THE CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

LESTER CROWN CENTER ON US FOREIGN POLICY

Do Liberal and Moderate Democrats Divide on US Foreign Policy?

Yes, especially on how to handle Iran, illegal immigrants, and whether the United States is the greatest.

Dina Smeltz, Senior Fellow, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy
Brendan Helm, Research Assistant, Public Opinion

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While Democratic presidential candidates are united in their opposition to the Trump administration's actions, they have tried to distinguish themselves along progressive and more moderate lines on key issues. Overall, Democrats among the American public—including those who consider themselves "liberal" Democrats and "moderate" or "conservative" Democrats—share a similar foreign policy outlook based on US international participation, alliances, and international trade. But there are key differences that might influence which candidates voters choose. Differences include the degree to which Americans consider climate change, the Iranian nuclear program, and US political polarization a threat to US national security. Moreover, liberals and moderate/conservative Democrats differ in their perceptions of the most effective ways to address illegal immigration, the nuclear threat from Iran, and whether the United States is the greatest country.

Key Findings

- Moderate/conservative Democrats are more alarmed than liberal Democrats by the nuclear threats from Iran (68% vs. 39%) and North Korea (69% vs. 57%).
- Majorities of both groups say that climate change is a critical threat, but a greater percentage of liberal Democrats are concerned (90% vs. 63%).
- A majority of liberal Democrats (59%), but only a minority of moderate/conservative Democrats (41%), believe that US political polarization is a critical threat.
- Liberal Democrats more heartily endorse diplomatic initiatives like humanitarian and economic aid and participating in international organizations as making the United States safer.

- Moderate/conservative Democrats are somewhat more likely than liberals to say that maintaining US military superiority makes the United States safer.
- Nearly half of moderate/conservative Democrats support the use of airstrikes (48%), cyberattacks (49%), and US troops against Iran (45%) if Tehran restarts nuclear weapons development. Majorities of liberal Democrats oppose these measures (65% for airstrikes, 47% for cyberattacks, 65% for sending troops).
- Both groups support immigration, but moderate/conservatives are more likely to favor imposing new fines on businesses that hire illegal immigrants (61% vs. 49% liberal), increasing border security (66% vs. 47% liberal), and carrying out more arrests and deportations (42% vs. 19% liberal).
- While a majority of moderate/conservative Democrats believe that the United States is the greatest country in the world (57%), only 39 percent among the liberal group agrees (with 59% saying it is no greater than other countries).
- Majorities of both Democratic groupings say that the distribution of income and wealth in the country has become less fair, but the difference between them has grown since 2008 (currently 84% liberal Democrats, 64% moderate/conservative Democrats).

Introduction: How Were the Groups Constructed?

A total of 37 percent of the 2019 Chicago Council Survey sample self-identify as supporters of the Democratic Party; of this portion, 57 percent identify as liberal Democrats (combining those who consider themselves very liberal, liberal, and slightly liberal). Forty-three percent identify as moderate or conservative Democrats (combining those who say they are middle of the road, slightly conservative, conservative, and very conservative).[1]

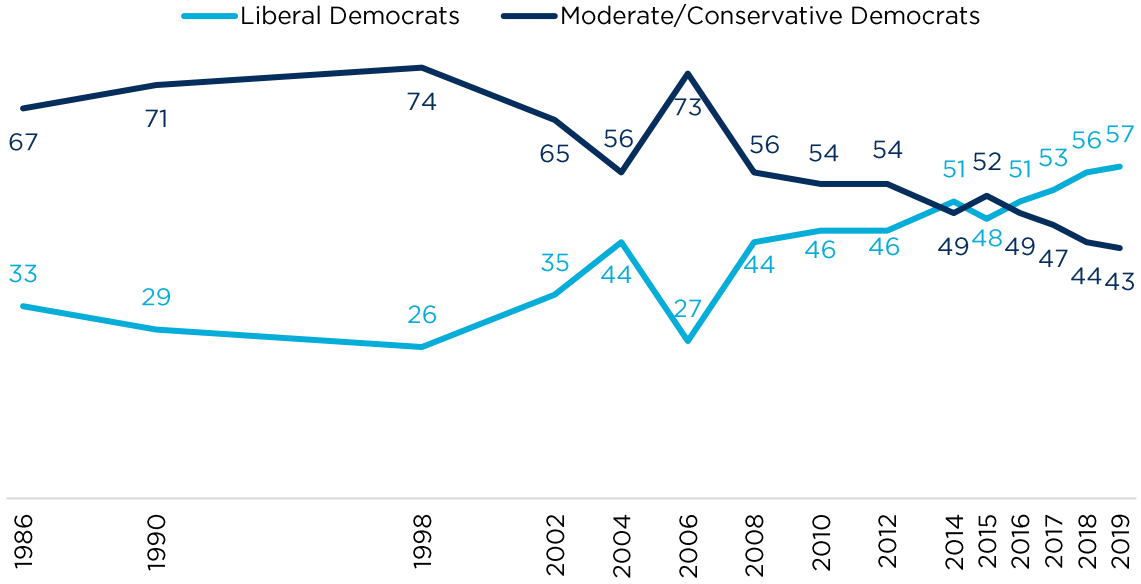
The percentage of Democrats who identify as liberal has been rising steadily over the past several decades, and today, a majority of self-identified Democrats describe themselves as liberal (see figure, next page). As Appendix Figures A through D show, liberal Democrats tend to be better educated, younger, and earn higher incomes than moderate/conservative Democrats.[2] Moreover, 73 percent of liberal Democrats describe themselves as strong Democrats versus 37 percent of moderate/conservative Democrats.

[1] For more on the composition of Democrats in this analysis, see the methodology section.

[2] At the time of survey fielding in June 2019, liberal Democrats' top four choices for president in 2020 were Joe Biden (27%), Elizabeth Warren (22%), Bernie Sanders (22%), and Pete Buttigieg (10%). Moderate/conservative Democrats' top four choices were Joe Biden (41%), Bernie Sanders (18%), Donald Trump (8%), and Elizabeth Warren (8%).

