



PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION  
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

# AMERICANS ON NATO



A Survey of Voters Nationwide

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## OVERVIEW

As NATO celebrates its 70<sup>th</sup> 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:

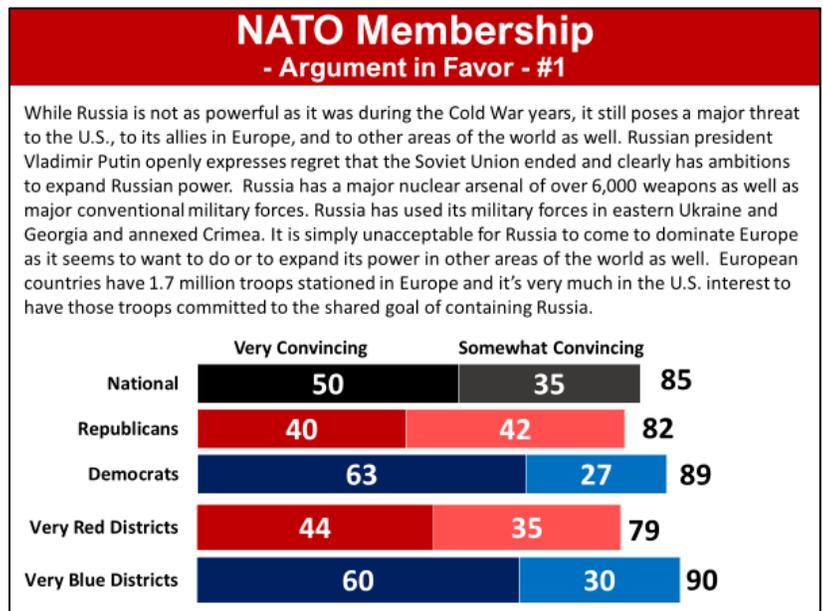
*While a key focus is the potential for an attack by Russia, NATO has addressed other issues as well. Right now, there are several NATO countries participating in the operation in Afghanistan, in addition to the U.S.*

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





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.

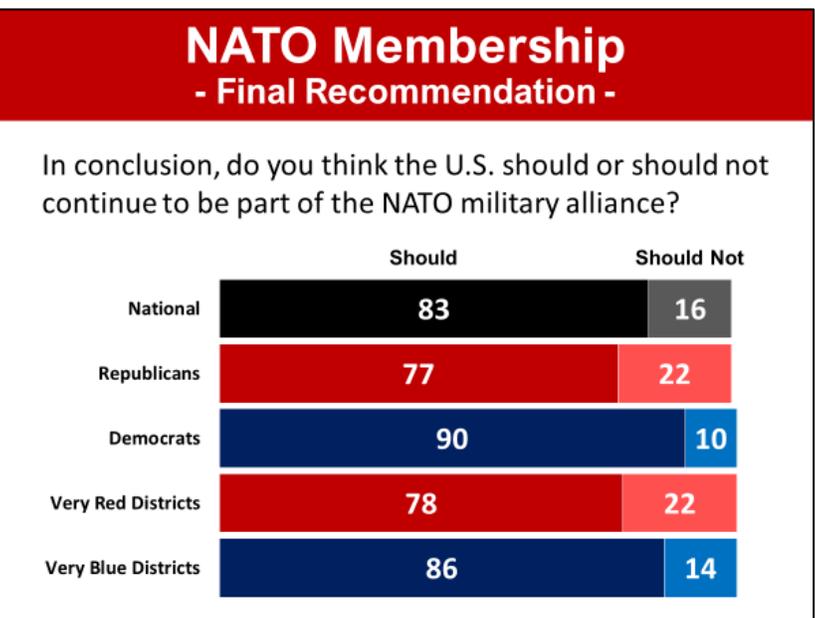
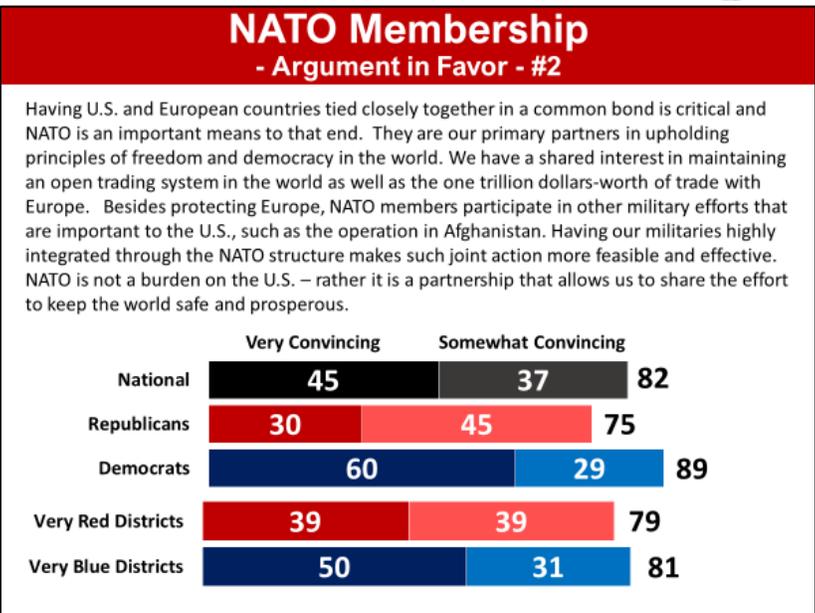
The counter argument challenged the necessity of the US making the expensive commitment to defense Europe, argued that the prospects of Russia attacking Europe are far-fetched and that Europe has the economic means to defend itself against an economically weaker Russia. However, this argument did relatively 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%.





