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Americans Fault China for Its Role in the Spread of COVID-19

Unfavorable views of China reach new historic high, and a majority supports taking a tougher stand on human rights

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How we did this

This analysis focuses on Americans' views of China on topics including how the country has handled the coronavirus pandemic, the state of bilateral relations and attitudes about the country more broadly. Pew Research Center has been tracking attitudes toward China since 2005. This report also includes demographic analysis comparing groups with different levels of education, age and political leanings.

For this report, we used data from a nationally representative survey of 1,003 U.S. adults conducted by telephone from June 16 to July 14, 2020.

Here are the [questions](#) used for the report, along with responses and [survey methodology](#).

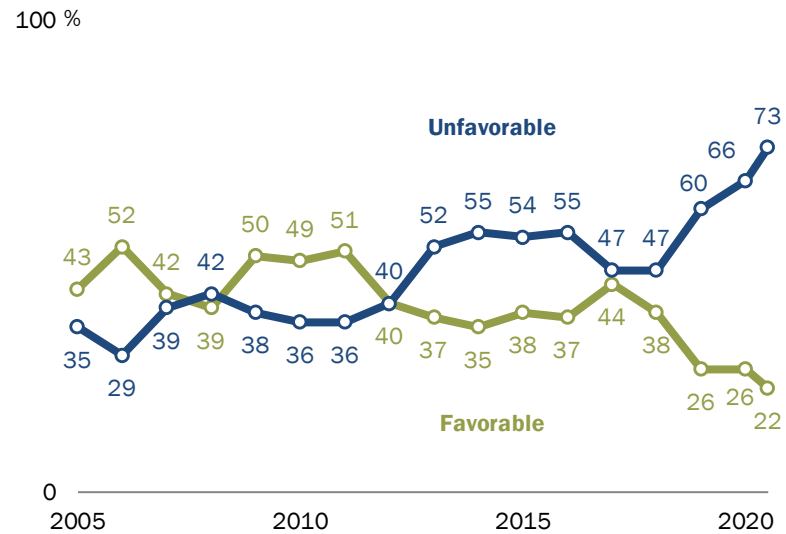
Americans Fault China for Its Role in the Spread of COVID-19

Unfavorable views of China reach new historic high, and a majority supports taking a tougher stand on human rights

Americans' views of China have continued to sour, according to a new Pew Research Center survey. Today, 73% of U.S. adults say they have an unfavorable view of the country, up 26 percentage points since 2018. Since March alone, negative views of China have increased 7 points, and there is a widespread sense that China mishandled the initial outbreak and subsequent spread of COVID-19.

Unfavorable views of China reach new highs in U.S.

% who say they have a(n) ___ opinion of China



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q8b.
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Around two-thirds of Americans (64%) say China has done a bad job dealing with the [coronavirus outbreak](#). Around three-quarters (78%) place a great deal or fair amount of the blame for the global spread of the coronavirus on the Chinese government's initial handling of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan.

Faith in President Xi Jinping to do the right thing in world affairs has also deteriorated: 77% have little or no confidence in him, up 6 percentage points since March and 27 points since last year.

More generally, Americans see Sino-U.S. relations in bleak terms. Around seven-in-ten (68%) say current economic ties between the superpowers are in bad shape – up 15 percentage points since May 2019, [a time in the trade war](#) when tariffs were ramping up.

Around one-in-four (26%) also describe China as an enemy of the United States – almost double the share who said this when the question was last asked in 2012. Another 57% say China is a competitor of the U.S., while 16% describe it as a partner.

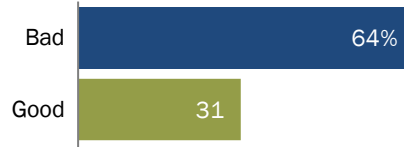
As the U.S. imposes sanctions on [Chinese companies](#) and [officials](#) over Beijing's treatment of Uighurs and other minority groups – [after originally resisting these actions](#) – the American public appears poised to support a tough stance. Around three-quarters (73%) say the U.S. should try to promote human rights in China, even if it harms bilateral economic relations, while 23% say the U.S. should prioritize strengthening economic relations with China at the expense of confronting China on human rights issues.

More Americans also think the U.S. should hold China responsible for the role it played in the outbreak of the coronavirus (50%) than think this should be overlooked in order to maintain strong bilateral economic ties (38%). But, when asked about economic and trade policy toward China, Americans are slightly more likely to prefer pursuing a strong economic relationship (51%) to getting tough on China (46%). Still, more support getting tough on China now than said the

Most Americans see China as having dealt poorly with COVID-19

% who say ...

