

Americans Support Free Trade Agreements but Deeply Divided on Tariffs

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Since re-entering the White House this year, President Donald Trump and his administration have upended America's longstanding [approach to trade](#) with other nations. Unilateral tariffs are now the order of the day, and the [chaotic nature](#) of their rollout has [scrambled the international trading system](#) as the world has known it for decades. The result has been finger-pointing at home and market-rattling trade wars with friends and adversaries alike.

Data from the 2025 Chicago Council Survey, fielded July 18–30, 2025, finds the American public remains largely positive toward the idea of international trade. However, Republicans embrace Trump's penchant for smashing established norms and the widespread use of tariffs, while Democrats and Independents oppose them. Partisan divisions have reached extremes over tariffs' effectiveness, the dangers of an economic downturn, and whether economic or military power matters most for America's global influence.

Key Findings

- A combined eight in 10 Americans (79%) think international trade benefits the United States and other countries (64%) or mostly benefits the United States (15%). Just 16 percent say it mostly benefits other countries, and Republicans are far more likely to hold this view (28%) than Democrats (8%).
- Most Americans (83%) say signing free trade agreements with other countries is an effective approach to achieving US foreign policy goals.

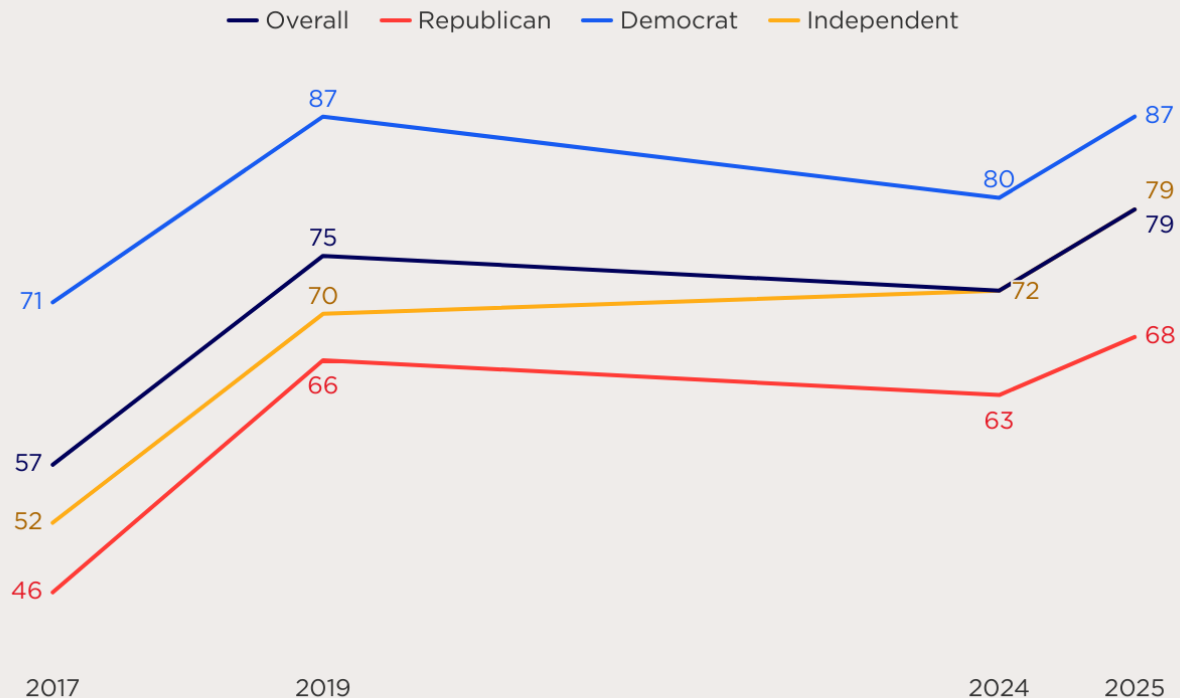
- Close to half of Americans (46%) now say US trade policy should have no restrictions to enable American consumers to have the most choices and the lowest prices, up from 31 percent in 2024.
- While less than half overall (44%) see tariffs as effective for achieving US foreign policy goals, a yawning partisan gulf separates Republican (78%) and Democratic (24%) support for them.
- Roughly half of Americans (49%) would consider a global economic downturn a critical threat, down from 54 percent overall in 2023. But just a third of Republicans (35%) agree this year, compared to 59 percent in 2023.

