



American Support for US Strikes against Syria Split along Partisan Lines

Dina Smeltz, Senior Fellow, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

Lily Wojtowicz, Research Associate, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

May 2018

Introduction

On April 14, 2018, the United States, United Kingdom, and France conducted joint airstrikes against several facilities in Syria believed to be part of the Syrian government's chemical weapons program. This attack was a response to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons in Douma the week before. Immediately after the strikes, US Defense Secretary Mattis warned that Syria would be "ill advised" to employ any future use of chemical weapons¹.

A majority of Americans expressed support for the strikes, though Democrats tended to oppose them. And majorities among both self-described Democrats and Republicans would favor additional strikes if Syria uses chemical weapons again, though they also expect that future strikes would escalate US-Russia tensions.

Americans Overall Support the Airstrikes, Democrats Do Not

The joint missile strikes dominated the news cycle the second weekend in April, and a majority of Americans followed the story closely, saying they heard or read either a great deal (17%) or a fair amount (39%) about it. Regardless of how closely they were following the issue, six in ten Americans overall supported the airstrikes (57%). But there were large differences by political affiliation. A strong majority of self-described Republicans (82%, 15% oppose) and about half of Independents (51%, 42% oppose) favored the military actions, compared to a minority of Democrats (43%, 56% oppose).

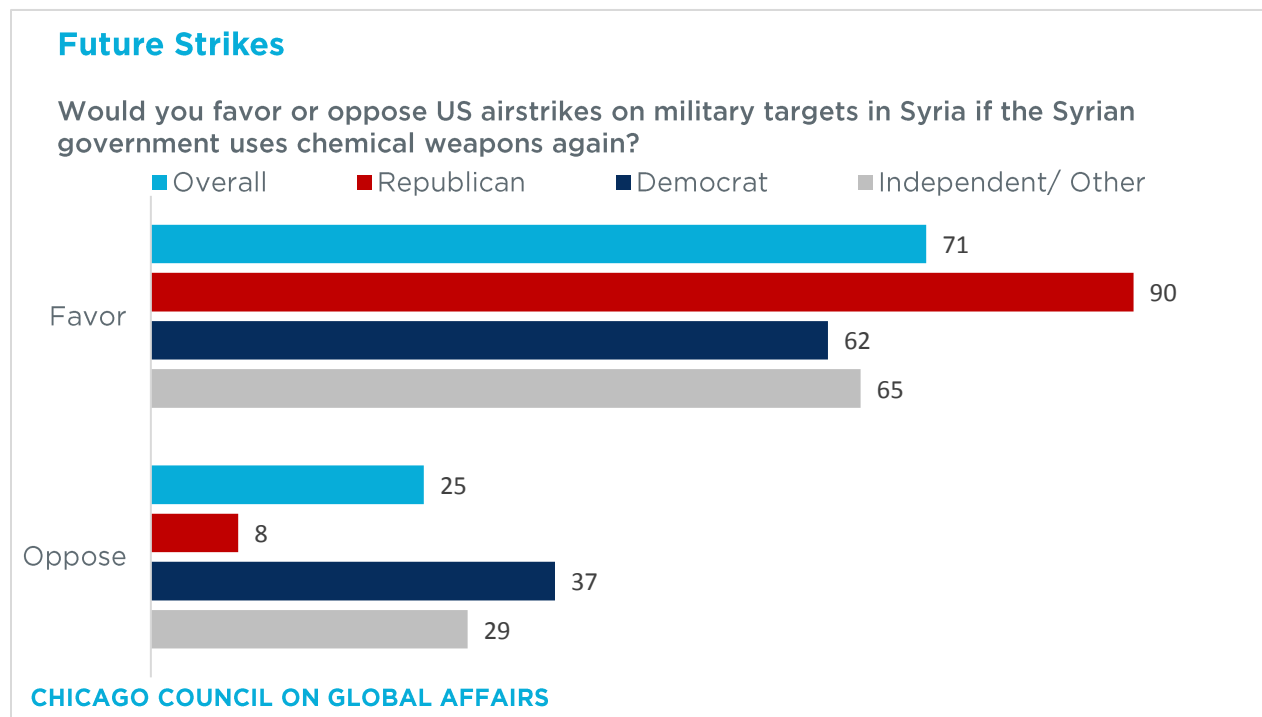
¹ Joshua Mitnick. April 21, 2017. "[Defense Secretary Mattis: 'No Doubt' Syria Still Has Chemical Weapons.](#)" *Los Angeles Times*.

