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Coming Together or Coming Apart?

Attitudes of Foreign Policy Opinion Leaders and the Public in the Trump Era

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Under the Trump administration, American foreign policy has experienced dramatic change in a number of areas, many of which reflect the imprimatur of the president himself. The United States has engaged in tariff disputes with major trading partners. The president has expressed deep skepticism about security alliances such as NATO, faulting allies for their failure to spend sufficiently on defense. The administration has initiated major restrictions in the country's immigration and refugee policies. The Trump administration has also sought to withdraw from major Obama-era agreements, including the Iran nuclear deal and the 2015 Paris agreement on climate change. Are Trump's policies creating stronger partisan divides among opinion leaders and the American public?

To investigate how public and opinion-leader views are changing during the Trump administration, the Texas National Security Network and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs conducted our third joint opinion leaders survey from August 2 to October 16, 2018. The survey included 588 foreign policy opinion leaders from different professional groups, including executive branch agencies, Congress, academia, think tanks, the media, interest groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), religious institutions, labor unions, and business. In this report,

we compare these findings among opinion leaders to findings among the public, using both the 2018 and 2019 Chicago Council Surveys.

Highlights

- In some areas, we find little evidence of polarization or partisan rallying around the president's position.
- Opinion leaders and the public increasingly see trade as beneficial to the United States, NATO continues to enjoy high bipartisan support, and there is broad support for US bases in Asia.
- The Republican public has embraced President Trump's anti-immigration point of view while the Democratic public increasingly rejects that position.
- On the Iran deal and climate change, long-standing sources of partisan division remain.

Introduction

The partisan rancor in Washington and the fracturing of domestic polity have led analysts to warn that domestic dysfunction in the United States undermines the country's ability to respond and adapt to global challenges. Tufts professor Daniel Drezner laments:

“Foreign policy discourse was the last preserve of bipartisanship, but political polarization has irradiated that marketplace of ideas. Although future presidents will try to restore the classical version of US foreign policy, in all likelihood, it cannot be revived.”¹

As well, Stanford professor Kenneth Schultz warns that political polarization undermines the country's ability to be a reliable actor in international affairs, affecting US relationships with friends and adversaries alike:

“As the parties become more ideologically distinct, there is a danger of greater swings from one administration to the next if the party in power changes. And as Congress loses its bipartisan center, it becomes less of a stabilizing force to keep swings in check.”²

New and growing disputes among political leaders would be one indicator of polarization. President Trump may have generated new sources of partisan division between opinion leaders on NATO and trade where differences historically have been limited. We might also observe widening differences on preexisting points of partisan divide, such as Israel, Iran, immigration, and climate change. Second, even if divisions among opinion leaders remain unchanged, we may see widening gaps at the mass public level, with Republican publics perhaps rallying around the president's new policy directions even if opinion leaders do not. Third, we might observe partisan division at all levels of society, with Republican leaders and public rallying

¹ Daniel W. Drezner, [“This Time is Different,”](#) *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2019).

² Kenneth Schultz, “Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Washington Quarterly* volume 40, issue 4, 2017, pages 7-28.

around the president's position while Democratic leaders and public stake out their opposition. Such a situation would point to partisan polarization in foreign policy all the way down from opinion leaders through the American public.³

Political Polarization Has Leaders Worried

This concern about partisan polarization was also reflected in the views of opinion leaders more broadly. In our survey of opinion leaders, the threat of partisan polarization emerged near the top of opinion leader concerns across the political spectrum. This preoccupation with partisan divisions suggests that leaders are profoundly aware that some of the greatest challenges facing the country come from within. Across the full sample, it was the top threat, with more than 70 percent of opinion leaders seeing polarization as a critical threat.⁴ The public, however, was less concerned: only half the public regarded polarization as a critical threat, behind other concerns such as North Korea and Iran's nuclear programs.

Are opinion leaders right to fear growing partisan polarization? The data suggest they are, in part. On several foreign policy issues that the president has made a high priority, the public is not with him, preventing the kind of dual-party rallying that would produce deep divisions between the parties at both the leader and public levels. Yet on other issues, such as immigration, climate change, and the Iran nuclear deal, partisan polarization has grown.

On trade, opinion leaders have long been more enthusiastic about the virtues of trade than the public, but in the Trump era, public opinion is now inching closer to opinion leaders. Similarly on NATO, public attitudes are now more in sync with opinion leaders and not with the president. There has been a similar convergence on US military bases in South Korea and Japan.