**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:

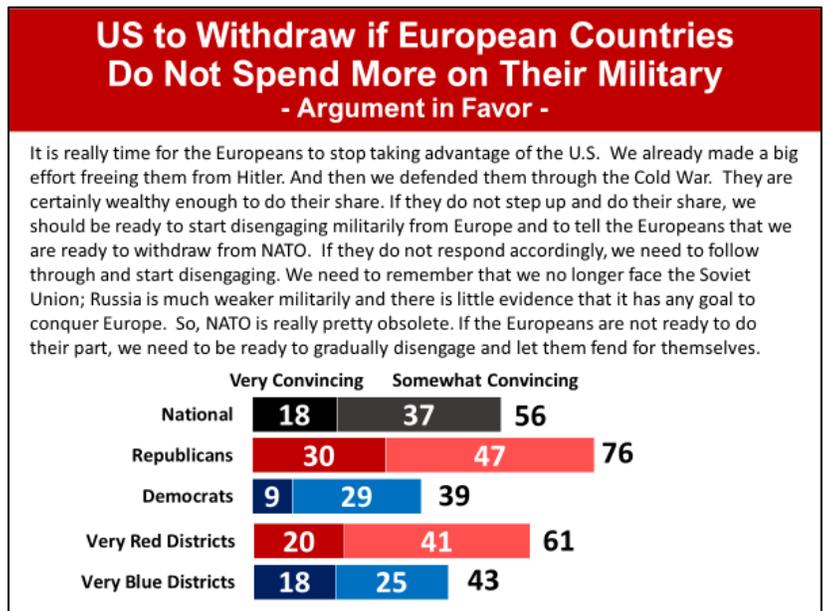
*For some years now there has been a dispute between the U.S. and other members of NATO about their level of defense spending. The U.S. has complained that it spends about 4-5% of the U.S. economy on its military, while European nations generally spend about 2% or less, some as low as 1%. Europeans point 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.



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.



