



# The Foreign Policy Establishment or Donald Trump: Which Better Reflects American Opinion?

*Americans are generally closer to “The Blob”*

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April 2017

## Introduction

It is an open secret that most US foreign policy experts opposed the presidency of Donald Trump. In fact, more than one hundred *Republican* foreign policy professionals went so far as to sign [an open letter](#) declaring that they would not vote for him. For his part, as a candidate, President Trump pledged to [“drain the swamp”](#) in Washington and said he would never take advice from the so-called foreign policy establishment, dubbed [“The Blob”](#) by a former Obama official.

The 2016 Chicago Council Leadership Survey<sup>1</sup>, conducted before the November election, showed that, for the most part, there was a bipartisan consensus among US foreign policy opinion leaders on active US engagement with the world, maintaining US alliances around the globe, and the benefits of international trade. In fact, the views among Republican and Democratic foreign policy experts more often aligned with each other than with the portion of the general public affiliated with their same party.

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<sup>1</sup>This report is based on results from the 2016 Chicago Council Survey and the 2016 Chicago Council Leadership Survey. The leadership survey was conducted in partnership with the Texas National Security Network among more than 400 professionals working on foreign policy issues. For more details on the sample, see the methodology section on page 15.

Some may interpret the election of Donald Trump as the general public's rejection of this elite consensus. But the 2016 Chicago Council public opinion survey, also conducted before the election, showed that rather than aligning with the stated foreign policy views of President Trump at that time, the general public was more attuned to the broad outlines of foreign policy positions promoted by the foreign policy opinion leaders, or "the Foreign Policy Establishment."

While the findings suggest that both opinion leaders and the public acknowledge that the United States needs allies and trading partners to succeed, they disagreed on foreign policy issues related to trade's specific impact on job creation and the threat posed by immigration.

Opinion leaders were much more convinced than the public of trade's ability to create jobs and were much less likely than the American public to prioritize protecting American jobs as a foreign policy goal. These differences highlight the potential appeal of candidates who emphasize trade's detrimental impact on jobs, despite healthy public support for free trade and globalization.

Republican leaders and Republicans among the public starkly disagreed on the threat posed by immigration, with the GOP public far more likely to consider large numbers of immigrants and refugees entering the United States as a critical threat.

Finally, while opinion leaders and the public favored maintaining the US commitment to NATO and maintaining US bases in key allied countries, the foreign policy experts were much more likely to consider protecting allies' security as a very important foreign policy goal. This could reflect a lack of awareness among the public of alliance expectations, a belief that these allies could defend themselves, or a feeling that US allies have not contributed to US military missions abroad.

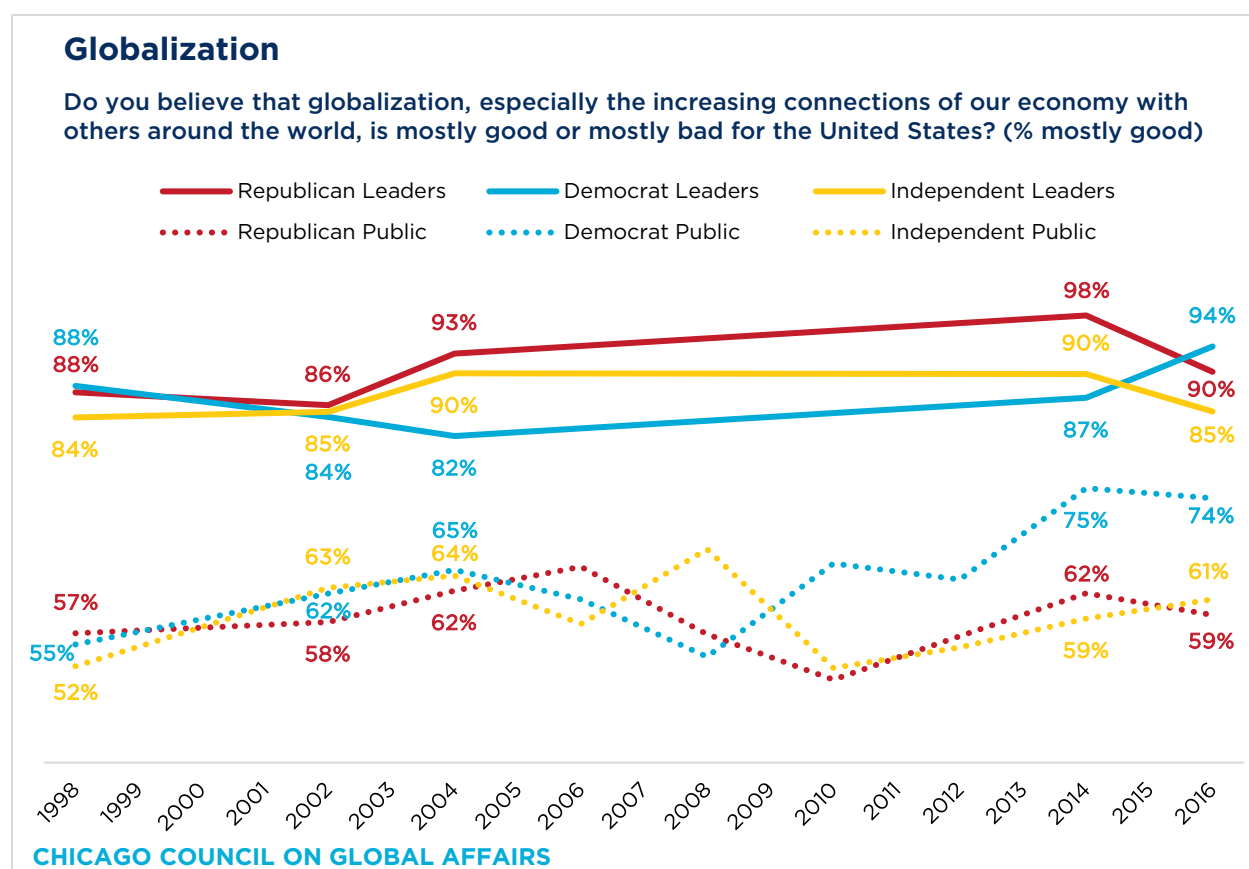
Donald Trump repeatedly pitched the downsides of trade agreements on American jobs and criticized US immigration policy to great electoral effect. He has also criticized American allies in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East for being free riders. These issues have continued to play prominent roles early in his presidency. While there are differences between the expert consensus and typical Americans on these points, the public and leadership are generally aligned on most foreign policy questions about international engagement. To be sure, there is evidence of partisan divisions, but at this point, there is no evidence of a hard turn toward isolationism. President Trump's ability to shift public and leader opinions will prove to be an important test of the durability of the broader foreign policy consensus in the coming years.

### **Majorities Support Globalization and See Many Benefits to Free Trade**

Despite the intensity of the debate over trade in the 2016 presidential campaign, both foreign policy leaders and the public largely supported globalization and international trade. About nine in ten opinion leaders said that globalization is mostly good for the

United States, as did six in ten (59%) of the Republican public and three-quarters (74%) of the Democratic public.

