



LESTER
CROWN CENTER
ON US FOREIGN POLICY

Americans Feel Less Safe after Killing of Soleimani

Dina Smeltz, Senior Fellow, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

Brendan Helm, Research Assistant, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

January 2020

On January 3, the United States launched a drone strike in Iraq that killed Iranian Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, ramping up tensions between Washington and Tehran. Results from a just-completed Chicago Council survey show that more Americans think the strike has made the United States less safe than more safe, and more name Iran as the country posing the greatest threat to the United States than any other country. If Iran restarts development toward a nuclear weapon, the US public prefers diplomacy, but more Americans now support military action against Iran.

Key Findings

- More Americans believe the killing of Soleimani makes the United States less safe (47%) than more safe (28%), with 22 percent saying it made no difference.
- The percentage of Americans saying Iran is the country that poses the greatest threat to US security increased from 10 percent in February 2019 to 34 percent in January 2020.
- The US public is more concerned about the threat from Iran's nuclear program (61% critical threat) than it is about Iran's influence in the Middle East (50% critical threat).
- If Iran restarts development toward a nuclear weapon, two in three Americans would support the United States rejoining a nuclear agreement with Iran (66%); even larger majorities support diplomacy (85%) and sanctions (77%) to pressure Iran.
- Majorities also support cyberattacks (65%) and airstrikes (56%) against Iranian facilities if Tehran restarts nuclear weapons development.
- If Iran attacks US military or diplomatic personnel in the region, majorities would back cyberattacks (67%), airstrikes against Iranian military facilities (68%), and targeted assassinations of Iranian military personnel (57%). Half would favor sending US troops to destroy Iranian military facilities (51%).

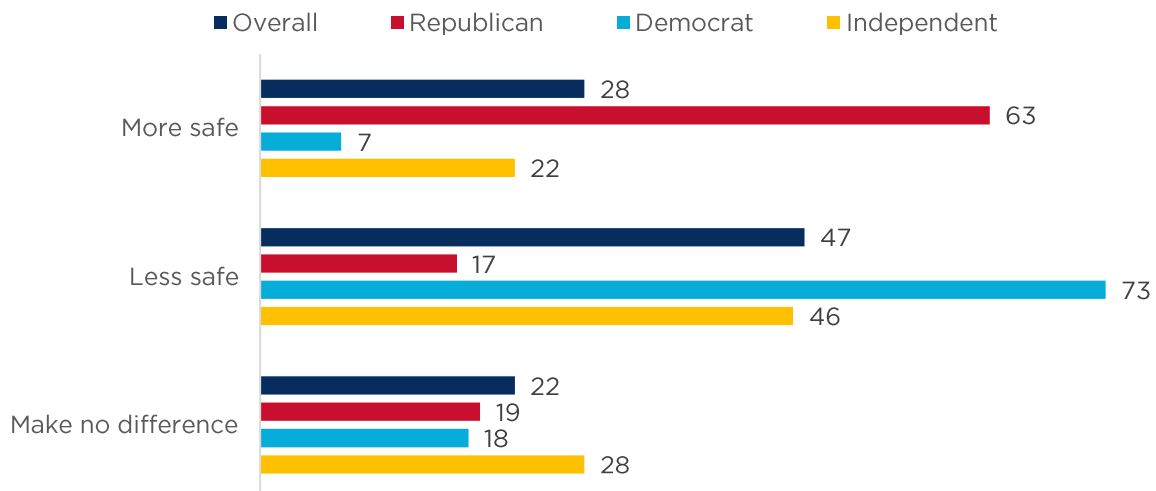
More Americans Think Soleimani Strike Makes the United States Less Safe than More Safe

More Americans believe that the strike against Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani makes the United States less safe (47%) than more safe (28%), with 22 percent saying it makes no difference. Similar to other polling about the January 3 strike, this assessment has a sharp partisan tinge, with 63 percent of self-described Republicans believing the strike made the country safer and a majority of self-described Democrats saying the opposite (73% less safe; see Figure 1).¹

At the same time, Americans are now more likely to say that drone strikes against suspected terrorists are a very effective way to achieve US foreign policy (35%, up from 23% in 2015), ahead of signing international agreements (29% very effective). Fewer say that placing sanctions on other countries (23%) or intervening militarily (17%) are very effective.

