



PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION

CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL & SECURITY STUDIES

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

AMERICANS ON NUCLEAR WEAPONS



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MAY 2019



Introduction

The Trump administration and members of Congress are making highly consequential decisions about U.S. nuclear weapons policies and key arms control agreements. However, there has been little public debate and the public has had virtually no role in the process.

For decades, the United States has tried to reduce nuclear risks by maintaining an effective deterrent while negotiating arms control and nonproliferation agreements with other countries. Now, some experts argue that potential adversaries are pursuing new nuclear, space, and cyber weapons, and may mistakenly conclude that they can take aggressive actions to advance their national interests unless the United States does more to convince them that it has numerous different types of nuclear options that it is prepared to use in response to both nuclear and non-nuclear strategic attacks. Other experts counter that the U.S. nuclear arsenal is already more than sufficient to deter deliberate attack, and that the more likely nuclear risks come from proliferation, terrorist access, a renewed nuclear arms race, and misperception or crisis escalation leading to nuclear war that neither side really wants. They argue for greater self-restraint and cooperation with other countries.

The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review directed the development of several new types of nuclear weapons and explicitly expanded the range of circumstances under which the United States might use nuclear weapons, beyond response to a nuclear attack. The Trump administration announced plans to withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement and is debating whether to extend the New START treaty limits on US and Russian long-range nuclear weapons past the current expiration date in early 2021. It has also expanded plans for a multi-decade program to modernize the entire U.S. nuclear arsenal and increase the capacity of its weapons production complex, positioning the United States to increase rapidly the number of nuclear weapons it has if the only existing strategic arms control treaty expires and a new arms race accelerates. In response, some members of Congress are holding hearings, sponsoring legislation, and taking other actions to preserve nuclear arms control agreements, prevent development of new types of nuclear weapons, scale back funding for nuclear modernization, and require Congressional approval for first use of nuclear weapons.

The Program for Public Consultation and the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland have conducted numerous studies of American public opinion on nuclear policy, using both standard polling methods and innovative public consultation methodology. We have found that the latter works well to elicit thoughtful responses about complex policy problems, particularly when respondents do not already have much relevant knowledge. This method uses an online policymaking simulation to put respondents in a decision-maker's shoes. Respondents receive a short, factual briefing about choices facing policymakers, evaluate arguments for and against various policy options, and make their policy recommendations. The simulation design is reviewed by policy experts across the spectrum of views to ensure that the briefing is accurate and balanced, and that the pro and con arguments are the strongest ones being made by advocates. This method has proven quite successful in eliciting meaningful public input on policy issues that could not be effectively explored through standard polling.



Development of the Survey

This policymaking simulation was developed during the fall of 2018. The 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, 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. We did not attribute arguments in the simulation to particular policy documents, hearings, or experts, though, to avoid giving respondents partisan cues that might inform their preferences. The draft text was reviewed by experts who support the Trump administration's more expansive approach to nuclear policy and those who prefer a more restrained approach.

Fielding of Survey

The survey was fielded January 7 – February 1, 2019 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. Data collection ended the day before the Trump administration officially started the six-month withdrawal process from the INF treaty.

The full sample of 2,264 respondents (margin of error +/-2.1%) was presented the introductory briefing and some of the questions. Some questions were asked to half the sample (margin of error +/-2.9%). See the questionnaire for more details.

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.

A further analysis was conducted by dividing the sample six ways, depending on the PVI Cook rating of the respondent's Congressional district. This enabled comparison of respondents who live in very red, somewhat red, leaning red, leaning blue, somewhat blue, and very blue districts.

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted with generous support from the MacArthur Foundation and the Yamamoto-Scheffelin Endowment for Policy Research.



Summary of Key Findings

NUCLEAR ARSENALS

Response to the Number of Nuclear Weapons in US Arsenal and Globally

When informed about the size of the US nuclear arsenal, a plurality of nearly half said that it was bigger than they expected, while only one in eight said it was smaller than they expected. When presented the number of nuclear weapons of each of the other nuclear powers in the world, a majority said it was more than they expected with just one in seven saying it was fewer.

NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL

US-Russian Arms Control Treaties

More than eight in ten favor the US continuing to have arms control treaties with Russia, with support among Republicans comparable to that of Democrats.

Extending New START

Eight in ten favor the United States agreeing to extend the New START Treaty.

Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty

Two thirds, including a majority of Republicans, oppose withdrawing from the INF Treaty and favor instead staying within the Treaty and redoubling efforts to work with the Russians to address concerns of both sides.

Nuclear Weapons Testing

Overwhelming majorities from both parties approve of the US continuing its moratorium on nuclear testing, effectively abiding by the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. In the event the US develops a technological innovation that might make it possible to build a new type of nuclear weapon that could destroy more of an adversary's nuclear weapons, a majority still said they would oppose breaking the moratorium, though a bare majority of Republicans favored it.

US NUCLEAR WEAPONS CAPABILITIES

Minimum Retaliatory Capability

Eight in ten or more from both parties support the US having a retaliatory nuclear capability destructive enough that no country could think that there would be any advantage in attacking the United States with nuclear weapons.

Low Yield Warheads and the Need for Matching Nuclear Options

Respondents were presented a rationale for developing nuclear capabilities over and above the minimum retaliatory capability based on the need to threaten to match any type of nuclear capability an adversary might use. When presented a specific example of the current debate over whether the US should put low-yield nuclear warheads on missiles on submarines to match corresponding Russian capabilities, a bipartisan majority of two thirds supported adding a low-yield option to nuclear missiles on submarines. Yet, when asked about the



general principle, a plurality endorsed the view that a minimum retaliatory capability is adequate, over the view that the US must have the capability to retaliate against a major attack using only a type of weapon similar to the type the adversary used.

Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs)

Knowing that the United States currently has strategic weapons on submarines, bombers, and land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, six in ten, including a majority of Republicans, favor phasing out the ICBM force. However, only one-third favor unilaterally reducing the net number of strategic warheads in the U.S. arsenal instead of putting more warheads on submarines and bombers to keep the same total as the Russians.

FIRST USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

US Declaratory Policy on First Use

Only one in five endorsed the United States explicitly declaring that it would consider using nuclear weapons first and stating what kinds of non-nuclear attacks would prompt the United States to consider doing so. Just slightly more than one in five favored explicitly declaring that the United States will never use nuclear weapons first. A majority favored continuing the current policy of being ambiguous about whether and under what conditions the United States would consider using nuclear weapons first. Presented a list of possible types of attack, less than one in six favored declaring that the United States would consider using nuclear weapons in response to any of them.

Limiting Presidential First Use

Two thirds, including six in ten Republicans, support Congressional legislation requiring that to use nuclear weapons first, the President would first have to consult Congress and it would have to issue a declaration of war on the country to be attacked with nuclear weapons.



FINDINGS

NUCLEAR ARSENALS

Response to the Number of Nuclear Weapons in US Arsenal and Globally

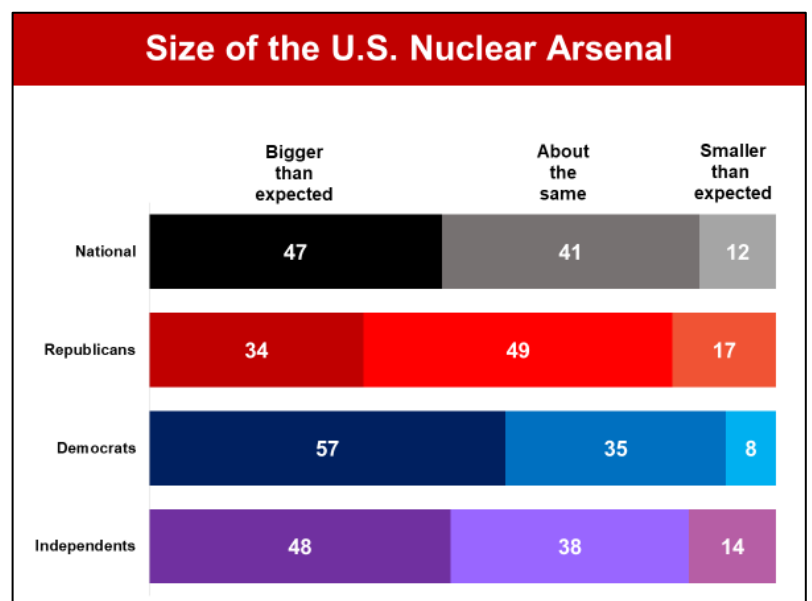
When informed about the size of the US nuclear arsenal, a plurality of nearly half said that it was bigger than they expected, while only one in eight said it was smaller than they expected. When presented the number of nuclear weapons of each of the other nuclear powers in the world, a majority said it was more than they expected with just one in seven saying it was fewer.

To introduce respondents to nuclear weapons issues, they were given an initial briefing. First, they were reminded of the scale of destructiveness of nuclear weapons, using the Hiroshima bomb as a baseline. Next, respondents learned about the components of the U.S. nuclear arsenal: that it includes about 4,000 nuclear weapons of various types: strategic weapons on land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and long-range bombers; about 150 non-strategic weapons; plus 2,200 weapons in storage.

Respondents were then asked whether—compared to what they had expected—the U.S. arsenal seemed bigger, smaller, or about the same. The most common answer was that the arsenal was bigger than they had expected (47%), but four in ten (41%) said it was about the same; only 12% said it was smaller than expected. A majority of Democrats said the arsenal was bigger than expected (57%), while a lesser third of Republicans (34%) felt this way.

The briefing then gave a rundown of the world's other nuclear arsenals: those of Russia, China, North Korea, France, Britain, India, Pakistan and Israel—with estimated numbers and how rapidly the weapons could be ready for use. Respondents also saw a world map showing the nuclear powers and their arsenal sizes.

Respondents were asked how this information compared with what they had expected. A clear majority (56%) said there were more nuclear weapons in the world than they had expected. Twenty-nine percent said the number was about what they had expected; only 15% said there were fewer. The reaction this time was more bipartisan, with half of Republicans (50%) saying the numbers of nuclear weapons were greater than they had expected (Democrats 61%, independents 56%).





NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL

US-Russian Arms Control Treaties

More than eight in ten favor the US continuing to have arms control treaties with Russia, with support among Republicans comparable to that of Democrats.

In setting the context for questions on nuclear arms control respondents were told about the condition of mutual vulnerability between the U.S. and Russia, meaning that each can inflict massive devastation on the other, regardless of who attacks first. This has been the case since the 1950s, essentially unchanged by technological developments. They were informed that, “countries with smaller nuclear arsenals also have the potential to inflict massive damage on each other.”

They were told how the U.S. and other countries have developed a number of treaties to limit and reduce nuclear weapons. After being given a summary of the most important provisions of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), they were asked whether they were aware that “that the U.S. has agreed to actively work together with other nuclear powers to reduce and ultimately eliminate all nuclear weapons.” Four fifths (82%) said they were aware of this basic commitment on the U.S.’s part; partisan differences were minor.

They were then introduced to the topic of US-Russian nuclear arms control treaties by reading that the U.S. and Russia (previously the Soviet Union) “have entered into a number of treaties that have substantially reduced the number of nuclear warheads on each side” and that extensive inspection systems were put in place to verify this.

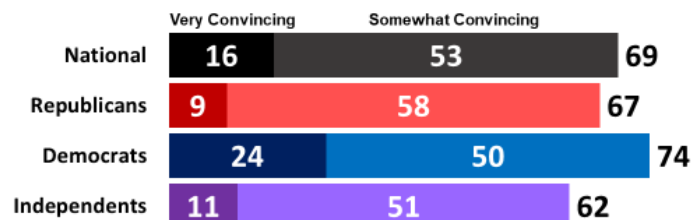
They were told “There is some debate about these U.S-Russian arms control treaties,” and presented an argument in favor and an argument against such treaties.

