University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll
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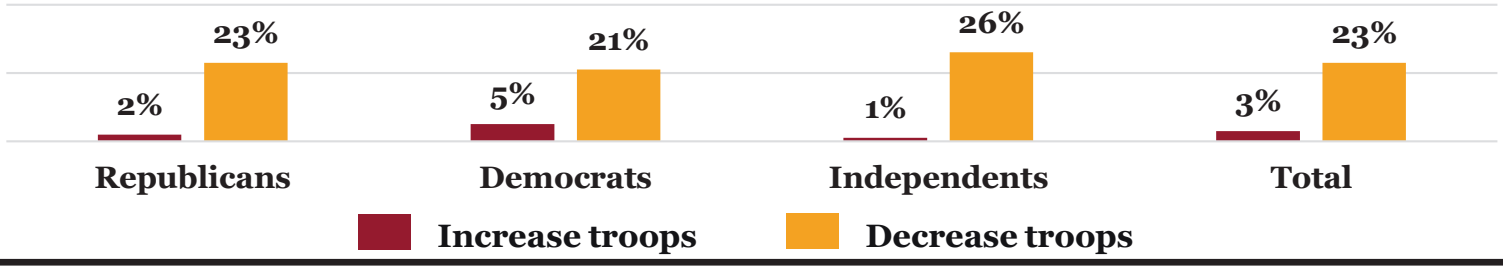
Study No. 5

Study of American Attitudes toward Iran, Syria, and Afghanistan

Shibley Telhami and Stella Rouse, Principal Investigators

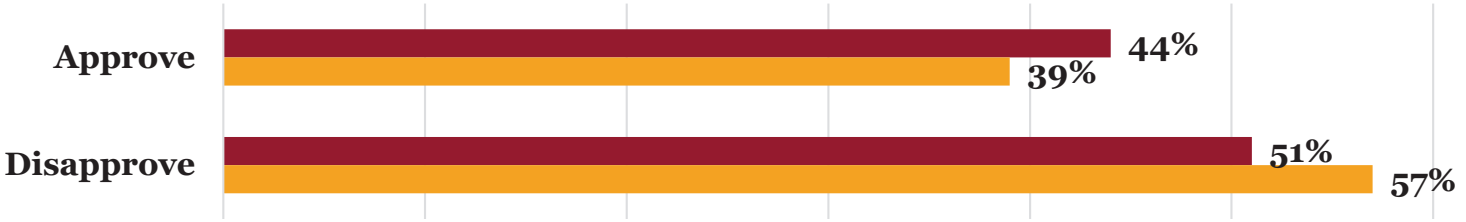
Americans Display Rare Bipartisanship in Opinions on Trump Administration's Policies in the Middle East

Do you think the U.S. should increase troops, maintain current troop levels, decrease troops, or remove all troops from Afghanistan in the next year?



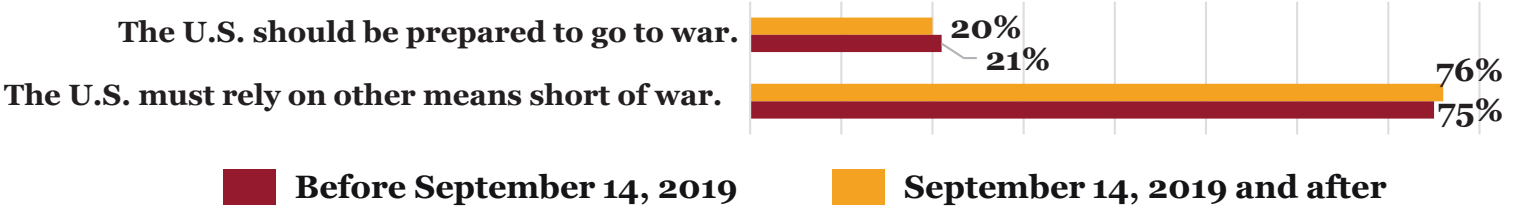
Disapproval of the U.S. government's handling of Iran grows after attack on Saudi oil facilities

Do you approve or disapprove of the way the U.S. government is handling Iran?

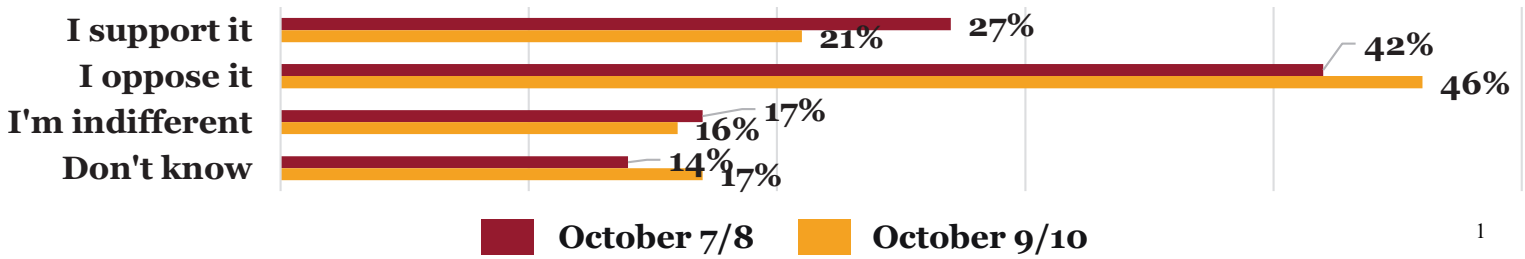


But strong opposition to war remained constant

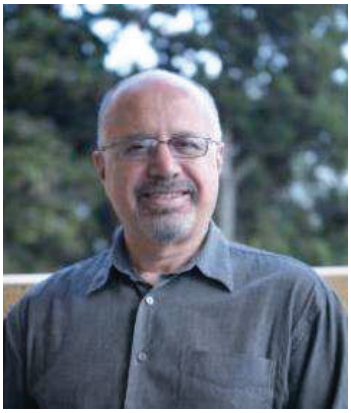
Which of the following is closer to your view vis-à-vis Iran?



Tell me how you feel about the move to withdraw U.S. forces from northern Syria:



Leadership for the Critical Issues Poll



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Professor Telhami has also been active in the foreign policy arena. He has served as advisor to the US Mission to the UN (1990-91), as advisor to former Congressman Lee Hamilton, more recently as senior advisor to George Mitchell, President Obama's United States Special Envoy for Middle East Peace (2009-2011) and as a member of the U.S. delegation to the Trilateral US-Israeli-Palestinian Anti-Incitement Committee.

Professor Telhami has contributed to *The Washington Post, The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* and regularly appears on national and international radio and television. His best-selling book, *The Stakes: America and the Middle East* was selected by Foreign Affairs as one of the top five books on the Middle East in 2003. He has been a principal investigator in the annual Arab Public Opinion Survey, conducted since 2002 in six Arab countries.

Stella Rouse is an associate professor in the Department of Government and Politics and director of the Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement.

Professor Rouse earned her Ph.D. from Louisiana State University in 2008. In 2010, she was a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity and Gender in the Social Sciences (REGSS) at Duke University as a Ford Foundation Post-Doctoral Fellow.

Rouse's book, *Latinos in the Legislative Process: Interests and Influence*, published by Cambridge University Press, was named by Huffington Post as one of the "Best Political Science Books of 2013." Her latest book, *The Politics of Millennials: Political Beliefs and Policy Preferences of America's Most Diverse Generation*, with Ashley D. Ross, was published in August 2018.

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Americans Display Rare Bipartisanship in Opinions on Trump Administration's Policies toward Iran, Syria, and Afghanistan

Public Opinion Trending toward Opposition to Syria and Iran Policies and Marked by Hesitancy to Commit U.S. Troops to Regional Conflicts

While gaps between Republicans and Democrats remain in public opinion on U.S. foreign policy toward Iran, Syria, and Afghanistan, a series of two surveys conducted by the University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll reveals some common trends that bridge the partisan divide. These two latest polls, conducted in September and October of 2019, were particularly distinct. Included in the data from the polls were date stamps, enabling us to analyze how responses evolved day by day. Using this data, we were able to take advantage of the fortuitous timing of two regional major developments.

First, on September 14, 2019, we were nearing the midpoint of one of our largest polls, surveying 3,016 respondents. That day a surprise attack was launched on Saudi Arabia's largest oil facilities. While there is debate over the identity of the perpetrators, the United States accused Iran of being behind the attack. The timing of this attack, along with the date stamps in our data, provided us with two comparable subsets: those answering questions about U.S. policy towards Iran prior to the attack and those answering the same questions while reacting to this event.

Second, on October 4, 2019, we began fielding a second poll surveying American opinions on U.S. foreign policy. As participants began responding, the White House unexpectedly announced the withdrawal of U.S. forces from northern Syria on October 7, 2019. We quickly drafted a question on these developments and added it to the poll in time for 958 participants to respond. In the following days, events continued to develop with Turkey launching airstrikes and a ground invasion of northern Syria on October 9, 2019, targeting America's former allies, the Syrian Kurds, and members of Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, voicing opposition to the president's move.

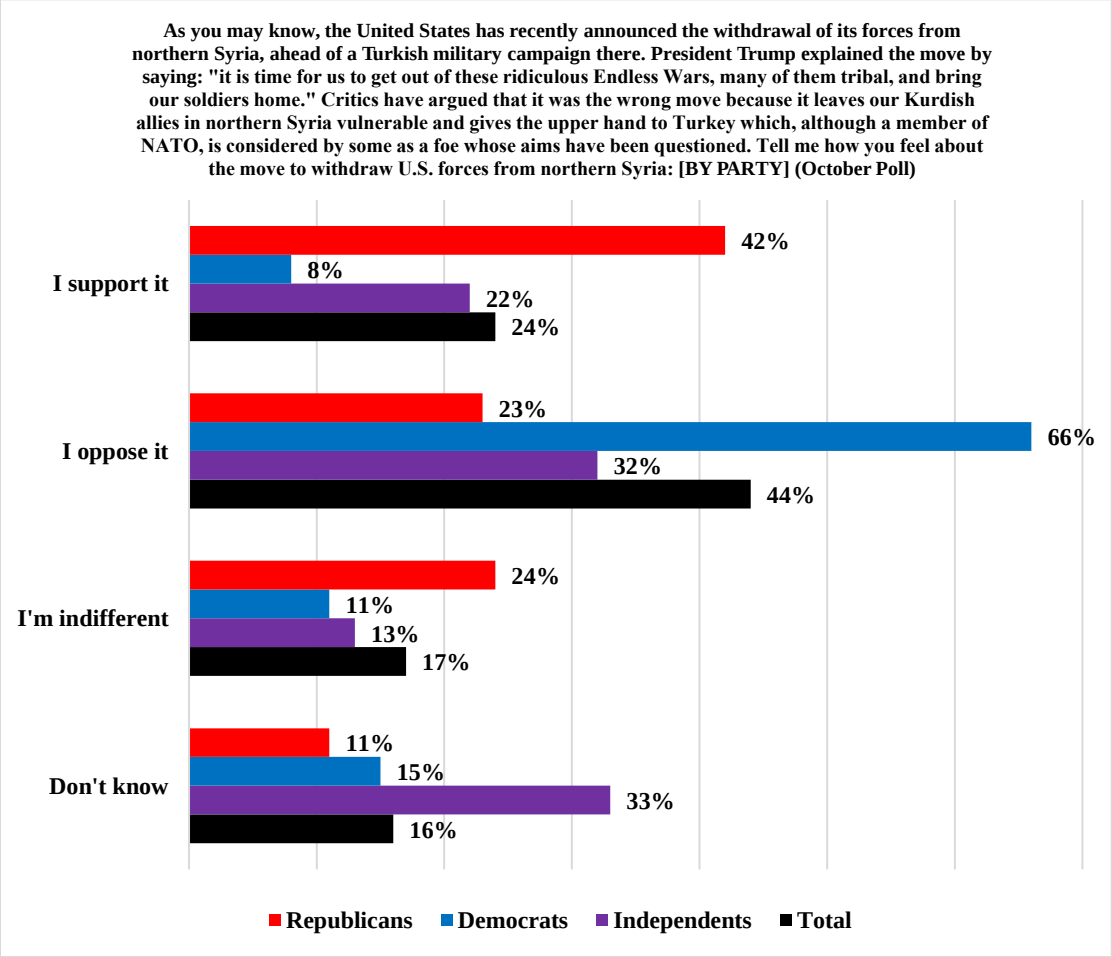
By examining subsets of respondents based on the timing of their responses, we were able to ascertain to a greater extent Americans' reactions to these rapidly unfolding events.