Americans Following the Situation Were More Likely to Support the Strike

In addition to partisan differences, those who followed the news about the strike more closely were, in turn, more likely to support it. Two-thirds (67%) of those who heard or read at least a fair amount about the military action favored the airstrike compared to half (47%) of those who heard or read not very much or nothing at all about it. In fact, among Democrats and Independents, the majority of those who followed the news about the strikes supported them (52% Democrats, 60% Independents), while an even larger majority of Democrats who *did not* follow the news *opposed* the airstrikes (65% Democrats, 52% Independents). Majorities of Republicans who both followed and did not follow the strikes supported them.

Bipartisan Support for Additional Strikes If Syria Uses CW Again

If the Syrian government uses chemical weapons again, majorities across the political spectrum would support future strikes (71% overall, 90% Republicans, 65% Independents, 62% Democrats).² On this question, too, informed Americans are more likely to support future military action than those who are not following the issue as closely. Nearly eight in ten (78%) among those who have heard or read at least a fair amount would support additional strikes compared to 64 percent who have followed the situation not very much or not at all.



² For their part, [Syrian rebels have said](#) that the strikes will only lead to more civilian deaths, because they did not hinder Assad's conventional capabilities which are responsible for far more casualties.²

Apprehension about US-Russia Escalation as a Result of Recent Action

Russia's presence in Syria—providing military assistance to Assad's government—generated concern among some analysts that the US attack [could prompt a response from Russia](#). In the days leading up to the joint strikes Russia even [threatened to strike](#) the origins of missiles should the United States attack the Assad regime. About half of Americans have also heard or read a great deal (13%) or a fair amount (37%) about Russia's involvement in the conflict in Syria, and a majority think it is likely that future US strikes on military targets in Syria could escalate to an armed conflict between Russia and the United States (14% very likely, 47% somewhat).

When asked whether the United States, Russia, or both are most to blame for enabling Assad for continuing to use chemical weapons, slightly more said that Russia is more to blame (34%) than both countries (21%) or the United States alone (4%), while four in ten (40%) did not know enough to state their opinion. But for those following news of Russia's involvement in Syria, at least a fair amount were markedly more likely to blame Russia for Assad's failure to adhere to Syria's chemical disarmament agreement brokered by Russia (48%) than those following it very little or not at all (20%).³ While recent polls have shown a greater bias against Russia among Democrats, both Republicans (39%) and Democrats (40%) were equally likely to blame Russia on this particular question.

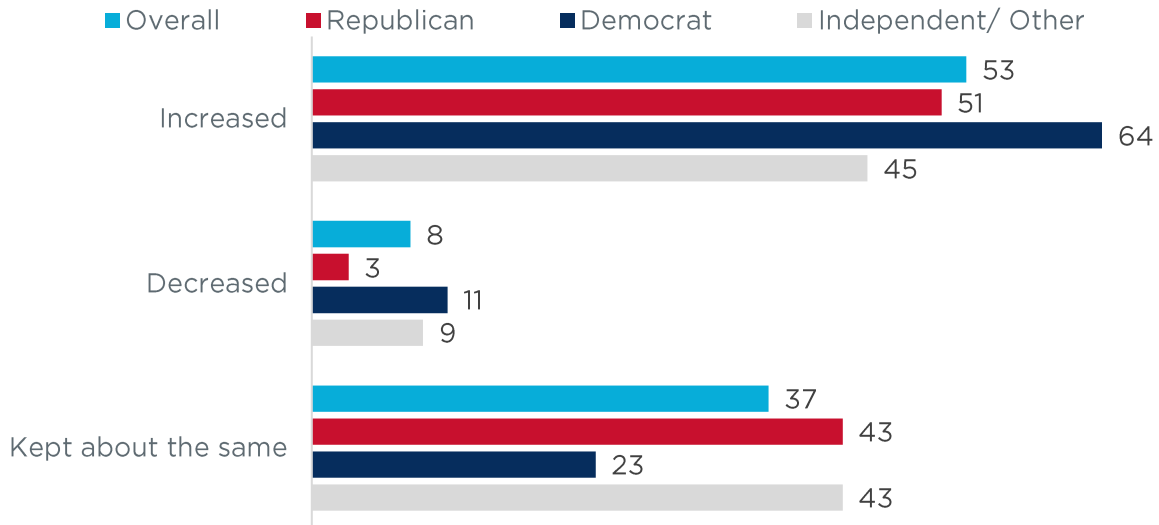
Majorities Support Maintaining or Increasing Sanctions against Russia

