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# VOTERS WANT TO SEE A PROGRESSIVE OVERHAUL OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

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In the nearly two decades since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States has dramatically increased its global military footprint in the name of national security. This has included large-scale ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, targeted air strikes, covert operations across the Middle East and North Africa, hundreds of military bases across the world, and a heavy pipeline of arms sales. This “War on Terror” posture has carried a massive price tag, both in terms of dollars spent and lives lost.

The resulting consequences aren’t limited to the use of force abroad. Policies enacted under the guise of national security have included domestic mass surveillance, racial profiling and discrimination, indefinite detention, torture and other cruel treatment, and militarization of the southern border and domestic law enforcement. These practices existed before the presidency of Donald Trump, though his administration has exacerbated them.

On a bipartisan basis, elected leaders have forwarded these policies using rhetoric that trafficks in threat inflation and fearmongering, warning that the world is a dangerous place that only American military dominance can truly counter. Washington’s foreign-policy and national-security establishment demonstrates hesitance or even opposition to meaningfully overhauling this over-militarized approach.

Here we test how registered voters think about security, and how they respond to proposals to change US national security and foreign policy. We found that the public rejects the predominant, fear-based framing and policies; instead, they want to see a revamped, demilitarized American foreign policy focused on international cooperation, human rights, and peacebuilding. These findings were consistent across the public at large, though they were particularly pronounced among Democratic voters and younger, diverse voters.

## Executive summary

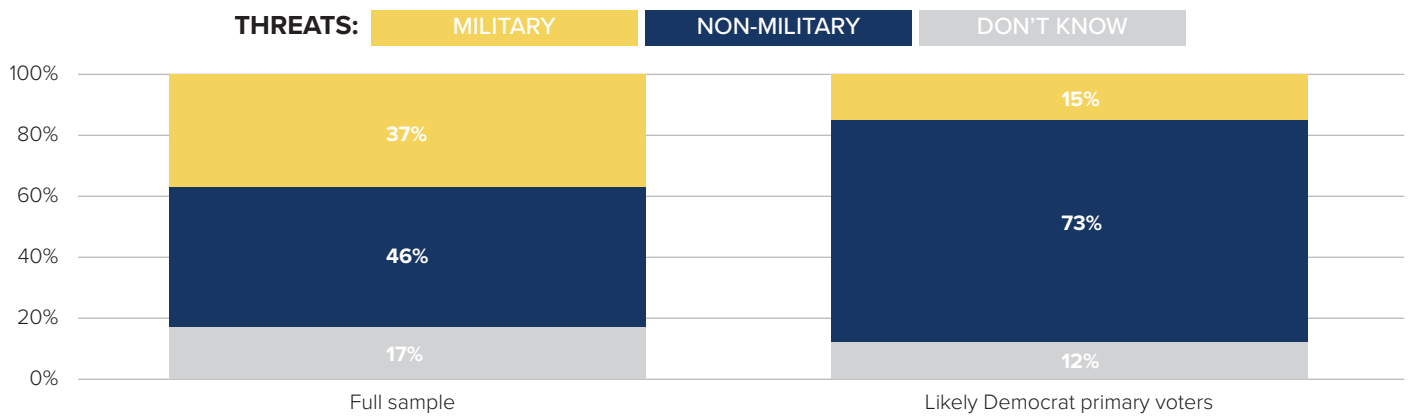
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- ▶ Voters think about their own security and the security of the country primarily in terms of nonmilitary challenges and solutions.
- ▶ When it comes to the role of the US in the world, voters reject Trump-esque “America First” isolationism, but they also reject the “American exceptionalism” framing that demands a blank check for maintaining global military supremacy and whitewashes harm that some US foreign policy has done in the world.
- ▶ Voters want to see an end to endless wars as well as to the practice of arming authoritarian regimes that commit human rights abuses in the name of security and counterterrorism.
- ▶ Voters want to see US funding go to domestic needs such as health care, or to other national security tools like diplomacy, instead of to the Pentagon and more endless war.
- ▶ Progressive national-security proposals that reject military interventionism in favor of peace and human rights are popular.

