

Americans Say Weakening Democracy Is the Most Critical Threat to the United States

More than half also say the decline of democracies around the world, foreign interference in American elections, and the conflict in the Middle East pose critical threats to vital US interests.

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In their first [presidential debate](#), Democratic nominee Kamala Harris and Republican nominee Donald Trump offered their perspectives on the various domestic challenges and international conflicts facing the United States. While Trump warned viewers about the imminent threat of immigration and criticized the Biden-Harris administration's lackluster approach to China, Harris sounded alarms over abortion rights and emphasized her opponent's disregard for the rule of law and other democratic norms.

The 2024 Chicago Council Survey, fielded June 21–July 1, 2024, and a series of Chicago Council-Ipsos polls conducted in August 2024 show that Harris and Trump were largely playing to their bases as they laid out their respective policy positions. While there is bipartisan consensus on the threat posed by broad domestic issues, like weakening democracy in the United States and foreign interference in American elections, the data also finds stark partisan differences in Americans' perceptions of climate change, immigration, and foreign adversaries.

Key Findings

- Americans are most likely to say weakening democracy in the United States poses a critical threat to its vital interests in the next 10 years (67%), but they also express concern about foreign interference (54%) in and political violence (49%) around the upcoming presidential election.
- Five in 10 Americans (52%) say the war between Israel and Hamas escalating into a wider regional war and Iran's support for and funding

of armed groups across the Middle East pose critical threats to the vital interests of the United States in the next 10 years.

- About half of Americans say China's development as a world power (52%) and territorial ambitions (48%) pose critical threats to the United States' vital interests, while only a third (33%) say the same about economic competition from China.
- Five in 10 Americans also say Russia's war in Ukraine escalating into a wider war in Europe (52%) and its territorial ambitions (50%) pose critical threats to the vital interests of the United States.

Introduction

Despite the rise of foreign adversaries and escalation of conflicts abroad, Americans say the most critical threat to the United States lies within the belly of the beast itself: weakening democracy. At the same time, Americans from different partisan affiliations feel more threatened by different domestic issues and international challenges.

Among Republicans, immigration, terrorism, China's development, and Iran's regional network pose the greatest threats to the vital interests of the United States in 10 years. To Democrats, democratic erosion in the United States and abroad, interference in and violence around US elections, climate change, and Russia's territorial ambitions pose the most critical threats to the United States.

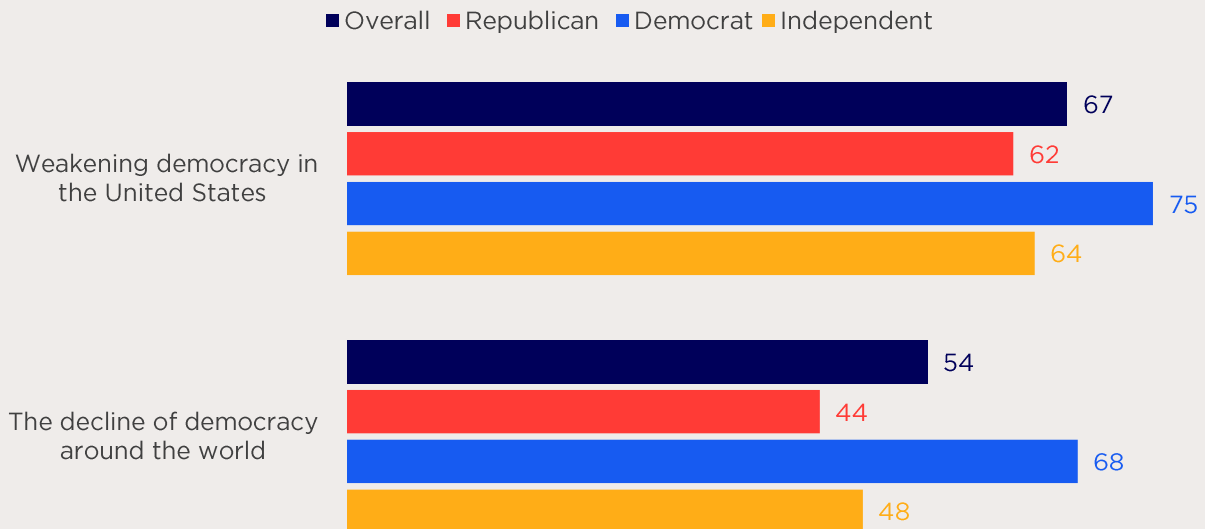
Democratic Backsliding in the United States Is the Top Threat for Americans

The health of [US democracy has declined](#) over the last decade owing in part to growing political polarization, distrust of elected officials and public institutions, and the proliferation of misinformation online. Two-thirds of Americans (67%) say weakening democracy in the United States poses a critical threat to vital US interests in the next 10 years, more than any other threat presented to respondents.

While Democrats are most likely to consider weakening democracy in the United States a critical threat (75%), substantial shares of Independents (64%) and Republicans agree (62%). However, Republicans and Democrats [blame each other for the state of democracy](#) in the United States and, aside from agreeing that its decline poses a critical threat, are unable to reach bipartisan consensus on the issue.

Critical Threat of Democratic Erosion

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests 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)



June 21-July 1, 2024 | n=2,106
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

With the exception of Republicans, who are now less likely to say that weakening democracy poses a critical threat to the United States (62%, down from 73% in 2023), the share of Americans who consider weakening democracy to be a critical threat has remained the same across the board since 2023 (see appendix table 1).

But it is not only in the United States: Americans also express concern over the state of democracies around the world, as more than half (54%, up from 43% in 2018) say the decline of democracy in other countries poses a critical threat to vital US interests. While seven in 10 Democrats (68%, up from 54%) consider global democratic backsliding a critical threat to the United States, less than half of Independents (48%, up from 36%) and Republicans (44%, up from 36%) agree. Since 2018, partisans across the board have become more wary of the threat posed by the decline of democracies around the world, but Democrats, in particular, grew the most concerned.