On immigration, we see a widening partisan public divide, with the Republican public very concerned that immigrants pose a threat while the Democratic public and opinion leaders across the board think this is a low priority. On issues like the Iran deal and climate change, partisan polarization at the leader and mass-public levels is also not new but has gotten worse.

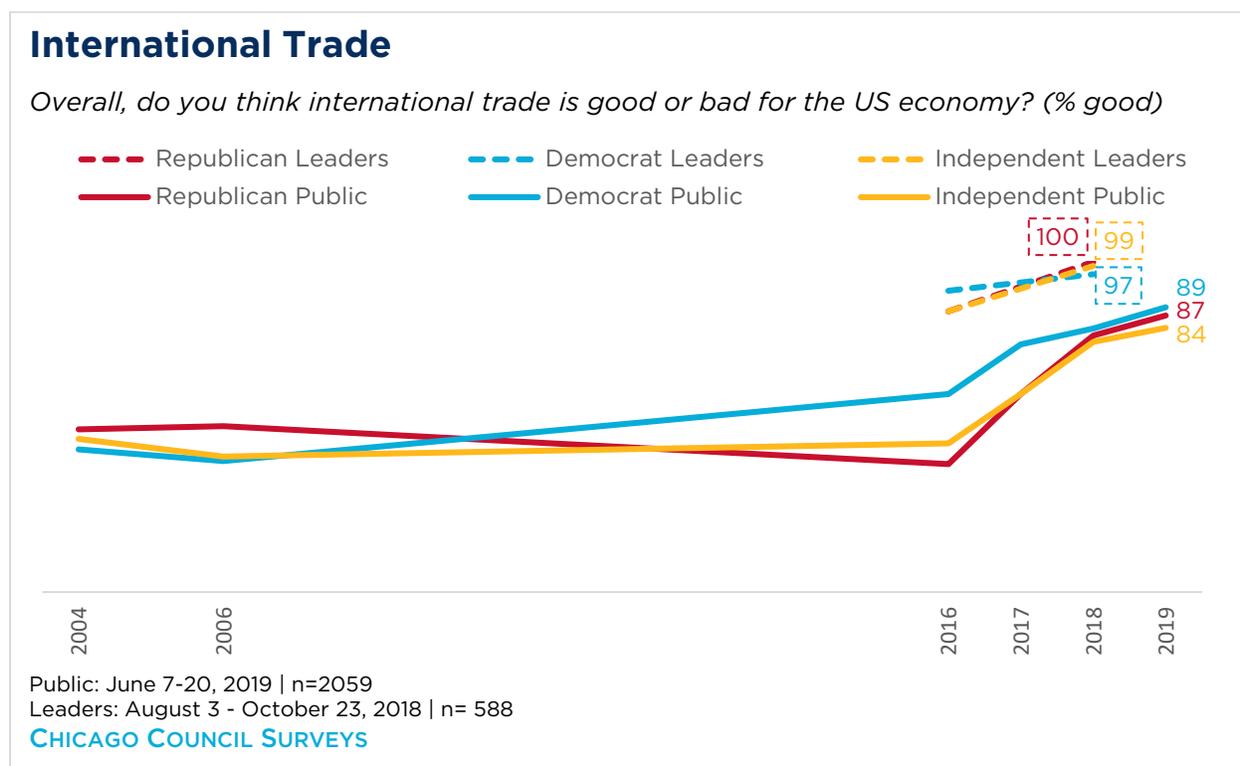
Shrinking Partisan Gaps on International Trade

Opinion leaders have consistently expressed belief in the benefits to the United States from international trade and globalization, while the public has been less supportive.

³ Mira Rapp-Hooper and Rebecca Lissner, "[The Open World](#)," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2019); Charles A. Kupchan, "[The Clash of Exceptionalisms](#)," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2018); Stephen Walt, "[America's Polarization Is a Foreign Policy Problem, Too](#)," *Foreign Policy*, March 11, 2019.

⁴ This value is weighted to reflect the proportions of professional groups in previous leader surveys. The weighted results show more than 70 percent of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans each regard polarization as a critical threat. Without weights, the value for Republicans is lower but still more than a majority. See the Methodology section at the end of the report for more information.