In light of Moscow's continued support of Assad, majorities overall and among all political stripes support maintaining or increasing sanctions against Russia. Four in ten Republicans and Independents and two in ten Democrats think the sanctions should be kept the same, while 51 percent of Republicans, 45 percent of Independents, and 64 percent of Democrats prefer that they be increased.

³ Among Americans who did not follow the news of Russia's involvement in Syria, the majority (61%) responded "I do not know enough to say."

Sanctions: Expand, Decrease, or Keep the Same

In response to Russia's continued support of Assad, do you think economic sanctions against Russia should be: (n=490)

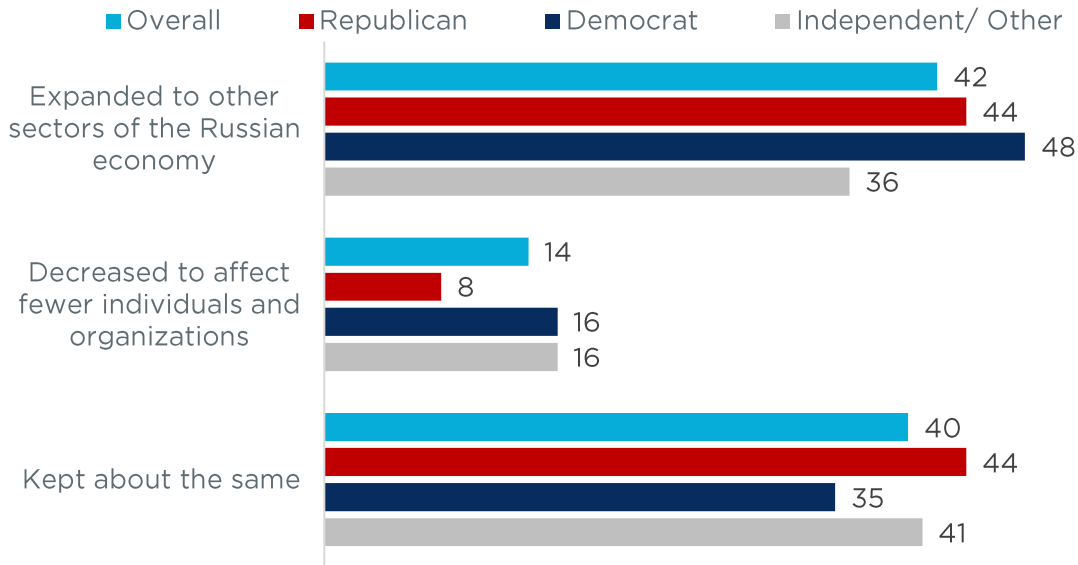


CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Currently, the sanctions on Russia target primarily individuals and organizations connected to Russian President Putin and to Russia's oil and defense sectors. Americans are nearly as likely to say that the sectors should be kept about the same (40%) as say they should be expanded to other sectors (42%). Few Americans (14%) think the sanctions should be reduced so that fewer individuals and organizations are affected.

