



# BATTLEGROUND:

How Trump and Harris Voters See America's  
Role in the World

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September 2024



**institute  
for global  
affairs**  
eurasia group



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# Executive Summary

This year the Institute for Global Affairs (IGA) asked 1,835 Americans their perspectives on key foreign policy issues.

Our findings reveal important differences across parties, candidate preferences, and between the national population and residents of hotly contested battleground states. In addition to a nationally representative sample, we included focused samples of three Rust Belt states (Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan) and three Sun Belt states (Georgia, Arizona, and Nevada), with potential consequences for this year's presidential election.

## **Harris leads on critical foreign policy issues nationally, but Trump leads in key swing states.**

- **Nationally**, Kamala Harris is seen as the candidate more likely to pursue a foreign policy which “benefits people like you,” improve America’s international reputation, be a strong leader who advances America’s interests internationally, and less likely to send US troops to an unnecessary war. In swing states, however, Donald Trump has the edge on each of these.
- Where Trump is perceived more favorably than Harris nationally — more likely to reform immigration, end the Gaza and Ukraine wars, and respond effectively to a Chinese attack on Taiwan — he has an even greater margin of favorability in swing states.
- People in **Rust Belt** states care more about the rise of China and less about climate change than Americans nationwide. Those in **Sun Belt** states care more than that nationwide population about immigration. These views could bode well for Trump’s candidacy.

## **Supporters of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump differ on key foreign policy issues.**

- Trump supporters appear less hawkish on China than the average Republican, and Harris supporters appear more hawkish on China than the average Democrat.

For example, more Republicans than Democrats think the West should prepare for a new Cold War between the US and China (68% vs. 52%), but the margin shrinks when comparing Trump supporters to Harris supporters (66% vs. 54%).

- Harris supporters are 18% more likely than Trump supporters (and 7% more likely than Democrats) to think the US should militarily defend Taiwan. People who intend to vote for a different candidate are least likely to think it should.
- A majority (58%) of Harris supporters think the US should maintain or increase the number of overseas troops while a majority (58%) of Trump supporters think the US should decrease the number. People who intend to vote for a different candidate are aligned with Trump supporters — 56% prefer a troop decrease.
- A majority of Harris supporters are “Wilsonian,” advocating for a rules-based order focused on democracy, liberal economics, and human rights (59%). A plurality of Trump supporters are “Jacksonian,” averse to international institutions and deep global engagement but supporting a strong military to deter enemies (41%). A plurality of people who plan to vote for candidate besides these two are “Jeffersonian,” wanting to strengthen democracy at home and promote it abroad not by force but by example (48%).

## **Republicans and Independents are less hawkish on European security than Democrats. Democrats and Independents are less hawkish on the Gaza war and China than Republicans.**

- US goals in Ukraine which would de-escalate the war are prioritized more than twice as often as those which would perpetuate or intensify it. Republicans and Independents are about 20% more likely than Democrats to prioritize avoiding a wider war.



- If Finland, a new NATO ally, were invaded by Russia, after being reminded of NATO's obligation for collective defense, 76% of Democrats — but only 55% of Republicans and 59% of Independents — would support a US military operation to expel Russian forces.
- Majorities of Democrats (67%) and Independents (55%) believe the US should either end support for Israel's war effort or make that support conditional on a ceasefire. Only 8% of Democrats but 42% of Republicans think the US must support Israel unconditionally.
- Twice as many Democrats as Republicans think the West's need to cooperate with China should dissuade the US from preparing for a new Cold War. Twice as many Republicans as Democrats think China presents a threat to US security, and so the US should prepare for one.
- Twice as many Democrats think the US should normalize relations with Cuba as should continue to pressure and isolate Cuba (66% vs. 34%), and Republicans are more evenly divided on the issue (45% vs. 55%).

**Americans have mixed views of the Biden administration's foreign policy record.**

- The release of American prisoners from Russia and NATO expansion are seen as among President Biden's most significant foreign policy successes (though addressing climate change is the top choice among Democrats).
- Republicans and Independents most often point to immigration as one of Biden's top foreign policy failures. Democrats most often select the US response to the war in Gaza.

