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Public Attitudes on US Intelligence 2020

Final Trump-Era Survey Confirms Broad Popular Support, Reveals Opportunities for Greater Transparency

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The University of Texas-Austin's 2020 survey reaffirmed Americans' broad-based belief that our intelligence agencies are vital to protecting the nation and effective in accomplishing their core missions.¹ Our fourth annual poll was the last conducted during Donald Trump's presidency. The high levels of public support for the intelligence community (IC) recorded over the life of this project have proven stable and remarkably resilient to the persistent public criticism by the former president and his political allies. Close examination of the survey data may help inform a strategy aimed at further enhancing the IC's democratic legitimacy through increased openness and renewed public engagement. Indeed, a majority of the participants in our 2020 survey agreed that the IC could share more information with the American people without compromising its effectiveness.

Key Takeaways from the 2020 Survey:

- A strong majority of Americans (64%) believe that the IC plays a vital role in protecting the nation. Popular support for the intelligence agencies has proven consistent, bipartisan, and notably resilient over a four-year span marked by unprecedented hostility emanating from a US president. Younger Americans are less inclined than their elders to regard the IC as necessary.

¹ In July 2020, the Intelligence Studies Project at the University of Texas-Austin fielded a nationally representative survey with the survey market research firm YouGov. University of Texas-Austin, "2020 Survey of the Mass Public, July 8, 2020 – July 13, 2020" by YouGov. See methodology section below for full details. The survey data are available online at thechicagocouncil.org.

- An overwhelming majority of Americans rate our intelligence agencies as capable in accomplishing their specialized missions with more than 8 in 10 rating the IC as effective or highly effective in preventing terrorist attacks (85%) and uncovering the plans of our adversaries (83%). However, barely half of Americans (52%) believe that US intelligence agencies are effective at safeguarding citizens' privacy rights and civil liberties.
- While Americans are evenly split on the need to respect the privacy rights of foreigners to the same degree as US citizens, this overall result masked significant age and partisan differences. 73% of Millennials agreed that IC agencies should protect the personal information of foreigners, but only 29% of Baby Boomers held that view. Democrats generally agreed that the IC should be constrained in its handling of personal data on non-Americans while many fewer Republicans supported this policy.²
- A majority of Americans (62%) agreed the IC could share more information with the US public without compromising its mission effectiveness. Black (31%), Hispanic (29%), female (29%), and Gen Z (36%) respondents were the most likely to admit they lacked the information needed to form an opinion on US intelligence.
- Americans remain uncertain about which government officials or institutions are responsible for overseeing our intelligence agencies. Partisan affiliation appears to color these responses. Republicans (23%) were more than twice as likely as Democrats (9%) to believe the president was responsible for ensuring US intelligence agencies "act within the law and in the country's best interest" while Democrats (27%) were more inclined than Republicans (11%) to charge the Congress with intelligence oversight.

Transparency, Public Trust, and Democratic Legitimacy

The unlawful disclosure of sensitive and intrusive electronic surveillance programs by former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden early last decade posed a serious challenge to the IC's public standing and democratic legitimacy. Neither President Barack Obama nor key congressional leaders who were informed of these counterterrorism programs acted forcefully to reassure Americans that NSA had acted in a manner that was effective, lawful, and respectful of their civil liberties.

Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper (2010-2017) responded to this crisis in public confidence by launching a so-called "Transparency Initiative" aimed at improving the public's understanding of the IC's mission, the laws, policies, and practices that constrain the IC, as well as how these secret activities were internally supervised and externally overseen.³

Notwithstanding the excessive secrecy, deliberate obfuscation, and routine deception practiced by the Trump White House, DNI Dan Coats (2017-2019) endorsed the IC's commitment to transparency in an

² For the purposes of the report, we follow the Pew Center's generational conventions: *Pre-1946 or Silent generation* (born before 1946), *Boomers* (those born between 1946 and 1964), *Generation X* (those born between 1965-1980), *Millennials* (those born between 1981 and 1996), and *Generation Z* (those born after 1996).

³ Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Principles of Intelligence Transparency for the Intelligence Community*, 2015. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ic-legal-reference-book/the-principles-of-intelligence-transparency-for-the-ic>

internal directive⁴ and acknowledged in his 2019 National Intelligence Strategy that more openness would be “necessary to earn and maintain public trust.”⁵

In practice, though, Trump-era intelligence officials deliberately lowered their public profiles to avoid triggering an irascible and vindictive boss. IC leaders avoided providing open testimony at Congress’s worldwide threat hearings—the single opportunity in most years for the American people to see and hear from senior intelligence officials.⁶ The few public actions taken by Trump’s last DNI, John Ratcliffe (2020-2021), involved the declassification of documents related to Russia’s interference in the 2016 US election which was apparently intended to bolster the incumbent’s re-election prospects, notwithstanding the risk of damage to intelligence sources and the IC’s reputation for nonpartisanship.⁷