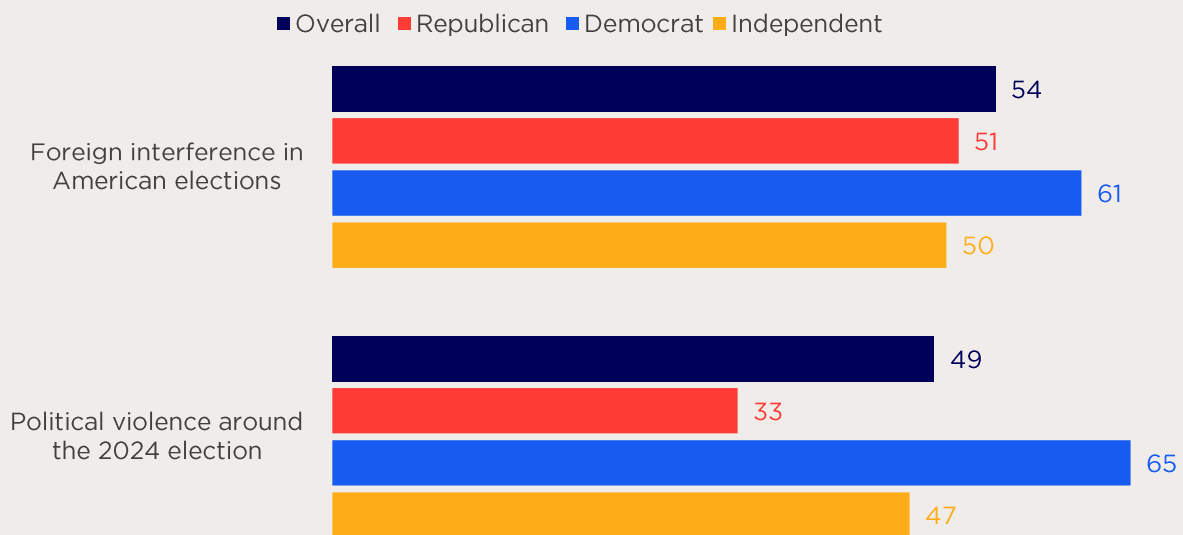
About Half of Americans Are Wary of Upcoming Presidential Elections

With the presidential election just weeks away, Americans also express concern about the threat of foreign interference in their elections. As recently

as 2022, malign actors from China, Russia, and Iran [attempted to influence the outcome of the 2022 midterm elections](#) by amplifying divisions in American society. Today, more than half of Americans (54%) say foreign interference in American elections poses a critical threat to the United States. Democrats (61%) are more likely to say so than other partisans (51% Republican, 50% Independent).

Threat of Political Violence and Foreign Interference in Elections

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests 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)



June 21-July 1, 2024 | n=2,106
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

In addition to foreign interference, Americans are also concerned about political violence surrounding the 2024 presidential election. While the [recent assassination attempts](#) against former US President Donald Trump are the latest and most brazen examples of political violence in the United States, [violence has long plagued American politics](#).

Prior to the assassination attempts against Trump, nearly half of Americans (49%) viewed political violence around the 2024 election as a critical threat to the United States, but only a third of Republicans saw it as such (33%). By contrast, two-thirds of Democrats (65%) and almost half of Independents (47%) saw political violence around the election as a critical threat.

Climate, Immigration, and International Terrorism Continue to Divide Americans along Partisan Lines

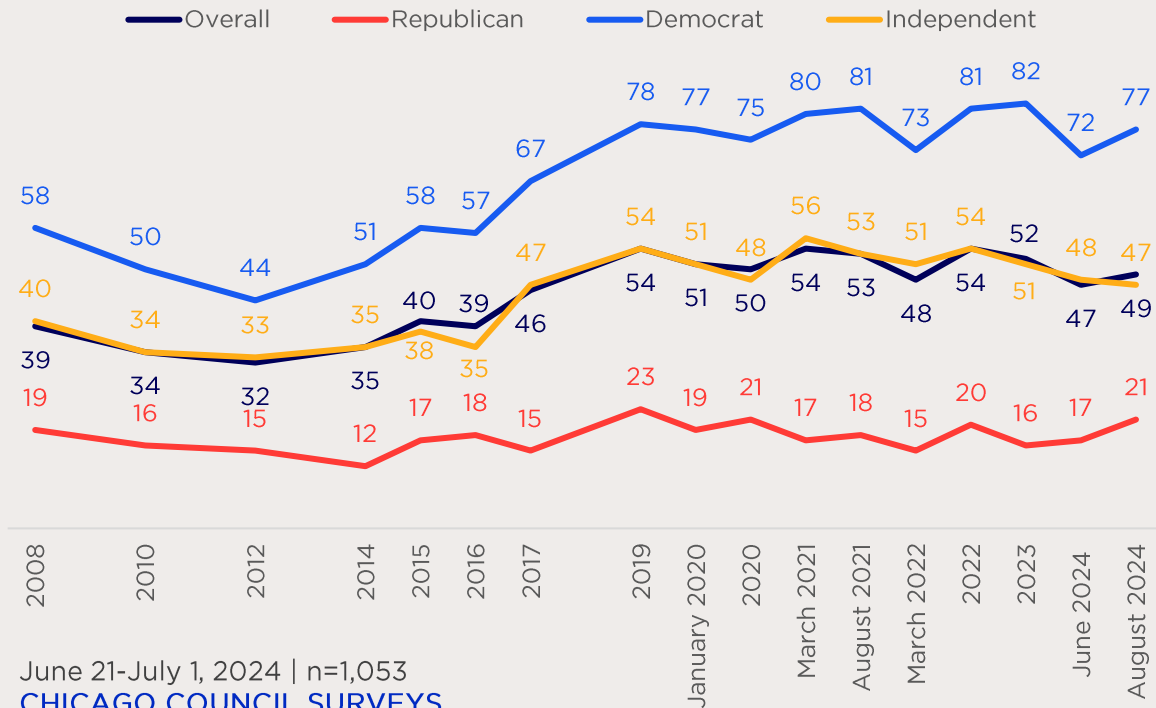
From wildfires and droughts to hurricanes and floods, climate change continues to devastate communities across the United States, with [Hurricanes Helene and Milton's destruction of the Southeast](#) being the latest examples. Yet climate change remains a highly divisive and polarizing issue among Americans, half of whom (49%) believe it poses a critical threat to the vital interests of the United States in 10 years.

Among Republicans, climate change is not widely considered a critical threat to the United States (21%) and instead, a plurality (44%) say it is not an important threat at all. On the other hand, more than three-quarters of Democrats (77%) and nearly half of Independents (47%) consider it to be a critical threat to vital US interests in 10 years.

Although Republicans and Democrats have long been divided in their perception of the threat posed by climate change, the share of Republicans that consider it to be a critical threat has remained relatively unchanged since the Chicago Council first started asking about it in 2008. By contrast, the share of Democrats who view climate change a critical threat has grown significantly over the last decade, reaching its highest level in 2023 (82%).

Critical Threat of Climate Change

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests 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: **Climate change** (% critical threat)

