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Public and Opinion Leaders' Views on US-China Trade War

Democrats, Independents more concerned than Republicans

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The Trump Administration has taken an aggressive line on US-China trade issues. Starting with steel and aluminum tariffs in March 2018, the United States has gradually imposed a number of tariffs on various Chinese goods. China responded in turn to each round. Recent negotiations, though initially fruitful, foundered on issues of Chinese subsidies and what US trade representative Robert Lighthizer described as “an erosion in commitments by China.”¹ Now the escalation cycle has resumed.

According to surveys conducted in 2018 among foreign policy opinion leaders by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the University of Texas², and the results of the 2018 Chicago Council Survey of the general US public, concerns about a potential trade war between the United States and China were already widespread before this most recent escalation:

Key Findings

- Large majorities of Democrats and Independents among both the public and foreign policy opinion leaders were concerned that a trade war with China would hurt their local economy. Republicans, public and leaders alike, were less concerned.
- However, for most opinion leaders and the public, a trade war with China did not rise to the level of a critical threat to the United States.
- Across parties and among both the public and opinion leaders, international trade was considered good for the US economy, US consumers, and creating jobs in the United States.

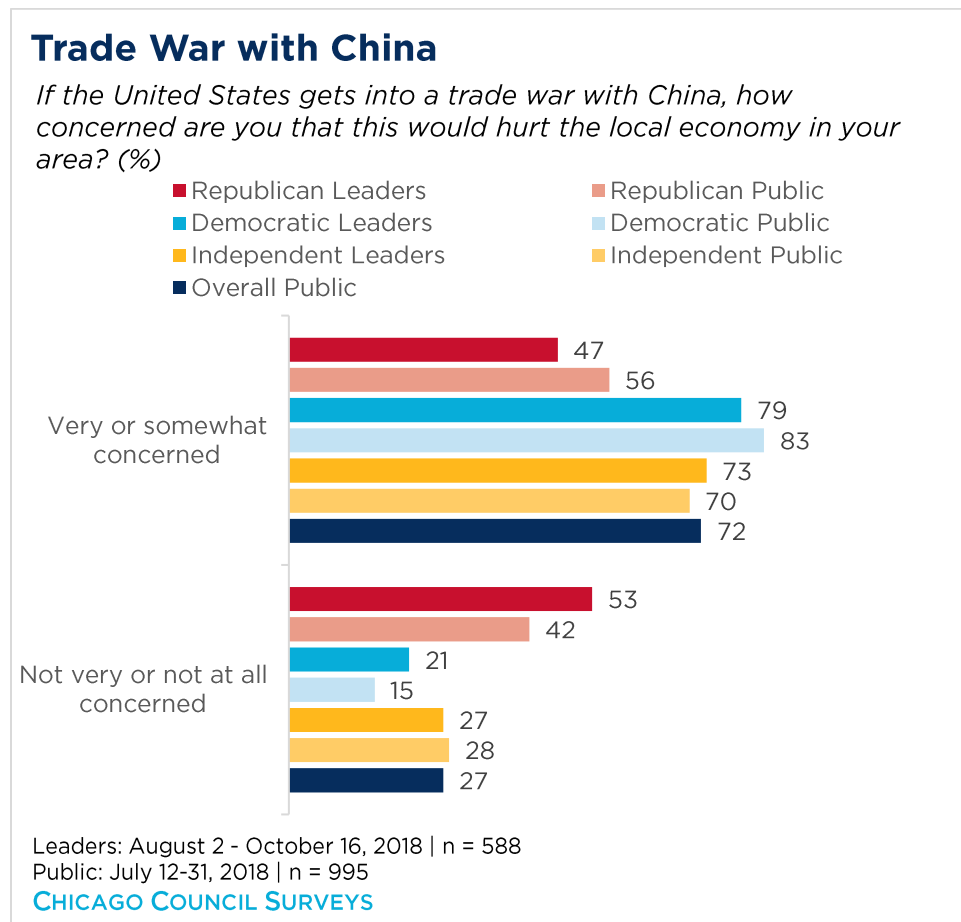
¹ “[Trump Advisers Accuse China of Reneging on Trade Commitments.](#)” Ana Swanson and Keith Bradsher. *The New York Times*, May 6, 2019.

² The leaders survey was conducted August 2 to October 16, 2018 among 588 foreign policy opinion leaders from different professional groups including executive branch agencies, Congress, academia, think tanks, the media, interest groups and NGOs, religious institutions, labor unions, and business.