In the 2019 Chicago Council Survey of the American public, nearly nine in ten Democrats (89%) and Republicans (87%), and more than eight in ten Independents (84%) described international trade as good for the US economy. This is a shift from 2016, when nine in ten leaders across party lines said international trade was good for the US economy, compared to half of Republicans (51%) and Independents (56%) among the public, and two-thirds of Democrats (68%). Since 2016, public views of international trade as benefiting the US economy have surged, cutting the gap between leaders and the public on both sides of the aisle roughly in half. That said, the surge in public support for trade does not automatically signal opposition to the Trump administration’s approach to trade, at least among Republicans. In the 2019 Chicago Council public survey, 74 percent of Republicans approved of tariffs against China compared to 30 percent of Democrats and half of Independents.⁵



This convergence on the benefits of international trade did not fully carry over into public views of existing trade agreements like NAFTA when asked in 2018. Only a minority of Republicans among the public (43%) viewed NAFTA, which Trump had sharply criticized, as good for the US economy, while eight in ten Democrats (79%) and six in ten Independents (62%) said the same.⁶ Leaders were quite positive about the deal, with at least eight in ten leaders across party lines viewing NAFTA as good for the US economy. Strikingly, this meant that a similar proportion of Republican

⁵ Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, Craig Kafura, and Brendan Helm, [Rejecting Retreat: Americans Support US Engagement in Global Affairs](#), Chicago Council on Global Affairs, September 6, 2019, 28.

⁶ Republicans among the public are far more enthusiastic about the re-negotiated NAFTA, the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) than the original NAFTA agreement. For more, see: [“Under AMLO, Mexican Views of the US Rebound from All-Time Low”](#) by Jorge Buendía et al. March 6, 2019. Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

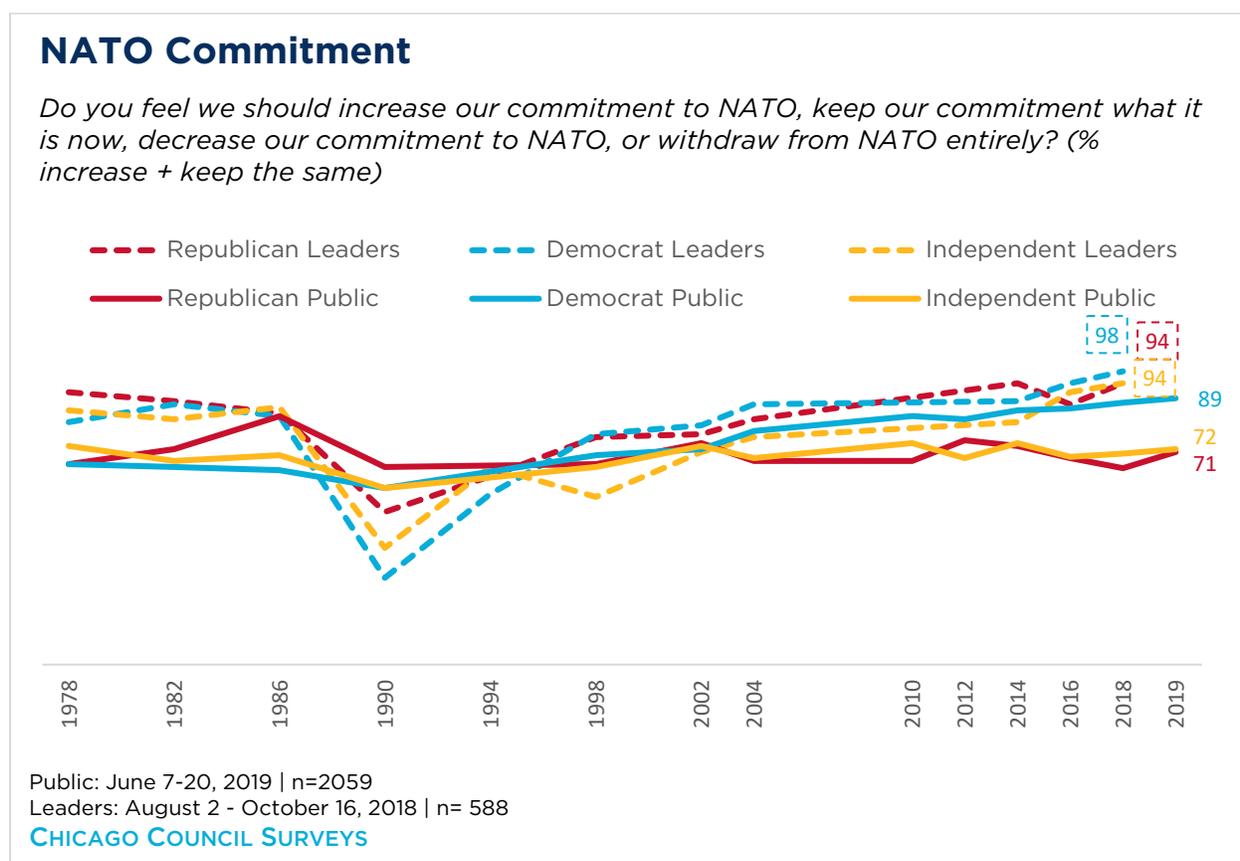
opinion leaders and the Democratic public believed that NAFTA was good for the US economy. (See appendix Figure A).