Figure 1. Effect of Soleimani Strike on US Safety

As you may know, the United States conducted an airstrike last week that targeted and killed a top Iranian military commander. Do you think that this action will make the United States more safe, less safe, or make no difference? (%)



January 10-12, 2020 | n = 1,019

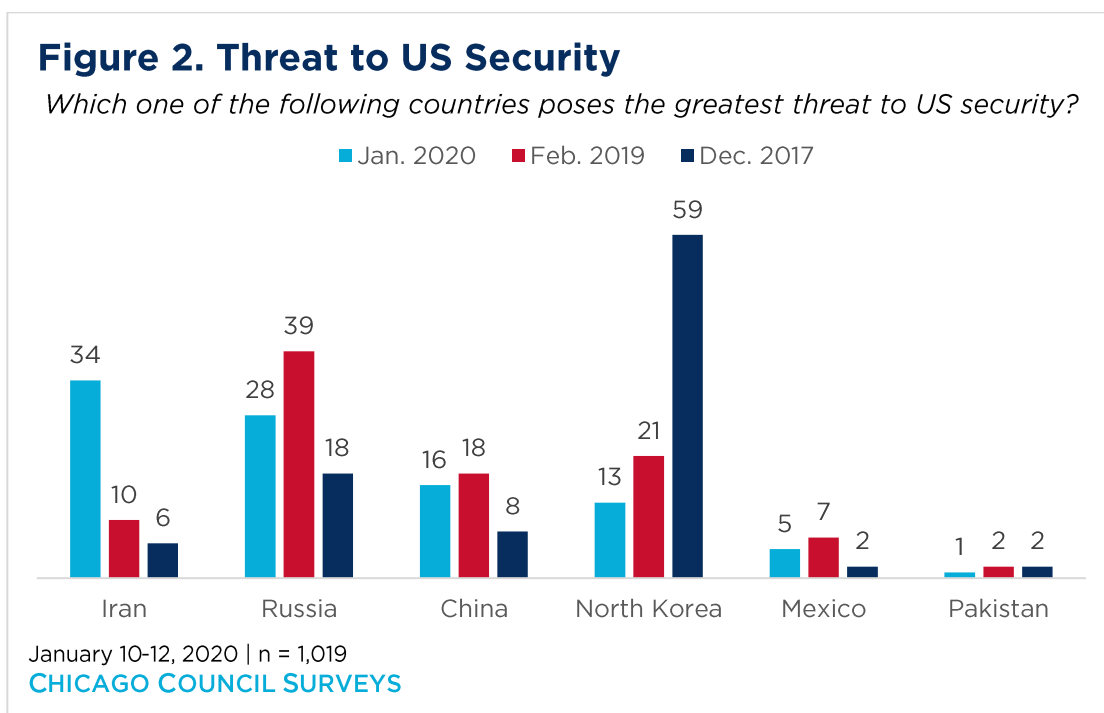
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

¹ An early January Pew survey similarly found that 54 percent of Americans believe the Trump administration's approach toward Iran has increased the likelihood of a major military conflict between the two countries (17% decreased, 26% no difference). See Pew Research Center survey, <https://www.people-press.org/2020/01/15/majority-of-u-s-public-says-trumps-approach-on-iran-has-raised-chances-of-a-major-conflict/>.

Americans More Concerned about Iran’s Nuclear Program than Regional Influence

The strike against Soleimani and Tehran’s retaliatory missile attacks against Iraqi airbases hosting US and coalition troops have raised public alarm about Iran.² The percentage of Americans who say Iran is the country that poses the greatest threat to US security has increased from 10 percent last year to 34 percent in January 2020. Among a list of six countries, Russia (28%) now comes second to Iran as the one posing the greatest threat to US security, followed by China (16%) and North Korea (13%). In February 2019, Russia was named most frequently as the country posing the greatest threat (with 39%); in 2017, North Korea had that distinction (59%).