Since taking office, President Joe Biden has acted to restore public confidence in essential government institutions like the intelligence agencies. In testimony delivered at her confirmation hearing, incoming DNI Avril Haines promised to “prioritize transparency” in order to enhance the public’s confidence in the competence, integrity, and nonpartisanship of US intelligence.⁸

Despite the unprecedented assault on American intelligence during the Trump presidency, our polling consistently confirmed the existence of a durable reservoir of public confidence in our intelligence agencies. At the same time, our surveys reveal differences in public attitudes on US intelligence based on age, gender, and party affiliation as well as specific topics that reliably trigger widespread concern. These insights may prove useful for incoming IC leaders who have expressed interest in reinvigorating efforts to increase transparency and design public-facing programs to educate and inform a broader public about the work of our intelligence agencies.⁹

For example, our data indicate that general knowledge of foreign affairs¹⁰ and the support for the IC is weakest among younger Americans and women. Skepticism about the IC’s commitment to protecting privacy rights and civil liberties is widespread. While the IC’s overall support is bipartisan, sharp party differences emerged when respondents were asked about the IC’s role in presidential policymaking, the respective roles of the president and Congress in overseeing the intelligence agencies, and the protections that should be provided to the personal information of foreigners. Closing these partisan

⁴ ODNI, Intelligence Community Directive 107, February 28, 2018. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICD/ICD-107.pdf>

⁵ ODNI, National Intelligence Strategy, 2019. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/item/1943-2019-national-intelligence-strategy>

⁶ Intel Agencies Push to Close Threats Hearing after Trump Outburst, Politico, January 15, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/15/intel-agencies-threats-hearing-trump-099494>

⁷ E.g., ODNI, DNI Ratcliffe Statement on Declassification of Transcripts, May 29, 2020. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/item/2124-dni-ratcliffe-statement-on-declassification-of-transcripts>

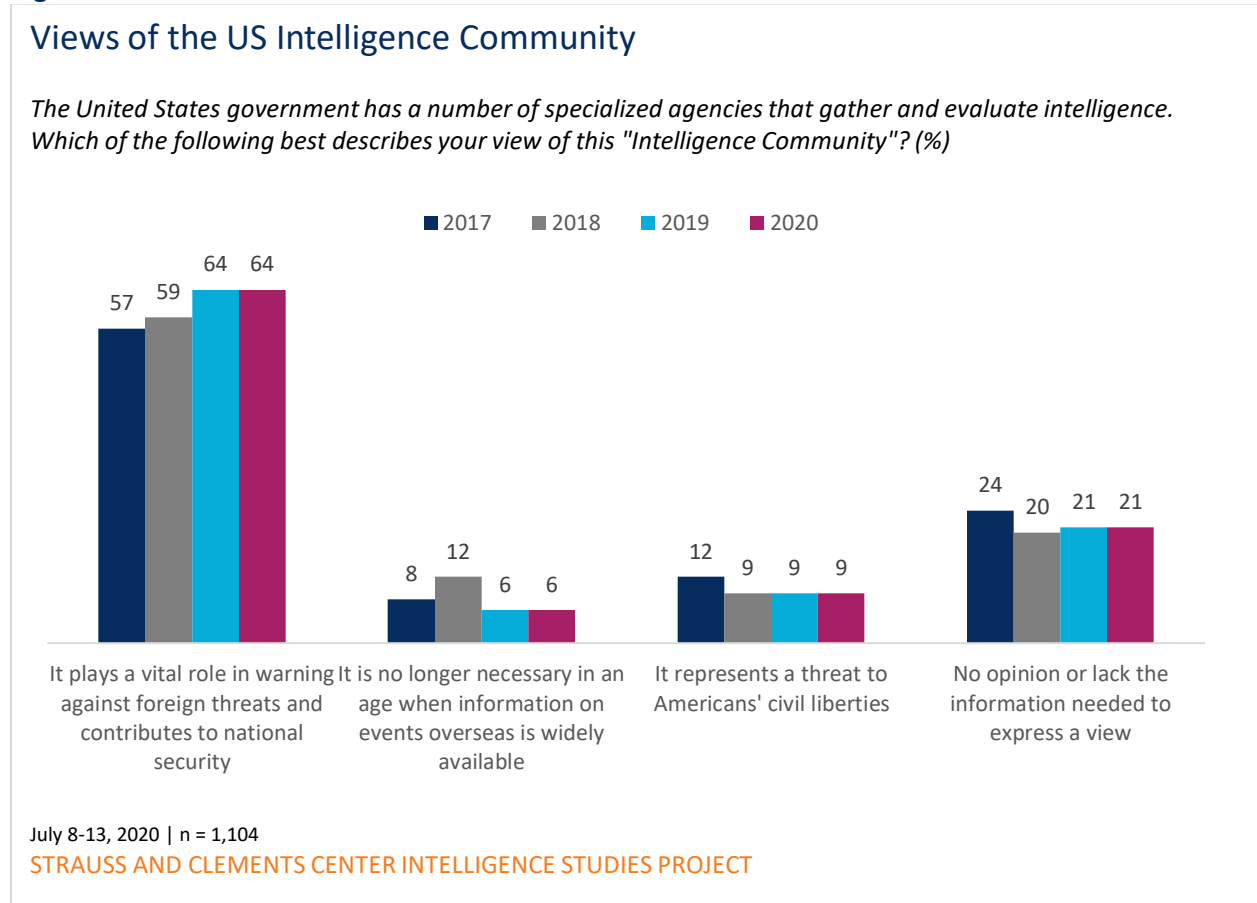
⁸ SSCI Open Hearing: On the Nomination of Avril D. Haines to be Director of National Intelligence, January 19, 2021. <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/hearings/t-ahaines-011921.pdf>