## Rejecting fearmongering and threat inflation

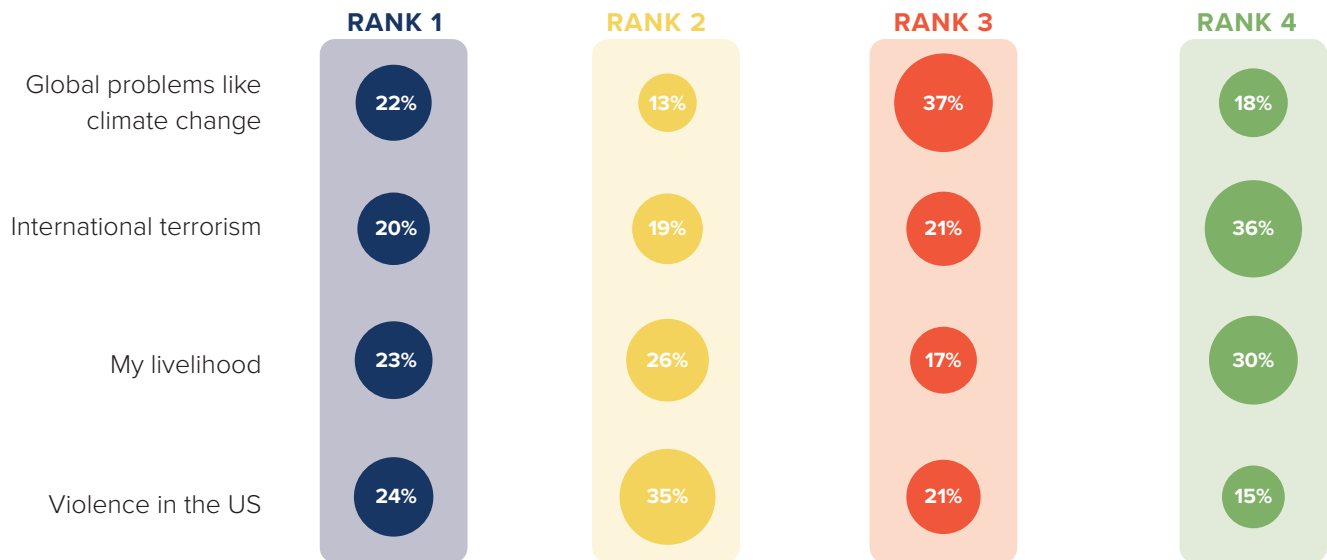
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When asked to identify the top threats to our security, a plurality of voters (46 percent) indicated that they believe the US primarily faces nonmilitary threats; they see challenges such as the climate crisis, the rise of authoritarianism and white nationalism, and global economic competition as more pressing priorities than the risk of foreign attack from a hostile nation or terror group. An overwhelming majority of likely Democratic primary voters (73 percent) ranked political, environmental, and economic challenges above threats of a military nature.



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### RANKING OF COMMON PROBLEMS



*Note: Columns do not sum to 100, as respondents could report they did not worry about any or all of these issues.*

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Voters responded to a prompt asking them to rank issues based on how much time they spend worrying about them. They were presented with the options in a randomized order and ranked them on a scale of one to four, with one being what they spend the most time worrying about and four being what they spend the least amount of time worrying about. They were also given the option to choose “I don’t worry about any of these.”

Most voters (87 percent) ranked things like gun violence in their communities, supporting their families, and global issues like climate change as more pressing fears than potential foreign attacks on the United States by other countries or terror groups.

