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Public Attitudes on US Intelligence: Annual Poll Reflects Bipartisan Confidence Despite Presidential Antagonism

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Since before his inauguration, President Donald Trump vigorously rejected the judgments of the US intelligence community (IC) on Russia's interference in the 2016 elections and repeatedly attacked these agencies and their former leaders. In 2018, the president accused the IC of spying on his 2016 campaign. The president's supporters labeled the IC as an anti-democratic "deep state" hostile to the administration. Despite this unprecedented antagonism from the president, most Americans, including Republicans, continued to express confidence in the IC. Indeed, survey results from summer 2018 show a slight improvement from 2017 in public views of the IC's effectiveness. While these results will likely reassure IC leaders, they should pay close attention to wide variations that emerge among generational groups, particularly among younger Americans whose attitudes may be malleable but are shaped by formative experiences. Americans in the youngest generational cohort analyzed here (Millennials) are less likely to see the IC as playing a vital role in warning against foreign threats and less likely to say the IC is effective in preventing terrorist attacks.

Key Takeaways from the 2018 Survey:

- Once again, a strong majority of Americans (59%) said the IC plays a vital role in protecting the country, including 60% of Republicans, 68% of Democrats, and 57% of Independents. Larger numbers of the Silent Generation (78% of those born between 1928 and 1945) expressed this view in 2018, compared to 67% of Boomers (1946-1964), 58% of Gen X-ers (1965-1980), and only 47% of Millennials (1982-1996);

- An overwhelming majority of Americans considered the intelligence agencies effective in accomplishing their assigned missions with nearly 8 in 10 crediting the IC for preventing terrorist attacks, including 85% of Republicans (up from 75% in 2017) and 78% of Millennials (up from 64% in 2017);
- Only half of Americans (51%) believe the IC effectively safeguards their privacy and civil liberties while pursuing its mission;
- Almost all Americans (89%) agreed the IC should use all lawful means to gather intelligence;
- The number of Americans that believe our intelligence agencies should respect the rights of foreigners to the same degree as US citizens grew by 15 percentage points from 2017 (38%) to 2018 (53%);
- The overall number of Americans who agreed the IC could share more information with the public without compromising its effectiveness increased from 2017 (rising from 54% to 65%), a view shared by nearly 7 in 10 Millennials;
- Americans remain divided over which government officials or institutions should be responsible for supervising and overseeing the intelligence agencies.

New IC Leaders Further Affirm the “Transparency Initiative”

Revelations of sensitive and highly intrusive electronic surveillance programs by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden earlier in the decade presented a serious challenge to the IC’s public standing. Neither the president nor the Congress acted decisively to reassure Americans that their intelligence agencies were acting in a manner that was both effective in keeping them safe and respectful of their cherished privacy and civil liberties.

In response, then-Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper announced a “Transparency Initiative” aimed at improving the public’s understanding of the IC’s mission, how the intelligence agencies pursued that mission, the laws and policies that constrain the IC, and how these secret activities were supervised and overseen. Clapper issued general “Principles of Transparency” along with a more detailed implementation plan for the initiative. He also established an interagency council within the IC to promote greater openness in the face of foreseeable bureaucratic resistance.¹

While the Trump administration has been criticized for excessive secrecy in other contexts, DNI Dan Coats early in his tenure reissued the directive that affirms the IC’s commitment to safeguarding Americans’ privacy and civil liberties, and also promoting transparency.² Indeed, the ODNI’s recent National Intelligence Strategy endorses the Principles of Transparency and asserts that greater openness will be “necessary to earn and retain public trust” on which the IC’s future mission success will depend.³

¹ [Principles of Intelligence Transparency for the Intelligence Community](#), 2015; [Principles of Intelligence Transparency: Implementation Plan](#), 2015.

² [Intelligence Community Directive 107](#), February 28, 2018.

³ [Remarks](#) as prepared for delivery by Dan Coats, Director of National Intelligence, January 22, 2019.

To investigate public opinion on the IC, the Texas National Security Network has carried out two rounds of public opinion surveys in 2017 and 2018. In May of last year, we published a report on the 2017 survey which sought to establish a baseline for future polling that would measure changes in public attitudes on intelligence, including possible shifts that could be attributed to ongoing efforts by the IC to be more transparent.⁴

