



EXECUTIVE MEMORANDUM

To: Whom It May Concern
From: Chris Anderson, Daron Shaw, Andrew Schwartz & Rob Moser
Date: December 2, 2024
Subject: Results from the 2024 Annual Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute National Defense Survey

Overview

From November 8-14, 2024, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute (RRPFI) sponsored a national poll to assess the priorities and opinions of Americans across a wide array of defense, military, and foreign policy issues. The 2024 poll is RRPFI's seventh such survey since 2018. The impetus behind the poll is straightforward: to provide politicians, policymakers, and experts consistent and timely information about public opinion on these critical issues.

Over those seven days, the bi-partisan team of Beacon Research (D) and Shaw & Company Research (R) interviewed 2,510 adults from across the United States. The poll gauged opinions on a variety of issues ranging from trust and confidence in the U.S. military, to assessments of domestic and international threats, to the appetite for U.S. global leadership. The survey includes a particularly comprehensive exploration of American public opinion on key foreign policy issues such as Russia's war in Ukraine, the U.S. relationship with China, and the growing conflict in the Middle East between Israel and forces backed by Iran. The data indicate substantial continuity in attitudes, especially those supporting U.S. engagement and peace through strength. And, increasingly, they want to see our strength translate into peace in international conflicts. Thus, there are some important—if small shifts—in opinions, most notably with respect to increased support for negotiated settlements in Ukraine and Gaza.

Confidence in the U.S. Military

In one of our ongoing, annual question batteries, we asked respondents how much confidence they have in a variety of institutions, including the U.S. military. Eighty-two percent say they have at least "some" confidence in the military (51% say a "great deal", the first time since early 2021 that a majority hold this view).

Two tendencies are worth noting. First, confidence in the military is much higher than it is for any other institution tested. Police and law enforcement garner at least "some" confidence among 77% of respondents (34% say they have a "great deal" of confidence), while election administrators

score 53% (23%), the presidency 45% (22%), the Supreme Court 48% (21%), Congress 39% (9%), and the news media 33% (10%).

Second, this latest uptick in confidence in the military does not erase an overall decline since our first poll in November 2018. At that time, 93% said they had at least “some” confidence in the military, with 70% expressing a “great deal” of confidence. Confidence declined to a low of 78% in November 2021 (after the withdrawal from Afghanistan), which is also where it was last year.

There are relevant differences in confidence in the military across demographic and political groups. Most striking is the age divide. Sixty-seven percent of seniors express “a great deal” of confidence in the military, compared to only 39% of those under 30 years of age. Confidence has increased by about eight points since November 2023 among both groups. This squares with the 6-point increase in the percentage of those under 30 who say they are “extremely” or “very” willing to serve in the military, up 6 points from 2023.

Beyond age, we also see differences in confidence in the military by race/ethnicity (whites express higher levels of confidence than people of color) and by partisanship (Republicans express higher levels of confidence than Democrats and independents). Despite these differences, even in groups with relatively less confidence, the percent saying they have a “great deal” is generally in the mid-to-low forties.

Defense Spending and the National Debt

Americans are clearly willing to spend more to bolster our national defense. When asked about different areas in which the federal government spends money, 79% favor increasing government spending on the military (49% strongly favor increased military spending). This is the highest level of support we have registered (the previous high was 77% in November 2023, with 46% strongly favoring increased spending in that poll).

Support for greater defense spending is higher than for increased spending on border security (75%), promoting freedom abroad (61%), or foreign aid (43%). For perspective, there is somewhat more support for increased spending on Social Security (89%), infrastructure (89%), health care (84%), and education (83%).

When asked to identify the highest priority from among these programmatic options, a plurality of Americans opt for either health care (24%) or border security (22%), followed by Social Security (16%) and education (15%), then the military (10%) and infrastructure (8%). The military is identified as one of the top two priorities by about one-quarter of the country (24%).