⁹ Greg Myre, “Avril Haines Takes Over as Intelligence Chief at a ‘Challenging Time,’” *National Public Radio*, February 28, 2021

¹⁰ Our proxies for knowledge in the 2019 and 2020 surveys were two questions about the current leaders of Turkey and France. High knowledge subjects were those that answered both of those questions correctly. 45 percent of male respondents in our sample were high knowledge and 23 percent of female respondents were high knowledge.

gaps by reinforcing the apolitical ethos of American intelligence should be a priority for the new administration.

Figure 1



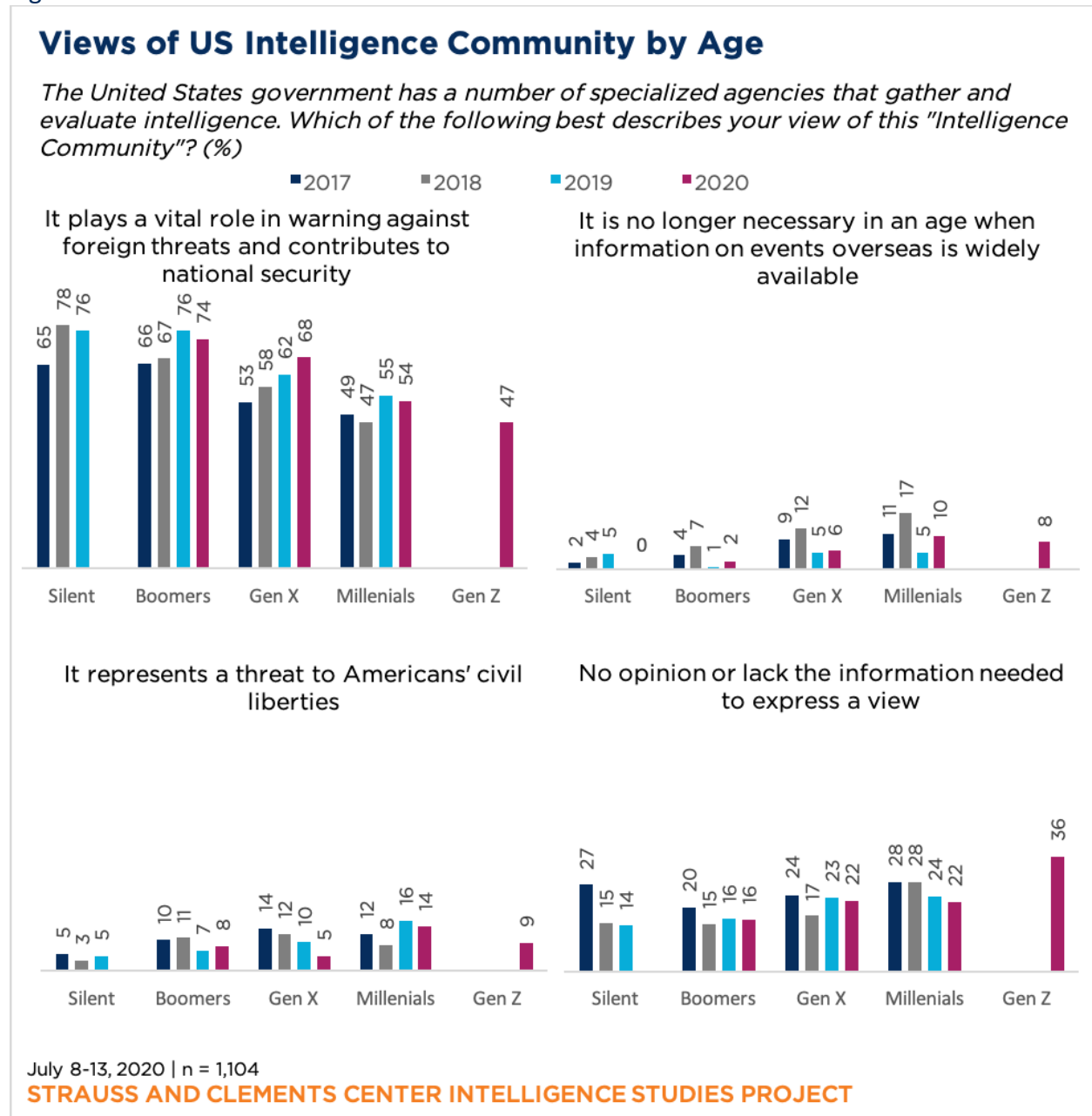
Our August 2020 survey once again reflected widespread agreement with the view that US intelligence agencies play a vital role in warning against foreign threats and contribute to national security. More than 6 in 10 respondents held this view while fewer than 1 in 10 thought our IC was no longer necessary because of the increased availability of information on events overseas or because these agencies represented a threat to Americans’ civil liberties. This favorable attitude by a majority of Americans toward US intelligence has proven over the four-year life of the project to be stable, nonpartisan, and resilient.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Americans who qualified as “high knowledge” were considerably more likely to regard the IC as necessary than others who were less well informed on foreign affairs. While majorities of both male and female respondents expressed a favorable view of the IC, support among men was slightly stronger.