Majority Agree on Benefits of Trade and Free Trade Agreements

Americans agree that the fruits of foreign trade are sweet. Overall, two-thirds say trade benefits the United States and other countries (64%) and an additional 15 percent thinks it mostly benefits the United States (79% combined). This is up 22 points from a combined 57 percent when the Chicago Council first asked this question in 2017.

Majority Believes Trade Benefits the United States

Which of the following comes closest to your view on trade between the United States and other countries? Does it: **[Mostly benefit the United States + Benefit both the United States and other countries]** (%)



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Democrats (87%) and Independents (79%) remain more likely to view international trade as beneficial to the United States than are Republicans (68%). Notably, views of trade as a benefit for the country are up among all partisan groups compared to eight years ago (by 16 points for Democrats, 27 points for Independents, and 22 points for Republicans).

In relative terms, trade skepticism is far more prevalent among Republicans than Democrats, though it is low overall. Whereas 16 percent of Americans overall think the benefits of trade accrue mostly to other countries, close to three in 10 Republicans (28%) hold this view, echoing Trump's [oft-repeated gripe](#) that the United States is being "ripped off" by its trading partners worldwide, regardless of whether they are US allies. By contrast, only 8 percent of Democrats feel the same way.

Who Does Trade Benefit Worldwide?

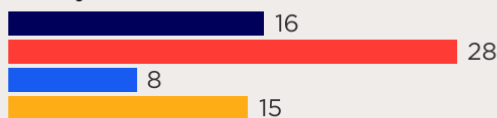
Which of the following comes closest to your view on trade between the United States and other countries. Does it: (%)

■ Overall ■ Republican ■ Democrat ■ Independent

Benefit both the United States and other countries



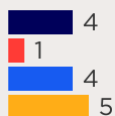
Mostly benefit other countries



Mostly benefit the United States



Benefit neither



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Rising View of Free Trade Agreements as Effective Foreign Policy Tool

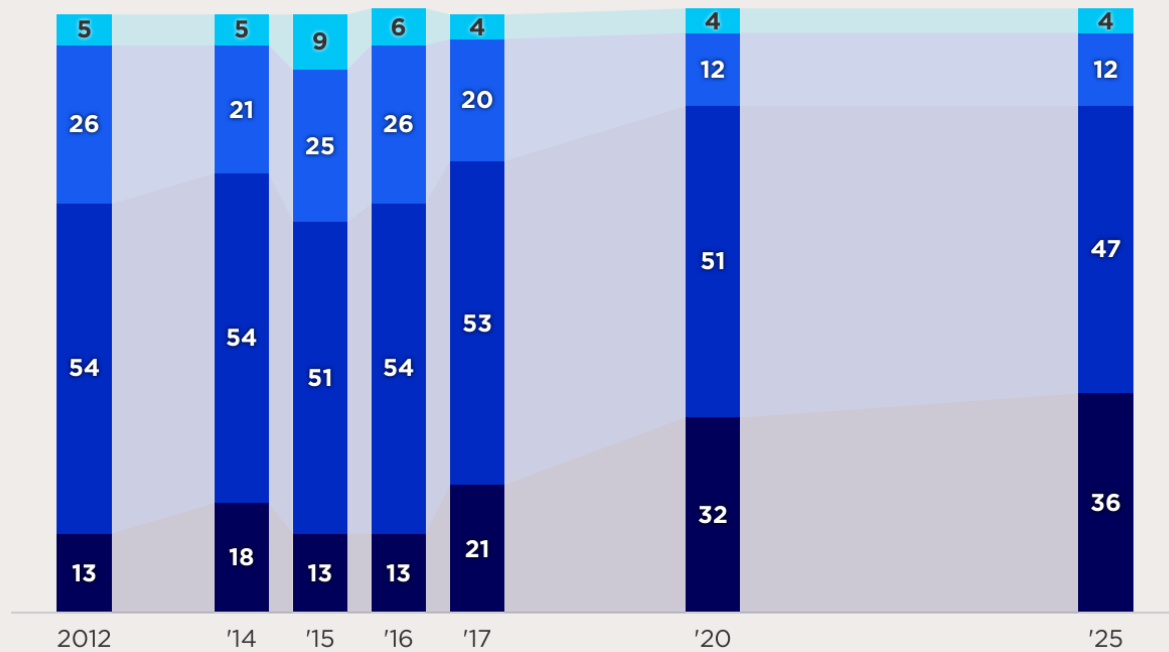
Experts believe Trump's unilateral tariffs this year have [likely violated](#) existing trade laws. Despite this, the United States currently remains party to valid free trade agreements (FTAs) with [20 countries](#), reducing mutual barriers to trade on a bilateral or multilateral basis.

