

2023-2024 Survey of Public Attitudes on US Intelligence

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The University of Texas at Austin's 2023 and 2024 national surveys of public attitudes confirm that most Americans believe the US intelligence agencies are vital to protecting the nation and effective in carrying out their specialized tasks. These final polls of the Biden presidency also affirm that partisan preference plays a significant role in shaping views on the Intelligence Community's (IC) performance, respect for civil liberties, and democratic oversight. Over the six-year span of this study, efforts to improve transparency and public understanding of the US IC have not overcome widespread public concern that the country's security agencies fail to adequately safeguard citizens' privacy rights and civil liberties.

Key Takeaways

- Most Americans believed that US intelligence agencies are necessary and play a vital role in protecting the nation (62% in 2024).
- Relatively few Americans believed the IC is no longer needed (5% in 2024) but a sizable number (12% in 2024) of Americans expressed concern that the intelligence agencies represented a threat to their civil liberties.
- An overwhelming majority of Americans rated the intelligence agencies as highly effective in accomplishing core missions like preventing terror attacks (83%) and discovering the plans of hostile governments (80%).

However, fewer than half of Americans believed the IC was effective in protecting their privacy rights (48%).

- Partisan differences described in previous reports were present in the 2023 and 2024 data and appear more deeply entrenched in public attitudes toward US intelligence. Americans' views on the effectiveness, respect for privacy rights, and institutional oversight of the intelligence agencies were each notably impacted by partisan affiliation.
- Four in 10 Americans (40%) learned about US intelligence from traditional media sources while one in four (25%) relied on social media. Age plays the most significant role in news sources, with older Americans following traditional print and electronic outlets while younger cohorts cited social media sources—only 1 percent of Americans said they relied on popular culture portrayals of US intelligence.

Views of the US Intelligence Community

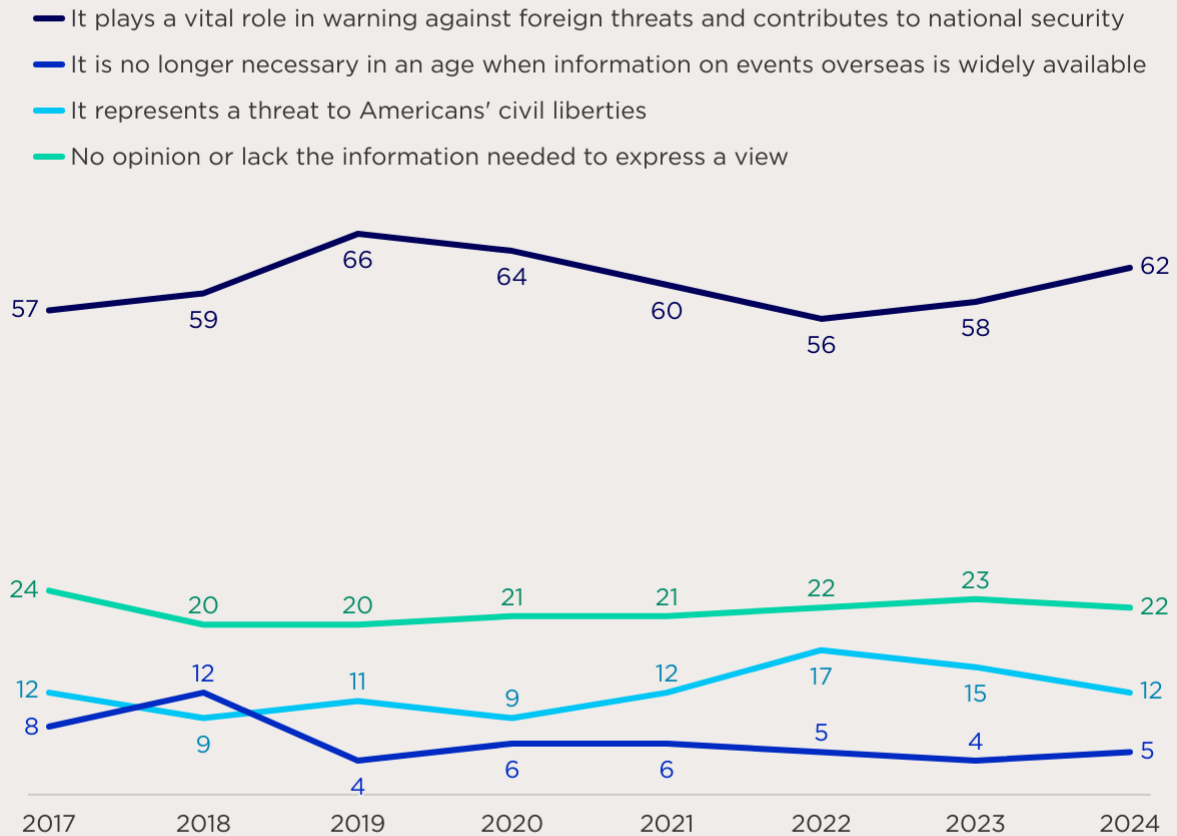
Our most recent surveys reflect that roughly six in 10 Americans believe that the IC plays a vital role in warning against foreign threats and contributes to national security (58% in 2023, and 62% in 2024) (see Figure 1). This solidly favorable view has been consistent over the six-year span of this study. In 2023 and 2024, as in previous years, men expressed slightly more favorable views of the IC than women. The level of support for US intelligence agencies also correlates quite closely with age. Older Americans were more likely to view the IC as necessary. For example, in 2024, 70 percent of “Boomers” and 68 percent of “Gen Xers” described the IC as vital to US national security, while 52 percent of “Millennials” and 57 percent of “Gen Z” Americans expressed that view.¹

Support by White (63%) and Black (66%) Americans was uniform and high in 2024, while the level of support by Hispanic Americans (48%) continued to lag. Furthermore, in both 2023 and 2024, Americans categorized as “High Knowledge” were more likely to regard the IC as vital than less informed participants. The survey respondents were asked two questions to evaluate their knowledge of foreign affairs: 1) Who is the current president of Turkey? and 2) Who is the current president of France? Respondents who answered both questions correctly were grouped into the “High Knowledge” category.