Republicans and Democrats also differ on this question. A clear plurality of Republicans (46%) say Iran poses the greatest threat, followed by China (21%). Democrats are more likely to perceive a threat from Russia (41%) than from Iran (32%). Independents are about equally likely to view Russia (29%) and Iran (27%) as threats, with 21 percent naming China (Figure 2).



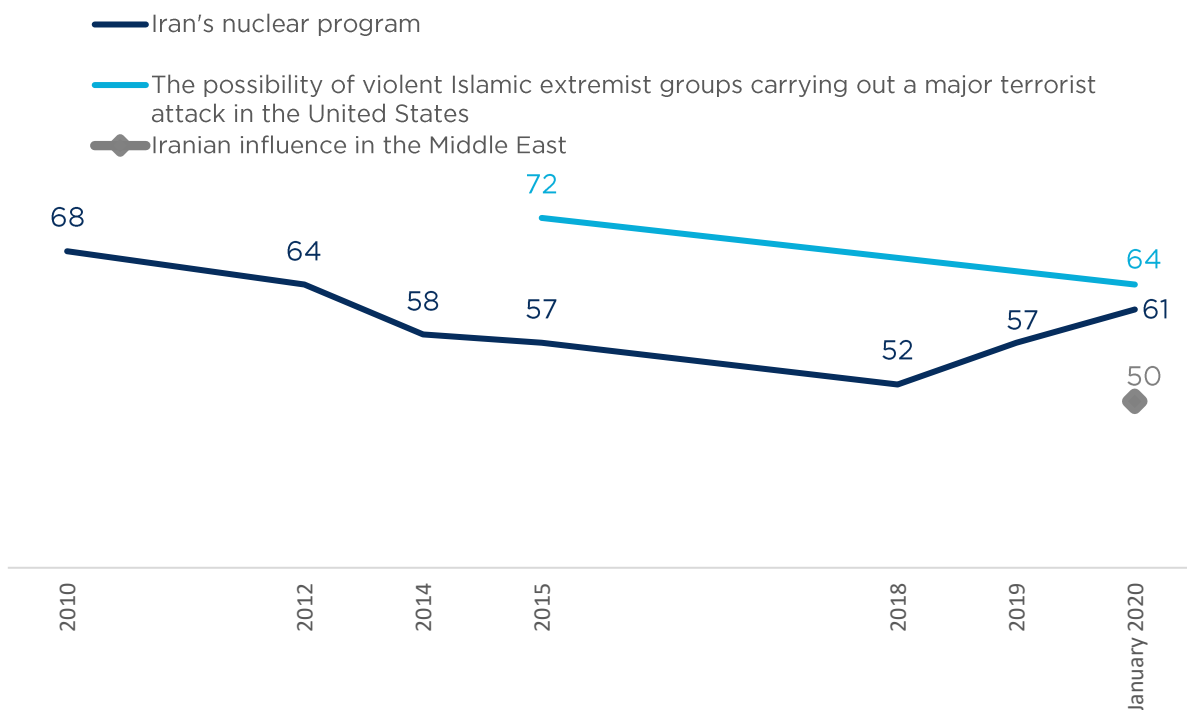
Despite the recent escalation in US-Iran tensions, Americans are only slightly more likely to sense a critical threat from Iran’s nuclear program today (61%) than they were in June 2019 (57%). Before that, there had been a downturn in concern, from 57 percent in 2015 to 52 percent in 2018. The current threat perception is on par with the percentage that considers a violent Islamic extremist group carrying out an

² Iran launched over a dozen missiles into Iraqi airbases in the early hours of January 8, before this survey was fielded. For more details, see <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51042156>.

attack in the United States a critical threat (64%)—which has declined since 2015— but lower than concerns about international terrorism and cyberattacks.³ In addition, while US policymakers view Iran’s power and influence as a destabilizing force in the Middle East, the US public is more concerned about the threat from Iran’s nuclear program than it is about Iran’s influence in the Middle East (50%; Figure 3).

Figure 3. Threats to the United States

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest 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: (% critical threat)



January 10-12, 2020 | n = 1,019
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

What If Iran Restarts Its Nuclear Weapons Program?

