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Record Number of Americans Say International Trade Is Good for the US Economy

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President Donald Trump has embarked on an ambitious and disruptive trade agenda, driven by his belief that the United States has lost “many billions of dollars” to trading partners and that “trade wars are good, and easy to win.”¹ During his term, the president has escalated trade tensions with China; has renegotiated trade agreements with countries such as Mexico, Canada, and South Korea; and has withdrawn US involvement in trade deals such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The 2019 Chicago Council Survey finds that though Republicans and Democrats differ on whether President Trump’s strategy is an effective approach to trade policy, the American public is more likely than ever to say that international trade benefits the United States.

Key Findings

- 83 percent of Americans think international trade is good for American companies, a 25 percentage point increase from when it was last asked in 2016.
- Nearly nine in ten Americans (87%) say that international trade is good for the US economy, the highest recorded in Chicago Council Surveys since the question was first asked in 2004.
- 63 percent of Americans now believe trade deals between the United States and other countries benefit both sides, up from 50 percent in 2017.
- Americans are deeply divided on whether to increase tariffs on Chinese products with 47 percent supporting it and 51 percent opposing it.

¹ See Twitter, March 2, 2019. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/969525362580484098?lang=en>.

- 77 percent of Americans favor complying with World Trade Organization (WTO) rulings against the United States.

Positive Outlook on Trade Continues to Rise

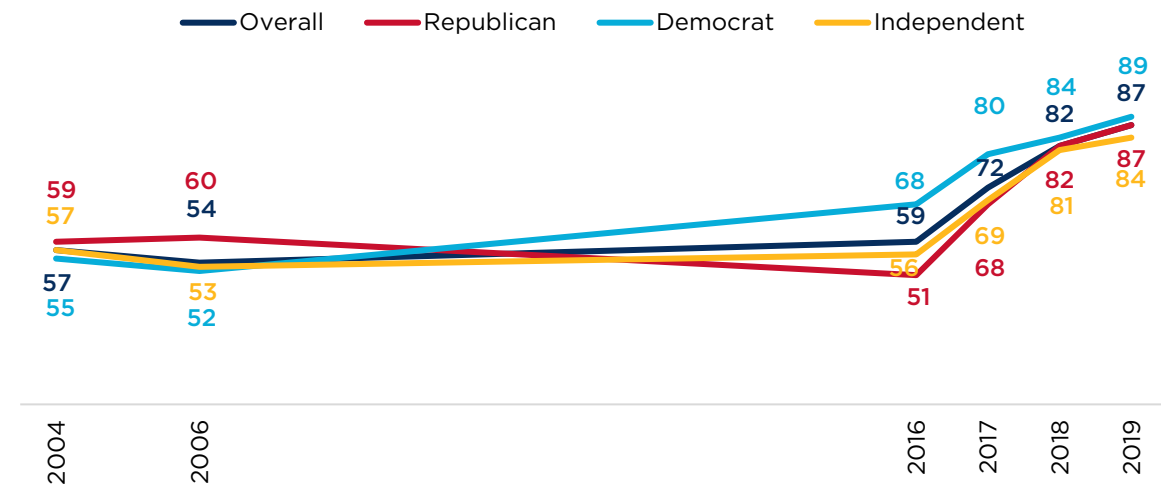
For the fourth consecutive year, the Chicago Council Survey shows that Americans are increasingly in favor of trade. Nearly nine in 10 Americans (87%) think international trade is good for the US economy and eight in ten (83%) say it is good for American companies. Since 2016, views that international trade is good for the US economy and American companies have each increased more than 25 percentage points. These large majorities hold across partisan affiliation, age, and education.



For the first time, the Chicago Council Survey asked whether international trade is good or bad for US relations with other countries and 89 percent of Americans responded that it is good. Breaking the results down by party affiliation yields a strong bipartisan consensus (91% of Republicans, 91% of Democrats, 86% of Independents). A growing majority of Americans also say that trade deals benefit both the United States and other countries (63%, up from 51% in 2017).