Each of our surveys has also recorded a significant disparity in the degree of confidence in their judgments claimed by males and females. For example, in the 2020 survey, 29 percent of female respondents expressed no opinion or claimed they lacked the information necessary to assess US intelligence, while only 13 percent of men chose these responses. Black (31%) and Hispanic (29%)

Americans were more likely than Whites (17%) to cite insufficient information or claim no opinion on US Intelligence.

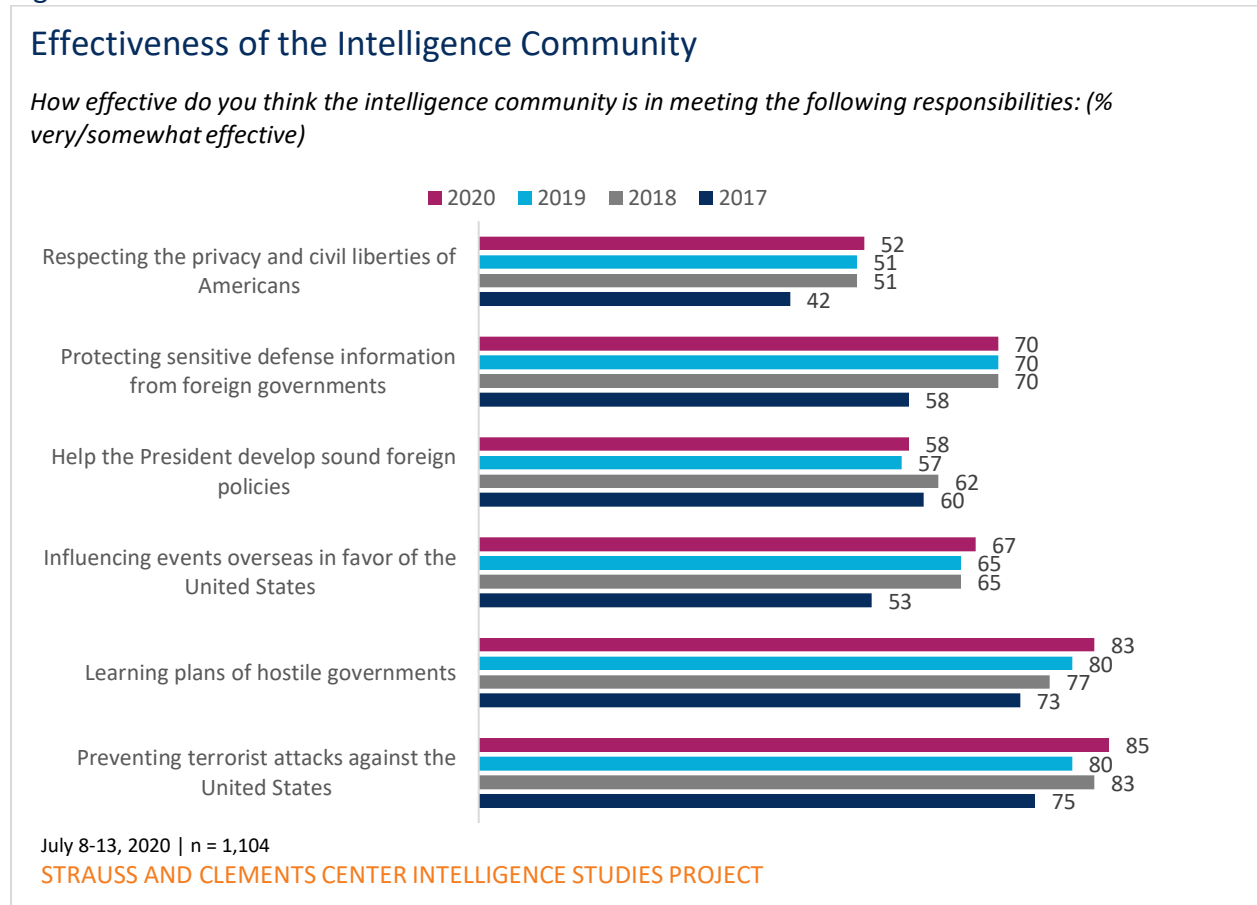
Figure 2



While the general polling data reflect stable majority support for the US intelligence agencies, comparing the support levels within different age cohorts reveals noteworthy disparities. Support for the IC is strongest with older Americans and weakest within the younger cohorts. Nearly 8 in 10 Boomers agreed that the IC was vital to our national security while fewer than half of Gen Z (post-1997) participants share that view.

The same generational gap emerged in responses to questions about civil liberties and public engagement. Only 3 percent of the oldest survey respondents believed the IC represented a threat to civil liberties, but 14 percent of Millennials expressed that concern. Similarly, 15 percent of Americans in the Boomer cohorts expressed no opinion (or lacked sufficient information) about the IC while more than one-third of Gen Z respondents (36%) said the same.

Figure 3



To better understand why Americans hold a generally favorable view of US intelligence, we asked respondents how effective the IC was in accomplishing a number of its core missions: counterterrorism, collecting foreign intelligence, influencing conditions abroad (covert action), supporting national security policymaking, and counterintelligence. Continuing a trend identified in earlier polling, our 2020 survey confirmed that an overwhelming majority of Americans believe our intelligence agencies are effective or highly effective in preventing terror attacks (86%) and learning the plans of hostile governments (84%). The large group of respondents who assign the IC high marks for effective work in the counterterrorism and foreign intelligence missions is stable (even rising) over time, gender-neutral, and bipartisan. Unlike in previous years, in 2020, the IC’s effectiveness in these high-profile missions was acknowledged equally by “high knowledge” respondents as well as those who are less well informed on foreign affairs.