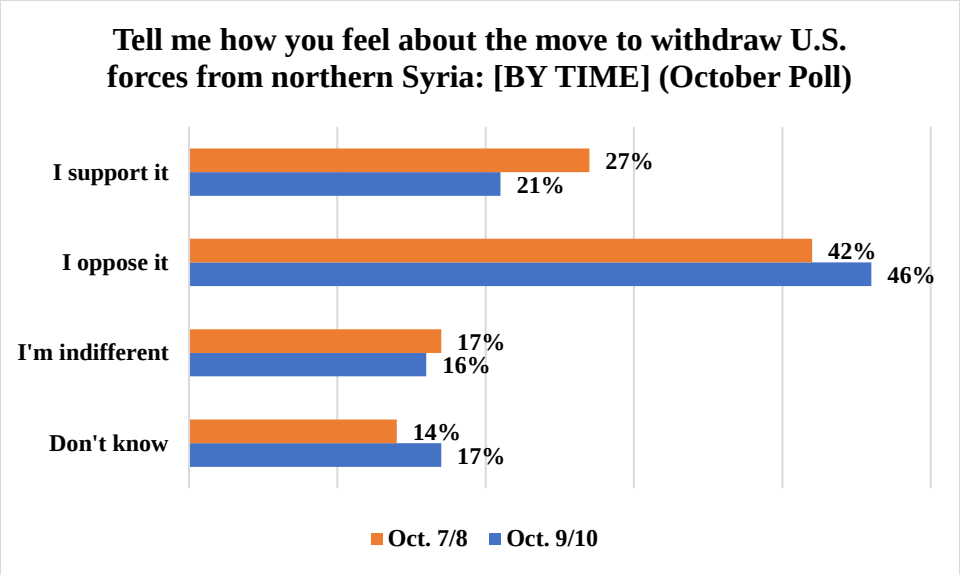
Republican Support for Syrian Withdrawal Weak, Total Disapproval Grows as Criticism Mounts

Shortly after the White House announced American forces withdrawal from northern Syria, President Trump took to Twitter defending his decision, saying in part, "it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous Endless Wars, many of them tribal, and bring our soldiers home." Between October 7th and October 10th, we asked respondents whether they supported or opposed the move. Unsurprisingly, there was a partisan divide with only 8% of Democrats supporting and 66% opposing the withdrawal while 42% of Republicans supported and 23% opposed it. Overall, a plurality of Americans (44%) opposed the withdrawal while less than a quarter (24%) supported it.

The timing of the responses, however, shed more light on the evolution of Americans' reactions to the withdrawal. As several days passed between the initial announcement, the withdrawal of U.S. forces, and the assault by Turkish forces on Syrian Kurds who had been America's allies in the fight against ISIS, more national security veterans and Republican lawmakers voiced their disapproval. Senator Lindsey Graham, a strong ally of President Trump, tweeted about the withdrawal on October 7th: "If press reports are accurate this is a disaster in the making." Criticism mounted as time went on, with Senator Graham partnering with Democratic Senator Chris Van Hollen of Maryland to release a proposal for sanctions against Turkey on October 9, 2019.

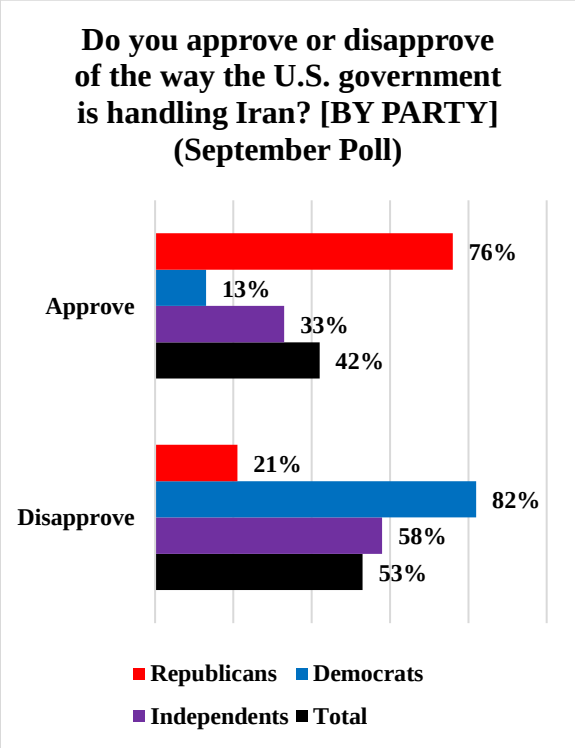
By dividing the responses into two subsets, those who answered on October 7th and 8th and those who answered on October 9th and 10th, we can see a clear trend across all respondents. While 27% of respondents supported the withdrawal initially on October 7th and 8th, that number dropped by six percentage points to 21% on October 9th and 10th. Meanwhile, opposition to the withdrawal grew by four percentage points (42% to 46%) in the same time period. As the impact of the withdrawal was reported, and importantly as the President's strongest supporters expressed displeasure, respondents reacted negatively.





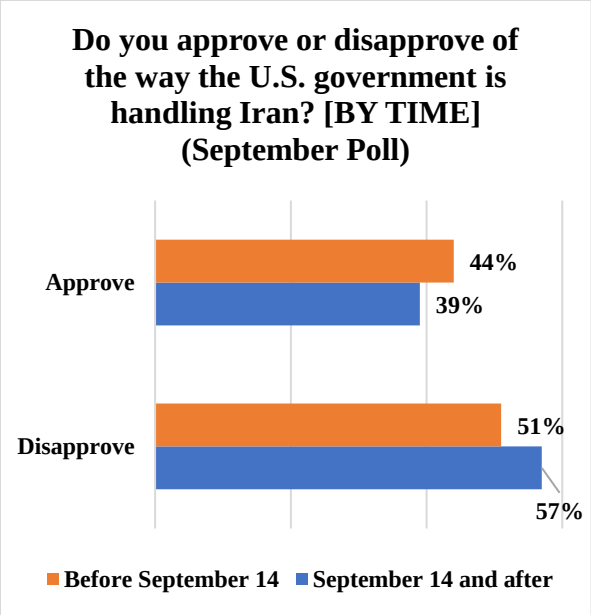
It is also the case that opposition to the President's abrupt decision among Democrats and independents was not as pronounced as with other foreign policy issues, such as Iran, which we turn to next. This may stem from an underlying hesitancy among Democrats to involve American troops in Middle Eastern wars.

Americans Blame Trump Administration Policies for Rising Gulf Tensions, Solidly Opposed to Going to War in Defense of Saudi Arabia



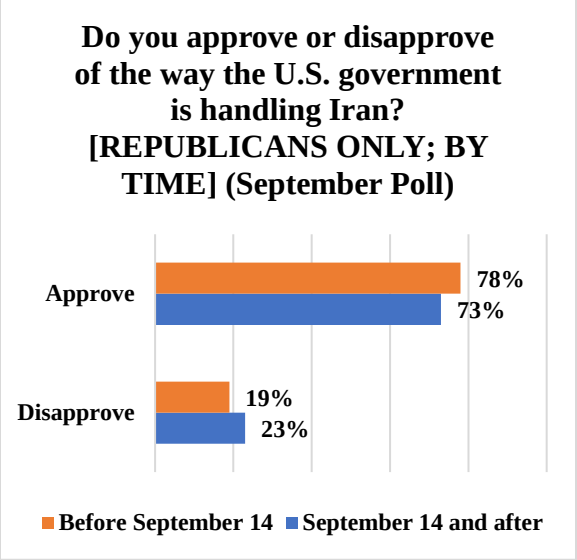
When asked whether they approved or disapproved of the U.S. government's handling of Iran, 82% of Democrats and 58% of independents responded in the negative, although Republicans strongly approve of the administration's Iran policy, (76%). This is noticeably more polarized than the Trump administration's policy on Syria discussed earlier.

As with our Syria question, we can examine how participants responded to the question of whether they approved of the U.S. government's handling of Iran before the attack and on the day of and after the attack on the Saudi oil facilities.

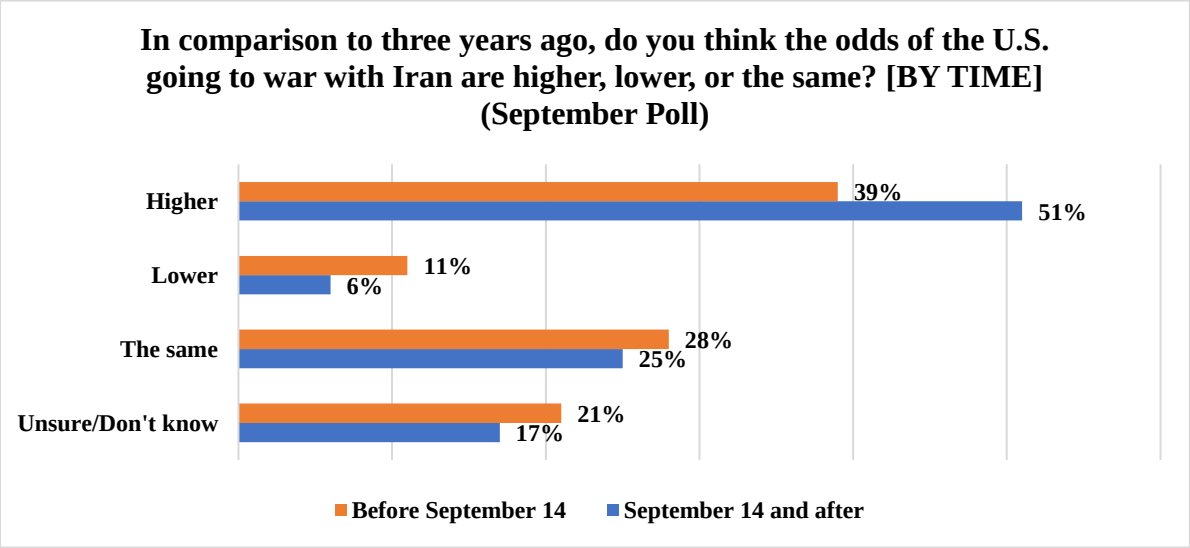


Again, in response to ongoing events in the region, we can see a decrease in support for the Trump administration's policies. Fifty-one percent of respondents who answered the question before September 14th disapproved of the U.S. government's handling of Iran. That number rose to 57% on the day of and after the attack.