Iran has [announced](#) it is now exceeding the limit of enriching uranium that was agreed to in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the JCPOA, or Iran nuclear agreement), prompting the European signatories to trigger the agreement’s dispute mechanism. If Iran restarts development toward a nuclear weapon, relatively few Americans would find that acceptable (23%). Solid majorities would favor US diplomatic efforts to get Iran to stop enriching uranium (85%) and imposing tighter economic sanctions on Tehran (77%).

³ In the Chicago Council Survey conducted in June 2019, 77 percent considered cyberattacks a critical threat and 69 percent said the same about international terrorism.

If Iran restarts nuclear weapons development, two-thirds of Americans would support the United States rejoining the Iran nuclear agreement that lifts some international sanctions against Iran in exchange for strict limits on its nuclear program for at least the next decade (66%; Figure 4).⁴ In fact, despite President Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Iran agreement, 55 percent of Republicans, 61 percent of Independents and 79 percent of Democrats say they would support rejoining.

Compared to similar results from the 2019 survey, American public support has increased for military actions such as conducting cyberattacks against Iranian computer systems (65%, up from 52%) and airstrikes against Iranian military facilities (56%, up from 48%) to stem Iran's nuclear program.⁵ Similar to last year, about four in ten (44%) would favor sending US troops to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities (appendix Table 1).

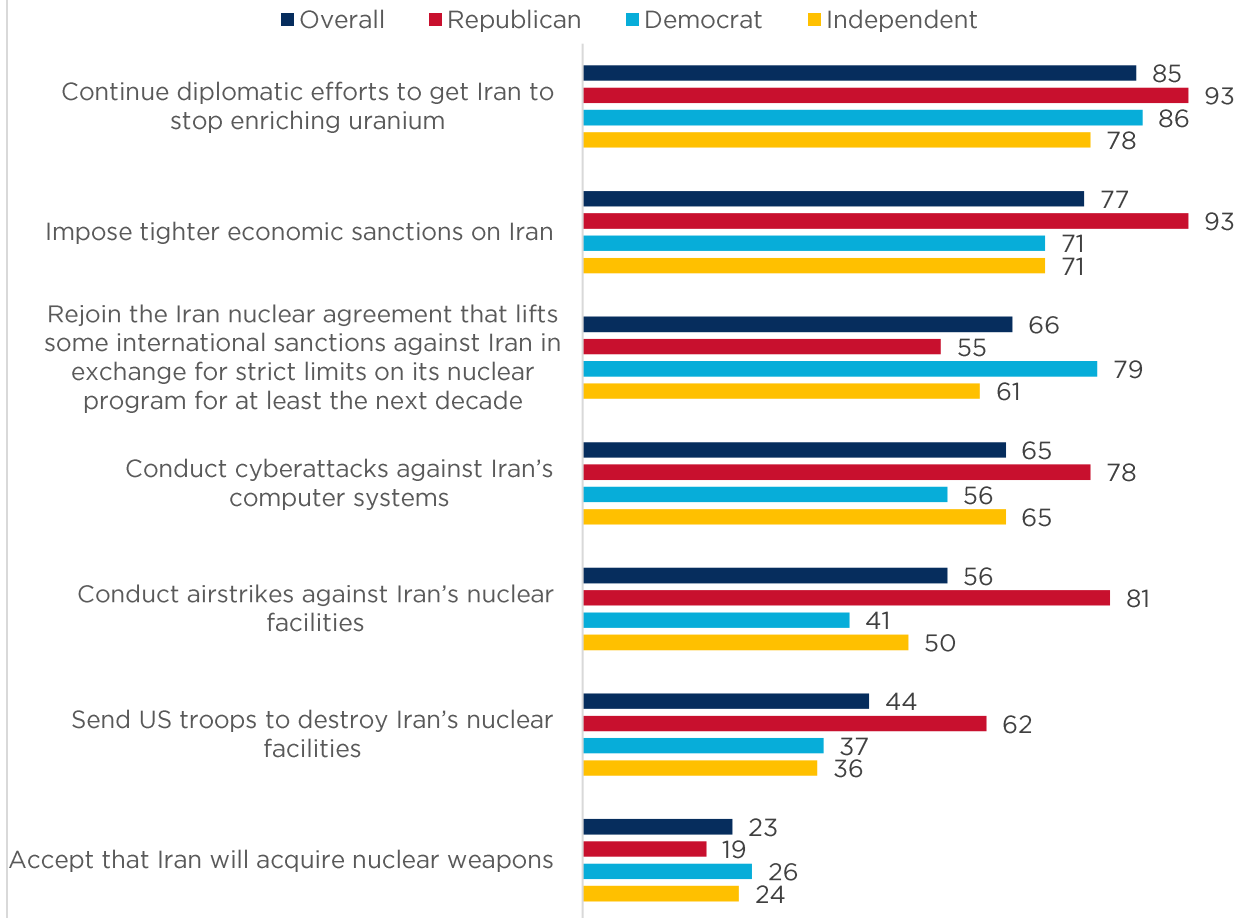
While there is cross-partisan support for the use of cyberattacks and for each of the nonmilitary options, there are partisan gaps on the use of force if Iran restarts nuclear development, with Republicans most in favor of forceful approaches. Majorities of Republicans favor conducting airstrikes (81%) or sending US troops (62%) against Iran's nuclear facilities, but only minorities of Democrats say the same (41% airstrikes, 37% sending troops). Among Independents, half support airstrikes (50%) but only 36 percent support sending troops.

