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Public Attitudes on US Intelligence

2019 Survey Confirms Broad Support Despite Limited Transparency and Persistent Presidential Antagonism

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Data gathered in UT-Austin's third annual survey of public attitudes on US Intelligence confirm that most Americans believe our intelligence agencies are necessary and make vital contributions to national security.¹ This level of support does not appear to be impacted by the Intelligence Community's (IC) reduced public engagement or the continued criticism of national security agencies by President Donald Trump. The IC still faces a challenge persuading Americans that it respects their privacy and civil liberties. Relatively few Americans understand the institutional framework for supervising and overseeing these powerful and secretive organizations.

Key Takeaways from the 2019 Survey:

- A growing majority of Americans believe our intelligence agencies play a vital role in protecting the nation. Support for this view was strongest among older Americans but the level of confidence increased in all age cohorts. There is no evidence that the President's persistent attacks impacted the public's attitude toward US Intelligence. Indeed, support for the IC among Republicans polled increased over the three-year survey period.

¹ In August 2019, The Texas National Security Network (TNSN) fielded a nationally representative survey with the survey market research firm YouGov. Joshua Busby, Jonathan Monten, Jordan Tama, and Craig Kafura, "2019 Survey of the Mass Public, August 09, 2019 - August 12, 2019" by YouGov. See methodology section for full details. The survey data is available online at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/uvvrnjilify6xbcw/Busby%20Intelligence%20Datasets%20and%20Documentation%20-%20Public.zip?dl=0>

- An overwhelming majority of Americans regard US intelligence agencies as effective in accomplishing their assigned missions with 8 in 10 crediting the IC with preventing terrorist attacks and successfully uncovering the plans of our adversaries.
- Only half of respondents believe that the intelligence agencies effectively safeguard Americans' privacy rights and civil liberties while pursuing their missions.- This concern is widespread even among the IC's strongest and most knowledgeable supporters.
- The number of Americans who believe IC agencies should respect the privacy of foreign nationals to the same degree as US citizens declined generally but that sentiment remains popular with Democrats and younger respondents. Fewer than half of those surveyed believe they will be required to sacrifice personal freedoms to remain safe from terrorism.
- A strong majority of Americans believe the IC could share more information with the public without compromising its effectiveness.
- Americans remain uncertain about which government officials or institutions are principally responsible for supervising and overseeing our intelligence agencies.

Measuring the Impact of Transparency

The unlawful disclosure of sensitive and intrusive electronic surveillance programs by former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden earlier this decade posed a threat to the IC's public standing and democratic legitimacy. Neither then-President Barack Obama nor key congressional leaders who were informed of the controversial programs acted forcefully to reassure Americans that the NSA had acted in a manner that was both effective in keeping them safe and respectful of their civil liberties.

Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper (2010-2017) responded to this crisis in public confidence by launching a "Transparency Initiative" aimed at improving the public's understanding of the IC's mission, how intelligence agencies pursued that mission, the laws and policies that constrain the IC, and how these secret activities are monitored and overseen.²

Notwithstanding the Trump administration's penchant for excessive secrecy, DNI Dan Coats (2017-2019) early in his tenure affirmed the IC's commitment to respecting Americans' civil liberties and promoting greater transparency.³ The 2019 National Intelligence Strategy affirmatively endorsed a set of Principles of Intelligence Transparency and acknowledged that greater openness would be "necessary to earn and maintain public trust."⁴ In practice, though, over the course of the current administration the DNI, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other intelligence leaders have deliberately lowered their profiles to avoid publicly

² Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), Principles of Intelligence Transparency for the Intelligence Community, 2015. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ic-legal-reference-book/the-principles-of-intelligence-transparency-for-the-ic>

³ ODNI, Intelligence Community Directive 107, February 28, 2018. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICD/ICD-107.pdf>

⁴ ODNI, National Intelligence Strategy, 2019. https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/National_Intelligence_Strategy_2019.pdf

contradicting an irascible and vindictive chief executive. Media reports indicated that IC leaders quietly sought earlier this year to postpone or cancel altogether their open testimony at the congressional worldwide threat hearings – the single opportunity most years for the American people to see and hear from senior intelligence officials.⁵