¹ The generations are defined by the following birth years: Boomers (1946 to 1964), Gen X (1965 to 1980), Millennial (1981 to 1996), and Gen Z (1997 to present). Prior surveys included some members of the Silent Generation (born prior to 1946).

Figure 1: Views of the US Intelligence Community

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



July 22-26, 2024 | n=1,000

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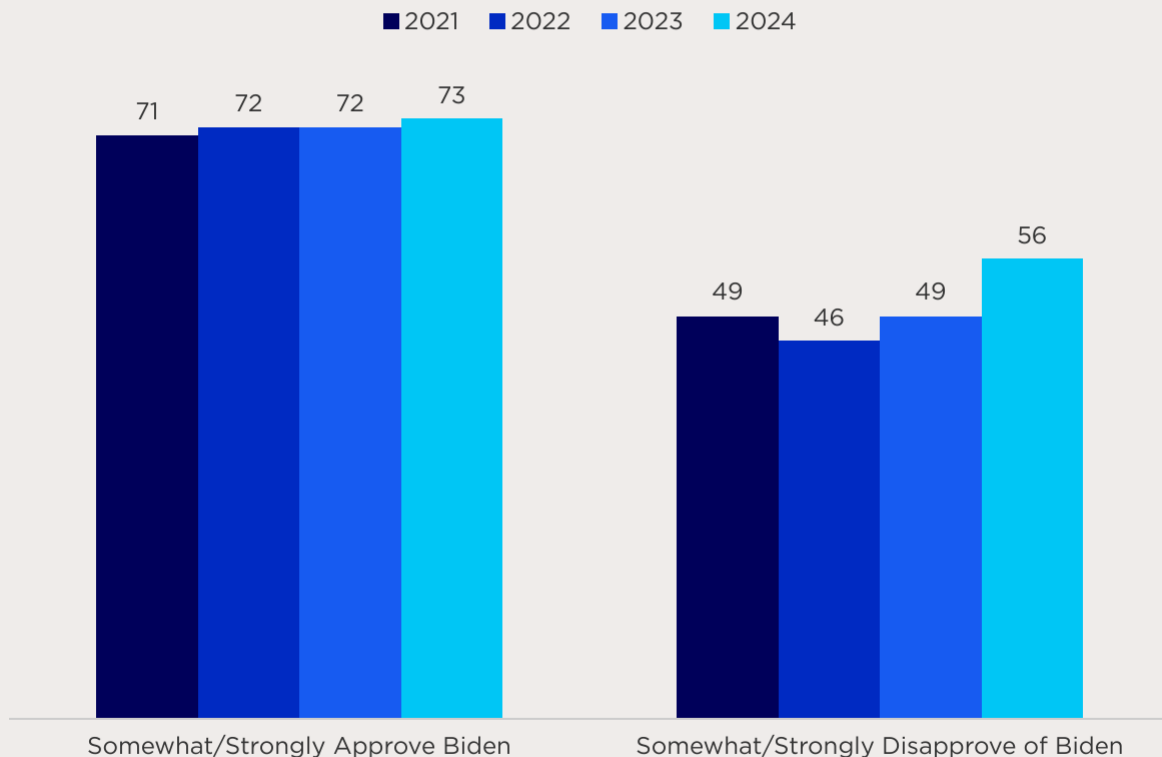
Relatively few Americans believed that the IC was no longer needed (just 5 percent in 2024). Even among more “security skeptical” age cohorts like Millennials and Gen Z-ers, there was little appetite for shuttering the IC.

In line with historic levels of concern, one in eight Americans (12% in 2024) described the IC as a “threat to Americans’ civil liberties.” Self-identified political Independents and Republicans were most inclined to regard the IC as a threat to civil liberties. For example, in 2024, 18 percent of Independents and 9 percent of Republicans highlighted that threat, while only 6 percent of Democrats described the IC in these terms.

The proportion of Americans who have no opinion or lacked the information needed to shape a view of the IC has proven remarkably stable since 2017 at roughly one in five, fluctuating within a narrow range between 20 and 24 percent over the life of this study. Significantly more women (28% in 2024) than men (15%) admitted they knew little about the IC. Higher numbers of Hispanic Americans (33%) than White Americans (19%) and Black Americans (21%) cited a lack of information on US intelligence in the 2024 survey.

Figure 2: Views of the US Intelligence Community by Support for President Biden

The US government has a number of specialized agencies that gather and evaluate intelligence. Which of the following best describes your view of this "Intelligence Community"? (% it plays a vital role in warning against foreign threats and contributes to national security)



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Our [last report](#)—informed by 2021 and 2022 surveys, and in the wake of Joe Biden’s 2020 election victory—highlighted partisan differences in public perceptions of US intelligence. Support for the IC increased among Democrats after Biden’s election, ranging between 69 percent and 73 percent throughout his administration (2021 to 2024). Although the percentage of Republicans viewing the IC as vital increased in the last two years of the Biden administration, it remained lower than Democrats, ranging between 51 percent and 67 percent in the last four years. We also note that the number of Republicans who viewed the IC as a threat to civil liberties increased after Democrats gained control of the White House, peaking in 2022, but followed by a decline in 2023 and 2024.

To further explore the influence of political preferences on public attitudes toward US intelligence, we began asking survey participants in 2021 to describe their views on then-President Biden (see Figure 2). During each year of the Biden presidency (2021 to 2024), more than seven in 10 Americans who “approved” or “strongly approved” of Biden described the IC as vital, while approximately half of those who “disapproved” or “strongly disapproved” of Biden expressed support for the IC. The same Americans who disapproved of Biden were also two to three times as likely to describe the IC as a threat to civil liberties than were Biden’s supporters. For example, in 2024, only 6 percent of those who approved of Biden described the IC as a threat to civil liberties, while 15 percent of Biden’s detractors expressed this fear.