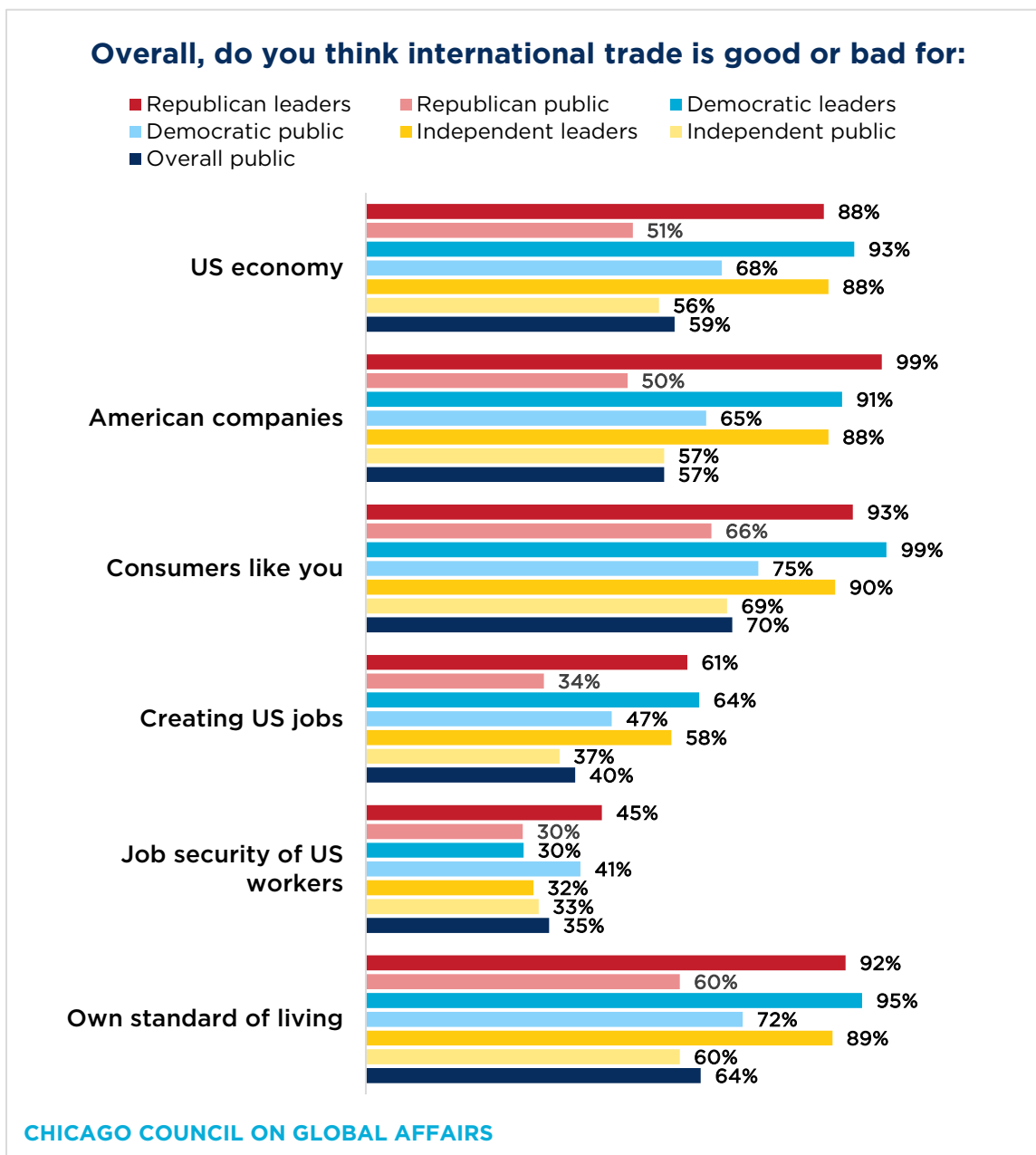
Since the Council first asked this question in 1998, Democrats among the public have grown more positive on globalization, while Republicans have held steady. Opinion leaders' views over the same period have changed little, with leaders across party affiliation remaining strongly positive on globalization.



Further, there is broad consensus among both the foreign policy elite and the American public that international trade—one of the core components of globalization—has had several positive impacts for the United States overall.

Majorities of the public of all political stripes said that international trade benefits the US economy, American companies, American consumers, and standards of living. However, Americans have not completely embraced all consequences of international trade and identified two points of caution. Americans of all political stripes viewed international trade as bad for both job security and creating jobs. When it comes to Americans' job security, the American public was not alone. Only a minority of the foreign policy experts said that international trade was good for the job security of American workers. But at

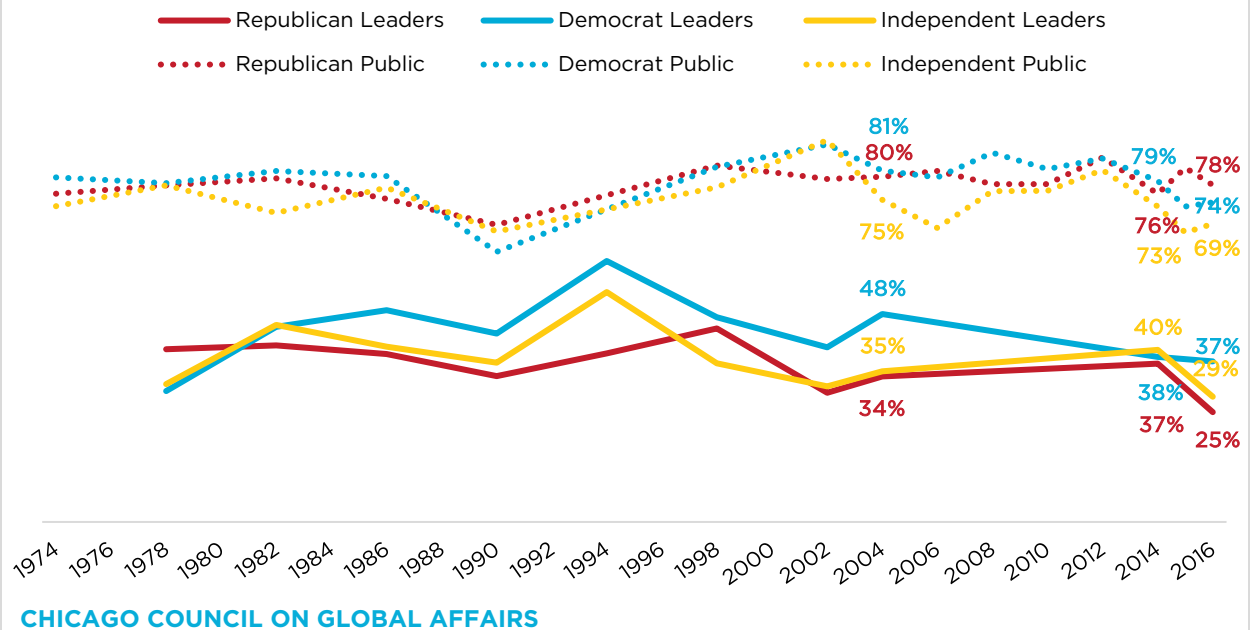
least six in ten experts across political affiliation said that trade was beneficial for job creation.



The issue of jobs has been vitally important to the public over decades of surveys. In 2016, majorities of self-identified Republicans (78%), Democrats (74%), and Independents (69%) considered protecting American jobs a very important goal. Yet opinion leaders were far less concerned: just one-quarter (25%) of Republican opinion leaders and one-third (37%) of Democratic opinion leaders said protecting jobs is a very important goal of US foreign policy. In fact, since 1978, Americans have consistently prioritized protecting American jobs as a top goal in contrast to opinion leaders.