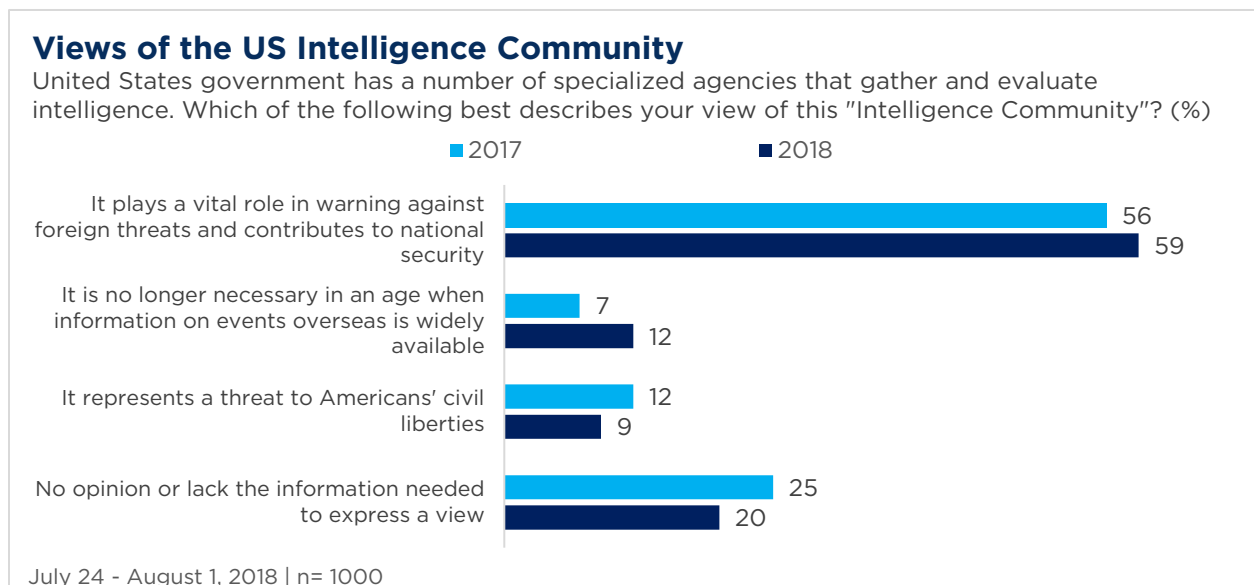
An identical survey was conducted one year later, in summer 2018.⁵ This report describes the data collected during this second round of polling, highlighting certain changes in how Americans regard our intelligence agencies.

The second edition of our survey confirmed a modest increase in Americans' assessment of the IC's utility and effectiveness, with notable variation among demographic groups. We cannot yet gauge how durable these gains may be, or confidently attribute them to the IC's limited steps to date toward greater openness.

Year-on-Year Outcomes: General Effectiveness

The design of our survey assumes that Americans will be more likely to view the IC favorably if they believe the intelligence agencies are effective in performing their central mission. Our 2018 survey confirmed that a strong majority of Americans continue to believe the IC "plays a vital role in warning against foreign threats and contributes to national security." The number of respondents who selected this choice from four alternative descriptions of the IC remained about the same (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



⁴ Stephen Slick and Joshua W. 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>

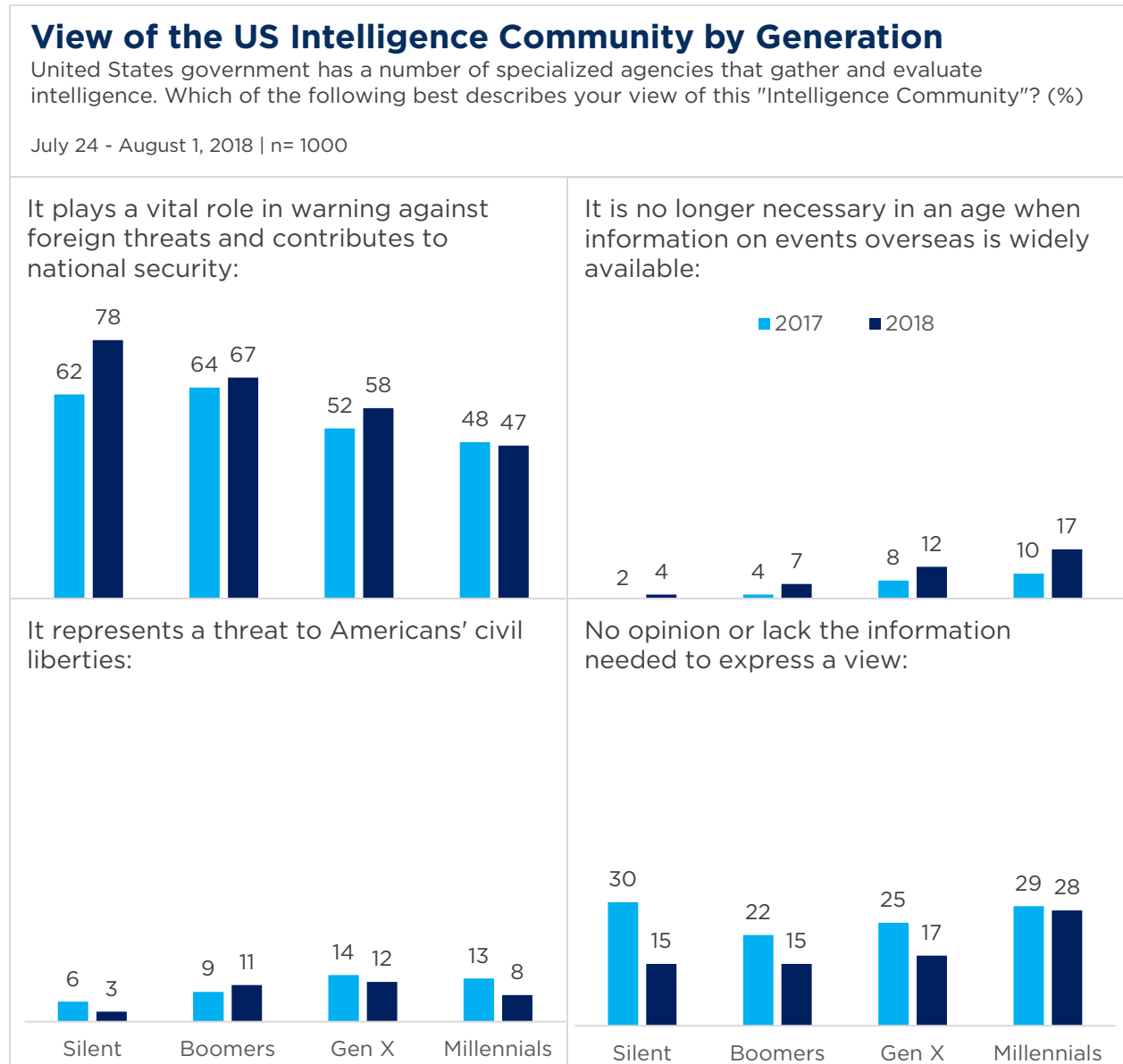
⁵ See appendix for survey methodology.

