

As Nuclear Clock Ticks, US Public Prefers Diplomacy with Iran

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November 2021

Negotiations to reinstate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement, or the Iran nuclear deal, are set to restart November 29 in Vienna. The talks have been stalled since hardline Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi took power in June. Although the US public generally views Iran unfavorably, a majority of Americans would prefer to use diplomatic and economic tools to respond to Iran's growing nuclear program rather than more-forceful measures. This new round of negotiations could provide an opportunity for the Biden administration to pursue that route, though there will be challenges to persuading both the GOP and Iranian leadership to rejoin a nuclear deal.

Key Findings

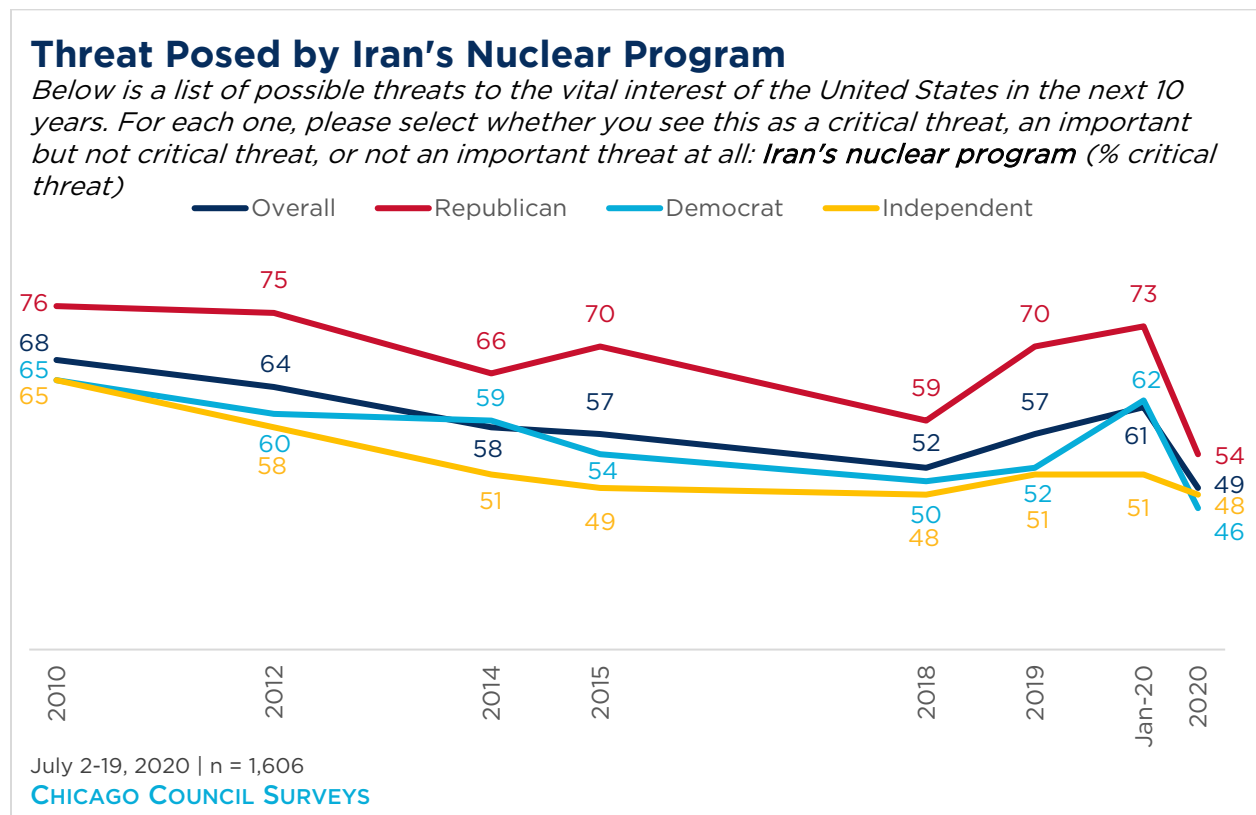
- Majorities of the overall public (59%), self-described Democrats (72%), and Independents (63%)—and four in 10 self-identified Republicans (41%)—would support US participation in a deal that lifts economic sanctions on Iran in exchange for limits on its nuclear program.
- If Iran restarts the development of a nuclear weapon, however, majorities of Americans would support conducting cyberattacks against Iranian computer systems (64%) and airstrikes against Iranian nuclear facilities (60%).
- Republicans are willing to go even further: Two-thirds of Republican Party supporters (67%) favor sending US troops to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities if Iran resumes weapons development.
- One in five Americans would support the United States accepting Iran's eventual acquisition of a nuclear weapon (22%).