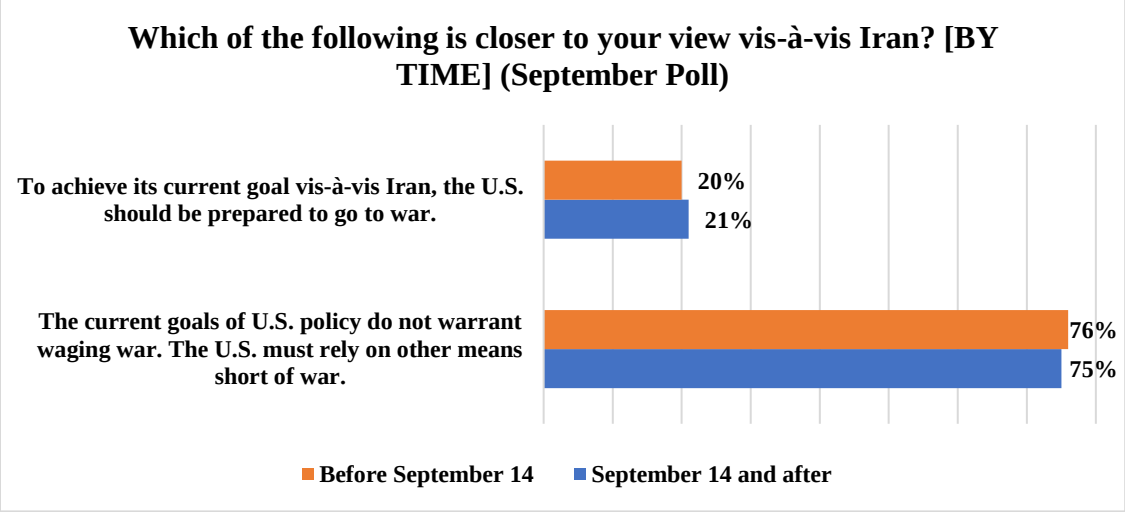
Crucially, this decrease in support for the government's handling of Iran was not unique to the total sample of respondents, but also appeared among those who identified as Republicans. Among Republicans, approval of the U.S. government's handling of Iran dropped from 78% to 73%.



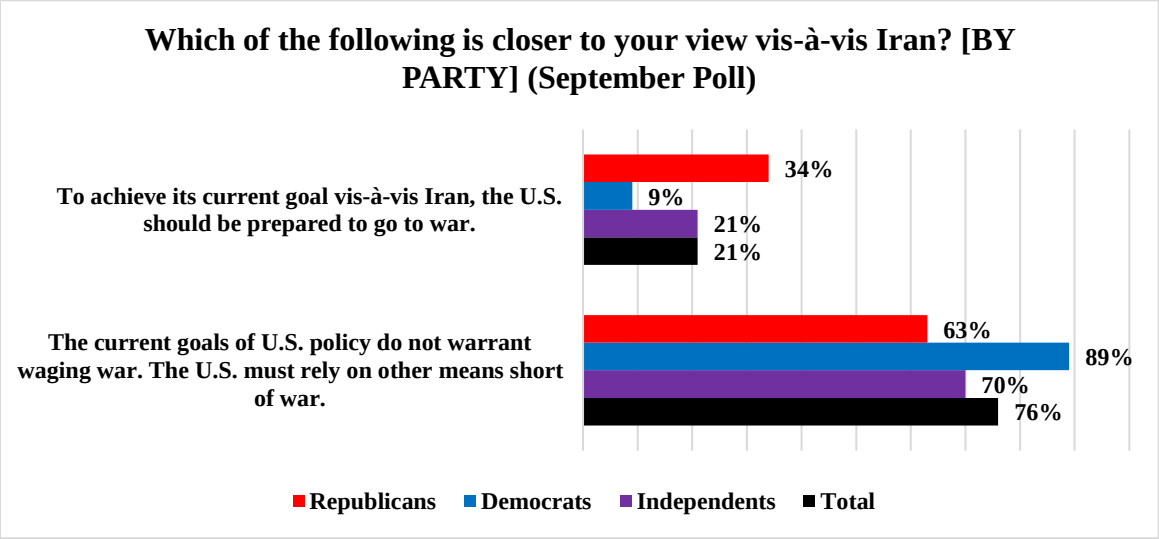
In addition to seeing approval of the government's Iran policy drop, respondents participating in the survey on or after September 14th were more likely to feel that the odds of a war between the United States and Iran were higher than three years ago, before President Trump took office. Fifty-one percent of respondents felt the odds of war were higher on or after September 14th, compared to 39% who felt this way before.



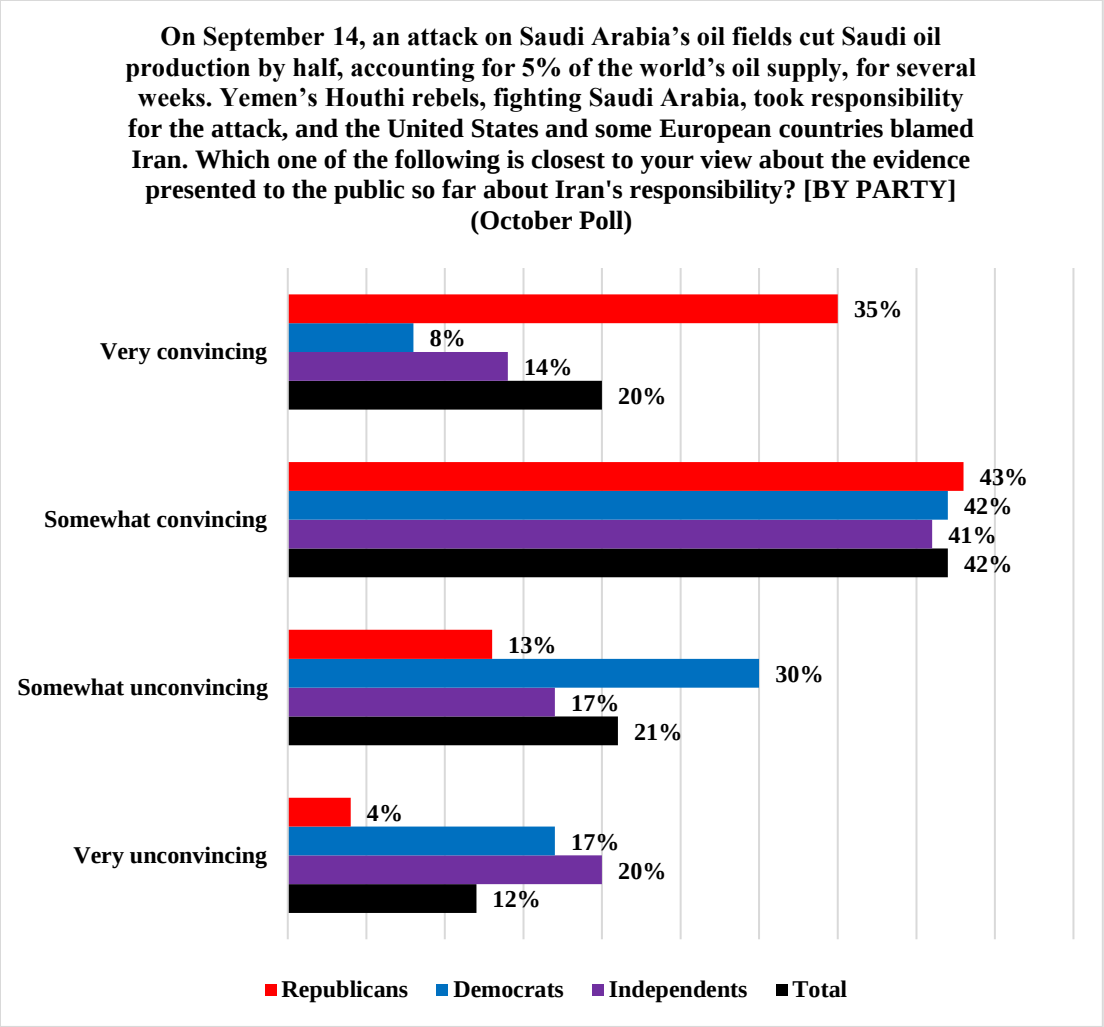
Notably, strong bipartisan opposition to war with Iran remained as robust after the attack on the Saudi oil facilities. The number of respondents who felt that America should be prepared to go to war to achieve its objectives pertaining to Iran remained static, with a firm majority opposing the possibility of war (76% before September 14th and 75% on or after September 14th).



By partisanship, firm majorities of Republicans (63%), Democrats (89%), and independents (70%) opposed going to war with Iran. Overall, Republicans were most likely to approve of the possibility of war, with a minority of 34% stating that the U.S. should be prepared to go to war to achieve its current goal vis-à-vis Iran.

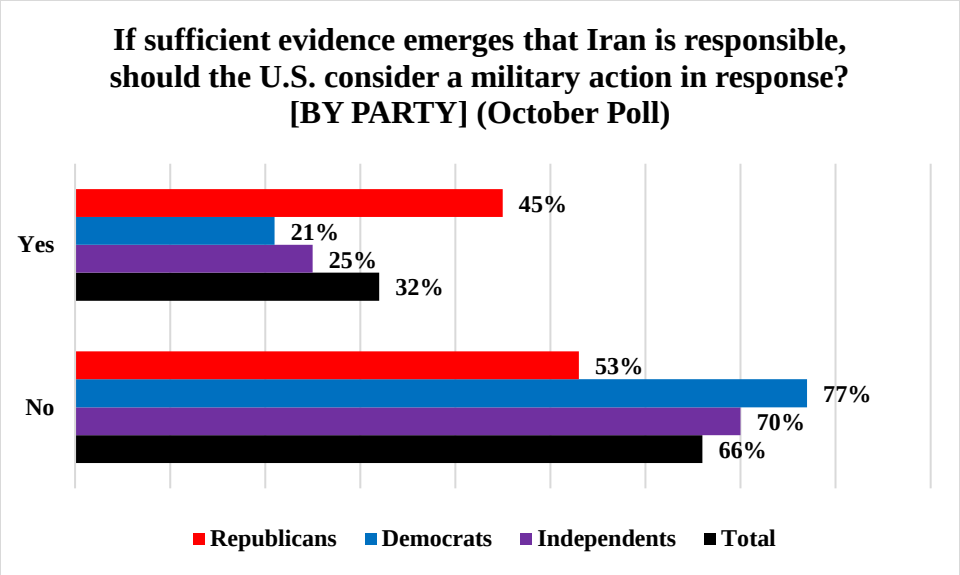


When polled on the quality of the evidence publicly provided thus far by the United States showing that Iran is responsible for the attack on the Saudi oil facilities, a plurality of Americans of all partisan backgrounds (42%) found the evidence 'somewhat convincing.' But Republicans were more likely to find the evidence 'very convincing' (35%) compared to 30% of Democrats who found it 'somewhat unconvincing.'

