

Liberal and Moderate Democrats: How Different Are They in Views on Foreign Policy?

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Progressive and moderate Democrats have struggled to find agreement on a range of issues during the Biden administration. Fiscal policy, voting rights, and immigration have all been contentious, but the divisions have been most glaring in the negotiations over the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill passed in November and the larger Build Back Better “social infrastructure” bill.

With these domestic policy divisions in the limelight, foreign policy differences among Democrats have been less visible. Public opinion among supporters of the moderate and liberal wings of the party suggests that divisions are sharpest on issues around American exceptionalism, climate change, defense spending, and immigration. While the growing polarization between Democrats and Republicans has received ample attention in the media and in policy discussions, these data also show that some key policy issues have the potential to disrupt intraparty Democratic unity, including when to militarily intervene on behalf of allied nations.

Key Findings

- In the 2021 Chicago Council Survey, 60 percent of self-identified Democrats say they are at least slightly liberal versus 40 percent total who say they are either moderate (33%) or conservative (7%). Over the past 17 years, an increasing proportion of Democrats identify as liberals.
- There are sharp differences on the idea of American exceptionalism. A majority of moderate Democrats (66%) believe the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world. Liberal Democrats are more apt to believe the United States is no greater than other countries (58%).
- A majority of moderates believe maintaining US military superiority is a very important goal (55%) compared to just a third of liberals (31%).

- While moderate Democrats are also more likely to favor defense spending increases, liberal Democrats are more likely to favor using US troops to help defend allies and partners under threat.
- This might be related to the finding that liberal Democrats (65%) are more likely than moderate Democrats (39%) to think that promoting and defending human rights in other countries is a very important foreign policy goal.
- Concern about climate change has been growing among both sets of Democrats, but it is more of a burning concern for liberals (88% a very important foreign policy goal) than for moderates (64%).
- Across the board, few Democrats think limiting immigration should be a top priority. But liberals (65%) are more likely than moderates (36%) to support an unconditional pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

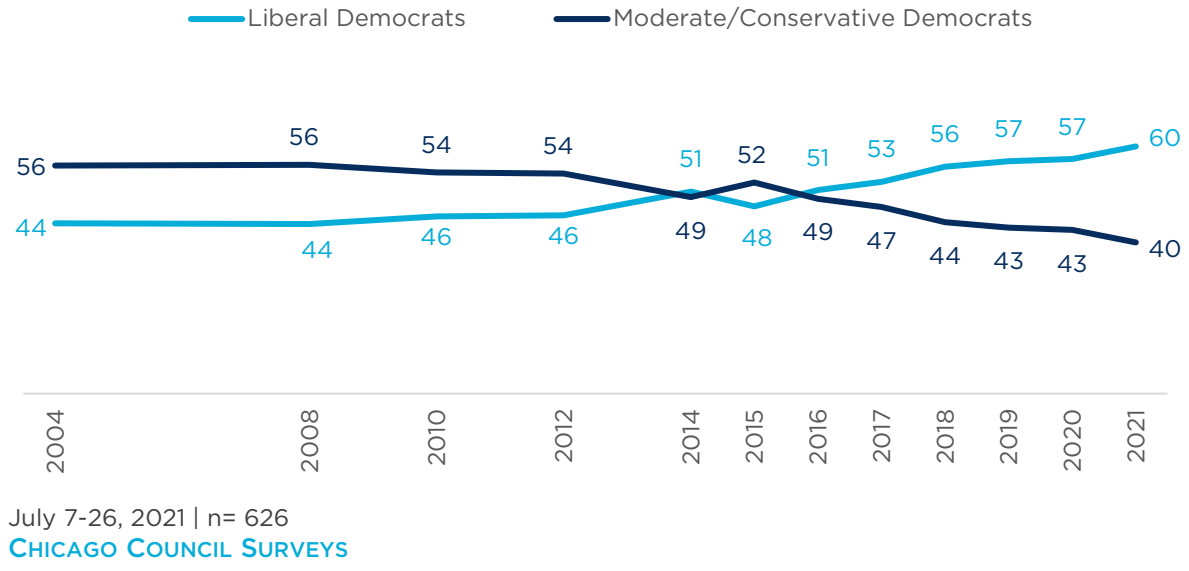
Liberal and Moderate Democrats—Who Are They?

From 2004 to 2012, the majority of Democrats in the Council’s polling identified as moderate or conservative to some degree. After a period of back and forth from 2014 to 2016, a steadily increasing majority of Democrats in the American public are now identifying as liberal. At the same time, liberal elected officials in Congress have been growing in number and in their prominence in US political discourse. As this ideologic division increases, it becomes essential to determine the differences in policy preferences and priorities within the party faithful. While party leadership is still mostly moderate, both ideological wings of the party will need to be incorporated and represented if the Democrats hope to find success in the 2022 midterm elections and beyond.

In the 2021 Chicago Council Survey, 60 percent of self-described Democrats identified themselves as being slightly liberal (17%), liberal (33%), or extremely liberal (9%), whereas 40 percent identified as being moderate (33%) or conservative (7%) to some degree.

Ideological Divisions among Democrats

Self-described Democrats who identified as slightly liberal, liberal, or extremely liberal and self-described Democrats who identified as moderate, slightly conservative, conservative, or extremely conservative. (%)



For the purposes of this analysis, we refer to the combination of self-described moderates and conservatives as “moderate Democrats.” Moderate and conservative Democrats are grouped together in this analysis because their policy positions tend to align more closely with each other than they do with the positions of self-identified liberal Democrats. While liberal Democrats are much more likely than moderate Democrats to identify as strong Democrats (66% vs. 32%), they voted in a greater majority for Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election (88% liberals, 72% moderates).

Liberal Democrats in this sample are, on average, younger, more educated, and more likely to self-identify as upper-middle or upper class than moderate Democrats. The majority of liberal Democrats are white (57%), whereas moderate Democrats are a more racially diverse group (37% white, 28% Hispanic, 27% black). Moderates are slightly more likely than liberals to live in the South. There is little difference between liberal and moderate Democrats in terms of urban versus rural residence or gender (see appendix).