Liberal and Moderate/Conservative Democrats

Party ID: Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?
Ideology: In general, do you think of yourself as extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, middle of the road, slightly conservative, conservative, extremely conservative? (%)



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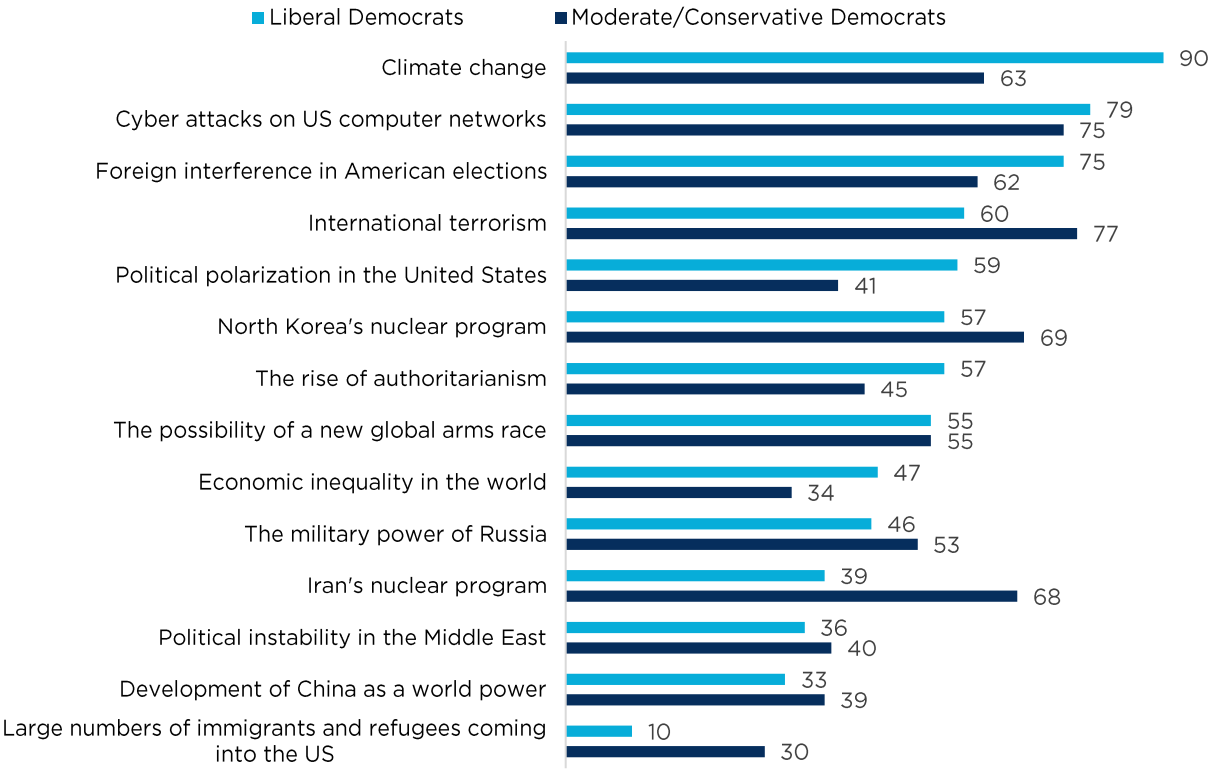
As a group, Democrats are similar in their preferences for active US participation in world affairs, shared international leadership, the value of alliances, and support for trade (See Appendix Figures E-H) regardless of their self-placement on a liberal to conservative scale.

Democratic Groups Differ on Threats Posed by Iran and US Polarization

The 2019 Chicago Council Survey finds just a few instances where liberal and moderate/conservative Democrats divide, including how critical threats posed by Iran and domestic political polarization are to the United States and whether international aid contributes to US security. The two camps also divide on the idea of the United States as an exceptional country, a new difference that has emerged in Chicago Council polling during the Trump era.

Critical Threats Facing the United States

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)



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Majorities of both liberal Democrats (75%) and moderate/conservatives (80%) think the world is becoming a more dangerous place, and both groups name climate change, cyberattacks, foreign interference in US elections, and international terrorism as the top threats facing the country. But there are some differences. The leading critical threats among liberal Democrats are climate change, cyberattacks, foreign interference in US elections, terrorism, and political polarization. The leading threats for moderate/conservative Democrats include terrorism and cyberattacks, but also the nuclear programs of North Korea and Iran.[3] Climate change (63%) and foreign interference in US elections (62%) round out moderate/conservative Democrats' top concerns.

As these ratings show, the issues where Democrats divide are Iran's nuclear program and political polarization in the United States. While majorities among both groups consider North Korea's nuclear program a critical threat (57% liberal Democrats, 69%

[3] While liberal Democrats are less concerned than moderate/conservatives about the threat from North Korea's nuclear program, they are more likely to support using US troops to defend South Korea if North Korea invades it (62% vs. 51% moderate/conservative Democrats).

moderate/conservatives), there is more of an opinion gap on Iran (39% liberal Democrats, 68% moderate/conservatives). On the threat of political polarization in the United States, a majority of liberal Democrats view it as a critical threat (59%) while only 41 percent of moderate/conservatives do the same.[4]

Chicago Council data from 2018 suggests that liberal Democrats are more politically active and may be more conscious of the polarization in contemporary politics. Liberal Democrats were the most likely out of both Democratic and Republican groups to say they have participated in campaigns and contacted public officials about personal or political problems. And when asked about their interest in various types of news reporting, liberal Democrats were the most likely out of all Republican and Democratic groups to be very interested in national news (56%), news about the relations of the United States with other countries (55%), and news about the 2018 midterm elections (55%).

Beyond their relatively greater political engagement, the liberal Democrat group also appears to be more personally affected by political polarization. A 2017 Pew survey found liberal Democrats to be the most likely out of all Republican and Democratic groups to respond that a friendship of theirs would be strained if the friend revealed that they had voted for Donald Trump (49% strain, 49% no effect). These responses help to frame liberal Democrats' relatively greater concern about political polarization in a broader context.

What Makes the Country Safer?