International Trade and the US Economy

Overall, do you think international trade is good or bad for: *The US economy* (%)



June 7-20, 2019 | n = 2,059

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Democrats' Support for Trade and Trade Deals Climbs Steadily

While there is still a portion of the Democratic Party leadership that [opposes trade agreements](#), the opinions of the Democratic public have moved increasingly in favor of trade, and recent increases could reflect magnified opposition to Trump's policies. However, Democratic support for trade has been trending upward for some time; during the Obama administration, Democratic support for economic interconnectedness increased steadily, with 65 percent saying globalization was mostly good in 2008 and 74 percent saying it was mostly good in 2016.² Since 2016, Democratic views that international trade's effect on the US economy is good have increased from 68 percent to 89 percent in 2019.

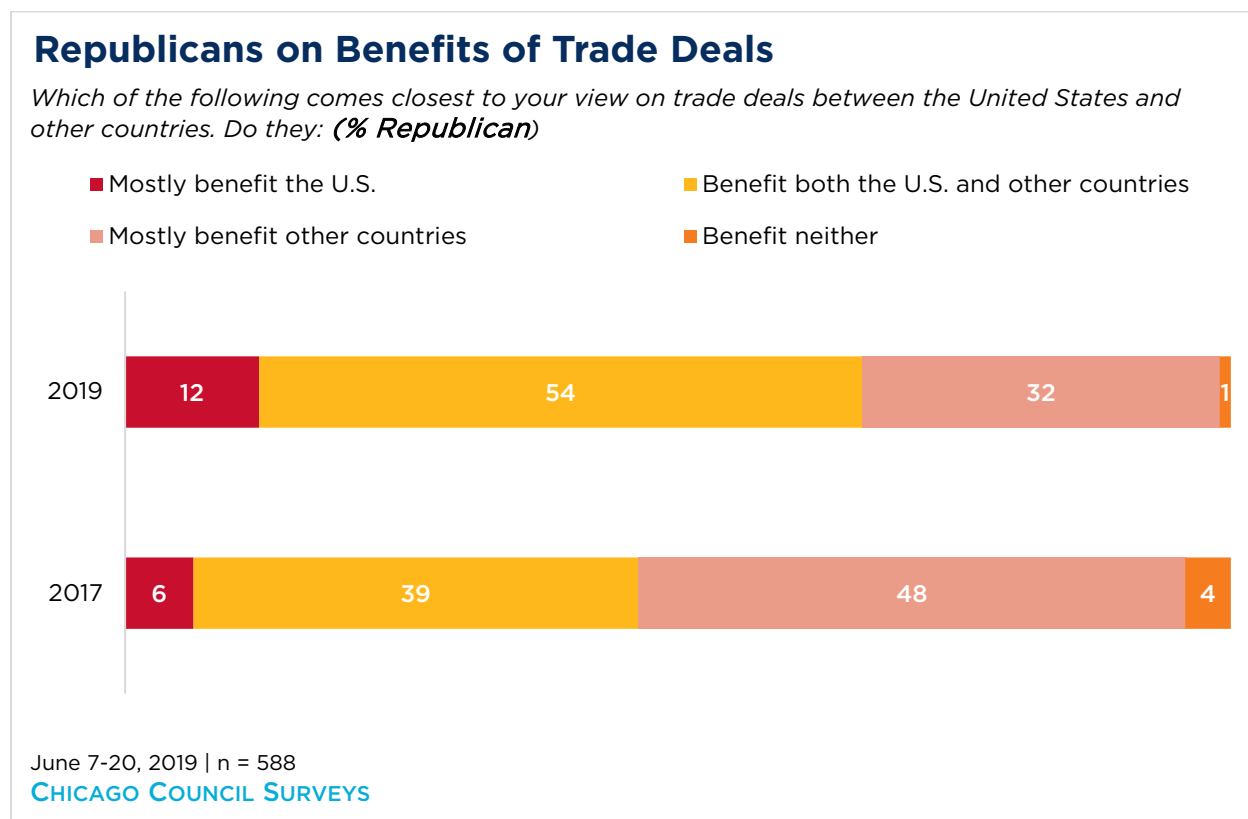
Democrats have also become more convinced that trade deals reached between the United States and other countries are mutually beneficial. Three in four Democrats (74%) say that trade deals benefit both the United States and other countries, up from 63 percent in 2017.