Public, Leader Concerns about Trade War with China

In addition to making regular headlines in papers across the world, the trade dispute with China has also impacted Americans' overall views of China. A February 2019 Gallup poll found that 41 percent of Americans say they have a favorable view of China, down 12 percentage points from the year before.³ And a June 2019 IBD/TIPP Poll found that a majority of Americans (52%) see tariffs on Chinese goods as hurting the US economy, while only 22 percent believe they help the US economy.⁴

The 2018 Chicago Council-University of Texas survey found that Democrats and Independents, both among leaders and the public, were more concerned than Republicans about a trade war with China. Eight in 10 Democrats (79% leaders, 83% public) and seven in 10 Independents (73% leaders, 70% public) said they were very or somewhat concerned that a trade war with China would hurt their local economies. Smaller proportions of Republicans—roughly half of Republican leaders (47%) and a majority of Republicans among the public (56%)—said they were concerned about such a trade war.

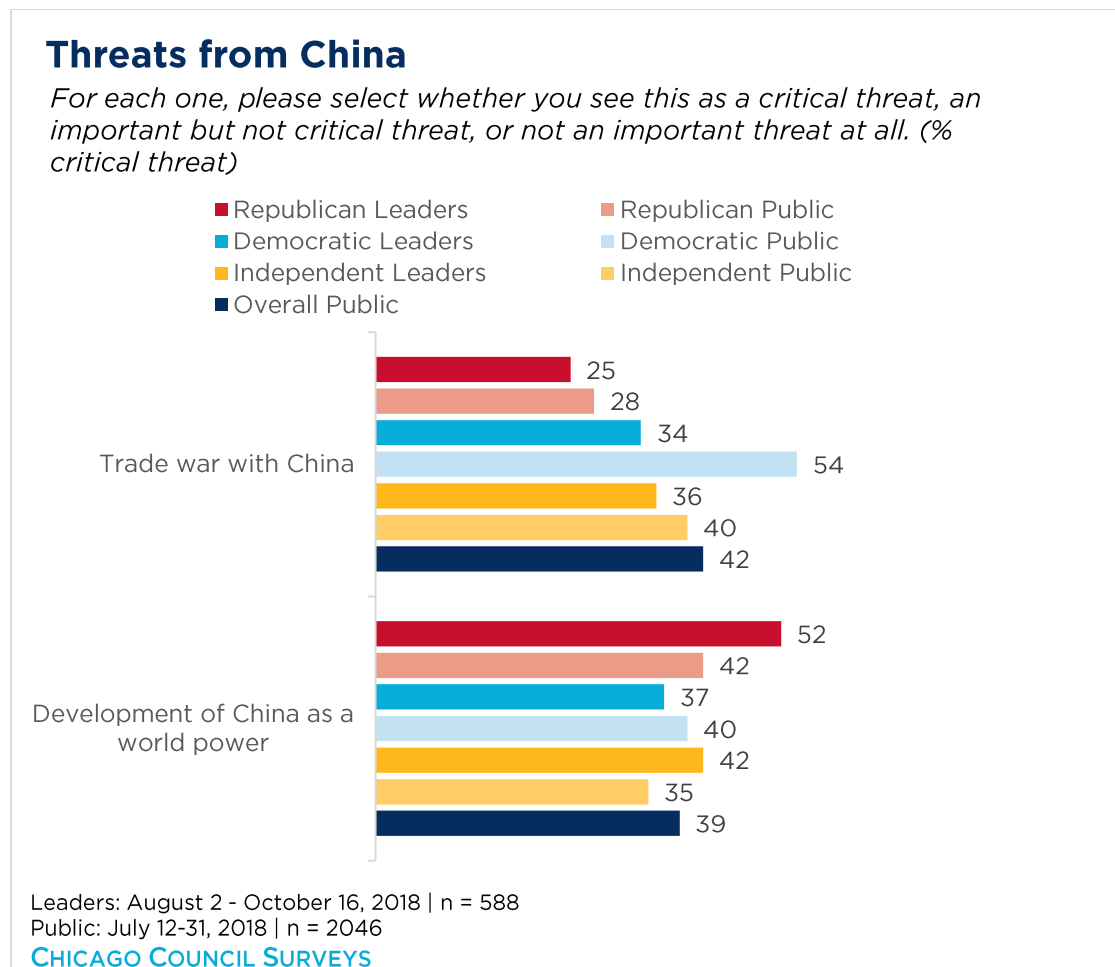


³ [“Americans’ Favorable Views of China Take 12-Point Hit.”](#) Gallup. Conducted February 1 to 10, 2019.