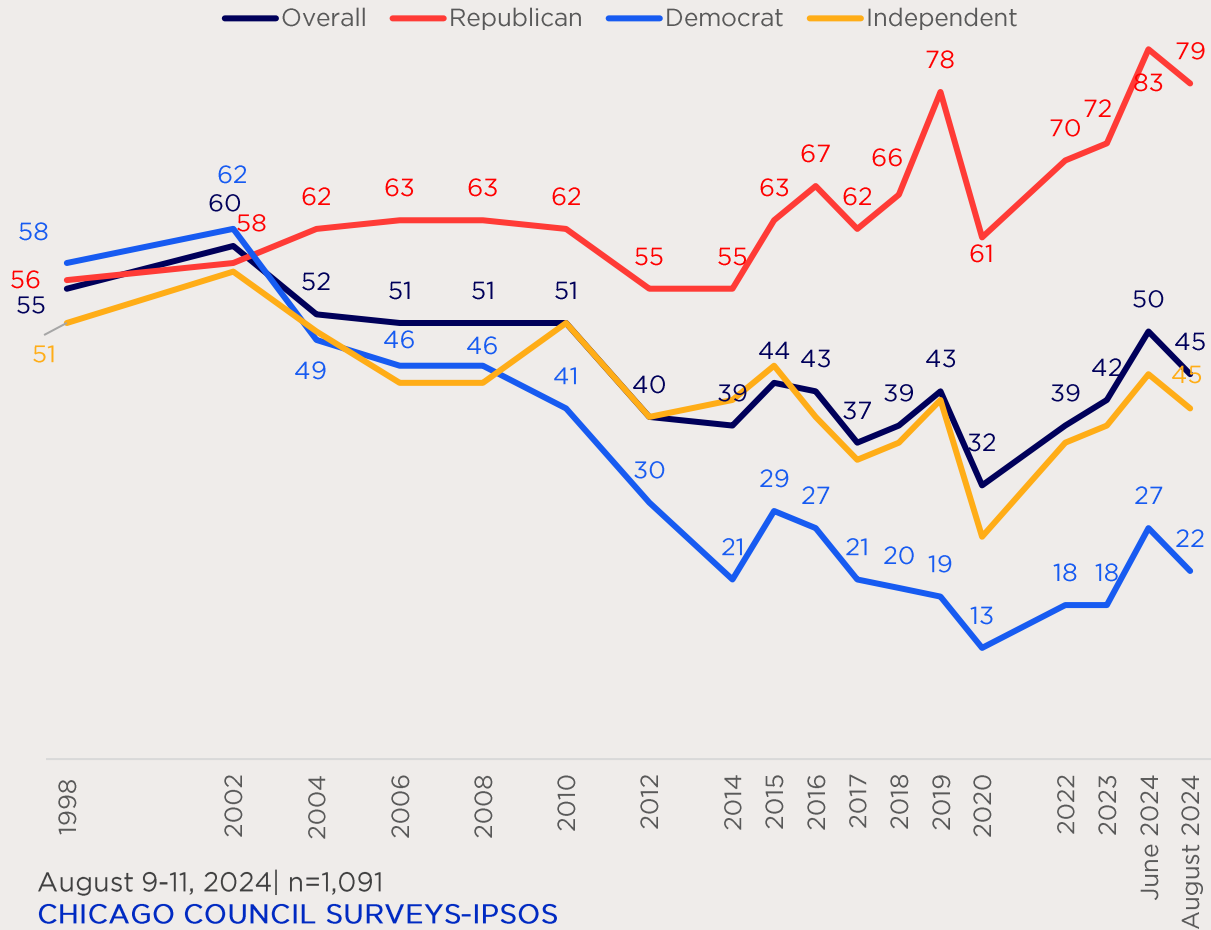


June 21-July 1, 2024 | n=1,053
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Republicans and Democrats are similarly divided on the issue of immigration, despite it being broadly designated as one of the [most important policy priorities](#) in the upcoming presidential election. Less than half of Americans (45%) overall say large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States pose a critical threat to vital US interests, down from 50 percent in June 2024, the highest level recorded by the Council since 2010. Among partisans, nearly eight in 10 Republicans (79%, down from 83% in June, an all-time high) consider it a critical threat, while only two in 10 Democrats (22%, down from 27% in June) agree. By contrast, Independents are less polarized, with four in 10 (44%) considering it a critical threat. This partisan divide over immigration has grown to a difference of 57 percentage points in the last two decades.

Critical Threat of Immigration

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests 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. **Large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the US** (% critical threat)

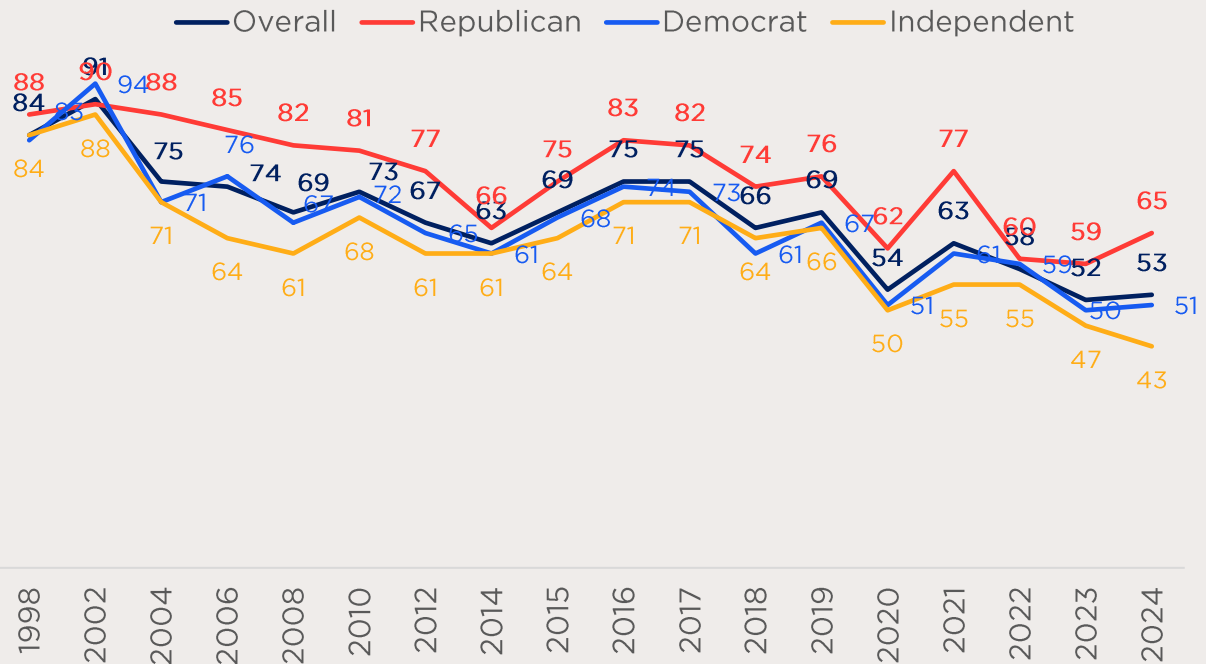


Republicans are also more likely to say that international terrorism poses a critical threat to vital US interests (65%) than other partisans (51% Democrat, 43% Independent). However, compared to climate change and immigration, the partisan division in the perception of threat posed by international terrorism is much narrower.

Americans are also less concerned now about terrorism than they were in the past. Today, just over half of Americans (53%) say international terrorism poses a critical threat to the United States, continuing a decline from the post-September 11 high of 91 percent found in the 2002 Chicago Council Survey.

Critical Threat Posed by International Terrorism

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



June 21-July 1, 2024 | n=2,106
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Americans Grow More Fearful of Wider War in the Middle East After Wave of Assassinations

Despite sustained efforts by four successive presidents to pivot away from the Middle East, the United States has become deeply embroiled in Israel’s multifront proxy war with Iran and its [network of nonstate allies](#). Most recently, the [Israeli invasion of Lebanon](#) and [assassination of Hassan Nasrallah](#), the secretary general of Hezbollah, have pushed Israel a step closer to a direct confrontation with Iran and a full-scale regional war.