Republicans Favor Trade but Also Tariffs

For Republicans, support for trade is now more in line with the party's traditional pro-business and free-market leanings. The proportion of Republicans who think international trade's effect on the US economy is good increased from 51 percent in 2016 to 87 percent in 2019.

² From the 2008 and 2016 Chicago Council Survey. Question 10: "Do you believe that globalization, especially the increasing connections of our economy with others around the world, is mostly good or mostly bad for the United States?" See The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, September 7, 2016. <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/actually-americans-free-trade>.

But the Republican public's belief in the positive effect of international trade is not mutually exclusive of support for President Trump's trade policies. Back in 2017, only 39 percent of Republicans said that trade deals benefited both the United States and other countries. But after several years of President Trump's policies, a narrow majority (54%) now view trade deals as mutually beneficial, perhaps suggesting some Republican support for President Trump's renegotiations of existing trade agreements.



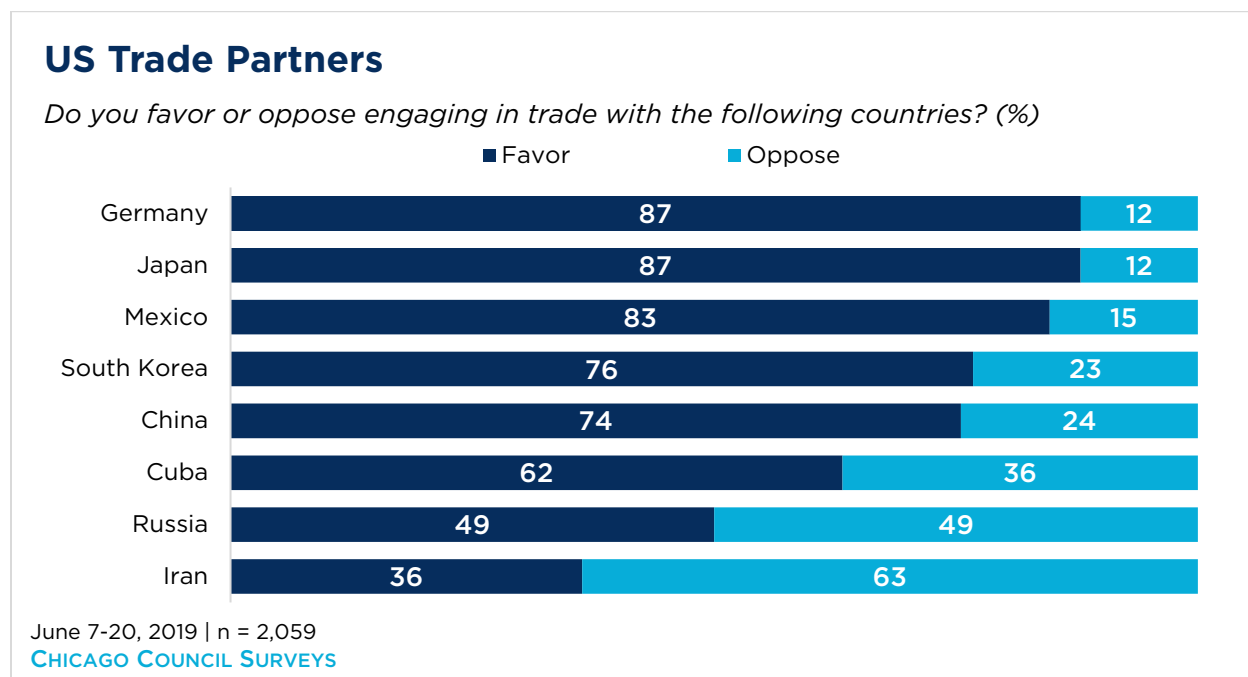
In addition, a majority of Republicans support the president's stance toward Beijing, with seven in ten in favor of increasing tariffs on products from China (72%). In sharp contrast, seven in ten Democrats (71%) oppose increased tariffs. Independents are divided (48% support, 50% oppose), much like the overall US public (47% support, 51% oppose).³