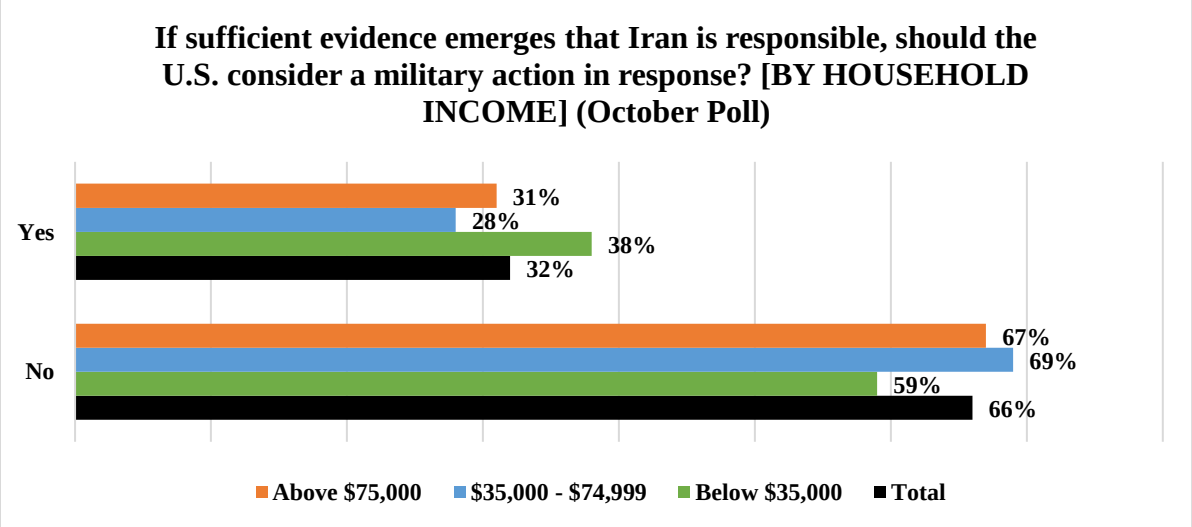


Polling from our subsequent survey in October yields greater insight into Americans' reactions to the Saudi attack. Regardless of the current quality of the evidence, if sufficient evidence emerged proving that Iran was responsible for the attack, a majority of respondents (66%) answered that they would not support a military response by the United States. Republicans, however, were nearly evenly split, with 45% approving of military action and 53% disapproving.

This is notable since Saudi Arabia has been viewed by policymakers as vital to U.S. strategic importance ever since President Franklin Roosevelt met Saudi King Abdul Aziz in 1945, recognizing the power of the kingdom's oil reserves. That such a longstanding partnership lacks a strong degree of support, to the point that the American public would not support a war to defend the Saudi kingdom, raises questions about the future of the Saudi-American relationship.



In addition to date stamps and partisan information, we also collected demographic information about our participants, including household income. A common assumption about war is that soldiers predominantly come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, it is assumed that lower income individuals are less supportive of foreign wars than those in middle to upper income brackets. While the idea that those from lower income backgrounds are overrepresented in the military is questionable, we decided to examine if income level had an effect on approval of a military reaction to the attack on the Saudi oil facilities.

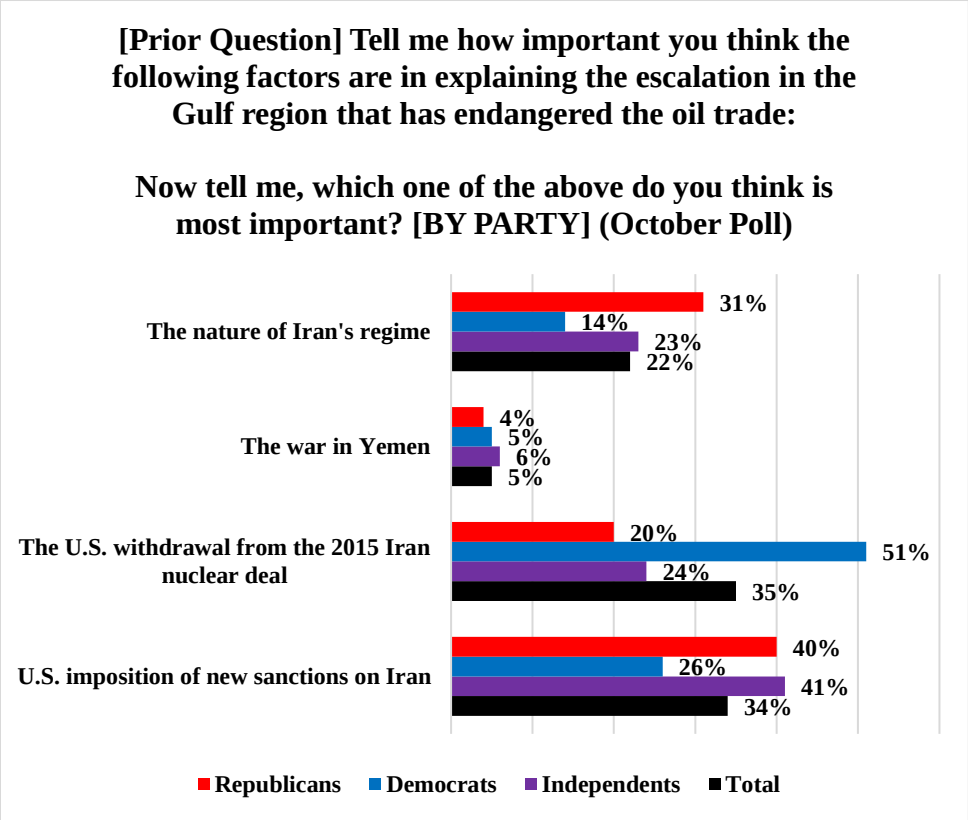


From this, we can see that compared to those in the next income bracket, $35,000-$74,999, and those with a household income above $75,000, lower income respondents were more likely, not less, to support military action against Iran. This suggests that fears of losing loved ones in a future military conflict may not be disproportionately reflected by lower income individuals or impact those individuals thinking on foreign policy.

When asked to identify the most important factor leading to the present escalation in the Gulf region, respondents were almost evenly split between the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and the U.S. imposition of new sanctions on Iran. A slim plurality (35%) said the main factor was the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. This included a majority of Democrats (51%) and 20% of Republicans. At a nearly even rate, 34% labeled the U.S. imposition of new sanctions on Iran as the prime factor. This included 40% of Republicans and 41% of independents.

Importantly, both of these policies are specific to the Trump administration, as opposed to the other options presented such as the war in Yemen and the nature of the Iranian regime. Regardless as to whether or not these policies were justified or prudent, the majority of our sample blames them for the escalation of tensions in the Gulf region.

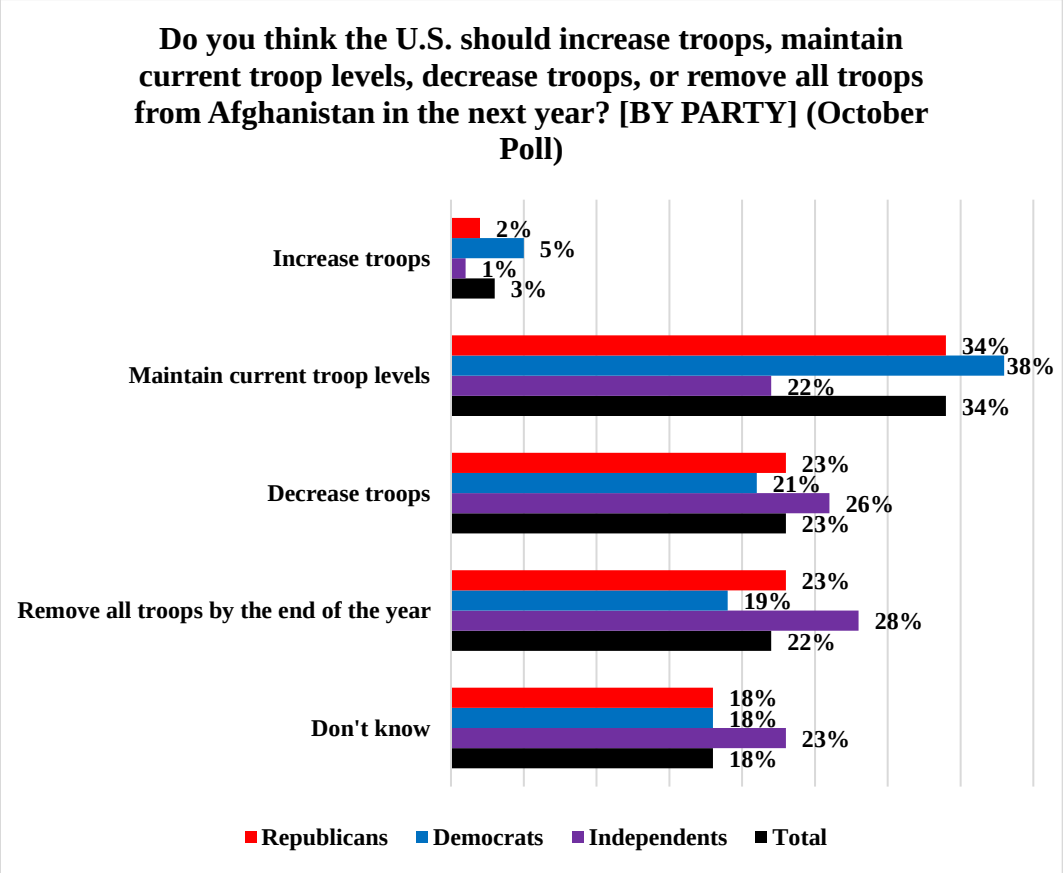
These tensions, Americans believe, have also heightened the risk of war, a war which the majority of our sample disapproves of, including Republicans.