It is still too early to assess how recently-appointed DNI John Ratcliffe will prioritize efforts to make the IC more accessible to the public. There are, however, grounds for concern judging by his first official act: the declassification and release of sensitive signals intelligence information sought by the President’s congressional allies.⁶

Initial Surveys, and Unforeseen Attacks by the “First Customer”

In Summer 2017, we fielded the first round of this annual poll aimed at establishing a stable baseline measure of Americans’ overall perceptions of the US IC, its effectiveness in key mission areas, the IC’s perceived respect for the privacy rights of both Americans and foreign nationals, and institutional responsibility for monitoring US Intelligence activities. The original goals of this project were to inform scholarly and general debate on the proper role of secret intelligence in our open democracy and to help government officials design public facing programs under the Transparency Initiative that would respond most directly to the actual knowledge, beliefs and concerns of the American people. The next summer we reported initial survey results highlighting evidence that Americans generally regarded the IC as vital to our national defense and highly effective in preventing acts of terrorism and discovering the plans of hostile foreign powers.⁷ The first year’s survey also cautioned that Americans were less persuaded that our intelligence agencies respected their privacy and civil liberties, a prime objective of the ODNI’s efforts to promote openness.

We repeated the survey in 2018. In reviewing the second year’s survey results, we continued to watch for the impact of transparency programs but we were also compelled to account for an unforeseen stream of public attacks on IC agencies and leaders by the sitting president, members of his administration and pro-Trump media outlets. The data suggested that public support for US Intelligence was not diminished by, for example, President Trump’s public rejection of the consensus IC judgment on Russia’s interference in the 2016 election, punitive acts against former IC leaders and sinister insinuations that our intelligence agencies were part of an anti-democratic “deep state” that undermined his ability to realize the people’s will.⁸

⁵ Intel Agencies Push to Close Threats Hearing after Trump Outburst, Politico, January 15, 2020

<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/15/intel-agencies-threats-hearing-trump-099494>

⁶ ODNI, DNI Ratcliffe Statement on Declassification of Transcripts, May 29, 2020.

<https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/item/2124-dni-ratcliffe-statement-on-declassification-of-transcripts>

⁷ Stephen Slick and Joshua Busby. Glasnost for US Intelligence: Will Transparency Lead to Increased Public Trust, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, May 2018, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/glasnost-us-intelligence-will-transparency-lead-increased-public-trust>

⁸ Stephen Slick, Joshua Busby and Kingsley Burns, Public Attitudes on US Intelligence: Annual Poll Reflects Bipartisan Confidence Despite Presidential Antagonism, 2019. <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/lcc/public-attitudes-us-intelligence>

President Trump's public antagonism toward the IC continued through the period measured by the 2019 survey on which we are currently reporting. In the months preceding our last survey, the President disputed key judgments presented to Congress during public hearings (while personally denigrating the witnesses),⁹ ordered a politically-tinged criminal investigation of IC counterintelligence activities undertaken before his inauguration,¹⁰ and publicly rejected the CIA's high confidence judgment that Saudi Arabia's leaders had ordered the extrajudicial killing of journalist Jamal Khasoggi.¹¹ Notwithstanding these unprecedented attacks by the IC's "first customer," public confidence in the IC has remained high, bipartisan, and resilient.

While we do not know the President's calculation, if any, in publicly deriding US intelligence agencies, his criticism does not appear to impact the level of support for the IC and its mission. Indeed, even among survey respondents of the President's party who are presumably sympathetic to his policies, support for the IC increased from 59% to 74% over the three-year period of this project.

The consistency of results generated over three annual surveys involving more than 3,000 respondents increases our confidence in the reliability of the data and, in turn, its potential utility for a future group of IC leaders who may choose to re-energize efforts to engage the American public and reinforce trust in these essential government institutions.