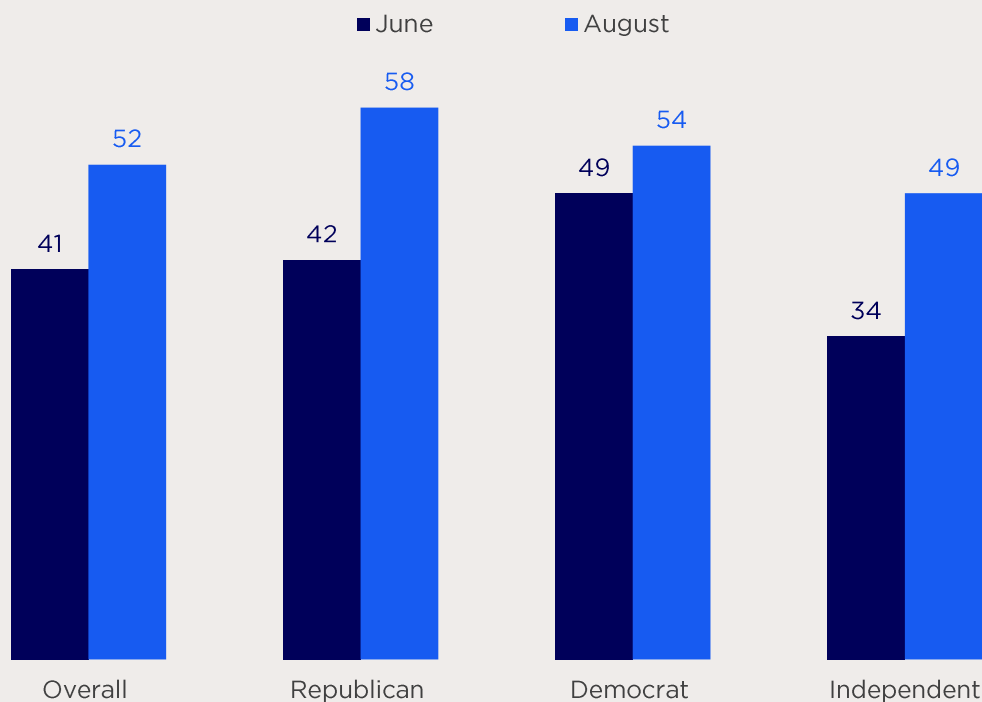
An August 9–11, 2024, Chicago Council-Ipsos poll found that Americans, and particularly Republicans, have grown more threatened by the possibility of the conflict between Israel and Hamas escalating into a wider war in the

Middle East. Prior to the [assassinations of two senior officials in Hamas and Hezbollah](#) in July, four in 10 Americans (41%) said a regional escalation posed a critical threat to the United States' vital interests. At the time, Democrats were the most fearful of a wider war (49%), while less than half of Republicans (42%) and Independents (34%) viewed it as a critical threat.

However, tensions in the Middle East reached a boiling point in July, after Hezbollah launched a major retaliatory attack on Israel and [the two exchanged heavy fire](#) in one of the largest cross-border clashes in decades. Now, five in 10 Americans (52%) say the war between Israel and Hamas escalating into a wider war in the Middle East poses a critical threat to vital US interests. Republicans have become the wariest of a regional escalation (58%), and in two months, Independents grew 15 percentage points more threatened by it (49%); slightly more than half of Democrats (54%) agree.

Critical Threat of Middle East Escalation

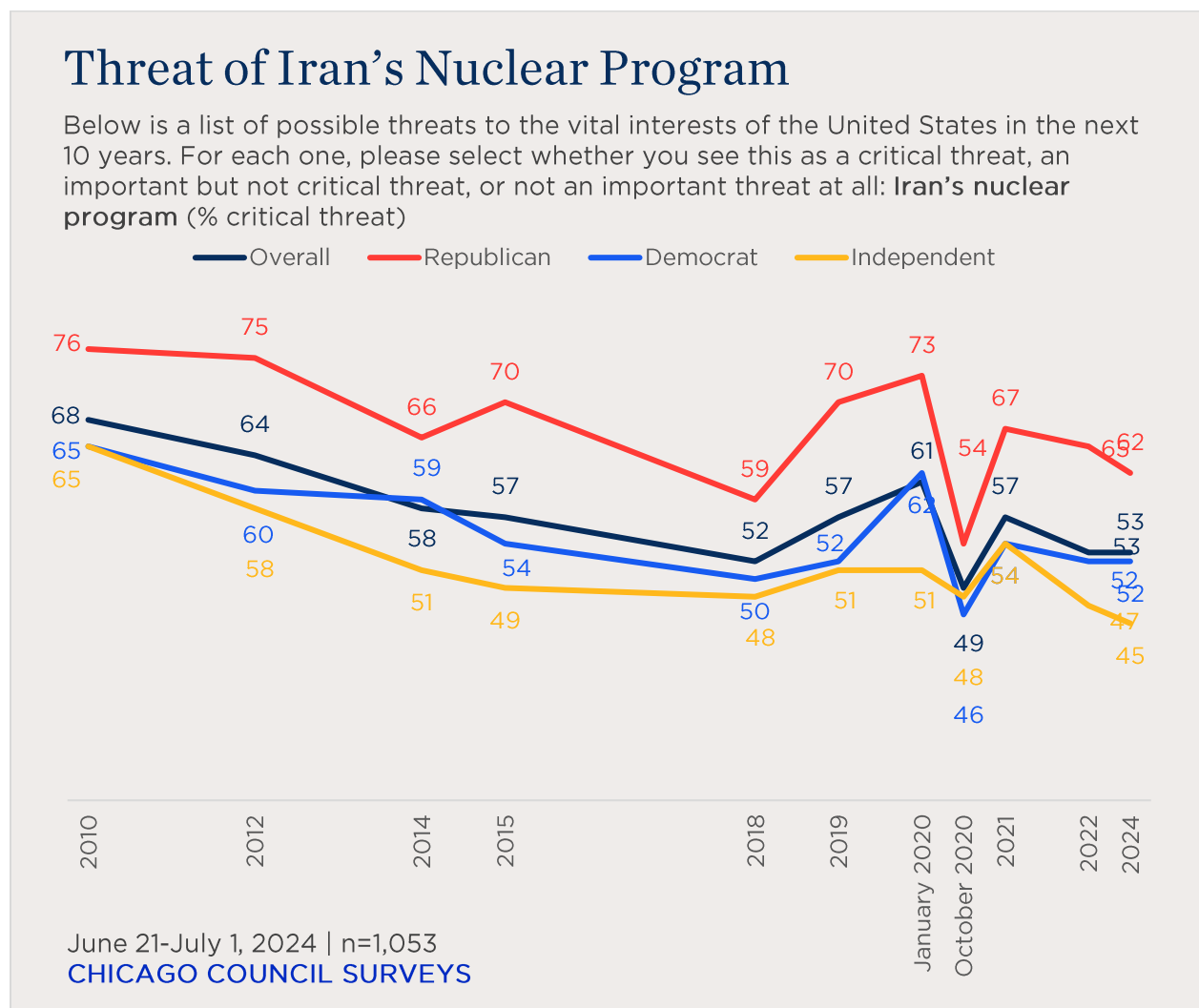
Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: **The war between Israel and Hamas escalating into a wider war in the Middle East** (% critical threat)



June 21-August 11, 2024 | n=1,091-2,106
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS-IPSOS

The same share of Americans overall (52%) also says Iran’s support for and funding of armed groups across the Middle East, like Hezbollah and Hamas, poses a critical threat to vital US interests. Seven in 10 Republicans (68%) view Iran’s network of allied groups as a critical threat to the United States, while less than half of Independents (47%) and Democrats (45%) agree.