⁴ [“Economic Optimism Falls as Americans Pan Trump’s China Trade War.”](#) Investor’s Business Daily. Conducted May 30 to June 7, 2019.

Trade War Not Considered a Critical Threat

However, for most opinion leaders and the public, a trade war with China did not rise to the level of a critical threat to the United States. With the exception of Democrats among the public (54%), only minorities of all other groups described a trade war with China as a critical threat. The same was true for the development of China as a world power: with the exception of Republican opinion leaders (52%), only minorities of these groups named China's rise a critical threat.

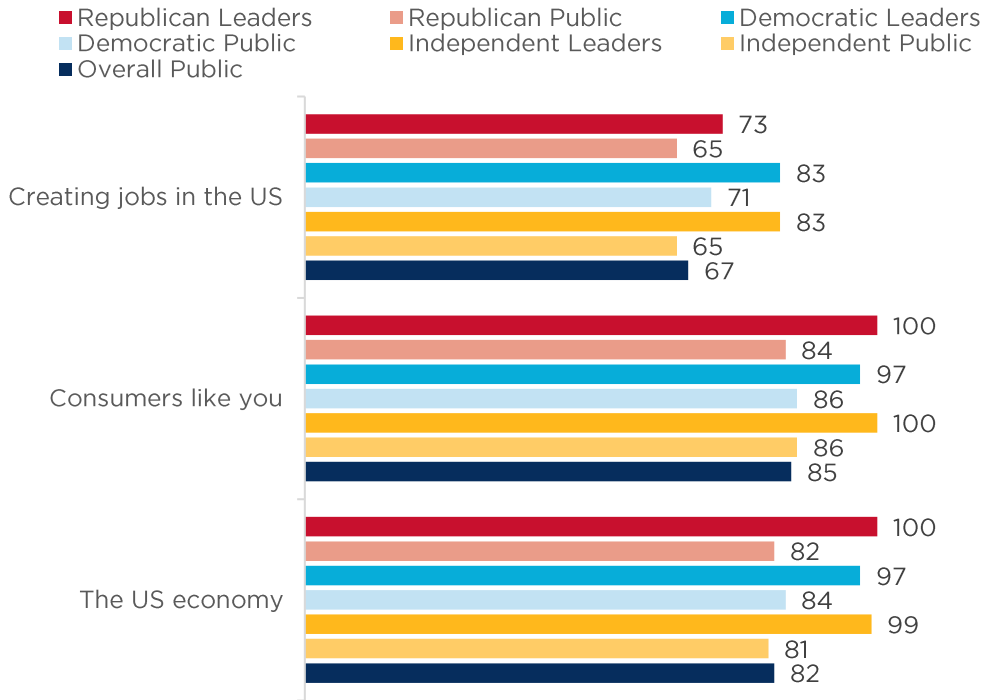


Agreement on Benefits of International Trade

There was broad agreement that international trade is good for the US economy, for consumers, and for creating jobs in the United States. Majorities across parties and among both the public and opinion leaders agreed. Opinion leaders were particularly unanimous about trade's positive impact on consumers and the US economy, with all Republican leaders—and nearly all Democratic and Independent leaders—saying trade is good for both.

Effects of International Trade

Overall, do you think international trade is good or bad for: (% good)



Leaders: August 2 - October 16, 2018 | n = 588

Public: July 12-31, 2018 | n = 2046

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Divisions over Trade as a US Foreign Policy Goal

