



AMERICANS ON NATO







A Survey of Voters Nationwide

Primary Investigator: Steven Kull Research Staff: Evan Fehsenfeld, Evan Lewitus and Emmaly Read

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OVERVIEW

As NATO celebrates its 70th anniversary, certainty about its future is less solid than it has been for anniversaries in the past. Of particular significance are a number of statements made by US President Donald Trump. During the presidential campaign and three days before entering office in January 2017 he stated that NATO was "obsolete." Also, in July of 2018 he questioned the US' commitment to defend NATO members who might become aggressive towards Russia.

A key focus of discussion has been on the failure of many NATO member countries to meet the commitment to spend at least two percent of their economy on defense. President Trump remarked as recently as August 2018 that if member countries continue to fail to meet this commitment, the US would consider pulling out of NATO.

Such comments have stimulated a discussion about the US' commitment to NATO, as well as a broader discussion of the US' role in the world. Many commentators assume that these suggestions that the US might consider withdrawing from NATO arise from growing isolationism in the American public, especially as the memories of the Cold War fade.

But, how do Americans feel about the US' role in NATO? The aim of this study was to give a representative sample of voters an opportunity to formulate their views of US participation in NATO.

The design of the study was to take respondents through a "policymaking simulation" in which they are put in the shoes of a policymaker and evaluate arguments for and against US participation in NATO, and for how the US should deal with concerns about defense spending levels of NATO allies, before providing their final recommendations.

Development of the Survey

The policymaking simulation on NATO was part of a larger simulation on collective security developed by the Program for Public Consultation of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland. Executive Branch statements, Congressional testimony, and other sources were used to help formulate the background and rationale for the policy options, and the key arguments for and against each option.

The draft text was reviewed by experts on collective security and NATO to ensure that the briefings were accurate and balanced and that the arguments presented were indeed the strongest ones being made.

Design of the Survey

The section on NATO began by providing a briefing on the current debate on NATO policy. Respondents were then presented a series of pairs of arguments on the question of whether the US should continue to be part of NATO. In the end, they made recommendations as to whether they think the US should or should not continue to be part of the NATO military alliance.

They were then provided a short briefing on the dispute about defense spending levels by NATO allies. They were asked to evaluate three options, with supporting arguments for each, for how the US should deal with the issue. They were then asked to provide their final recommendation for which option the US should pursue.

Fielding of Survey

The survey was fielded by Nielsen-Scarborough with a probability-based representative sample of registered voters. The sample was provided by Nielsen-Scarborough from its larger sample, which is recruited by telephone and mail from a random sample of households. The survey itself was conducted online.

Responses were subsequently weighted by age, income, gender, education, and race. Benchmarks for weights were obtained from the US Census' Current Populations Survey of Registered Voters. The sample was also weighted by partisan affiliation.

Field Dates: Jan. 16 – Feb. 11, 2019 **Total Sample:** 2,416 registered voters **Margin of Error:** +/- 2.0%

KEY FINDINGS

US Membership in NATO

An overwhelming bipartisan majority of eight in ten favors the US continuing to be part of NATO. The arguments in favor of continued participation in NATO--based on the persistent threat from Russia, the common bond of promoting freedom and democracy, and the value of having integrated militaries—were found convincing by equally overwhelming majorities. The counter arguments—based on the idea that Russia would invade Europe is out of date, that promising to protect European nations could lead to nuclear war, that a military alliance is not really necessary for our bonds to Europe, and that NATO is an unnecessary provocation to Russia—did quite poorly, with less than half finding them convincing. When broken out by district, support for being part of the NATO alliance was about eight in ten in very red as well as very blue districts.

Defense Spending Levels by NATO Allies

Respondents were told about the dispute between the US and other NATO members regarding their lower levels of defense spending towards NATO. Presented three options for dealing with this situation, the least popular option was to press European countries to spend more by threatening to disengage from Europe and possibly withdraw from NATO. The most popular option for both parties, supported by half, was to remain part of NATO, but reduce U.S. military investments to bring them more in line with the level that the Europeans spend. The second most popular option was to press European countries to spend more, but not to threaten to disengage or withdraw from NATO.



NATO's new headquarters in Brussels, Belgium.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

US Membership in NATO

An overwhelming bipartisan majority of eight in ten favors the US continuing to be part of NATO. The arguments in favor of continued participation in NATO—based on the persistent threat from Russia, the common bond of promoting freedom and democracy, and the value of having integrated militaries—were found convincing by equally overwhelming majorities. The counter arguments—based on the idea that Russia would invade Europe is out of date, that promising to protect European nations could lead to nuclear war, that a military alliance is not really necessary for our bonds to Europe, and that NATO is an unnecessary provocation to Russia—did quite poorly, with less than half finding them convincing. When broken out by district, support for being part of the NATO alliance was about eight in ten in very red as well as very blue districts.