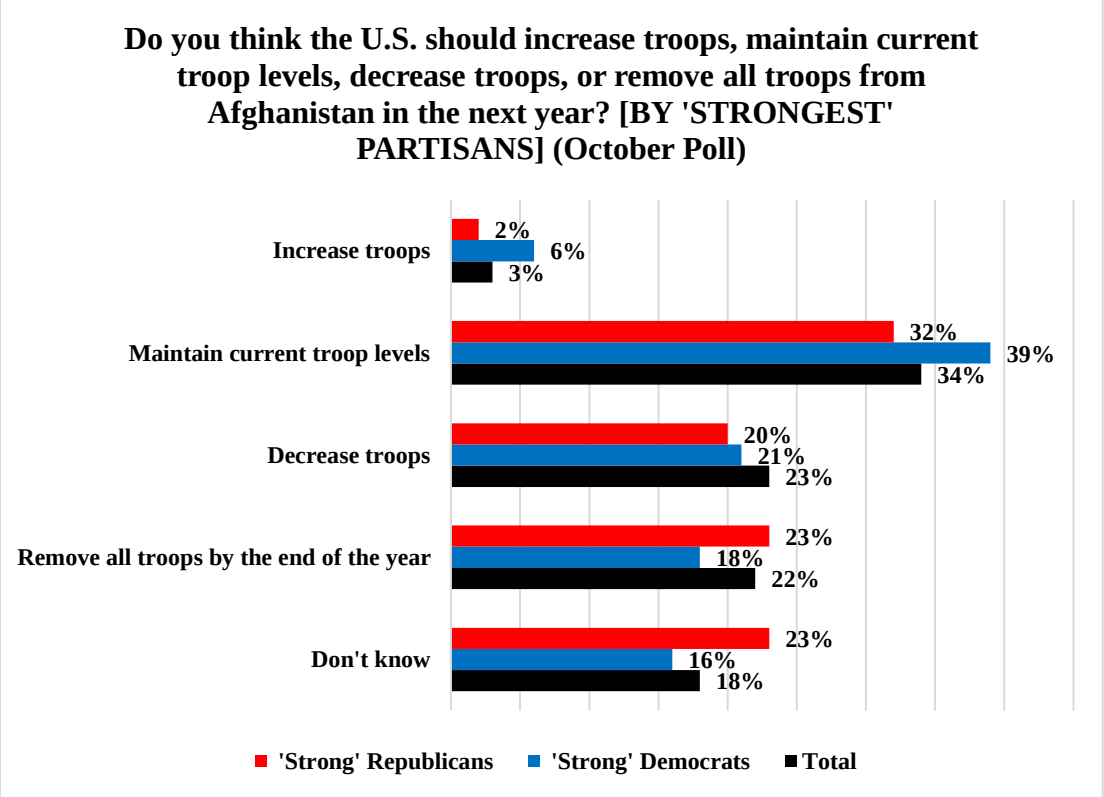
Americans Share a Bipartisan Desire to Stay the Course in Afghanistan, "Strong" Democrats Support Negotiations with the Taliban

In addition to the conflict in Syria and in the Gulf region, respondents were also asked a number of questions in our October poll about Afghanistan, the longest war in American history. Around the time that this poll was fielded, 13,000 U.S. troops were deployed in Afghanistan after roughly 2,000 were secretly withdrawn in the last year.

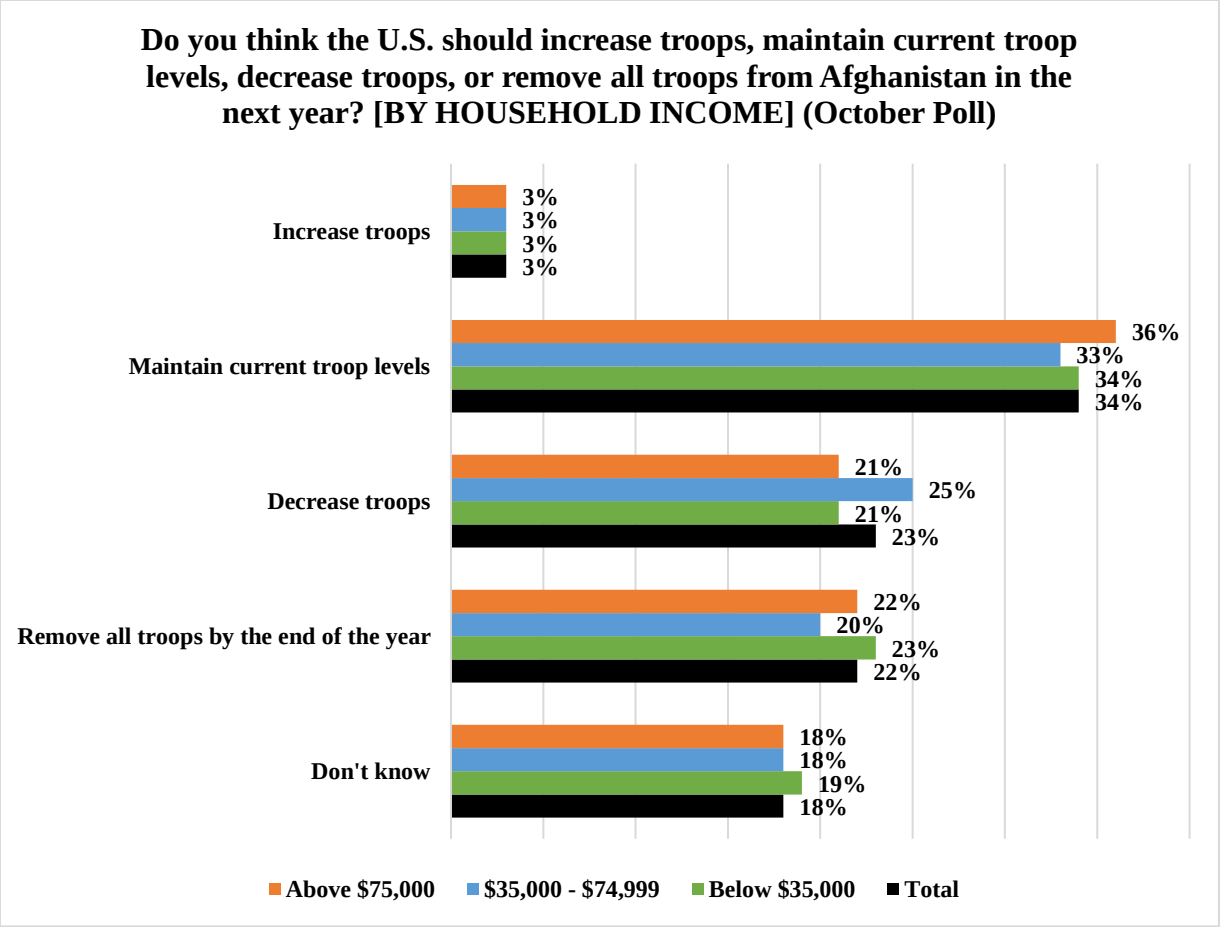
Surprisingly, little partisan divide was seen on the preferred number of U.S. troops stationed in Afghanistan. A plurality of respondents (34%) preferred maintaining current troop levels. Republicans and Democrats preferred this option at almost even rates (34% and 38%, respectively). Nearly a quarter of all respondents supported decreasing the number of troops (23%) and a nearly even number supported a total withdrawal by the end of the year (22%). Slightly less were unsure (18%) and very few supported a troop increase (3%). Across all preferences, responses by partisanship were nearly identical.



This trend is not only true among the total number of Democrats and Republicans in general. In our poll, respondents were asked whether they identified as a 'strong' or 'not a very strong' member of their party (Republican or Democrat). Among those who identified as a 'strong' member of their party, we also find nearly identical response rates to the question of ideal troop placement in Afghanistan.

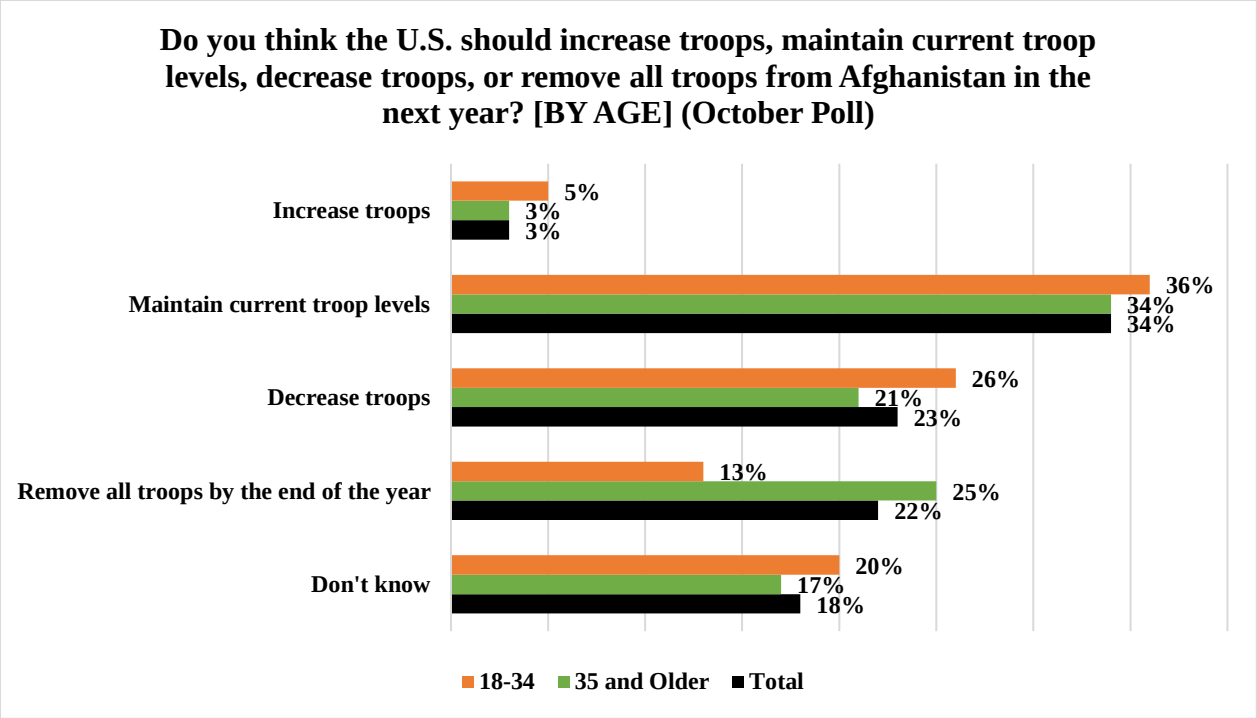


This pattern is not unique to partisanship. As described in our discussion on Iran policy, it is sometimes assumed that lower income individuals would be more critical of foreign wars since they would be the ones fighting them. There was little evidence of this in the case of a potential war with Iran, as lower income respondents were actually more likely to support military action, and it proved to be true with Afghanistan as well. We see no significant difference in responses across income brackets.