- Thirty percent of respondents cite the withdrawal from Afghanistan as one of Biden's biggest foreign policy failures. However, 62% of Americans believe the Afghanistan war was primarily a failed mission from the start or should have ended when Osama bin Laden was killed.
- President Biden's framing of foreign policy as a global struggle between democracy and autocracy may not resonate with most Americans. Though four times as many Democrats as Republicans cite threats to democracy in foreign countries as a top concern, among a list of 12 foreign policy issues, it is the issue Americans care about the least.

**Younger and older generations disagree about how US policy should approach Israel's war in Gaza, a new Cold War with China, and normalizing relations with Cuba.**

- Twice as many adults under 30 as those 65 and older think the US must stop supporting Israel's war in Gaza (23% vs. 11%).
- Twice as many adults 65 and older as those under 30 think the US must support Israel's war unconditionally (26% vs. 13%).
- Americans 45 and older are much more likely than Americans under 45 to think the US must prepare for a new Cold War with China (68% vs 47%).
- Two-thirds of adults under 30 think the US should normalize relations with Cuba rather than continue isolating the island nation. A slight majority of Americans 65 and older agree (66% vs. 53%).

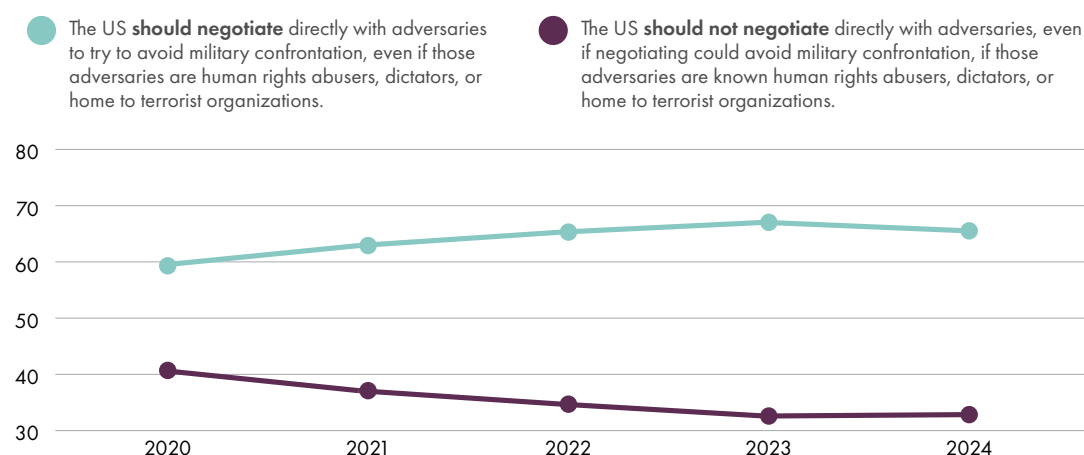


## Issues for the Next President

**Two-thirds of Americans believe the United States should negotiate directly with any and all adversaries to avoid military confrontation.**

Prison exchanges negotiated by the Biden administration with the Russian government have been noted as a major foreign policy success by Americans, regardless of partisan affiliation.<sup>45</sup> This preference for negotiation holds across partisan lines. Americans 65 and older support negotiation more than their younger peers, including adults under age 30 (71% vs. 63%).<sup>46</sup> People who believe the United States should continue to work to rekindle the 2015 Iran nuclear deal are slightly more likely to believe in negotiation more broadly than people who do not support restarting the nuclear deal (68% vs. 55%).<sup>47</sup> There are similar trends between those who believe that the United States should pursue a settlement in the Russia-Ukraine War and those who do not (69% vs. 59%).<sup>48</sup> This indicates that robust attempts at negotiation are a general preference of Americans, regardless of the geopolitical context.

Which of the following statements comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