Strong Bipartisan Support for NATO

NATO has also been a focal point of discussion during the Trump administration. President Trump has repeatedly criticized America’s European allies for failing to meet the NATO target of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense.

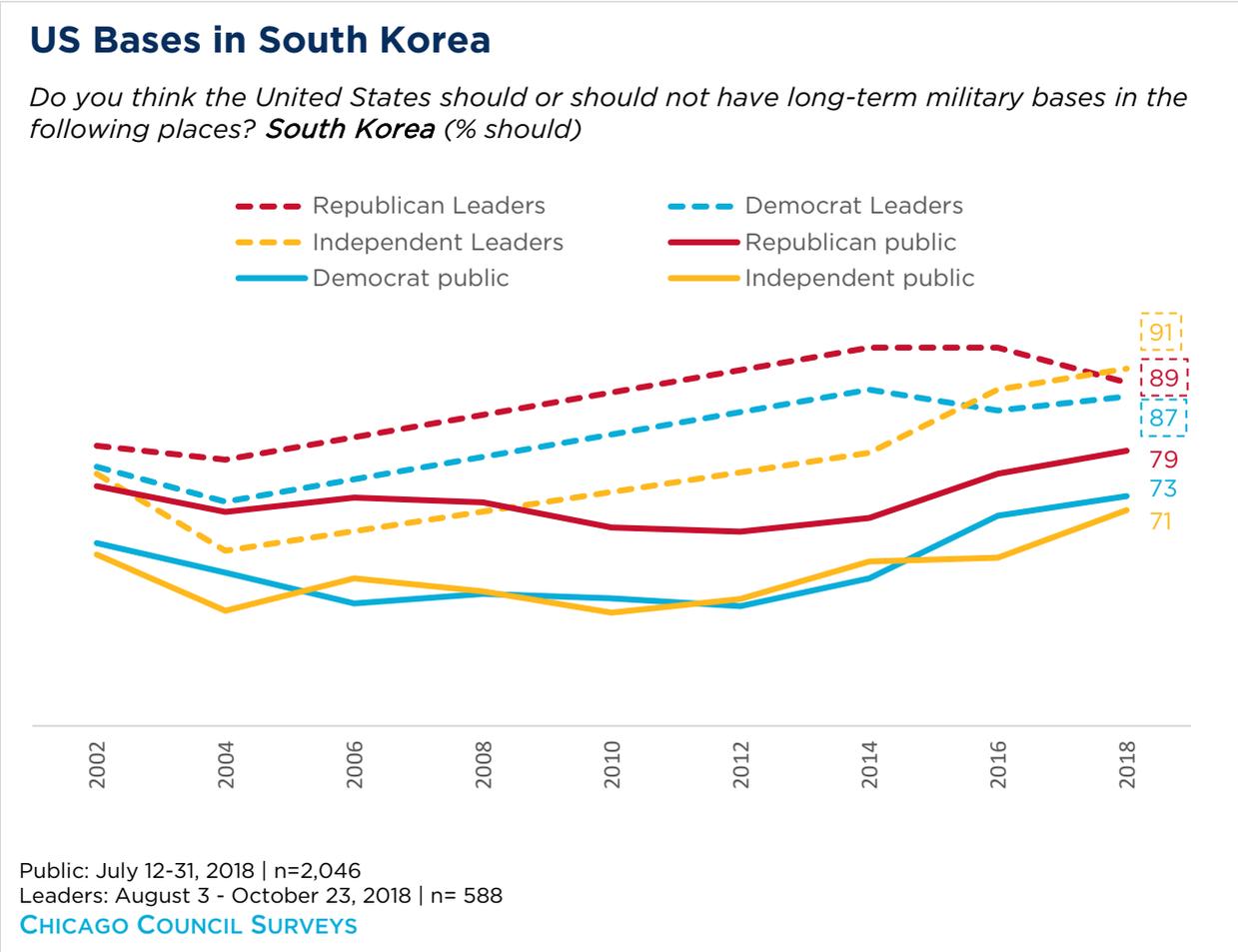
However, opinion leaders and the public firmly back the US commitment to NATO. At least nine in ten leaders across partisan lines say the United States should increase or maintain its commitment to NATO, as do majorities of Democrats (89%), Independents (72%), and Republicans (71%) among the public.