These results are confirmed when we disaggregate by partisanship. 68% of Democrats, 60% of Republicans, and 57% of Independents said the IC played a vital role in 2018, not dissimilar from 2017 when it was 66%, 58%, and 54% respectively.

While too soon to tell if this is a trend, the fraction of respondents who said that the IC was no longer necessary jumped by five percentage points between 2017 and 2018. An increase of similar magnitude was observed for all partisan groups.

These aggregate and partisan results mask wider variation based on generation and knowledge. Less confidence in the IC among younger generations would be worrisome from the perspective of the IC's long-term democratic legitimacy.

Figure 2



For example, the number of Silent Generation members who believed the IC plays this vital role increased from 62% to 78% while members of this cohort who claimed to have no opinion on intelligence decreased from 30% to 15%. The most pronounced shift in attitudes about the IC's utility was among Millennials, or those born between 1982 and 1996. Fewer than half of respondents from this generational group believed the IC's work was vital, fully 17% (up from 10%) thought the intelligence agencies were no longer needed, and another 28% of Millennials claimed to lack the information necessary to form an opinion (see Figure 2).

As in 2017, the 2018 survey results show large differences in views of the IC based on respondents' knowledge of foreign affairs. We asked respondents two questions to assess their general familiarity with foreign affairs: 1) the country negotiating to leave the European Union; and 2) the leader of Syria. High knowledge subjects were those who got both these questions right, which was 57% of the sample. 70% of high knowledge respondents agreed the IC plays a vital role in our national security while fewer than half of the low-knowledge respondents expressed that view. Older men with some knowledge of global affairs remain the IC's strongest supporters while less knowledgeable, often younger, women are the most skeptical or indifferent toward US intelligence.