Partisan differences are notable on this subject. Two-thirds of MAGA Trump voters rate the border as one of their top two funding priorities, as do half of non-MAGA Trump voters. Only 11% of Harris voters cite border security as one of their top funding priorities. Less predictably, 42% of MAGA Trump voters cite the military as one of their top two priorities. Twenty six percent of non-MAGA Trump voters do likewise, as do 11% of Harris voters.

The willingness to increase defense spending persists despite most Americans not knowing how much of the federal budget is spent on the military. Defense spending is about 13% of the 2023 federal budget, yet only 8% of respondents pegged it between 11% and 15%. Thirteen percent

were too low in their assessment, while 72% were too high (including 21% who said it was over 50% of the budget). Even so, a majority (51%) correctly answered a question about whether the government spends more on the debt than defense (38% incorrectly said defense).

Given the debate about the need to reduce the national debt, we were interested in gauging opinion on potential trade-offs between the rising debt and national security needs. Almost 70% of Americans (69%) expressed concern that the cost of the debt will force defense cuts (28% extremely concerned). This number rises to 77% (37% extremely concerned) when informed that the U.S. spends more on interest on the debt than it does on all military programs combined.

This concern is notably bipartisan: 79% of MAGA Republicans express concern over this possibility, as do 77% of all Republicans, 68% of independents, and 63% of Democrats.

As part of the defense budget conversation, there is also a perception that America lacks defense production capacity. We asked specifically whether people think the U.S. has the manufacturing base to produce the materials, equipment, and weapons we need: 73% say that we need more, and 40% say “a lot” more.

Despite this concern about our domestic manufacturing capacity, respondents rated the U.S. as “the best in the world” or “one of the best” in satellites and rockets (84%), artificial intelligence (79%), computer and cellular technologies (74%), and robotics (72%). On each of these metrics, however, roughly 50% rate the U.S. as “one of the best” – meaning we may be seen as lagging competitors.

Threats, Engagement, and Capabilities

As might be expected, Americans are wary of the threat posed by China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran (the so-called “axis of authoritarianism”). Eighty-six percent say they are concerned about increased cooperation between and among these countries, with 50% saying they are “extremely” concerned. Only 12% are not concerned. This concern persists across all relevant social and political groups.

This concern is unaffected by providing respondents with more specific information about the nature (and potential threat) of this cooperation—Americans view these countries as adversaries and intuitively understand that cooperation between them is a problem.

Roughly half of our respondents cite China as the greatest threat to the U.S. (49%), followed by Russia (26%), North Korea (9%), and Iran (6%). Although these numbers are mostly unchanged from last year, only 21% chose China in 2018, whereas 30% chose Russian. North Korea has declined from 18% in 2018 to 9% today.

There are partisan differences on which country constitutes the greatest threat. While Trump voters overwhelmingly see China as the number one threat (61%, with 15% saying Russia), Harris voters see Russia (40%) as slightly more menacing than China (37%).

These partisan differences seem to reflect elite rhetoric. The Biden Administration has frequently spoken of China as a competitor but not an enemy; Trump has emphasized China and taken a softer stance on Russia. Still, this distinction seems lost on most Americans, 75% of whom see China as an enemy. Only 18% see China as an ally. By comparison, two-thirds see Taiwan as an ally and only 16% see it as an enemy.

Russia is viewed even more cautiously, with 80% saying Russia is an enemy, while only 14% see it as an ally. Seventy-five percent see Ukraine as an ally, whereas 18% see it as an enemy.

Iran also scores poorly on the enemy-ally continuum, with 76% rating it as an enemy and 15% as an ally.

It is likely that these perceived threats are why Americans continue to support engagement over isolationism when it comes to foreign policy. When asked a simple question about U.S. foreign policy, a solid majority (57%) prefer that America is more engaged and take the lead rather than be less engaged and react to events (32%). This 25-point pro-engagement margin is the greatest we have seen since we began asking the question in February 2021 (when it was 51%/27% engagement over less engagement). It is also a 17-point increase in the pro-engagement margin since November 2023.