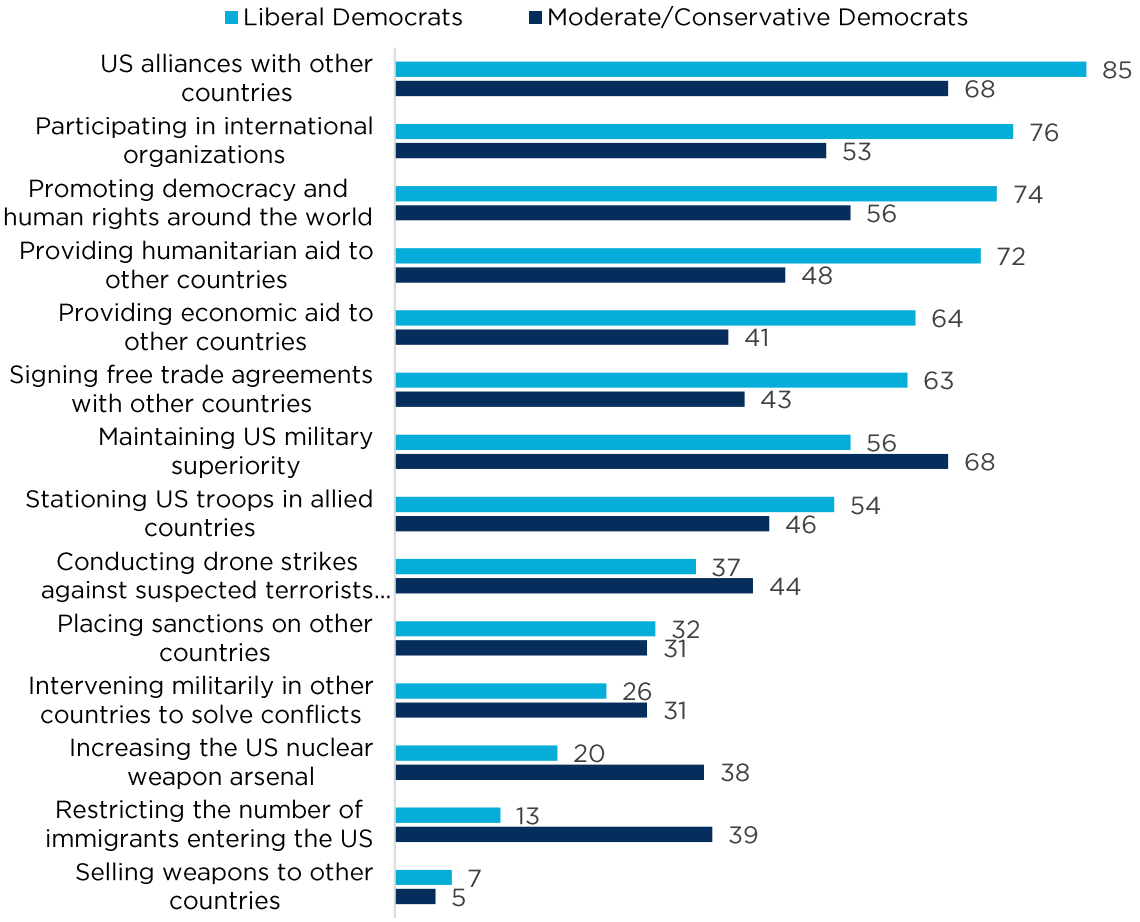
While Democrats mostly agree on the top threats facing the country, they place varying emphasis on specific foreign policy tactics. For example, liberal Democrats more wholeheartedly embrace diplomatic initiatives like providing humanitarian and economic aid to other countries, promoting democracy and human rights around the world, participating in international organizations and alliances, and signing free trade agreements as ways to make the United States safer.

Moderate/conservative Democrats are more inclined than other Democrats toward traditional security and military-related activities. They are also more likely than liberal Democrats to say that maintaining military superiority makes the United States safer (68% vs. 56% liberal Democrats); and while only in minority proportions, they are more likely to say that conducting drone strikes against suspected terrorists, increasing the US nuclear arsenal, and intervening militarily in other countries makes the United States more safe (see figure next page).

[4] A majority of moderate/conservatives say that polarization is an important but not critical threat (52%).

Making the United States More Safe

In your opinion, do each of the following policy approaches make the U.S. more safe, less safe, or do they not make a difference? (% more safe)



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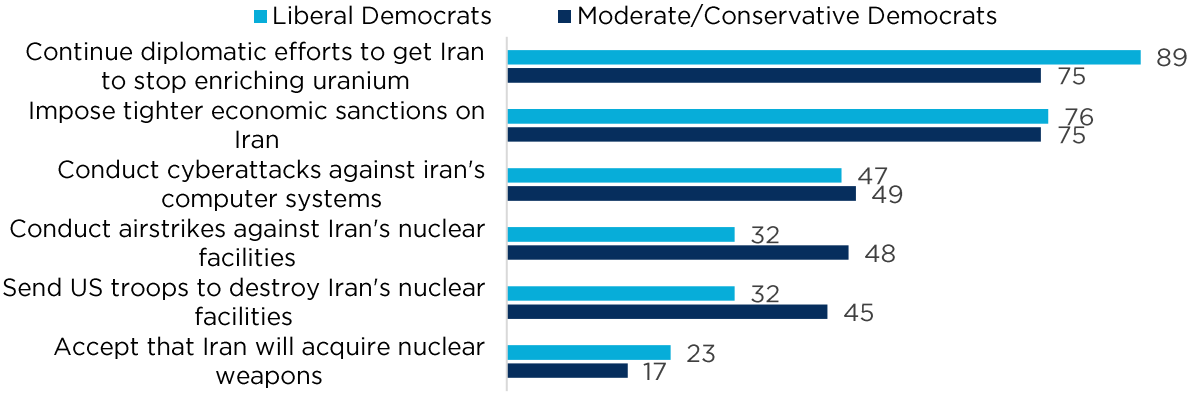
These differences are demonstrated in Democratic views of potential ways to address Iran's nuclear program. When asked about measures the United States could take should Tehran withdraw from the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, nearly half of moderate/conservative Democrats favor conducting cyberattacks against Iranian computer systems (49%), conducting airstrikes against Iranian nuclear facilities (48%), or sending troops to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities (45%). By contrast, majorities of liberal Democrats oppose these actions.