Overall, a large majority of Americans (83%) believe signing FTAs with other countries is either somewhat (47%) or very effective (36%) for achieving US foreign policy goals. Views of FTAs as a very effective approach to achieving America's policy goals have grown significantly over the past decade, rising from 13 percent in 2015 to 36 percent today, an increase of 23 percentage points.

Are Free Trade Agreements Effective for Foreign Policy?

How effective do you think each of the following approaches are to achieving the foreign policy goals of the United States—very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, or not effective at all? **[Signing free trade agreements with other countries]** (%)

■ Very effective ■ Somewhat effective ■ Not very effective ■ Not effective at all



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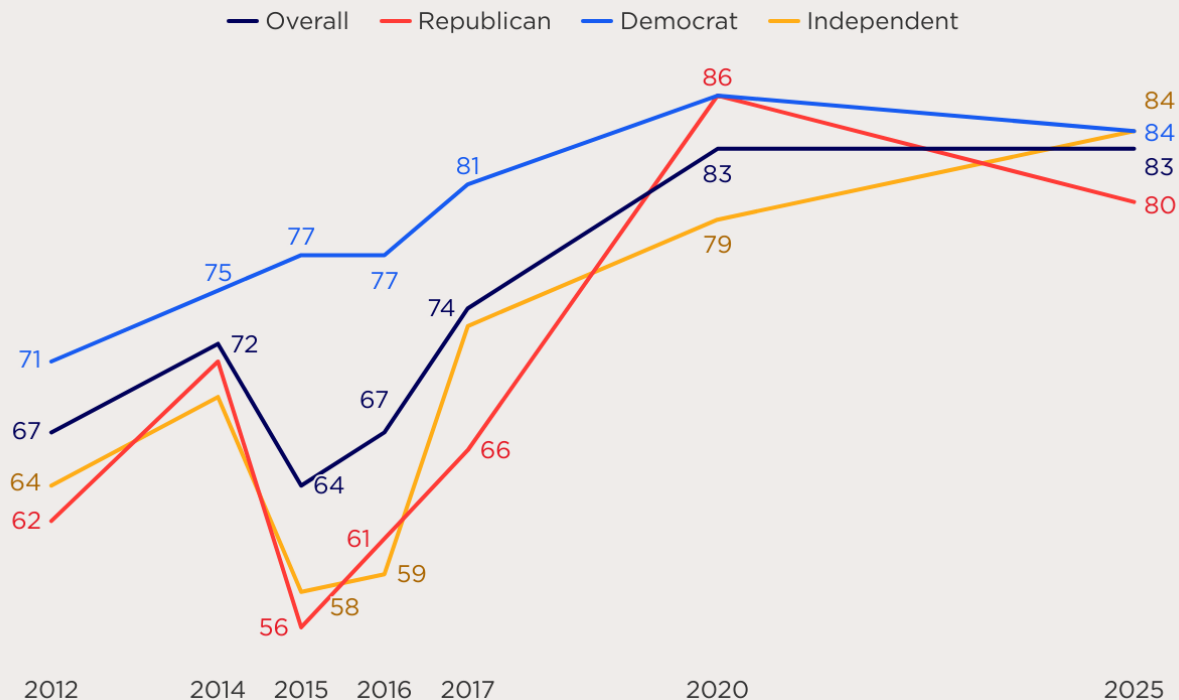


Crucially, Americans of all partisan stripes have come to embrace FTAs. Over the past 13 years, Democrats have been generally more eager than Republicans and Independents to call these agreements either a “somewhat effective” or “very effective” approach for achieving American policy goals.

But despite this difference, partisan views have moved in tandem, narrowing since 2015, when 77 percent of Democrats and 56 percent of Republicans agreed that FTAs were effective, a gap of 21 points. This year, almost six in seven Democrats (84%) and four-fifths of Republicans (80%) believe trade agreements are effective, a partisan gap of just 4 points. A comparable number of Independents (84%) agree.