The argument supporting the treaties pointed out that the U.S. and Russia “have dismantled thousands of nuclear weapons” thanks to their framework and said mutual suspicion has been reduced relative to the Cold War years. Seven in ten (69%) found this argument convincing, including 67% of Republicans and 74% of Democrats but less independents (62%).

U.S. – Russian Arms Control Treaties

- Argument in Favor -

Before they had arms control treaties, the U.S. and Russia (then the Soviet Union) built tens of thousands of nuclear weapons with the goal of trying to achieve a superior position. This raised tensions, increased the risk of nuclear war, and multiplied the amount of destruction that could occur if a nuclear war broke out. No matter how many weapons the U.S. had, the Soviet Union did whatever it needed to do to make sure that it could still destroy the U.S. in an all-out war. Since entering into arms control agreements, the U.S. and Russia have dismantled thousands of nuclear weapons so that their arsenals are a fraction of what they were before and have made it much harder for either side to think that it might be able to win a nuclear war. By having extensive inspection systems, both sides understand more clearly what weapons the other side has, so there is less suspicion. Both sides gain assurance that the other side cannot achieve a decisive advantage.





The counter-argument dismissed “the idea that we should accept that we are vulnerable to a devastating nuclear attack” and said that arms control treaties “tie our hands,” preventing the U.S. from leveraging its technological advantages to build a superior arsenal. It did not reject the idea of deterrence but argued superiority would enhance deterrence. Only 45% found this convincing, with parties significantly split. A clear majority of Republicans (58%) found it convincing, while only one third of Democrats did. In very red districts only, a bare majority of 51% found it convincing.

After reviewing the arguments, respondents were asked whether or not they approved of “the U.S. continuing to have arms control treaties with Russia.” Over four in five (83%) supported continuation-- a much larger majority than either argument gained. Democrats, Republicans and independents were all at 80% or higher. Respondents who voted for Donald Trump and those who voted for Hilary Clinton were no different—in both cases 83% were in support.

Interestingly, the number supporting continuing to have arms control treaties with Russia was even higher than the number who found the argument in favor convincing, suggesting that there may be more reasons that people support arms control treaties than those expressed in the argument.

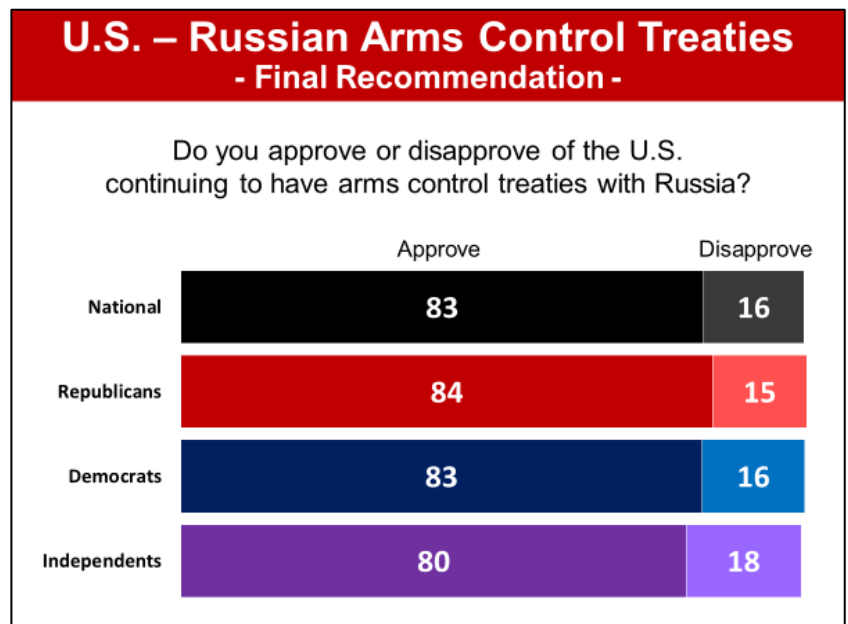
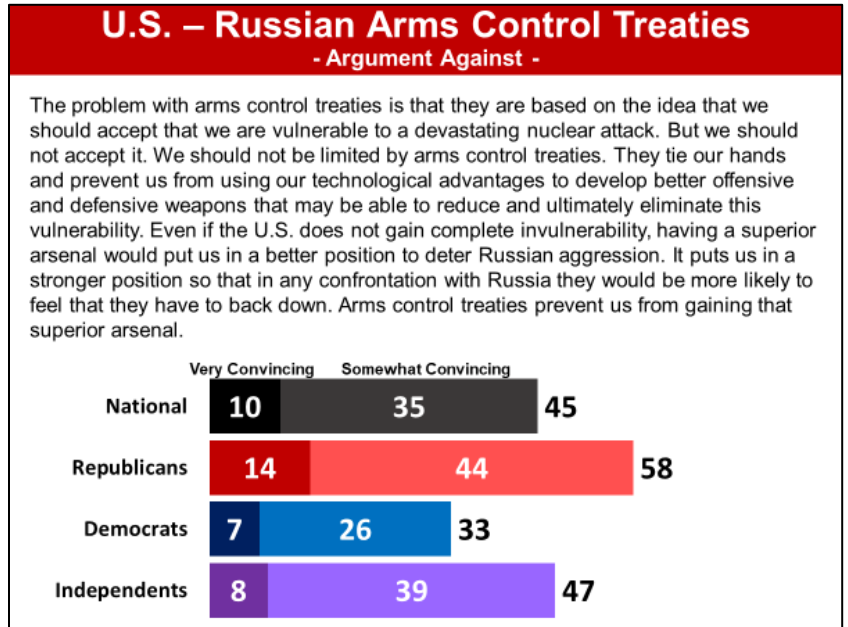
Extending New START

Eight in ten favor the United States agreeing to extend the New START Treaty.

Later in the survey respondents were told that “Another debate is over whether the U.S. and Russia should extend an arms control agreement called the New START Treaty.”

They were given a briefing on the Treaty as follows:

It was signed in 2010 and approved by the U.S. Senate by a vote of 71-26. The Treaty requires each side to limit its deployed strategic nuclear warheads (the kind that can reach the other country) on land-based





missiles, submarine-launched missiles and long-range bombers to equal levels. Extensive verification systems were put in place. There are now 18 on-site inspections per side each year, plus various forms of information sharing about each side's arsenal. The New START Treaty expires in 2021 but can be extended for five years if both sides agree.

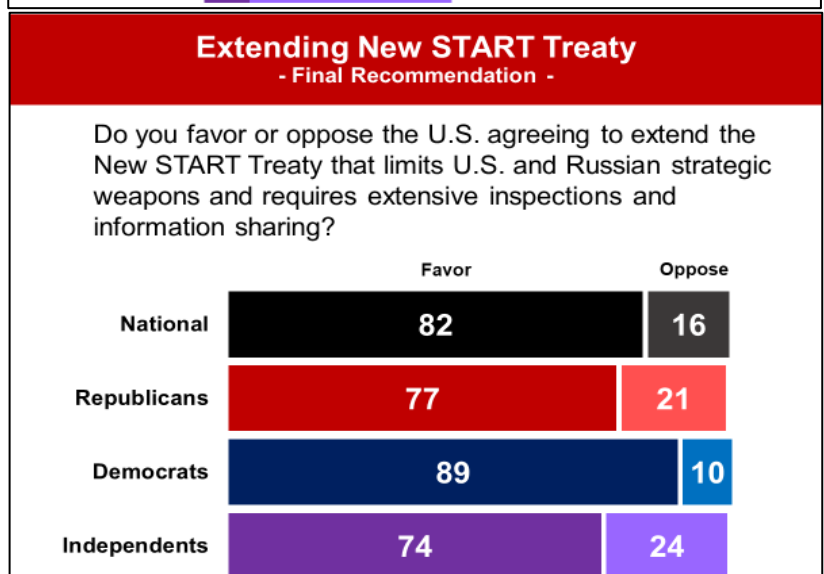
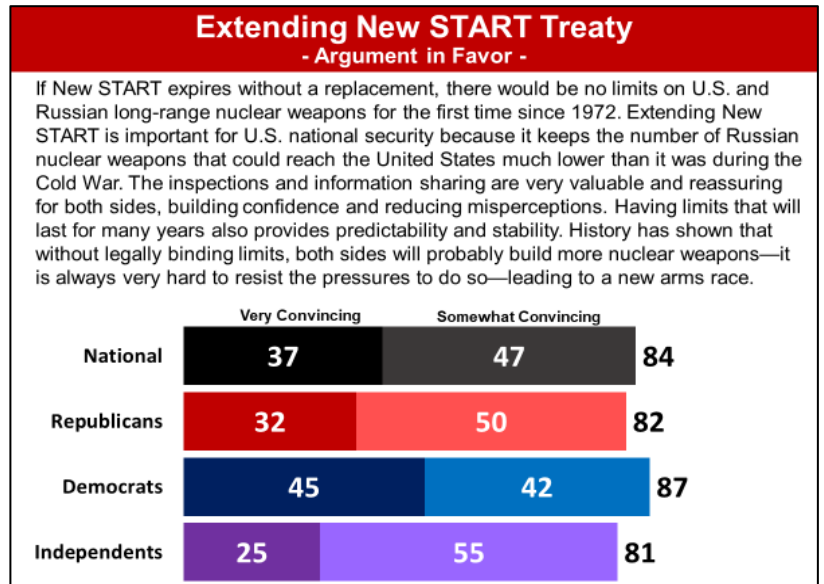
Respondents evaluated arguments for and against an extension of New START.

The argument for extension pointed out that if New START expired, there would be no limitations on U.S. and Russian long-range nuclear weapons for the first time since 1972 and asserted that a new arms race would likely ensue. Well over four in five (84%) found this argument convincing, with little party differentiation.

The argument opposing extension named Russian violations of the intermediate-range nuclear weapons treaty as a reason not to reward Russia. It asserted that since the world is a dangerous place, the U.S. should keep its options open about a future expansion of its arsenal. U.S.-Russian information sharing might continue in any case on a voluntary basis, it said.

This was found convincing by just 44%. A majority of Republicans considered it convincing, but not overwhelmingly so (55%). In very red districts a bare majority found it convincing. Only one-third of Democrats found this argument convincing (34%); independents were divided.

Asked to decide whether they favored or opposed extending New START, an overwhelming four in five (82%) supported extension. Three in four Republicans (77%) and independents (74%) likewise supported it, as did 72% of Trump voters and 89% of Democrats. Support ranged from 76% in very red districts to 88% in very blue districts.





Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty

Two thirds, including a majority of Republicans, oppose withdrawing from the INF Treaty and favor instead staying within the Treaty and redoubling efforts to work with the Russians to address concerns of both sides.