Effectiveness of the US Intelligence Community

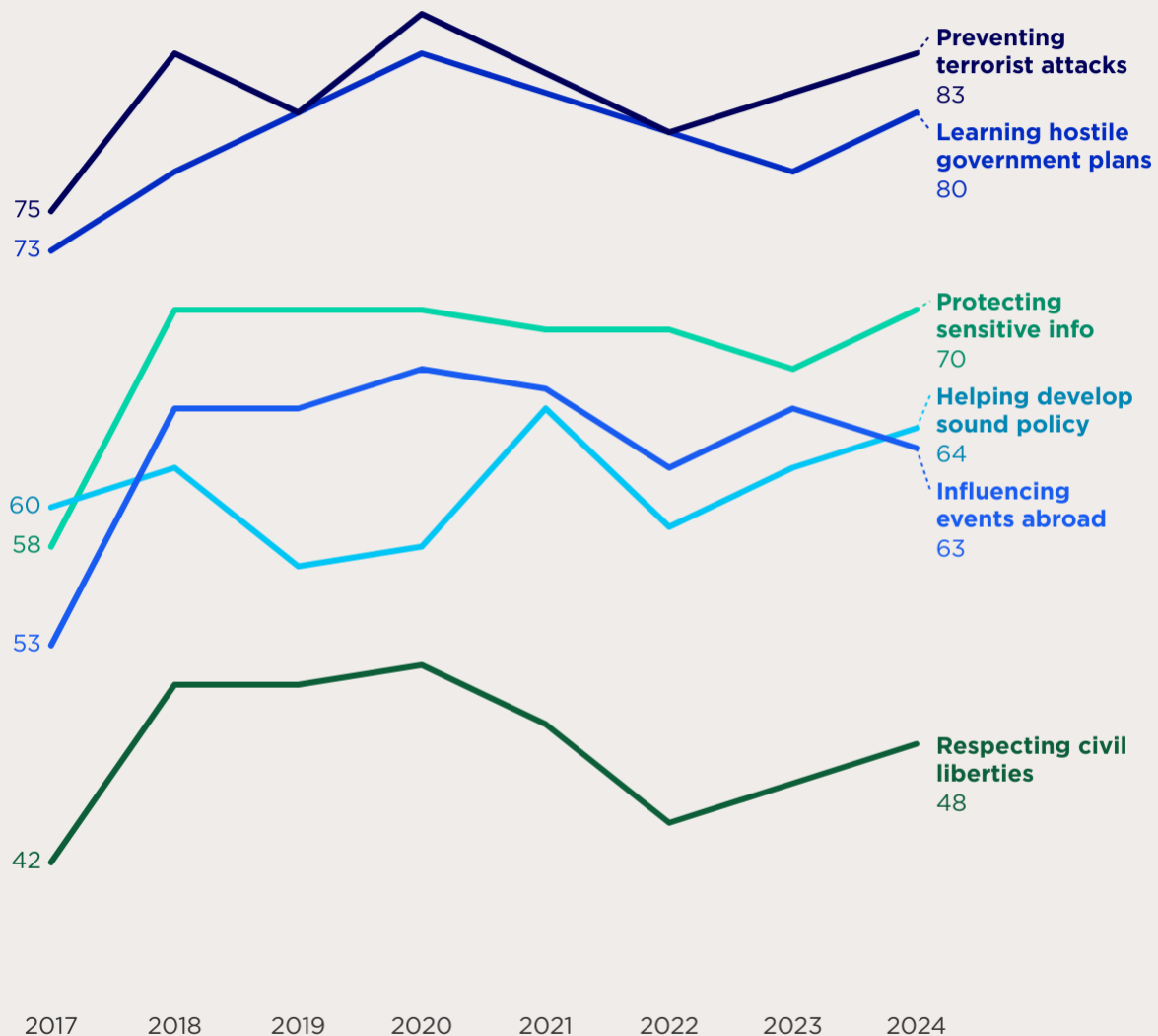
Since the beginning of this study, we have asked Americans how effectively the IC performs in its assigned missions: preventing terrorism against the United States, learning the plans of hostile governments, influencing events abroad, helping the president develop sound foreign policies, protecting sensitive defense information from foreign governments, and respecting the privacy and civil liberties of Americans (see Figure 3).

The most recent data conforms to the longstanding pattern: Americans expressed exceptionally high confidence in the IC’s ability to detect and prevent attacks by terrorists (83% in 2024). The IC’s high marks for combatting terrorism are consistent across age, gender, race, party, and “knowledge” variants. Similarly, the IC continues to receive credit from the public for discovering the plans of hostile governments. Roughly eight in 10 Americans since the start of this study in 2017 described the IC as somewhat or very effective in penetrating and learning the secrets of other governments (80% in 2024). Although a smaller percentage, over six in 10 Americans (63%) credited the IC for effectively “influencing events overseas” and “protecting

sensitive defense information from foreign governments” (which for the IC is termed counterintelligence).

Figure 3: Effectiveness of the US Intelligence Community

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



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Less flattering for the IC, fewer than half of Americans (48%) regarded US intelligence agencies as effective in “respecting the privacy and civil liberties of Americans.” These results are likely frustrating for IC leaders and agency