⁴ For its part, however, the Iranian public may have lost interest in rejoining an agreement. An October 2019 University of Maryland-IranPoll survey found that just 42 percent of Iranians approved of the Iran nuclear agreement, down from 76 percent approval in August 2015.

⁵ A similar iteration of this question in Figure 4 was asked in 2019 which included a longer introduction: "If Iran withdraws from the nuclear agreement with the remaining countries—the UK, France, Germany, Russia, and China—and restarts development towards a nuclear weapon, would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the US taking each of the following actions."

Figure 4. Actions If Iran Restarts Nuclear Development

If Iran restarts development towards a nuclear weapon, would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the US taking each of the following actions: (% strongly + somewhat support)



January 10-12, 2020 | n = 1,019
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

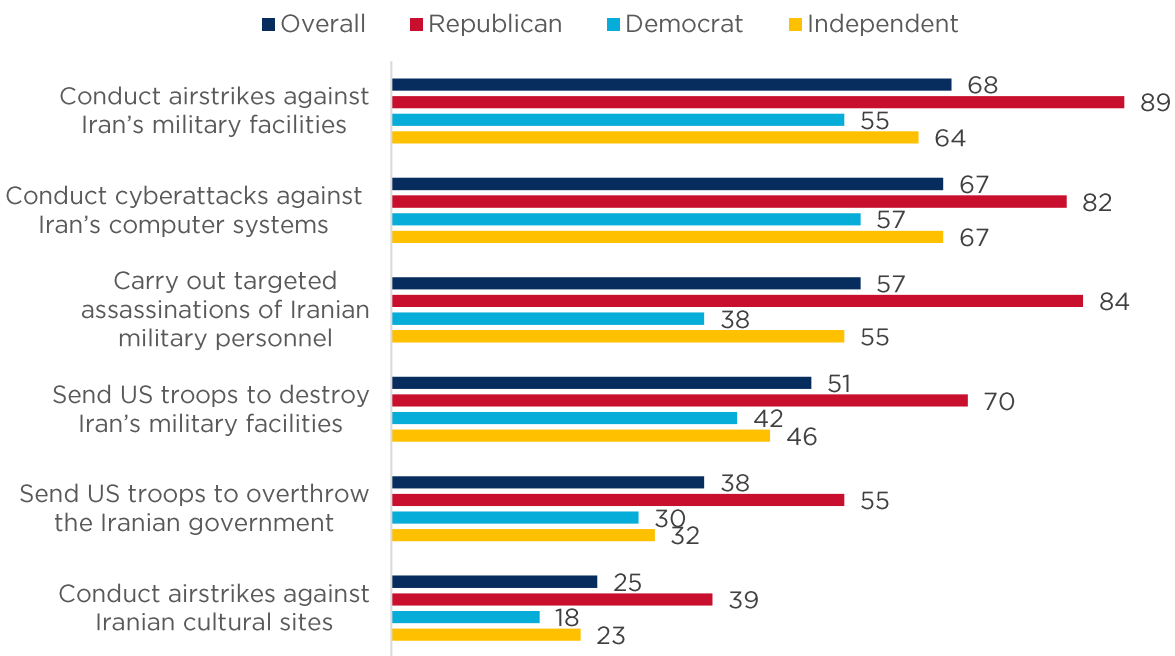
What If Iran Attacks American Military or Diplomatic Personnel?