The 2020 survey reflected that somewhat smaller but still solid majorities of Americans continued to view the IC as effective in “influencing events overseas in favor of the US” as well as in “protecting sensitive defense information from foreign governments.” We noted with interest that more than 7 in

10 Americans (71%) rated the IC as effective or very effective in performing its counterintelligence and information security functions notwithstanding the increasing number of large, well-publicized, damaging breaches of government and private networks by foreign intelligence services.

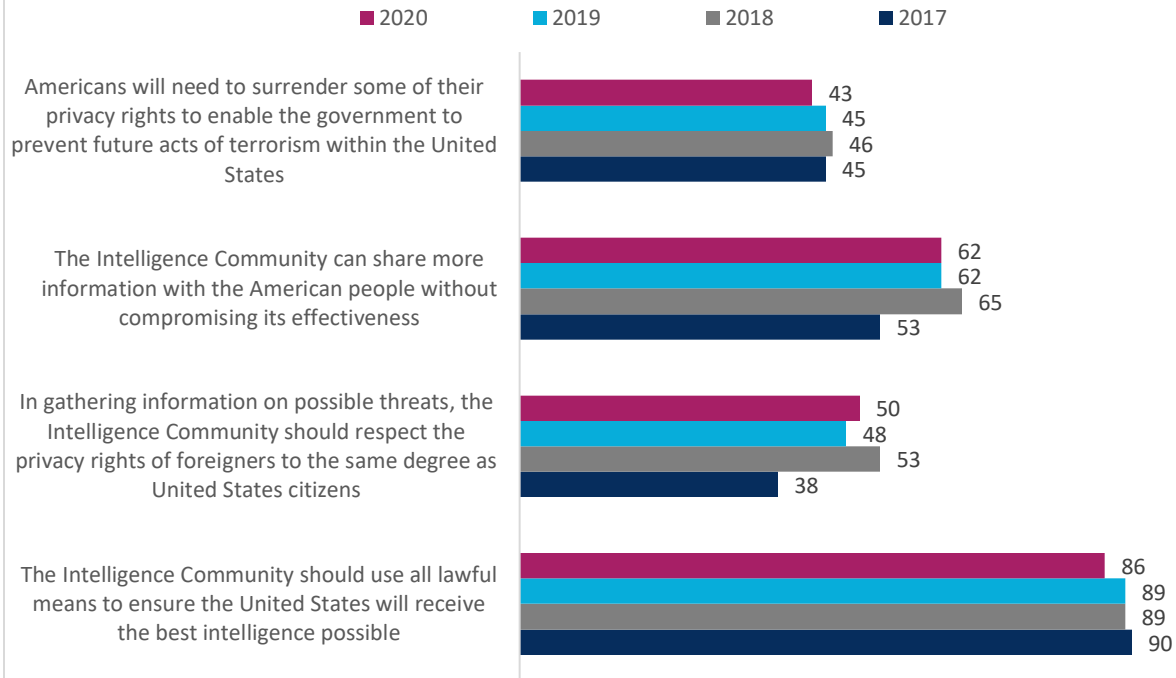
While the overall assessment of the IC's effectiveness in helping the president "develop sound foreign policies" has remained steady over the life of the project at roughly 60 percent, we first noted in last year's report that this general result masked a significant disparity in the perceptions of respondents who identified as Republicans or Democrats. Roughly 8 in 10 Republicans thought the IC was effective in helping the president develop sound foreign policies while fewer than half of those who identified as Democrats held that view. We doubt that these disparate perceptions are grounded in an informed evaluation of the IC's actual performance providing information to former President Trump, which took place outside public view, but rather they were shaped by respondents' attitudes toward Trump, his policies, and the unconventional manner in which he developed them. Evidence that Americans' attitudes toward the IC are shaped by views on a polarizing political leader rather than available measures of performance is unremarkable, but the fact should nonetheless concern intelligence leaders anxious to reinforce the traditional apolitical ethos that undergirds the IC's credibility with elected officials of both parties.