Mission Effectiveness

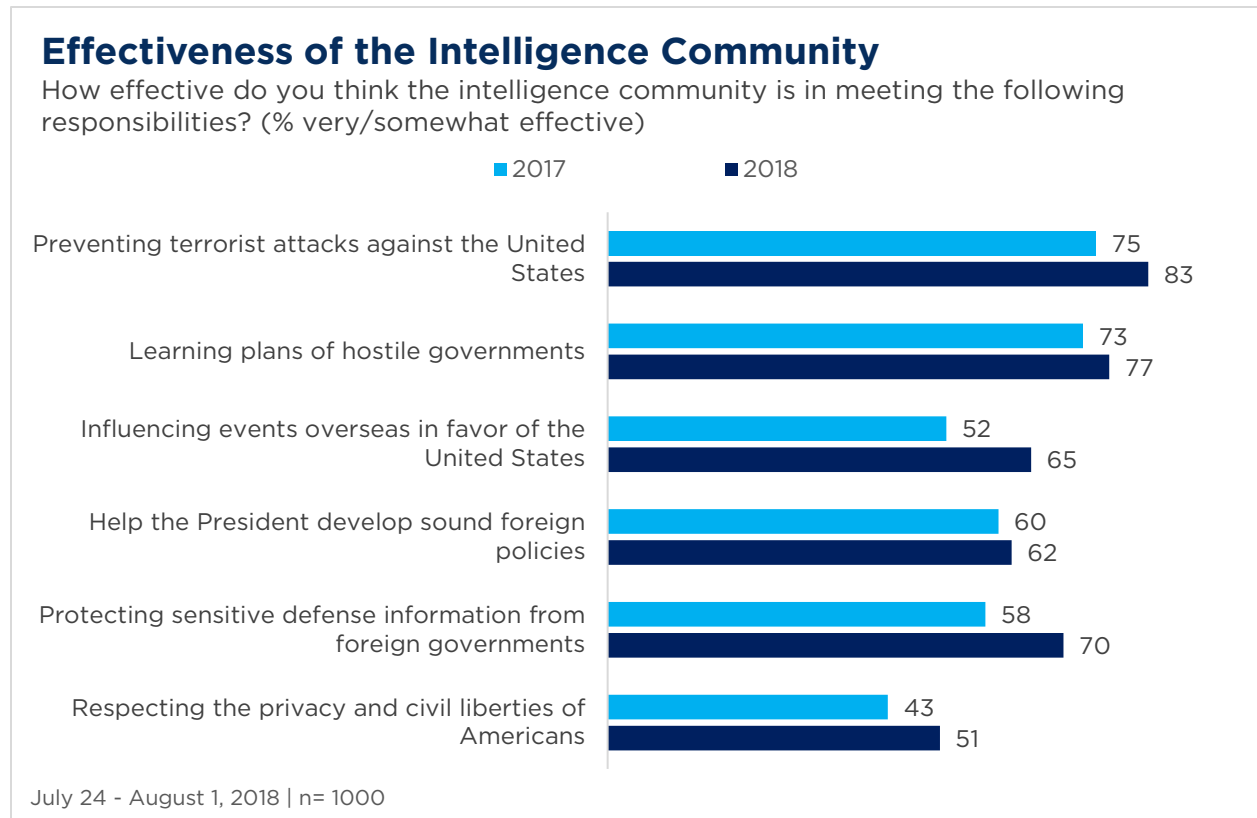
To understand more precisely why Americans generally believe in the important role played by US intelligence, our survey asked respondents to judge the IC's effectiveness in its key mission areas: counterterrorism, foreign intelligence collection, covert action, support to policymaking, and counterintelligence. In 2018, more Americans judged the IC as somewhat or very effective in accomplishing each of its main missions.

As in the previous year, an overwhelming majority of respondents say the IC is effective in preventing terrorist attacks (83%) and learning the plans of hostile governments (77%). On preventing terrorist attacks, 85% of Republicans said the IC was effective in preventing terrorist attacks (up from 75% in 2017), compared to 87% of Democrats (up from 80% in 2017) and 80% of Independents (similar to 79% in 2017).

In terms of generational trends, 78% of Millennials (up from 64% in 2017) said the IC was effective in preventing attacks, compared to 81% of Gen-Xers, 85% of Boomers, and 94% of the Silent Generation.

In terms of gender, the largest jumps were among women, with 62% of women saying the IC was effective in influencing events abroad (up from 48% in 2017). For men, the comparable figures were 67% (up from 57% in 2017). Higher proportions of women also said the IC was effective in protecting sensitive information, 69% in 2018 compared to 55% the year before. For men, the figure was 72% in 2018, up from 61% in 2017.