Respondents also evaluated the debate about the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty (INF). They were given a background briefing as follows:

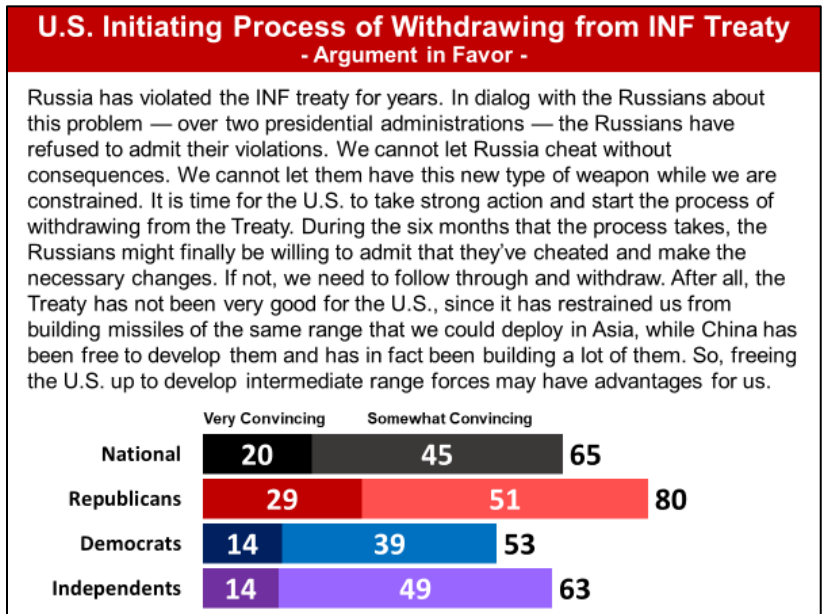
This treaty was signed by former President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987. It prohibits the U.S. and Russia (then the Soviet Union) from having land-based missiles with flight ranges between 310 to 3,420 miles. It was the first treaty to ban a whole class of weapons and included unprecedented on-site inspections.

They were told that “The U.S. has accused Russia of violating the treaty, but Russia has denied it. Similarly, Russia has accused the U.S. of violating the treaty, but the U.S. has also denied it.”

Respondents were informed that there is a debate about whether the US should withdraw from the treaty and that for the U.S. to withdraw, it must first formally announce that intention (as it in fact did on February 2, 2019, one day after fielding ended for this study). A six-month interval must ensue before withdrawal takes place.

Respondents first evaluated an argument in favor of the U.S. withdrawing from INF. It referenced longstanding U.S. concerns about Russian violations and suggested that announcing U.S. withdrawal might serve as a ‘wake-up call’ that convinces the Russians to fix the problem during the six-months before U.S. withdrawal takes effect. It also argued that INF has constrained the U.S. from building a class of missile that China has developed, “so, freeing the U.S. up to develop intermediate-range forces may have advantages for us.”

About two in three (65%) found this argument convincing, including 53% of Democrats, 80% of Republicans, and 63% of independents.

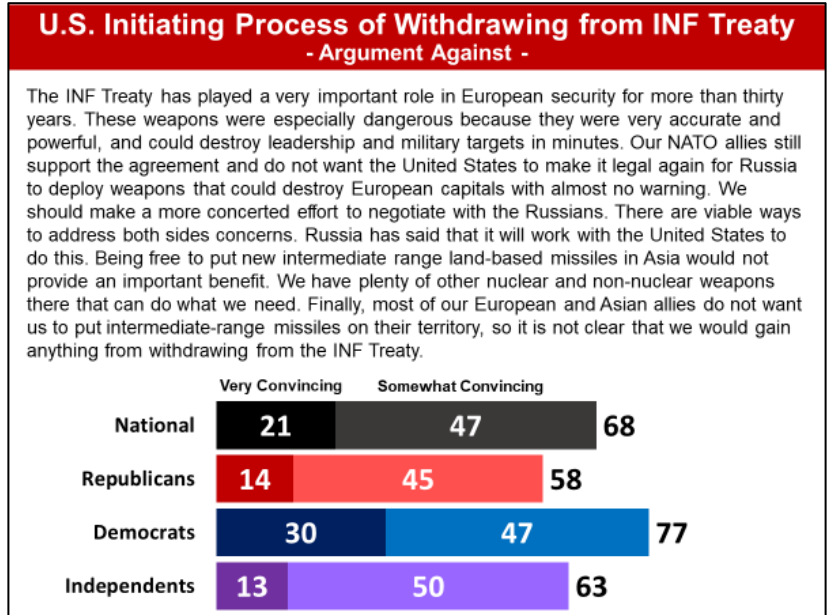


President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev signing the INF Treaty in the East Room of the White House, December 8, 1987.



The counter argument—which favored maintaining INF—pointed out that the weapons abolished by the treaty “were very accurate and powerful and could destroy leadership and military targets in minutes.” It noted that NATO allies still support the agreement and will not consent to basing new intermediate-range missiles on their soil. It made two more points:

- that Russia has stated it is willing to negotiate the concerns over INF compliance, and
- that where Asia is concerned, adding intermediate-range missiles to the types of U.S. weapons already able to hit those targets would provide little benefit.



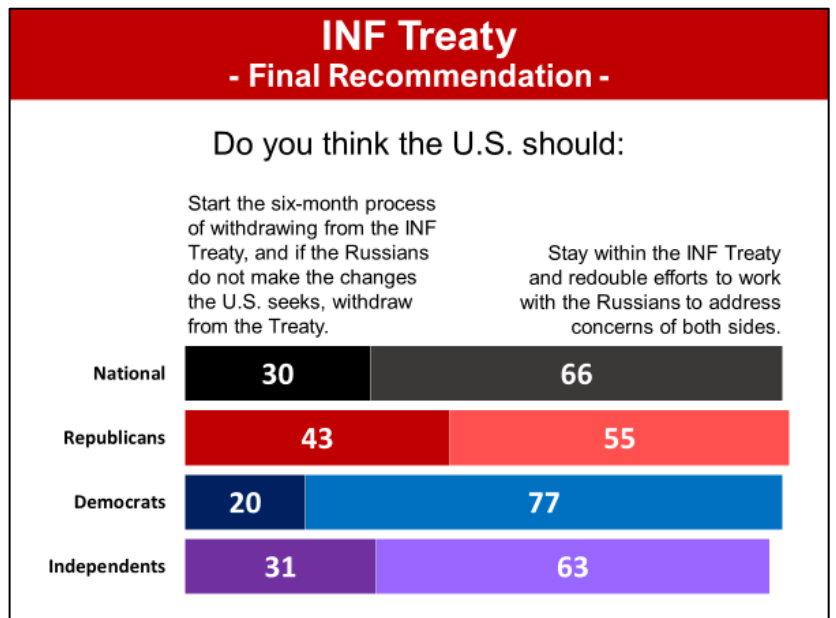
This argument did slightly better than its counterpart: 68% found it convincing including 58% of Republicans and 77% of Democrats.

Respondents were then asked to choose between two courses of action:

1. Start the six-month process of withdrawing from the INF Treaty, and if the Russians do not make the changes the U.S. seeks, withdraw from the Treaty.
2. Stay within the INF Treaty and redouble efforts to work with the Russians to address concerns of both sides.

Two thirds (66%) chose to stay in INF and go back to the table with Russia; 30% chose withdrawal.

Although it was being reported in the news at the time of the fielding that the Trump administration was preparing to initiate the formal withdrawal process, 55% of all Republicans preferred to stay in, as well as 51% of Trump voters. Even in very red districts, 59% preferred staying in INF as did 71% in very blue districts.





Nuclear Weapons Testing

Overwhelming majorities from both parties approve of the US continuing its moratorium on nuclear testing, effectively abiding by the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. In the event the US develops a technological innovation that might make it possible to build a new type of nuclear weapon that could destroy more of an adversary’s nuclear weapons, a majority still said they would oppose breaking the moratorium, though a bare majority of Republicans favored it.

Respondents received background information on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the moratorium on nuclear explosions that covered the following points:

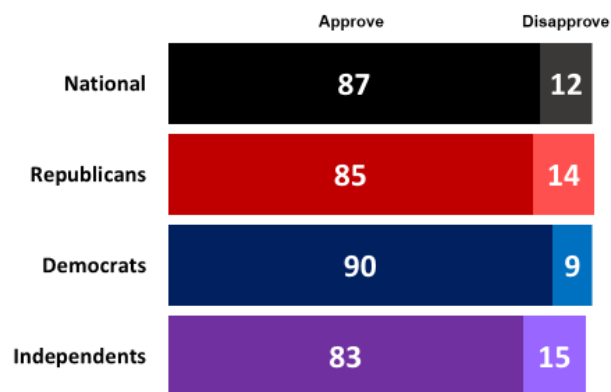
- Between 1942 and the mid-1990s, about two thousand nuclear tests were conducted across the world, mostly by the U.S. and the Soviet Union
- The U.S. ceased testing in the early 1990s and made it a priority to convince other countries not to test
- Most countries have signed the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which banned all nuclear tests. The U.S. signed, but the Senate voted against ratifying it
- A global monitoring system watches for evidence of nuclear explosions. Three countries with nuclear weapons--India, Pakistan, and Israel--did not sign CTBT, and later North Korea withdrew
- North Korea is the only country to have tested a nuclear weapon for the past two decades
- The current administration has said that it will continue to abide by the moratorium, though it reserves the right to resume testing if necessary, to ensure the effectiveness as well as the safety of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Respondents were asked their views on “the U.S. continuing to abide by the moratorium on nuclear testing.” Nearly nine in ten (87%) approved, while 12% disapproved. This included 85% of Republicans, 90% of Democrats, and 83% of independents. Trump voters were 82% in support.

Respondents were then given a hypothetical scenario that some argue would be a reason for the US to break the moratorium on nuclear testing. They were asked to “imagine that the U.S. has a technological innovation that some weapons developers think might make it possible for the U.S. to make a new type of nuclear weapon that could more effectively destroy some, but not all, of the nuclear weapons of an adversary. Developing such a new type of weapon would require that the U.S. test it, which would break the moratorium on testing nuclear weapons. “

Moratorium on Nuclear Weapons Testing

Do you approve or disapprove of the U.S. continuing to abide by the moratorium on nuclear testing?





They were told, “The question is whether, under these circumstances, the U.S. should or should not develop and test a new weapon, breaking the moratorium against testing nuclear weapons,” and were given pro and con arguments that fit the scenario.

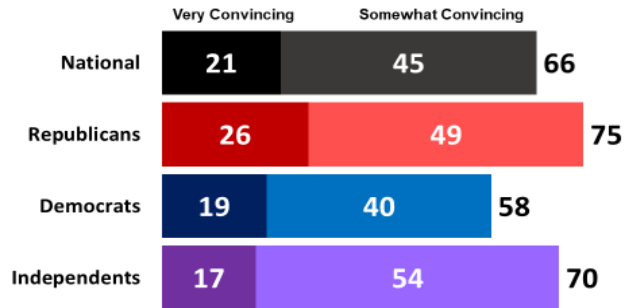
The argument for breaking the moratorium declared that whatever could be done to “reduce the number of weapons that could reach the U.S. or its allies,” should be done. Though the innovation might not destroy all the adversary’s nuclear weapons, it could still help the United States end the conflict on better terms—a prospect that would help to deter potential enemies. Two thirds (66%) found this argument convincing, and this result was bipartisan: 58% of Democrats, 75% of Republicans and 70% of independents.

The argument against breaking the moratorium insisted that the U.S. would remain vulnerable to a major attack even if it increased the number of nuclear weapons it could destroy. Adversaries would develop countermeasures and increase their nuclear arsenals with less vulnerable types of weapons. Above all, other countries would also begin testing nuclear weapons, which would accelerate development of their arsenals. Over seven in ten found this counter-argument convincing (72%). Republicans were not different from the national level (70%).

Finally, asked whether—in the scenario presented—the U.S. should or should not break the moratorium and conduct tests, a 56% majority said the U.S. should not test, while 42% thought it should. Opponents of testing included 65% of Democrats and 51% of independents. A bare majority of Republicans favored testing (52-47%) as did 54% of Trump voters. In very red districts, 53% favored testing; in all the other sets of districts, testing was rejected in a 54-64% range.