The only clear majorities of support across both groups are for continuing diplomatic efforts to get Iran to stop enriching uranium (89% liberal Democrats, 75% moderate/conservatives) and for imposing tighter economic sanctions on Iran (76% liberals, 75% moderate/conservatives).

Actions if Iran Withdraws from JCPOA

If Iran withdraws from the nuclear agreement with the remaining countries—the UK, France, Germany, Russia, and China—and restarts development towards a nuclear weapon, would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose the U.S. taking each of the following actions: (% strongly support + somewhat support)



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Divergent Views on Dealing with Illegal Immigration

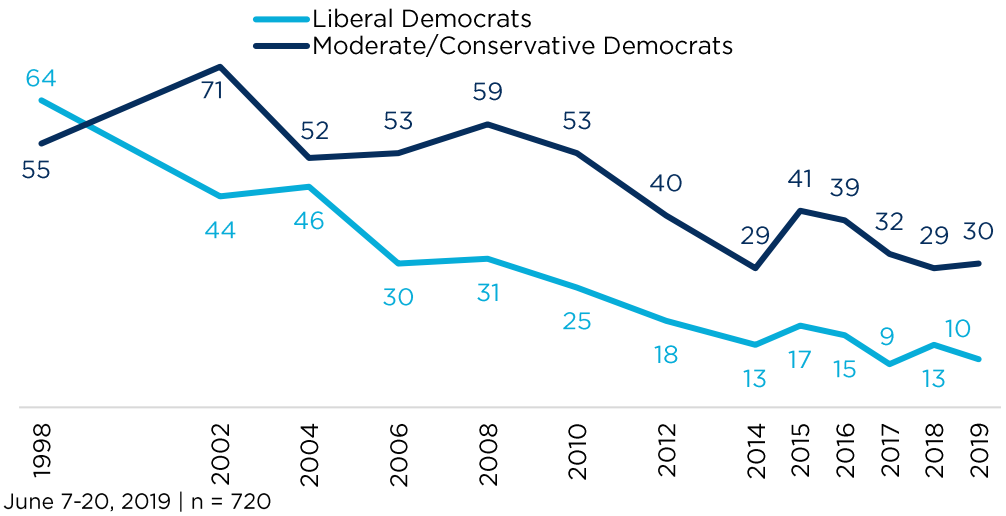
One of the major topics for the 2020 election will be immigration, as Donald Trump has centered his presidency on the issue. Few Democrats view immigration as a critical threat (10% liberals, 30% moderate/conservatives), and the proportions of both groups of Democrats that perceive immigration to be a critical threat have dropped substantially since 2002.[5] In 2002, 71 percent of moderate/conservative Democrats and 44 percent of liberal Democrats responded that immigration was a critical threat.[6]

[5] The ideology variable in 2002 had only five categories instead of the seven used when creating the liberal vs. moderate/conservative distinction thereafter. The categories were very liberal, fairly liberal, middle of the road, fairly conservative, and very conservative.

[6] Liberal Democrats are far more likely than moderate/conservative Democrats to say that a large influx of immigrants and refugees into the United States is not an important threat (45% versus 14% moderate/conservative). A plurality of the moderate/conservatives say it is an important but not a critical threat (56% vs. 45% liberal).

Threat of Immigration

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 US (%)***



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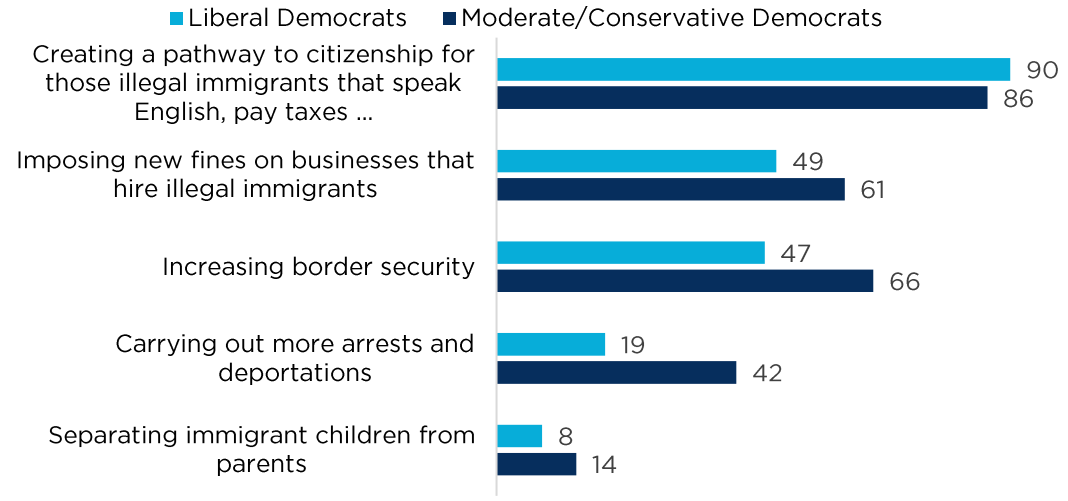
Reflecting their relatively greater perception of immigration as a threat, moderate/conservatives are also more likely to view punitive measures as effective in combatting illegal immigration such as imposing new fines on businesses that hire illegal immigrants (61% vs. 49% liberal), increasing border security (66% vs. 47% liberal), and carrying out more arrests and deportations (42% vs. 19% liberal). Moreover, moderate/conservatives are much more likely than liberals to say that restricting the number of immigrants entering the United States will make the country more safe (39% vs. 13% liberal). In a separate question, moderate/conservatives are also more likely than liberals to support using US troops to stop immigrants from entering the United States from Mexico (36% vs. 14% liberal), though large majorities of both groups oppose such measures.[7]

However, large majorities of both groups are in favor of creating a pathway to citizenship for those illegal immigrants who agree to pay taxes, speak English capably, have a clean criminal record, and have steady employment (89% liberals, 86% moderate/conservatives; see figure next page).

[7] 85 percent of liberal Democrats and 62 percent of moderate/conservative Democrats oppose the use of US troops to stop immigrants from coming into the United States from Mexico.