China has done a ___ job dealing with the coronavirus outbreak



The Chinese government's initial handling of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan is ___ to blame for the global spread of the virus



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q10b & Q20.

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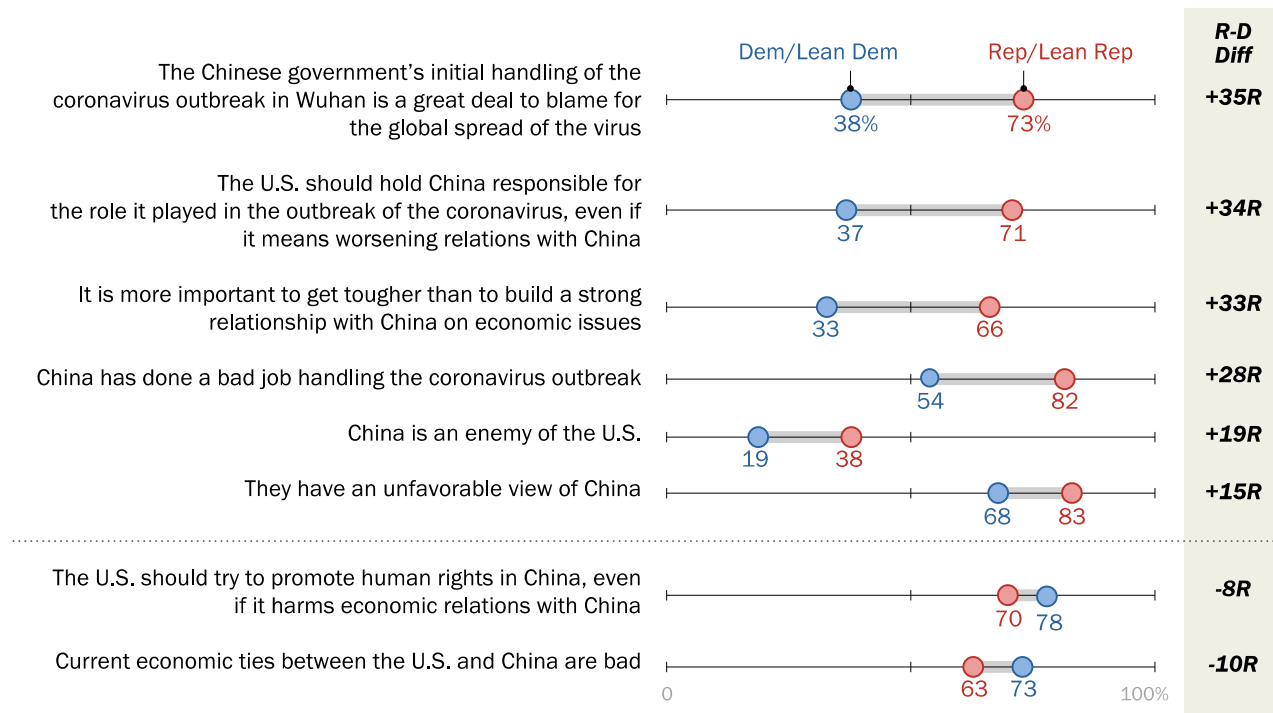
same in 2019, when 35% held that view.

While more Americans say the U.S. is the world's leading economy (52%) than say the same of China (32%), views of U.S. economic superiority declined 7 percentage points over the past four months. And those who see China as economically dominant are less likely to support getting tough on China economically, instead prioritizing building a strong relationship with China on economic issues. They are also less likely to say the U.S. should hold China responsible for its role in the pandemic at the expense of the bilateral economic relationship.

These are among the findings of a new survey by Pew Research Center, conducted June 16 to July 14, 2020, among 1,003 adults in the United States. The survey also finds that while Republicans and Democrats both have negative views of China and are critical of Beijing's handling of the coronavirus, this criticism is more prevalent among Republicans. Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are significantly more likely than Democrats and Democratic leaners to have a *very* unfavorable view of China, to criticize the Chinese government's role in the global pandemic, and they often want to take a tougher policy approach to the country. (For more on partisan differences in views on China, see "Republicans see China more negatively than Democrats, even as criticism rises in both parties".)