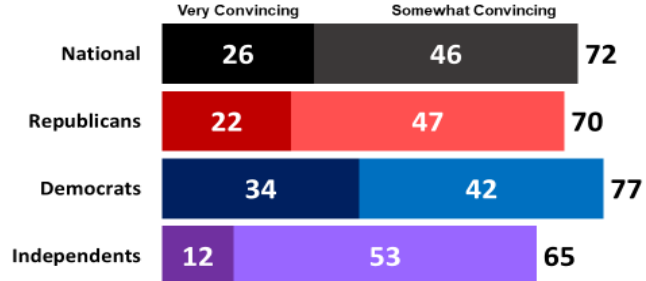
With Possible Breakthrough, Should US Test?
- Argument in Favor -

Anything that we can do to reduce the number of weapons that could reach the U.S. or its allies is something we should do. It could save lives and reduce damage to our military forces and infrastructure. Even if the new weapon could not destroy all of the adversary’s nuclear weapons, it still might give us an edge so that we could end a conflict on better terms than if we were not to have it. Knowing this, our potential enemies would be more deterred from thinking of attacking us in the first place.



With Possible Breakthrough, Should US Test?
- Argument Against -

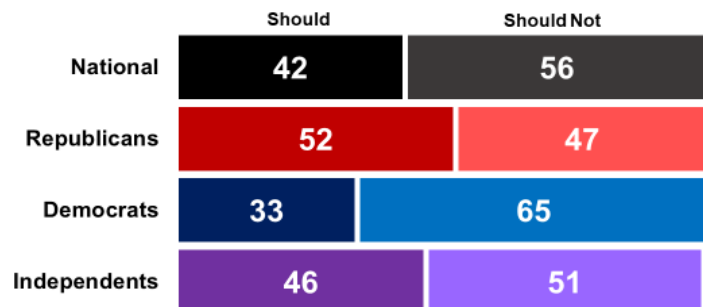
Even if the U.S. were able to destroy a few more of an enemy’s nuclear weapons than it can now, the U.S. would still be vulnerable to a major attack. Further, adversaries would surely develop countermeasures that would make the new capability ineffective or simply build more nuclear weapons that are less vulnerable. More importantly, if the U.S. were to break the moratorium, other countries would feel free to develop and test new types of nuclear weapons. Countries that now have less technologically advanced nuclear arsenals could end up posing a greater threat to us. It is better to keep the moratorium in place.



With Possible Breakthrough, Should US Test?
- Final Recommendation -

Imagine that the U.S. has a technological innovation that some weapons developers think might make it possible for the U.S. to make a new type of nuclear weapon that could more effectively destroy some, but not all, of the nuclear weapons of an adversary.

In such a case, do you think the U.S. should or should not develop and test the new type of weapon, breaking the moratorium against testing nuclear weapons?





US NUCLEAR WEAPONS CAPABILITIES

Minimum Retaliatory Capability

Eight in ten or more from both parties support the US having a retaliatory nuclear capability destructive enough that no country could think that there would be any advantage in attacking the United States with nuclear weapons.

Respondents were introduced to the idea of a minimum requirement for a U.S. nuclear arsenal as follows:

Some people say that the U.S. should have an arsenal that meets the following minimum requirement:

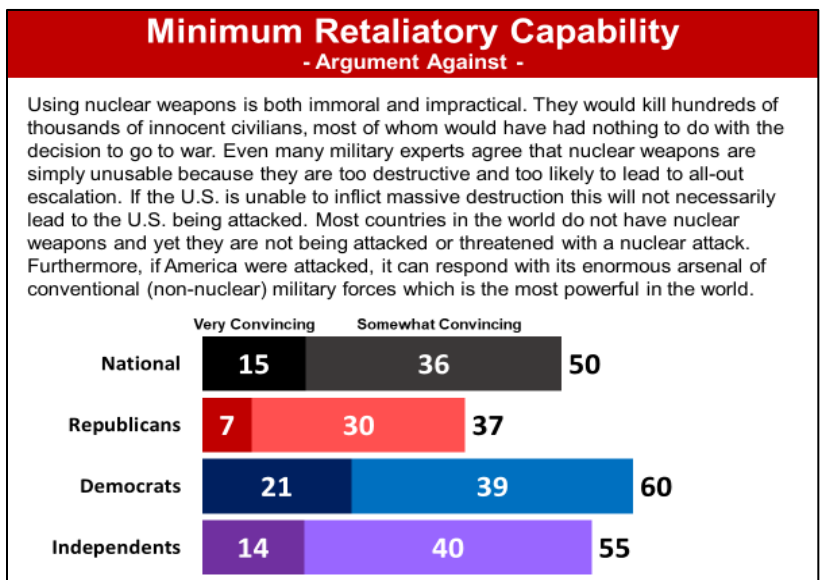
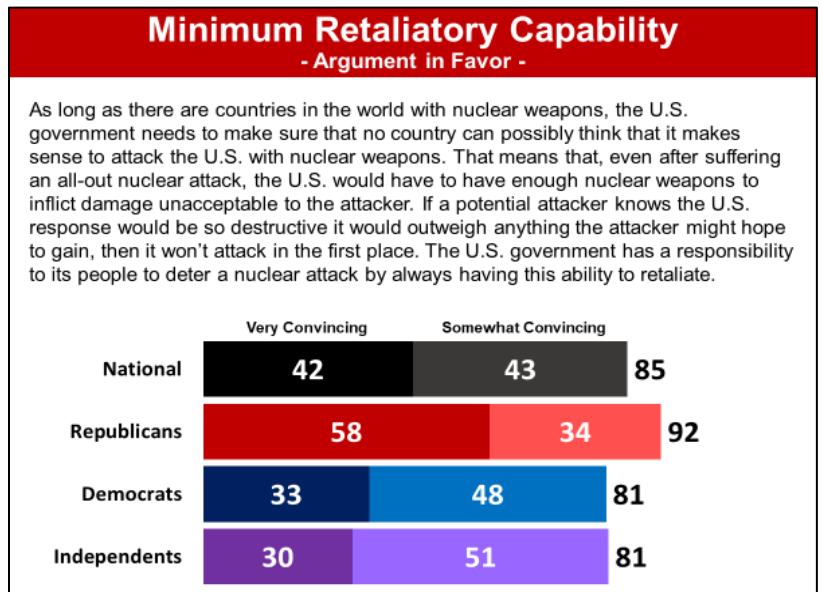
As long as other countries have nuclear weapons, the U.S. must have, at a minimum, enough nuclear weapons that could not be destroyed by an all-out surprise nuclear attack, so that the U.S. could always retaliate with a major nuclear strike. This potential retaliatory strike needs to be destructive enough that no country could think that there would be any advantage in attacking the U.S. with nuclear weapons.

They then evaluated arguments for and against the U.S. having an arsenal that meets this minimum. The argument in favor rested on deterrence— “to make sure that no country can possibly think that it makes sense to attack the U.S. with nuclear weapons.” It insisted that “the U.S. government has a responsibility to its people” to “always [have] this ability to retaliate.”

This argument elicited near consensual support, with 85% finding it convincing (very, 42%). All partisan groups showed eight in ten or more finding the argument convincing, as did all the sets of districts.

The counter argument declared that “using nuclear weapons is both immoral and impractical,” and that many military experts view them as unusable because of the uncontrollable nature of a nuclear conflict. It also held that the vast conventional arms of the U.S. would still be able to inflict a devastating response on the attacker.

This argument got a divided response, with 50% finding it convincing. The response was distinctly partisan: 37% of Republicans found it convincing, as compared to 60% of





Democrats. Interestingly, independents did not mirror the (divided) national result; instead, 55% found the counter-argument convincing. In very red districts, 45% said the argument was convincing; in very blue districts, 55% did.

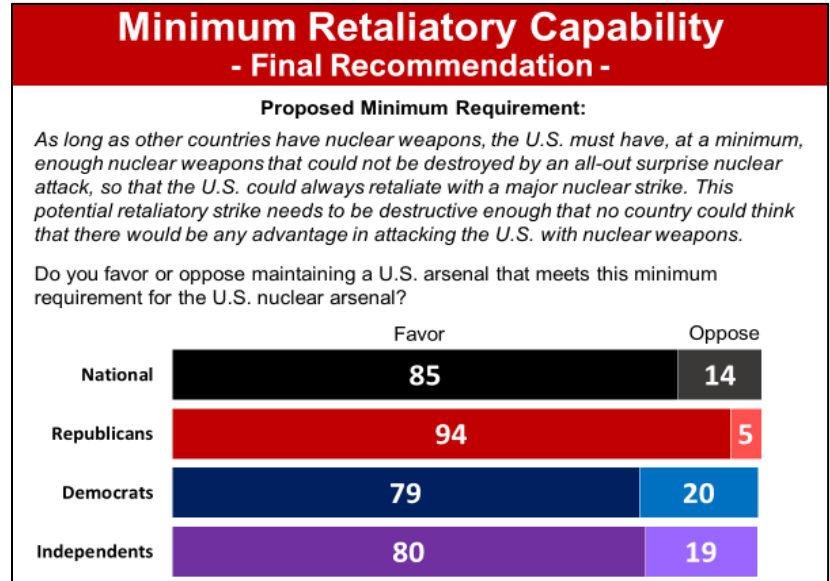
After considering the pro and con arguments, respondents were asked whether the U.S. should maintain a nuclear arsenal that, at a minimum, met the given criteria. Eighty-five percent said the U.S. should: Republicans were highest at 94%; Democrats were at 79% and independents, 80%.

Respondents were then asked to give their own figure for “how many nuclear weapons... the U.S. needs to have that would survive an all-out nuclear attack and could then be used for retaliation?”

Overall, the median response was 1,000.

This was the median among Democrats and independents as well. Republicans’ median was 3,000 weapons.

This finding needs to be viewed carefully, especially the median of 3,000 for Republicans. Respondents were informed initially that the US has a total of about 4,000 nuclear weapons, as well as 1,650 deployed strategic weapons. Thus, it is not entirely clear whether the respondent was selecting the proposed residual size of the entire arsenal or the residual size of the deployed strategic arsenal. Cross tabulations suggest that some respondents who gave a number higher than 1,650 were in fact using the 4,000 number as the baseline, because a substantial number of them also endorsed the idea of having a nuclear arsenal limited to minimum retaliatory capability only, which clearly points to a reduction in the number of weapons in the arsenal, not an increase.



Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work tours a B-52 weapons loading training hangar on Minot Air Force Base, N.D., February 2015. Work, who chairs the Nuclear Deterrent Enterprise Review Group, met with nuclear enterprise airmen. DoD photo by Claudette Roulo



Low Yield Warheads and the Need for Matching Nuclear Options

Respondents were presented a rationale for developing nuclear capabilities over and above the minimum retaliatory capability based on the need to threaten to match any type of nuclear capability an adversary might use. When presented a specific example of the current debate over whether the US should put low-yield nuclear warheads on missiles on submarines to match corresponding Russian capabilities, a bipartisan majority of two thirds supported adding a low-yield option to nuclear missiles on submarines. Yet, when asked about the general principle, a plurality endorsed the view that a minimum retaliatory capability is adequate, over the view that the US must have the capability to retaliate against a major attack using only a type of weapon similar to the type the adversary used.