Similarly, 53 percent of Americans view Iran’s nuclear program as a critical threat, though concerns about it are notably lower than in the early 2010s. Today Republicans (62%) are also most likely to view Iranian nuclear ambitions as a critical threat, compared to half of Democrats (52%) and less than half of Independents (45%).

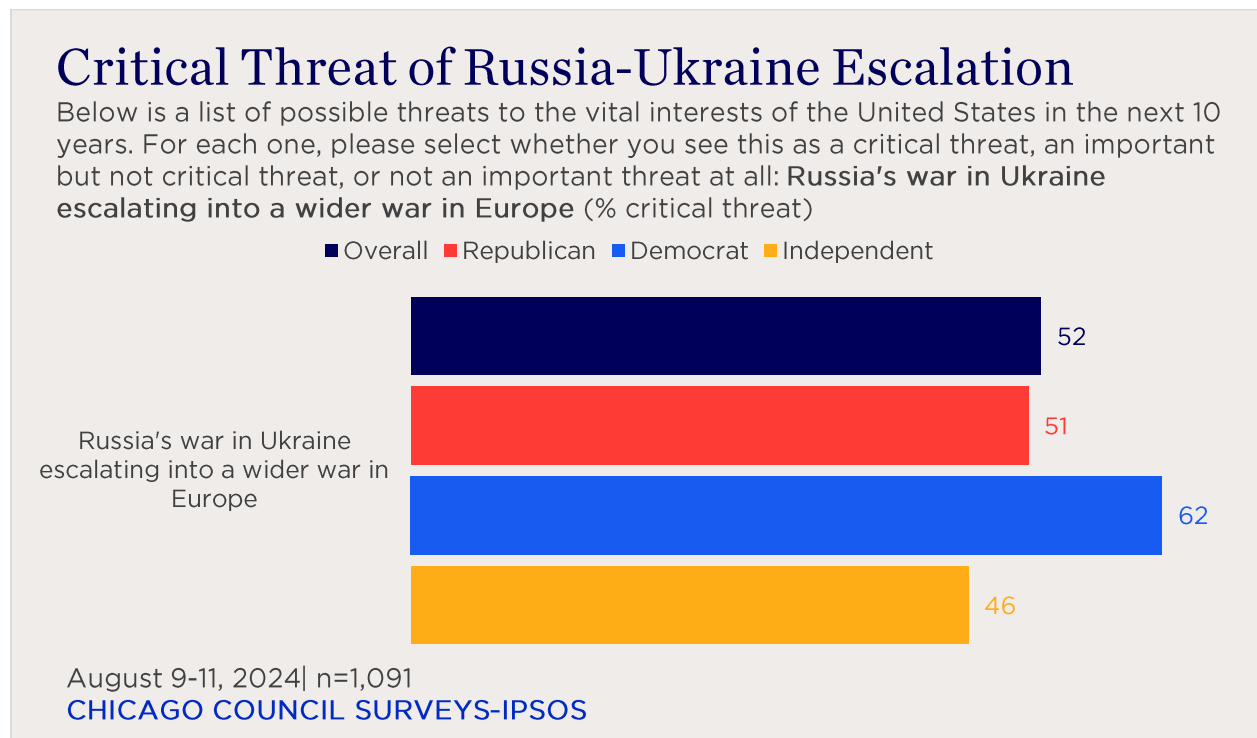


By contrast, the lack of a longstanding peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians is not a main concern for most Americans, as only three in 10 (31%) say it is a critical threat to the United States’ vital interests. Among

partisans, Democrats are the most concerned by this issue (39%, up from 27% in 2014), while fewer than three in 10 Republicans (27%, down from 29%) and Independents (26%, up from 22%) say it poses a critical threat.

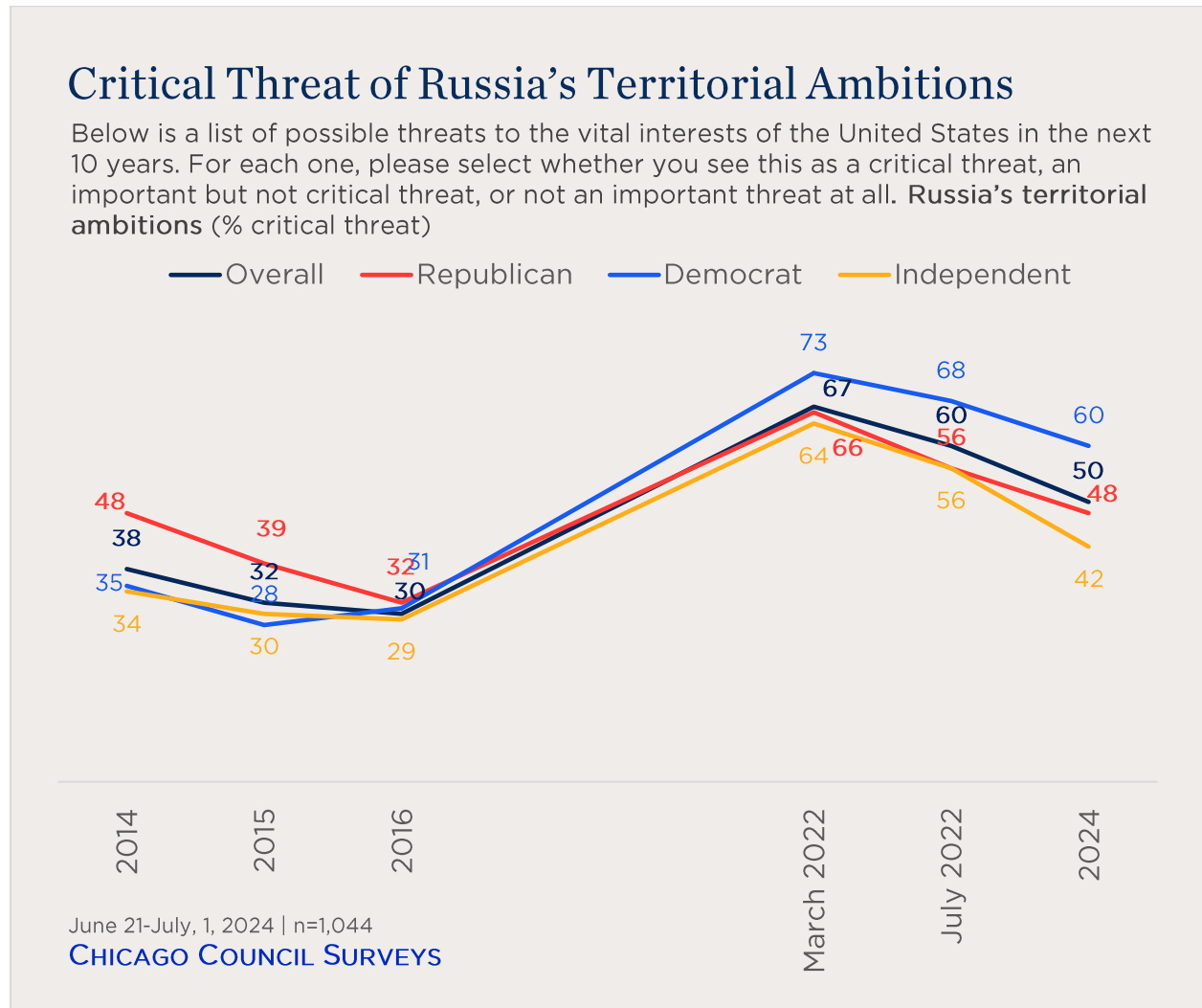
Critical Threat Posed by Russia's Territorial Ambitions Continues to Decline