Measures to Deal with Illegal Immigration

Please tell me whether you think each of the following measures is very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, or not at all effective in dealing with the issue of illegal immigration? (% very effective + somewhat effective)



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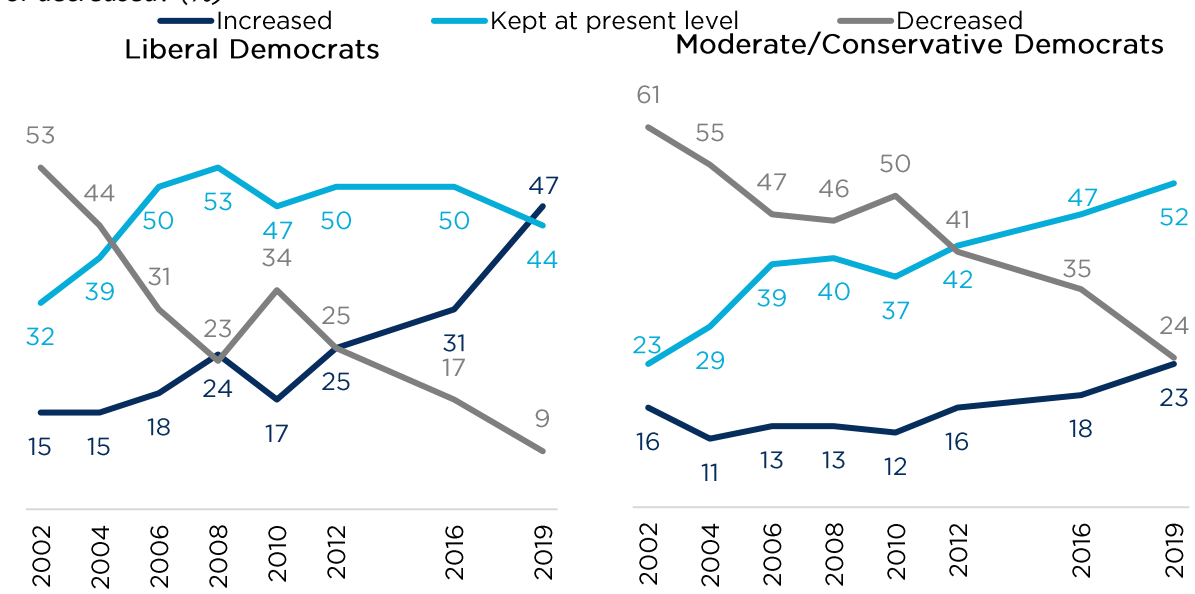
In addition, liberal Democrats tend to say that legal immigration should be increased (50% vs. 23% of moderate/conservative), while moderate/conservative Democrats are more inclined to say it should be kept at the present level (52% vs. 44% liberal). Both groups have become more amenable since first asked in 2002, when merely 15 percent of liberals and 16 percent of moderate/conservative Democrats said that legal immigration should be increased.[8]

[8] The starkest change over time is the proportion of each group who said that legal immigration should be decreased. In 2002, 53 percent of liberals and 61 percent of moderate/conservatives called for decreased levels of legal immigration but in 2019, those numbers dropped to 8 percent of liberals and 25 percent of moderate/conservatives. Opinions within the Democratic Party have shifted dramatically over the last two decades and this change does not appear to be an explicit result of the Trump administration's policies—the bulk of the movement happened before he assumed the presidency.

Legal Migration Levels

Should legal immigration into the United States be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased? (%)



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Big Difference in Views of United States Being the Greatest

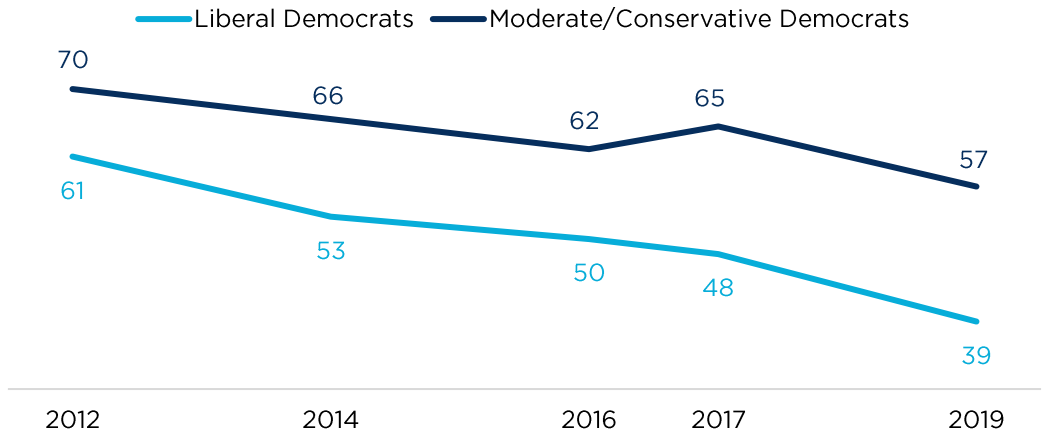
One of the sharpest differences between the two groups of Democrats is on perceptions of the United States itself. Overall, a lower percentage of Americans today than when first asked in 2012 say that the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world (57% vs. 70% in 2012). Conversely, four in ten Americans today say that the United States is no greater than other nations (42% vs. 29% in 2012).

While a majority of moderate/conservative Democrats believe that the United States is the greatest country (57%), the liberal group begs to differ, with only 39 percent saying it is the greatest country (and 59% saying it is no greater than other countries).[9] While there were also differences between these groups during the years of the Obama administration, the divide has grown since 2016. Not until 2019 did a clear majority of liberal Democrats say the United States is no greater than other nations.

[9] By comparison, a majority of Republicans think the United States is the greatest country in the world (81%) and Independents are split (49% greatest country, 51% no greater than other countries).

Greatest Country?