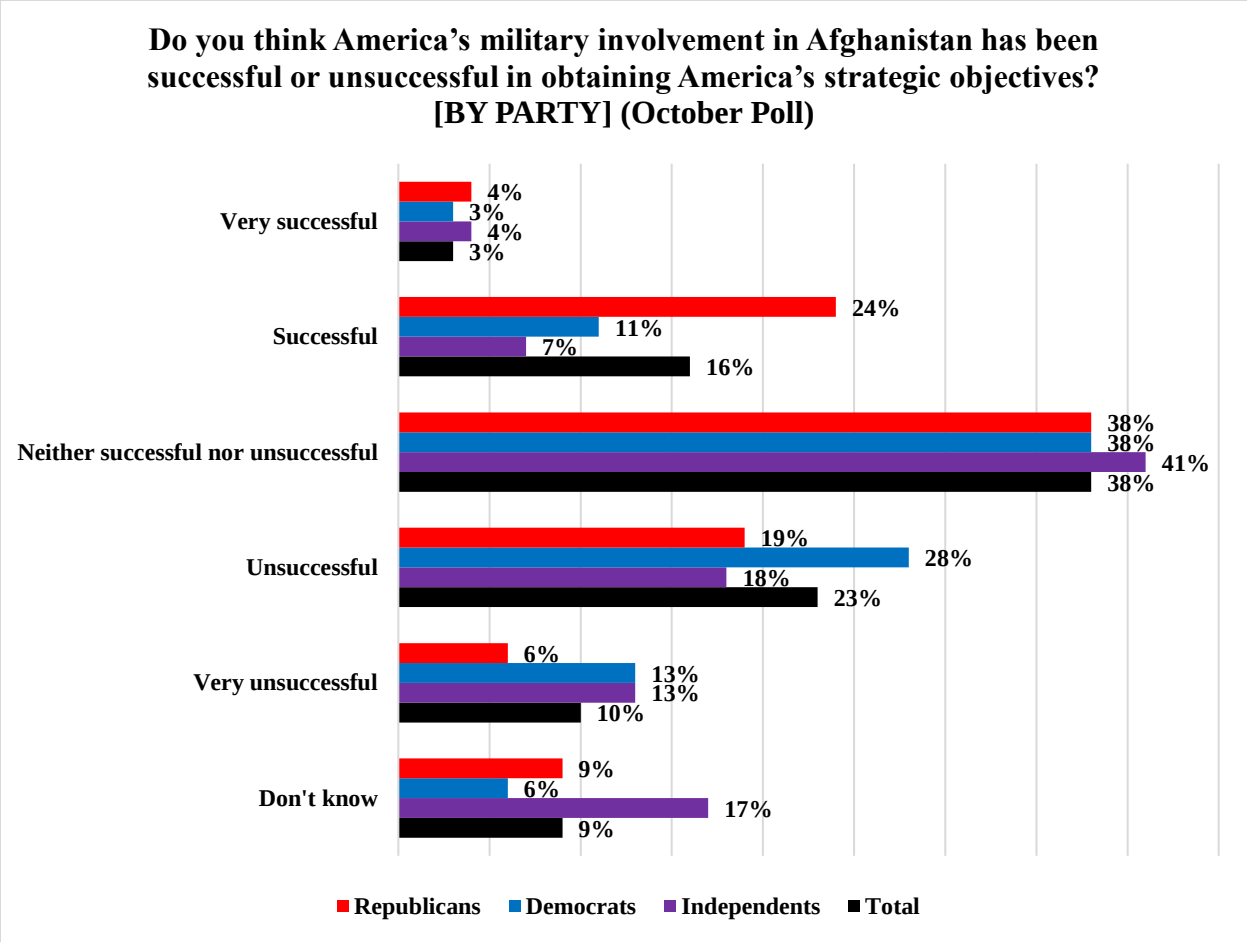


Likewise, one might assume that Americans who are young enough to serve in the military would be less supportive of deploying troops to the current war in Afghanistan. A counterargument could be that those younger Americans would have grown up with the war and felt the effects of September 11th and would thus be more supportive of deploying troops to Afghanistan.

Like income, however, we see that there is relative synchronism in the responses of Americans of all age ranges. The only major distinctions are that Americans aged 18-34 are much less likely to support withdrawing all troops by the end of the year (13%) and Americans 35 years of age or older are more supportive of this withdrawal (25%). A plurality of all Americans, however, support maintaining current troop levels in Afghanistan.



The same pattern holds true, although to a lesser extent, on the question of mission success. When asked whether the war in Afghanistan has been successful or unsuccessful in obtaining America's strategic objectives, a plurality (38%) answered that the war has been 'neither successful nor unsuccessful.' A plurality of Democrats and Republicans (38% for both) also selected this option, although Republicans were more likely to choose 'successful' (24%), Democrats were more likely to choose 'unsuccessful' (28%), and independents 'don't know' (17%).

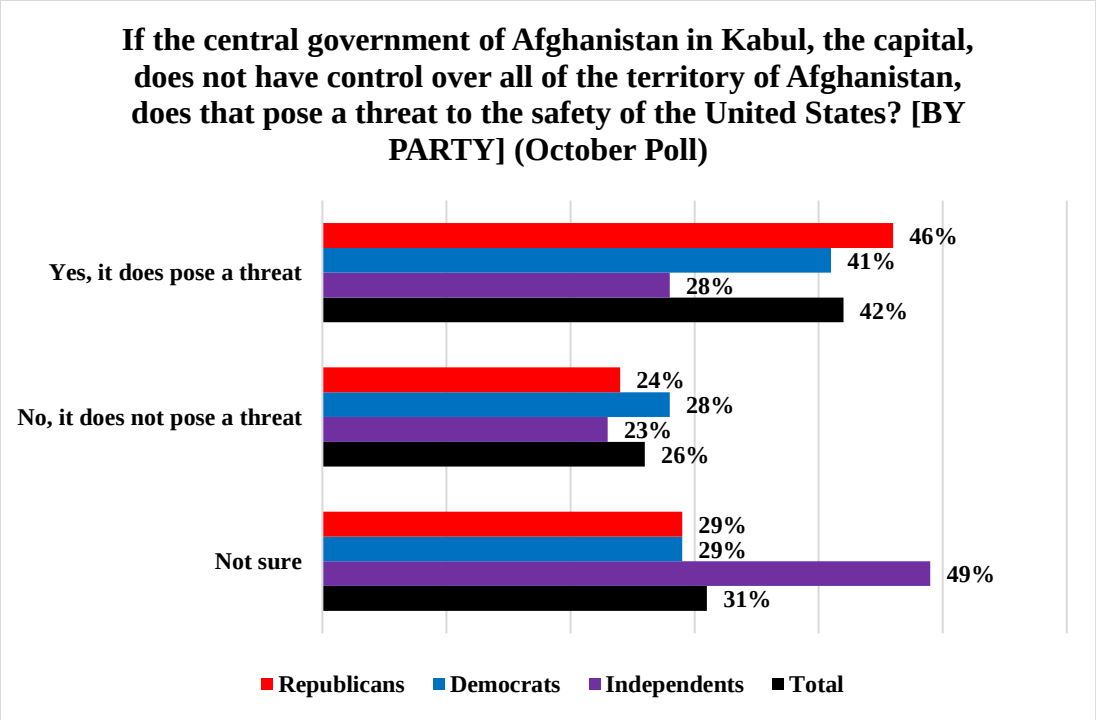


As the war in Afghanistan has progressed, the Taliban has continued to acquire control of more territory in the country, while the government in Kabul struggles to make its presence felt throughout the country.

When asked whether the central government's lack of control over all of the territory of Afghanistan would pose a threat to the safety of the United States, respondents remained consistent across partisan divisions.

A plurality of respondents (42%) felt this would pose a threat to the United States, including 46% of Republicans and 41% of Democrats. Slightly more than a quarter of respondents (26%) felt it would not pose a threat, including 24% of Republicans and 28% of Democrats.

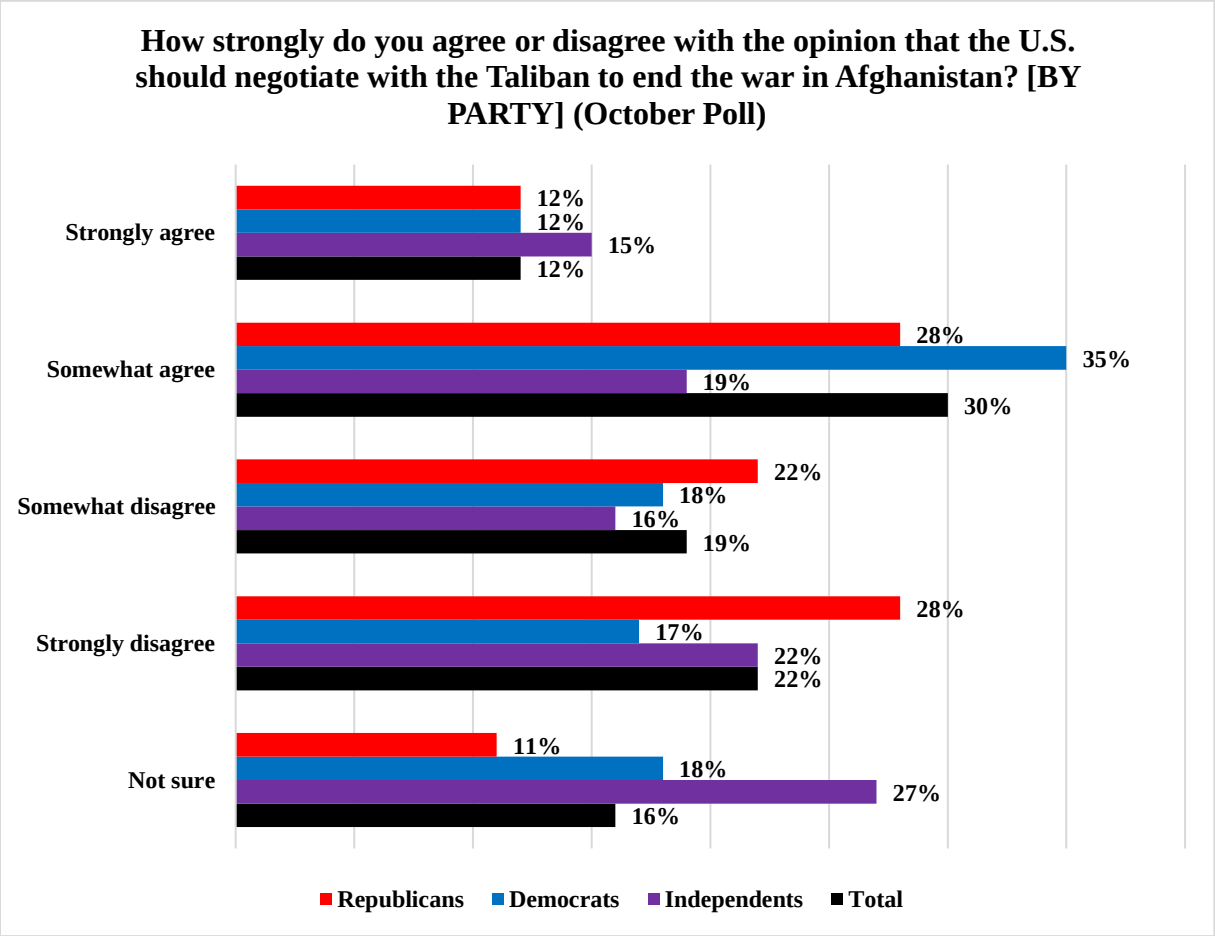
Independents, however, were least likely to consider this a threat (23%) and most likely to answer 'not sure' (49%).