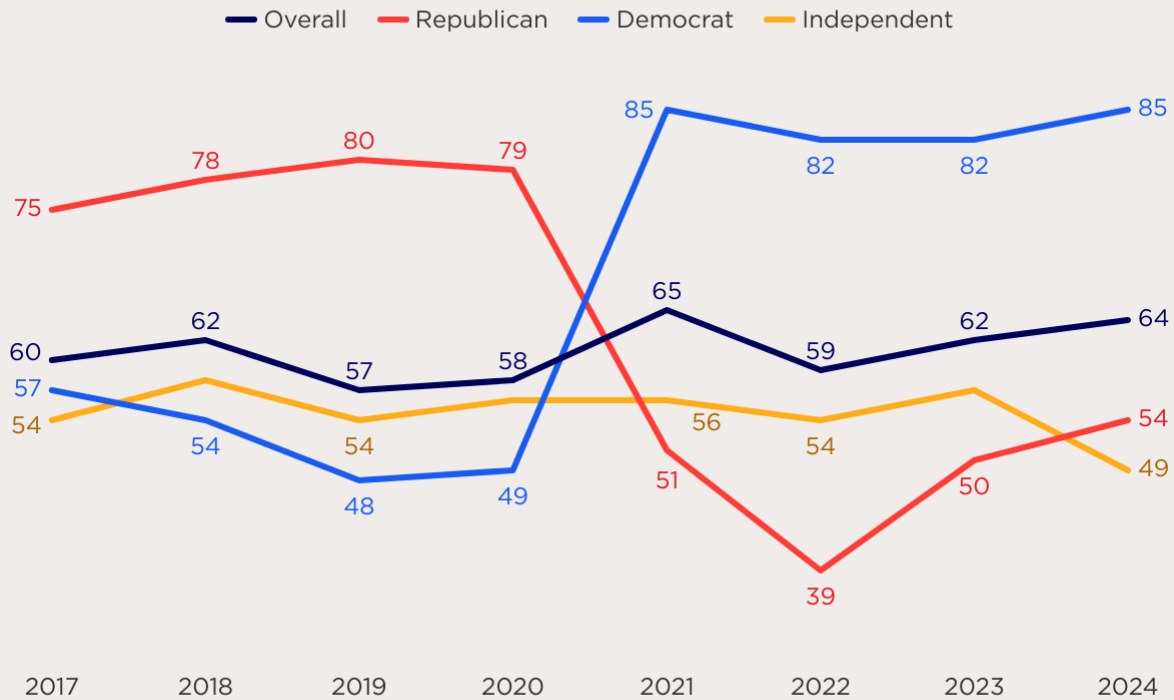
privacy officers who have made sincere efforts in recent years to persuade civil society groups and the broader public that the IC, in fact, safeguards the rights of their fellow citizens while pursuing important national security missions.

The generalized data on civil liberties conceals a notable partisan variation. Republicans were significantly more skeptical of the IC's effectiveness in safeguarding civil liberties than Democrats. In 2024, 65 percent of Democrats viewed the IC as effective in this regard while only 41 percent of Republicans expressed that view. This level of skepticism is likely linked to claims by President Donald Trump, who has asserted that his 2016 campaign was the target of a politically motivated counterintelligence investigation that included electronic surveillance. It will be interesting to see how partisan sorting of attitudes on the intelligence community evolves in a second Trump administration.

In our last report, we argued that the data on the effectiveness of the IC's support for the development of sound foreign policies demonstrated strikingly that a growing and potentially harmful partisanship was distorting the public's perception of US intelligence. The data gathered in 2023 and 2024 reinforce that conclusion (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Partisanship and the Effectiveness of the US Intelligence Community

How effective do you think the Intelligence Community is in meeting the following responsibilities? **Helping the President develop sound foreign policies** (% very/somewhat effective)



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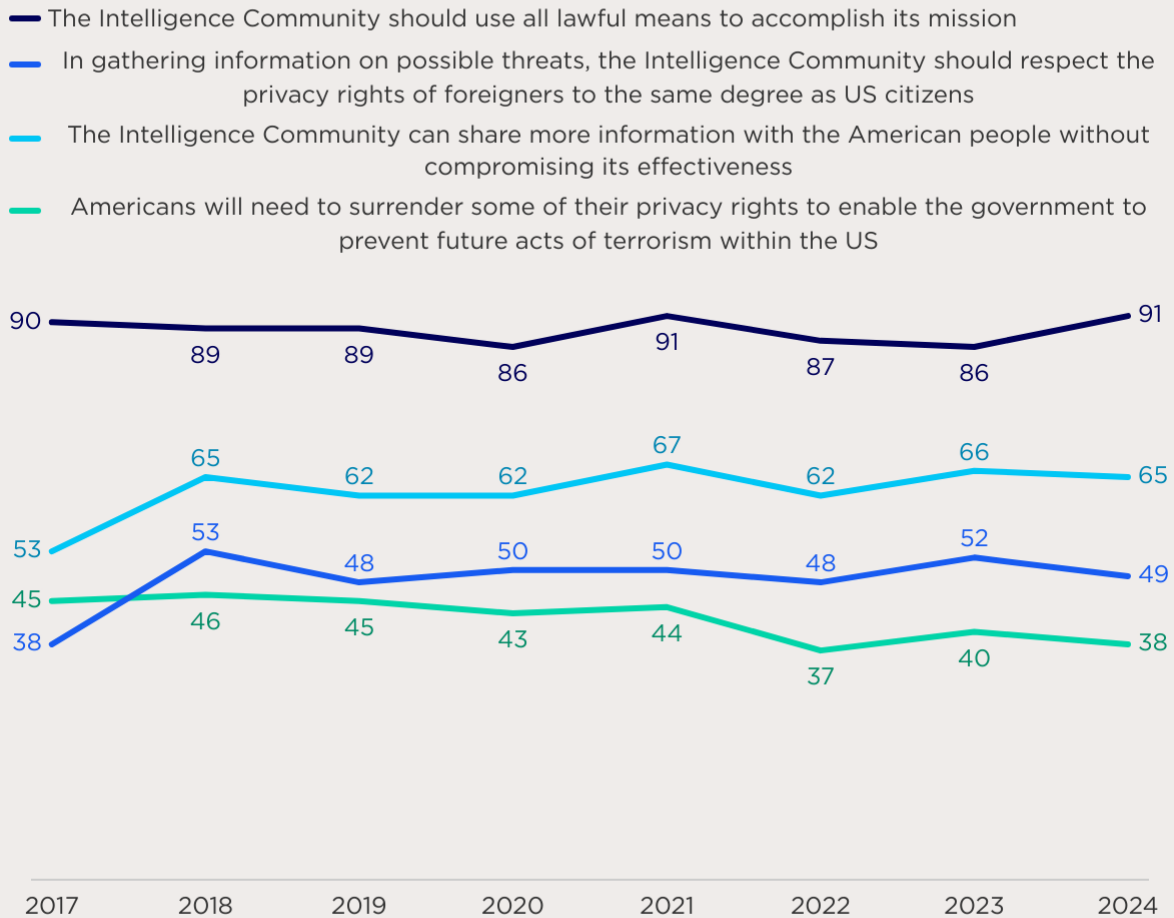
The survey results from 2024 (during Biden’s presidency) found that two-thirds of Americans (64%) believed the IC was effective in helping the president develop sound foreign policies. However, that view was held much more strongly by Democrats (85%) than Republicans (54%). In our 2020 survey—conducted four years earlier during the final year of the first Trump presidency—an identical 30-point partisan divide existed, but the party roles were reversed. Then, eight in 10 Republicans (79%) believed the IC was effectively supporting Trump’s policymaking while only half of Democrats (49%) said the same. Since the IC’s actual performance in supporting the foreign policymaking process is largely invisible to the public, survey respondents were likely evaluating the IC’s work based on their affinity (or dislike) for the incumbent president and his policies. This hypothesis will be tested when we evaluate data on public perceptions collected in summer 2025, months after Trump’s return to the White House.