Not All Trading Partners are Equal

Despite divisions over increasing tariffs on Chinese goods, a large majority of the American people favor engaging in trade with China (74%). This majority also extends across party lines (65% of Republicans, 82% of Democrats, 73% of Independents). Republican support for trade with China suggests that they likely view tariffs as a way to secure a more fair trade arrangement with China.

³ Kafura, Craig, "Americans Favor US-China Trade, Split Over Tariffs," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, September 3, 2019. <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/americans-favor-us-china-trade-split-over-tariffs>.

As the US trade war with Beijing continues to escalate, the administration has also pushed forward on redressing trade concerns with the European Union, Japan, and others. Besides China, Americans are somewhat selective with which countries they would like to trade. Americans favor trade with many of the United States' traditional partners—Germany (87%), Japan (87%), Mexico (83%), South Korea (76%)—as well as one non-traditional trading partner Cuba (62%). Yet Americans oppose trade with Iran (63% oppose) and are split on Russia (49% oppose).



Despite [Democratic leaders' fears](#) that the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) does not go far enough in addressing Mexican labor regulations, 90 percent of the Democratic public favors engaging in trade with Mexico. Moreover, a recent Chicago Council Survey examining [opinion on US relations with Mexico](#) showed that majorities of each party think that the USMCA will be good for the US economy (86% of Republicans, 70% of Independents, 59% of Democrats).

Today, a majority of Americans favor trade with Cuba (62%), a marked shift in opinion from 2010 when 54 percent of Americans opposed engaging in trade with the island nation. Negating President Obama's attempts to open US relations with Cuba, President Trump has rolled back his predecessor's restoration of diplomatic relations with Havana. In June 2019, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin explained this move by saying that "Cuba continues to play a destabilizing role in the Western Hemisphere...by fomenting instability, undermining the rule of law, and suppressing democratic processes."⁴ Even considering such statements, majorities of Democrats (75%) and Independents (62%)—as well as nearly half of Republicans (45%)—favor engaging in trade with Cuba.

4 Mzezewa, Tariro, "New Rules on American Travel to Cuba Include Cruise Ban," The New York Times, June 4, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/travel/cuba-travel-restrictions-trump.html>.

Along with Cuba, responses on Russia and Iran show partisan divisions. While a majority of Republicans (55%) favor engaging in trade with Russia, 57 percent of Democrats oppose it. As for Iran, 74 percent of Republicans oppose trade while 56 percent of Democrats oppose it. Democrats' views of engaging in trade with Russia are nearly the same as their views of engaging in trade with Iran. The same proportion of Democrats (42%) favors trading with both nations and nearly the same proportion opposes engaging in trade (56% for Iran, 57% for Russia).

While both nations' relations with the United States have been cold in recent history, Democrats' responses, compared with Republican responses, suggest differing motives toward each country. Their relative opposition to trade with Russia could be borne of a desire to punish Moscow for its interference in US elections; data from a [2017 Chicago Council Survey](#) showed that a majority of Democrats favored increasing (58%) or maintaining (29%) sanctions on Russia. On the other hand, their relative favorability toward trade with Iran is potentially indicative of a growing inclination toward liberalization via trade. Between 2016 and 2018, majorities of Democrats responded that the United States should participate in the Iran nuclear deal (74% in 2016, 73% in 2017, 82% in 2018), an agreement that would have facilitated international trade with Iran.