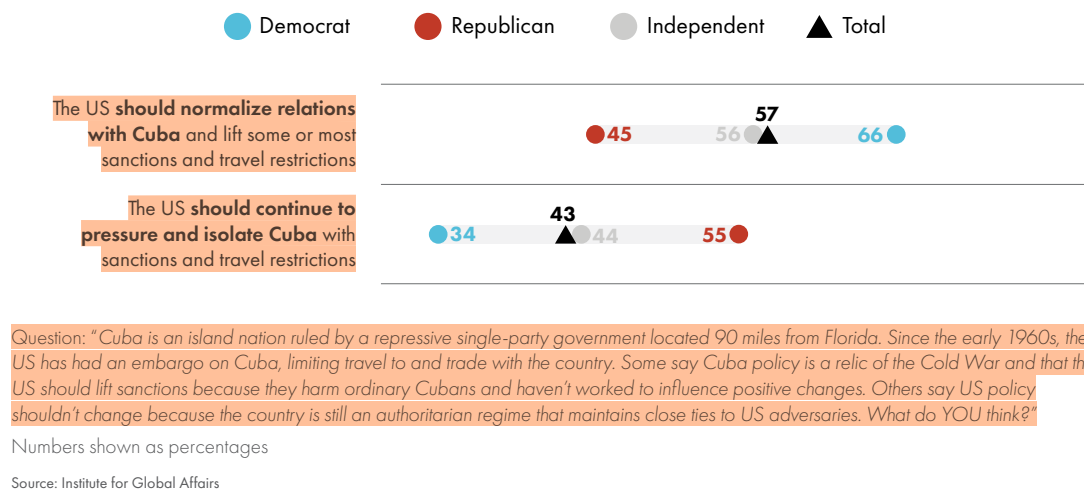


Numbers shown as percentages

Source: Institute for Global Affairs

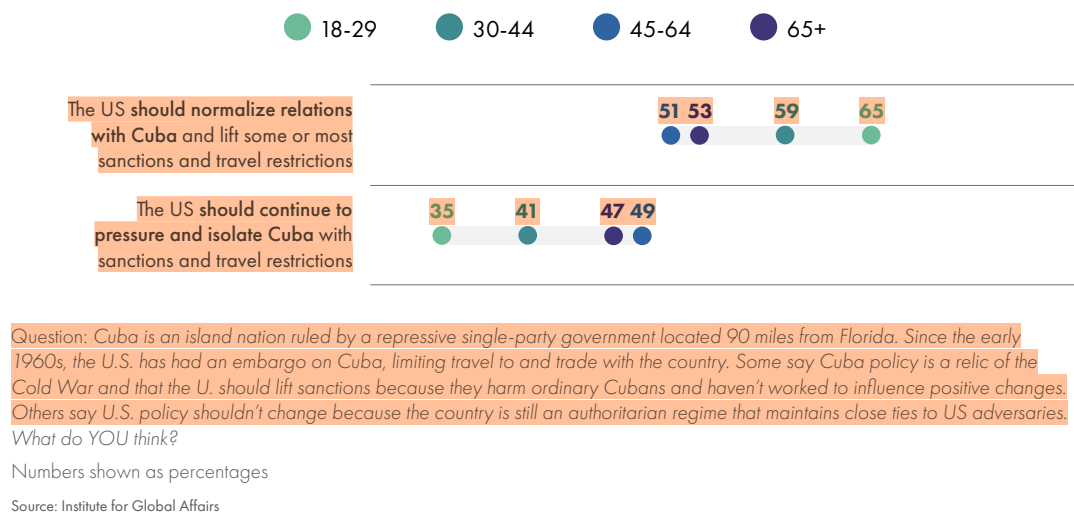
**Twice as many Democrats think the US should normalize relations with Cuba as should continue to pressure and isolate Cuba. Republicans and Independents are more evenly divided.**

The United States has maintained a general embargo on Cuban exports since 1962. Relations thawed briefly during the Obama administration, but the Trump administration resumed all sanctions in 2017. The United Nation General Assembly has criticized the embargo since it restricts Cubans' access to essential goods like food and medicine. Americans support normalizing relations with Cuba by a slim majority (56%). A majority of Independents support normalization (55%) while Republicans oppose it by the same margin (55%). Americans in Rust Belt states support normalization by a slightly wider margin than the general population (61%).<sup>49</sup>



**Majorities across every age group think the US should normalize relations with Cuba. Nearly twice as many younger Americans think it should do so as think it should continue to pressure and isolate Cuba.**

Relations with Cuba have historically been a campaign issue during presidential elections. Florida, with the largest Cuban-American population, has become more solidly Republican and is no longer a swing state. This year, the Biden administration quietly lifted some financial restrictions on Cuban businesses.<sup>50</sup>



**Four in five Americans, including substantial majorities of both Harris and Trump supporters, think the US should continue pursuing negotiations to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.**

The 2015 Iran nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), ended in 2018 when the Trump administration pulled the United States out of the plan. Despite efforts by the Biden administration to revive the deal, negotiations have stalled. Support for negotiating with Iran