Responsibilities of the US Intelligence Community

In each annual survey, we have asked Americans to evaluate a short list of statements regarding the IC's responsibility to use all lawful means to accomplish its mission; to respect the privacy rights of foreigners and citizens equally; to share more information with the public; and Americans' willingness to surrender personal privacy to gain added security. The data representing the IC's responsibility to use all lawful means to carry out its duties have been remarkably consistent over the life of this study (see Figure 5). As we have observed in previous reports, though, this veneer of stability often masks potentially significant differences in how certain groups view the IC's responsibilities.

Figure 5: Responsibilities of the US Intelligence Community

For each of the statements below about the US Intelligence Community, please indicate whether you agree or disagree: (% agree/strongly agree)



July 22-26, 2024 | n=1,000

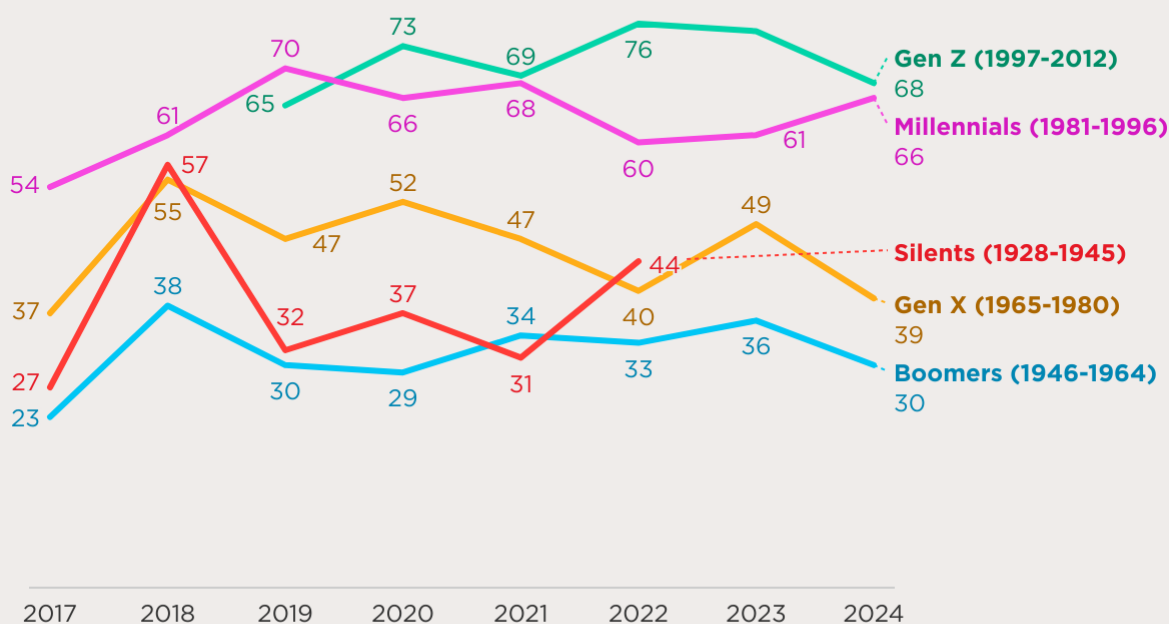
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For example, our most recent surveys reflect an even split (52% in 2023, and 49% in 2024) in overall support for the relatively new requirement that US intelligence agencies respect the privacy rights of foreigners to the same extent as US citizens. However, further investigation exposes notable differences based on age and party affiliation. While two-thirds of the youngest cohort (Gen Z, or those born after 1997) expressed support for treating foreigners the same as US citizens, only 30 percent of the oldest cohort (Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964) held that view (see Figure 6).

The 2024 survey also revealed that two-thirds of Democrats (65%) favored extending US privacy protections to foreign nationals, compared to just 31 percent of Republicans.