Free Trade Agreements and US Foreign Policy Goals

How effective do you think each of the following approaches are to achieving the foreign policy goals of the United States—very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, or not effective at all? **[Signing free trade agreements with other countries]** (% somewhat + very effective)



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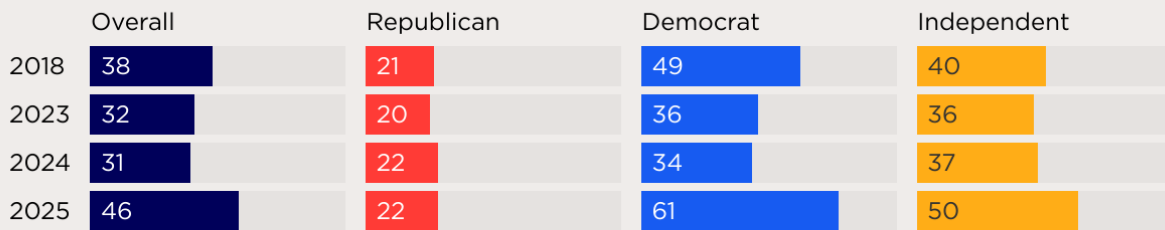
Republicans Embrace Tariffs; Democrats and Independents Oppose Them

In the past year, as Trump has unilaterally raised America's average tariff rates to [levels not seen in almost a century](#), public appetite for less-restrictive trade measures has increased substantially. Today, almost half (46%) believe US trade policy should have no restrictions to allow American consumers the widest possible range of choices and the lowest prices, compared to just three in 10 (31%) last year. By contrast, the share of Americans who favor restrictions on imports to protect American jobs has dropped from two-thirds (66%) in 2024 to 52 percent today.

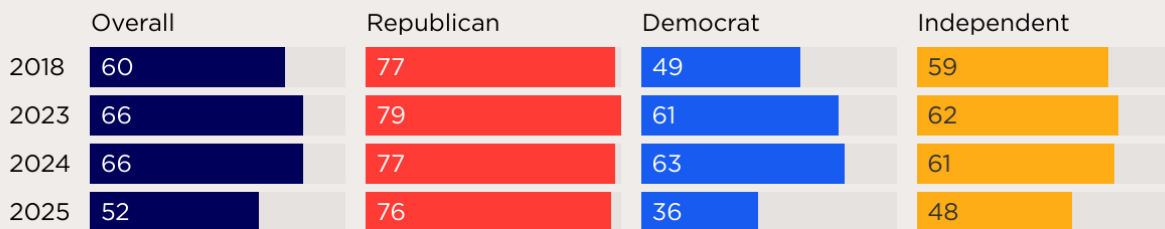
Rising Opposition to Restricting Foreign Imports

Generally speaking, do you think US trade policy should have restrictions on imported foreign goods to protect American jobs, or have no restrictions to enable American consumers to have the most choices and the lowest prices? (%)

US trade policy should have no restrictions to enable American consumers to have the most choices and the lowest prices



US trade policy should have restrictions on imported foreign goods to protect American jobs



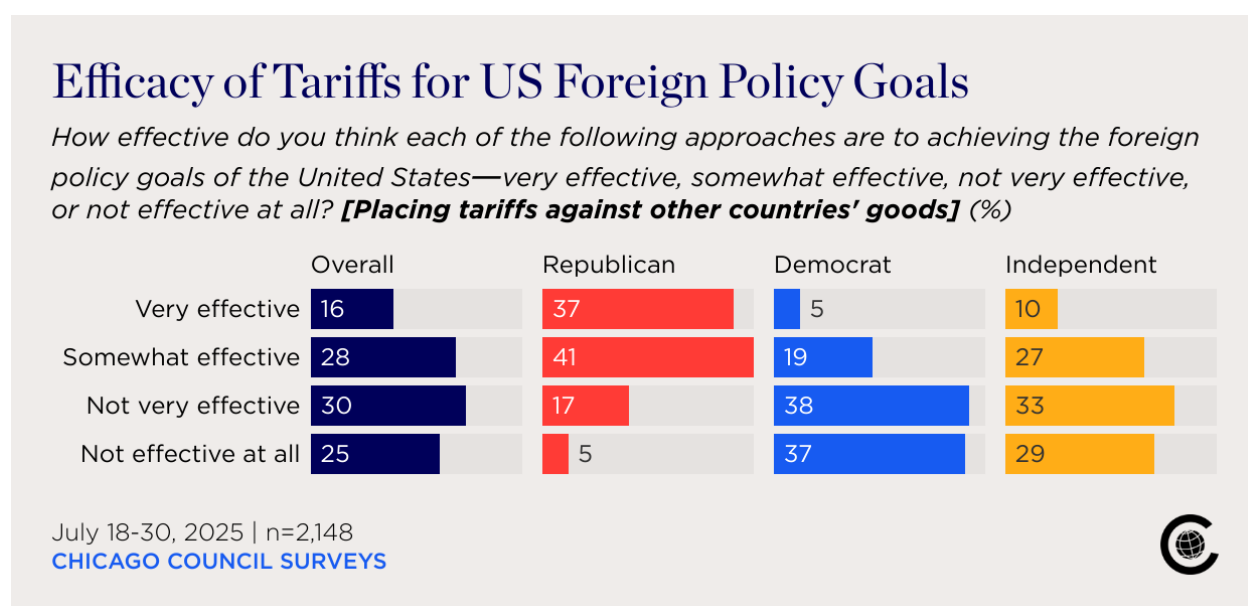
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Unsurprisingly, partisans have reacted differently to current events. Republican enthusiasm for less-restrictive trade policy has remained tepid over the past seven years, remaining near 20 percent since the Chicago Council first asked this question amid Trump's [first trade war](#) with China in 2018. Republicans' support for trade restrictions has stayed consistently between 76 and 79 percent in the seven years since. Views among Democrats and Independents, however, have shifted markedly since 2024. Last year, one third of Democrats (34%) and 37 percent of Independents supported loosening trade restrictions to increase consumer choices and lower prices. Today, those numbers have rocketed to six in 10 Democrats (61%) and half of Independents (50%).