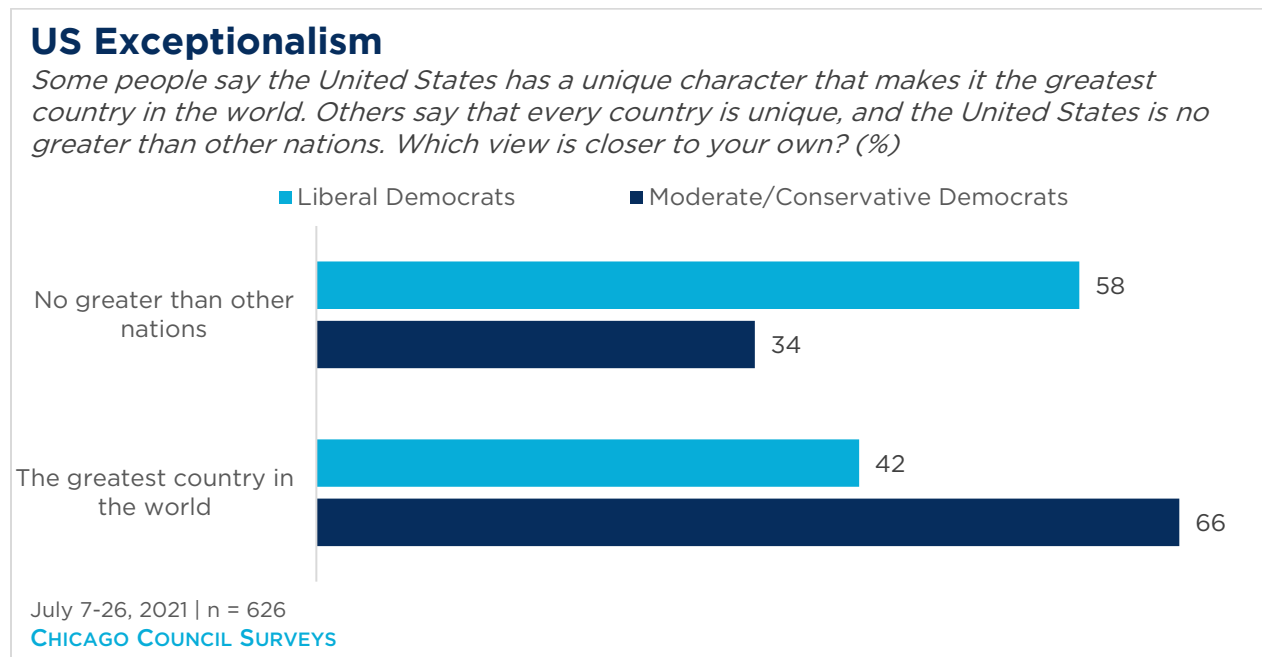
Agreement on US Role in the World, but Differences on American Exceptionalism

Across the Democratic spectrum, supporters favor an active US international role and shared international leadership, and they believe the United States should play a

leading role in solving a variety of international problems. Majorities of liberal (74%) and moderate (60%) Democrats believe it will be best for the future of the country to take an active role in world affairs. However, neither group wants the United States to lead alone, with over three-quarters of both liberal (79%) and moderate (76%) Democrats preferring that the United States share its leadership role with other countries. (See appendix)

Democrats, whether on the liberal or moderate end of the scale, also favor US participation in international treaties and organizations. This support remains consistent for agreements addressing a range of international issues. For example, majorities of both Democratic subgroups support the agreement on the International Criminal Court (liberal Democrats 84%, moderate Democrats 70%) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (liberal Democrats 81%, moderate Democrats 68%). (See appendix)

Despite a shared sense that the United States works best internationally when it does so with other countries, there are sharp differences over the idea of American exceptionalism. Where 66 percent of moderate Democrats believe the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world, liberal Democrats are more apt to believe the United States is no greater than other countries (58%). This difference may also be partially attributable to age and education differences between the Democratic subgroups. Liberal Democrats are, on average, younger and more educated, and support for the idea of American exceptionalism is lower among those demographics regardless of ideology.

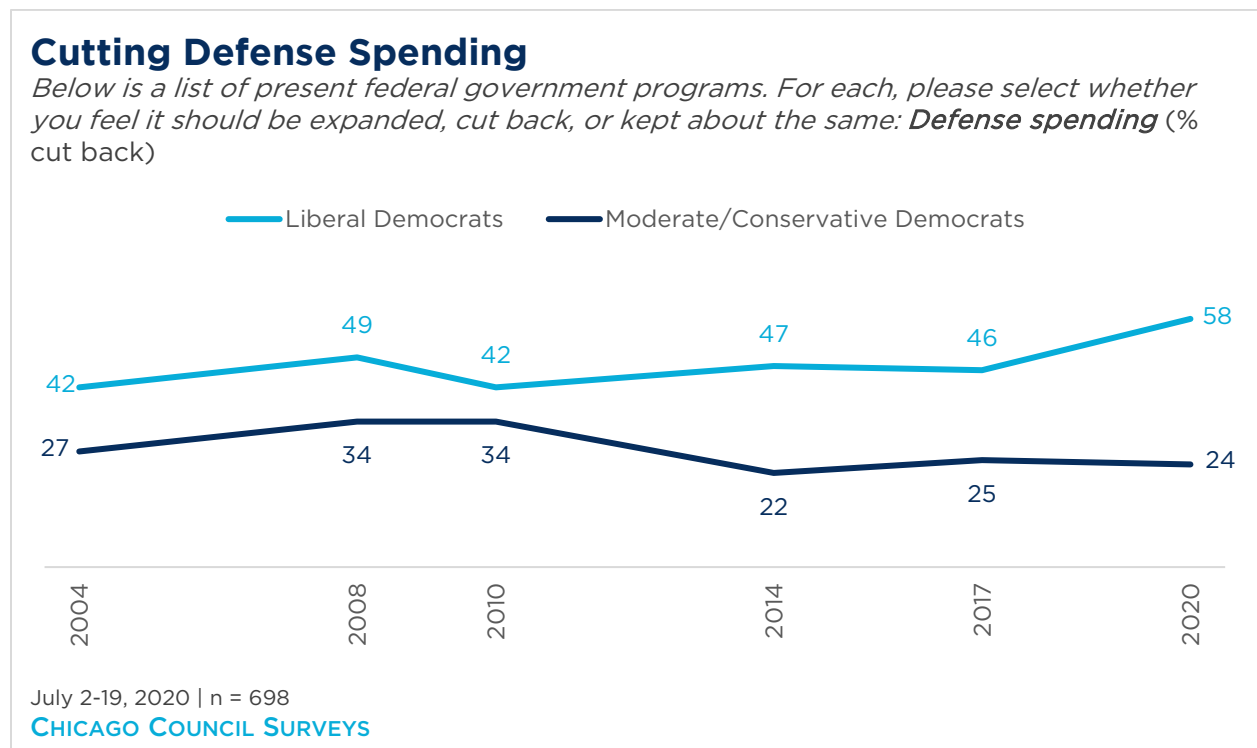


Moderates More Likely to Favor Maintaining US Military Superiority . . .