Until September of this year, the United States had been engaging in diplomatic negotiations with the Taliban, a process that began under the Obama administration and progressed under the Trump administration.

The proposed end goal of these negotiations would be an end to combat between U.S. forces and the Taliban. Negotiations remained ongoing over issues such as the Taliban's harboring of foreign fighters and terrorists, and its relationship with the central government in Afghanistan.

When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the U.S. government negotiating with the Taliban to end the war in Afghanistan, a plurality of respondents 'somewhat agreed' (30%) including 35% of Democrats and 28% of Republicans. Practically even levels answered 'somewhat disagree' (19%) or 'strongly disagree' (22%).

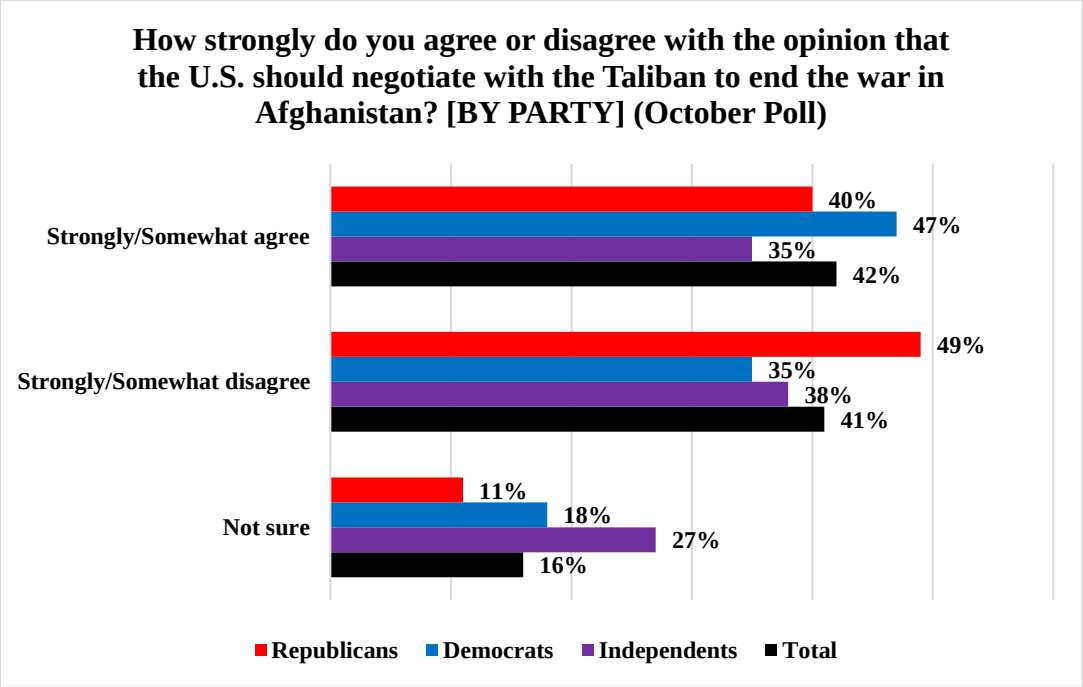


By breaking down the responses into the categories of strongly/somewhat agree or strongly/somewhat disagree, we can see a clearer pattern emerge.

A minority of Americans disagreed with negotiations with the Taliban (41%) with Republicans (49%) more likely than Democrats (35%) to disagree. However, only one percentage point differentiated the majority of Americans who agreed with negotiations with the Taliban with those who disagreed.

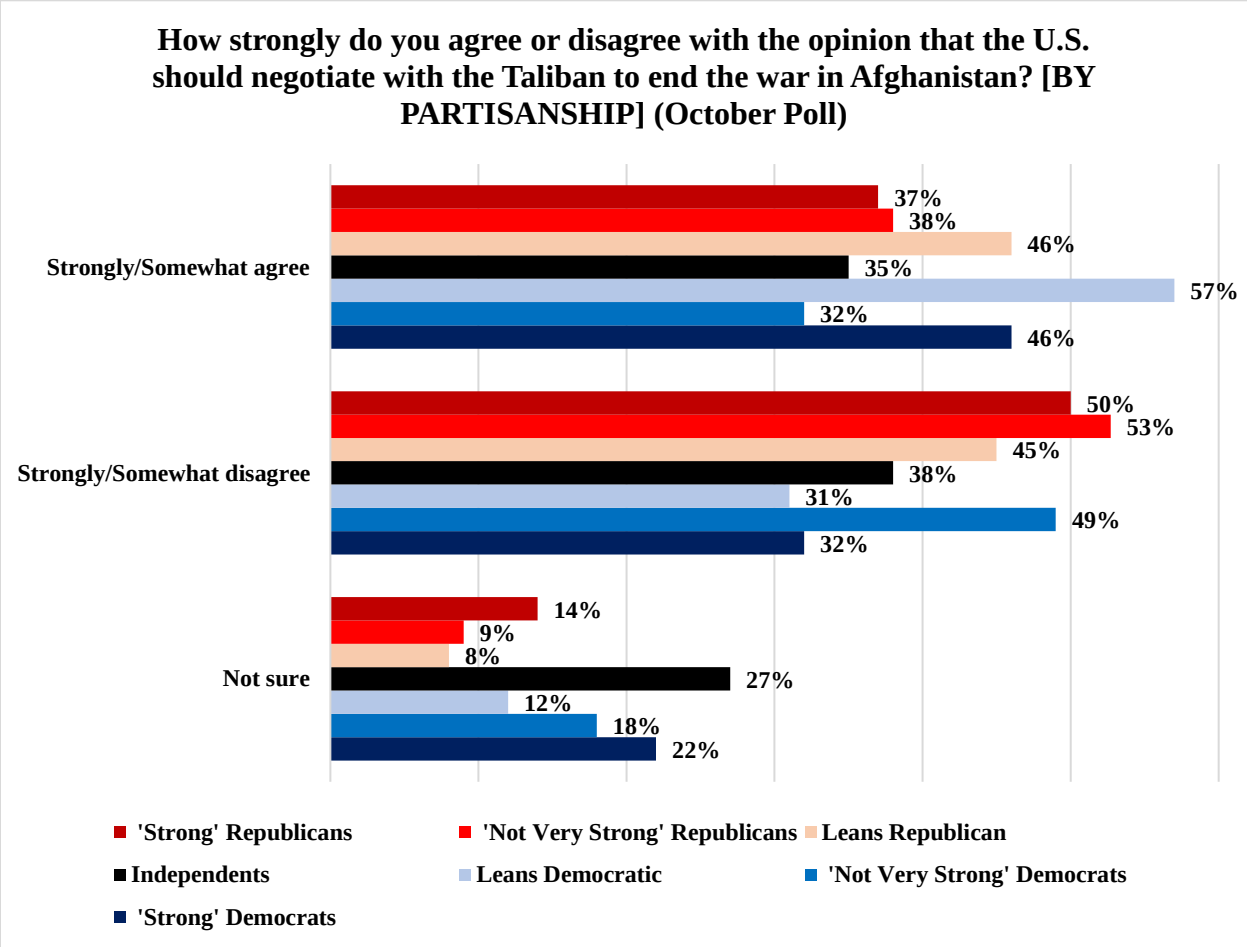
Forty-two percent of respondents agreed with negotiations with the Taliban, with Democrats (47%) more likely than Republicans (40%) to agree.

Independents were also more likely to disagree (38%) than agree (35%) with negotiations.

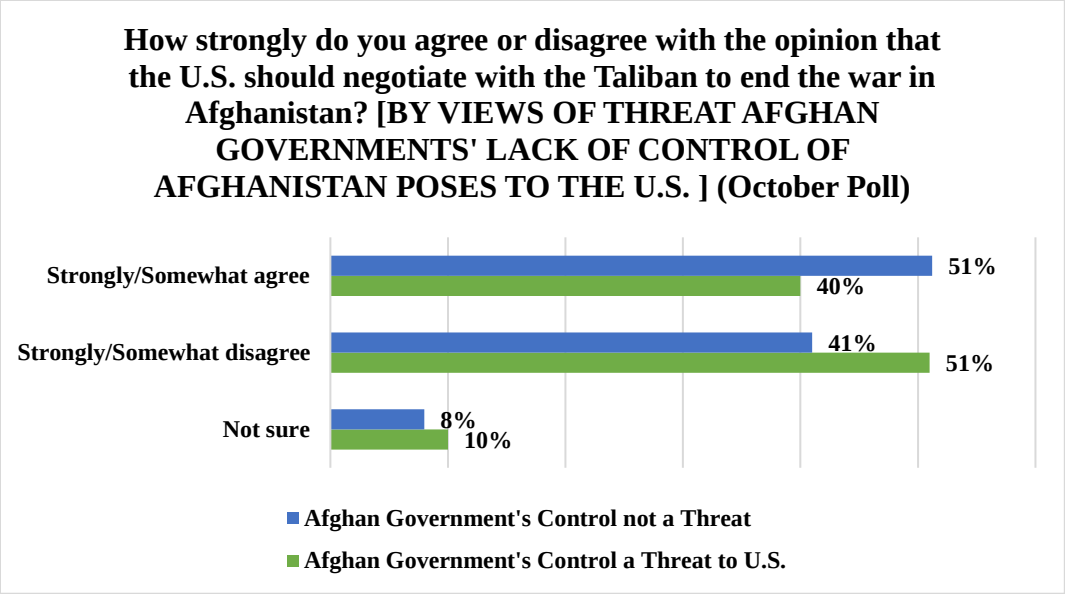

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the opinion that the U.S. should negotiate with the Taliban to end the war in Afghanistan? [BY PARTY] (October Poll)
Strongly/Somewhat agree
40%
47%
35%
42%
Strongly/Somewhat disagree
49%
35%
38%
41%
Not sure
11%
18%
27%
16%
Republicans
Democrats
Independents
Total

Interestingly, the largest divide is not between Republicans and Democrats, but between Democrats. By breaking down the respondents by 'very strong' versus 'not very strong' Democrats and Republicans, we can see that there is only a marginal discrepancy in responses between 'strong' and 'not very strong' Republicans.

'Not very strong' Democrats, however, are more likely to disagree with negotiations (49%) than 'strong' Democrats (32%). Democrats of both strands are also more likely to be 'not sure' than Republicans across the board. The discrepancy was even greater among those who claimed to not identify with either party, but 'lean' toward the Democrats, with 57% favoring negotiations with the Taliban.