Sanctions: Expand, Cut Back, or Keep the Same

As you may know, the United States has mainly sanctioned individuals and organizations connected to Russian President Vladimir Putin and to Russia's oil and defense sectors. In response to Russia's continued support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, do you think these sanctions should be: (n=510)

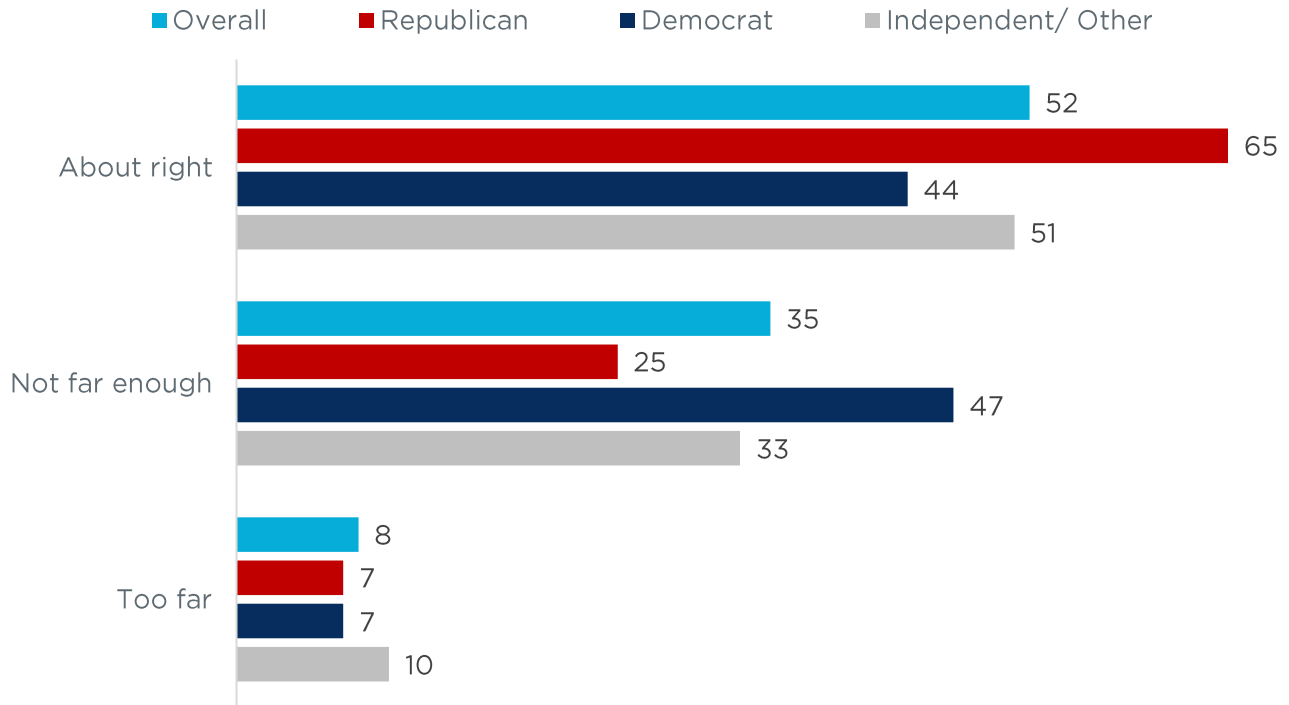


CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

All in all, 52 percent of Americans think that the United States' actions to punish Russia to date—isolating Russia through economic sanctions, diplomatic expulsions, and confiscation of Russian compounds in the United States—has been a sufficient response to its recent aggression. Another third (35%) thinks the US response has not gone far enough. And only 8 percent believe the response goes too far. Democrats are most likely to say that the United States' actions to punish Russia to date have not gone far enough to isolate Russia, while Republicans are most likely to say they have been just about right.

Russia's Isolation

Do you think that the United States' actions to date to isolate Russia – including sanctions, the expulsion of 60 Russian diplomats from the US, and confiscation of Russian compounds in the US – have gone too far, are about right, or not far enough in responding to Russia's recent aggressive behavior?



CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from a 2018 Chicago Council survey of the American public on the situation in Syria. This survey was conducted by GfK Custom Research using their national online omnibus service, KnowledgePanel™, between April 20-22, 2018. A total of approximately 1,000 interviews were completed, with approximately 500 female adults and 500 male adults. The margin of error on weighted data is ± 3 percentage points for the full sample, with higher margins of error for partial-sample items and subgroups.