Figure 3

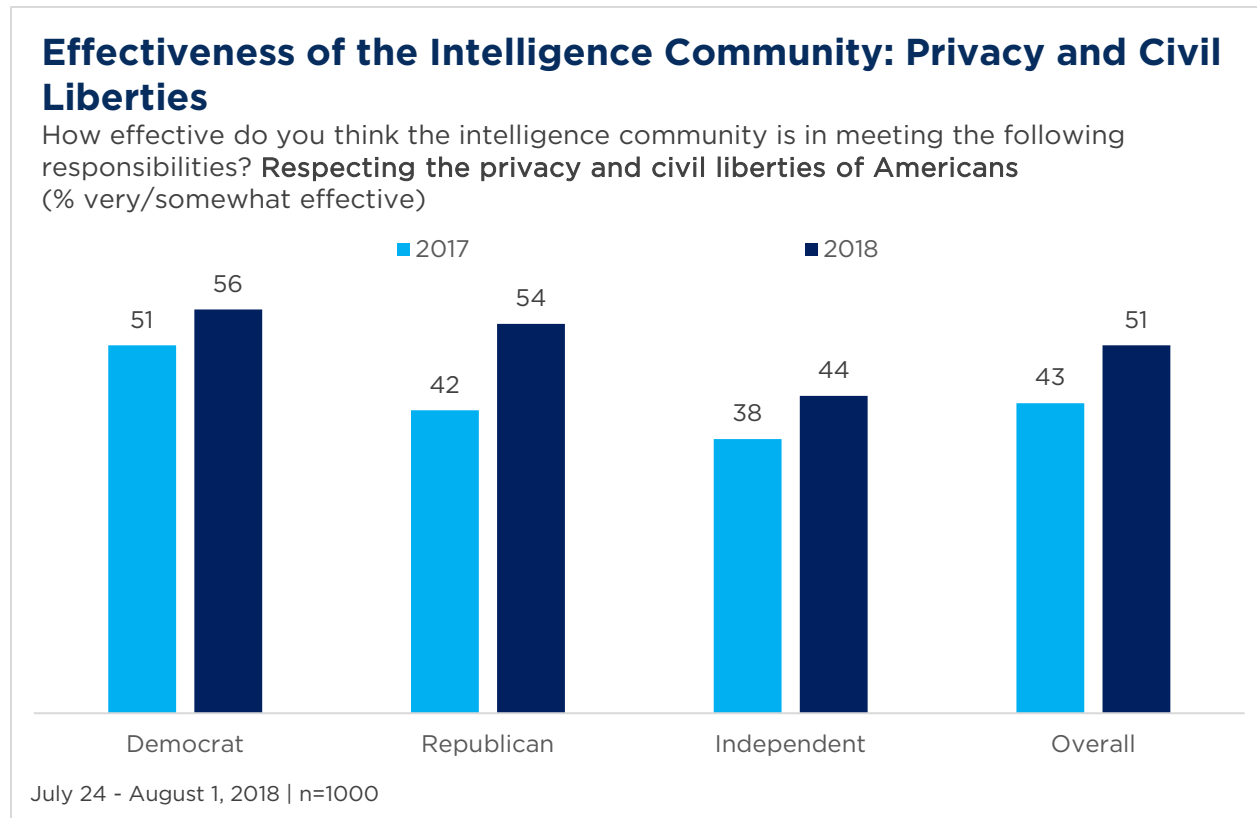


Differences between 2017 and 2018 significant at $p < .01$ (Preventing attacks, influencing events, protecting sensitive information, respecting privacy)

While the IC received high marks for mission effectiveness, only half of survey respondents believed the IC respected citizens' privacy rights, although the number that agreed increased by 8 percentage points in the year between our surveys. Republicans in particular saw a 12 percentage point increase in this dimension between 2017 and 2018 (see Figure 4).

These views as well as the year-on-year gains in perceived mission effectiveness were generally bipartisan and age/gender neutral. Low knowledge respondents had higher confidence in the IC's counterterrorism, intelligence collection, and foreign influence missions in 2018 compared to 2017. Better-informed Americans also rated the IC as more effective in influencing events abroad compared to 2017, and a higher proportion of them viewed the IC as effective in protecting sensitive information and respecting Americans' civil liberties.

Figure 4



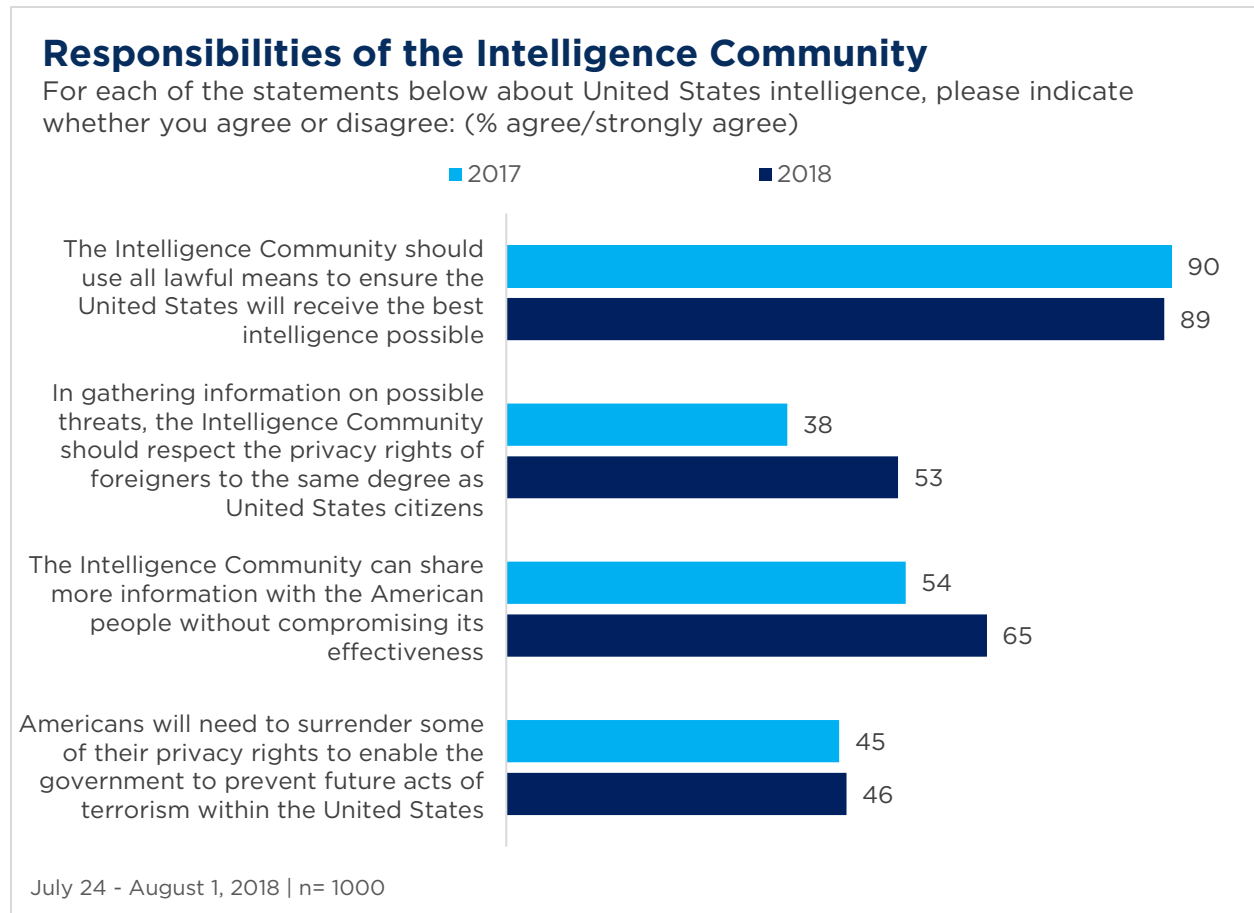
Differences between 2017 and 2018 significant for Republicans ($p < .10$), Overall ($p < .01$)