⁹ Eileen Sullivan, "Trump Calls Intelligence Officials 'Naïve' After They Contradict Him," *New York Times*, January 30, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/30/us/politics/trump-intelligence.html>

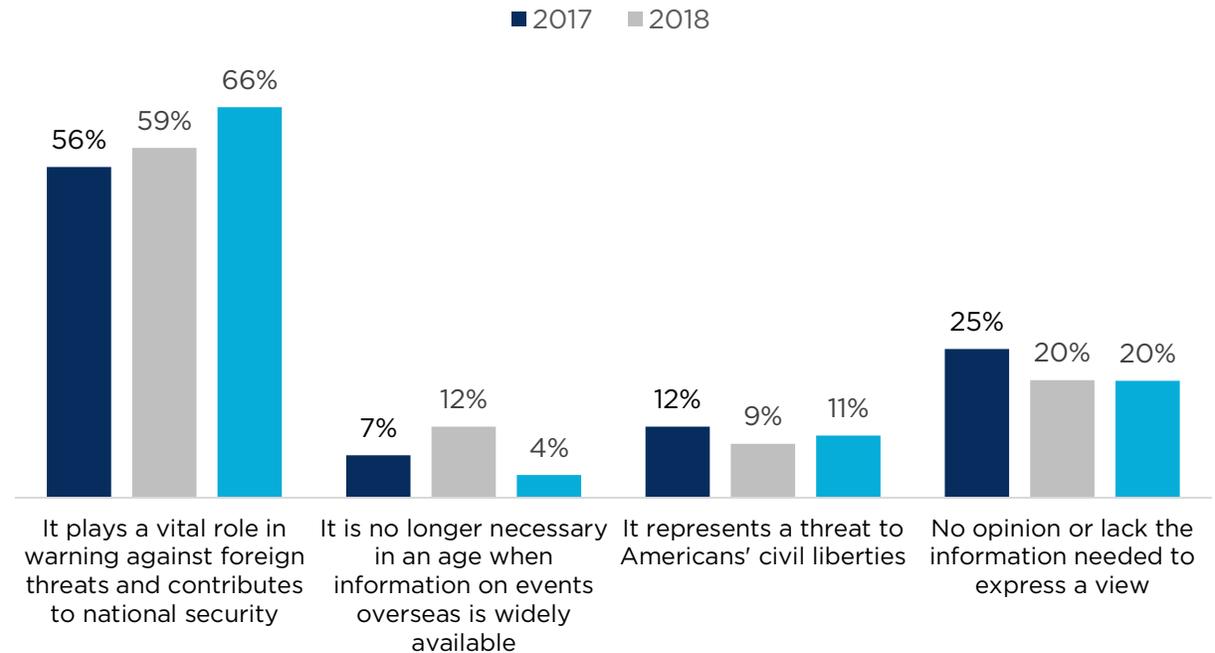
¹⁰ Matthew Choi, "Trump Orders Intel Community to Cooperate with Barr Probe into 2016 Campaign Surveillance," *Politico*, May 17, 2019. <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/05/23/trump-barr-intelligence-community-1342880>

¹¹ Emily Cochrane, "Rebuffing CIA, Trump Says it Only Has Feelings about Khasoggi Killings", November 22, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/22/us/politics/trump-saudi-thanksgiving.html>

The 2019 Results: General Effectiveness

Figure 1: Views of the US Intelligence Community

The United States government has a number of specialized agencies that gather and evaluate intelligence. Which of the following best describes your view of this "Intelligence



August 9-12, 2019 | n = 1,146

STRAUSS AND CLEMENTS CENTER INTELLIGENCE STUDIES PROJECT

One central assumption in the design of this polling project was that Americans would be more likely to hold a favorable view of US Intelligence if they thought the IC was effective in performing its assigned missions. Our third year of polling more firmly establishes that a strong majority of Americans believe the IC “plays a vital role in warning against foreign threats and contributes to national security.”

Notwithstanding the lack of progress in opening the IC to public scrutiny and the President’s criticism, the levels of public support have increased each year and now represent a two-thirds majority of those surveyed. In 2019, only 4% of those surveyed described the IC as “no longer necessary in an age when information on events overseas is widely available.” The shares of respondents who describe the IC as a “threat to American civil liberties” (11%) or who lacked the information needed to express an opinion (20%) have remained roughly the same over the life of the project.