In an attempt to turn the tide in the Russia-Ukraine war, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy recently launched a [major cross-border incursion](#) into the western Russian region of Kursk, seizing more than [100 Russian towns and villages](#). In an August 9-11, 2024, Chicago Council-Ipsos poll, conducted just days after the Kursk offensive, about half of Americans (52%) said Russia's war in Ukraine escalating into a wider war in Europe poses a critical threat to the United States' vital interests in the next 10 years. Democrats are the most likely to say so (62%), but half of Republicans (51%) and 46 percent of Independents agree.



[Data from the 2024 Chicago Council Survey](#) further show that if Russia were to win, Americans believe the deployment of more US forces to bases in Europe, a direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO allies in Eastern Europe, and even a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would likely follow. The majority of Americans also think it is likely that Russia would take military action against Moldova, Georgia, or other former Soviet states should Moscow prevail in its war against Ukraine. At the same time, only five in 10 Americans

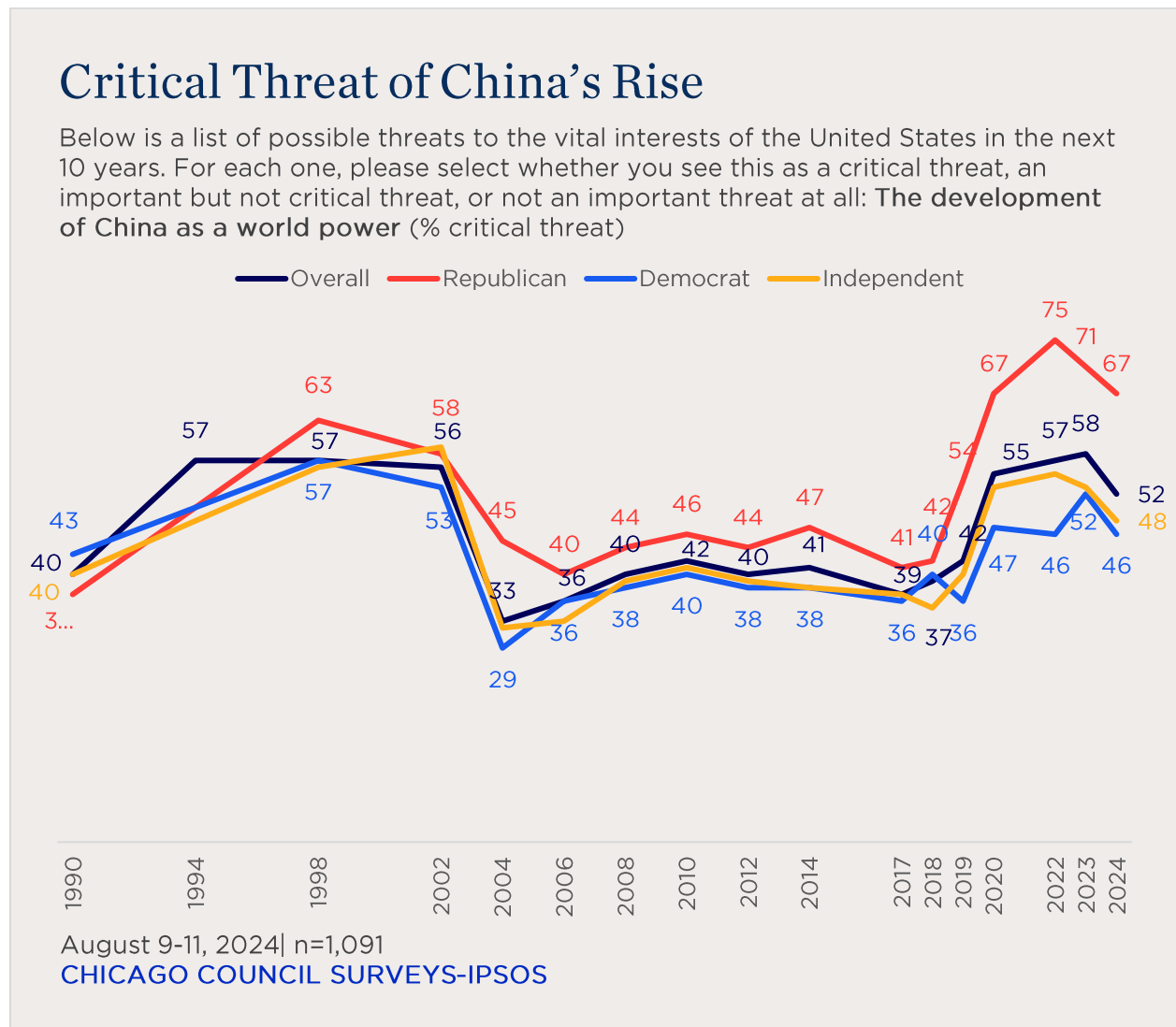
(50%) say Russia’s territorial ambitions pose a critical threat to the vital interests of the United States in 10 years, down from 67 percent at the onset of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in March 2022. They are also more likely to say that a Russian victory would negatively impact European security (63%) than American security (51%). Taken together, these data suggest that while Americans see high stakes in the Russia-Ukraine war, they also feel a degree of insulation from it and believe the United States’ European allies will bear the brunt of a potential Russian victory.