Republicans are much more critical of China's handling of COVID-19 and have more negative views of the country

% who say ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q8b, Q10b, Q16, Q17, Q18, Q19, Q20 & Q20a.
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Negative opinion of China sharply increased in recent months

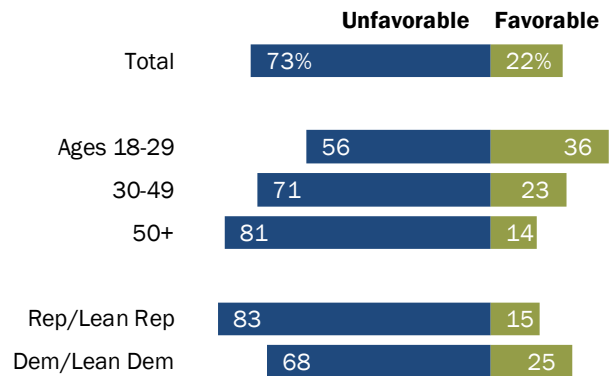
Around three-quarters (73%) of Americans have an unfavorable view of China today – the most negative reading in the 15 years that Pew Research Center has been measuring these views. This July survey also marks the third survey over the past two years in which unfavorable views of China have reached historic highs. Negative views have increased by 7 percentage points over the last four months alone and have shot up 26 points since 2018.

The percent who say they have a *very* unfavorable view of China is also at a record high of 42%, having nearly doubled since the spring of 2019, when 23% said the same.

Negative views of China are consistent across education levels. Around seven-in-ten of those who have completed at least a college degree and those who have less schooling voice this opinion. Men and women also differ little in their views of China.

Most Americans have an unfavorable view of China

% who say they have a(n) ___ opinion of China



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q8b.

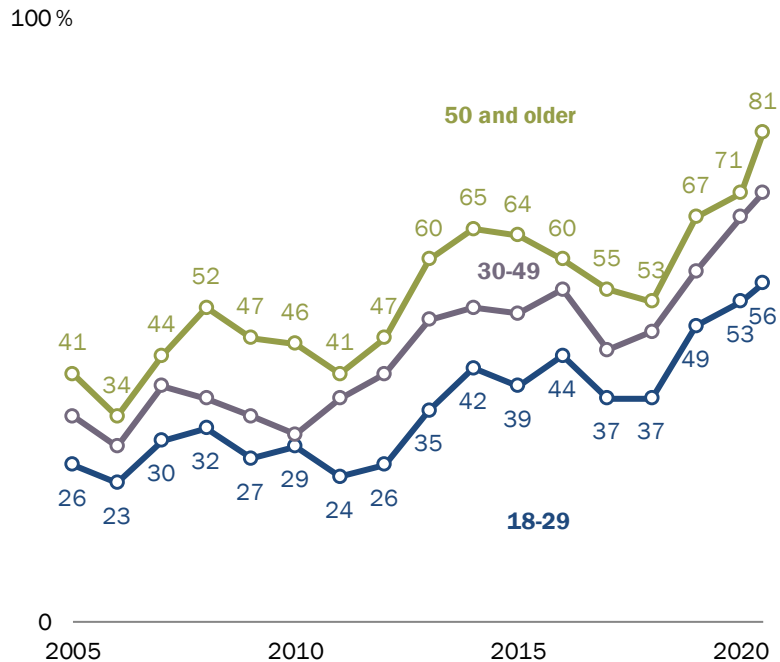
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While majorities of every age group now have an unfavorable view of China, Americans ages 50 and older are substantially more negative (81%) than those ages 30 to 49 (71%) or those under 30 (56%). For those ages 50 and older, this represents an increase of 10 percentage points since March.