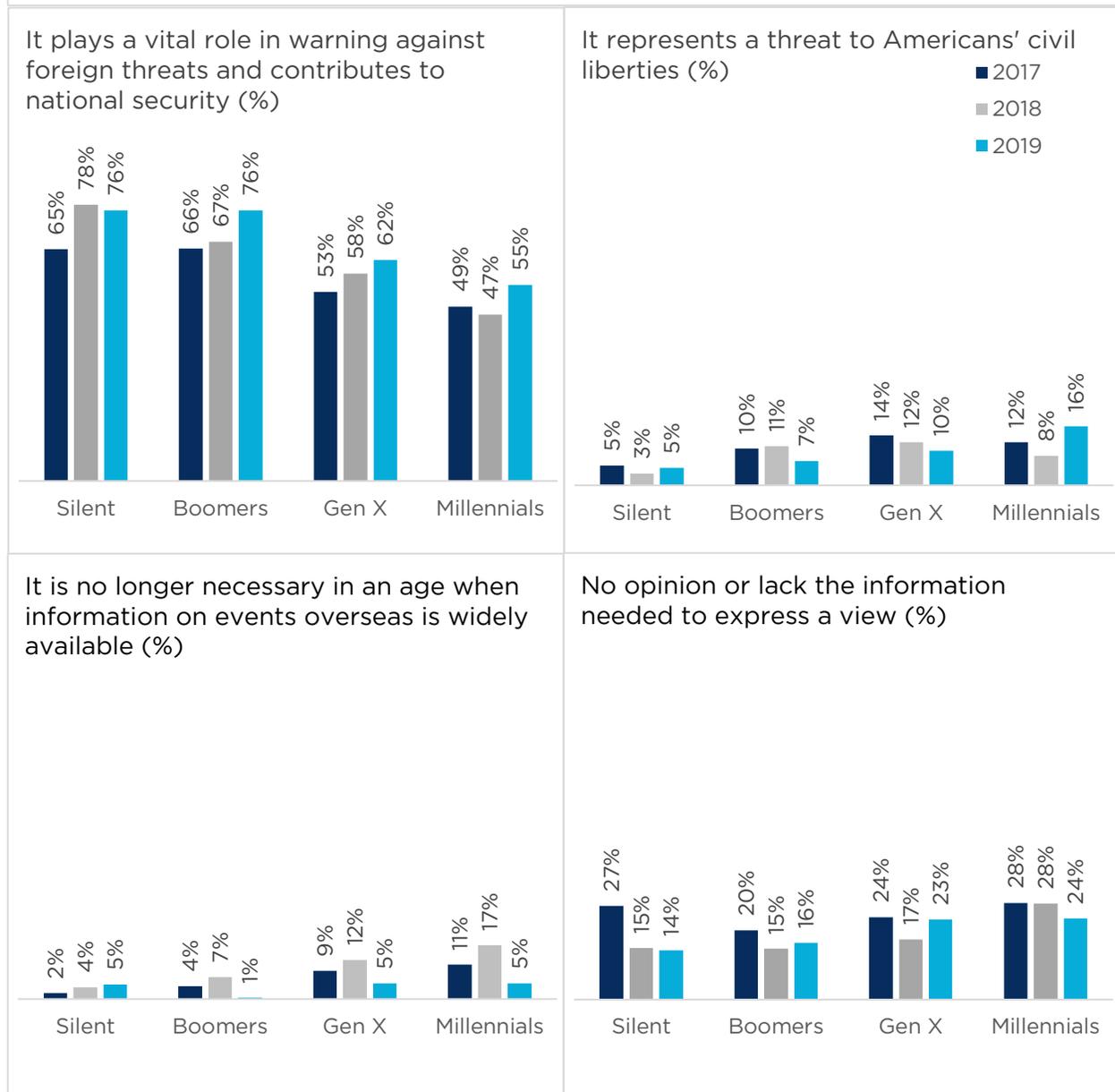
The degree of support for the IC reflected in the 2019 survey increased within every age cohort, although older respondents (“Silents” and “Boomers”) continue to believe most strongly in the IC’s mission. “Millennials” consistently exhibit the lowest

levels of support and most pronounced skepticism about the IC's commitment to protecting Americans' civil liberties.¹²

Figure 2: View of the US Intelligence Community by Generation

The United States government has a number of specialized agencies that gather and evaluate intelligence. Which of the following best describes your view of this "Intelligence Community"? (%)

