

Do Americans care about privacy?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

June 11, 2013

[A new WaPo/Pew poll](#) finds that 56 percent of Americans thing it's acceptable for the National Security Agency to secretly access millions of Americans' phone records. Sixty-two percent favor investigating terrorist threats "even if that intrudes on personal privacy."

Do people just not give a damn about privacy anymore, what with their dreams of reality-TV celebrity and their willingness to [function as a Facebook or Google product](#) ? Well, change the question from "MILLIONS of Americans" to "everyone" and only 45 percent think federal monitoring is okay.

In other words, public tolerance for this is partly due to the assumption that it will only happen to other people. I think [Jamelie Bouie is right about this](#):

The United States isn't a stranger to civil liberties violations, but overwhelmingly, they've targeted the more marginal members of our society: Political dissidents, and racial and religious minorities. For the large majority of Americans, the surveillance state is an abstraction.

Then there's the fact that the question isn't privacy violations vs. the risk of garden-variety danger; it's privacy violations vs. the risk of *terrorism*. And we Americans don't tend to treat terrorism like other risks. Here's [Matt Yglesias](#):

Just as in the banal case of airport security the national security agencies never really put their cards on the table. Rhetoric about how we need to do whatever it takes to save Americans is all well and good for a 30 second sound bite, but we don't apply that standard in any other walk of life. A nationwide 40 mile per hour speed limit would save tons of lives, but we have a firm consensus that the costs would be too high.

It's very hard to have a rational conversation about the costs of fighting terrorism. We're too effectively terrorized to do so.

We're also too entirely partisan. [Jon Cohen compares the new poll to data from 2006](#), after the public learned that the NSA had been monitoring people's communication without court approval. Seven years and a change of executive power later, far more Democrats prioritize terrorism investigations over privacy concerns—and far fewer Republicans do.

More Democrats were right then, and more Republicans are right now. But the fact that Bush's NSA took us down this chilling road and Obama's followed suit is reason enough not to see this through a partisan lens. If we want to blame someone, [we might want](#) to go with [everyone who](#) voted for the Patriot Act—and all of us who allowed our fear to keep us from taking them to task.