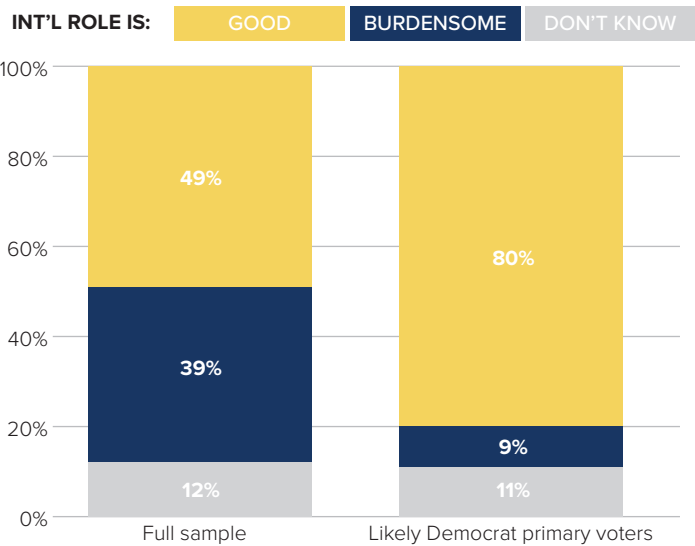
The partisan divide was most evident when voters were asked, on a scale of one to ten, how dangerous they believe the world is. With one meaning “there are no serious threats of attack to the United States” and ten meaning “there are many serious threats of attack to the United States,” Democratic voters’ average answer was six, and Republicans average answer was seven.

Voters think about their own security primarily through the lens of human needs, and while they have absorbed rhetoric that inflates the risk of international terrorism and war, they still believe the top challenges and solutions to US security are of a nonmilitary nature.

# America's role in the world

When asked about US participation in the international community through partnerships, agreements, and institutions, voters were asked to choose between a statement reflecting Trump-esque “America First” sentiment (framing international endeavors as burdensome and unfair to the US), and a pro-engagement statement (framing international institutions as beneficial and worthwhile). A plurality (49 percent) of voters overall chose the pro-engagement statement, and a minority (39 percent) chose the “America First” framing. This is an area with a big partisan split: 80 percent of likely Democratic primary voters prefer engagement over isolation.

While voters favor international engagement, they also understand the harm that can result from the US holding itself out as a benevolent hegemon. Voters were asked to choose between a statement reflecting “American exceptionalism” and prioritizing US military dominance in order to keep global peace, and a statement recognizing that the US has strengths and weaknesses like any other country and has in fact caused harm in the world. A majority (53 percent) rejected the “American exceptionalist” framing.