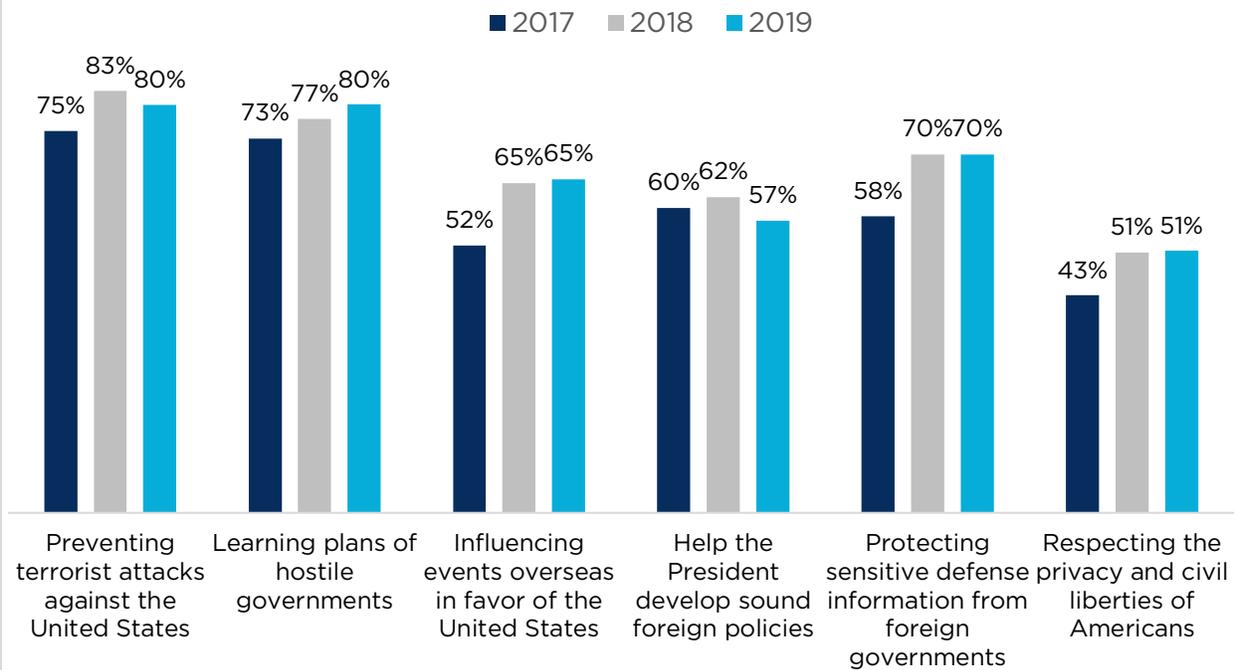
August 9-12, 2019 | n= 1,146



¹² We follow the Pew Research Center's generational definitions for the Silent Generation (born 1928-1945), Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (born 1965-1980), and Millennials (born 1981-1996). See: Michael Dimock, "Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins." January 17, 2019. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>

Figure 3: Effectiveness of the Intelligence Community

How effective do you think the intelligence community is in meeting the following responsibilities? (% very/somewhat effective)



August 9-12, 2019 | n = 1,146

STRAUSS AND CLEMENTS CENTER INTELLIGENCE STUDIES PROJECT

To better understand why Americans hold a generally favorable view of US Intelligence, we asked respondents how effective the IC was in its key mission areas: counterterrorism, foreign intelligence gathering, covert action, support to policymaking, and counterintelligence. As in previous years, a strong majority of respondents expressed the view that our intelligence agencies are somewhat effective or very effective in preventing terror attacks (80%) and learning the plans of hostile governments (80%). Again, respondents who were more familiar with world affairs were significantly more likely to credit the IC’s performance in preventing terror attacks and strategic intelligence collection than those with less knowledge of events overseas.

