\]](#) by researchers at Reed College in Oregon, led by Paul Gronke, a [political science](#) professor.

"By and large, 70 to 80 percent of the people reject the techniques that are described in this month's Senate committee report, yet these findings are not getting into the public conversations," says Eichenberg. He points to the Reed researchers' compilation of survey numbers that show that 80 percent of Americans polled between 2004 and 2009 opposed electric shock, waterboarding, sexual humiliation and punching or kicking as [interrogation techniques](#).

So while response to more general questions on the use of torture may continue to produce mixed reactions, Eichenberg says public support for torture will decline as more people become aware of the explicit details of torture techniques contained in the Senate report.

"The graphic details evoke disgust, and the more salient these details are in the press, the more the polls will reflect that disgust—even when the [poll](#) question might be fairly general," he says.

A change in sentiment, he says, could lead to public pressure on the U.S. government to adhere to its obligations under the United Nations Convention against Torture agreement that President Ronald Reagan signed in 1988 and the U.S. Senate ratified in 1994. The agreement, in part, calls for the investigation and prosecution of crimes that clearly fall under the definition of torture as cruel and inhumane treatment.

"Whether our government will live up to its obligations under the law of the land is still an open question," Eichenberg says.

Provided by Tufts University

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