## Protecting American Jobs

Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy, or not an important goal at all (% very important)



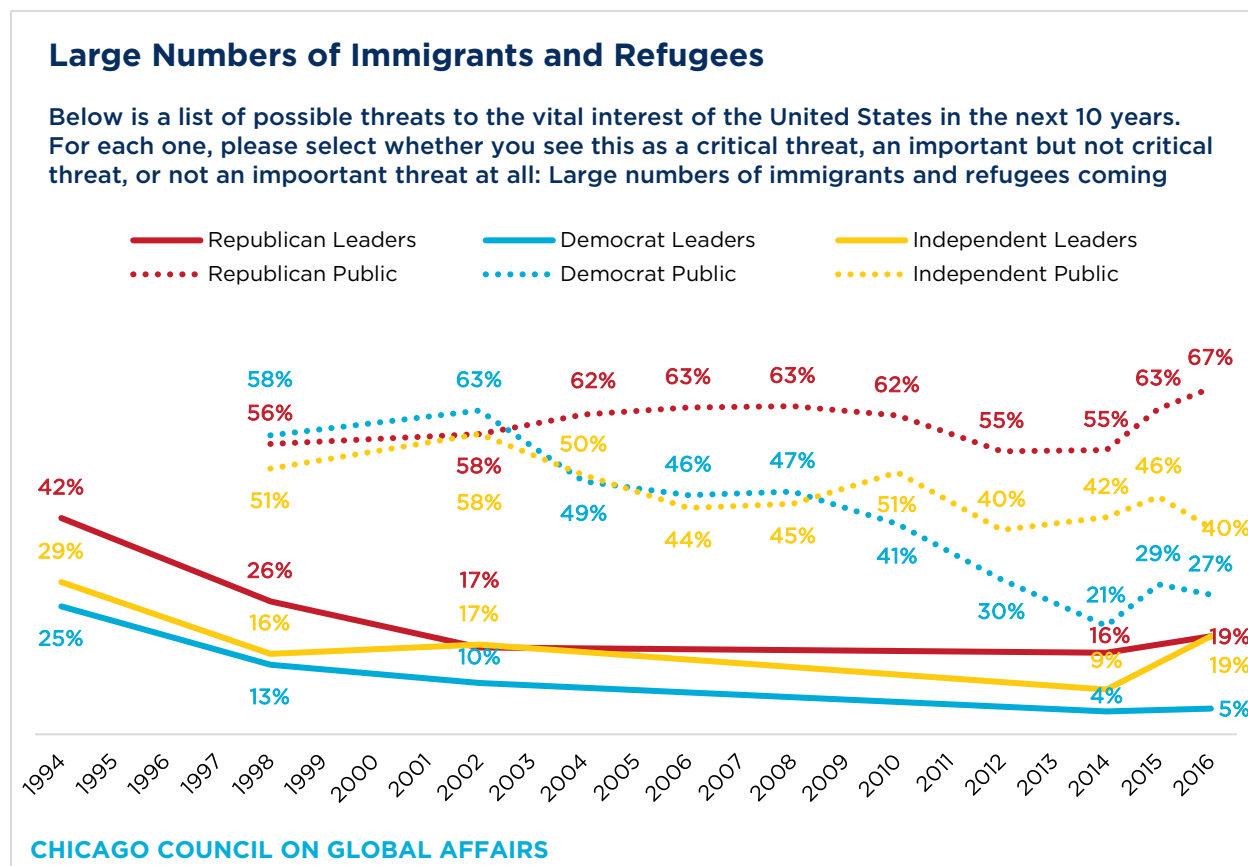
The priority Americans place on protecting jobs and their belief that trade negatively impacts job security and job creation helps explain the effectiveness of Trump's message. While majorities of foreign policy elites have rarely supported the use of US foreign policy to protect American jobs—likely because it implies employing the tools of economic nationalism and protectionism—this is a message that has traction among the public.

Of course, what the Trump administration's policies will mean for trade in practice is unclear. The inherent tension between protecting American jobs and the broadly recognized benefits of globalization complicate any protectionist proposals. If the benefits for consumers, US companies, and the US economy are clearly undermined by President Trump's trade agenda, then public support for his agenda may be compromised.

### Republican Public, Leaders Disagree on Threat of Immigration

Along with Trump's tough talk on trade, immigration formed another key pillar of his primary campaign message. For a candidate who sought to break with the Republican establishment, the data show that immigration offered that opportunity. Among the Republican public in 2016, a historic high of 67 percent said that large numbers of immigrants and refugees entering the United States is a critical threat. Just 19 percent of Republican opinion leaders said the same.

This gap is not new. Since the question was asked to both opinion leaders and the public in 1998, there has been at least a 30 percentage point gap among Republicans. This gap had gone unexploited for nearly two decades, but now that it has been exploited there is a very real chance that it will become a prominent feature of future campaigns.

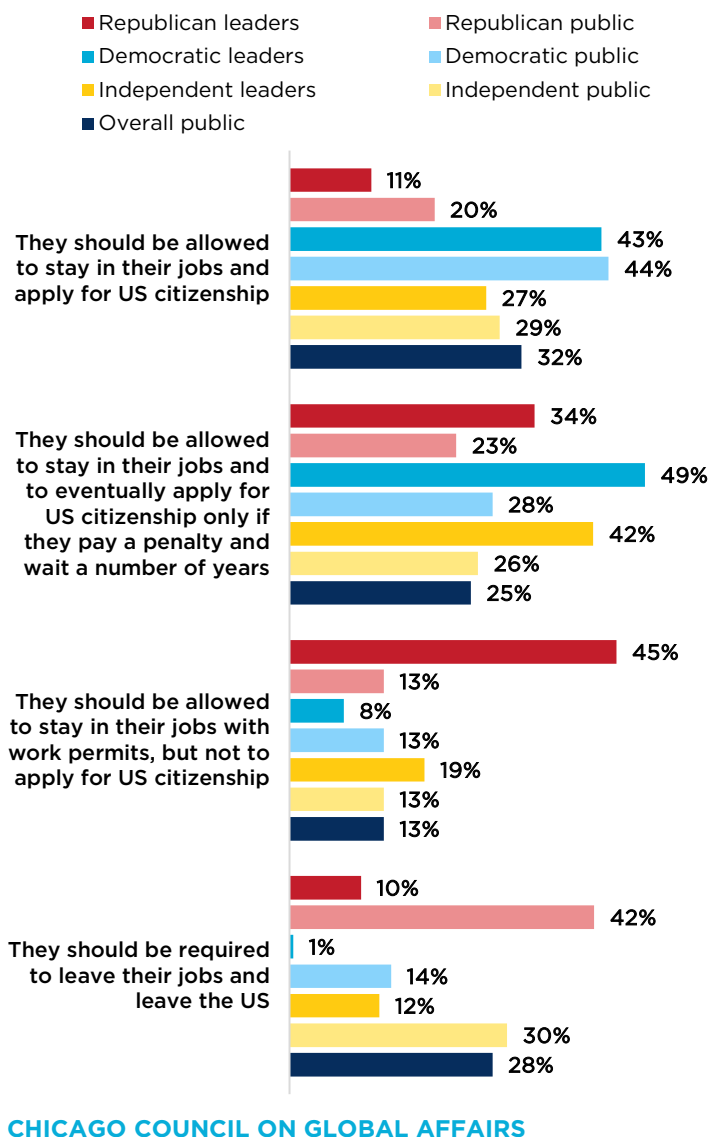


The Republican public has shifted relatively little on this issue since the question was first asked in 1998, but the Democratic public has steadily become less threatened over time. In 2002, 63 percent of the Democratic public cited illegal immigration as a critical threat compared to just 27 percent by 2016. There are a few possible explanations for this shift. One is that self-identified Democrats are now a more diverse group than in previous years, with fewer whites as a percentage of total supporters than among Republican party supporters.<sup>2</sup> In addition, some Democrats may have negatively reacted to the Patriot Act policies enacted under George W. Bush after the September 11 attacks that expanded enforcement measures to identify and remove immigrants, raised hurdles for entry into the United States, and targeted people of Arab and Muslim backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In 2002, 92 percent Republicans self-identified as white in the Chicago Council Survey. Among Democrats, that number was 74 percent. By 2016, Republicans were 88 percent white compared to 63 percent of Democrats.