A defining difference between liberals and moderates is in their views toward items relating to the US military.

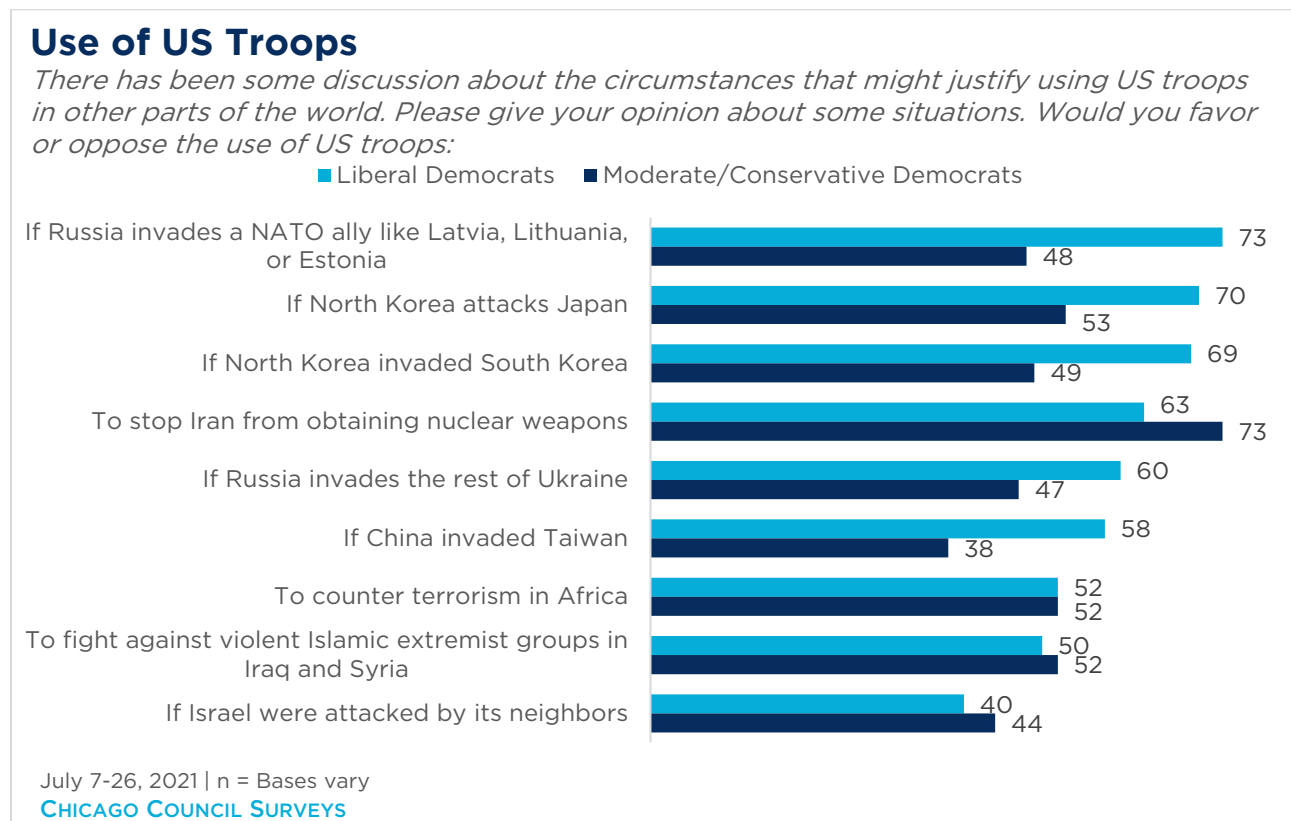
Moderate Democrats are more inclined than liberals to support actions that fund and operationalize the US military edge above other countries. Two-thirds of moderate Democrats (66%) say maintaining US military superiority is a crucial factor for maintaining US influence abroad, compared to 41 percent of liberals. A majority of moderates also say maintaining US military superiority is a very important goal (55%), compared to just a third of liberals (31%).

In 2020, when asked whether federal defense spending should be expanded, cut back, or kept about the same, a majority of liberal Democrats preferred to see the budget cut back (58%). Moderate or conservative Democrats were more evenly split on their preferences, with a plurality of 40 percent opting to keep defense spending at about the same level (vs. 24% cut back). Here, as with many other trends, the views of these ideological subgroups are diverging. The portion of liberal Democrats favoring cutting the defense budget has increased in recent years, while the portion of moderate Democrats favoring that option has decreased slightly.



... But Liberals Are More Willing to Use US Troops to Defend Allies

Moderate Democrats may be more positive toward defense spending, but when push comes to shove, liberal Democrats are more likely to back US actions to help defend allies and partners under threat. This is true for a number of examples, including if North Korea invades South Korea (69% vs. 49%) or attacks Japan (70% vs. 53%), if Russia invades a Baltic NATO ally (73% vs. 48%), if Russia invades the rest of Ukraine (60% vs. 47%) and if China invades Taiwan (58% vs. 38%).



This increased willingness among liberal Democrats to commit troops to defend allies may be due to the nature of the threats these allies face. Two-thirds of liberal Democrats (65%) classify promoting and defending human rights in other countries as a very important foreign policy goal for the United States, compared to only 39 percent of moderate Democrats. Russia, North Korea, and China, the countries that liberals and moderates are most divided on whether to commit troops against, are all countries that regularly face accusations of [serious human rights violations](#). While less supportive of defense spending and maintaining a large military in general, liberal Democrats may be more willing to defend allies in these situations because of concerns about the human rights implications of invasions by these countries.