Confidence in tariffs as a tool of US foreign policy is also declining, driven by a sharply growing partisan gap between Republicans on one side, and Democrats and Independents on the other.

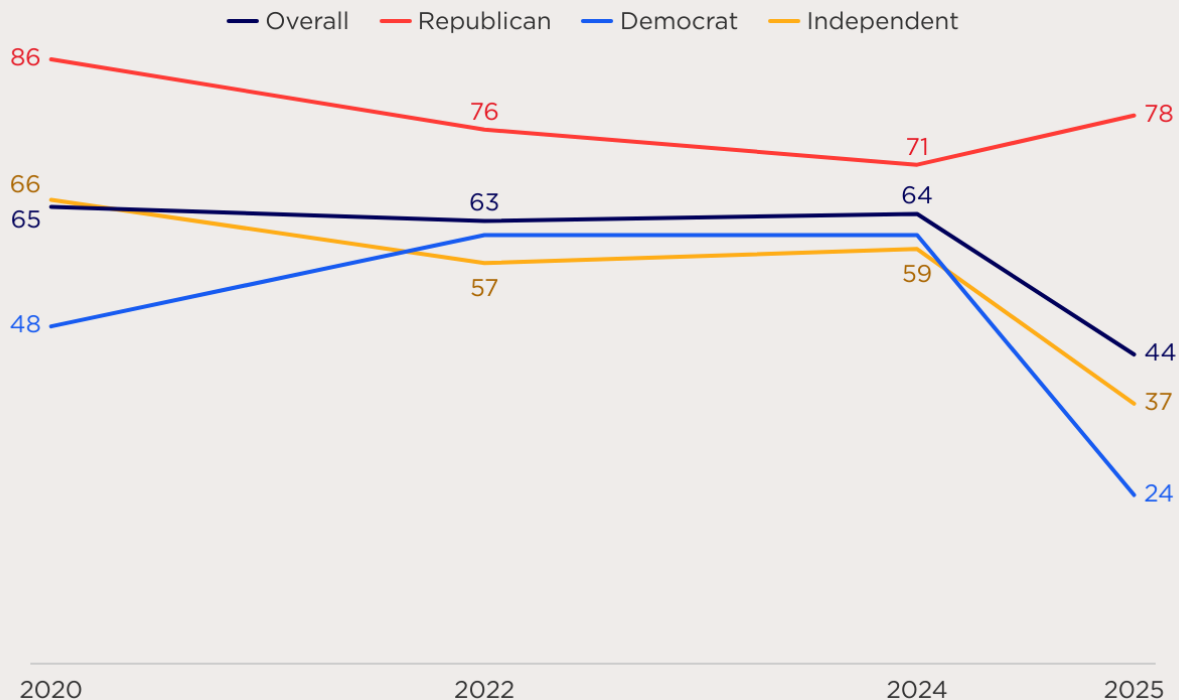
Overall, fewer than half of Americans (44%) believe tariffs are either somewhat or very effective in achieving US foreign policy goals. Republicans, however, are far more likely to think so than average, with more than three-quarters saying they are effective (78%) compared to 37 percent of Independents and just a quarter of Democrats (24%). As a result, a yawning 54-point gap separates Republican and Democratic opinion on whether tariffs are effective as a foreign policy instrument. And while almost four in 10 Republicans (37%) view tariffs as very effective, few Independents (10%) or Democrats (5%) say the same.