Older Americans turn even more negative toward China in recent months

% who say they have an unfavorable opinion of China



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q8b.
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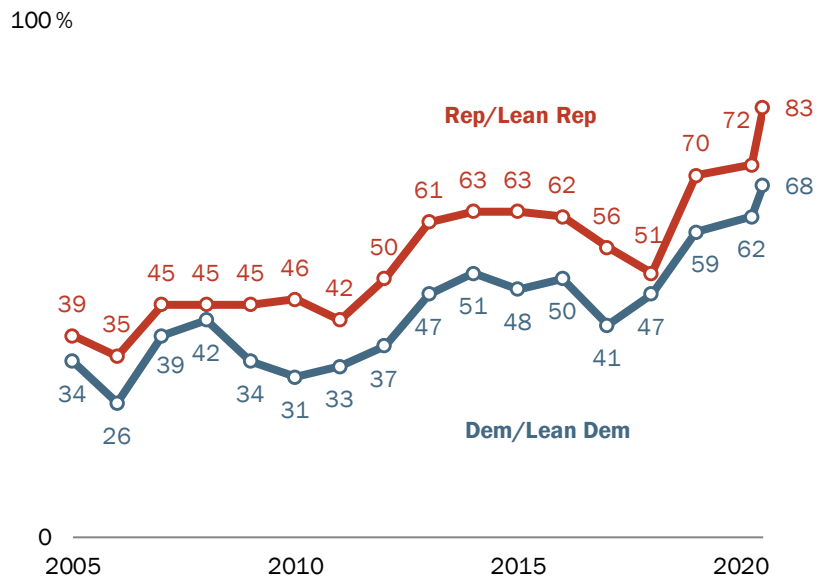
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As has been the case for much of the last 15 years, Republicans continue to hold more unfavorable views of China than Democrats, 83% vs. 68%, respectively. Republicans are also much more likely to say they have a *very* unfavorable view of China (54%) than Democrats (35%).

In the past four months, negative views toward China among Republicans have increased 11 percentage points. Over the same period of time, unfavorable views among Democrats have increased 6 points, resulting in a 15 point gap between the parties.

Republicans remain more unfavorable toward China, but all partisans are increasingly negative

% who say they have an *unfavorable* opinion of China



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q8b.
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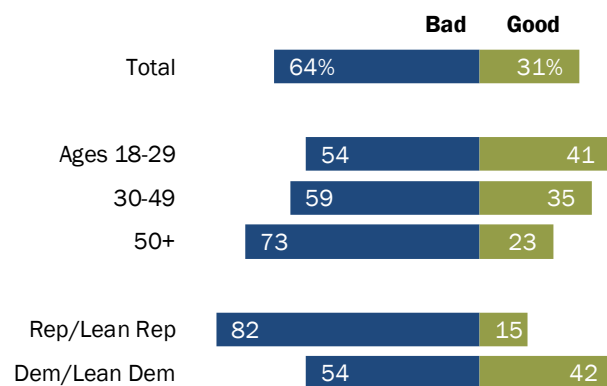
Americans are critical of China's role in the spread of COVID-19

Americans are highly critical of the way China has handled the coronavirus outbreak. Around two-thirds (64%) say China has done a bad job, including 43% who say it has done a *very* bad job. (When a [slightly different question](#) was administered online in April and May, 63% of Americans said China was doing only a fair or a poor job dealing with the coronavirus outbreak, including 37% who said it was doing a poor job.)

Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are significantly more likely than Democrats and Democratic leaners to say China has done a bad job dealing with the coronavirus: 82% vs. 54%, respectively. And they are about twice as likely to think China has done a *very* bad job (61% vs. 30%). Older people, too, are more critical, with 73% of those ages 50 and older finding fault in China's pandemic response, compared with 59% of those 30 to 49 and 54% of those under 30. But education has little relationship to how people think China has handled the novel coronavirus: Around two-thirds of those with and without a college degree say China has not done well in its response.

Republicans, older Americans more critical of China's response to COVID-19

% who say China has done a ___ job dealing with the coronavirus outbreak



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q10b.

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Around three-quarters of Americans say the Chinese government's initial handling of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan contributed either a great deal (51%) or a fair amount (27%) to the global spread of the virus. Republicans are particularly critical: 73% believe China's early handling of the pandemic contributed a great deal to its spread, compared with 38% of Democrats who say the same. Older people, too, are especially likely to lay the blame on China.

Most in U.S. say China's initial response to coronavirus contributed to its spread

% who say the Chinese government's initial handling of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan is ___ to blame for the global spread of the virus



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q20.

"Americans Fault China for Its Role in the Spread of COVID-19"

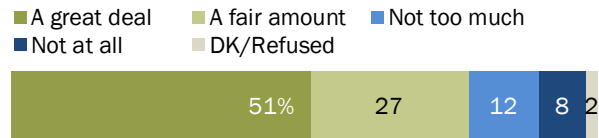
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Half of Americans think the U.S. should hold China responsible for the role it played in the outbreak of the coronavirus, even if it means worsening economic relations, while 38% think the U.S. should prioritize strong U.S.-China relations, even if it means overlooking any role China played in the outbreak. (The 8% of adults who say the Chinese government's initial handling of the virus is *not at all* to blame for the global spread of the virus were not asked this follow-up question, while 5% expressed no opinion, either to the first or second question.) Republicans and those who lean toward the GOP are about twice as likely (71%) as Democrats and Democratic leaners (37%) to say the U.S. should hold China responsible even at the expense of worse economic relations.