Iran's Nuclear Program: Are Americans Concerned?

When President Joseph Biden took office, he announced his intention to rejoin the Iranian nuclear agreement following President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the

accord in 2018. When negotiations restart on November 29, Iranian officials will be meeting directly with European, Chinese, and Russian officials. American representatives will also be in Vienna but have been denied official meetings with the Iranian delegation. At the close of the last round of negotiations in June 2021, all sides reported significant progress, and it seemed as though the 2015 nuclear agreement would be imminently restored. In the months since, President Raisi's inauguration and accelerated development of Iranian nuclear capabilities have largely dashed these hopes. Officials and experts now see a return to the conditions of the 2015 deal as [unlikely](#).

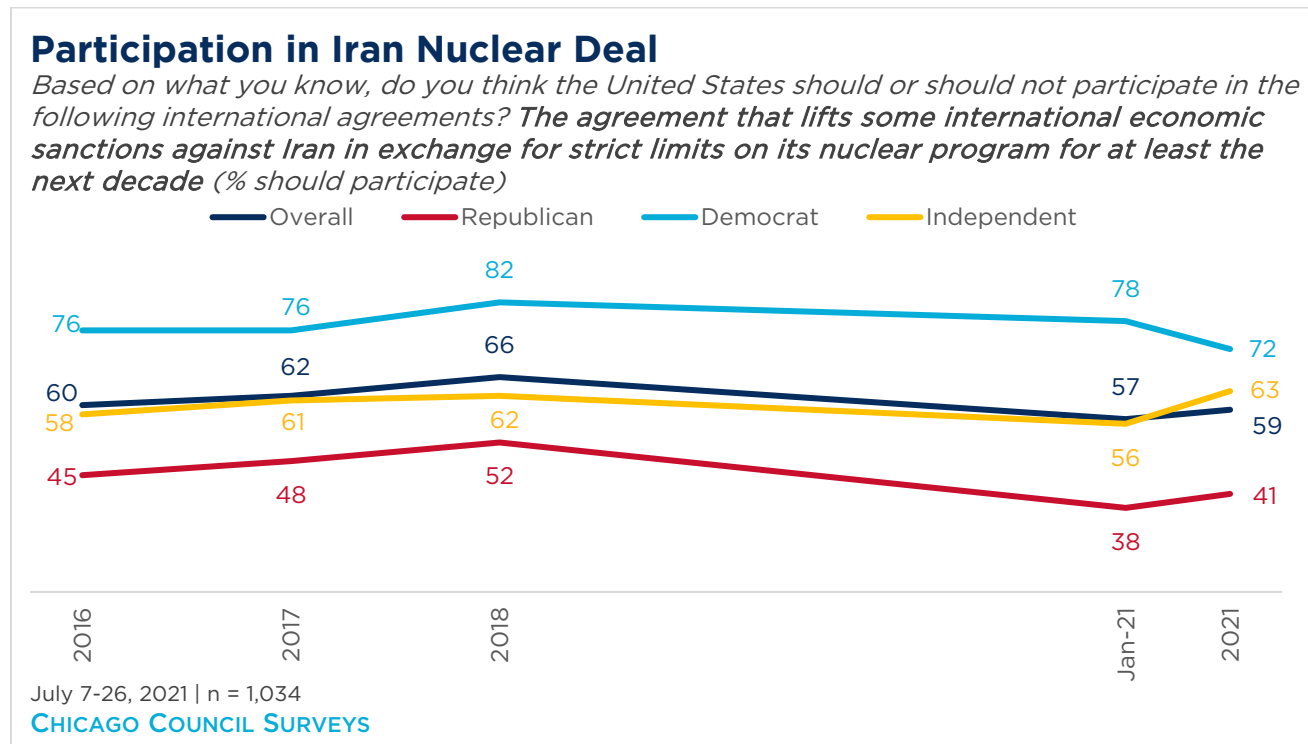
For its part, the Americans public seems less alarmed lately than in previous years about the potential for Iran to develop its own nuclear weapon. When the Chicago Council on Global Affairs last asked about the potential threat from Iran's nuclear program in summer 2020, half of Americans described it as a critical threat (49%). That is the lowest reading since the question was first asked in 2010. Americans likely recalibrated their sense of threats in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (which 67% saw as a critical threat), domestic violent extremism (57%), and increased concerns about the rising power of China (55%). Although the partisan gap has narrowed in recent years, Republicans (54%) have been consistently more likely than Democrats (46%) or independents (48%) to perceive Iran's nuclear program as a critical threat.