Over the past two decades, support for maintaining or increasing the US commitment to NATO has been on the rise among both the Democratic opinion leaders (from 70% in 1998 to 98% in 2018) and the Democratic public (from 60% in 1998 to 89% in 2019) over the past two decades. Republicans from both opinion leaders and the public have also been strongly in support of NATO since the 1970s, with the exception of a trough from 1986 to 1994.



Converging Leader and Public Support for US Bases in East Asia

Just as NATO has been a topic of debate and controversy during the Trump era, American military bases in East Asia have also come in for scrutiny. South Korea, in particular, has dealt with tough negotiations over the Special Measures Agreement that details Seoul’s financial support for US bases in the country. Opinion leaders across party lines strongly support the presence of US bases in South Korea, with roughly nine in ten Republican, Democratic, and Independent leaders saying the United States should have long-term bases in the country. While the public has historically supported South Korean bases as well, that support has typically been lower than among policy leaders. However, in the last several years, support for US bases in Korea has risen notably, cutting the gaps between leaders and the public in half.



Views about US bases in Japan have followed a broadly similar trend, with leaders more likely than the public to support long-term bases in Japan, but with public support on the rise, thus reducing the gap between opinion leaders and the public. (See appendix Figure B).

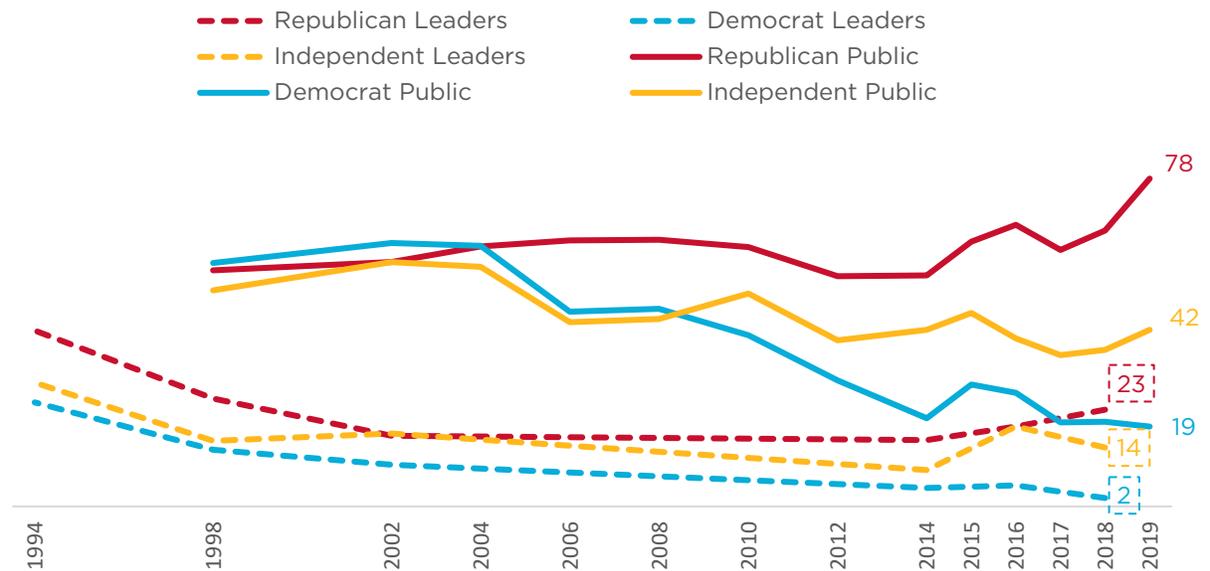
Immigration: Democrats Converge and Republicans Diverge

American public opinion on the threat posed by large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States has changed significantly over the past two decades. What was in 1998 an issue of bipartisan consensus has become the issue of greatest partisan division in the 2019 Chicago Council Survey. Today nearly eight in ten Republicans (78%), compared to two in ten Democrats (19%), say the possibility of large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States represents a critical threat.