What a difference a year makes. In 2024, close to two-thirds of Americans (64%) considered tariffs either somewhat or very effective as a means for achieving foreign policy goals. In fact, a year ago, majorities of Republicans (71%), Democrats (61%), and Independents (59%) agreed on the effectiveness of tariffs as a foreign policy tool. Since Trump's second inauguration, however, partisans have moved in opposite directions. Republican support for tariffs as a policy tool has increased, while Independent and Democratic estimations of their effectiveness have plunged to record lows.

Increasing Partisan Divergence on Tariff Effectiveness

How effective do you think each of the following approaches are to achieving the foreign policy goals of the United States—very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, or not effective at all? **[Placing tariffs against other countries' goods]** (% somewhat + very effective)



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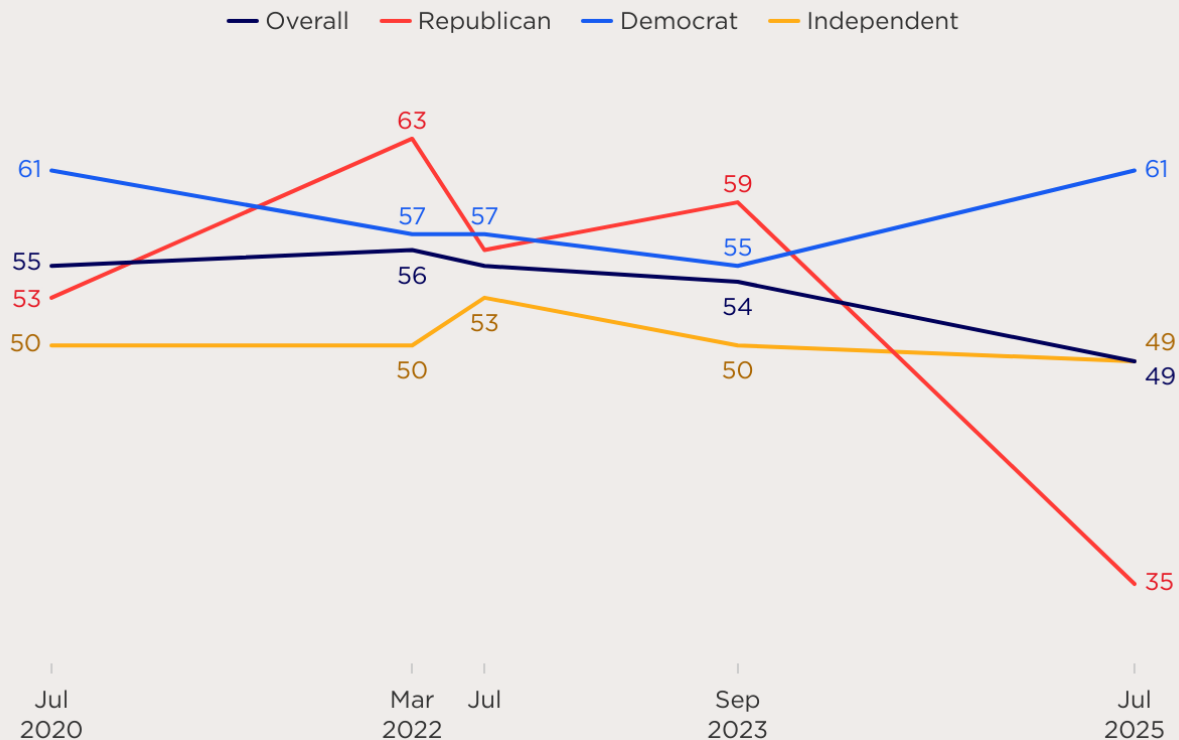


Republicans Shrug Off Downturn Fears; Worries Rise among Democrats

Economists warn that Trump's erratic trade policy [endangers the US economy](#) not only by raising prices in the short term but also by provoking retaliation from other countries and by spooking investors holding or buying US assets, causing the [dollar to depreciate](#). Roughly half of Americans (49%), including the same proportion of Independents (49%) and 61 percent of Democrats, say a global economic downturn would constitute a critical threat to the United States.