Critical Threat of Chinese Development Also Waning among Americans

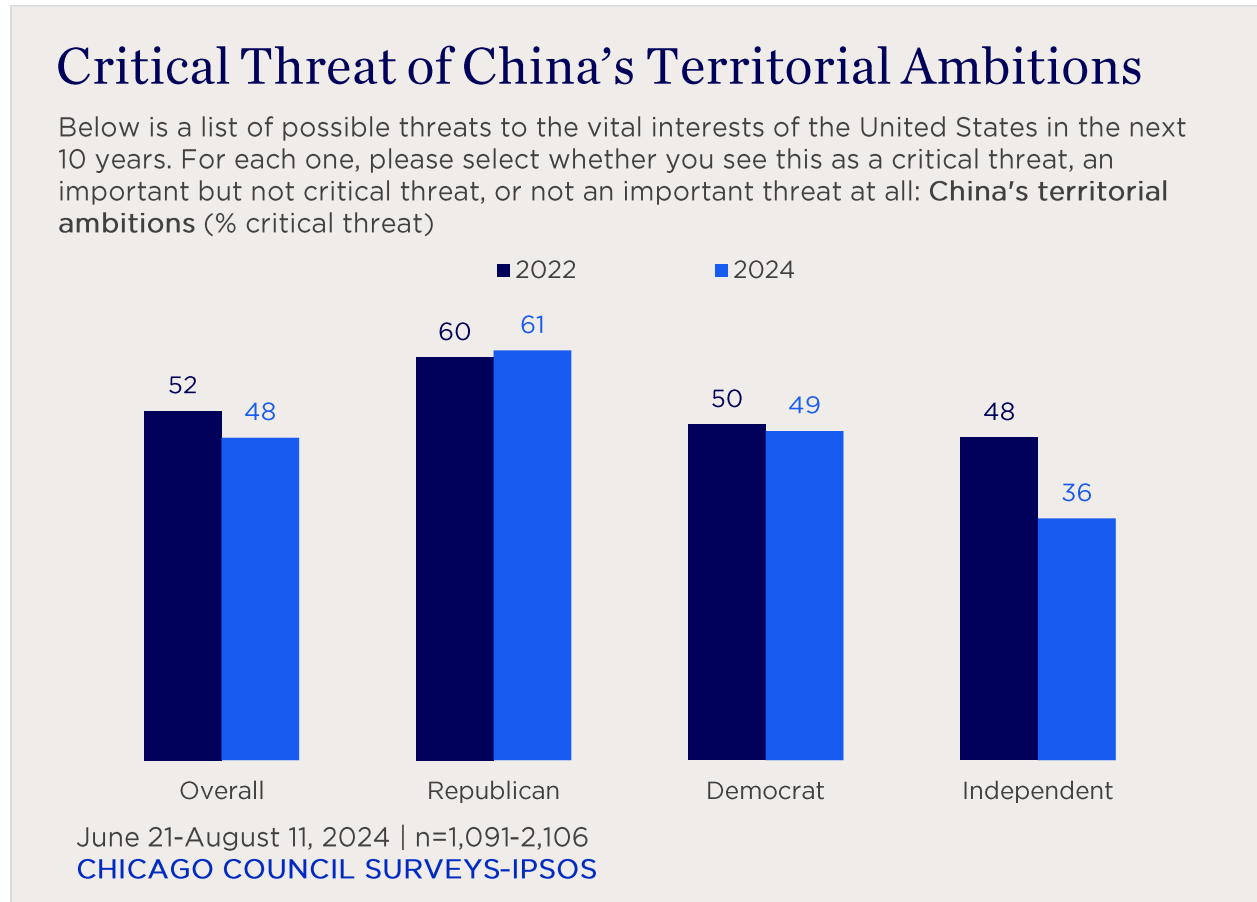
Finally, although US foreign policy has been increasingly focused on the challenges posed by a rising China, the 2024 Chicago Council Survey finds that Americans are less concerned about China now than they were a year

ago. In 2023, a record 58 percent of Americans described the development of China as a world power as a critical threat to the United States. Over the past year, however, concerns have fallen across partisan groups, perhaps reflecting the more stable state of US-China relations. Today, just over half of Americans (52%) say China’s development is a critical threat to the United States. As has been the case for several years, Republicans (67%) are far more likely to view China as a threat than are Independents (48%) or Democrats (46%).



Similarly, Americans are now less threatened by China’s territorial ambitions (48%) than they were in 2022, at which point 52 percent said China’s territorial ambitions pose a critical threat to the United States’ vital interests in 10 years. This decline is being driven by Independents, who are now 12 percentage points less likely to say China’s territorial ambitions pose a critical

threat to the United States, while the attitudes of Republicans and Democrats remain unchanged.



Although China was [once poised to surpass the United States as the world's largest economy](#), only a third of Americans (33%) say economic competition from China poses a critical threat to the United States. Republicans are also more likely to say that such competition poses a critical threat (45%) than other partisans (30% Independents, 25% Democrats).

Elsewhere in East Asia, the critical threat of North Korea's nuclear program remains unchanged since 2020 (52%).