Figure 6: Generational Views on Respecting Foreigners' Privacy Rights

For each of the statements below about the US Intelligence Community, please indicate whether you agree or disagree: **In gathering information on possible threats, the US Intelligence Community should respect the privacy rights of foreigners to the same degree as US citizens** (% agree/strongly agree)



July 22-26, 2024 | n=1,000

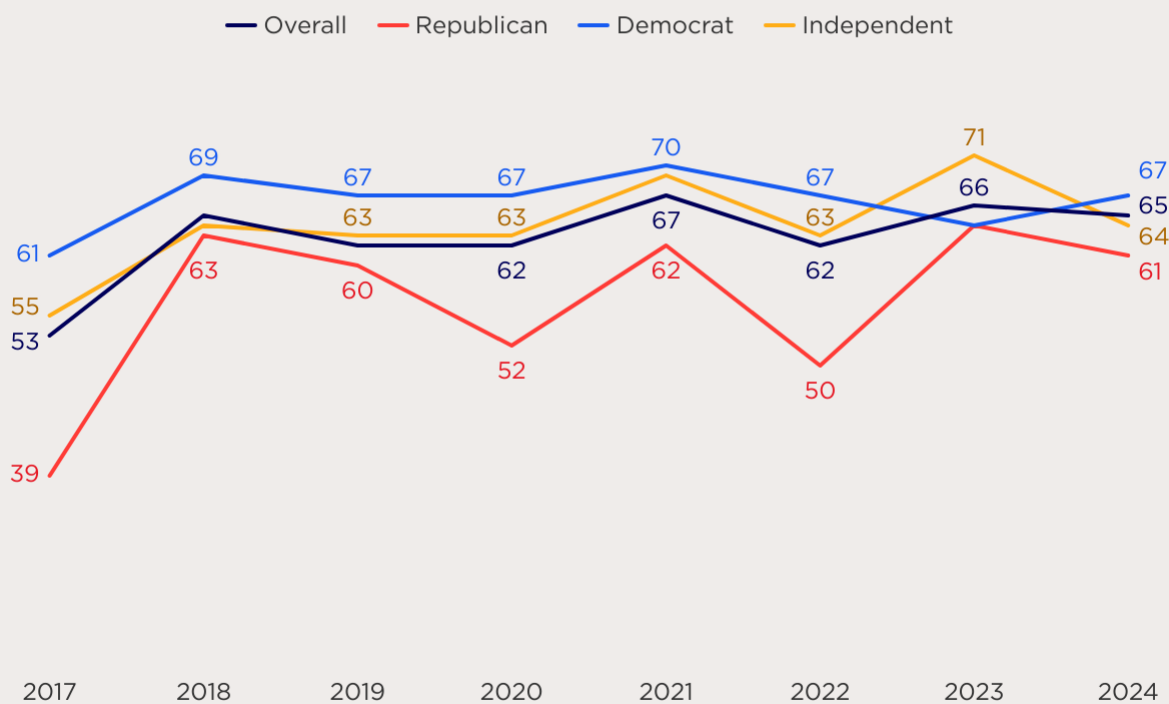
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Regarding secrecy in 2024, a strong majority of Americans (65%) believed the IC could share more information with the public without compromising its effectiveness. This view was uniform across variants of gender, race, and knowledge but diverged widely based on age. Once again, Gen Z agreed overwhelmingly (80%) that the IC could share more information with the American public while far fewer (56%) Boomers supported greater public transparency into the intelligence agencies. A partisan disparity on sharing more with the public that we noted in our last report (based on data from 2021 and 2022) was absent from the most recent survey data. In 2024, both

Democrats (67%) and Republicans (61%) expressed strong support for greater sharing by the IC (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Partisan Views on Sharing Intelligence Information with the American Public

For each of the statements below about the US Intelligence Community, please indicate whether you agree or disagree: **The Intelligence Community can share more information with the American people without compromising its effectiveness** (% agree/strongly agree)



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Oversight of US Intelligence

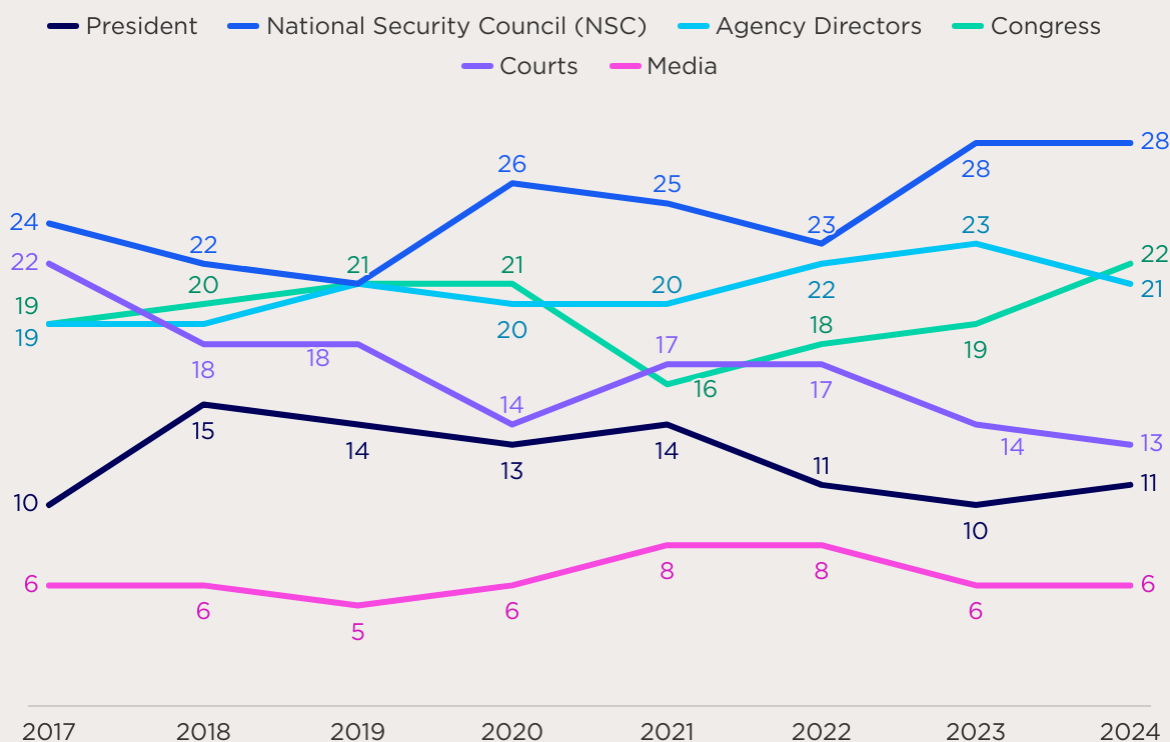
Our 2017 baseline poll and each successive annual survey has reflected a great deal of uncertainty by the public over which government officials and institutions are responsible for overseeing US intelligence agencies. The 2023 and 2024 surveys yielded similarly inconclusive results (see Figure 8).