<sup>3</sup> Preserving Safety and Freedom Post 9/11, address by Nadine Strossen, President of the ACLU To the Counter-Terrorism and Civil Liberties Conference, CMSU, March 19, 2003, <https://www.ucmo.edu/cjinst/issue3.pdf>

### When it comes to immigration, which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants who are currently working in the US?



Given the stark contrast between their perceived threat from immigration, it is not surprising that the Republican public (42%) was more inclined than Republican opinion leaders (10%) and the Democrats (14% Democratic public, 1% leaders) to favor deportation for illegal immigrants currently working in the United States. But deportation is not the Republican public's top choice for handling illegal immigrants. Perhaps unexpectedly, the GOP public tended to favor some type of legal status for illegal immigrants. Four in ten supported either an immediate path to citizenship (20%) or citizenship after a fine and waiting period (23%). An additional 13 percent supported work permits without a path to citizenship. As the figure shows, Democrats were much more likely to support some kind of path toward citizenship.

As on trade, the leader-public data demonstrate how the Trump platform was able to activate the public's fear of immigration in a way that other Republican leaders had not been willing to do. Trump's pledge to [harden policies toward illegal immigrants](#) speaks to a

significant portion of the Republican public.

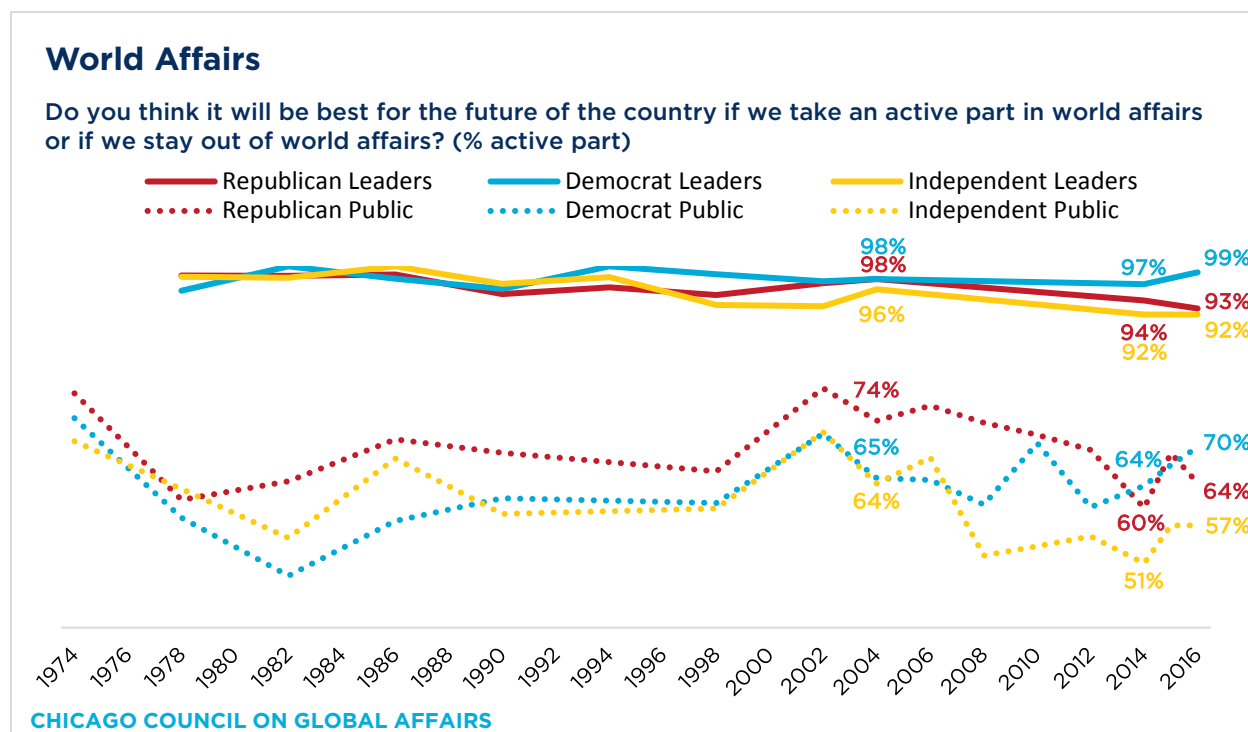
### A Broad Foreign Policy Consensus

The previous sections outline disagreements between foreign policy experts and the public on immigration and the job-creating potential of trade, issues that touch on both

domestic and foreign policy. When it comes to issues that more closely hue to traditional foreign policy, the American public shares much common ground with “The Blob.” While the foreign policy elite often have more in common with each other regardless of their partisan loyalties, elite-public differences on preferences for the US global role are often a matter of degree rather than outlook.

When it comes to the broadest measure of globalism, a majority Americans of all political stripes said that the United States should maintain an active part in world affairs. The same has been more or less true since 1974. Foreign policy leaders are relatively more stable than the public with at least nine in ten from all political affiliations consistently expressing support for active engagement (see figure). An important question is now how the United States should fulfill that role.

On that, few among the public—and even fewer opinion leaders—thought the United States should play no leadership role at all. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of the Democratic opinion leaders said the United States should play a shared leadership role and majorities of the Democratic public (70%) and Republican public (53%) agreed. But there was not complete agreement among the foreign policy experts on whether the United States should play a shared leadership role or be the dominant world leader. Only the Republican elite (64%, see Appendix for full figure) that said the United States should be the dominant world leader.



One manifestation of shared leadership is alliances and security partnerships. Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, then-candidate Trump called into question US commitment to allies and the specific relevance of NATO—although as president he has said NATO is no longer obsolete. But his campaign rhetoric was not reflected in US



opinion, either among opinion leaders or the general public. In both cases, majorities said that the United States should either maintain or increase its commitment to NATO. Less than 20 percent of each group favored decreasing the US commitment, and fewer than one in ten supported withdrawing from NATO (see Appendix for full figure).