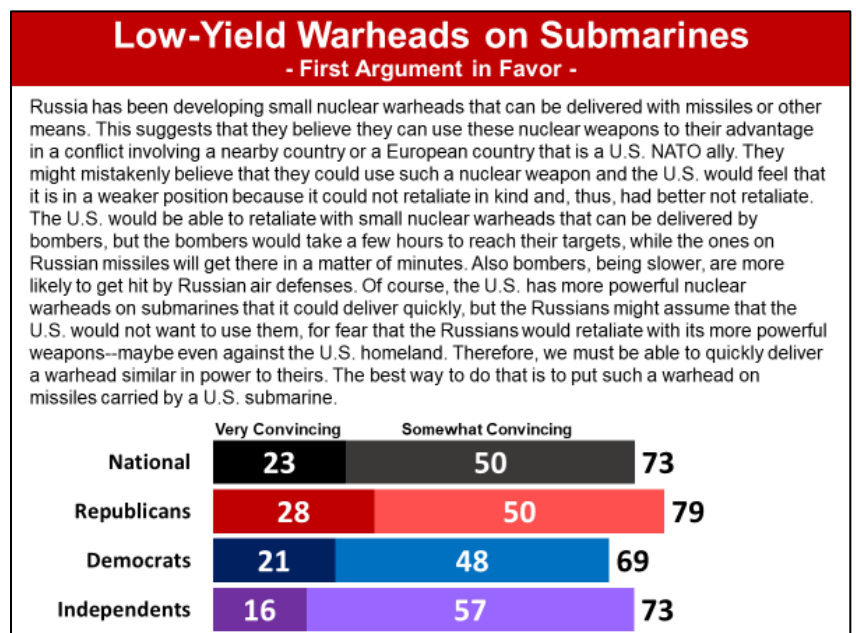
After assessing the minimum requirement for the nuclear arsenal, respondents learned about the debate over whether “there are additional requirements that the U.S. needs to meet and that necessitate having more nuclear weapons than this minimum.” They were told that “One such additional requirement is based on the possibility that an enemy might make a limited first strike attack against the U.S. or an ally, using only a specific type of nuclear weapon. The requirement is that the U.S. must be able to retaliate with a nuclear strike using only weapons that are similar to the ones used by the enemy in terms of their explosive power, their speed, and how close they are to the area of conflict.”

They were then told:

This argument is coming up in a current debate about whether the U.S. needs to respond to new types of Russian nuclear weapons by having something similar. The focus of this concern is that the Russians have been developing warheads with relatively low explosive power—about half the size of the Hiroshima bomb—that they could put on missiles as well as other means of delivery. If Russia were to use such a weapon against a U.S. ally close to Russia, the U.S. already has the ability to respond with warheads that have similarly low explosive power. But right now, the U.S. can only deliver them by bombers, and it would take up to a few hours for the bombers to reach their targets. Some people say that this is a problem and the U.S. should put nuclear warheads with low explosive power on submarine missiles that travel more quickly.

Respondents started with an argument in favor of taking this action. It asserted the Russians may believe they can use relatively small warheads to their advantage, perhaps in a conflict with a U.S. NATO ally. If the US felt it could not retaliate in kind in a timely fashion, it might forego a response. The Russians would be more effectively deterred if the United States put comparable small warheads on submarine-borne missiles to show readiness to retaliate in kind.

About three quarters (73%) found this argument convincing. Republicans, Democrats and independents all had essentially the same reaction (a range of 69-79%).





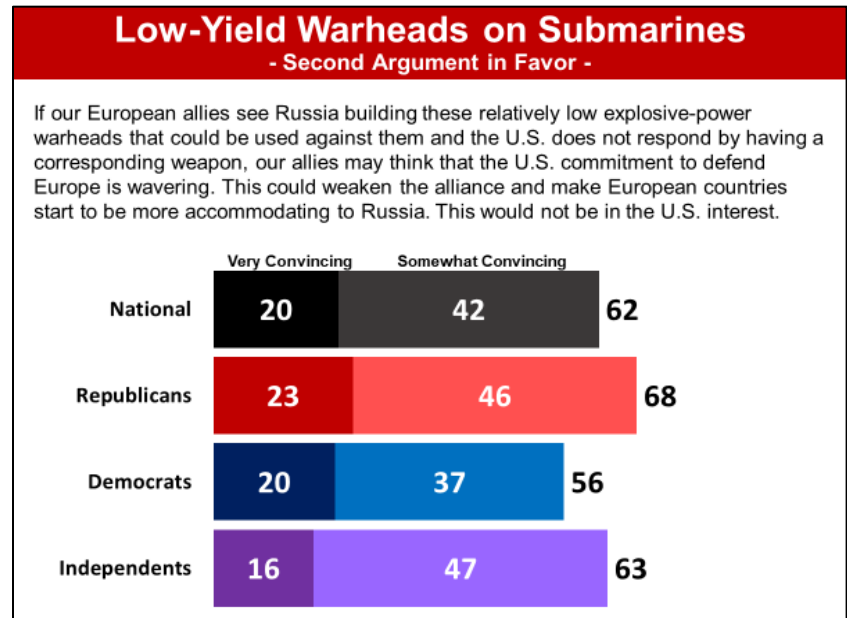
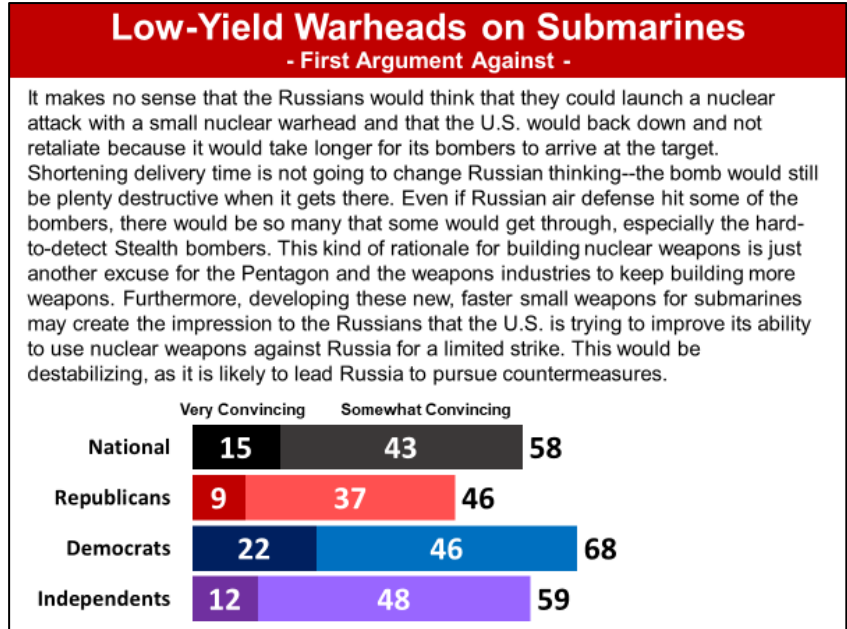
The first counter-argument held that “shortening delivery time is not going to change Russian thinking” about a U.S. nuclear response. It noted that the United States can already use planes, particularly Stealth bombers, to deliver low-yield weapons. It claimed the proposal to put low yield options on submarines was “just another excuse... to keep building more weapons.” It also suggested that this step could be destabilizing, making Russians think the US was fine-tuning its capacity for a limited strike against Russia.

The first counter argument was found convincing by almost three in five (58%). Majorities of Democrats (68%) and independents (59%) found it convincing, but less than half of Republicans felt the same (46%). However, in the Congressional districts it was found convincing by majorities in all six classes, ranging from 52 to 68%.

The second pair of pro and con arguments concentrated on the attitudes of U.S. allies toward the proposed action. The argument favoring the action asserted that if it were not taken, our European allies would perceive U.S. commitment in the alliance as wavering and would consequently start to accommodate Russia, hurting U.S. interests.

Three in five (62%) found this convincing. These attitudes were bipartisan, with 68% of Republicans and 56% of Democrats finding the argument convincing.

The second counter-argument pointed out that there was no doubt of the size and variety of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and so adding yet more would not be reassuring for allies. Rather, maintaining relations that are genuinely close would be the most reassuring action the U.S. could take, especially since ordinary European citizens are likely to see new weapons as simply heightening tensions.





This con argument did just well as the pro argument it countered, with 62% finding it convincing. It also garnered a majority in each party, though not by much among Republicans (51%), compared with 71% of Democrats.

After considering these four arguments, respondents were asked to conclude whether “the U.S. should or should not put nuclear warheads with relatively low explosive power on missiles on submarines?”

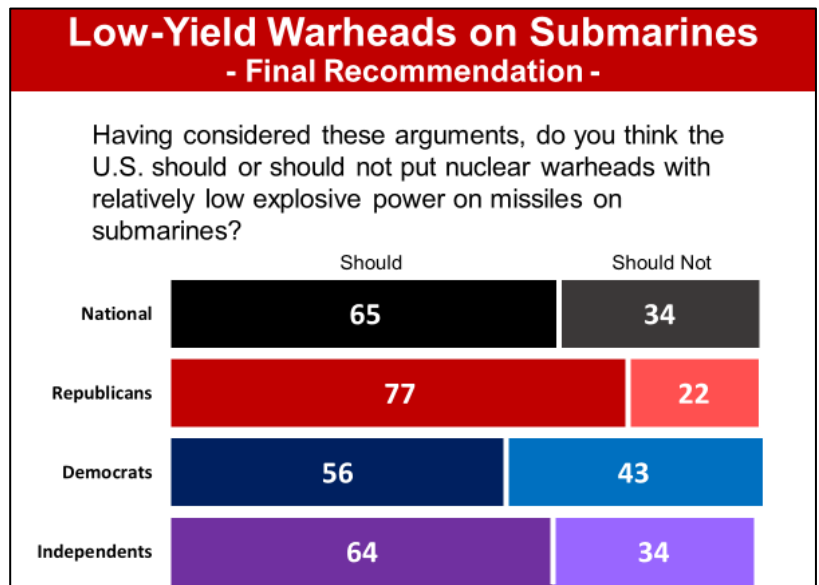
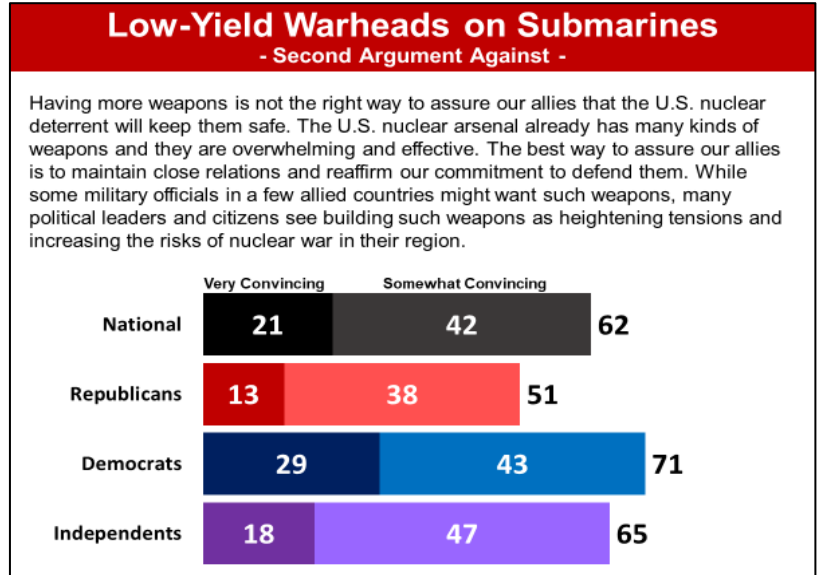
A clear bipartisan majority of 65% said the U.S. should take this specific step: 77% of Republicans, 56% of Democrats and 64% of independents. Among the Congressional districts, 71% of very red and 61% of very blue districts were in favor.

It is noteworthy, though, that when asked in general, less than half agreed with the underlying principle that effective deterrence requires the United States to have the capability to retaliate with a specific type of nuclear weapon similar to each type the enemy could use.