In addition, Iran was one of two countries presented in the survey that a majority of the public designated as an adversary (52%), with only North Korea receiving a more negative assessment (62% adversary). Republicans display the most-negative views of Iran, with two-thirds describing the country as an adversary. Smaller pluralities of Democrats (46%) and Independents (49%) classified Iran in this way.

Partisan Divides on a Path Forward

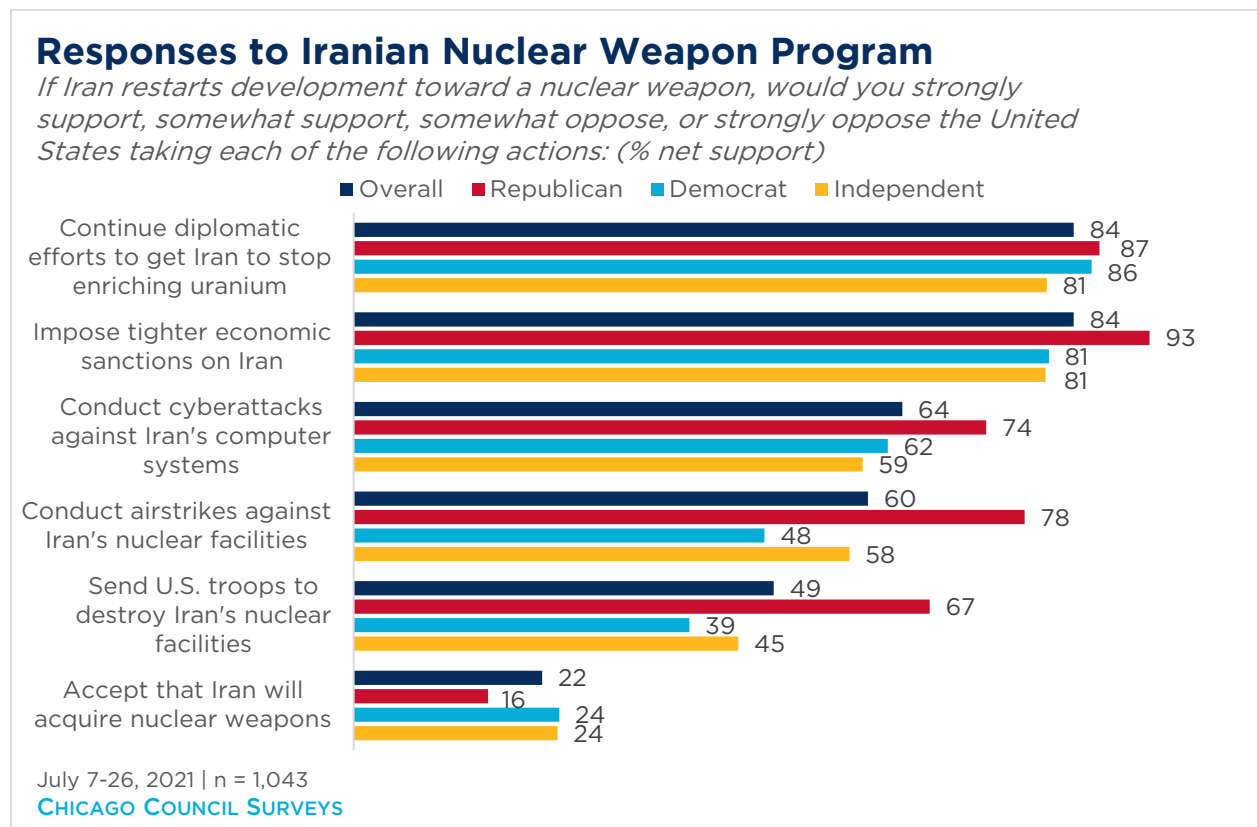
Republicans, Democrats, and Independents prefer diplomatic efforts and economic sanctions for curtailing Iran’s nuclear capabilities. However, when it comes to whether the existing Iran agreement is an appropriate tool for this diplomatic approach, there is significantly less agreement. A majority of Americans (59%) agree that the United States should participate in the agreement that lifts some international economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for strict limits on its nuclear program for at least the next decade, the same general premise as the 2015 JCPOA. In 2018, just after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, clear majorities of Democrats and Independents, and a narrow majority of Republicans supported this type of agreement. In 2021, support for US participation is sharply divided along party lines, with 72 percent of Democrats, 63 percent of Independents, and 41 percent of Republicans supporting US participation.