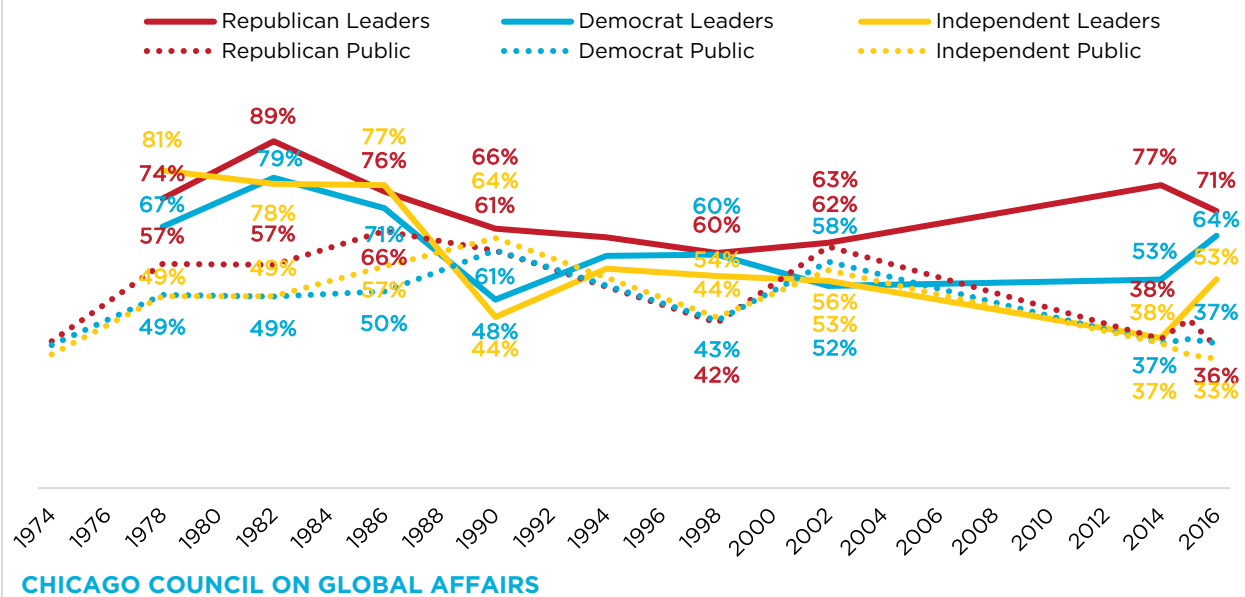
Moreover, Americans also expressed appreciation for traditional alliance partners in Asia. Majorities among all groups said that the United States should place a higher priority on building up strong relations with traditional allies like South Korea and Japan, even if this might diminish our relations with China (Appendix Figure D). In addition, both leaders and the public supported maintaining long-term US military bases in key allied nations such as Japan, South Korea, and Germany (Appendix Figure C).

Perhaps the most stringent measure of alliance commitment is how high a priority Americans place on protecting allies' security. On this measure, there were large differences in opinion between opinion leaders and the public. Majorities of opinion leaders characterized defending allies as a very important goal, compared to no more than four in ten among the public. It could be that this element of Donald Trump's demands for more burden-sharing from US allies has some sway among a portion of the public.

The public had been more likely to prioritize defending allies as a critical threat during the Cold War and after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Again, there could be several reasons for this decline, though the data do not provide much beyond speculation. Americans among the public may not be aware of alliance obligations, they may believe the US allies can defend themselves in the post-Cold War world, and they may feel that US allies have not always reciprocated when the United States requested military assistance for missions abroad.

## Defending our Allies' Security

Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important goal, or not an important goal at all: defending our allies' security (% very important)



However, the belief among the American public that defending allies is not an important US foreign policy goal should not be seen as a wholesale endorsement of the Trump administration's outlook on US foreign policy. There is seemingly little appetite to decrease commitments to long-held US allies, with perhaps no better example than NATO.

## Common Views on Threats

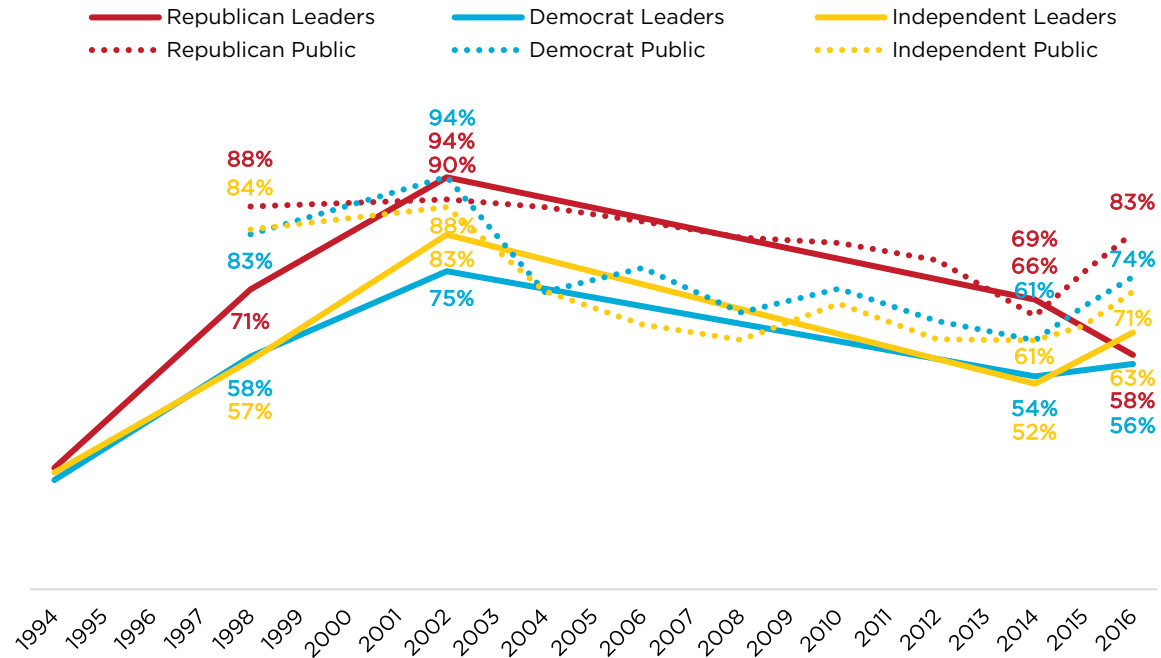
There is a shared view of the top threats facing the United States. Americans across party lines and among both leaders and the public agreed on the top threats facing the United States: terrorism and the spread of nuclear weapons. Both issues have been consistent priorities for the public and leaders alike since at least 1998.

The Trump administration cited terrorism as a top threat facing the country, pledging to come up with a plan to eradicate ISIS in its first days in office.

There is consensus about this threat across opinion leaders and the public. Majorities of opinion leaders both among Republicans (58%) and Democrats (56%) viewed international terrorism as a critical threat. Even larger majorities of self-described Republicans (83%) and Democrats (74%) stated the same. This made terrorism the top-ranked threat among the public across party lines, and a top-three threat for opinion leaders.

## International Terrorism

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: international terrorism (% critical threat)



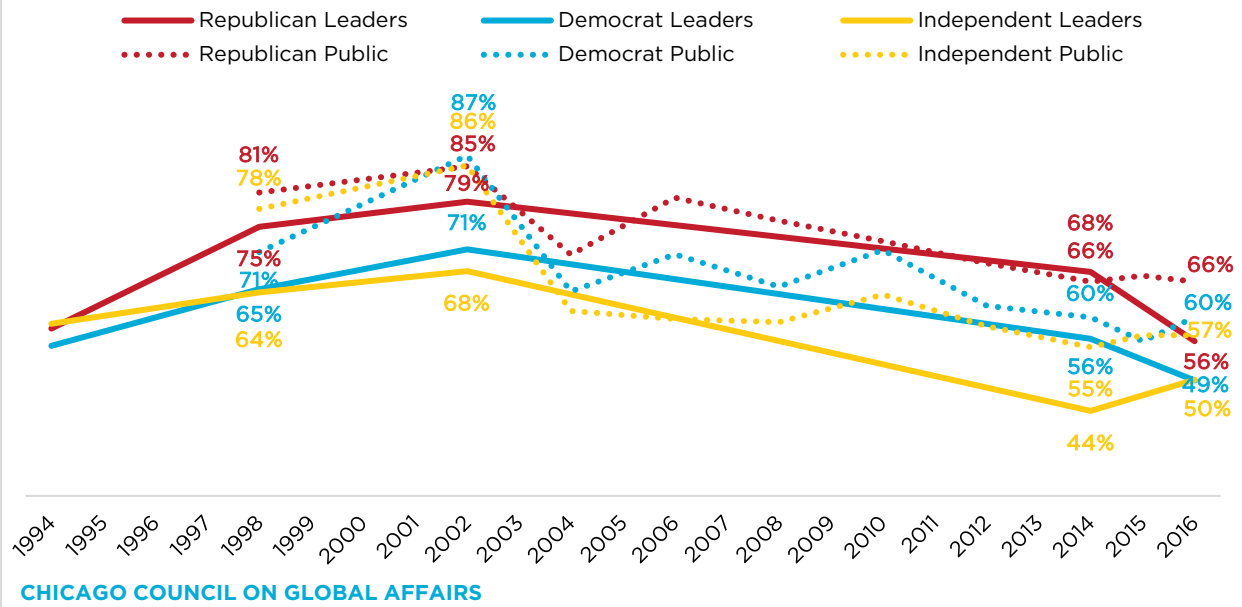
CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