Liberals More Alarmed than Moderates about Climate Change

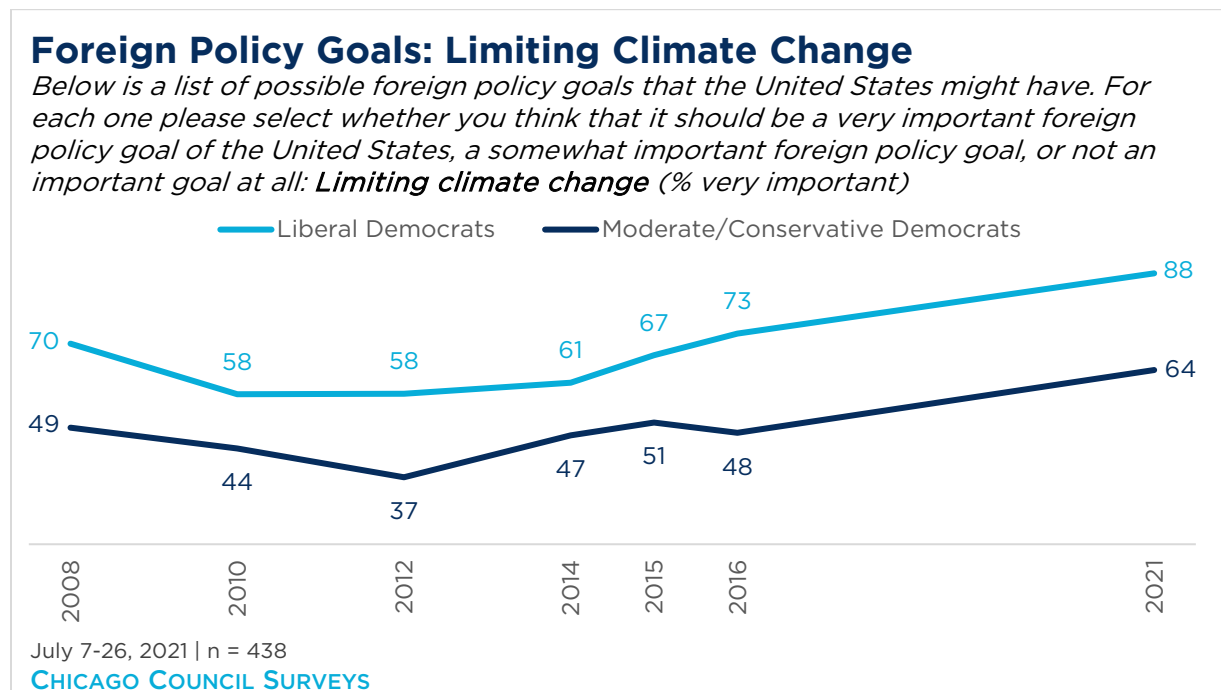
Senator Joe Manchin’s (D-WV) recent objections to the climate measures in the Build Back Better Act lead commentators in Washington to [frame the challenges](#) facing it

as ideological differences between liberal and moderate Democrats. As the bill gained the support of the 49 other Democratic senators, it quickly became clear that climate change is a priority that spans the ideological wings of the Democratic Party and that Manchin is simply an outlier from a coal-producing state.

Among the public, Democrats across the ideological spectrum are similarly supportive of efforts to limit climate change, although support is higher among liberal Democrats. While nearly nine in ten liberal Democrats (88%) say limiting climate change is a very important goal for US foreign policy—making this the most important goal among liberal Democrats—a smaller majority of moderate Democrats agree (64%). For moderate Democrats, a number of other goals, including preventing cyberattacks (82%) and future pandemics (79%) rate higher in priority.

Top Seven Foreign Policy Goals		
<i>Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: (% very important)</i>		
Liberal Democrats	Rank	Moderate Democrats
Limiting climate change 88%	1	Preventing cyberattacks 82%
Preventing and combating global pandemics 87%	2	Preventing and combating global pandemics 79%
Preventing cyberattacks 82%	3	Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons 76%
Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons 78%	4	Protecting the jobs of American workers 75%
Protecting the jobs of American workers 70%	5	Combating international terrorism 74%
Combating world hunger 69%	6	Limiting climate change 64%
Promoting and defending human rights in other countries 65%	7	Improving America's standing in the world 60%

Concern about climate change has been growing among both sets of Democrats, both in terms of limiting climate change as a foreign policy goal and climate change as a critical threat. Since 2012, the portion of liberal Democrats identifying limiting climate change as very important has increased by 30 points (58% to 88%), and the portion of moderate Democrats saying the same has increased by 27 points (37% to 64%). Similarly, from 2012 to 2020, the portion of Democrats classifying climate change as a critical threat to the United States rose from 53 percent to 80 percent among liberals and 46 percent to 69 percent among moderates. When viewed together, these trends show a clear and major shift among both liberal and moderate Democrats over the last ten years in how they think about climate change.