Immediately after being asked about putting low yield warheads on submarine launched missiles, the same respondents were asked:

Regardless of whether you think the U.S. needs to develop this particular weapon, as a general principle do you think that:

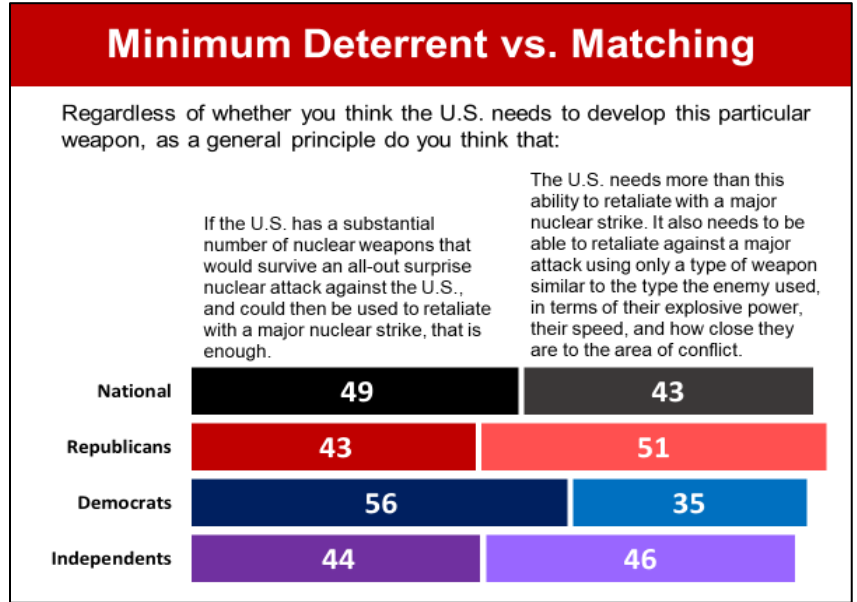
1. *If the U.S. has a substantial number of nuclear weapons that would survive an all-out surprise nuclear attack against the U.S. and could then be used to retaliate with a major nuclear strike, that is enough.*
2. *The U.S. needs more than this ability to retaliate with a major nuclear strike. It also needs to be able to retaliate against a major attack using only a type of weapon similar to the type the enemy used, in terms of their explosive power, their speed, and how close they are to the area of conflict.*





Interestingly, only 43% chose the second position calling for the ability to respond in kind to any nuclear attack, though this was the rationale provided for the low yield weapon. Rather a clear plurality (49%) opted for the principle that a minimum retaliatory capability is adequate, as did 56% of Democrats. Among Republicans, a bare majority (51%) endorsed the principle of being able to always retaliate in kind, while independents were divided.

The spectrum of Congressional districts showed no meaningful pattern.



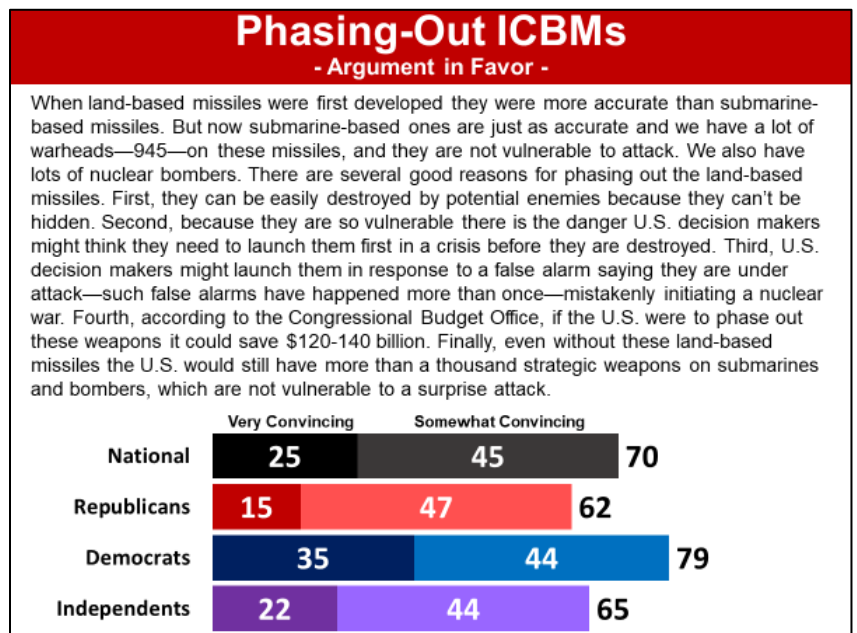
Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs)

Knowing that the United States currently has strategic weapons on submarines, bombers, and land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, six in ten, including a majority of Republicans, favor phasing out the ICBM force. However, only one-third favor unilaterally reducing the net number of strategic warheads in the U.S. arsenal instead of putting more warheads on submarines and bombers to keep the same total as the Russians.

Respondents were informed that there is a debate about the U.S.’s land-based strategic missiles (intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs) saying that “The U.S. has about 400 [ICBMs] that are active and ready to be used. All of them are aging and are scheduled to be replaced by 2030. However, some people say that they should not be replaced, but phased out instead.”

The argument in favor of phasing out ICBMs underscored that ICBMs are stationary and cannot be hidden from attack; that since they are vulnerable, U.S. decision makers might be prone to launch them in response to a false alarm; and that over a thousand strategic weapons are currently on submarines and bombers in any case. Phasing out ICBMs would also save \$120-140 billion.

Seventy percent found this argument convincing (62% of Republicans and 79% of Democrats).





The counter argument emphasized the value of the strategic triad--the long-standing policy that the U.S. can deliver strategic nuclear weapons by land-based missiles, sea-based missiles, and bombers. It asserted that retaining the full triad heightens deterrence, and that altering this policy would signal that our will is faltering.

The counter argument also said that a future technical development could make submarines more detectable and vulnerable to attack. Even if this does not happen, phasing out ICBMs would remove some of the targets that Russian weapons currently need to cover.

Two thirds (68%) found this argument convincing. Republicans had a stronger positive response at 80%. Both Democrats and independents showed three in five finding the argument convincing.

Respondents were told there was another debate “about whether, if the U.S. phases out its land-based missiles, it should increase the number of warheads on its submarines and bombers.” On this related debate, respondents also dealt with two arguments.

The argument in favor of increasing warheads on other platforms said simply:

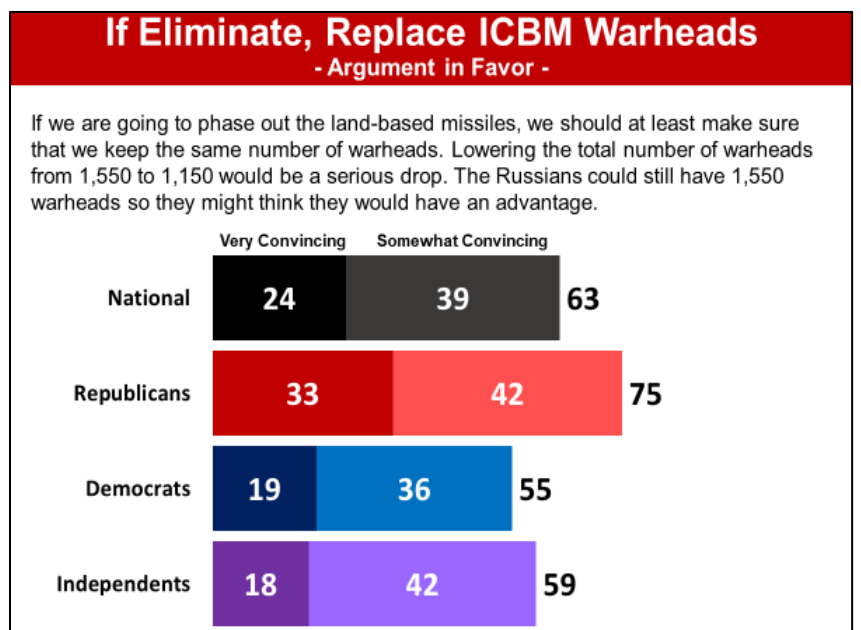
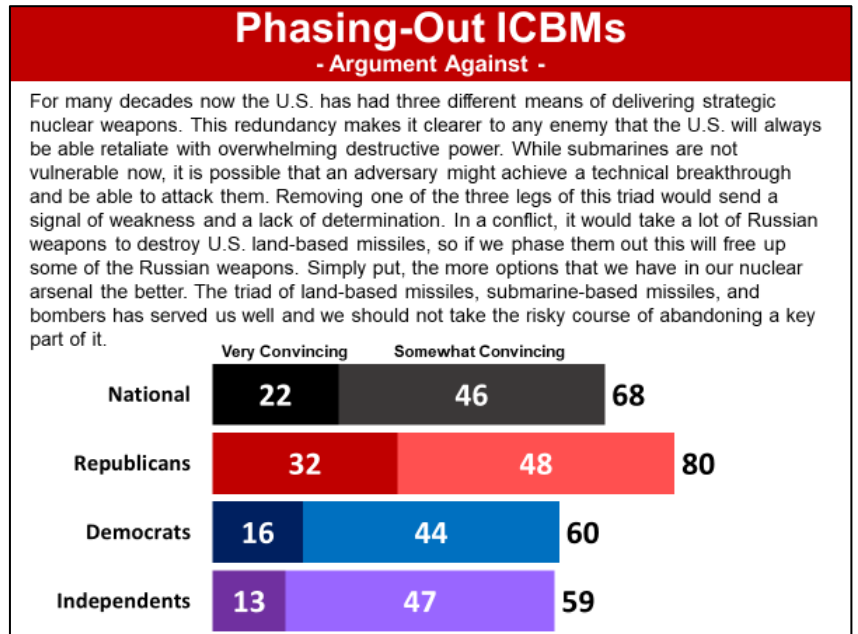
If we are going to phase out the land-based missiles, we should at least make sure that we keep the same number of warheads. Lowering the total number of warheads from 1,550 to 1,150 would be a serious drop. The Russians could still have 1,550 warheads so they might think they would have an advantage.

A little over three in five (63%) found this argument convincing. While this reaction was bipartisan, there was a 20-point gap between Republicans (75%) and Democrats (55%).

The counter-argument was also brief:

Having 1,150 warheads would be more than plenty for assuring that we can deter any potential enemy from attacking us. Building additional warheads for submarines and bombers would be expensive and unnecessary.

The counter-argument, while found convincing by a majority, did not do as well





as the pro argument, with 56% finding it convincing overall, (Democrats 64%) while among Republicans this was only 42%.

Finally, respondents selected among three options:

1. replace existing land-based missiles with new ones
2. phase-out land-based missiles, but maintain the total number of warheads at 1,550 by increasing their numbers on submarines and bombers (savings: \$120 billion)
3. phase-out land-based missiles and keep 1,150 warheads on submarines and bombers (savings: \$140 billion)

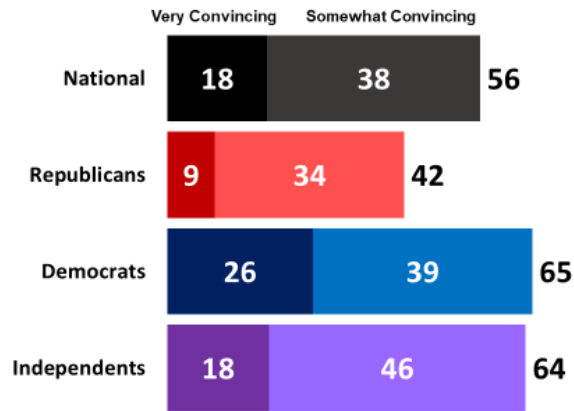
Only a third (32%) wanted to keep and renew the ICBM force with new missiles. Three in five (61%) chose one of the two options that would phase out land-based missiles.