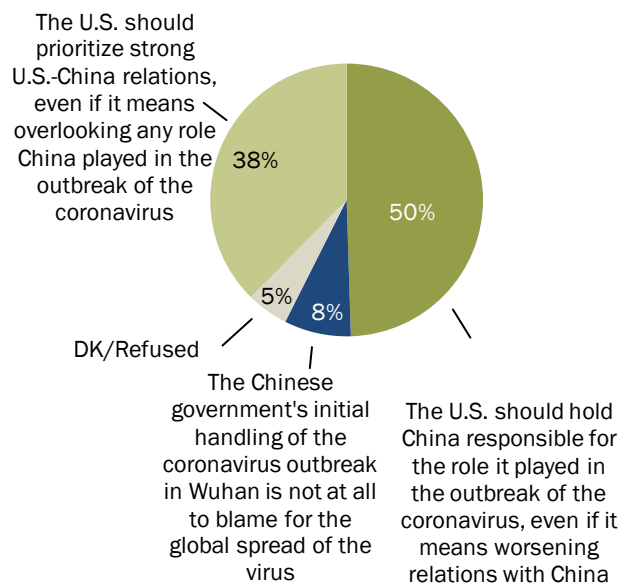
Those who think China has done a poor job handling the outbreak or who fault its role in the virus's global spread are significantly more likely to have negative views of the country. For example, 85% of those who say China had done a poor job handling the COVID-19 pandemic have an unfavorable view of the country, compared with 53% among those who think it's doing a good job dealing with the outbreak.

Half of Americans think the U.S. should hold China responsible for its role in the pandemic

% who say the Chinese government's initial handling of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan is ___ to blame for the global spread of the virus



% who say ...



Note: Based on total sample. Those who said the Chinese government's initial handling of the virus is not at all to blame for the global spread of the virus were not asked how the U.S. should handle China's perceived role.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q20 & Q20_tot.

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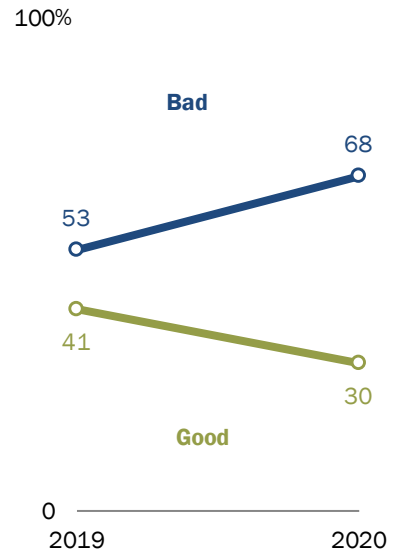
Americans divided on getting tougher with China on trade

When it comes to the bilateral economic relationship, Americans, by a more than two-to-one margin, say economic ties are bad (68%) rather than good (30%). And a quarter say economic relations are *very bad*.

While more than half thought economic ties were bad in the spring of 2019, when the question was last posed, this sense has increased by 15 percentage points over the past year. These shifts are visible across the political spectrum. Among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, who were split nearly evenly last year, a majority (63%) now believe bilateral economic ties are bad, a 15-point increase. Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents have also become more negative – roughly three-quarters (73%) say ties are bad, up 12 points from a year prior.

Rising share say U.S. economic ties with China are bad

% who say current economic ties between the U.S. and China are ...



Note: Don't know responses not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q16.
"Americans Fault China for Its Role in the Spread of COVID-19"

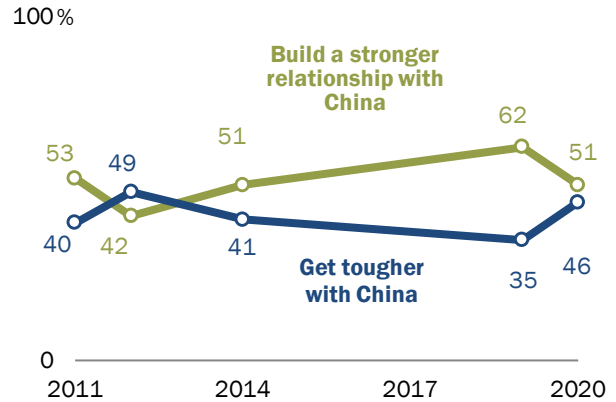
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And Americans have mixed preferences on how to best shape economic and trade policies with China. Around half say it is more important to build a stronger relationship with China, while 46% place more value on getting tougher with China. In the past year, the share endorsing a tougher stance with China on economic and trade policy has grown by 11 percentage points.