Republicans Shrug Off Downturn Fears

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests 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. **[A global economic downturn]** (% critical threat)



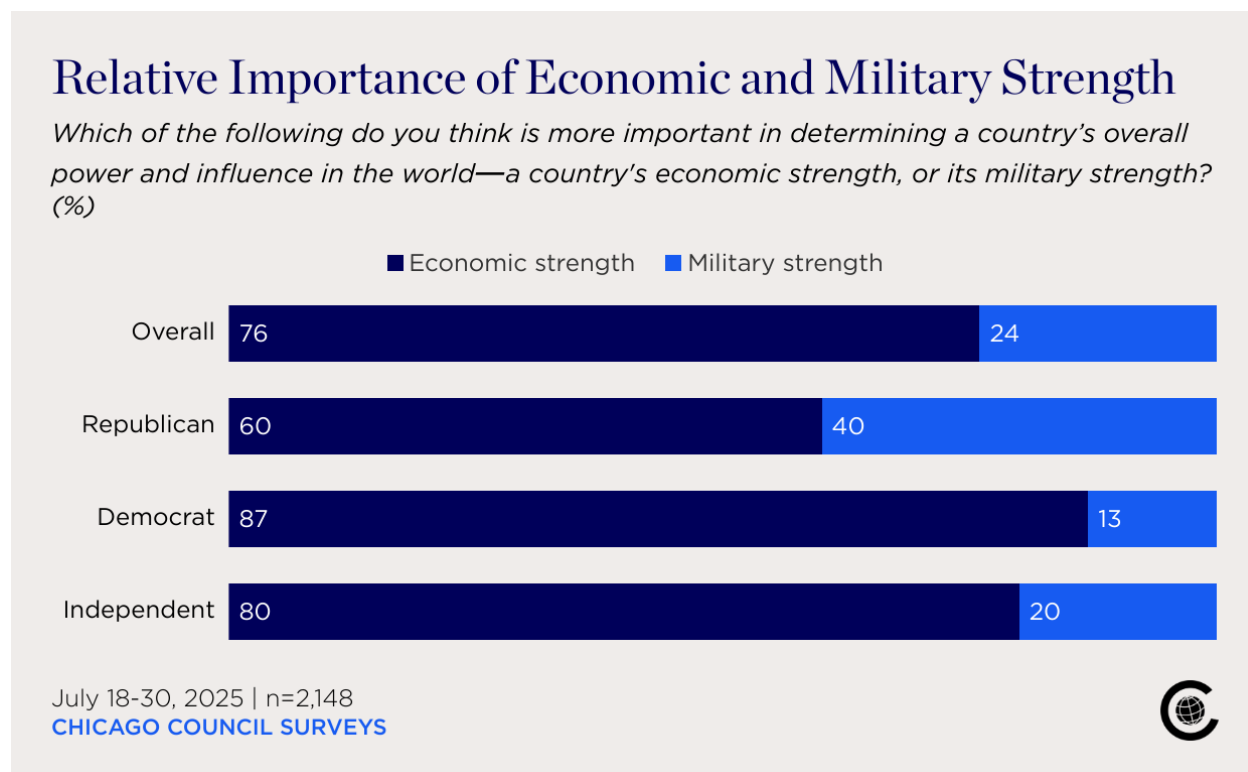
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These fears, however, currently elicit a shrug from Republicans, with just one-third (35%) considering a potential downturn to be a critical threat. This represents a significant change from the Biden era. Last year, more than half of Republicans (59%) viewed a global economic downturn as a critical threat, with two separate surveys in March and July 2022 uncovering comparable levels of Republican economic anxiety (63% and 56% “critical threat,” respectively).