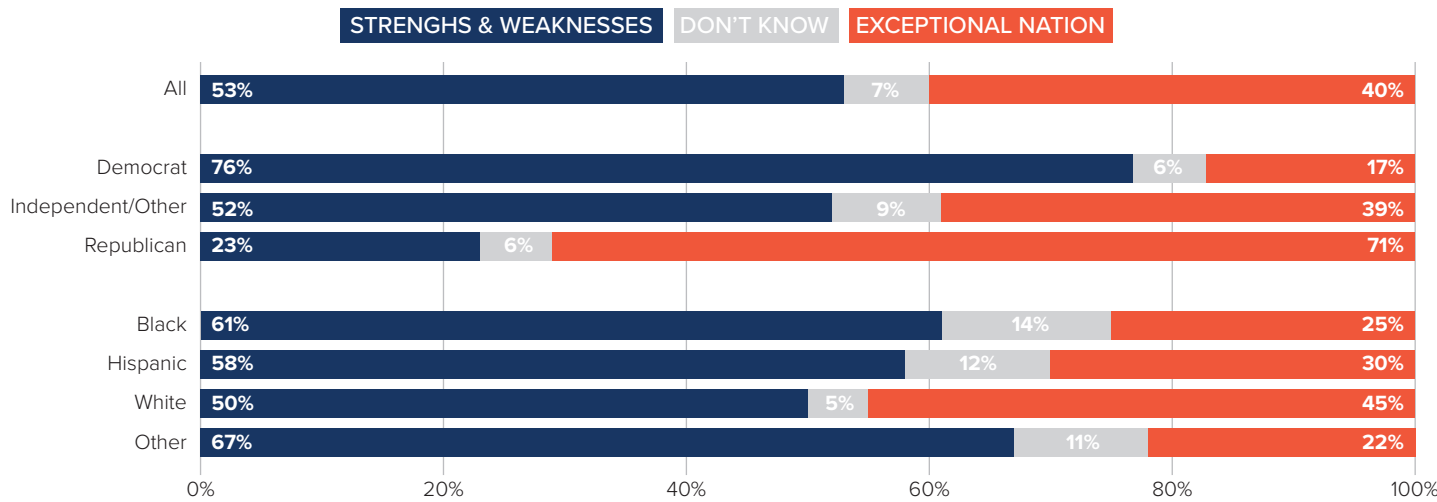


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There was a wide partisan gap. Seventy-six percent of Democrats and 52 percent of independents rejected the “American exceptionalism” framing, while 71 percent of Republicans favored it.

There was also a racial gap, with voters of color acknowledging US harm in the world by a larger margin than white voters (50 percent of white voters rejected American exceptionalism, as compared to 61 percent of black voters, 58 percent of Hispanic voters, 89 percent of Asian voters, 81 percent of Native American voters, and 81 percent of those who identified as mixed-race).

## BELIEF ABOUT US ROLE IN THE WORLD VOTERS, BY PARTY ID, BY RACE



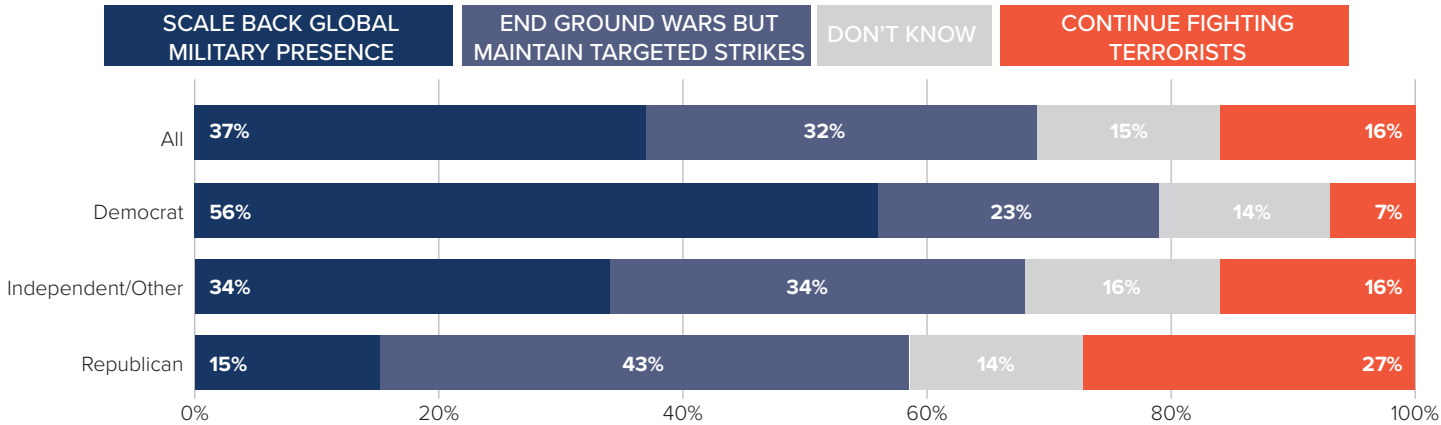
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# Ending endless wars and complicity in human rights abuses

When asked what should happen in the next phase of US counterterrorism operations abroad, more than two-thirds of voters (69 percent) indicated that they want to see an end to the “War on Terror” operations in Afghanistan and the Middle East. A majority of Democratic voters (58 percent) want operations to end completely, with a refocus on other national-security tools like diplomacy and peacebuilding. Democratic voters also rejected the strategy advanced by some that the US should withdraw the majority of combat troops but continue targeted counterterrorism strikes, and pivot instead to a military ramp-up to counter Russia and China (only 21 percent of Democratic voters selected this option).