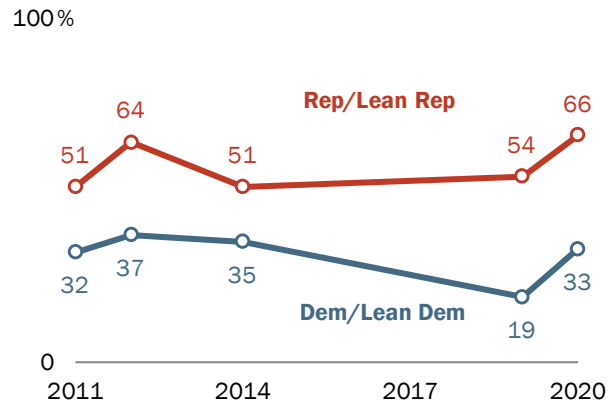
Republicans and Democrats have both shifted their views over the past year in favor of getting tougher on China on economics and trade. Today, roughly two-thirds of Republicans support this position, 12 points higher than in 2019. Democrats, for their part, are 14 points more likely this year to favor getting tough on China, though only a third pick this option over building relations.

U.S. public increasingly seeking tougher stance toward China on trade

% who say that when it comes to our economic and trade policy toward China, it is more important to ...



% who say it is more important to get tougher with China on economic issues



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020.

Q17.

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Majority favors promoting human rights in China over prioritizing economic relations

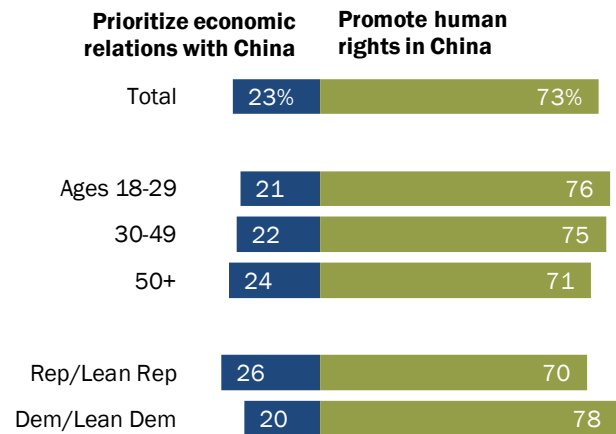
In recent months the Chinese government has come under fire on several human rights fronts, including a new [national security law in Hong Kong](#), [mass surveillance and detention of ethnic Muslim Uighurs](#), [drastic responses to the coronavirus](#) and [mistreatment of Africans in the country](#).

When asked whether the U.S. should prioritize economic relations with China or promote human rights in China, nearly three-quarters of Americans choose human rights, even if it harms economic relations with China.

Democrats are more likely than Republicans to emphasize human rights over economic gain, though at least seven-in-ten of both groups hold this opinion. Younger and older Americans alike prefer more emphasis on human rights than economic relations when it comes to China. Less than a quarter of all age groups say the U.S. should prioritize economic relations with China, even if it means not addressing human rights issues.

Most Americans say human rights a higher priority than economic relations for U.S.-China relationship

% who say the U.S. should ...



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q19.

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Most Americans see China as a competitor, but share seeing the country as an enemy grows

When asked if they see China as a competitor, enemy or partner, a majority of Americans say they see the country as a competitor (57%). This is a significant decline from last time the question was asked in 2012, when 66% said the same. The share of Americans who consider China an enemy has increased by 11 percentage points over the same period, from 15% to 26%. The proportion of Americans who see China as a partner has remained steady at 16%.