Survey participants were asked to select the institution primarily responsible for monitoring the activities of the US intelligence agencies from a short list of options. In 2024, the National Security Council led the list, with 28 percent of Americans saying it should be primarily responsible for oversight. The next

most popular choices were Congress (22%) and agency directors (21%). Another 13 percent of Americans pointed to the federal courts and judges, and 11 percent believed that oversight responsibility rested with the president. Only 6 percent of Americans believed that investigative journalists and the media should be principally responsible for overseeing the intelligence agencies.

Figure 8: Oversight of the US 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? (%)



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Beginning with the 2020 report, we have identified partisan disparities concerning the public's understanding of the oversight role played by the president and Congress. While Trump was serving his first term in office, Republicans were twice as likely as their Democrat counterparts to believe the

president was responsible for ensuring that US intelligence agencies “act within the law and in the country’s best interest.” During that cycle, Democrats were more than twice as likely as Republicans to believe that the Congress—then controlled by Democratic majorities—was responsible for intelligence oversight.

When the White House changed hands in 2021 after Biden’s election victory, the partisan preference reversed, and more Democrats and fewer Republicans selected the president as the official responsible for the oversight of US intelligence. However, in 2022, we observed a decrease in Democrats who placed the responsibility with the US president, with similar results reflected in the 2023 and 2024 surveys. Regardless, the percentages of Democrats placing oversight responsibilities with the president remained relatively higher during the Biden administration than the Trump administration, and, generally, the reverse applied to the Republicans.

Our surveys have confirmed that partisan affiliation influences how Americans rate the IC’s effectiveness, respect for civil liberties, and treatment of foreigners. It also appears to generally affect Americans’ choice of officials who should be responsible for supervising and overseeing its work. Analysis of data collected during our summer 2025 survey should record any significant shift in public attitudes on intelligence oversight attributable to Trump’s return to the White House, appointment of new IC leaders, and Republican control of both houses of Congress.

Primary Source of Information

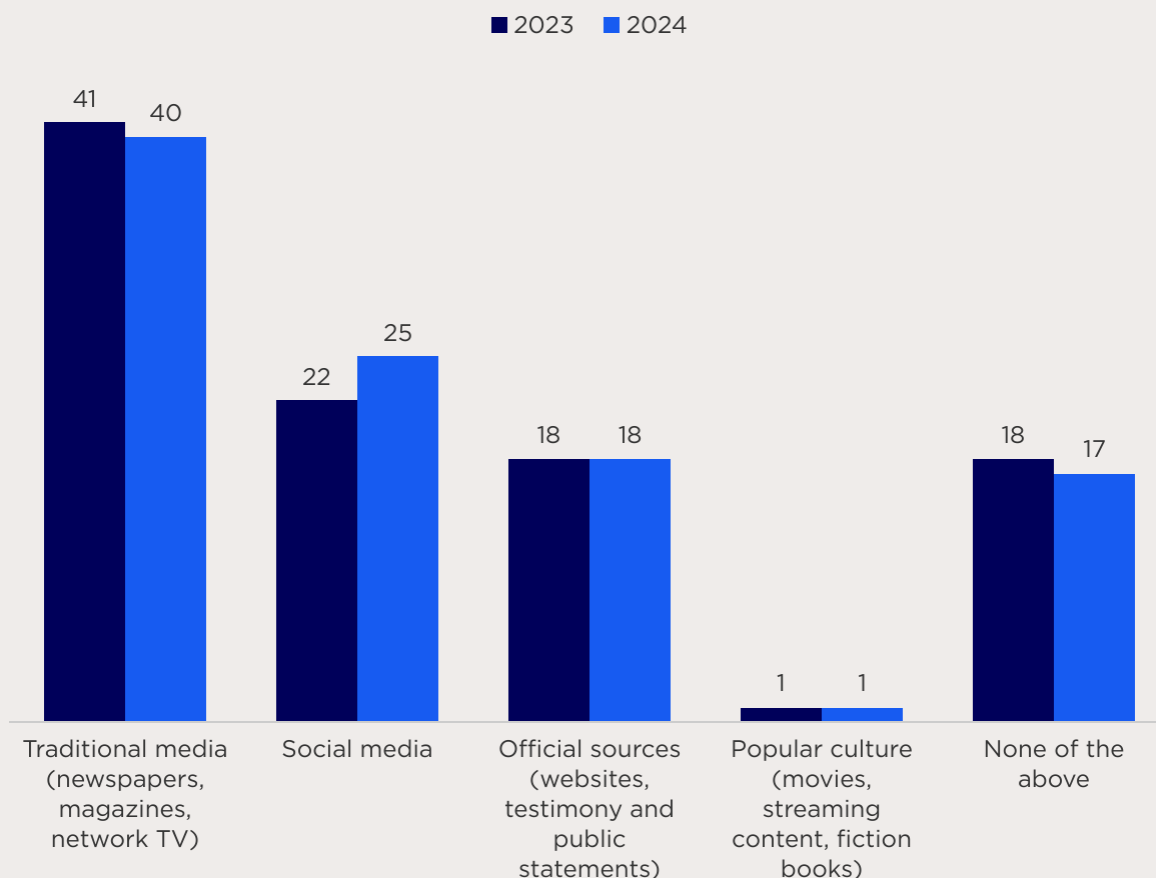
In response to peer feedback, we augmented our surveys in 2023 and 2024 to include a question on Americans’ primary source of news and information about US intelligence. While the primary purpose of this study is to gauge the public’s attitudes toward US intelligence agencies, it is equally useful to understand how these views are informed. The intelligence agencies expend considerable effort and expense to enhance their standing with key internal and external constituencies, including the general public. Universities, non-governmental organizations, and a variety of specialized media organizations are similarly interested in shaping attitudes on these large, powerful, and secretive agencies.