The decline in concern among the Democratic public over the past two decades has had the effect of widening one gap—the partisan gap among the public—while simultaneously shrinking another—the gap between Democratic opinion leaders and the public. Among Republicans, however, the gap between leaders and the public remains large.

Immigration as a Threat

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: **Large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States** (% critical threat)



Public: June 7-20, 2019 | n=2059
 Leaders: August 3 - October 23, 2018 | n= 588

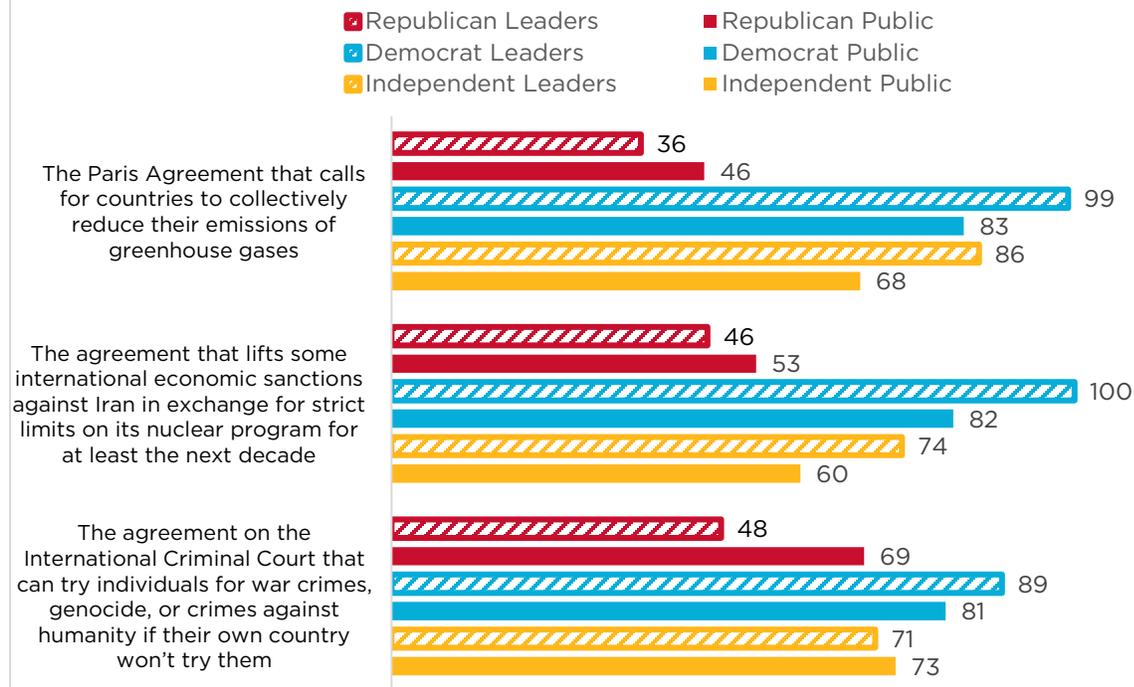
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Partisan Differences on Iran Deal, Paris Agreement, International Criminal Court

Just as Republicans are typically more likely to favor US military strength and military options in resolving international problems, Democrats generally have greater support for international organizations and institutions. Reflecting that tendency, Democrats among the public and opinion leaders broadly favor US participation in the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Iran nuclear deal, and the agreement on the International Criminal Court.

International Agreements

Based on what you know, do you think the United States should or should not participate in the following international agreements? (% should)



Public: July 12-31, 2018 | n=2046
 Leaders: August 3 - October 23, 2018 | n= 588

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Conclusion

There is little evidence that President Trump's attitudes on trade, alliances, bases, or even immigration are diffusing to other Republican leaders, much less to opinion leaders with differing political affiliations. The public response to debate over basic elements of US foreign policy—trade, alliances, and bases—has been to back those policy pillars more strongly than in the past. On alliances and bases, Trump's attitudes are also not shared by the Republican public, let alone other partisans. In these issue areas, increasing public support has had the effect of reducing “populist” gaps between opinion leaders and the public. Immigration is an area where the Republican public has rallied around the president's view, despite the lack of enthusiasm from most Republican opinion leaders.