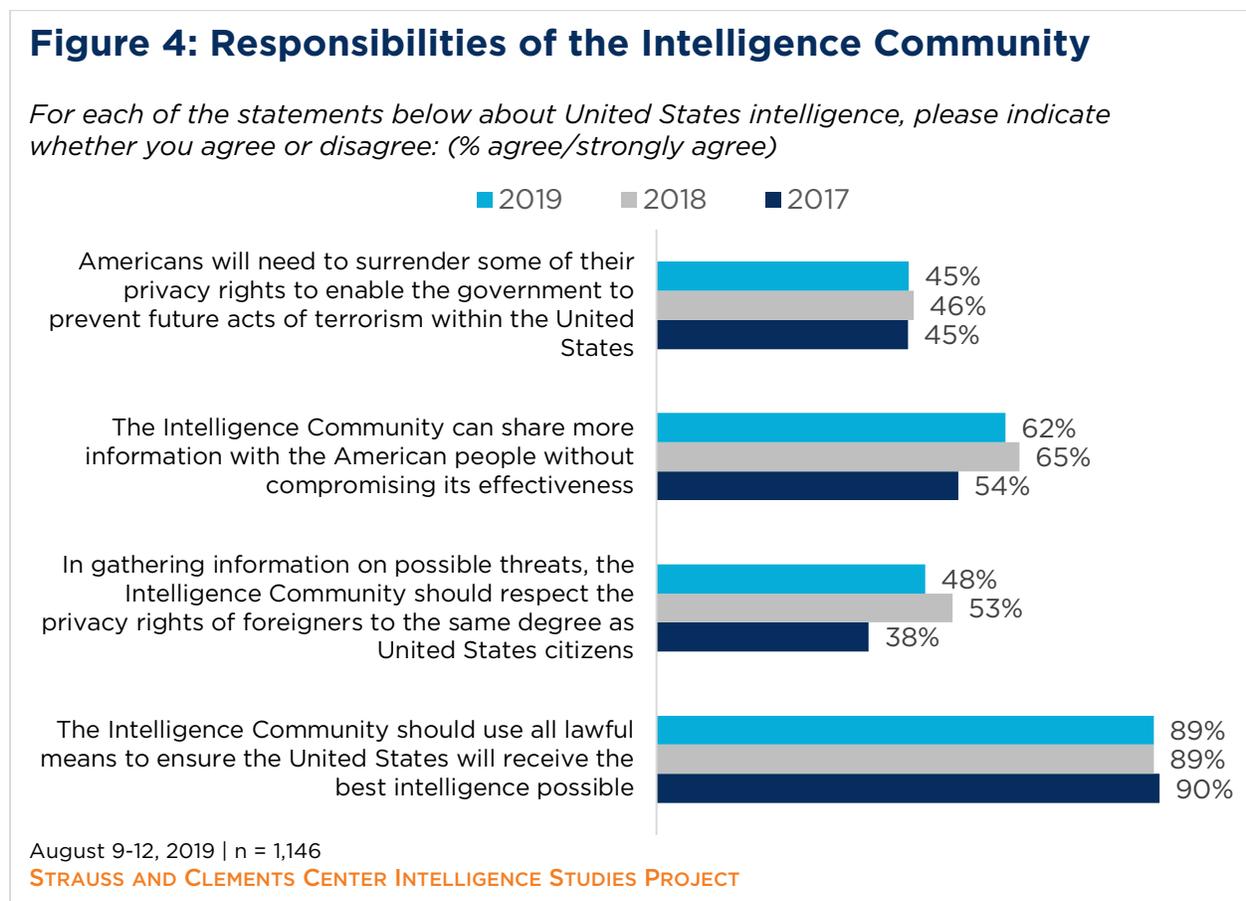
Smaller but still solid majorities of Americans rated the IC as effective in “influencing events overseas in favor of the United States” (our effort to describe the CIA’s covert action mission) and helping the president develop sound foreign policies. While partisan identification generally had little impact on judgments about the IC’s effectiveness, a significant disparity emerged around the fundamental intelligence task of helping the president develop sound foreign policies. 8 in 10 respondents who identified as Republicans agreed or strongly agreed that the IC was effective in this role, while fewer than half of Democrats surveyed agreed with that statement. It is not clear whether this disparity is based on an informed view of how the IC actually supports President Trump or, more likely, Democrats’ generally unfavorable view of

the incumbent’s actual policies and the unconventional process by which he develops them.