The pro-engagement sentiment has increased across all groups, but it is sharpest among the young: those under 30 years of age show a 32-point increase in pro-engagement opinion (they are now 61% more engaged, 31% less engaged), compared to only a 3-point increase among seniors (63% more engaged, 28% less engaged).

One practical manifestation of this attitude is that Americans continue to support maintaining military bases overseas so that we can respond quickly to events rather than reducing our military presence abroad and only deploy troops in response to aggression (62% support, 34% oppose).

An important—and controversial—recent change in defense policy is moving away from the idea of being able to fight two major power wars at once. Americans do not necessarily support this change. Forty-one percent say our military capabilities ought to be substantial enough to fight wars against China and Russia simultaneously. Another 20% say our military capabilities should be substantial enough to fight a war against China as well as a smaller power, such as Iran or North Korea, at the same time. Twelve percent say we should only be prepared to fight a war against China, and 5% say we should only aim to fight China to a draw. Finally, 12% say we should only have a military large enough to defend our own borders.

Support for the “two wars” force posture is highest among older Americans (51% among seniors, 30% among those under 30) and Republicans (46% for GOPers, 37% for independents and Democrats). MAGA Trump voters are one-point *more* in favor of a “two war” military capacity than Trump voters overall (49% to 48%).

And while there are differences of opinion on the appropriate strategy, 73% of Americans think that our military should at least be large enough to win a war against China. This consensus holds at 60% or higher across all age, party, and voting groups.

While there are differences of opinion over what our military capabilities *should* be, most Americans think that our current force posture is strong. There is overwhelming consensus that America would triumph in a conflict against Russia (+44 win/lose), Iran (+71), or North Korea (+56). Attitudes on a possible war with China, however, are mixed: 52% of respondents say we would win a war against China, 28% say we would not, and 20% are unsure. Less than half of women, independents, Democrats, and Harris voters think the U.S. military could win a war against China.

Ukraine-Russia

The American public increasingly believes that Russia is winning the war in Ukraine (41%, vs 24% who think Ukraine is winning). This is a dramatic change from a year ago, when slightly more Americans (34%) thought Ukraine was winning compared to Russia (31%). This perceived change in the contours of the war is shared across parties, with nearly half of both Harris and Trump voters expecting Russia to take over some or all of Ukraine's territory, far outweighing the less than 20% of respondents in both parties who expect Ukraine to expel Russia from all its territory.

Although there has been a gradual decline in support for sending U.S. weapons to Ukraine, a majority (54%) continues to support U.S. military aid, nearly 20 percentage points more than the 35% who oppose. There are similar results regarding opinion on Ukraine firing missiles inside Russia (50% in favor, 34% against), which indicates broad support for Ukraine and less concern about escalation.

There are, however, substantial partisan differences surrounding support for US military aid to Ukraine. A large majority of Democrats (68%) support aid, which is 24 points more than Republicans (44%). The margin grows to over 30 points when comparing Harris voters (74% support) to Trump voters (42% support).

Opponents have an array of reasons for opposing military aid to Ukraine, including feeling that the conflict does not concern the U.S. (33%), aid costs too much money (20%), aid will escalate the conflict and provoke Russia (18%), and aid could cause the conflict to drag on indefinitely (13%). Many—but not all—opponents are dug in on the issue. After hearing a message specifically addressing their main concern, one-third of those who oppose aid (33%) say they are “much more likely” to support aid.

A majority supports (56% in favor, 30% opposed) ending the conflict through a negotiated peace, even if it means Ukraine giving up some territory to Russia. This suggests two things. First, that there is likely to be strong support among the American public for any initiative by the Trump Administration to seek a negotiated settlement to end the war. Second, that most realize Ukraine has little chance of regaining Crimea and other lost territory.

The appetite for a peace settlement crosses party boundaries. Most Democrats (55%), independents (53%), and Republicans (65%) support such a deal. The same holds true for both Harris (55%) and Trump (63%) voters.