In dealing with the threat of violent Islamic extremist groups in Syria specifically, nine in ten leaders supported airstrikes, and 72 percent of the public stated the same. There was also very little support for negotiating an agreement to keep Assad in power—just one-third of the public and leaders supported such negotiations. While this poll was conducted before the April 2016 airstrikes against the Assad regime in the wake of its use of chemical weapons, subsequent polls by other organizations have found broad support for such strikes.

The threat of nuclear proliferation has also long been a top concern for both Republicans and Democrats and for both opinion leaders and the public. Though concern has declined among all groups from its peak in 2002, majorities of nearly all groups saw the possibility of nuclear weapons spreading to unfriendly countries as a critical threat. The exception was among Democratic and Independent leaders, with only pluralities percent naming it a critical threat, though it is one of the top five threats identified by Democratic and Independent leaders.

## Nuclear Proliferation

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: The possibility of unfriendly countries becoming nuclear powers (% critical threat)



But on the threat of nuclear proliferation, the Trump administration seems to have broken with both the public and with opinion leaders. Throughout the campaign, then-candidate Trump stated on multiple occasions that there may come a time when Japan and South Korea may have to consider acquiring their own nuclear weapons. This was repeated by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on his first trip to Asia. Such sentiment came at a time when concern about nuclear proliferation was trending downward, but it is unclear if the American public and opinion leaders would support additional countries gaining nuclear weapons, even if they were traditional allies dealing with their own security threats.

## Conclusion: Consensus Holding

At a time when many long-settled issues are once again being thrust back into view—such as the US commitment to NATO and the importance of nuclear nonproliferation—the American public and opinion leaders across party lines still largely hold consensus views of support for the international trading system, an active US role in foreign affairs, and maintaining support for US alliances.

The bipartisan consensus on foreign policy is one of the most enduring features of the United States and stands in stark contrast to the bitterly debated divides on the domestic policy, including health care, immigration, taxes, and education—which have only grown more acrimonious in the recent past.

The 2016 election has been widely read as a populist revolt, with average Americans rising up to reject the political elite, particularly on issues of immigration and trade. As the Council's parallel survey results show, there is an element of truth in this argument: the

American public and opinion leaders are in fact divided over several key issues, including the importance of protecting American jobs, US immigration policy, and the importance of protecting US allies' security. Perhaps not coincidentally, these areas where elite-public gaps exist are also the issue areas where Donald Trump's message has resounded the loudest.

But one should not overstate the level of division between these key groups on many key components of foreign policy. On core questions about the US role in the world, the value of alliances, and the importance of countering major security threats, consensus still largely persists.

## About the Chicago Council Surveys

From 1978 to 2004 the Council regularly asked a subset of questions from the Chicago Council Survey of American public opinion to a sample of “foreign policy leaders” including decision makers in executive branch agencies, Congress, academia, think tanks, the media, interest groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), religious institutions, labor unions, and business. These studies proved vital for researchers seeking to understand the relationship between public opinion and the views of policy leaders.

In 2014 the Council on Global Affairs revived this tradition and once again conducted a survey of foreign policy leaders in tandem with the 2014 public survey. The 2016 Chicago Council Survey’s parallel polls of opinion leaders and the public represent a continuation of the Council’s commitment to examining opinion on foreign policy and tracking both public preferences for foreign policy and potential gaps between the public and leaders. In partnership with the Texas National Security Network, the Council asked hundreds of foreign policy leaders questions on pressing issues in the world today related to US foreign policy using an online platform and a sample designed on past Chicago Council leadership surveys.

The Council on Global Affairs’ leadership sample represents a broad spectrum of those who are likely to influence US foreign policy because of their expertise or role in government or influential organizations. These 484 opinion leaders include persons working in Congress and executive branch agencies; fellows at top foreign policy think tanks; academics in the top universities for international relations; leaders of internationally focused interest groups and NGOs; leaders of labor unions, religious organizations, and multinational corporations; and members of the media writing on international issues. Throughout this report, the terms foreign policy leaders, opinion leaders, and in some cases, just leaders, are used interchangeably.

## Leader Survey Methodology and Limitations

This report is based on a leadership survey conducted August 25 to October 25, 2016 among 484 foreign policy opinion leaders from executive branch agencies, Congress, academia, think tanks, the media, interest groups and NGOs, religious institutions, labor unions, and business. While the survey team worked hard to design a sample that would reflect broad networks of policy leaders on both sides of the aisle, as in previous Chicago Council leader surveys, the final sample included a disproportionate number of Democrats (50% Democrat 17% Republican, 33% Independent). For this reason, the leader results are shown by partisan affiliation and not as an overall leader average.

To more closely reflect the composition of previous Chicago Council Survey leaders surveys, these data were weighted by target sample group to reflect the proportional representation of leader groupings within previous leader samples. As was true in the 2014 Chicago Council leadership survey, low response rates from business, labor, and religious leaders required heavily overweighting them. Therefore, individuals using these data for their own research purposes should use caution in interpreting the results from these small subgroups on their own.

In addition, while this leader survey should not be interpreted to reflect the views of elected officials, the respondents are influential members of their organizations, and many who are currently outside government service have held positions in government in the past. While this survey's sample was carefully and thoughtfully constructed to sample the full range of foreign policy opinion leaders, it cannot be directly compared to a scientifically executed public opinion sample (such as the 2016 Chicago Council Survey) in terms of margin of error or other familiar survey statistics. Despite these limitations, the Council on Global Affairs is confident the results will shed light on the views of opinion leaders and improve the dialogue around US foreign policy and policymaking.

### **2016 Chicago Council Public Opinion Survey**

The 2016 edition of the survey is the latest effort in a series of wide-ranging surveys on American attitudes toward US foreign policy. The 2016 Chicago Council Survey was made possible by the generous support of The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Korea Foundation, and the personal support of Lester Crown and the Crown Family.

The survey was conducted from June 10 to 27, 2016, among a representative national sample of 2,061 adults. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is  $\pm 2.38$ , including a design effect of 1.2149. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups.

Partisan identification is based on respondents' answer to a standard partisan self-identification question: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?"

The survey was commissioned by the Council on Global Affairs and conducted by GfK Custom Research, a polling, social science, and market research firm in Palo Alto, California using a randomly selected sample of GfK's large-scale nationwide research panel, KnowledgePanel® (KP). The survey was fielded to a total of 3,580 panel members yielding a total of 2,244 completed surveys (a completion rate of 63%). The median survey length was 20 minutes. Of the 2,244 total completed surveys, 183 cases were excluded for quality control reasons, leaving a final sample size of 2,061 respondents.