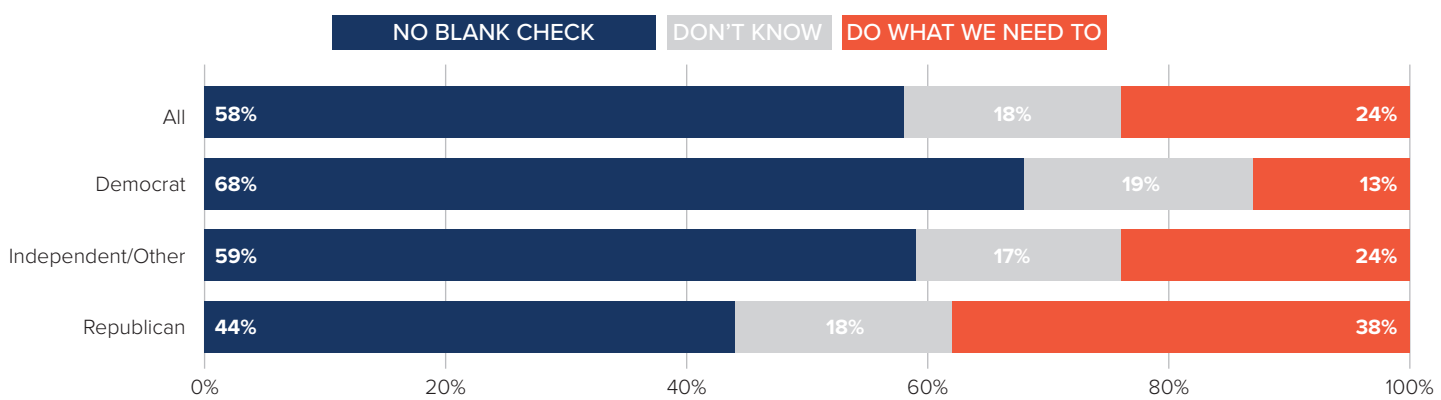
In addition to ending direct US operations, most voters (58 percent) want to see the US stop selling weapons to authoritarian regimes that commit human rights abuses under the guise of countering terror groups and hostile foreign actors. Voters indicated their support of ceasing these arms sales, even if presented with the argument that this would mean a loss of US business, dominance, or influence in critical regions. This was particularly resonant among Democrats, 73 percent of whom indicated their support to end the “blank check” of support that causes the US to become complicit in human rights abuses. When asked how the post-9/11 wars have affected them, 63% of voters reported serving or knowing someone who has served in them. Thirty percent indicated that someone close to them has served in the conflicts, such as a family member or close friend.

BELIEF ABOUT ENDING MIDDLE EAST WARS  
VOTERS, BY PARTY ID



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BELIEF ABOUT US ARMS SALES TO ALLIES  
VOTERS, BY PARTY ID



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# Shifting budget priorities away from endless war

When asked whether they would support reallocating money away from the more than \$700 billion allocated to the Pentagon toward domestic needs like health care and/or protecting the environment, a majority of voters from both parties (52 percent) indicated they would “support” or “strongly support” this approach, with nearly two-thirds (66 percent) of Demoratic voters “supporting” or “strongly supporting” such a policy.