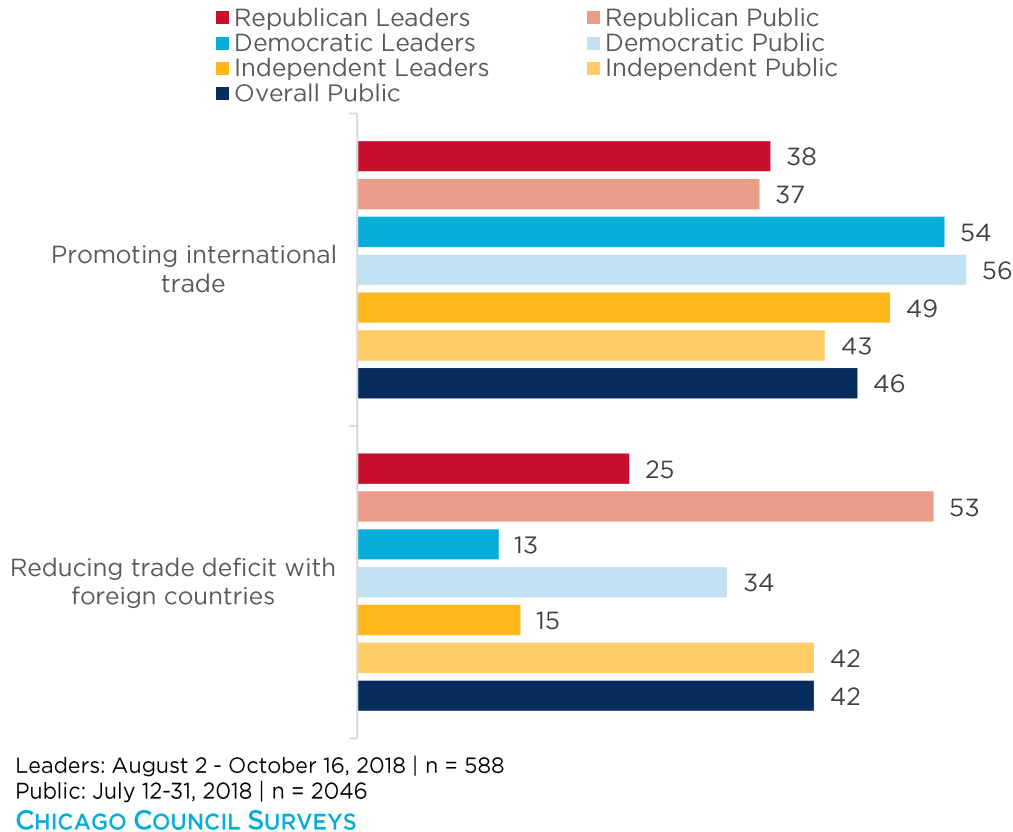
However, there were differences between partisan groups when it comes to trade as a goal of US foreign policy. Majorities of Democrats, both among the public (56%) and leaders (54%), named promoting international trade a very important goal for US foreign policy. Only minorities of Independents (49% leaders, 43% public) and Republicans (38% leaders, 37% public) shared this view.

For President Donald Trump, reducing the US trade deficit is a key goal for US policy, and its existence a sign of the “bad policies and leadership” of the past.⁵ A narrow majority of Republicans among the public (53%) shared his view that reducing the trade deficit is a very important goal for US foreign policy. Lower proportions of Democrats (34%) and Independents (42%) among the public agreed. Leaders across parties were even less likely to name it a very important goal.

⁵ [Tweet from Donald Trump \(@realdonaldtrump\)](#), March 7, 2018, 11:40 a.m.

Trade Goals

For each one, please select whether you think that it should be a very important policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important policy goal, or not an important goal at all. (% very important)