Some people say the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world. Others say that every country is unique, and the United States is no greater than other nations. Which view is closer to your own? (% greatest country in the world)



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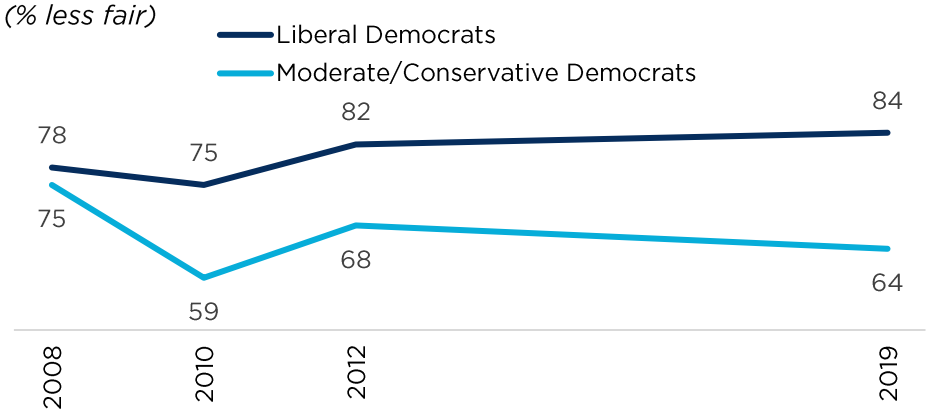
Some Democrats likely view the country as less great with the election of Donald Trump, but the data also show an association with perceptions of increasing economic inequality in the country. Specifically, those who sense growing inequality are more likely to say the United States is no greater than other nations. A majority of both Democratic wings say the distribution of income and wealth in the United States has become less fair (84% liberal Democrats, 64% moderate/conservative Democrats). Yet differences between the two groups have grown since 2008, when this question was first asked. In 2008, somewhat fewer liberal Democrats (78%) and somewhat more moderate/conservative Democrats (75%) thought that the distribution of wealth in the United States had recently become less fair. While the changes have not been substantial, this item nonetheless suggests a potential wedge in the future of the Democratic Party.

Wealth Distribution in the United States

Do you think that the distribution of income and wealth in the U.S. has recently become more fair, less fair, or stayed about the same? (% less fair)



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Conclusion

While the 2019 Chicago Council survey displays mainly Democratic agreement on the global role of the United States, the value of alliances, and the benefits of trade, the results highlight a few divisions on the threat of Iran's nuclear program, political polarization, ways to address Iran and immigration, and American exceptionalism. For each of the presidential debates leading up to the primaries next year, Democrats will be paying attention to these issues as they determine who will ultimately get their vote come primary season. The real differences on foreign policy will play a larger role when it comes to the 2020 elections, as the final Democratic candidate is pitted against Donald Trump and his "America First" foreign policy.

Appendix

Figure A

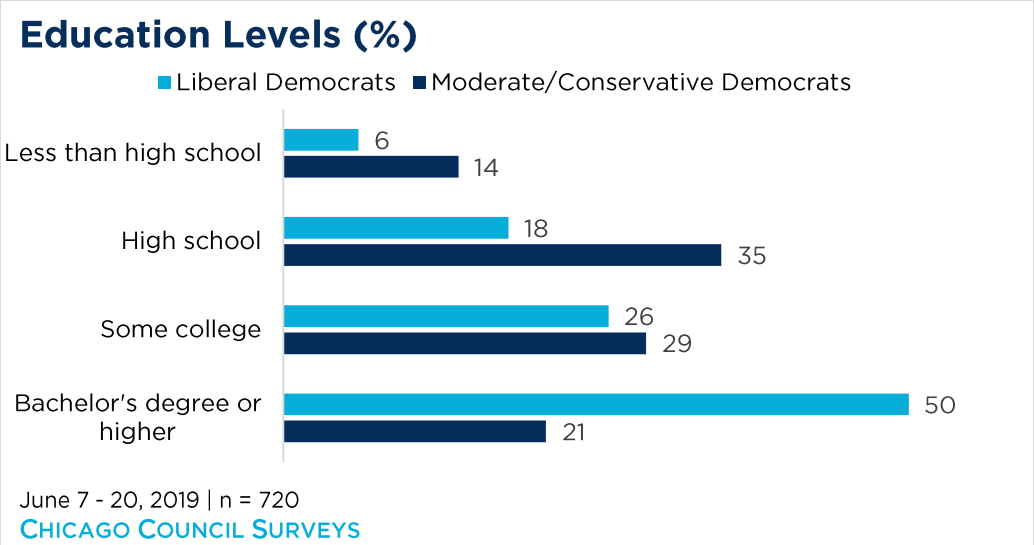

Figure B

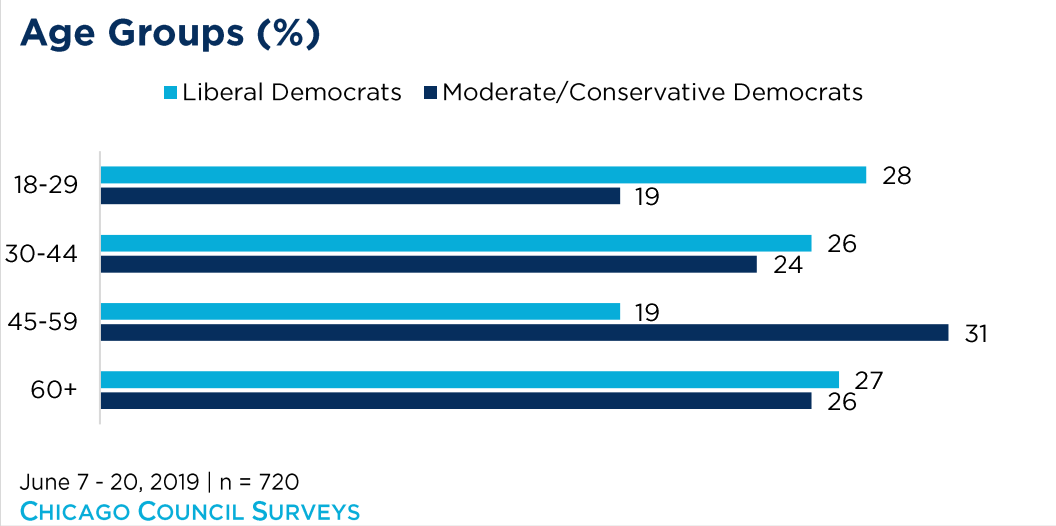

Figure C

Income and Democrats

Income bracket and Ideology among Democrats (%)