While younger Americans expressed the least support for the necessity of an intelligence community, their support for its effectiveness on key functions, namely preventing terrorist attacks and protecting sensitive information, did increase markedly in 2018.

Responsibilities of the IC

Unsurprisingly, an overwhelming number of Americans once again agreed that the IC should use “all lawful means” to ensure US leaders receive the best possible intelligence. Nine in 10 respondents agreed with this proposition in both 2017 and 2018 (see Figure 5). Agreement with this aspirational goal was unaffected by gender or political affiliation but notably impacted by generation: 100 percent of Silent Generation members agreed with the statement, while agreement among Millennials declined in 2018 to 80%, down from 85% in 2017. For Boomers and Gen X-ers, the figures were 95% and 90% respectively in 2018 for using all lawful means.

Figure 5

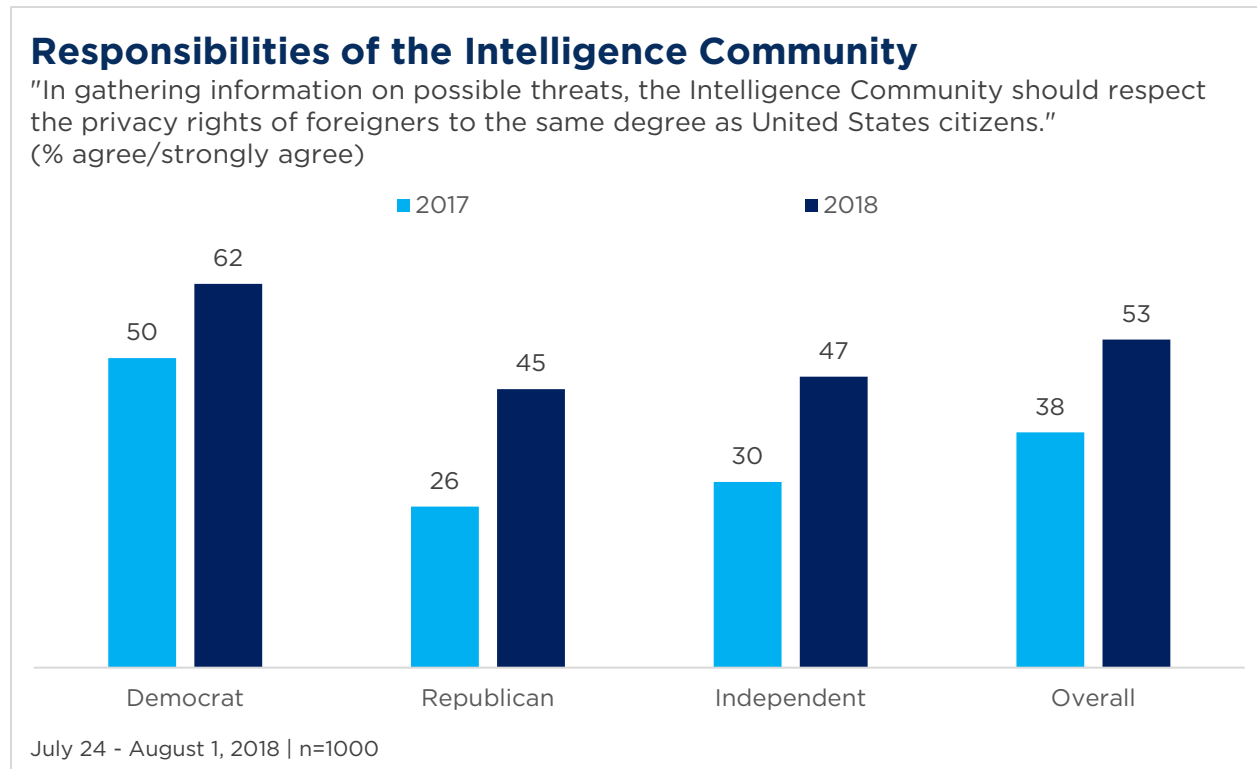


Differences between 2017 and 2018 significant at $p < .01$ (Right of foreigners, sharing information)