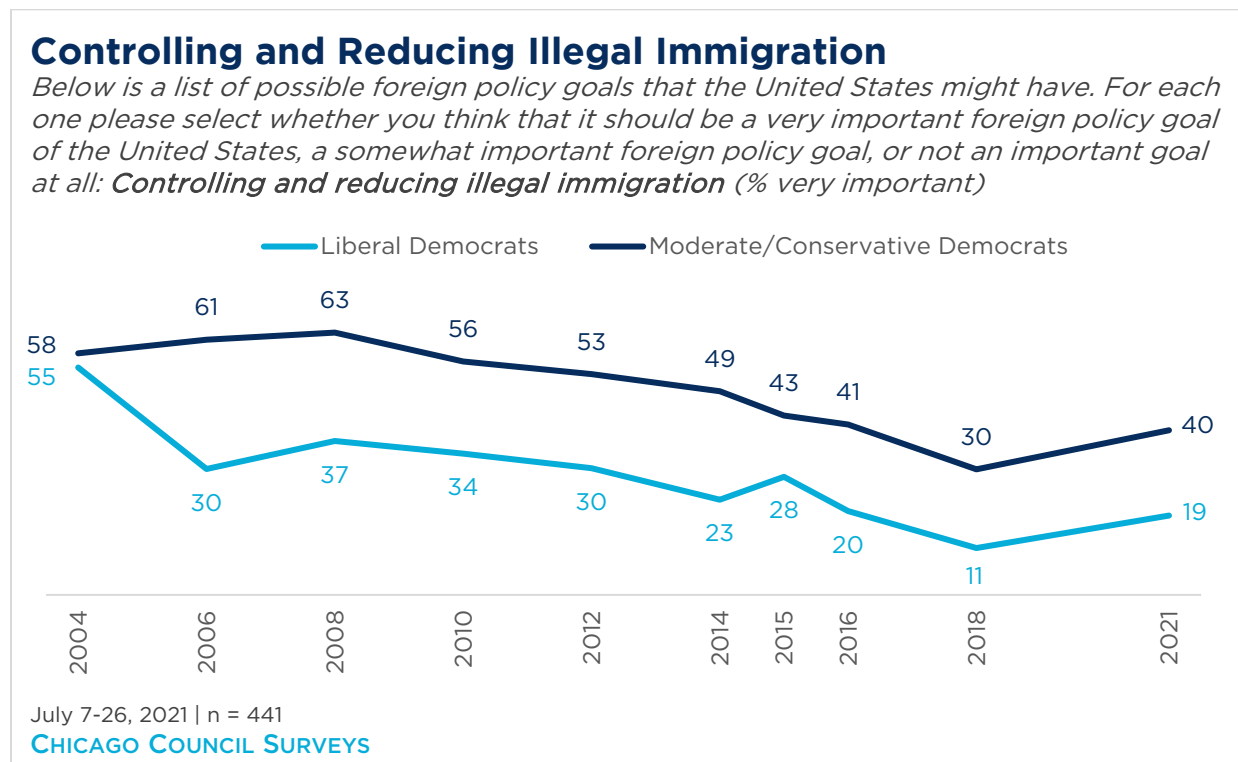


In the same vein, majorities of both types of Democrats think the United States should play a leading international role on the issue of climate change (92% liberal vs. 67% moderate) and also favor US participation in the Paris agreement “that calls for countries to collectively reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases” (93% liberal vs. 79% moderate). Matching their focus on limiting climate change as a very important goal for the United States, liberal Democrats affirm these views in larger majorities.

Democrats Diverging on Specifics of a Path to Citizenship

Over the last fifteen years, the Democratic Party has generally become more pro-immigration, both at the public and elite levels. President Bill Clinton’s 1996 [party platform](#) called for drastically increased border security and declared “we cannot tolerate illegal immigration and we must stop it.” Such sentiment would likely be unrecognizable to most Democrats today. In both the liberal and moderate Democratic camps, the portion of the public believing that controlling and reducing illegal immigration is a very important foreign policy goal has declined significantly

since the Council first asked the question in 2004. Today, only one in five liberal Democrats (19%) and two in five moderate Democrats (40%) hold this view.

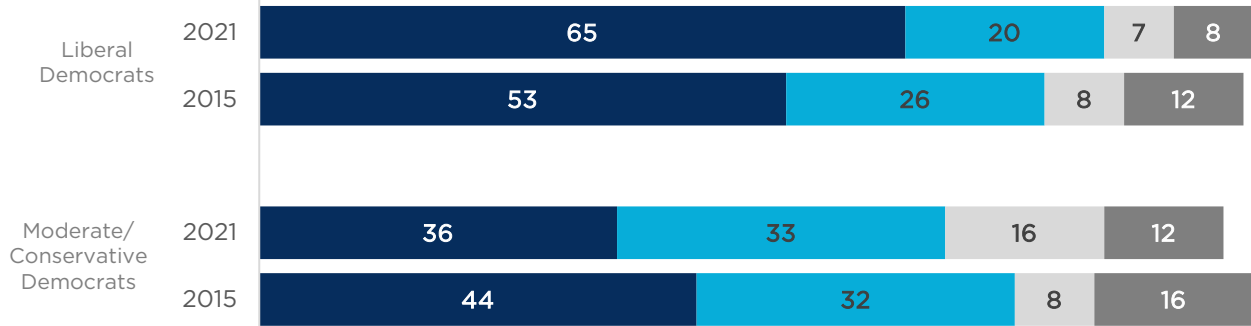


However, there is still some division between the different ideological wings of the party when it comes to immigration policy. For example, the portion of liberals identifying controlling and reducing illegal immigration as a very important foreign policy goal has declined more precipitously than the portion among moderates. Liberals and moderates are also moving in different directions when it comes to handling those illegal immigrants already working in the United States. While both liberal and moderate Democrats favor policies that would grant a path to citizenship for these immigrants, liberals have become more supportive of providing an unconditional path (65%, up from 53% in 2015), while moderates have become less likely to support such a plan (36%, down from 44% in 2015).

Path to Citizenship for Illegal Immigrants

When it comes to immigration, which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants who are currently working in the United States? (%)

- They should be allowed to stay in their jobs and to apply for US citizenship
- They should be allowed to stay in their jobs and to eventually apply for US citizenship only if they pay a penalty and wait a number of years
- They should be allowed to stay in their jobs with work permits, but not apply for US citizenship
- They should be required to leave their jobs and leave the United States