The disparate strands here – continued support for U.S. military aid, support for Ukraine firing missiles inside Russia, and support for a negotiated settlement that involves territorial concessions to Russia – indicate broad support for a policy that ends the war on terms that would produce a smaller Ukraine but one that maintains some degree of independence and security.

China

The threat from China noted above is very much on the minds of Americans. When asked what concerns them most, Chinese military build-up is clearly viewed as the number one threat (28%). This is followed by technology theft (19%), expansive foreign policy (16%), human rights abuses (13%) and the threat of China invading Taiwan (11%). Moreover, we have seen a 9-point jump in those choosing the military threat since November 2021.

This is not to say that Americans think China has achieved superiority over the U.S. In fact, Americans see the U.S. as currently having a major edge over China with respect to air forces (66% say the U.S. has superiority, 6% say China, for a net U.S. superiority rating of +60), space forces and capabilities (+50), naval forces (+51), diplomatic influence (+36), and overall military strength (+34). The gap is somewhat narrower when it comes to autonomous devices, such as drones (+19), economic strength (+18), ground forces (+13), and artificial intelligence (+9), while China is viewed as superior on cyber capabilities by 6 points.

When those who rated the U.S. ahead in specific areas of military capacity were asked whether the U.S. would maintain their edge (or whether China would catch up) over the next five years, roughly two-thirds said America will extend its advantage while about one-quarter expect China to close the gap. There are some slight differences across different military dimensions, but the tendency largely persists throughout.

Conversely, those who think China is ahead in a specific aspect of military capability are split on whether the future will see a closing or an expansion of China's advantage. Respondents were most optimistic about the U.S. closing the gap with respect to air forces (49% say the U.S. will shrink the gap, 30% say China will extend it), naval forces (52% say the U.S. will close the gap, 39% say China will extend it), and autonomous capabilities (45% say U.S. will close the gap, 38% say China will extend it). They are most pessimistic on ground forces (57% expect China to extend the gap, 27% say the U.S. will close it) and AI (47% say China will extend their edge, 40% say the U.S. will close it).

If China were to invade Taiwan, a plurality of Americans would support a wide array of strong responses up to and including the provision to U.S. troops.

Softer responses all have overwhelming support, such as officially recognizing Taiwan as an independent country (73% support, 16% oppose) and imposing economic sanctions against China (66% support, 22% oppose). Somewhat firmer responses, such as increasing military support (56% support, 32% oppose), moving U.S. military assets—such as carriers—into the region (58% support, 30% oppose), and establishing a “no fly” zone over Taiwan and possibly shooting down Chinese aircraft that violate this space (51% support, 33% oppose) also garner majority support, albeit at lower levels.

Perhaps most strikingly, just under half of Americans would support sending U.S. troops to help Taiwan repel a Chinese invasion (48%), while roughly two in five would oppose such a move (37%). There is, in short, +9 net support for direct U.S. commitment of troops to defend Taiwan.

There are small partisan differences on how the U.S. should react to China invading Taiwan. Across the range of policy options, Harris voters are much more open to diplomatic recognition of Taiwan (77% to 70%) and a bit more open to U.S. military support than are Trump supporters, whereas Trump supporters are more open to economic sanctions against China (71% to 66%).

Americans are similarly open to relatively strong actions to deter China from launching an invasion of Taiwan. Support ranges from +65 on establishing a regional defense alliance including the U.S., Taiwan, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and India (78% support, 13% oppose, +65 net support) to public declarations of support for Taiwanese autonomy (+47) to economic sanctions (+44) to increasing the U.S. military presence near Taiwan (+35) to increasing U.S. arms sales (+27).

Once again, partisan differences on deterring China are muted, although Trump voters are much more willing to impose economic sanctions than are Harris voters (76% support to 61% support).