This survey is made possible by the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization that provides insight—and influences the public discourse—on critical

global issues. We convene leading global voices, conduct independent research, and engage the public to explore ideas that will shape our global future. The Council is committed to bringing clarity and offering solutions to issues that transcend borders and transform how people, business, and governments engage the world. Learn more at thechicagocouncil.org and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

Appendix: Topline

Q1. How much have you read or heard about the recent missile strike conducted by the United States, United Kingdom, and France against Syria in response to its use of chemical weapons?

	Republican (%)	Democrat (%)	Independent/ Other (%)	R-D (%)	Total (%)
A great deal	16	17	16	1	17
A fair amount	43	38	39	5	39
Not too much	32	34	33	2	33
Nothing at all	8	11	12	2	10

Q2. Regardless of how much you've heard or read, do you support or oppose the recent missile strike against Syria?

	Republican (%)	Democrat (%)	Independent/ Other (%)	R-D (%)	Total (%)
Support	82	43	51	39	57
Oppose	15	56	42	41	38

Q3. Would you favor or oppose US airstrikes on military targets in Syria if the Syrian government uses chemical weapons again?

	Republican (%)	Democrat (%)	Independent/ Other (%)	R-D (%)	Total (%)
Favor	90	62	65	28	71
Oppose	8	37	29	29	25

Q4. How much have you read or heard about Russia's involvement in the conflict in Syria?

	Republican (%)	Democrat (%)	Independent/ Other (%)	R-D (%)	Total (%)
A great deal	11	15	14	4	13

A fair amount	41	37	35	4	37
Not too much	34	33	34	1	34
Nothing at all	13	15	16	2	15

Q5. How likely is it that future US strikes on military targets in Syria could escalate to an armed conflict with Russia?

	Republican (%)	Democrat (%)	Independent / Other (%)	R-D (%)	Total (%)
NET (Very/somewhat likely)	51	72	59	22	61
Very likely	9	20	13	12	14
Somewhat likely	42	52	46	10	47
Somewhat unlikely	39	20	30	19	29
Very unlikely	9	7	7	2	8

Q6A. As you may know, the United States has mainly sanctioned individuals and organizations connected to Russian President Vladimir Putin and to Russia's oil and defense sectors. In response to Russia's continued support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, do you think these sanctions should be:

	Republican (%)	Democrat (%)	Independent / Other (%)	R-D (%)	Total (%)
Expanded to other sectors of the Russian economy	44	48	36	4	42
Decreased to affect fewer individuals and organizations	8	16	16	8	14
Kept about the same	44	35	41	9	40

Q6B. In response to Russia's continued support of Assad, do you think economic sanctions against Russia should be:

	Republican (%)	Democrat (%)	Independent / Other (%)	R-D (%)	Total (%)
Increased	51	64	45	13	53
Decreased	3	11	9	8	8
Kept about the same	43	23	43	20	37
Refused	3	2	3	1	3

Q7. *There has been some discussion about which world power is most to blame for enabling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to continue to use chemical weapons. Which of the following statements is closest to your view:*

	Republican (%)	Democrat (%)	Independent / Other (%)	R-D (%)	Total (%)
<u>Country</u>					
The United States is most to blame because it failed to deter Assad from using chemical weapons	5	3	3	2	4
Russia is most to blame because it failed to enforce the 2013 agreement with Assad to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons program	39	40	26	1	34
Both are equally to blame	16	19	24	3	21
I don't know enough to say	38	37	44	1	40

Q8. *Do you think that the United States' actions to date to isolate Russia - including sanctions, the expulsion of 60 Russian diplomats from the US, and confiscation of Russian compounds in the US - have gone too far, are about right, or not far enough in responding to Russia's recent aggressive behavior?*

	Republican (%)	Democrat (%)	Independent/ Other (%)	R-D (%)	Total (%)
<u>Country</u>					
Too far	7	7	10	0	8
About right	65	44	51	21	52
Not far enough	25	47	33	22	35