Respondents were provided a briefing on the NATO alliance that covered its history and membership. They were told:

The NATO charter includes a key section, called Article 5, which says that NATO members regard an attack on any

member as an attack on all and that all members will defend any member that is attacked.

They were also told:

While a key focus is the potential for an attack by Russia, NATO has addressed other issues as well. Right now, there are several NATO countries participating in the operation in Afghanistan, in addition to the U.S.

They received a description of the working relationship between the NATO militaries and told:

The U.S. keeps about 65,000 troops stationed in Europe to help defend Europe if necessary and to send a signal of its commitment to help defend Europe. The European members have 1.7 million troops stationed in Europe.

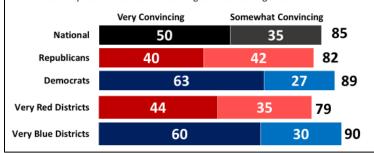
Finally they were told, "Currently, there is some debate about whether the U.S. should continue to be part of NATO."

They then evaluated two sets of arguments in favor and against continuing to be part of NATO. The first argument in favor of NATO membership emphasize the continuing threat from Russia, citing the ambitions of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Russia's nuclear arsenal and the value of

NATO Membership

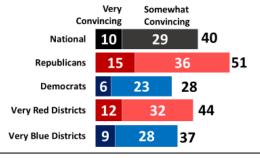
- Argument in Favor - #1

While Russia is not as powerful as it was during the Cold War years, it still poses a major threat to the U.S., to its allies in Europe, and to other areas of the world as well. Russian president Vladimir Putin openly expresses regret that the Soviet Union ended and clearly has ambitions to expand Russian power. Russia has a major nuclear arsenal of over 6,000 weapons as well as major conventional military forces. Russia has used its military forces in eastern Ukraine and Georgia and annexed Crimea. It is simply unacceptable for Russia to come to dominate Europe as it seems to want to do or to expand its power in other areas of the world as well. European countries have 1.7 million troops stationed in Europe and it's very much in the U.S. interest to have those troops committed to the shared goal of containing Russia.



NATO Membership - Argument Against - #1

Why exactly does the U.S. have to make this expensive commitment to defend Europe? The only real possible threat is from Russia and the idea that Russia might invade Europe is farfetched and simply out of date. Furthermore, Europe is far wealthier than Russia and already spends more than twice as much on its military than Russia. Why exactly do they need us? Remember, we are promising to be ready to go to war with Russia - which could well end up escalating to an all-out nuclear war - if any NATO member gets into conflict with Russia. We can't be sure that some country might be unnecessarily provocative, especially if they are so confident that we will simply back them up. Would we be ready to go to war over some little NATO country like Lithuania? If not, then we have no business being in this outdated alliance.



having European military forces aligned with the US goal of containing Russia.

This argument was found convincing by an overwhelming majority of 85%, including 82% of Republicans as well 89% of Democrats.

The counter argument challenged the necessity of the US making the expensive commitment to defense Europe, argued that the prospects of Russia attacking Europe are far-fetched and that Europe has the economic means to defend itself against an economically weaker Russia. However, this argument did relatively poorly. Only 40% found it convincing. A slight majority—51% of Republicans—found it convincing but barely more than a quarter of Democrats concurred.

The second argument in favor emphasized that NATO is an important means for the US to maintain strong bonds with Europe, that Europeans are important partners in upholding freedom and democracy, and that Europeans participate in joint operations in other regions, and that the integration of the militaries shares the burden of keeping the world safe and prosperous. Once again, this was found convincing by overwhelming majorities—82% overall, 75% of Republicans, 89% of Democrats.

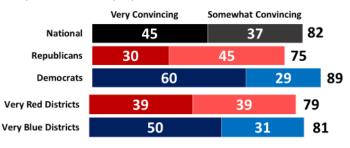
The counter argument stressed that US ties to Europe do not require a military alliance, that a military alliance targeted at Russia is provocative, that NATO expansion has been destabilizing, and that phasing out NATO would likely improve relations with Russia. This argument did poorly. Only 35% found it convincing—42% of Republicans, 28% of Democrats.

Finally, asked whether "they think the U.S. should or should not continue to be part of the NATO military alliance?" an overwhelming 83% said they think the US should continue to be part of NATO. This included 90% of Democrats, 77% of Republicans and 76% of those who said they voted for Donald Trump for president.