Israel-Iran

As the conflict in the Middle East escalates, American attitudes have become increasingly complex. At the most fundamental level, the data show that a majority of Americans continue to stand by Israel. For example, by a 54% to 39% margin the American public continues to support the U.S. sending weapons to Israel. This +15 support/oppose margin remains substantial, but it is down from +21 in May 2024. Almost all demographic and political groups continue to back the U.S. provision of arms to Israel, although opinions are split among those under 30 years of age, Black Americans, and Harris voters.

While a solid majority of Americans support Israel, they are also reticent to get directly involved in another war in the region. For example, when asked for their opinion on whether Israel has a right to continue military action until it has removed the threat posed by Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, or whether the war in Gaza has gone on long enough and it is time for a cease-fire, respondents split 45%-45%.

Support for a cease-fire is greatest among African-Americans (57% time for a cease-fire, 28% Israel has a right to continue) and Harris voters (63% to 30%). MAGA Trump voters are the most pro-Israel, as 67% say Israel has a right to remove threats while 26% say it is time for a cease-fire.

When asked to prioritize an array of potential U.S. policies in the Middle East, Americans were most focused on freeing American hostages held by Hamas (61% calling it a top priority, 24% a high priority) and leading peace negotiations (51% a top priority, 35% a high priority). By contrast, committing U.S. troops to conflicts involving Israel was deemed a top or high priority by only 38%, whereas 57% rate this as either not a priority or a low priority.

Still, a majority support making the provision of weapons to Israel a top or high priority: 58% support making defensive weapons to Israel a top/high priority, while 55% support making offensive and defensive weapons a top/high priority.

There are some strong partisan differences over U.S. priorities in the Middle East. Specifically, Trump voters are much more supportive of providing both defensive *and* offensive weapons to Israel than Harris voters (71% of Trump voters think this should be a high priority vs. 44% of Harris voters). The gap is less pronounced on providing defensive weapons only (65% of Trump voters, 54% of Harris voters).

Harris voters are more supportive of advocating for humanitarian aid to Gaza (81% high priority, compared to 61% among Trump voters).

More broadly, there is support for a more assertive policy towards the main bad actor in the region. A full 42% say the next U.S. administration should be “more aggressive” when it comes to dealing with Iran. Only 22% say “less aggressive,” while 26% say about the same.”

Similarly, when asked about potential responses to Iranian aggression against Israel, 66% would support sending U.S. missile defense systems to Israel to defend against missile attacks, and 60% would support an Israeli counter-attack.

Again, however, Americans do not want to be involved in another Mid-East war. When asked what the U.S. should do in the event of an Israeli counter-attack against Iran, 51% would favor providing technical and logistical support but not direct involvement, while only 18% would favor using U.S. military force in support of Israel and 25% would not want the U.S. to be involved at all.

Evaluations of Presidents

When asked about their attitudes towards recent presidents (Jimmy Carter through Joe Biden), President Reagan is rated the most favorably. Sixty-eight percent view our 40th president “somewhat” or “very” favorably. Thirty-seven percent view Reagan “very favorably” and only 11% view him very unfavorably. Overall, Reagan’s rating is a net +43 favorable.

Ranking just behind Reagan is Barack Obama (61% favorable) and George H.W. Bush (60% favorable), followed by Bill Clinton (59%), Jimmy Carter (58% favorable), George W. Bush (56%), Donald Trump (51%), and Joe Biden (43%).

Methodology

This survey was conducted from November 8-14, 2024. It features a mixed-mode design, with 1,008 responses collected by live telephone interviewers and another 1,502 responses gathered online. The telephone portion of the survey is a probability sample, relying on a multi-stage cluster design. Forty-nine percent of the calls were completed via landline and 51 percent were completed via cell phone. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. To ensure that results accurately reflect the demographics of the country, they were weighted by age/gender, race/region, and education targets drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2023 American Community Survey. The probability sample was then used to calibrate the non-probability online sample (conducted over the same dates) by key demographic and attitudinal variables. For the full sample of 2,510 respondents, the estimated margin of error is +/- 2.0 percentage points. Most questions were asked of half the respondents, with an associated margin of error of +/- 2.8 points. The margin of error for sub-groups is larger.