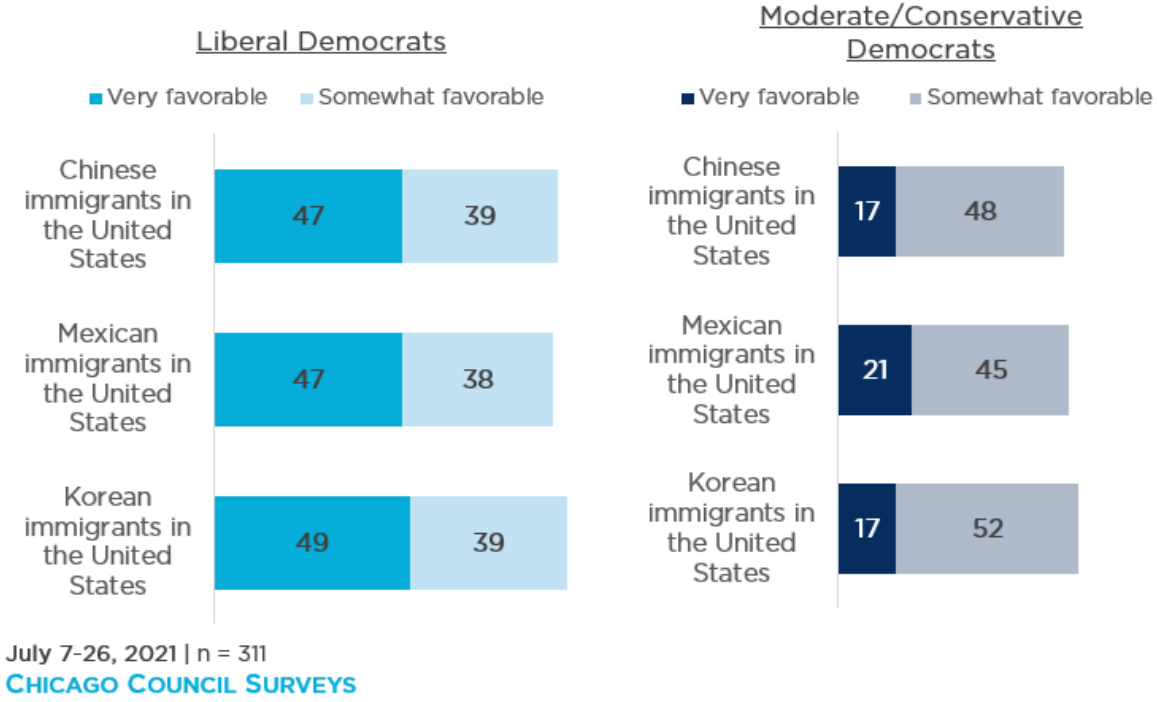
July 7-26, 2021 | n= 311

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Liberals are also more likely than other Democrats to express very favorable views of Chinese, Mexican, and Korean immigrants, though all Democrats express net positive views. To some extent, this difference in degree of support for immigrants among the public reflects views at the Democratic leadership level. One notable example of this came in June 2021, when Vice President Kamala Harris, who is considered by most to be a moderate, gave a speech in which she addressed migrants considering coming to the United States saying, “Do not come. Do not come. The United States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our borders.” Immediately, prominent liberal Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY) took to Twitter, calling Harris’s comments “disappointing” and noting not only that seeking asylum at the border is a legal way to come to the United States but also that the United States has a responsibility to take in Central American migrants after playing a large role in destabilizing the region.

Democratic Views of Various Groups

Do you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable view of the following people: (%)

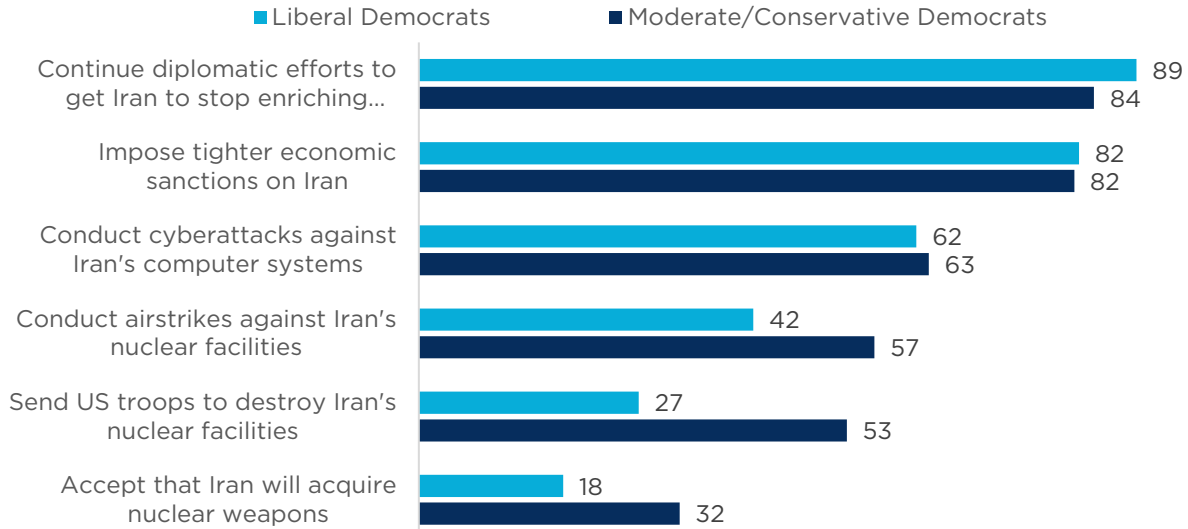


Differences on Middle East Policy

The data show that liberals and moderates also differ on US policy toward Iran and Israel. While liberals are more willing to use force in the previous scenarios that include an allied country, moderate Democrats may be more willing to use force if the United States faces a direct threat from Iran. According to 2020 Council data, moderate and conservative Democrats (59%) were significantly more likely than liberal Democrats (35%) to classify Iran’s nuclear program as a critical threat to the United States. If Iran restarts development toward a nuclear weapon, at least a narrow majority of moderates supports airstrikes against (57%) and sending US troops to destroy (53%) Iranian nuclear facilities. But only minorities of liberals agree with these approaches (42% airstrikes, 27% troops).