2020 survey respondents credited the IC with being highly effective in most of its core mission areas, but the number of respondents who agreed that the IC was effective in safeguarding Americans' privacy and civil liberties continued to lag. Only half of Americans surveyed (51%) agreed that the intelligence agencies effectively protected their civil liberties. Younger Americans, Independents, and Democratic respondents were marginally more skeptical of the IC's performance in this area.

Figure 4

Responsibilities of the Intelligence Community

For each of the statements below about United States intelligence, please indicate whether you agree or



July 8-13, 2020 | n = 1,104

STRAUSS AND CLEMENTS CENTER INTELLIGENCE STUDIES PROJECT

Each year, we have asked survey participants to evaluate statements regarding the IC’s responsibilities: 1) to use all lawful means to accomplish their missions, 2) to protect the personal information of foreigners, 3) to share information with the US public, and 4) willingness to surrender privacy to gain added security. The top-line findings in Figure 4 above have been remarkably consistent over the life of the project. This veneer of stability, however, masks potentially significant differences in how certain groups view the IC’s responsibilities.

Beginning with President Reagan in 1981, US presidents of both parties have charged the US IC to use “all reasonable and lawful means” to ensure that our government receives the best possible intelligence.¹¹ Overall, nearly 9 in 10 respondents in our four annual surveys have agreed or strongly agreed with that seemingly innocuous statement. But, the level of support for that charge is weaker with younger Americans. In 3 of our 4 annual surveys, including this year, a high proportion of respondents in the oldest cohorts agreed with the statement but the level of support weakens with each successive cohort—just under 7 in 10 Gen-Z’ers (69%) agreed this year.¹²

¹¹ National Archives, Executive Order 12333 (as amended), December 4, 1981. <https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/12333.html>

¹² We should note that the number of respondents in the Pre-1946/Silent were too small to report for 2020. The Gen-Z category (at nearly 100) is now large enough to report this year.

Without amending President Reagan’s longstanding order, President Obama directed in 2014 that IC agencies engaged in electronic surveillance must provide “safeguards for the personal information of all individuals regardless of nationality.”¹³ The voluntary extension of privacy rights to foreign nationals formed part of the Obama administration’s response to complaints by European allies about alleged widespread signals collection undertaken by US intelligence agencies. This restriction remains in effect and indeed has been incorporated into US-EU diplomatic agreements that govern the transatlantic movement of personally identifiable data by American businesses. Recent rulings in European courts have called into question the adequacy of US protections for personal information of the citizens of EU member states.¹⁴

Since 2017, we have surveyed annually Americans’ attitudes on the requirement that US intelligence agencies respect the privacy rights of foreigners to the same extent as those of US citizens. Overall, 50 percent of respondents to the 2020 survey agreed or strongly agreed with this policy, although the underlying data revealed wide disparities in attitude based on age and party affiliation. For example, while 73 percent of Millennials agreed that the IC should safeguard foreigners’ personal data, only 29 percent of their Boomer parents held that view. The partisan divide on this topic was similarly stark. Six in ten (60%) respondents who identified as Democrats agreed with this voluntary constraint on the IC’s handling of information on non-citizens but only 36 percent of Republicans thought our intelligence agencies should be limited in this manner.