In that item, we embedded a survey experiment to test whether additional information about the scale of US defense spending would move voters on their support for reallocating the budget toward domestic needs. Specifically, we randomly assigned half of voters to read a piece of information showing that US defense spending was greater than most of the rest of the world’s defense spending. We asked voters:

*According to the Congressional Budget Office, the United States is expected to spend \$738 billion on its military in*

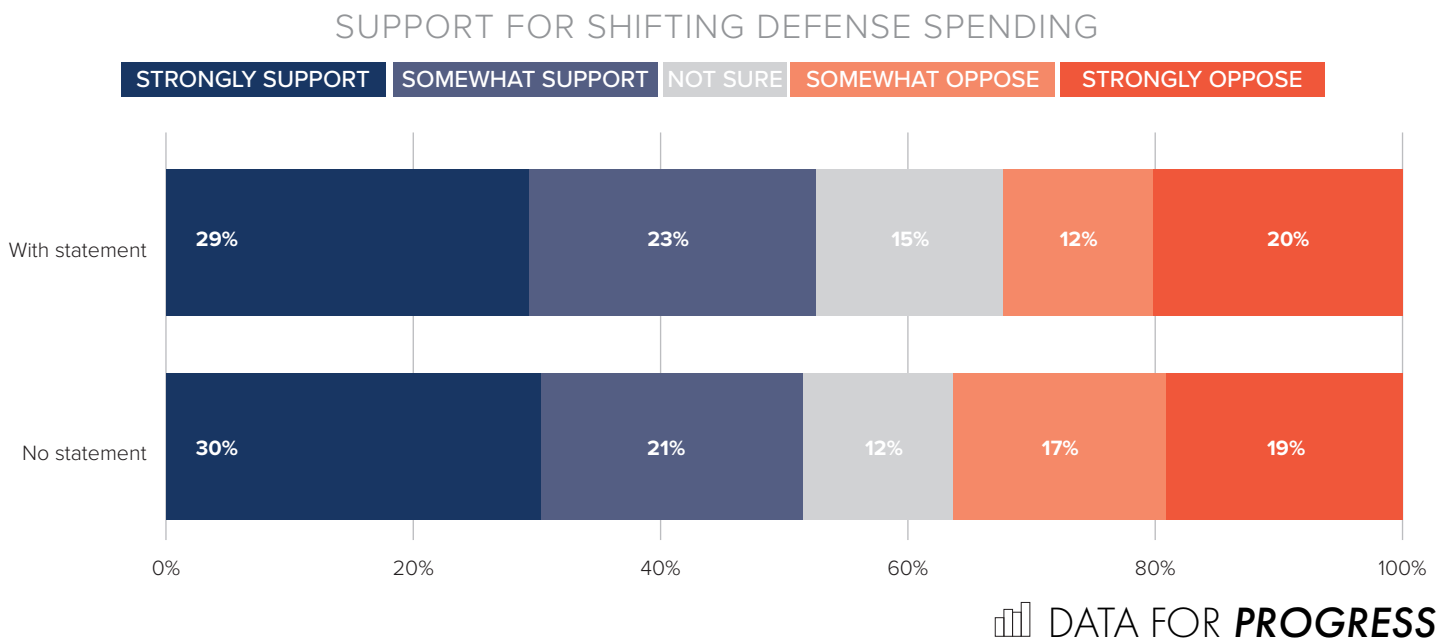
*2020. (Split statement): That’s more than the next seven countries combined and more than the U.S. budget for education, federal courts, affordable housing, local economic development, and the State Department combined.*

*Some say that maintaining a dominant global military footprint is necessary to keep us safe, and is worth the cost.*

*Others say that money could be better spent on domestic needs like health care, education, or protecting the environment.*

*Based on what you’ve just read, would you [support or oppose] reallocating money from the Pentagon budget to other priorities?*

Whether exposed to that information or not, clear majorities of voters support reallocating some of the Pentagon budget to other priorities. The differences in either condition was not significant, with 52 percent of voters in the “informed” condition supporting reallocating some of the budget along with 51 percent of voters in the condition not including the extra statement.