Although Republican party supporters do not currently support US participation in the JCPOA, they agree with Democrats and Independents that using diplomatic and economic tools to curtail Iran’s nuclear activities would be the preferred course of action. Majorities of Americans across partisan affiliations support diplomatic efforts to get Iran to stop enriching uranium (84%), the imposition of additional economic sanctions on Iran (84%). A majority also supports using cyberattacks against Iran’s computer systems (64%).

There are additional divisions when it comes to more-traditional uses of force should Iran restart development toward a nuclear weapon. Democrats are divided on whether they support (48%) or oppose (48%) conducting airstrikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, and more oppose (58%) than support (39%) sending US troops to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities. A majority of Independents support airstrikes (58%) but narrowly oppose (53%, 45% support) ground troops.

Republicans are willing to use the full spectrum of US military capabilities to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Majorities support conducting airstrikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities (78%) and sending US troops to destroy those nuclear facilities (67%). This likely reflects the greater tendency among Republicans than Democrats or Independents to classify Iran as an adversary and its nuclear program as a critical threat to the United States. Republicans are also more inclined to say the United States does not use military tools enough to accomplish its foreign policy goals (40% Republicans, 22% Democrats, 24% Independents).



Conclusion

In Washington, lawmakers' views seem to be generally in line with those of the constituents they represent. Most members of both parties generally agree that diplomatic and economic tools would be the preferred way to slow Iran's nuclear development, but they [disagree on the specific structure](#) of a new agreement between the countries. Democratic lawmakers will have significant challenges ahead, including from their Republican colleagues, who continue to advocate for a new deal that would lengthen or eliminate "sunset clauses" on nuclear-activity limitations and address Tehran's sponsorship of terrorism and ballistic missile program. But the Biden administration will first have to work with allies to try to persuade Iran to return to compliance with the original deal.

Methodology

The [2021 Chicago Council Survey](#), a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy, is the latest effort in a series of wide-ranging surveys on American attitudes toward US foreign policy. The 2021 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

The survey was conducted July 7–26, 2021, among a representative, probability-based national sample of 2,086 adults. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/- 2.33 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.1817. 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 usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?"

The survey was conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs, a polling, social science, and market research firm in Palo Alto, California, using a randomly selected sample of Ipsos's large-scale nationwide research panel, KnowledgePanel® (KP). KnowledgePanel is the first and largest online research panel that is representative of the entire US population. Ipsos recruits panel members using address-based sampling (ABS) methods to ensure full coverage of all households in the nation.