Notwithstanding increased media attention on the threat posed by China’s security services and large data breaches attributed to Chinese hackers, in each of the last two years 7 in 10 survey respondents credited the IC with effective work in “protecting sensitive defense information from foreign governments.”

IC Responsibilities

We asked respondents to evaluate four statements about the responsibilities of the IC: the agencies’ use of lawful means to accomplish their missions, treatment of foreigners, information sharing and respondents’ willingness to surrender privacy for added security. The top-line findings are in Figure 5.



For more than three decades, the charge to the US IC from presidents of both parties has been to use “[a]ll reasonable and lawful means” to ensure our government receives the best possible intelligence.¹³ Unsurprisingly, 9 in 10 Americans who

¹³ National Archives, Executive Order 12333 (as amended), December 4, 1981. <https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/12333.html>

participated in our surveys over the three years have agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

Without changing that longstanding order, though, in 2014 President Obama issued a directive requiring IC agencies engaged in electronic surveillance to provide “safeguards for the personal information of all individuals, regardless of their nationality.”¹⁴ This voluntary extension of privacy rights to foreign nationals was one response to criticism of the United States by European governments based on information about NSA’s global collection capabilities revealed by Edward Snowden. These restrictions on US intelligence gathering remain in effect, and indeed have been incorporated into formal US-EU agreements that facilitate the transatlantic movement of commercial data. Our survey, however, reflects that only 38% of respondents support extending to foreigners the same privacy rights enjoyed by American citizens. This figure is down from 53% in 2018. These cumulative results mask wide disparities among age cohorts and party affiliation. For example, 59% of respondents who identified as Democrats agree that foreigners’ personal information should be protected in the same manner as that of US citizens while only 41% of Republicans support that practice. Nearly 7 in 10 younger respondents agree that our IC should respect foreigners’ privacy rights while only 3 in 10 pre-1946 and Boomers shared that view.

Fewer than half (45%/46%/45%) of respondents to our survey each year have agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that Americans need to surrender some privacy to enable the government to prevent future acts of terrorism. There were no significant differences on this question based on age, gender or partisan affiliation.

In 2019, a solid majority (62%) of survey respondents agreed that the IC could share more information with the American people without compromising its effectiveness. This support for greater openness corresponds strongly with age, with younger Americans in particular supporting this idea. For example, nearly 8 in 10 Millennials agreed or strongly agreed with the premise underlying the ODNI’s Transparency Initiative.