A full listing of questions asked in the 2016 Chicago Council Survey, including details on which questions were administered to split samples, is available online at [thechicagocouncil.org/survey](http://thechicagocouncil.org/survey).

*Thanks to Erica Carvell at New America and Lily Wojtowicz and Kelhan Martin at the Council for their help in preparing and executing this report.*

## Appendix: Additional Figures

Figure A

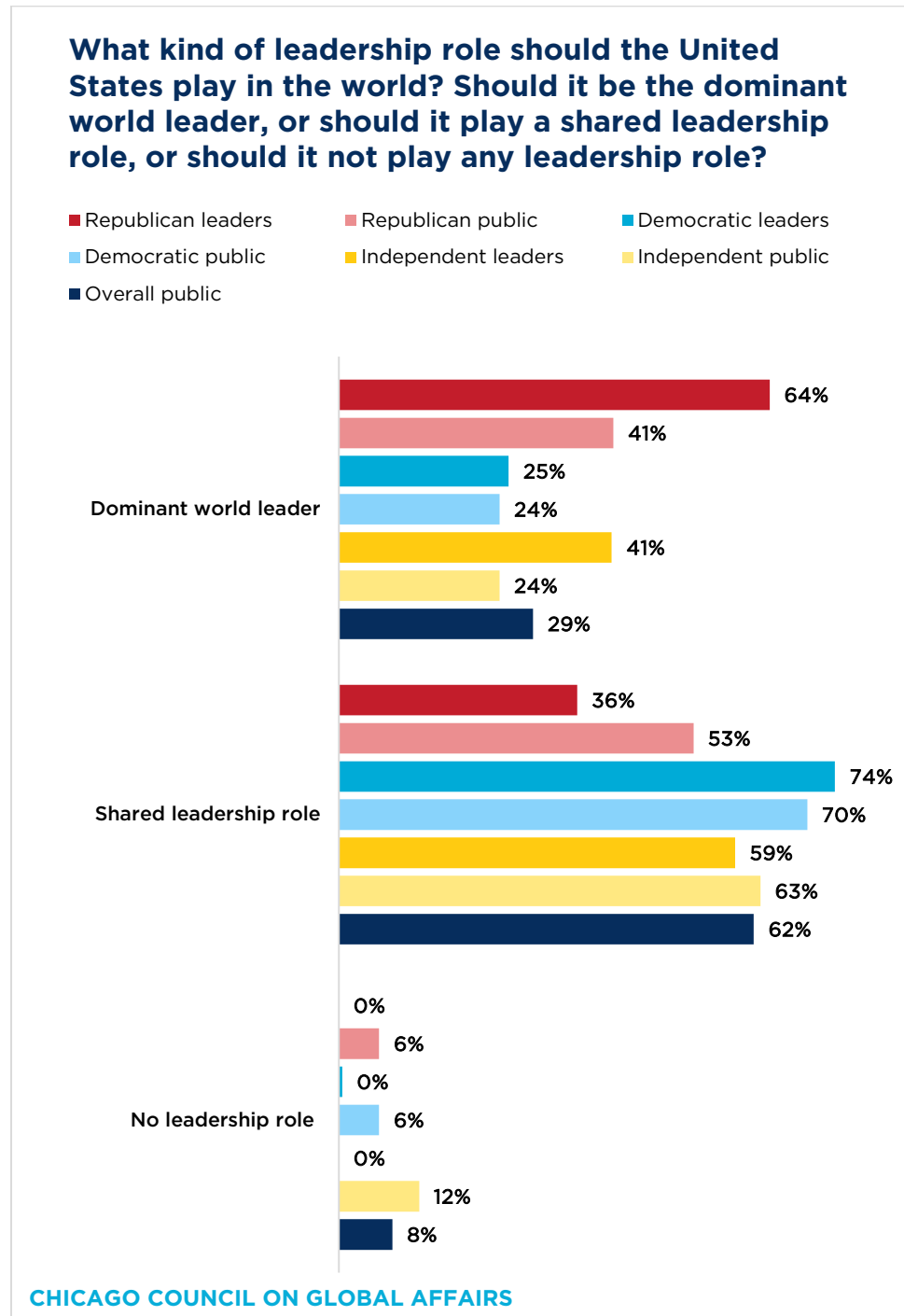




Figure B

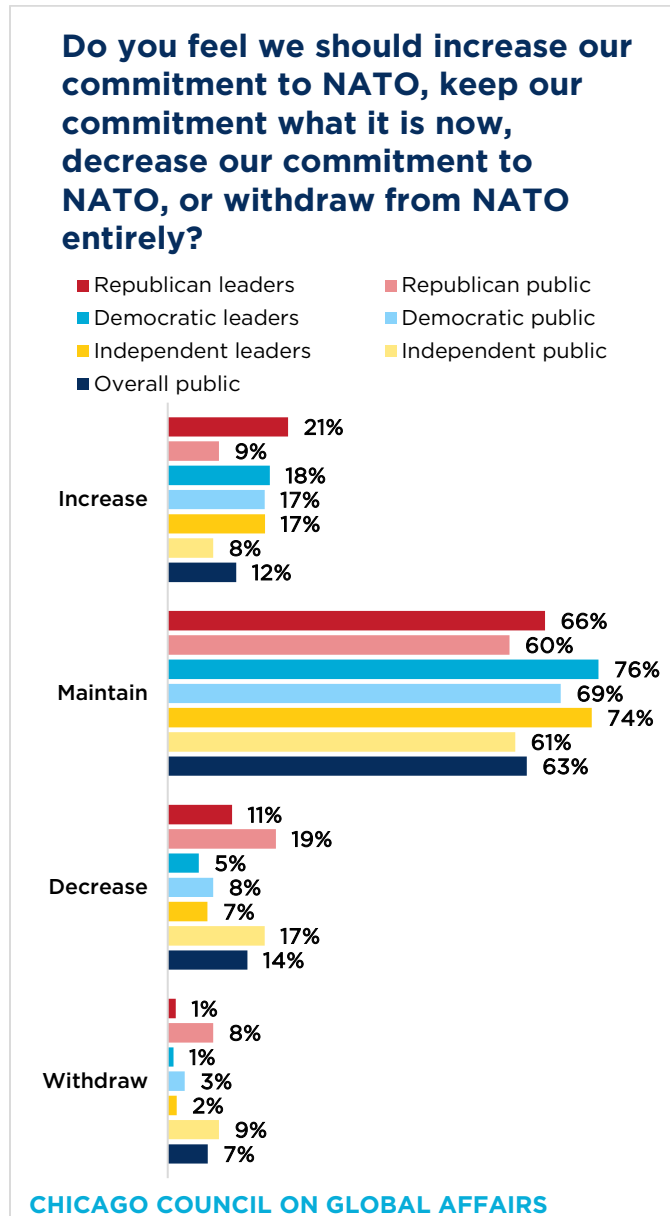


Figure C

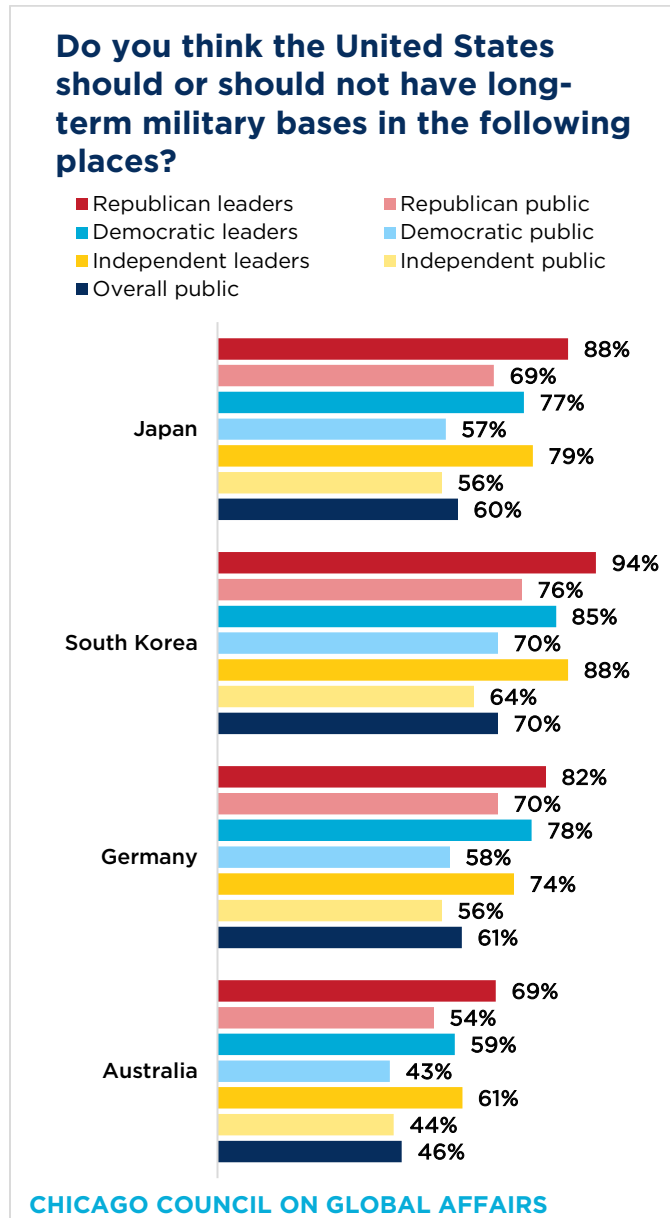
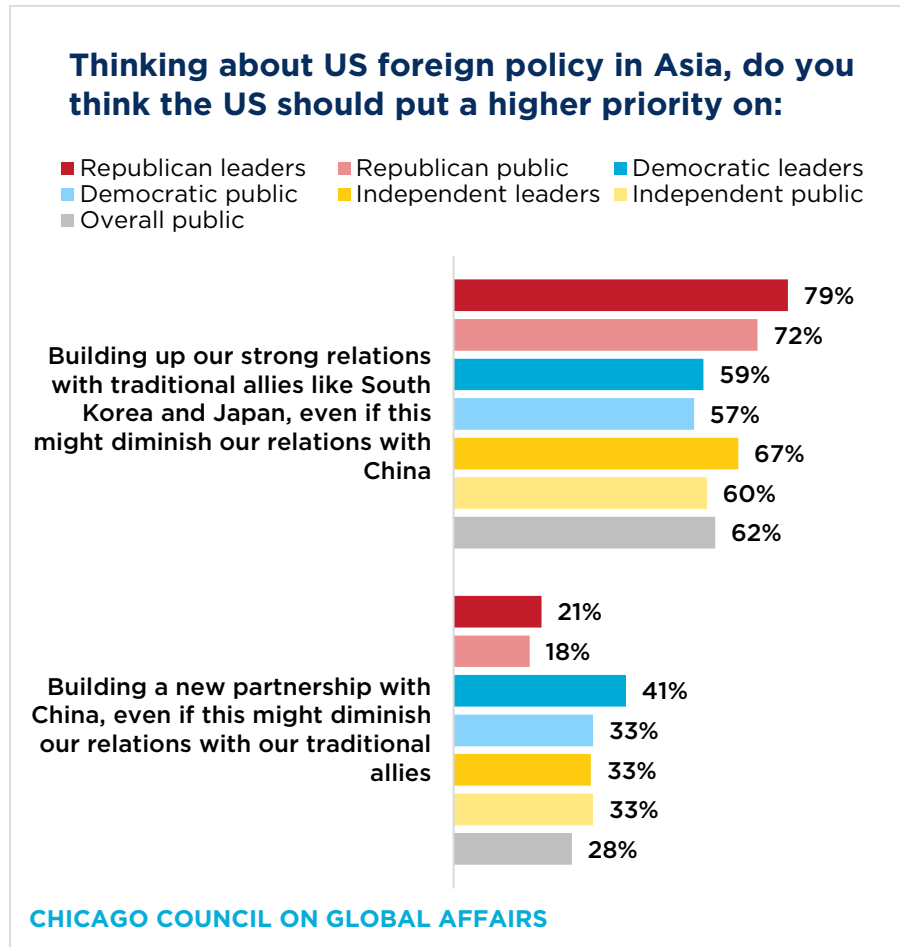


Figure D



## Appendix Table A: Threats

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all (% critical threat)

	Overall public	Republican public	Democratic public	Independent public	Republican leaders	Democratic leaders	Independent leaders
<i>International terrorism</i>	75%	83%	74%	71%	58%	56%	63%
<i>The possibility of unfriendly countries becoming nuclear powers</i>	61%	66%	60%	57%	56%	49%	50%
<i>North Korea's nuclear program</i>	60%	63%	64%	52%	35%	62%	50%
<i>Islamic fundamentalism</i>	59%	75%	49%	57%	66%	40%	59%
<i>An international financial crisis</i>	49%	49%	50%	49%	38%	52%	51%
<i>Large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the US</i>	43%	67%	27%	40%	19%	5%	19%
<i>Climate change</i>	39%	18%	57%	35%	20%	86%	48%
<i>China's military power</i>	38%	41%	36%	35%	56%	30%	43%
<i>Drug related violence and instability in Mexico</i>	34%	35%	34%	32%	4%	10%	20%