A majority of voters (57 percent) also embraced the idea of spending on a “dime for a dollar” basis, with at least ten cents of spending going to nonmilitary national-security tools that prevent conflict for every dollar spent on the Pentagon. We asked voters,

*Others argue that rather than pouring money into war we should invest in preventing wars before they happen.*

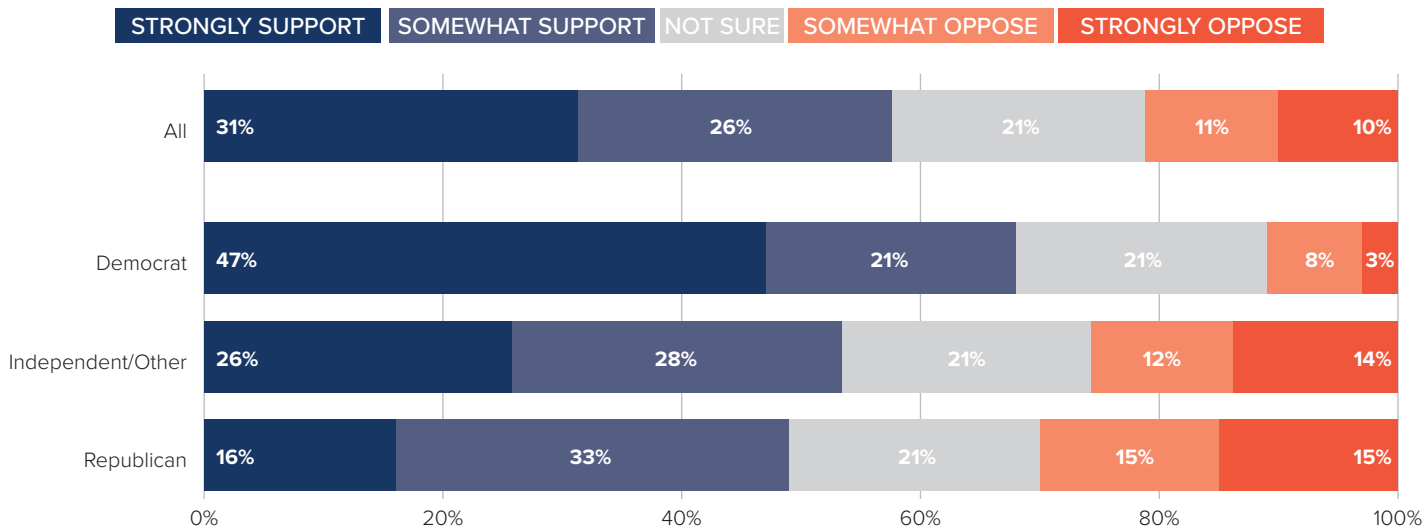
*Do you [support or oppose] a proposal to spend at least ten cents on non-military war prevention tools for every dollar we spend on the Pentagon?*

*The United States currently spends more than half of its discretionary budget on military spending, which is considerably more than it spends on other foreign policy tools such as diplomacy and economic development programs.*

*Some argue that maintaining U.S. military superiority should be the top foreign policy goal, and we should continue spending levels as they are.*

A clear majority of voters support the “dime for a dollar” policy, with 57 percent somewhat or strongly supporting and just 21 percent opposing the policy. This includes a plurality of Republican voters, 49 percent of whom support and just 30 percent of whom oppose the policy. The dime for a dollar policy is overwhelmingly popular among Independents and Democrats. A net +28 percent of Independents and a net +57 percent of Democrats support the dime for a dollar policy.

SUPPORT FOR ‘DIME FOR A DOLLAR’ SPENDING ON PREVENTING WARS



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## Progressive national security ideas are popular

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Voters were shown a list of progressive proposals on issues of foreign policy and national security, and asked whether they would “strongly support,” “support,” “oppose,” or “strongly oppose” each idea.