Trade Conflicts Changing Americans' Views of Sino-US Relations

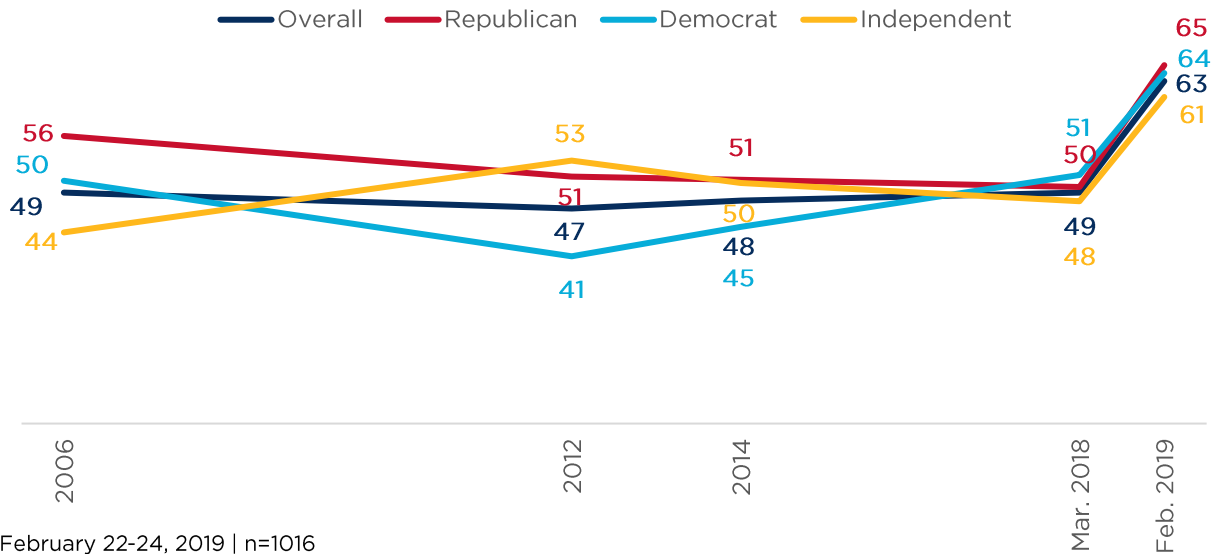
Americans have been unhappy with the US-China trade relationship: a majority of Americans have described China as an unfair trading partner since the Council first asked the question in 2002.⁶ The long-running trade conflict between the United States and China may now be affecting American perceptions of US-China relations. According to a Chicago Council poll conducted from February 22 to 24, 2019, a majority of Americans (63%) now describe the US and China as mostly rivals, up from 49 percent who said the same in March 2018.⁷ Only one in three (32%) say the two are mostly partners, down from 50 percent in March 2018. Though Americans have long considered China an unfair trading partner, this marks the first time in Chicago Council Survey trends dating to 2006 that majorities of all partisan groups have named the United States and China mostly rivals.

⁶ Last asked in the 2017 Chicago Council Survey. See: [What Americans Think about America First](#), by Dina Smeltz, Ivo H. Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, Craig Kafura. October 2, 2017.

⁷ ["Elite-Public Gap on China May be Decreasing."](#) Karl Friedhoff, *Running Numbers*. April 8, 2019.

US and China: Mostly Rivals?

At present, are the following countries mostly rivals or mostly partners? US and China (% mostly rivals)



The Long Trade March?

After the most recent round of negotiations fell through, President Trump announced he would expand US tariffs to cover all Chinese imports—some \$540 billion in goods—while Beijing imposed retaliatory tariffs on an additional \$60 billion in US imports.⁸ Chinese President Xi Jinping told crowds in Jiangxi that China is now “embarking on a new Long March,” a comment broadly interpreted as commentary on the worsening US-China relationship. President Xi and President Trump are expected to meet at the G-20 summit in Osaka, Japan this summer.⁹ Perhaps that meeting will herald a new agreement between the United States and China on trade. The issue is certainly on the minds of Americans: according to a May 2019 Quinnipiac survey, half of American voters (48%) say Trump’s trade policies are bad for the US economy, and similar proportions disapprove of his handling of trade (53%) and US policy towards China (50%).¹⁰ But for now, trade disputes between the United States and China continue to escalate with no immediate off-ramp in sight.

⁸ [“US prepares to slap tariffs on remaining Chinese imports, which could add levies on roughly \\$300 billion in additional goods,”](#) David J. Lynch, Taylor Telford, Damian Paletta, and Gerry Shih. *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2019.

⁹ Caitlin Orprysko, [“Trump to meet with Putin, China’s Xi at G-20 summit,”](#) POLITICO, May 13, 2019.

¹⁰ [Quinnipiac University survey conducted May 16 - 20](#), among 1,078 voters nationwide with a margin of error of +/- 3.7 percentage points.

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2018 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The public portion of the 2018 Chicago Council Survey was conducted July 12 to 31, 2018 by GfK Custom Research using their large-scale, nationwide online research panel among a weighted national sample of 2,046 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 ± 2.37 , including a design effect of 1.1954. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

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

Data on American views of China as a partner or rival come from a survey conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs using their national online omnibus service, KnowledgePanel™, between February 22 and 24, 2019 among a weighted national sample of 1,016 American adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of error is ± 3 percentage points.

Opinion leader results come from the 2018 Chicago Council-University of Texas Opinion Leaders Survey. The leadership survey was conducted August 2 to October 16, 2018 among 588 foreign policy opinion leaders from executive branch agencies, Congress, academia, think tanks, the media, interest groups and NGOs, religious institutions, labor unions, and business. To more closely reflect the composition of previous Chicago Council opinion leader surveys, these data have been weighted by target sample group to reflect the proportional representation of leader groupings within previous leader samples.

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About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

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