Leaders across political lines broadly agree that international trade is good for the US economy. That support also extends to NAFTA, an agreement that was at the time of the survey under renegotiation. On trade, public attitudes have shifted to recognize the benefits to the US economy, though the Republican public also backs the president's tariffs against China. As the data show, leaders and the public broadly want to maintain or even expand support for NATO, as they have for years. Leaders and the public also want to keep the US military bases hosted by key allies in Asia such as Japan and South Korea. And the vast majority of Republican leaders do not share Trump's alarmism regarding immigrants and refugees, though as past Council research has shown, core Trump supporters among the public certainly do.

This is a mixed portrait for those concerned about polarization. Leaders and publics are rallying around trade, alliances, and bases. The bipartisan support for the renegotiated NAFTA agreement suggests a way forward. That said, there are deep divides on hot-button issues like immigration, the now nearly defunct Iran deal, and climate change. With tensions between Iran and the United States at a high water mark and climate emergencies becoming more stark, there are risks of a deeply divided America, as we have seen with the oscillation between the Obama and Trump administrations on both issues. Whatever happens in the 2020 presidential election, the United States is likely to remain deeply divided on some of the most important challenges facing the country.

Appendix

Figure A

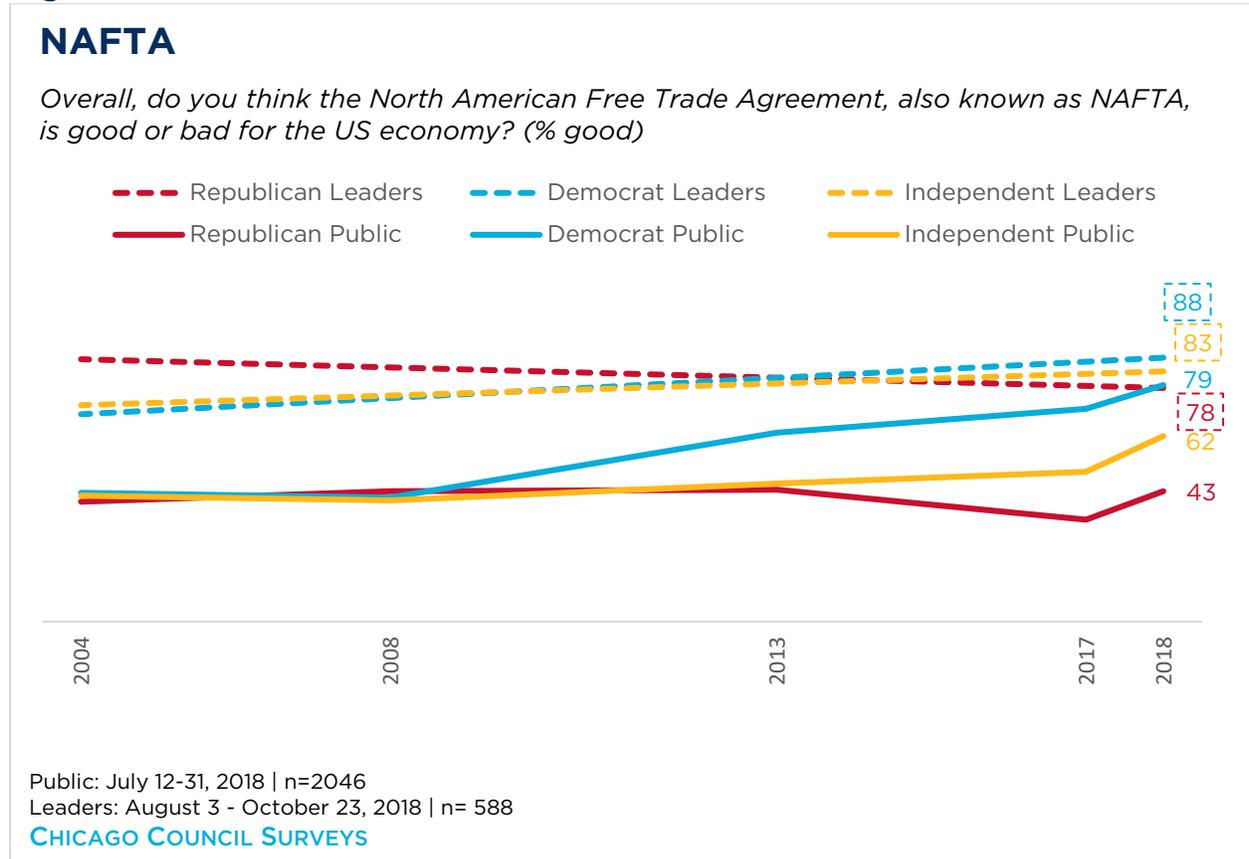
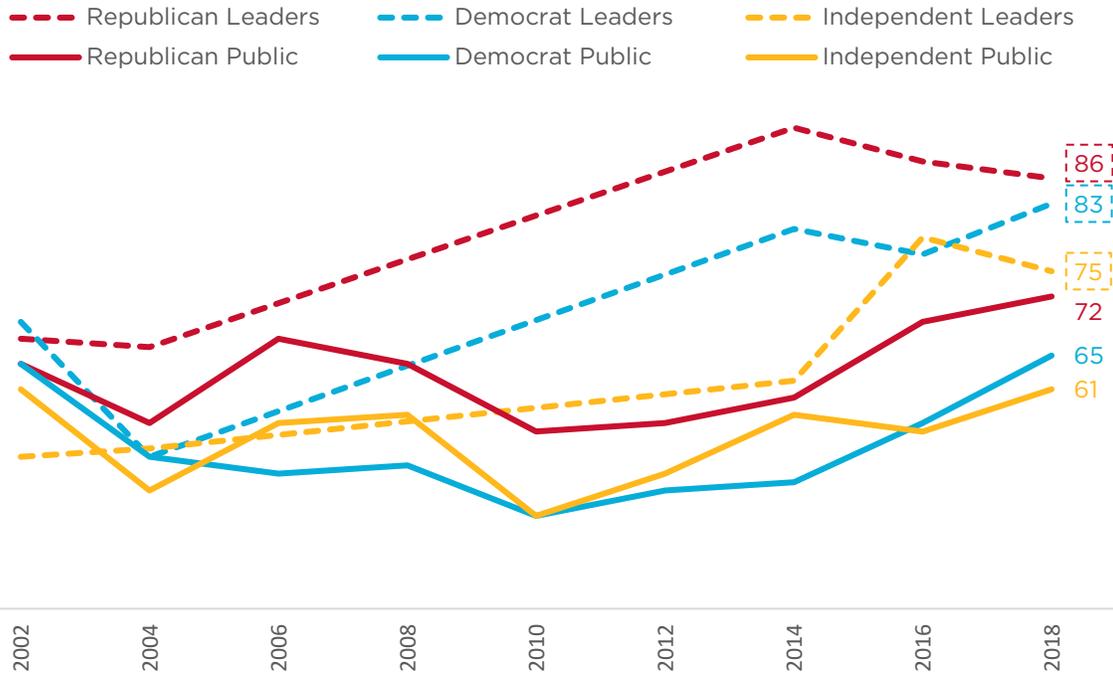