Responses to Iran's Nuclear Program

If Iran restarts development toward a nuclear weapon, would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose the United States taking each of the following actions: (% net support)



July 7-26, 2021 | n = 315

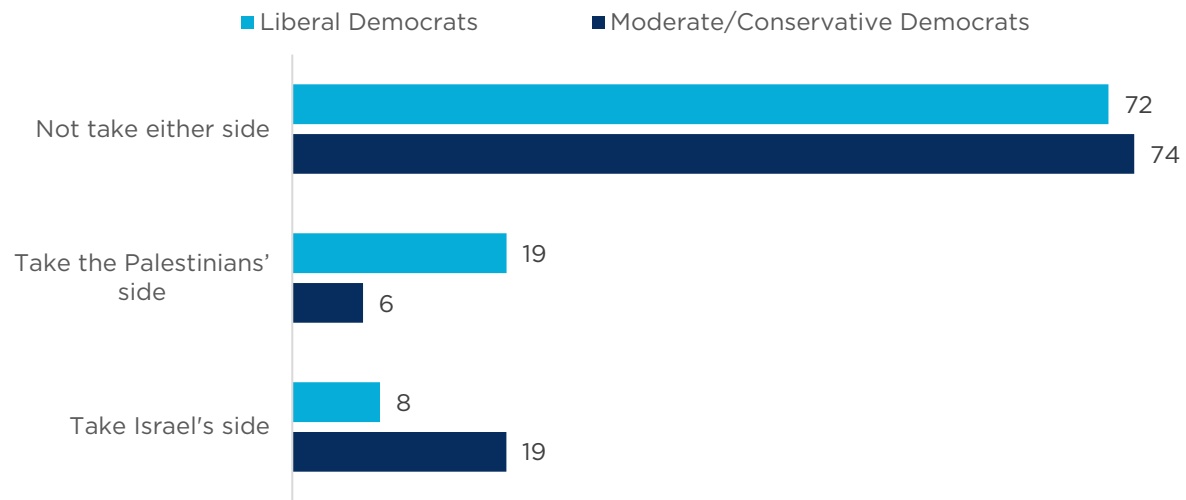
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US policy toward Israel is becoming a prickly issue for some Democrats in Congress. A small but vocal group of progressive members of Congress have begun to accuse other Democrats of being too unconditional in their support of Israel. Meanwhile, the majority of congressional Democrats, as well as President Biden, have expressed steadfast support for Israel. Democratic supporters among the public believe the United States should take neither side in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians (72% liberals, 74% moderates).

But among the rest (those who think the United States should take a side), liberal and moderates hold nearly opposite views. More liberals would prefer that the United States take the Palestinians' side (19%) than Israel's side (8%), with support shifting significantly away from Israel and toward the Palestinians in recent years. Conversely, more moderates would support siding with Israel (19%) than with the Palestinians (6%), displaying levels of support that are fairly consistent with recent years.

Response to Middle East Conflict

In the Middle East conflict, do you think the United States should: (%)



July 7-26, 2021 | n = 626

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Conclusion

Differences within the Democratic Party have become very clear in the last presidential election cycle and have only become more prominent in the White House's attempts to corral Democratic votes for President Biden's signature domestic policies. On foreign policy, the divergences have thus far been more muted. Both ideological camps within the party want to see their country lead internationally, take action to address climate change, and maintain a military presence around the world. And yet, there are some key issues—climate change, immigration, and US military superiority and use of force—where disagreements could disrupt Democratic unity. While senior party leadership and a sizable portion of the Democratic base remains moderate, an increasing share of Democrats, and particularly young Democrats, identify as liberal. This means that progressive perspectives will continue to influence the direction of policy. Democratic unity could be tested further as the Biden administration responds to today's geopolitical challenges from Russia, Iran, and China, given the differences in perspectives in how strongly to project US influence abroad.

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 from 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?"

Additional results come from the 2020 Chicago Council Survey, which was conducted from July 2-19, 2020, among a representative, probability-based national sample of 2,111 adults.

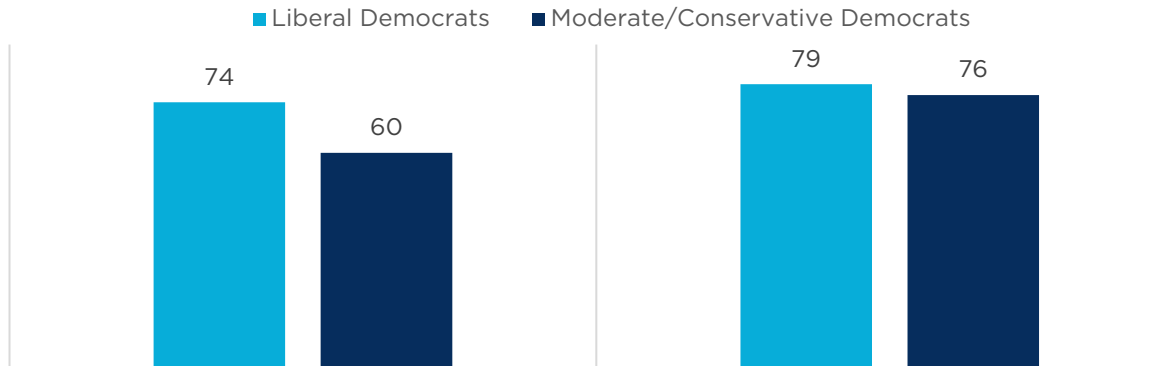
Both surveys were conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs, a polling, social science, and market research firm in Palo Alto, California, using a randomly selected sample of Ipsos's large-scale nationwide research panel, KnowledgePanel® (KP). KnowledgePanel is the first and largest online research panel that 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.

Appendix

	Liberal Democrats	Moderate Democrats
Strong Democrat	66%	32%
Not very strong Democrat	34%	68%
Voted Biden	88%	72%
Voted Trump	2%	9%
Urban	40%	44%
Suburban	49%	45%
Rural	11%	11%
Northeast	19%	13%
Midwest	20%	18%
South	30%	42%
West	30%	27%
Male	41%	44%
Female	59%	56%
Less than high school education	11%	17%
High school	18%	30%
Some college	26%	31%
Bachelor's degree or higher	45%	22%
Lower/Lower-middle class	31%	39%
Middle class	43%	43%
Upper/Upper-middle class	26%	18%
18-29	23%	17%

30-44	30%	23%
45-59	18%	28%
60+	30%	32%
White, non-Hispanic	57%	37%
Black, non-Hispanic	16%	27%
Other, non-Hispanic	8%	8%
Hispanic	17%	28%
2+ races, non-Hispanic	2%	0%