Millennials (age 18-34), who would conceivably be less attuned to the concern about the threat from Russia due to coming of age after the end of the Cold War, were still overwhelmingly supportive of NATO membership at 77%.

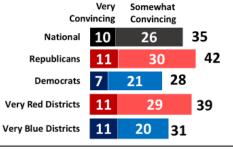
NATO Membership - Argument in Favor - #2

Having U.S. and European countries tied closely together in a common bond is critical and NATO is an important means to that end. They are our primary partners in upholding principles of freedom and democracy in the world. We have a shared interest in maintaining an open trading system in the world as well as the one trillion dollars-worth of trade with Europe. Besides protecting Europe, NATO members participate in other military efforts that are important to the U.S., such as the operation in Afghanistan. Having our militaries highly integrated through the NATO structure makes such joint action more feasible and effective. NATO is not a burden on the U.S. – rather it is a partnership that allows us to share the effort to keep the world safe and prosperous.



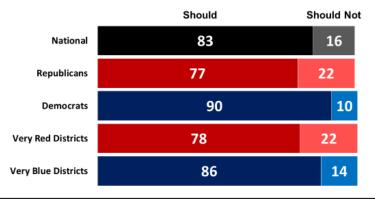
NATO Membership - Argument Against - #2

The ties between Europe and the U.S. are strong and multifaceted due to our shared values and interests. We can pursue those values and interests in many ways. We do not need to have a military alliance for that purpose. Having a military alliance that is clearly targeted at Russia is provocative. The fact that NATO keeps expanding by bringing in more and more countries that used to be allied with Russia, drawing closer to the Russian border, is destabilizing. Russia perceives it as a threat and as violating the understanding between the U.S. and Russia that occurred at the end of the Cold War. This sense of threat is a key reason that Putin and his aggressive stance have been elevated in Russia. If we were to phase out NATO, relations with Russia would likely improve and whatever threat is there would diminish.



NATO Membership - Final Recommendation -

In conclusion, do you think the U.S. should or should not continue to be part of the NATO military alliance?



Defense Spending Levels by NATO Allies

Respondents were told about the dispute between the US and other NATO members regarding their lower levels of defense spending towards NATO. Presented three options for dealing with this situation, the least popular option was to press European countries to spend more by threatening to disengage from Europe and possibly withdraw from NATO. The most popular option for both parties, supported by half, was to remain part of NATO, but reduce U.S. military investments to bring them more in line with the level that the Europeans spend. The second most popular option was to press European countries to spend more, but not to threaten to disengage or withdraw from NATO.

Respondents were introduced to the dispute between the US and European NATO members over defense spending levels as follows:

For some years now there has been a dispute between the U.S. and other members of NATO about their level of defense spending. The U.S. has complained that it spends about 4-5% of the U.S. economy on its military, while European nations generally spend about 2% or less, some as low as 1%. Europeans point out that the amount that the U.S. spends is not only in Europe but also in Asia and in the U.S. homeland, and that Europe already spends twice as much as Russia, which is NATO's primary focus.

Nonetheless, in 2014, the European NATO partners agreed to set a goal to increase their defense spending to at least 2% of their budget. There have been some increases, but only 4 of the 26 European countries have met this goal, though several more are expected to reach this level within the year. One of the largest countries, Germany, is unlikely to reach it at any point in the near future.

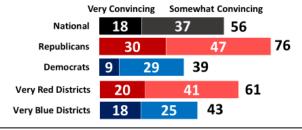
They were then told that there is some debate about what the U.S. should do about this situation and were asked to evaluate three options with an argument in favor of each one. Three possible approaches were presented.

The first argument stressed that the Europeans should stop taking advantage of the US after it freed them from Hitler and defended them during the Cold War, that the Europeans can afford to do their share, and that the Russians pose a smaller threat, so if Europeans do not do more, the US should be ready to disengage from Europe.

This argument did only moderately well with an overall majority of 56% finding it convincing. However, there was a sharp partisan divide: 76% of Republicans, but only 39% of Democrats found it convincing. Likewise in very red districts 61% found this argument convincing, but only 43% in very blue districts.

US to Withdraw if European Countries Do Not Spend More on Their Military - Argument in Favor -

It is really time for the Europeans to stop taking advantage of the U.S. We already made a big effort freeing them from Hitler. And then we defended them through the Cold War. They are certainly wealthy enough to do their share. If they do not step up and do their share, we should be ready to start disengaging militarily from Europe and to tell the Europeans that we are ready to withdraw from NATO. If they do not respond accordingly, we need to follow through and start disengaging. We need to remember that we no longer face the Soviet Union; Russia is much weaker militarily and there is little evidence that it has any goal to conquer Europe. So, NATO is really pretty obsolete. If the Europeans are not ready to do their part, we need to be ready to gradually disengage and let them fend for themselves.