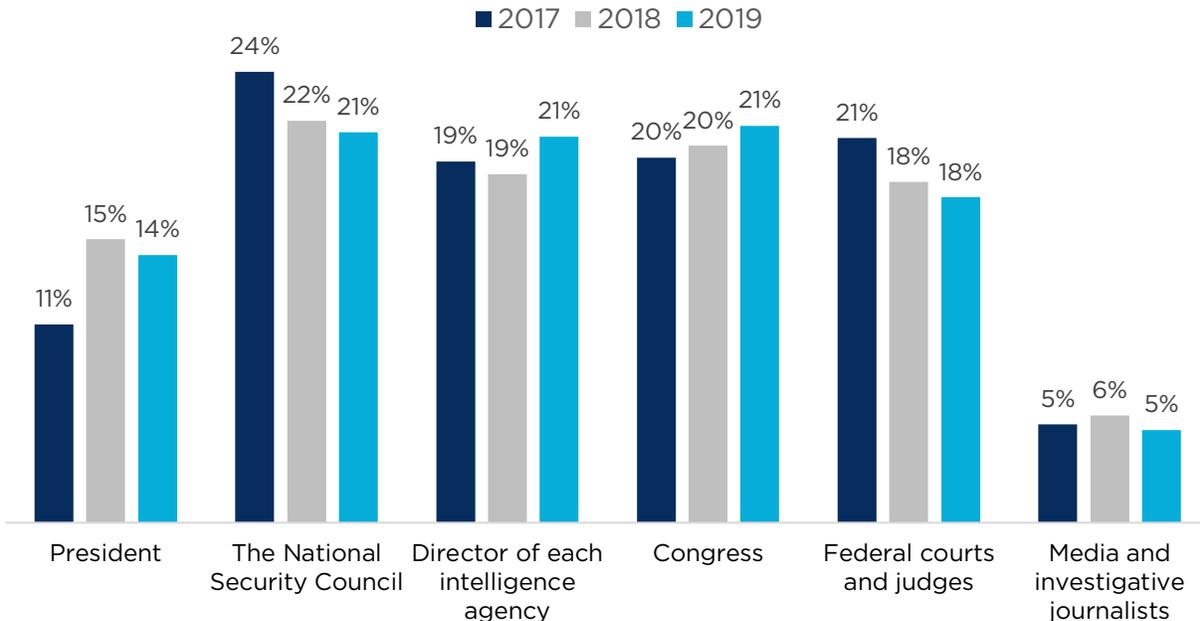
Supervision and Oversight

Our baseline poll in 2017 revealed considerable uncertainty over which government officials or institutions bear principal responsibility for overseeing our secret intelligence agencies. The 2018 and 2019 surveys returned similar results, although there are several potentially useful insights hidden beneath the top-line.

¹⁴ Office of the Press Secretary, PPD-28 - Signals Intelligence Activities, January 17, 2014. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/17/presidential-policy-directive-signals-intelligence-activities>

Figure 5: Oversight of the Intelligence Community

Intelligence work is almost always conducted in secret. In the past, United States intelligence agencies have exceeded their authority and used secrecy to conceal inappropriate activities. If you had to say, who do you think should be principally responsible for monitoring these agencies to ensure they act within the law and in the country's best interest? (%)



August 9-12, 2019 | n = 1,146

STRAUSS AND CLEMENTS CENTER INTELLIGENCE STUDIES PROJECT

Respondents were asked to select the institution primarily responsible for monitoring the activities of US intelligence agencies from a short list. The views recorded on IC oversight have been largely consistent over the three-year span of our project. In 2019, identical shares (21%) identified the National Security Council (NSC), Congress and the “leaders of each intelligence agency” as responsible for ensuring the legality and integrity of intelligence operations. A smaller, but still significant, number of respondents (18%) looked to judges and the federal courts to oversee the IC. A much smaller share of respondents (5%) believed the media and investigative journalists play the primary role monitoring US Intelligence.

Perhaps reflecting higher levels of general confidence in the incumbent, 24% of respondents who identified as Republicans believed the president was responsible for monitoring IC activities while only 8% of Democrats held that view. Twice as many Democrats as Republicans identified Congress as the institution principally responsible for intelligence oversight (26% to 13%).

In all three surveys, older respondents (pre-1946 and Boomers) were most inclined to identify the NSC as the primary supervisor of the IC while, each year, many Millennials believe the courts serve as a primary check on our intelligence agencies (31%/22%/25%).

Conclusion

These results suggest largely stable views among Americans on US Intelligence, strong support for its necessity, high regard for its effectiveness on a few key dimensions, but some lasting skepticism about its regard for civil liberties. Younger Americans remain more skeptical about the IC than older Americans. Despite the broadsides from President Trump directed at the IC, this criticism does not seem to have had much of an effect, and, indeed, Republicans seem to increasingly support the IC on the vital role it plays. With the 2020 election looming, we shall see whether these attitudes remain stable going forward.

Methodology

This report is based on data from a survey conducted by YouGov from August 9-12, 2019. YouGov interviewed 1,146 respondents who were matched down to a sample of 1,000 to produce the final dataset. The margin of error is +/- 3.3 percentage points.

The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and region. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-categories), race (4-categories), and education (4-categories), to produce the final weight.

About the Intelligence Studies Project

The Intelligence Studies Project (ISP) was established in 2013 as a joint venture of the [Clements Center for National Security](#) and [Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law](#) out of a conviction that the activities of the US Intelligence Community were increasingly critical to safeguarding our national security and yet were understudied at American universities. The ISP is building at the University of Texas at Austin a premier center for the study of US Intelligence through a variety of programs, including new course offerings and research projects, as well as periodic conferences and other public events focused on intelligence topics.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization that provides insight—and influences the public discourse—on critical global issues. We convene leading global voices, conduct independent research, and engage the public to explore ideas that will shape our global future. The Council is committed to bringing clarity and offering solutions to issues that transcend borders

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