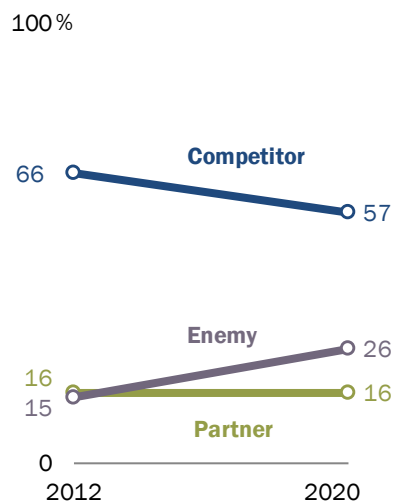
The share of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents who see China as an enemy has increased 21 percentage points since the question was last asked in 2012. In comparison, there has been an 8 percentage point increase among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, widening the gap between the two parties.

Perceptions of China's relationship with the U.S. differ by age. While roughly a quarter of those ages 18 to 29 see China as a partner, only 6% of those 50 and older say the same. Conversely, older Americans are nearly three times as likely as their younger counterparts to see China as an enemy (36% vs. 13%). Americans of all age groups are equally likely to see China as a competitor.

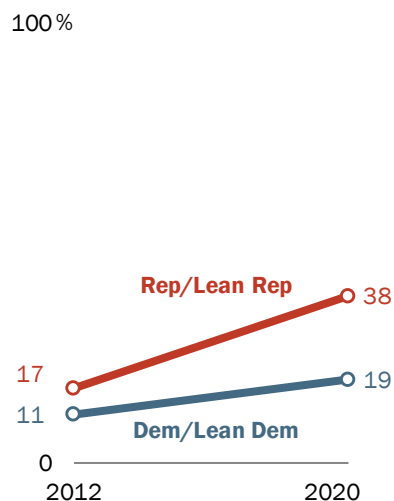
Americans who see China's initial handling of the coronavirus outbreak as at least somewhat responsible for the global pandemic are more likely to see China as an enemy.

Few Americans see China as a partner

% who think of China as a(n) ...



% of ___ who think of China as an enemy



Note: Don't know responses not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q18.

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Americans' views of their international economic standing falters

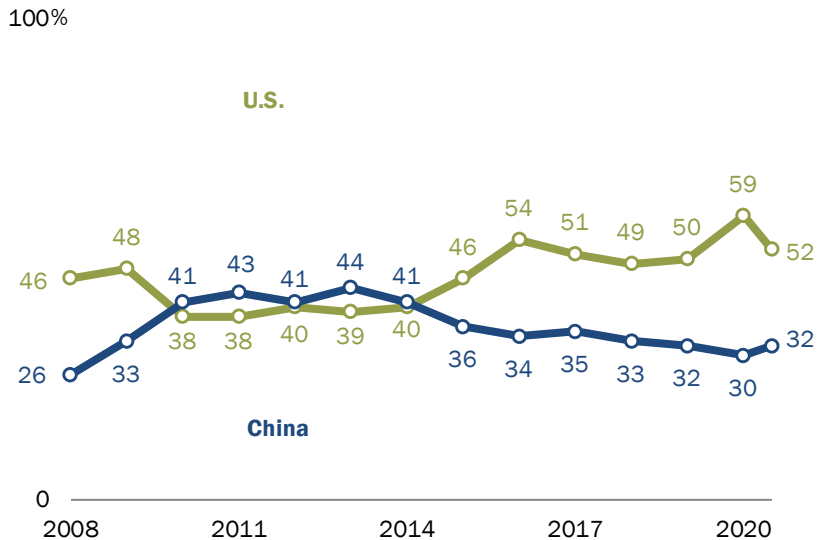
Since the coronavirus outbreak was declared a pandemic in March, the U.S. unemployment rate has skyrocketed, and the International Monetary Fund [predicts the U.S. gross domestic product will shrink](#) in 2020, while the Chinese economy will achieve positive growth. The American public's economic confidence has also declined. While 52% of Americans still see their country as the world's leading economic power, this is down from 59% in March, an unprecedented high in Pew Research Center's surveys on this question.

The share of Americans who see China as the world's top economy continues to hold steady at about a third (32%). No more than one-in-ten name either Japan or the European Union as the world's leading economy (5% and 6%, respectively).

American men are significantly more likely than women to see the U.S. as the world's top economy. But there are few differences in opinion across different age groups or education levels.

Americans still see their country as the world's leading economy – but this is down since March

% who say ___ is the world's leading economic power



Note: Data for "Japan" and "The countries of the European Union" and for the volunteered categories "Other" and "None/There is no leading economic power" not shown. Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q14.