The second proposal considered was to press European countries to spend more, but to refrain from threatening to disengage from Europe or withdraw from NATO. The argument for this stressed that it is not really feasible to withdraw from Europe or NATO, that the US should not make such a threat, that doing so could backfire by emboldening Russia and causing Eastern European countries to draw closer to Russia, and that overall, it is better for the US to stand close to Europe and that doing so is affordable. This argument did far better than the first argument. Overall 80% found it convincing as did 87% of Democrats.



Among Republicans, 72% found it convincing—roughly the same as the 76% who found the argument for the first proposal convincing—suggesting substantial ambivalence. In very red districts, 72% found the argument convincing—more than the 61% that found the argument for the first proposal convincing.

The third proposal was that the US should remain in NATO but adjust its military investment there to be more in line with the European investment. This argument stressed that the European members of NATO spend a substantial amount on the military and many troops under arms, that their reluctance to spend more is understandable given the low level of threat from Russia, that adjusting US commitments might cause Europeans to do more, but even if they do not, NATO will still be far stronger than Russia.

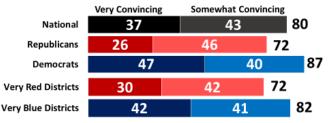
This argument also did quite well with 74% finding it convincing. Among Republicans (77%) and in very red districts (75%) it did the best of all arguments, with 72% of Democrats concurring.

Asked for their final recommendation, the clear favorite, endorsed by about half overall and by both parties, was the third option. The least attractive option was to threaten withdrawal from Europe and NATO, which was endorsed by just 12% overall—one in five Republicans and a miniscule 4% of Democrats. The option of pressing the Europeans but not threatening withdrawal was endorsed by 35% overall—Republicans 29%, Democrats 41%.

Those who voted for Donald Trump in 2016 did not differ much from Republicans. One in five said the US should threaten to withdraw, while 48% favored adjusting the US military commitment.

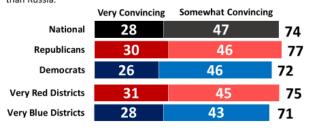
Press European Countries to Spend More, But Do Not Threaten U.S. Withdrawal - Argument in Favor -

The U.S. should not make threats that it is not ready to follow through on. And it is out of the question for the U.S. to actually withdraw from Europe. NATO has been a bulwark of our security and ties us together with Europe in many other important ways as well. Russia these days, under Putin, has shown expansionist aspirations, like his annexing of Crimea. We should urge the Europeans to do more but suggesting that NATO is obsolete or suggesting that we might disengage from Europe is a dangerous approach that can backfire in a big way. Russia will be emboldened and some European countries might start pulling closer to Russia as we have already seen with some Eastern European countries. We can afford the military that we have and the investment we make in NATO. It is better for us to stand together with our European allies than to stand alone. The benefits far outweigh the costs.



Remain in NATO, But Reduce U.S. Military Investments - Argument in Favor -

European members of NATO already spend \$203 billion on their military. That is already quite a lot – far more than the \$75 billion that Russia spends. European countries have 1.7 million troops under arms. It is understandable that Europeans are reluctant to spend a lot more since it is very unlikely that Russia will attack Europe, especially given existing European military capabilities. In any case, Europeans seem content with their current level of defense preparation. So, the U.S. should maintain its commitment to participate in the defense of Europe but go ahead and reduce its military investment to be more in line with the level of commitments the Europeans make. Maybe this will prompt Europe to step up and do more, but if not, that is a risk they are choosing to take. NATO will still have far more military capacity than Russia.

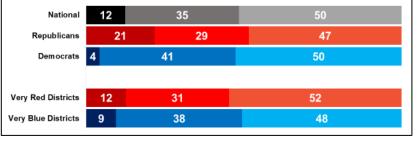


US Response to European Military Spending Levels - Final Recommendation -

In conclusion, of these three options, which do you think that the U.S. should do in relation to NATO?

Press European countries to spend more on their military; say that if they do not, U.S. will disengage from Europe militarily and possibly withdraw from NATO

Press European countries to spend more on their military but NOT threaten to disengage from Europe or withdraw from NATO Remain part of NATO but reduce U.S. military investments to bring them more in line with the level that the Europeans make





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