<i>A confrontation between North Korea and South Korea</i>	32%	32%	36%	29%	41%	37%	36%
<i>Russia's territorial ambitions</i>	30%	32%	31%	29%	52%	34%	43%
<i>China's economic power</i>	30%	39%	26%	28%	34%	12%	31%

## Appendix Table B: Goals

Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important goal, or not an important goal at all (% very important goal)

	Overall public	Republican public	Democratic public	Independent public	Republican leaders	Democratic leaders	Independent leaders
<i>Protecting the jobs of American workers</i>	73%	78%	74%	69%	25%	37%	29%
<i>Combating international terrorism</i>	72%	81%	70%	66%	75%	64%	65%
<i>Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons</i>	67%	68%	71%	62%	81%	79%	81%
<i>Attaining US energy independence</i>	64%	63%	66%	64%	20%	30%	26%
<i>Maintaining superior military power worldwide</i>	55%	71%	50%	49%	85%	49%	55%
<i>Improving America's standing in the world</i>	53%	56%	54%	48%	62%	41%	41%
<i>Maintaining superior economic power worldwide</i>	48%	53%	48%	45%	84%	40%	46%
<i>Improving the world's environment</i>	47%	29%	63%	45%	28%	75%	52%
<i>Controlling and reducing illegal immigration</i>	45%	68%	31%	40%	52%	2%	23%
<i>Combating world hunger</i>	42%	27%	56%	37%	25%	50%	37%
<i>Limiting climate change</i>	40%	19%	59%	38%	29%	82%	59%
<i>Promoting the full participation of woman and girls in their societies around the world</i>	37%	20%	53%	33%	22%	43%	21%
<i>Defending our allies' security</i>	35%	36%	37%	33%	71%	64%	53%