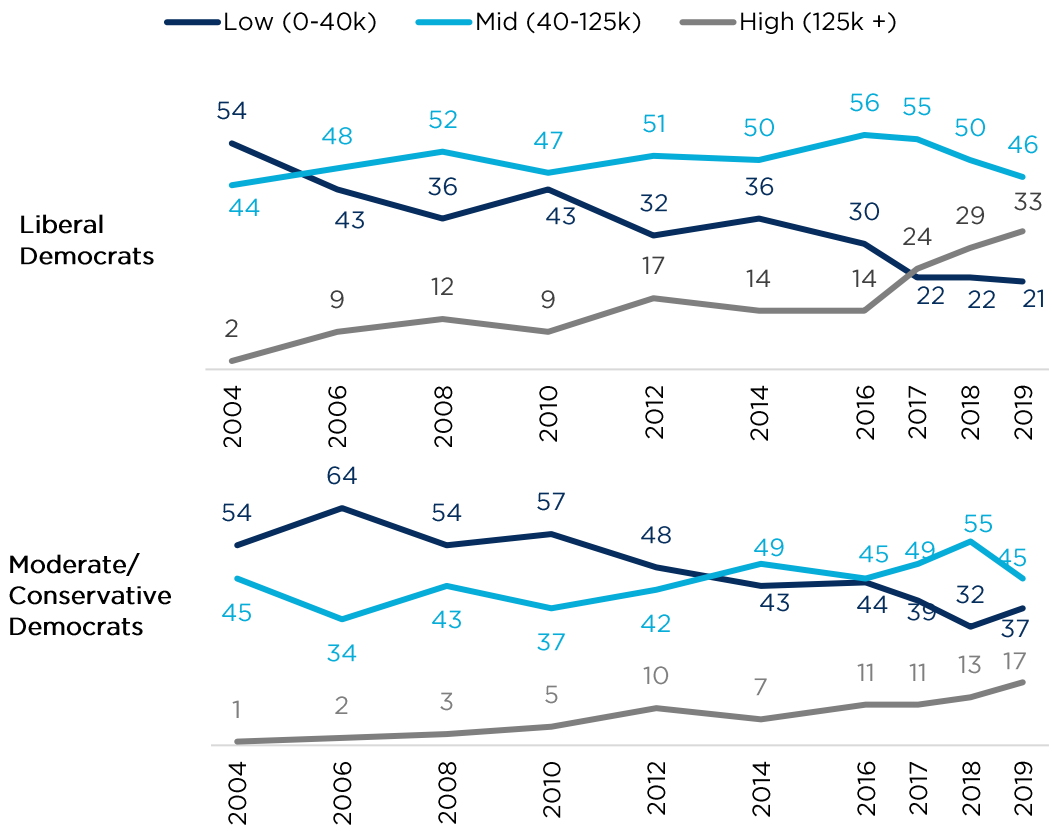

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Figure D

Degree of Democrat

Would you call yourself a strong Democrat or a not very strong Democrat? (%)