Americans Want Compliance, Not Withdrawal

In the 2019 survey, Americans were asked whether the United States should comply with WTO rulings in the event of a complaint and ruling against US trade practices. Majorities of Americans across party lines indicated that the United States should comply with these rulings (65% of Republicans, 87% of Democrats, 76% of Independents). These results illustrate a disconnect between the Trump administration's foreign policy and the American public's views. President Trump has long been critical of the WTO, saying in 2017 that it "was set up for the benefit of everybody but us"⁵ and that it "was the single worst trade deal ever made."⁶ Further, the Trump administration has blocked the appointment of judges to the WTO's Appellate Body; if the United States continues to follow this course of action, the institution's dispute settlement mechanism will be rendered nonoperational by December 2019.

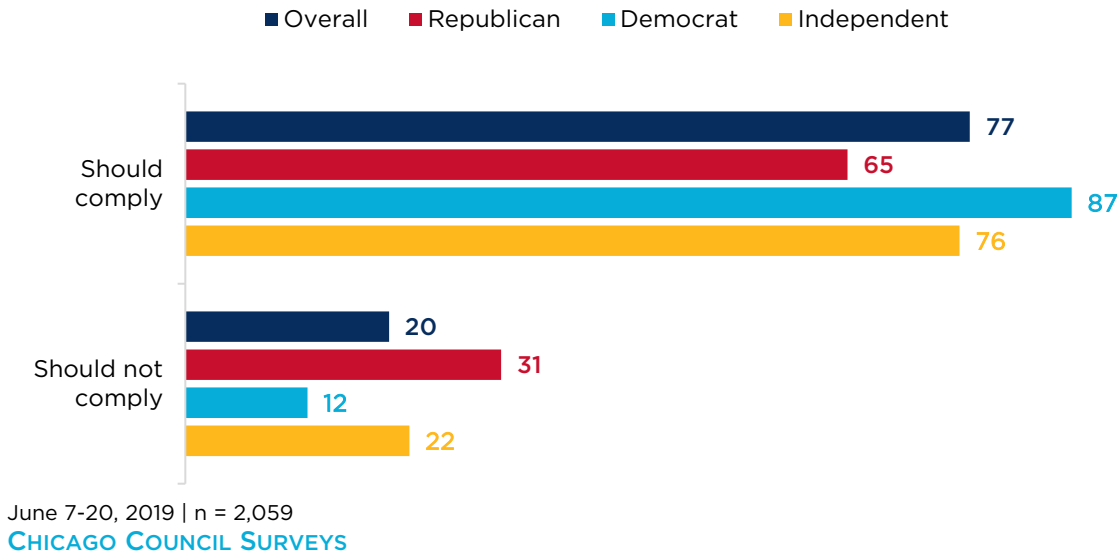
5 Bown, Chad P. and Douglas A. Irwin. "What Might a Trump Withdrawal from the World Trade Organization Mean for US Tariffs." Peterson Institute for International Economics. November 2018.

<https://www.piie.com/system/files/documents/pb18-23.pdf>

6 "Trump threatens to pull US out of World Trade Organization," BBC, August 31, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45364150>.

WTO Compliance

The World Trade Organization was established to rule on disputes over trade treaties. If another country files a complaint with the World Trade Organization and it rules against the United States, as a general rule, should the United States comply with that decision or not? (%)



Conclusion

The 2019 Chicago Council Survey illustrates that Americans, more than ever before, support trade and see benefits not just to American businesses and the US economy but to the United States' trading partners as well. The Trump administration's actions against US trading partners, US allies, and multilateral institutions present an impediment to the system of international trade that has been cultivated over the last 70 years. Americans across the political spectrum have illustrated that regardless of whether they support President Trump's policies, they do support trade.

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2019 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2019 Chicago Council Survey was conducted June 7-20, 2019 by IPSOS using their 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.

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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About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

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