As in previous years, fewer than half of Americans in the 2020 survey (43%) agreed with the proposition that Americans will be required to surrender some privacy to enable the government to prevent future acts of terrorism. There were no significant differences on this question based on age, gender, or party affiliation.

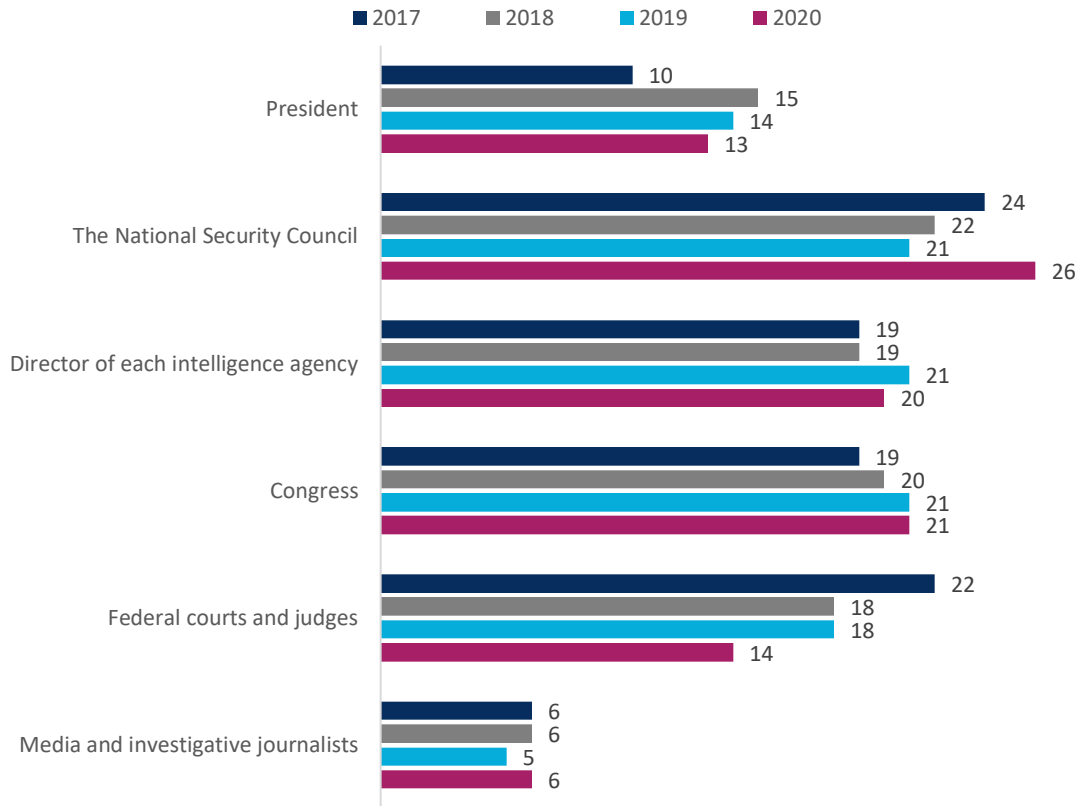
A majority of Americans (62%) in both 2019 and 2020 agreed that the IC could share more information about its activities with the American people without compromising its effectiveness. Support for greater openness tracked moderately with age (younger respondents were more likely to favor greater transparency) and more directly with partisan affiliation. Two-thirds of self-identified Democrats agreed or strongly agreed that more information could be shared but only one-half of Republican respondents thought that sharing more information with the public would be possible without the IC compromising its effectiveness.

¹³ Office of the Press Secretary, PPD-28 – Signals Intelligence Activities, January 17, 2014. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/17/presidential-policy-directive-signals-intelligence-activities>

¹⁴ Bradley A. Brooker, Sujit Raman, and James M. Sullivan, “The Need for Clarity after Schrems II,” *Lawfare*, September 29, 2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/need-clarity-after-schrems-ii>
Eric Manpearl and Steve Slick, “Revisiting Legacy Restrictions on the IC’s Handling of SIGINT Data on Non-Americans,” October 17, 2019. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/revisiting-legacy-restrictions-intelligence-communitys-handling-sigint-data-non-americans>

Oversight of the 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? (%)



July 8-13, 2020 | n = 1,104

STRAUSS AND CLEMENTS CENTER INTELLIGENCE STUDIES PROJECT

Our 2017 baseline poll and each subsequent survey have revealed considerable uncertainty over which government officials or institutions bear principal responsibility for overseeing America's intelligence agencies. The overall results in the 2020 survey were similar to those in previous years but, once again, potentially useful insights were hidden beneath the top-line results.