Our two most recent surveys returned nearly identical results on “sources of information” (see Figure 9). Four in 10 Americans (40% in 2024) relied primarily on traditional media outlets (newspapers, magazines, network TV) for news about US intelligence. Roughly one in four (25%) claimed they learned about intelligence matters from social media platforms. Another 18 percent identified official websites, testimony, and public statements as their

primary source of intelligence news, while only 1 percent admitted that they relied on pop culture to learn about national security intelligence.

Figure 9: Primary Source of News about the US Intelligence Community

What is your primary source of news about US intelligence agencies? (%)



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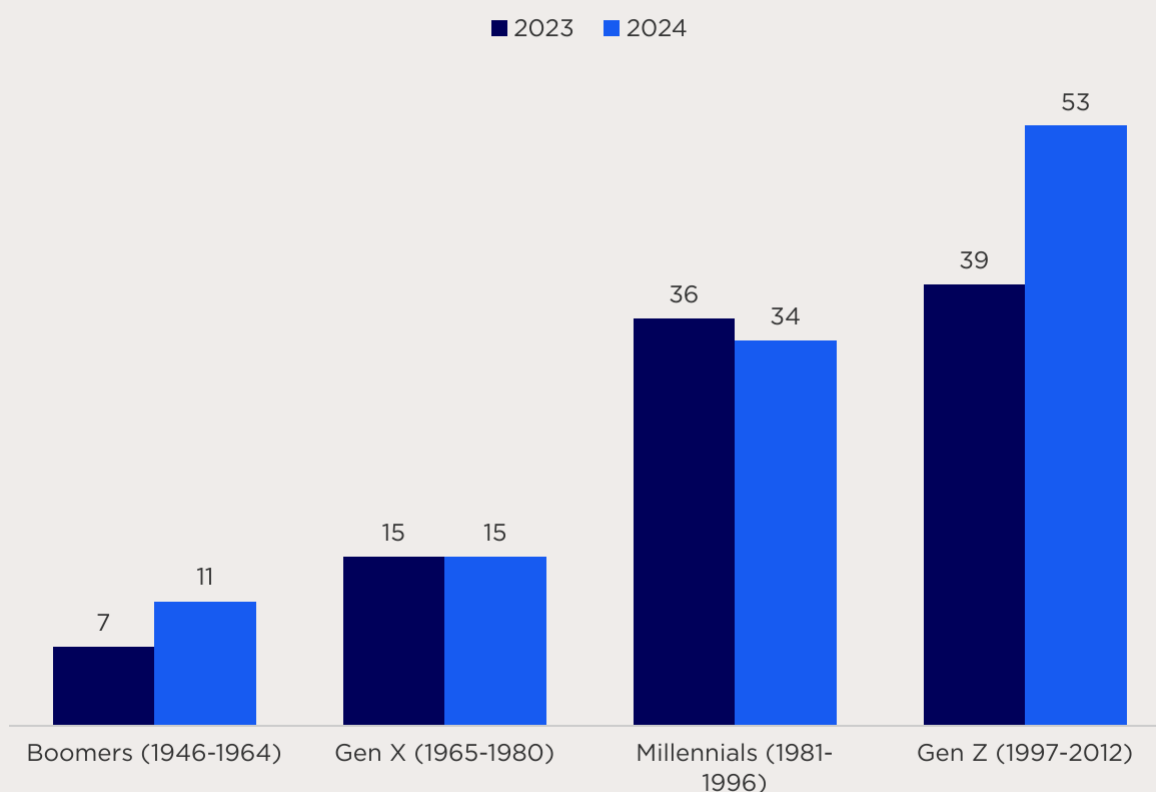
The poll results on sources of information were largely unaffected by gender, knowledge level, or partisan affiliation, but were foreseeably impacted heavily by age. Older Americans get their news primarily from traditional media outlets and younger ones from social media. In 2024, half of Boomers (51%) said they learned about intelligence from traditional media outlets while only 17 percent of Gen Z-ers said the same. Conversely, social media was the primary source of news about intelligence for half of Gen Z (53%), compared to only 11 percent of Boomers. Yet for both generational cohorts, reliance on

traditional news sources is declining while use of social media sources is increasing.

Institutions interested in shaping public attitudes on US intelligence, including the security agencies themselves, will increasingly need to disseminate news and information via social media to reach large audiences (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Social Media as a Primary Source of News about the US Intelligence Community

What is your primary source of news about US intelligence agencies? **Social media** (%)



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Conclusion

With a second Trump administration beginning in 2025, our next survey should provide some visibility on whether the pattern of partisan re-sorting of support for the US IC occurs again. With new leadership atop the IC and other broader changes in budgets and foreign policy priorities, 2025 is likely to be a consequential year for US foreign policy broadly and the IC in particular. Public perceptions of the IC and its contributions to our security will be an important measure of the agencies' impact and relevance.

Methodology

The data cited in this report derives from two national surveys conducted by YouGov from August 9 to 18, 2023, and July 22 to 26, 2024. In 2023, YouGov interviewed 1,126 respondents who were matched down to a sample of 1,000 to produce a final dataset. Similarly, in 2024, 1,121 respondents were interviewed and matched to a final sample of 1,000. The margin of error is +/- 3.49 percentage points in 2023 and +/- 3.54 percentage points in 2024.

The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The sampling frame is a politically representative "modeled frame" of US adults, based upon the American Community Survey (ACS) public use microdata file, public voter file records, the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration supplements, the 2020 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll, and the 2020 CES surveys, including demographics and 2020 presidential vote. 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, region, and Presidential vote choice 2020. 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 2020 presidential vote choice as well as 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 [Strauss Center for International Security and Law](#) out of a conviction that the activities of the US IC were increasingly critical to safeguarding our national security and yet were understudied at American universities. ISP has emerged as a premier center for the study of intelligence through a variety of programs, including course offerings and policy-relevant research projects as well as periodic conferences and other public events focused on intelligence topics.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

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