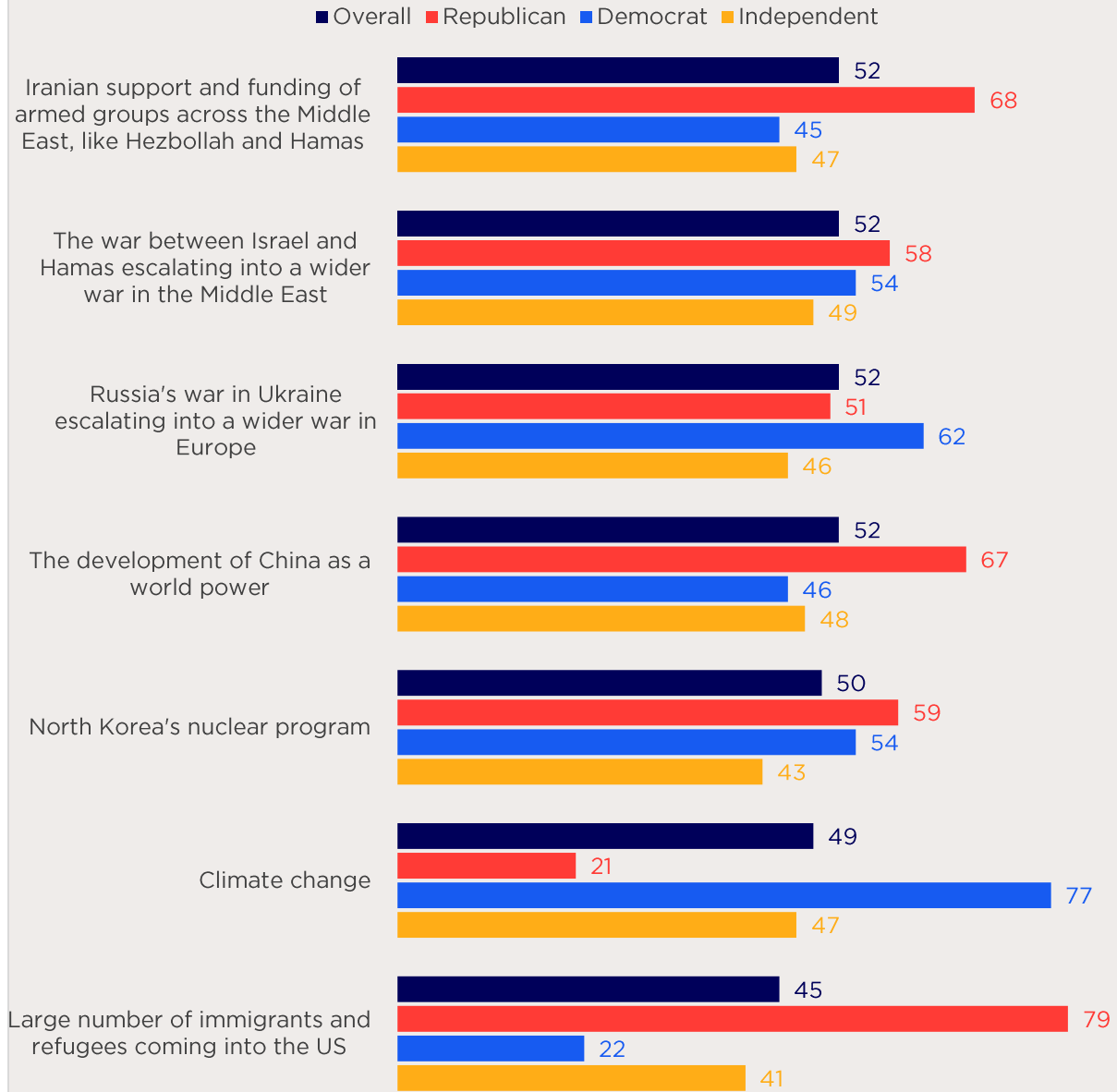
Appendix

Table 1. Critical Threat of Weakening Democracy in the United States

Q5/38b. Weakening democracy in the United States (% critical threat)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2023	69	73	73	65	0
2024	67	62	75	64	-13

Critical Threats to Vital US Interests

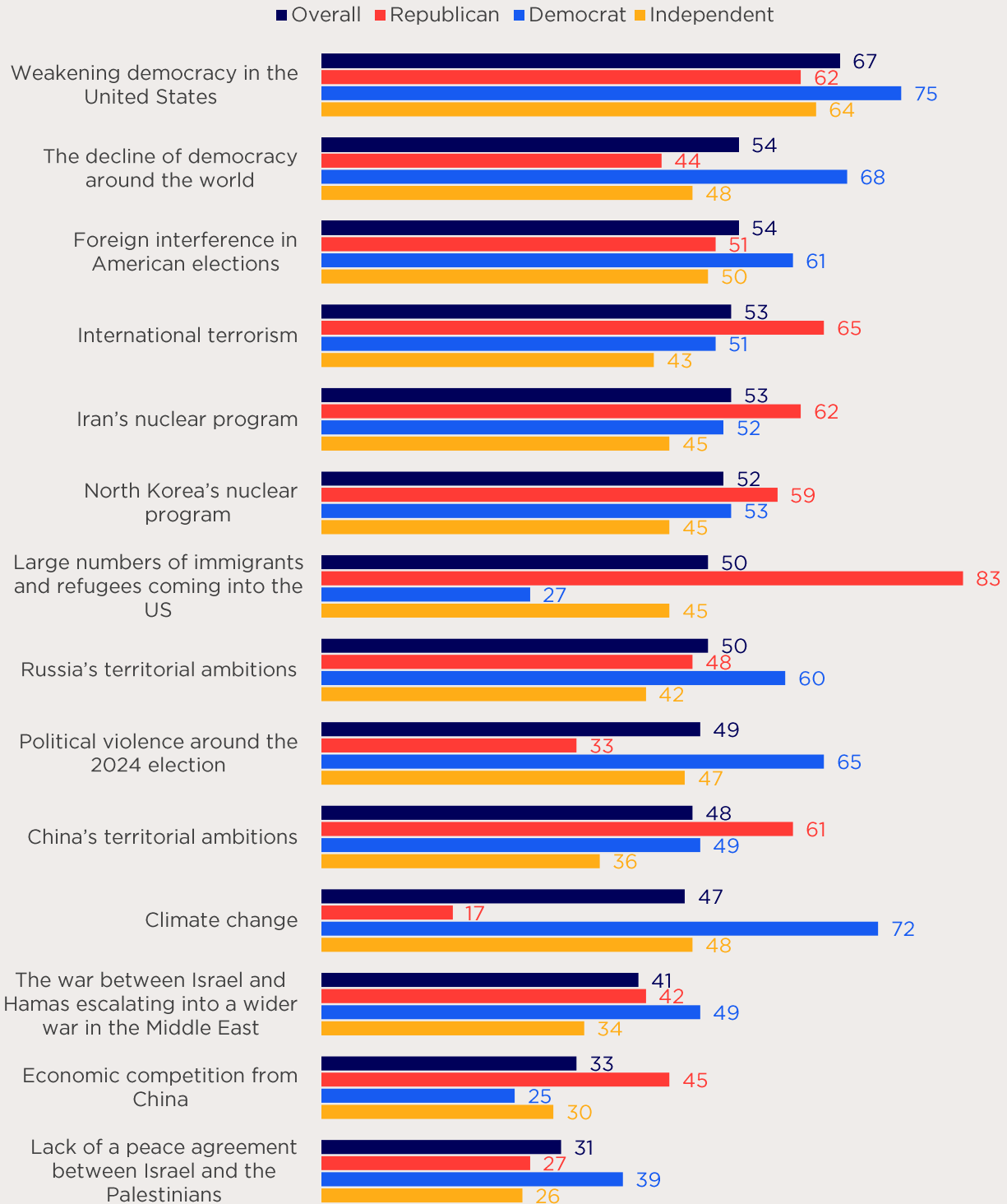
Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: (% critical threat)



August 9-11, 2024 | n=1,091
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS-IPSOS

Critical Threats to Vital US Interests

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Methodology

This analysis is based on data from the 2024 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2024 Chicago Council Survey was conducted June 21–July 1, 2024 by Ipsos using its large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, in both English and Spanish among a weighted national sample of 2,106 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 ± 2.3 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.1229. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Additional data in this report comes from a joint Chicago Council on Global Affairs / Ipsos survey. It was conducted August 9–11, 2024 by Ipsos using its large-scale, nationwide, online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 1,091 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 ± 3.1 percentage points including a design effect of 1.10.

Partisan identification is based on how respondents answered a standard partisan self-identification question: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”

The 2024 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family, the Korea Foundation, and the United States-Japan Foundation.

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).

About the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy

Established in 2018 with a transformative gift from the Crown Family, the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy is driven by the belief that the public plays a critical role in determining the direction of US foreign policy and that an informed and engaged public is critical for effective policymaking. The centerpiece of the Lester Crown Center is its annual survey of American public opinion and US foreign policy, the Chicago Council Survey, which has been conducted since 1974. For the latest research from the Crown Center, follow [@ChiCouncilFP](https://twitter.com/ChiCouncilFP).