Democrats on the US Role in the World



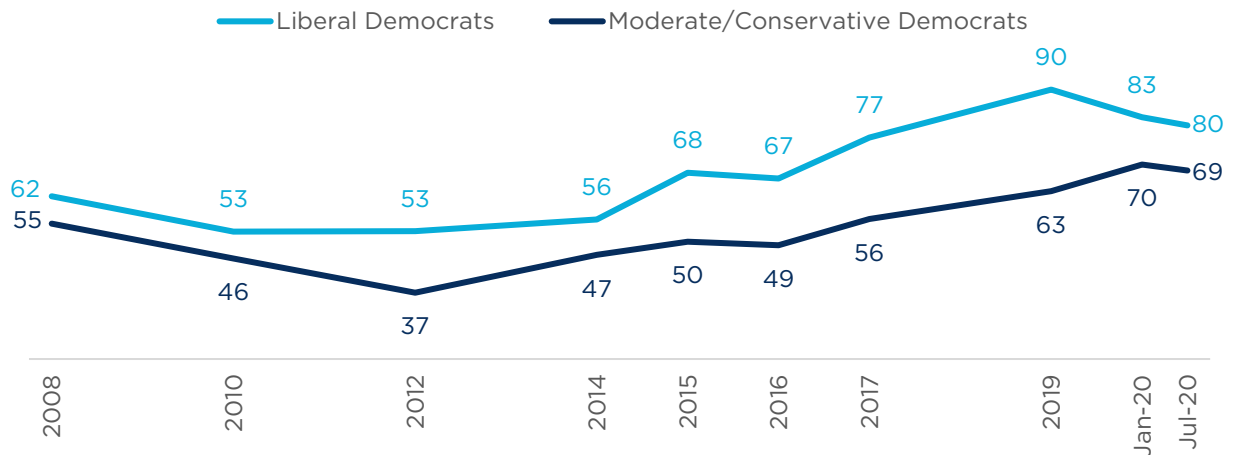
Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs? (% active part)

What kind of leadership role should the United States play in the world? Should it be the dominant leader, or should it play a shared leadership role, or should it not play any leadership role? (% shared leadership role)

July 7-26, 2021 | n=626
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Climate Change as a Threat

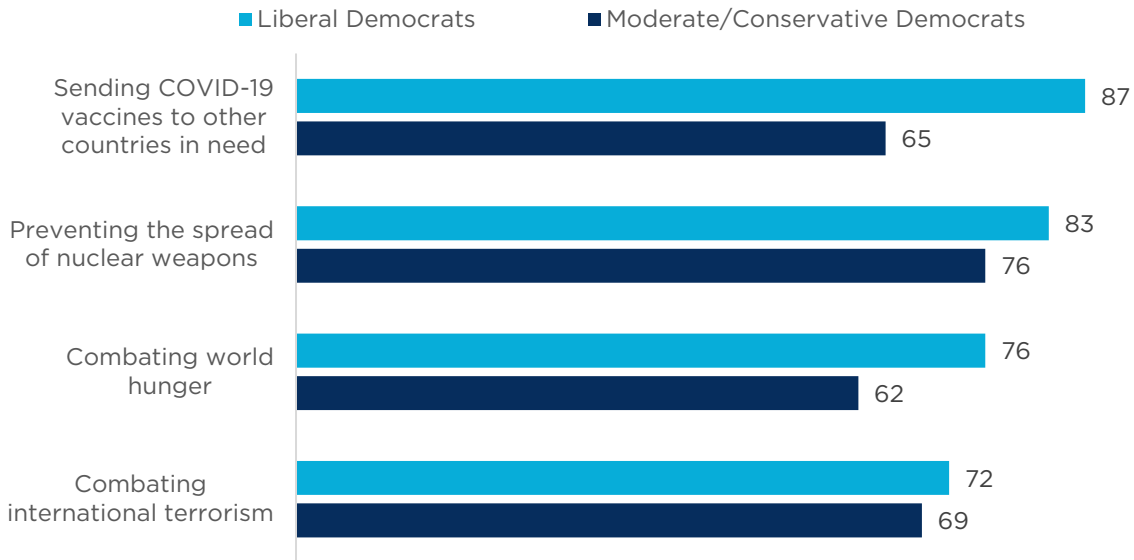
For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: **Climate change** (% critical threat)



July 2-19, 2020 | n = 547
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Leadership in International Efforts

Should the United States play a leading role, a minor role, or no role in the following international efforts: (% leading role)

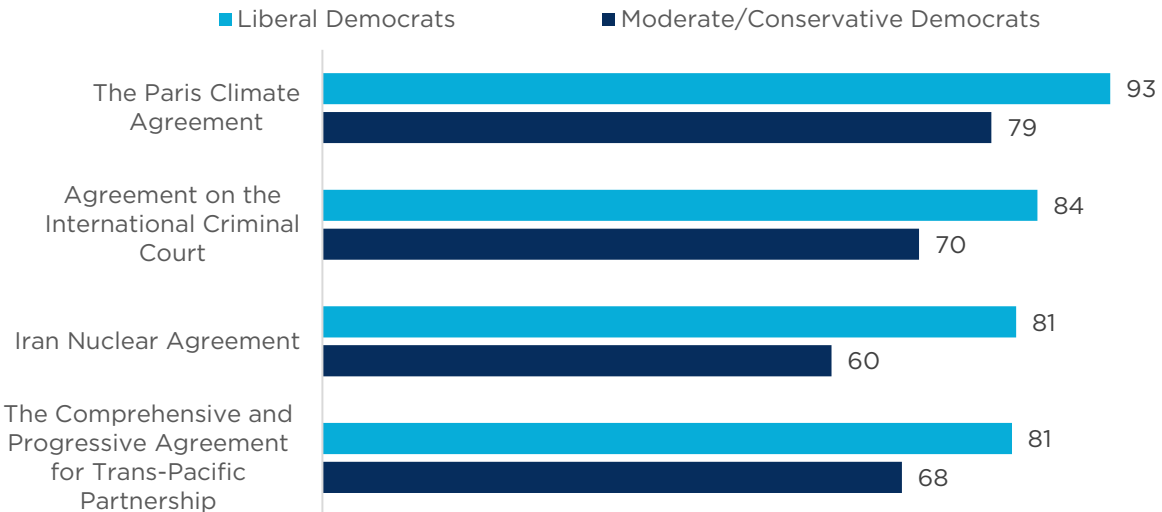


July 7-26, 2021 | n = 315

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Participation in International Agreements

Based on what you know, do you think the U.S. should or should not participate in the following international agreements? (% should participate)



July 7-26, 2021 | n = Bases vary

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