The Trump administration has justified the assassination of Soleimani by saying there was [an imminent threat of attack](#) to four US embassies in the region. When asked what types of actions they would support if Iran attacked US military or diplomatic personnel in the region, solid majorities of Americans say they would back a military response. Seven in ten say they would favor the United States initiating airstrikes against Iranian military facilities (68% vs. 56% supporting airstrikes against Iran's nuclear facilities in the previous scenario) and cyberattacks against Iranian networks (67%), while six in ten would support targeted assassinations of Iranian military personnel (57%; Figure 5).

While half of Americans say they would support sending US troops to destroy Iran’s military facilities, a large majority of Americans would stop short of sending troops to overthrow the Iranian government. Just four in ten say they would favor sending US troops to overthrow the Iranian government (38%; 58% oppose) in the event Iran attacks US personnel in the Middle East. And lastly, although President Trump [initially warned](#) Tehran of the possibility of targeting 52 cultural sites “representing the 52 American hostages taken by Iran many years ago,” only 25 percent of Americans would approve of such attacks.

Figure 5. Actions in the event of Iranian Attack

If Iran attacks US military or diplomatic personnel in the Middle East, would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the US taking each of the following actions: (% strongly + somewhat support)



January 10-12, 2020 | n = 1,019
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Repeating a partisan pattern, Republicans are more comfortable with taking military action than Democrats and Independents. In the case of an attack against US personnel, majorities of Republicans and Democrats favor conducting cyberattacks against Iranian computer systems and airstrikes against military facilities, but there are sharp differences on other options. Eighty-four percent of Republicans and 55 percent of Independents say they would support carrying out targeted assassinations of Iranian military personnel compared to only four in ten Democrats (38%).

Seven in ten Republicans (70%) support sending US troops to destroy Iranian military facilities versus fewer than half of Independents (46%) and Democrats (42%).

A majority of Republicans support using US troops to overthrow the Iranian government (55%), while only minorities of Independents (32%) and Democrats (30%) agree. Majorities across the board oppose the idea of conducting airstrikes against Iranian cultural sites, but Republicans (39%) are about twice as likely as Democrats (18%) to support this option.

Conclusion

The United States and Iran have accused each other of taking aggressive actions, especially since the US withdrawal from the Iran agreement in May 2018. The tensions arising since then into 2020—with tankers, drones, and sanctions in play—seem to have prepared the American public for the worst.

Appendix Table 1.

2019: *If Iran withdraws from the nuclear agreement with the remaining countries—the UK, France, Germany, Russia, and China—and restarts development towards a nuclear weapon, would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose the US taking each of the following actions:*

2020: *If Iran restarts development towards a nuclear weapon, would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose the US taking each of the following actions:*

	2019	2020
Accept that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons	21	23
Send US troops to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities	40	44
Conduct airstrikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities	48	55
Rejoin the Iran nuclear agreement that lifts some international sanctions against Iran in exchange for strict limits on its nuclear program for at least the next decade	N/A	65
Conduct cyberattacks against Iran’s computer systems	51	65
Impose tighter economic sanctions on Iran	78	77
Continue diplomatic efforts to get Iran to stop enriching uranium	81	84

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from a 2020 Chicago Council survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. This omnibus survey was conducted January 10 to 12, 2020, by Ipsos using its large-scale online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 1,019 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 ±3. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups.

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).