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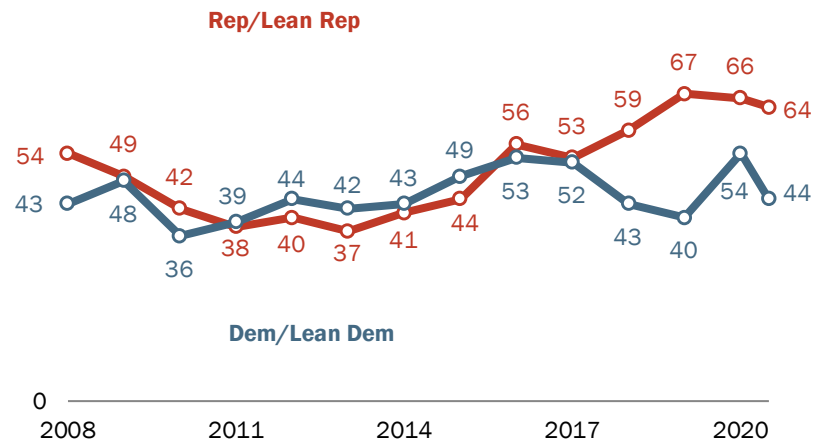
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While Republicans' views on this question have mostly held steady over the past four months, Democrats have become significantly less likely to see the U.S. as the leading global economy: 54% of Democrats held this opinion in March, compared with 44% today.

Since March, decline in share of Democrats who see the U.S. as the world's top economy

% of ___ who say the U.S. is the world's leading economic power

100%



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q14.
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Few have faith in President Xi

When asked how much confidence they have in Chinese President Xi Jinping to do the right thing regarding world affairs, about three-quarters of Americans say they have not too much confidence or no confidence at all (77%). And, for the first time since the question was first asked in 2014, a majority (55%) now say they have no confidence *at all* in the Chinese president. This is a 10-point increase from March and more than double the share who said so last year.

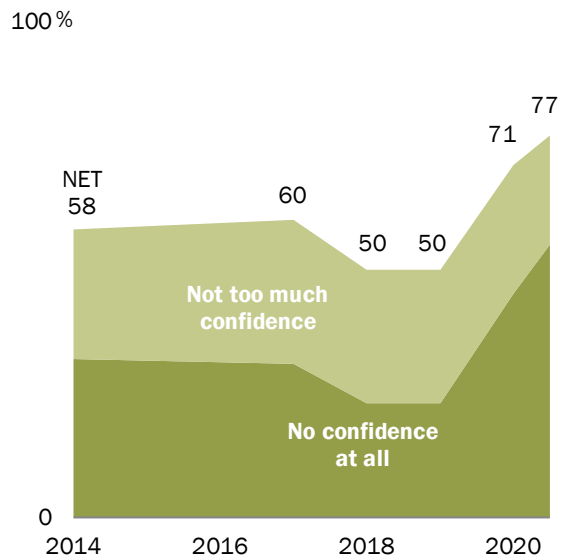
The low confidence in President Xi is tied to concerns over how China has handled the coronavirus pandemic. Americans who say the Chinese government has done a bad job dealing with the coronavirus outbreak are significantly more likely to have no confidence in Xi (64%) than those who say it has done a good job (39%). The same is also true for those who blame China for the global spread of the virus.

As Xi and Trump discuss execution of the [Phase 1 trade agreement](#), signed in January, Americans' views of the bilateral economic relationship also are associated with their opinion of Xi. Those who think Sino-U.S. economic relations are bad are significantly more likely to have no confidence in him (61%) than those who think relations are good (44%).

Americans ages 50 and older are about 20 percentage points more likely than their younger counterparts to have no confidence at all in Xi (62% vs. 40%). And a partisan divide in evaluations of Xi has reemerged. Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are now 10 points more likely than their Democratic counterparts to have no confidence at all in Xi. In comparison, partisans were equally likely to lack confidence in the Chinese leader in March, as well as in 2019 and 2018.

Americans continue to lose faith in Xi

% who say they have ___ in Chinese President Xi Jinping to do the right thing regarding world affairs



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-July 14, 2020. Q15b.

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Methodology

About Pew Research Center's Summer 2020 Global Attitudes Survey

Results for the survey are based on telephone interviews conducted under the direction of Abt Associates. The results are based on national samples, unless otherwise noted. More details about our international survey methodology and country-specific sample designs are [available here](#).