Guns or Butter? Partisan Disagreements Widen on the Recipe for Power

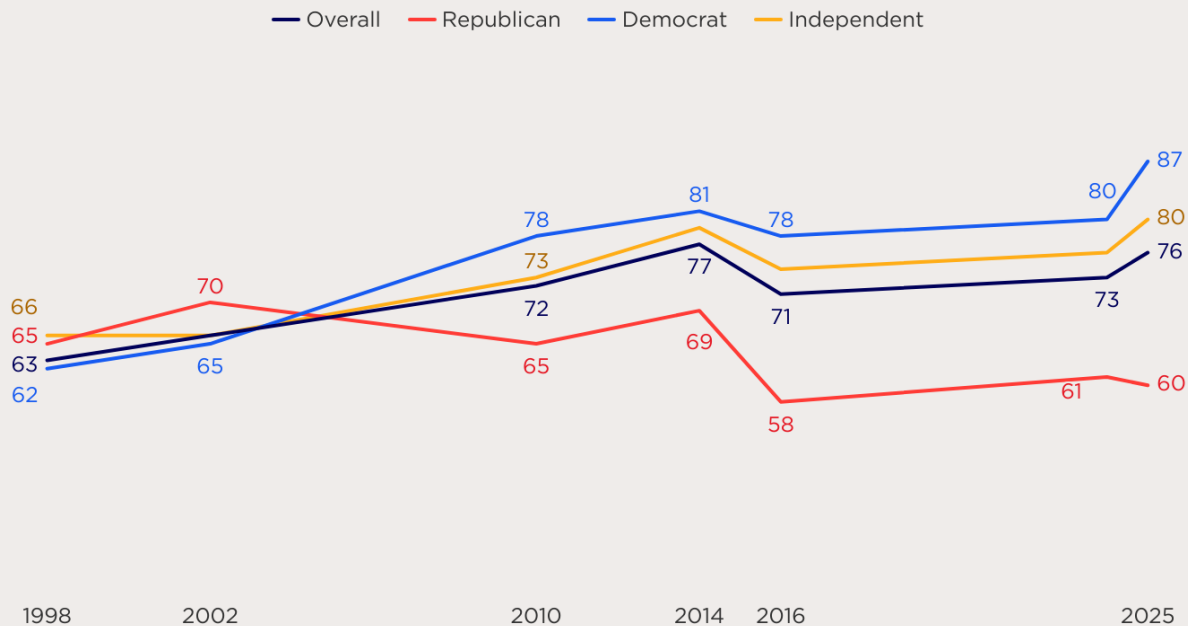
In addition to direct divisions over Trump's unilateral policies, partisan differences may also derive in part from disagreements over whether the foundational ingredient for maintaining global influence is economic power or military might. Overall, advocates of economic strength outnumber those who prefer military strength by roughly three-to-one (76% economic strength, 24% military strength).



Democrats are more likely to emphasize the economic foundations of national power. Just 13 percent consider military prowess more important than economic strength, while the rest (87%) choose the economy. Republicans also prioritize economic power (60%), but a larger minority than among Democrats think military strength is more important (40%). Partisan differences have widened considerably in the 27 years since the Chicago Council first asked this question. Until 2002, partisans mostly saw eye-to-eye on the relative importance of American economic might. Since 2010, however, Democrats and Independents have become considerably more likely to view national power in economic terms than Republicans, with a further rise in partisan divergence occurring over the past year.

Views of Economic Strength and Overall Power

Which of the following do you think is more important in determining a country's overall power and influence in the world—a country's economic strength, or its military strength? (% **economic strength**)



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Conclusion

Public support for free trade remains a defining feature of American attitudes toward the global economy. In theory, Americans increasingly recognize the importance of free trade agreements in achieving US foreign policy goals, but they cannot seem to agree on what carrying them out entails. Amid Trump's sweeping unilateral tariff hikes, Republicans' appetite for tariffs has grown in proportion to their declining fears about a potential global downturn, marking a clear departure from Democratic and Independent views. While Americans still appear to believe in the idea of free trade in the abstract, Trump's unprecedented departure from longstanding trade policy norms has deepened existing divides on what it looks like in the details and where to go from here.

Methodology

This analysis is primarily based on data from the 2025 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy.

The 2025 Chicago Council Survey was conducted July 18–30, 2025, by Ipsos using its large-scale, nationwide, online research panel (KnowledgePanel) in English and Spanish among a weighted national sample of 2,148 adults 18 or older living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 2.2 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.07.

Partisan identification is based on how respondents answered a standard partisan self-identification question: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”

The 2025 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown Family and the Korea Foundation.

The data for the total sample were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race/ethnicity, education, Census region, metropolitan status, and household income using demographic benchmarks from the 2024 March Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS). The specific categories used were:

- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18–29, 30–44, 45–59 and 60+)
- Race/Hispanic Ethnicity (White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Other non-Hispanic, Hispanic, 2+ Races non-Hispanic)
- Education (Less than High School, High School, Some College, Bachelor or Higher)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West)
- Metropolitan Status (Metro, Non-Metro)
- Household Income (Under \$25,000, \$25,000–\$49,999, \$50,000–\$74,999, \$75,000–\$99,999, \$100,000–\$149,999, \$150,000+)

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

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About the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy

Established in 2018 with a transformative gift from the Crown Family, the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy is driven by the belief that the public plays a critical role in determining the direction of US foreign policy and that an informed and engaged public is critical for effective policymaking. The centerpiece of the Lester Crown Center is its annual survey of American public opinion and US foreign policy, the Chicago Council Survey, which has been conducted since 1974.