The 2018 survey also offered encouragement to proponents of the ODNI's Transparency Initiative, inside and outside of government. The number of respondents who agreed that the IC could share more information with the American people without comprising its effectiveness increased moderately year-on-year from 54% to 65%. In 2018, 69% of Millennial respondents agreed with that proposition, compared to 57% in 2017.

On surrendering privacy, there were some interesting gender divisions. The number of American men who agreed that it was necessary to surrender some of their privacy rights to prevent future terror attacks inside the United States remained relatively unchanged at 40% while more than half of women thought surrendering privacy was necessary (52% compared to 49% in 2017).

Figure 6



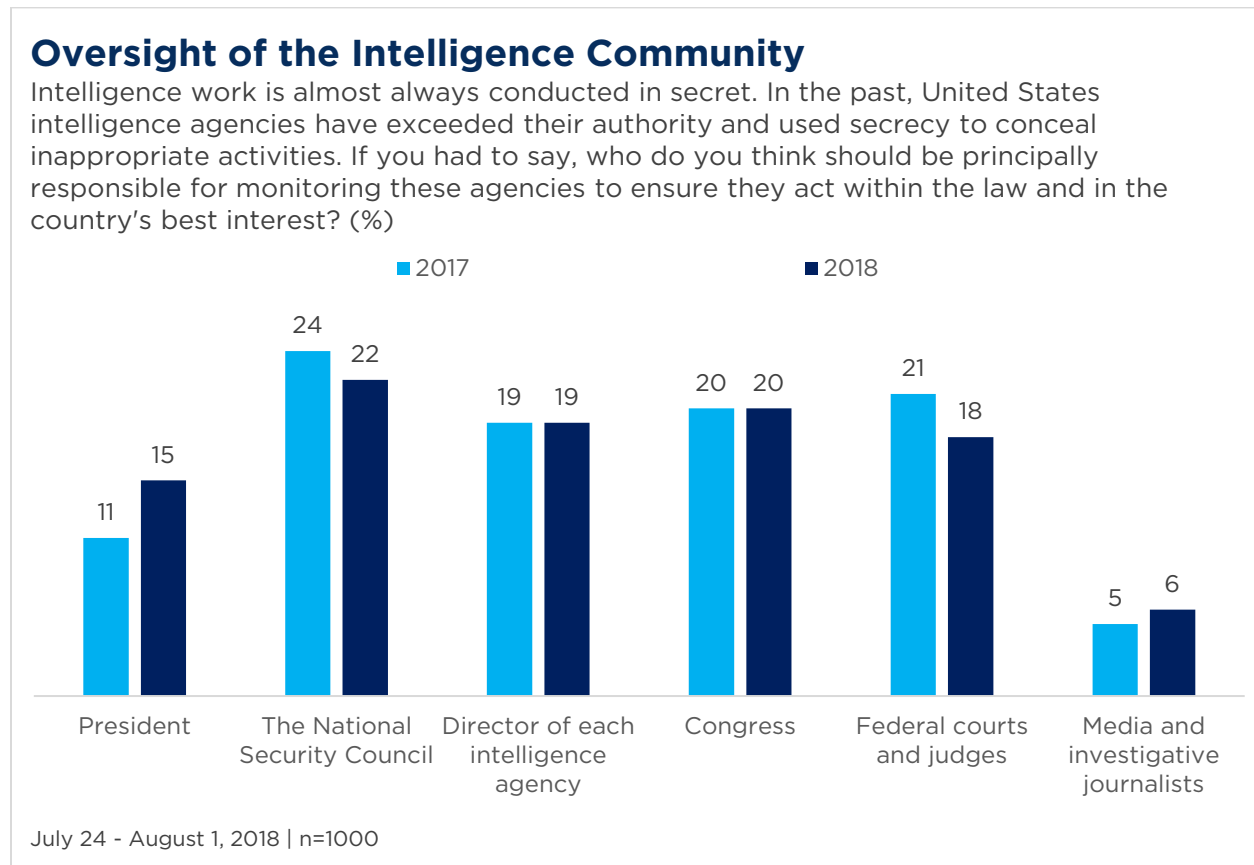
Differences between 2017 and 2018 significant at $p < .01$ (Republicans, Independents), $p < .05$ (Democrats)

Notwithstanding this firm support for using all lawful means, the number of Americans that agreed the IC should “respect the privacy rights of foreigners to the same degree as US citizens” climbed by 15 percentage points between 2017 and 2018. The most significant gains in support for the privacy rights of foreigners were among Republicans (26%-45%) and the Silent Generation (25%-57%) (see Figure 6).