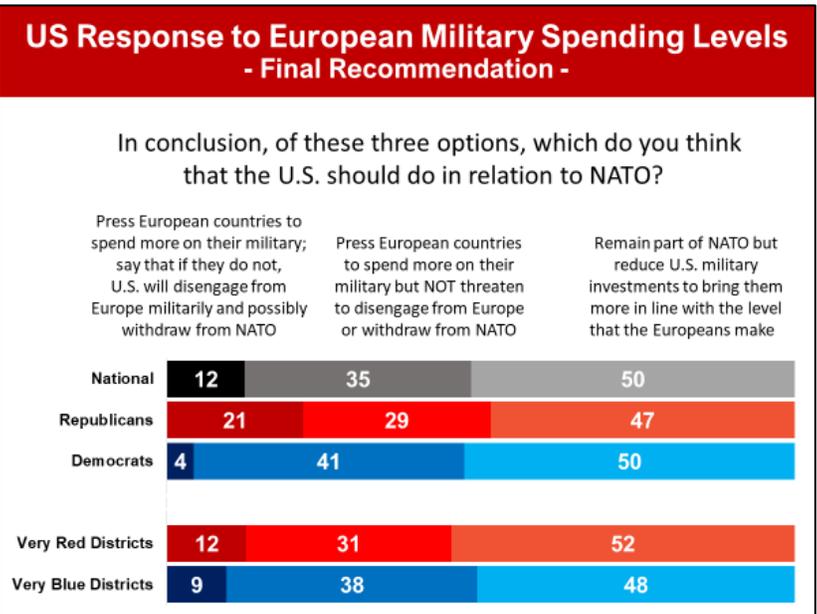
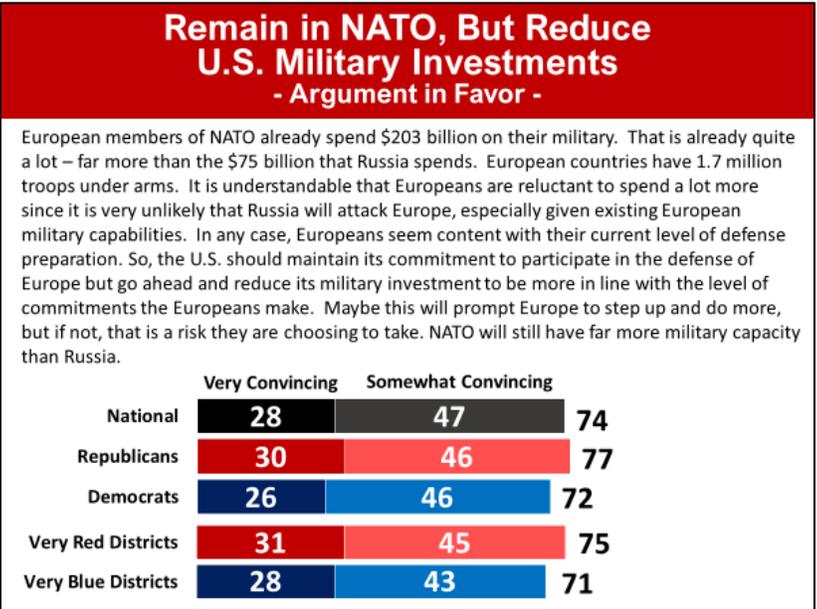
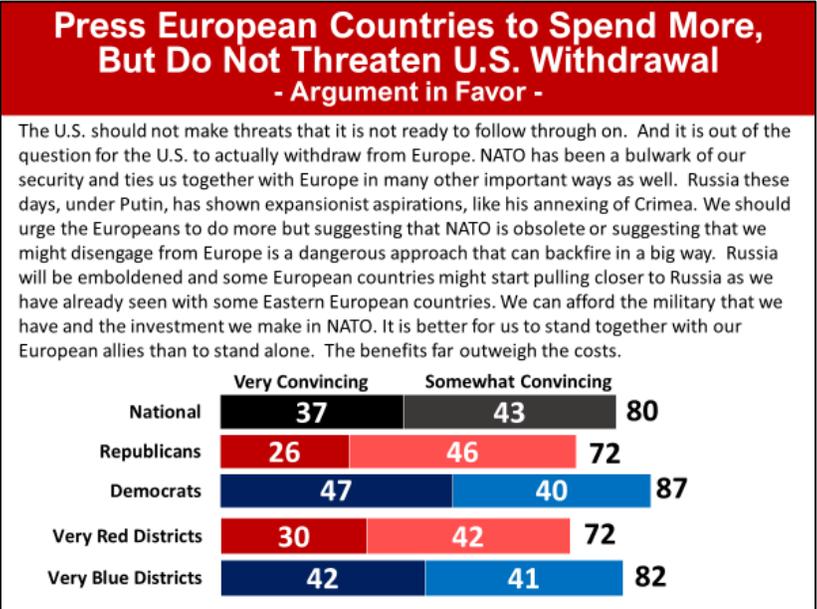
Among Republicans, 72% found it convincing—roughly the same as the 76% who found the argument for the first proposal convincing—suggesting substantial ambivalence. In very red districts, 72% found the argument convincing—more than the 61% that found the argument for the first proposal convincing.

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.





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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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