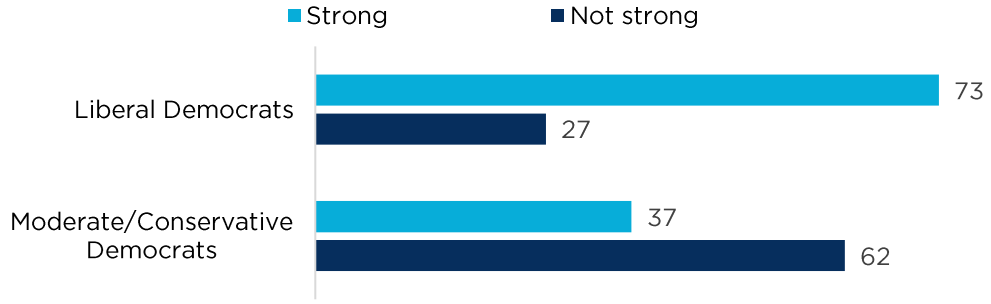

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Figure E

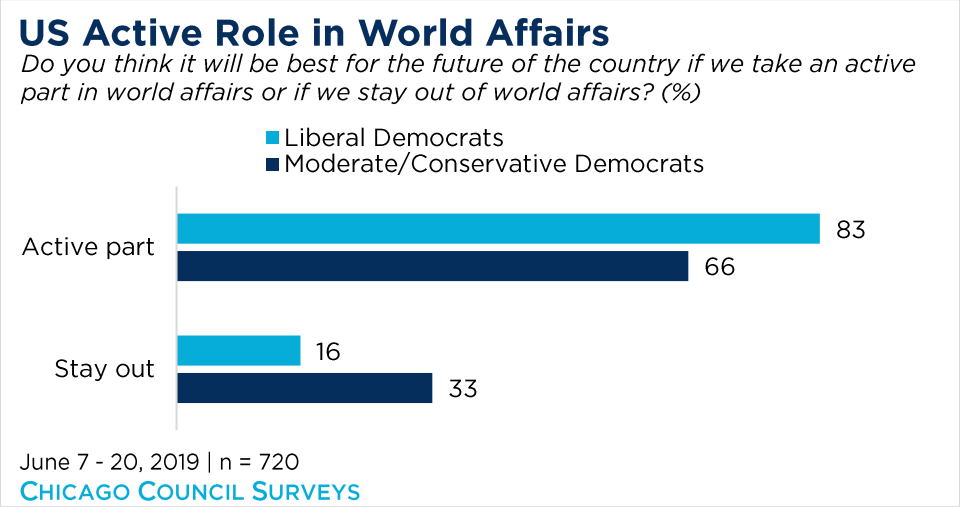


Figure F

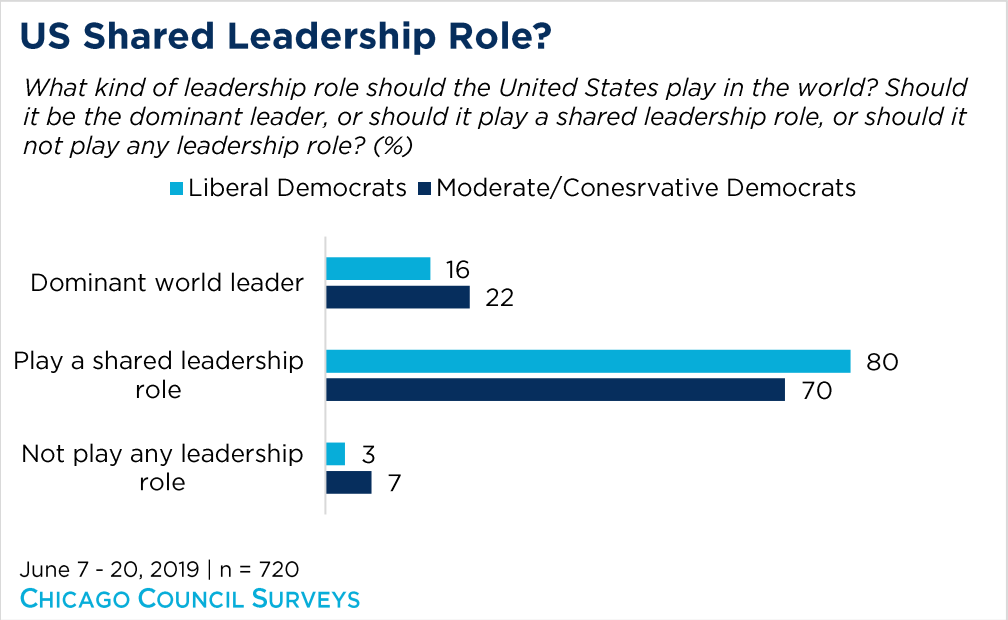


Figure G

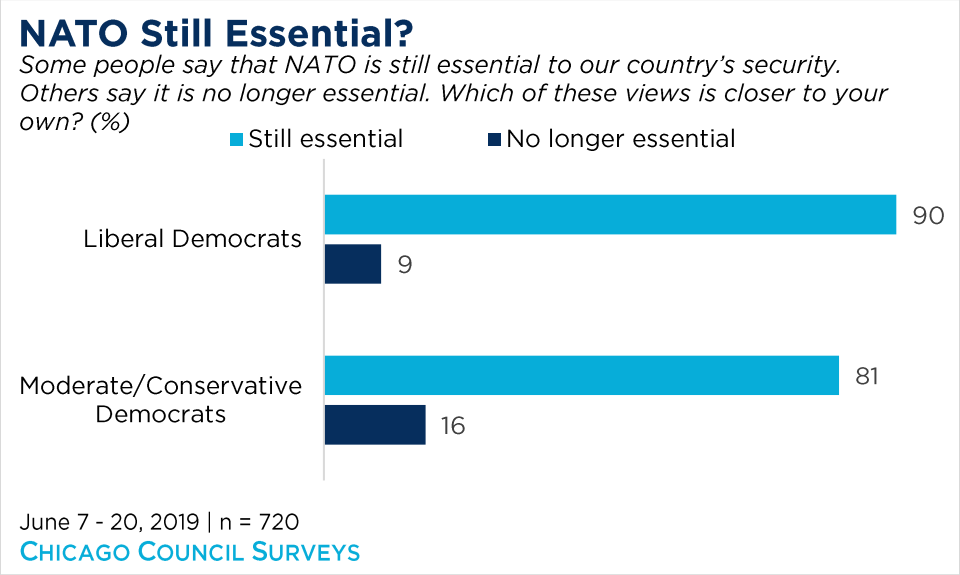
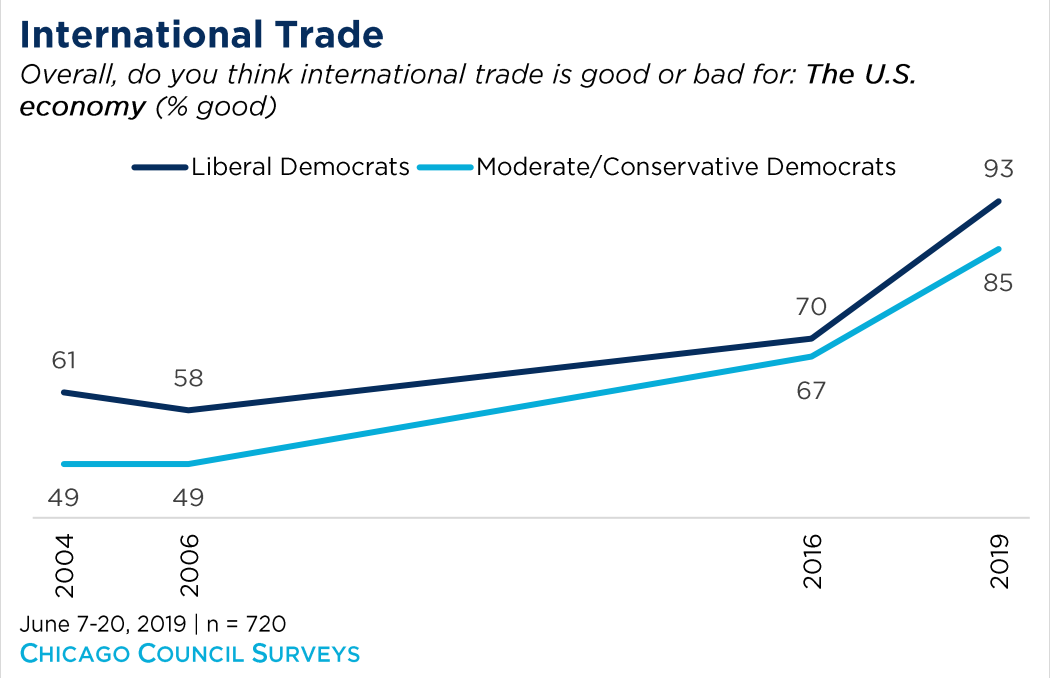


Figure H



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

Ideological identification is based on respondents' answer to an ideological self-identification question: In general, do you think of yourself as: [Extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate, slightly conservative, conservative, extremely conservative]

The 57 percent of Democrats who identify as very liberal, liberal, or slightly liberal constitute 21% of the overall sample. The 43 percent of Democrats who identify as Moderate/conservative constitute 16% of the sample (Moderates = 12.5%, Conservatives = 3.5%).

For more information please contact the authors, Dina Smeltz (dsmeltz@thechicagocouncil.org) or Brendan Helm (bhelm@thechicagocouncil.org).

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