Respondents were asked to select the institution primarily responsible for monitoring the activities of US intelligence agencies from a short list. In 2020, the National Security Council (23%), Congress (21%), and the respective agency heads (20%) were most frequently cited. Data show 15 percent of respondents identified the courts, 13 percent selected the president, and only 6 percent assigned this responsibility to the media. The highest levels of support for oversight by the media and investigative journalists (9%) came from the youngest age cohorts. This distribution has been nearly identical over the four-year life of our project.

More interesting were disparities concerning the role of the president and Congress based on party affiliation. Republicans were more than twice as likely as Democrats (23%-9%) to identify the president as the official responsible for ensuring that US intelligence agencies “act within the law and in the country’s best interest.” We attribute this disparity to a high level of trust and confidence in Trump among Republicans (and equivalent distrust among Democrats) when this survey was conducted in summer 2020. In turn, 27 percent of respondents who identified as Democrats assigned this responsibility to Congress while only 11 percent of Republicans thought intelligence oversight was the task of the legislature. This disparity is possibly explained by a series of high-profile investigations of the Trump administration undertaken by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence under Democratic control.

Survey History: Fixing Baseline Attitudes Amid Turmoil

In 2017, we fielded the first round of a poll aimed at establishing a baseline measure of how Americans perceive the IC, its effectiveness in key mission areas, the agencies’ respect for civil liberties, and institutional responsibility for monitoring US intelligence activities. The original project goals were to inform scholarly and general debate over the proper role of secret intelligence in our open democracy and to help serving officials design public-facing programs that responded most directly to the actual knowledge, beliefs, and concerns of the American people.

Our initial survey results offered evidence that Americans generally regarded the IC as important in safeguarding the nation and notably effective in preventing acts of terrorism and uncovering the plans of our adversaries.¹⁵ The first survey also signaled that many Americans were unpersuaded that our intelligence agencies respected their privacy and civil liberties—the prime objective of the ODNI’s ongoing Transparency Initiative.

The survey was repeated in 2018.¹⁶ In reviewing data from the second annual survey, we watched for any impact from the IC’s continued transparency efforts but were compelled to account for an unforeseen series of public attacks on IC agencies and their leaders by the sitting president. The data suggested that the public’s support for US intelligence was not diminished by former President Trump’s rejection of the IC’s consensus judgment that Russia had interfered in the 2016 election, his denigration of intelligence leaders, and sinister insinuations that the US intelligence agencies were part of a “deep state” committed to undermining the people’s will.

¹⁵ Stephen Slick and Joshua Busby, *Glasnost for US Intelligence: Will Transparency Lead to Increased Public Trust*, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, May 2018. <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/glasnost-us-intelligence-will-transparency-lead-increased-public>

¹⁶ Stephen Slick, Joshua Busby, and Kingsley Burns, *Public Attitudes on US Intelligence: Annual Poll Reflects Bipartisan Confidence Despite Presidential Antagonism*, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2019. https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/public_attitudes_on_us_intelligence_0.pdf

Former President Trump’s public antagonism toward the IC continued during the period measured by our third annual survey in 2019.¹⁷ While the former president persistently sought to undermine the credibility of the intelligence agencies, his criticism did not appear to impact the high level of public support for the IC, even among survey respondents who identified as Republicans and were presumably sympathetic to his views.

Methodology

This report is based on data from a survey conducted by YouGov from July 8-July 13, 2020. YouGov interviewed 1104 respondents who were matched down to a sample of 1,000 to produce the final dataset. The margin of error is +/- 3.47 percentage points.

YouGov interviewed 4654 respondents who were then matched down to a sample of 4000 to produce the final dataset (1251 in 2017, 1153 in 2018, 1146 in 2019, and 1104 in 2020). The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). ACS datasets used were 2010 (for intelligence survey in 2017), 2016 (for the 2018 and 2019 surveys), and 2018 (for the 2020 survey).

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 the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law out of a conviction that the activities of the US Intelligence Community were increasingly critical to safeguarding our national security and yet were understudied at American universities. The ISP is building at the University of Texas at Austin a premier center for the study of US Intelligence through a variety of programs including new course offerings and research projects as well as periodic conferences and other public events focused on intelligence topics. More about the ISP and our contact information is available at intelligencestudies.utexas.edu.

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, businesses, and governments engage the world. Learn more at thechicagocouncil.org and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

¹⁷ Stephen Slick and Joshua Busby, *Public Attitudes on US Intelligence: 2019 Survey Confirms Broad Support Despite Limited Transparency and Persistent Presidential Antagonism*, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2020. <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/commentary-and-analysis/blogs/public-attitudes-us-intelligence>