Thirty-three percent thought that having 1,150 warheads on submarines and bombers was enough even if the Russians still had 1,550 warheads, while 28% favored increasing the number of U.S. warheads on submarines and bombers to 1,550 under current circumstances (e.g. without a treaty limiting both the U.S. and Russia to lower warhead numbers).

Support for phasing out ICBMs cut across party lines. Among Republicans, 53% wanted to phase out land-based missiles (20% supporting 1,150 warheads and 33% the 1,550 option). Among Democrats, 69% wanted to phase out land-based missiles (42% supporting 1,150 warheads and 26% the 1,550 option). Among independents, 57% wanted to phase out land-based missiles (39% supporting 1,150 warheads and a lower 18% the 1,550 option). Even in very red districts, 58% chose to phase out land-based missiles.

If Eliminate, Replace ICBM Warheads - Argument Against -

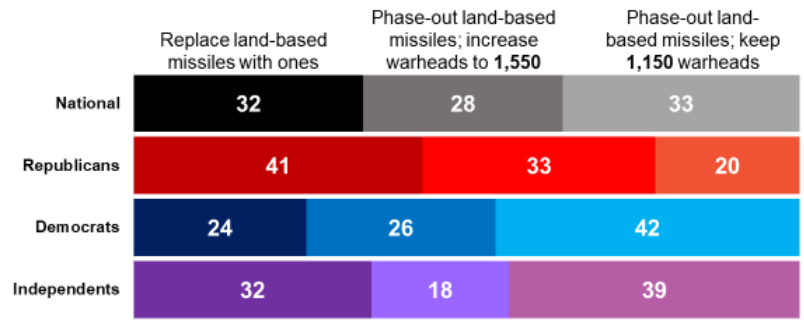
Having 1,150 warheads would be more than plenty for assuring that we can deter any potential enemy from attacking us. Building additional warheads for submarines and bombers would be expensive and unnecessary.



What to Do About ICBMs - Final Recommendation -

Do you think the U.S. should:

1. replace land-based missiles by building new land-based missiles
2. Phase-out land-based missiles and increase the number of warheads on submarines and bombers to 1,550 (savings over replacing them: about \$120 billion)
3. Phase-out land-based missiles while keeping 1,150 warheads on its submarines and bombers (savings over replacing them: about \$140 billion)





FIRST USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

US Declaratory Policy on First Use

Only one in five endorsed the United States explicitly declaring that it would consider using nuclear weapons first and stating what kinds of non-nuclear attacks would prompt the United States to consider doing so. Just slightly more than one in five favored explicitly declaring that the United States will never use nuclear weapons first. A majority favored continuing the current policy of being ambiguous about whether and under what conditions the United States would consider using nuclear weapons first. Presented a list of possible types of attack, less than one in six favored declaring that the United States would consider using nuclear weapons in response to any of them.

Respondents were introduced to an issue addressed in the most recent Nuclear Policy Review document: whether the U.S. should declare in advance its readiness to consider a nuclear response to a variety of non-nuclear strategic attacks. The issue was presented in this way:

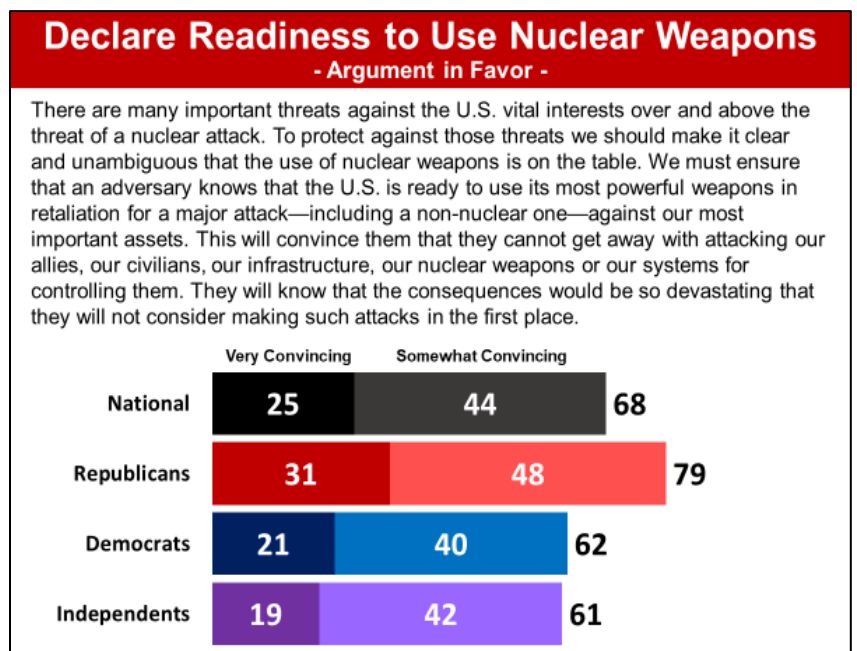
Right now, the United States promises never to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against countries that do not have nuclear weapons and have allowed international inspectors to verify that they are not trying to build them.

But, for all other cases, the U.S. has been publicly ambiguous about whether it might use nuclear weapons first and under what conditions. U.S. officials, under some administrations, have commented that the United States would consider responding with nuclear weapons to a major non-nuclear attack on an ally (such as a Russian invasion of a NATO country), or one involving biological or chemical weapons. But this has not been a formal U.S. policy and such statements have varied with different administrations.

Respondents were asked to consider two distinct proposals, each of which would end the posture of ambiguity: for the U.S. to declare it would consider using nuclear weapons first in certain named circumstances; or, for the U.S. to declare “it will never use nuclear weapons first.”

First, respondents evaluated an argument in favor of declaring the U.S. “will consider using nuclear weapons first in response to a number of specific types of non-nuclear attacks.” It noted that apart from nuclear threats, there were other types of grave threats against US vital interests, and claimed that clearly putting a nuclear response to such attacks “on the table” would be a powerful deterrent.

This argument was found convincing by two thirds (68%) including majorities from both parties (79% of Republicans, 62% of Democrats).





The counter-argument recalled that the nuclear threshold has not been crossed since Hiroshima and Nagasaki 73 years ago. If the US makes declarations and then deterrence fails, it will be under pressure to initiate nuclear use in order to preserve the credibility of future threats. Even a very limited nuclear response would greatly increase the possibility of nuclear use by other powers—and make more countries feel compelled to acquire nuclear weapons.

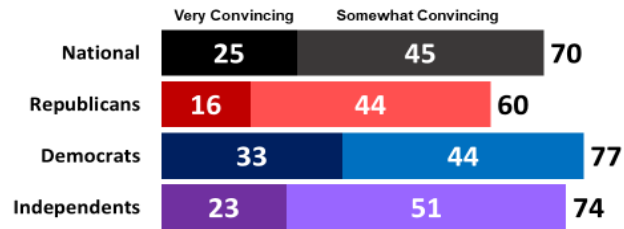
The counter-argument had about the same potency as the pro argument, with 70% finding it convincing, including large majorities in both parties.

Next, respondents evaluated pro and con arguments for a policy shift in the opposite direction—the U.S. declaring that it will *never* use nuclear weapons first. The argument for making a No First Use declaration held that nuclear threat could only be justified for the purpose of deterring a nuclear attack. The mere belief in other countries that the U.S. might use nuclear weapons for other purposes would suggest that nuclear weapons are an “ordinary military option.” This would encourage other countries to develop or expand their nuclear arsenals. Hence the best policy would be to state the U.S. will never be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict. This argument was, like the others, found convincing on a bipartisan basis (67% overall, 57% of Republicans, 76% of Democrats).

The counter argument—against declaring no first use—reminded respondents of other types of threats, “such as... the use of chemical or biological weapons,” that the current U.S. ambiguity about nuclear use could help to deter. It also asserted that if our allies did not think the U.S. might possibly use nuclear weapons in an extreme case to protect them from such attacks, they would tend to think that they need their own nuclear arsenals.

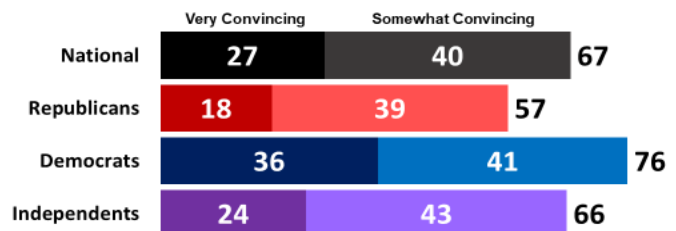
Declare Readiness to Use Nuclear Weapons - Argument Against -

It is easy to say that we will deter bad behavior with the explicit threat of nuclear weapons. But sometimes deterrence fails. What then? Would we really want to use nuclear weapons in response to a non-nuclear attack? We must never forget how significant it would be to cross the nuclear threshold for the first time since Hiroshima and Nagasaki 73 years ago. If we were to use a nuclear weapon first, there would be a serious likelihood that a nuclear weapon would be used in response which would kill many thousands of Americans. Just declaring that we will consider using nuclear weapons first could make other countries feel freer to use nuclear weapons and make countries without nuclear weapons feel more compelled to get them. In response to a non-nuclear attack, the U.S. has many powerful non-nuclear forces that can inflict enough damage to deter an adversary.



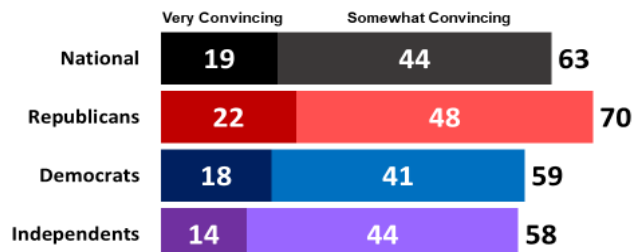
Declare No First Use of Nuclear Weapons - Argument in Favor -

While it can be justified to use nuclear threats to deter a country from attacking us or our allies with nuclear weapons, there is no way to justify using nuclear weapons for other purposes. Even if the United States were to only use a small nuclear weapon against a purely military target, many thousands of civilians could still be killed. The chances are very high it would escalate to a major nuclear war that could kill many millions. If countries believe the U.S. might use nuclear weapons first, countries with small nuclear arsenals would be more motivated to expand their arsenal to make sure the U.S. does not push them around with nuclear threats. It sends a signal to the world that the use of nuclear weapons is an ordinary military option, which it is not. Besides, the U.S. has tremendous non-nuclear military power that it can always use. The U.S. should declare unambiguously that it will never use nuclear weapons first.



Declare No First Use of Nuclear Weapons - Argument Against -

Declaring unambiguously that the U.S. would never use nuclear weapons first would effectively tie one of our arms behind our back. There are many important threats that the U.S. is seeking to deter other than a nuclear attack—such as a large-scale non-nuclear attack against our allies, or the use of chemical or biological weapons. Letting our enemies think we might use nuclear weapons in response to those kinds of attacks makes them nervous and might help deter them. It is also important for our allies to believe that, in an extreme case, we might be ready to use nuclear weapons to protect them from a non-nuclear attack. If it becomes clear that that will not happen, they may decide that they need nuclear weapons too. That would not be in our interest.