Figure B

US Military Bases in Japan

Do you think the United States should or should not have long-term military bases in the following places? *Japan* (% should)



Public: July 12-31, 2018 | n=2046
Leaders: August 2 - October 16, 2018 | n= 588
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Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from several surveys of the American public and foreign policy opinion leaders on foreign policy issues and is a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy.

The 2018 Foreign Policy Opinion Leaders Survey was conducted August 3 to October 23, 2018, by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Texas National Security Network among 588 foreign policy opinion leaders from different professional groups, including executive branch agencies, Congress, academia, think tanks, the media, interest groups and NGOs, religious institutions, labor unions, and business. To allow for comparison to prior years' opinion leader surveys, results are weighted by professional group to match the group composition of leadership surveys conducted from 1978 to 2004, and matching the process used in the 2016 and 2014 leadership surveys conducted by the Chicago Council and the Texas National Security Network. Among those who answered the partisanship question, there were 50 Republicans, 256 Democrats, 143 Independents, and 14 Others.

The 2019 Chicago Council Survey was conducted June 7-20, 2019 by Ipsos using its large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 2,059 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 2.3 , including a design effect of 1.1607. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

The 2018 Chicago Council Survey was conducted by GfK Custom Research using their large-scale, nationwide online research panel July 12-31, 2018 among a weighted national sample of 2,046 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 2.37 , including a design effect of 1.1954.

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

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