Supervision and Oversight

Our 2017 baseline survey revealed considerable public division about which government officials or institutions should be responsible for overseeing our intelligence agencies.

Figure 7



As in 2017, the 2018 survey finds Americans divided over democratic oversight of American intelligence. Roughly equal numbers of respondents in both 2017 and 2018 identified the National Security Council, individual agency heads, Congress, and the courts as responsible for monitoring the intelligence agencies. The number of respondents who assigned the media this role was stable near five percent. Support for the NSC's role in supervising intelligence activities decreased slightly but it remained the most popular choice among those polled in 2018. Fifteen percent of respondents — an increase of four percentage points — now believe the president should be responsible for ensuring that US intelligence agencies “act within the law and in the country's best interest” (see Figure 7). This increase in support for the president's role supervising US intelligence was most pronounced among Republican and male respondents.

Conclusions: More Openness Amidst Criticism from the “First Customer”

With two years of survey data available, we can begin to develop a more reliable understanding of the American public's attitude toward our intelligence agencies. Most Americans regard the IC as vital to our national security, and its performance as increasingly effective — in particular, in preventing terror attacks. The public does not understand well how the US government supervises and provides democratic oversight to institutions whose activities remain largely secret. The trend lines that

emerged between 2017 and 2018 were generally positive for the IC, but we note that awareness and support for US intelligence is weakest among Millennials, the youngest generation of Americans analyzed here.

One goal of this survey project is to supplement anecdotal assessments of public support for the IC with more reliable evidence of that relationship. Since the last two DNIs (and many IC agency heads) have cited a connection between transparency, public understanding, and support for the IC, our polling data may also help test this proposition, albeit imperfectly. However, our current survey does not ask respondents why they hold certain views about US intelligence or what events may cause them to think differently.

Identifying the cause of the public's increasingly favorable attitude toward US intelligence is particularly fraught at this moment. In the twelve months between our surveys, Americans continued debating the merit of the January 2017 IC Assessment (ICA) of Russian attempts to interfere in the previous year's presidential election. This product was prepared in anticipation of declassification and public release.⁶ DNI Coats and several IC agency heads also appeared in well-publicized open hearings convened by the congressional intelligence committees where they explained and fielded questions on the unclassified version of the IC's annual Worldwide Threat Assessment.⁷

At the same time, however, President Donald Trump, members of his administration, and pro-Trump media outlets contested the ICA's key judgments and the competence of its authors, consigned the IC agencies to an anti-democratic "deep state," and threatened to revoke the security clearances of critical former intelligence leaders. On the world stage, President Trump rejected the US IC judgments on election interference in favor of Russian President Vladimir Putin's "strong and powerful" personal assurances.

It is tempting to conclude that the IC's efforts to be more open are generating public confidence, or that the president's attacks on the intelligence agencies are unserious and ineffective, but neither conclusion is yet supported by survey evidence. We have noted that the majority of Americans that expressed confidence in the IC's effectiveness includes Republicans who might otherwise be expected to align with the president's views. We will continue measuring the public's confidence in US intelligence annually, documenting any significant changes in those attitudes, and seek future opportunities to examine more closely why Americans hold, retain, or change those attitudes.

⁶ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Background to "[Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections](#)": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution," 2017.

⁷ [Statement](#) for the record, Dan Coats, Director of National Intelligence, February 2018.

Survey Methodology

From July 24, 2018 to August 1, 2018, UT-Austin fielded a survey through the market research firm YouGov with 1,000 respondents matched demographically to be nationally representative. The margin of error is 3.73 percent. The data analyzed in this paper use survey weights.

YouGov interviewed 1,153 respondents who were matched down to a sample of 1,000 to produce the final dataset based on a sampling frame on gender, age, race, education, party identification, ideology, and political affiliation. The recruitment of survey respondents was based a stratified sample from the 2016 US Census American Community survey. For each respondent in the target frame a respondent is selected from the YouGov opt-in panel that most closely matches the characteristics of the ideal sample.

Joshua Busby, Jonathan Monten, Jordan Tama, and Craig Kafura, "[2018 Survey of the Mass Public](#)", by YouGov on behalf of the University of Texas.