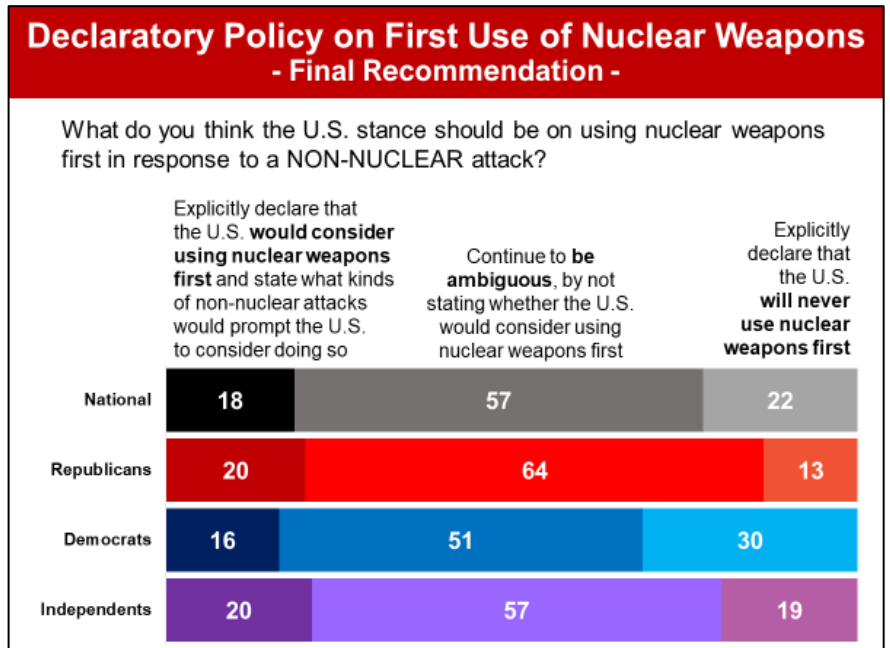
This counter-argument did slightly less well than the preceding three, with 63% finding it convincing (19% very). Republicans were at 70% and Democrats and independents together at 58-59%.

Finally, respondents were asked to make a choice from all three options discussed:

1. explicitly declaring conditions under which the U.S. would consider first use;
2. the status quo, “continu[ing] to be ambiguous”; or
3. explicitly declaring the U.S. will never use nuclear weapons first.

Keeping the current ambiguity on nuclear use won an absolute majority—which is striking, since three options were offered. There was also an absolute majority in each party. Retaining the current ambiguity was supported by 57%, including 64% of Republicans, 51% of Democrats, and 57% of independents.

Less than a fifth (18%, 20% of Republicans) chose the stance taken in the Nuclear Policy Review, of explicitly declaring possible first-use situations. Twenty-two percent chose declaring a no-first-use policy (30% of Democrats). No class of Congressional districts varied meaningfully from the overall proportions among the three positions.



Types of Non-Nuclear Attacks

The study then took the 21% of respondents who favored the U.S. explicitly declaring that it would consider using nuclear weapons first in certain situations or who did not take a position on the question and presented specific types of non-nuclear attacks (others were not asked the series because they had rejected the option in principle). For each one the subsample was asked whether they favored declaring that the United States would consider using nuclear weapons in response to each of them.

TYPE OF NON-NUCLEAR ATTACK	FAVOR
A major attack using chemical or biological weapons on the U.S. or other countries that are our partners or allies	16%
Non-nuclear attacks on nuclear forces of the U.S. or our allies	11%
Non-nuclear attacks on systems that provide warning about attacks on the U.S. or our allies and damage assessments	11%
A major non-nuclear attack on military forces of the U.S. or other countries that are our partners or allies	10%
A major non-nuclear attack on civilians in the U.S. or other countries that are our partners or allies	10%
Non-nuclear attacks on infrastructure in the U.S. or other countries that are our partners or allies	9%



Only one option elicited clear majority support among the 21% of the sample that was asked the question (16% of the full sample): “A major attack using chemical or biological weapons on the U.S. or... partners or allies.” All others were endorsed by a bare majority of the sample asked or fewer and about one in ten of the full sample. The chart shows all the types of attacks in descending order of support for making an advance declaration.

Limiting Presidential First Use

Two thirds, including six in ten Republicans, support Congressional legislation requiring that to use nuclear weapons first, the President would first have to consult Congress and it would have to issue a declaration of war on the country to be attacked with nuclear weapons.

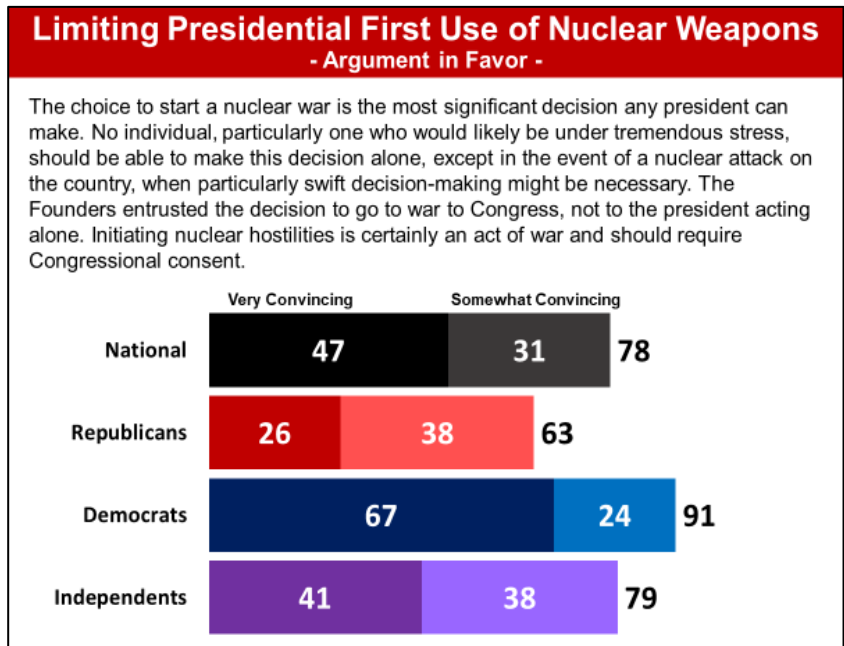
A large bipartisan majority endorsed the idea behind legislation pending in Congress that would require the President, before making first use of nuclear weapons, to consult Congress and request a declaration of war. (The bill makes an exception for the President to respond to intelligence that a nuclear attack from a foreign power is immanent.)

Respondents were reminded that “only the President has the authority to order the launch of nuclear weapons and he is not required to consult with or get approval from Congress.” They were told that in the proposed legislation, the President would keep “the authority to use nuclear weapons in response to the launch of a nuclear strike against the U.S. or an ally.” But to use nuclear weapons first would require Congressional consultation, and Congress would have to vote to declare war.

The argument favoring the legislation reminded respondents that starting a nuclear war would be too consequential for any president to make on his own. The president should need approval from Congress, the branch of government that the Founders entrusted with the decision to go to war. Almost four in five (78%) found this argument convincing (47% very). This was true of 63% of Republicans and 91% of Democrats.

The counter-argument pointed out that the president is the commander-in-chief of U.S. armed forces and has the authority to act promptly to defend the country.

Congress—which has not voted a declaration of war since World War II—will “make it extremely hard to get the necessary approval” if this requirement is imposed on the president. This would weaken deterrence, emboldening potential adversaries.





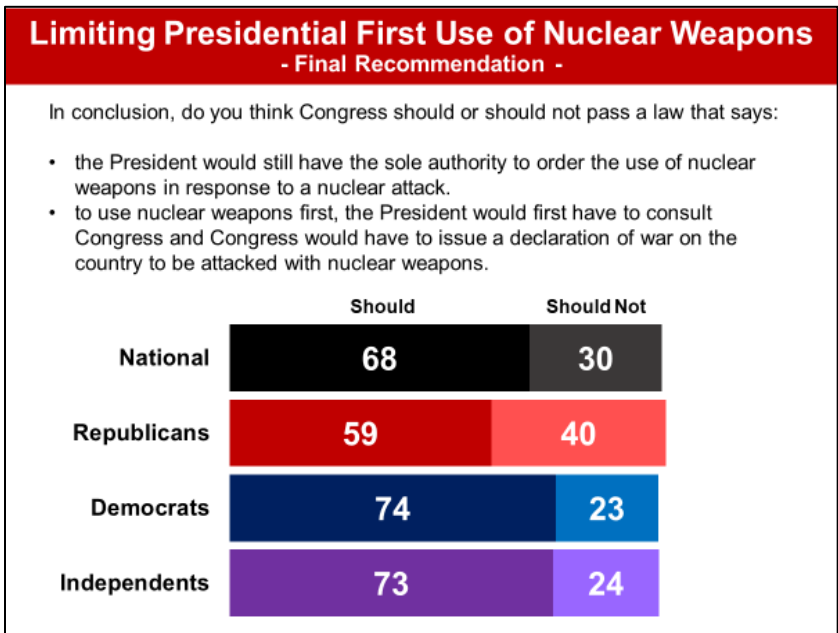
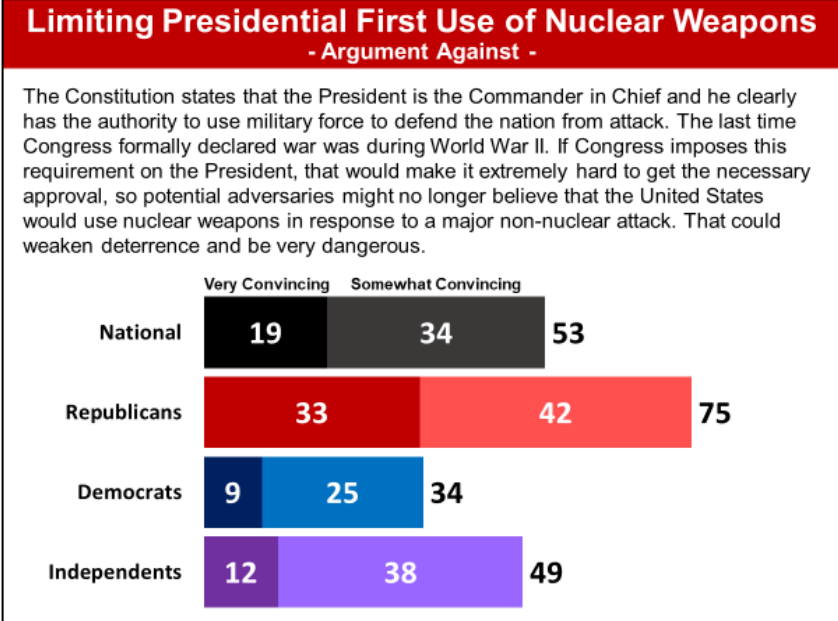
The counter-argument was not received nearly as well as the pro argument. Still, a modest majority (53%) did find it convincing. There was a strong partisan divide, with 75% of Republicans giving weight to the counter-argument, but only 34% of Democrats. Independents were divided.

In the Congressional districts, 59% of respondents in very red districts found it convincing, while only 46% of respondents in blue and very blue districts gave it weight.

Respondents were then asked whether Congress should or should not pass a law saying that:

- The President would still have the sole authority to order the use of nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack.
- To use nuclear weapons first, the President would first have to consult Congress, which would have to issue a declaration of war on the country to be attacked with nuclear weapons.

Two-thirds (68%) thought the bill should be passed into law. This was bipartisan, with 59% of Republicans and 74% of Democrats agreeing (Independents, 73%). Only thirty percent of all respondents opposed legislation requiring the president to get Congressional approval before starting a nuclear war. Among those who approve of Trump, 58% favored the law.



Testing of the Peacekeeper ICBM re-entry vehicles at the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, 1983.



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SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

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SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was conducted with generous support from the **MacArthur Foundation** and the **Yamamoto-Scheffelin Endowment for Policy Research**.

The survey was fielded by **Nielsen-Scarborough** with a probability-based representative sample of registered voters. Special thanks to Scott Willoth and Neil Schwartz of Nielsen-Scarborough for their continued support.

The **Center for Public Integrity** provided consulting for the survey.

Allison Stettler managed press outreach, as well as the design, production and dissemination of the report.