We found that voters’ attitudes stand in stark contrast to the hesitation demonstrated by elected leaders to enact major shifts in national-security policy (as evidenced, for example, by 18 years and counting of post-9/11 militarized foreign policy across administrations, congressional failure on a bipartisan basis to limit or repeal wide-ranging authorizations for surveillance or use of force). Many progressive proposals have bipartisan support, and some have particular resonance among Democratic voters:

- ▶ Fully repealing the Muslim ban (50 percent support overall, 74 percent support among Democrats)
- ▶ Limiting or repealing surveillance authorities like the Patriot Act (53 percent support overall, 63 percent support among Democrats)
- ▶ Closing the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay (52 percent support overall, 74 percent support among Democrats)
- ▶ Ending arms sales to Saudi Arabia (64 percent support overall, 81 percent support among Democrats)
- ▶ Maintaining an absolute ban on the use of torture (63 percent support overall, 82 percent among Democrats)
- ▶ Negotiating a peace agreement with North Korea (67 percent support overall, 63 percent support among Democrats, 76 percent support among Republicans, and 64 percent support among independents)
- ▶ Adopting a policy of “no first use” of nuclear weapons (66 percent support overall, 78 percent support among Democrats, 53 percent support among Republicans, 65 percent support among independents)
- ▶ Leveraging military aid to Israel to curb its human rights abuses against Palestinians (plurality support of 46 percent among the public at large, 65 percent support among Democrats with only 14 percent opposed)
- ▶ Ramping up humanitarian aid and economic development in Latin America to address the root causes of migration (63 percent support overall, 74 percent support among Democrats)
- ▶ Ending the practice of appointing political campaign donors as ambassadors (68 percent support overall, 73 percent support among Democrats, 59 percent support among Republicans, 73 percent support among independents)
- ▶ Ending the ban on transgender Americans serving openly in the military (55 percent support overall, 78 percent support among Democrats)
- ▶ Halting deportation of veterans and granting citizenship to every immigrant serving in the military (69 percent support overall, 79 percent support among Democrats, 56 percent support among Republicans, 69 percent support among independents)
- ▶ Creating a program at universities to train young diplomats, similar to the military’s ROTC program (68 percent support overall, 76 percent support among Democrats, 63 percent support among Republicans, 65 percent support among independents)



## SUPPORT FOR PROGRESSIVE FOREIGN POLICIES

	-11%- -40%	-1%- -10%	0-14%	15-24%	25-34%	35-44%	45-54%	55-64%	65-75%
	All	Democrat	Independent	Republican					
University program to train diplomats	+56%	+69%	+55%	+46%					
Torture ban	+38%	+73%	+26%	-2%					
Repealing the Muslim ban	+12%	+58%	-4%	-36%					
Ramping up aid to Latin America	+40%	+63%	+46%	+5%					
Peace with North Korea	+52%	+48%	+45%	+64%					
No more ambassador appointments for political donors	+55%	+61%	+59%	+43%					
No first use of nuclear weapons	+49%	+70%	+47%	+23%					
Limiting surveillance	+26%	+48%	+27%	-9%					
Leveraging aid to Israel to protect human rights	+9%	+51%	-1%	-37%					
Halting deportation of veterans	+51%	+70%	+52%	+27%					
Ending the transgender ban	+20%	+66%	+9%	-27%					
End arms sales to Saudi Arabia	+44%	+75%	+35%	+14%					
Closing Guantanamo	+19%	+64%	+8%	-30%					

## Conclusion

New data shows there is a clear appetite for progressive reforms to US foreign policy. Americans perceive much bigger threats from global phenomena like climate change and democratic decline than from international terrorism. Programs that would balance military and diplomatic spending are overwhelmingly popular, including among Independents and Republicans.

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## Methodology

This survey is based on 1,009 interviews of self-identified registered voters, conducted by YouGov on the internet. The sample was weighted according to gender, age, race, education, US Census region, and 2016 presidential vote choice. Respondents were selected from YouGov's panel to be representative of registered voters. The weights range from 0.16 to 4.9 with a mean of 1 and a standard deviation of 0.6. The margin of error was +/- 3.5 percent.