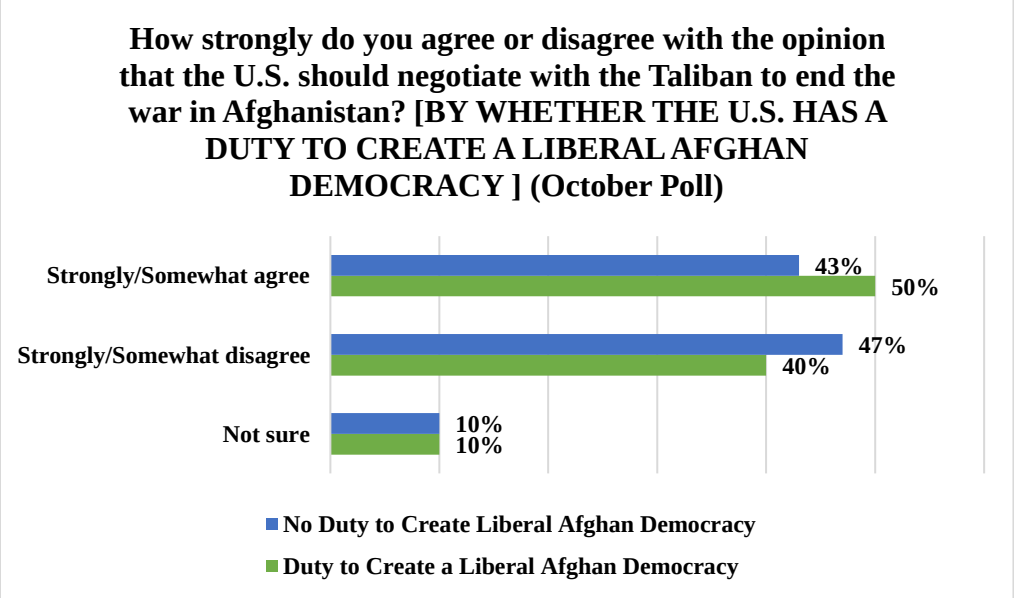


Comparing agreement of negotiations with the Taliban with previous questions also yields fruitful insight. Respondents who answered that the Afghan government losing control of Afghan territory would not pose a threat to the United States were more likely to agree with negotiations with the Taliban (51%) versus those who believed it would pose a threat (40%).



Likewise, respondents were asked whether the United States had a responsibility to ensure that Afghanistan has a liberal democratic government. Those who believed that it did not have a responsibility were less likely to agree with negotiations with the Taliban (43%) compared to those who believed the United States has a responsibility to leave Afghanistan with a liberal democratic government (50%). In some ways, this would appear counterintuitive, as the prospects of an Afghan government that respects citizens' democratic rights and a liberal understanding of human rights would seem to diminish with the Taliban's involvement.

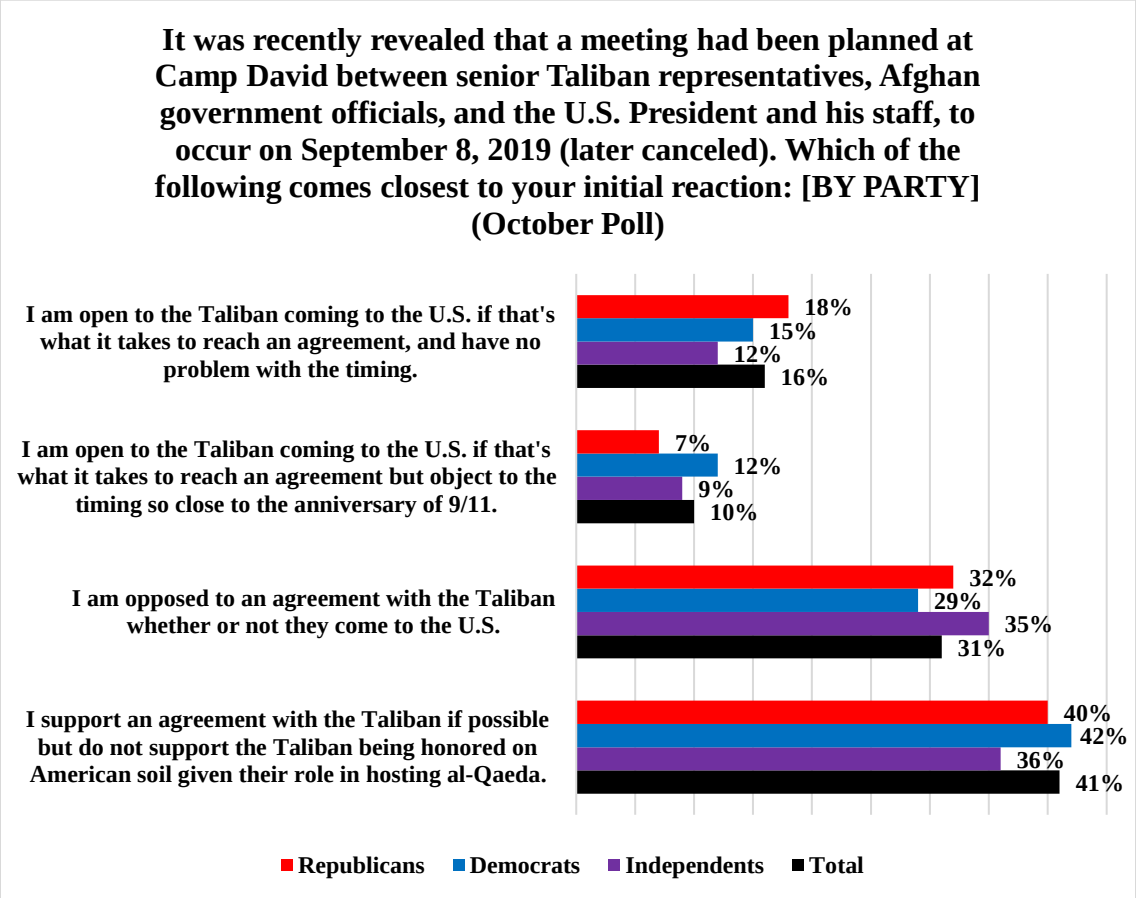
Those respondents could, however, be more generally inclined to the process of negotiation than those who place a lower value on preserving democratic rights.



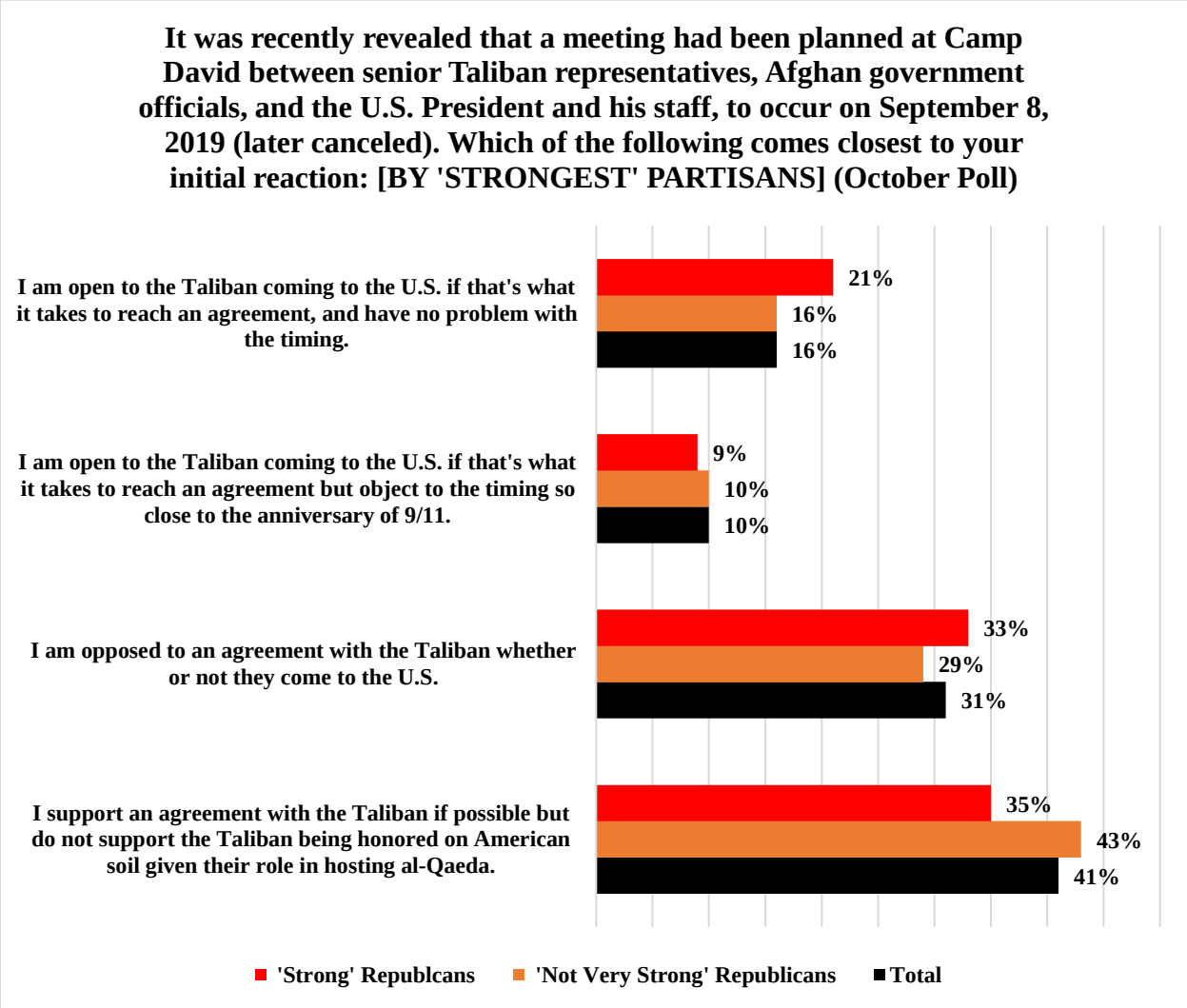
Negotiations between the United States and the Taliban were abruptly canceled when President Trump announced, via Twitter, that he had secretly invited Taliban leaders to Camp David to a September 8th peace summit. Blaming the Taliban's continued use of suicide attacks, including one which killed an American service member, the President announced that he was canceling both the summit and negotiations.

When asked for a reaction to these events, a plurality of respondents supported an agreement with the Taliban, but not honoring them with a summit given their role in hosting al-Qaeda (41%). The second most popular response was a general opposition to an agreement with the Taliban, regardless of whether or not they come to the United States (31%). Nearly even numbers of Democrats and Republicans favored both options.

Together, roughly 82% of respondents disapproved of some aspect of the planned summit, including a majority of Republicans. Only 18% of Republicans had no qualms with the planned summit and its timing, a rare signal of disapproval to a proposed act by President Trump.



Again, we can see that this disapproval is fairly constant across both ‘strong’ and ‘not very strong’ Republicans. ‘Not very strong’ Republicans were, however, less likely to support the summit (16%) than ‘strong’ Republicans (21%) and more likely to support an agreement with the Taliban but disapprove of honoring them on American soil due to their involvement with al-Qaeda (43% vs. 35%).



The strong disapproval of the proposed Trump-Taliban summit is a rare instance of all but the most adamant of the President’s base turning against one of his proposals.

In our survey of American public opinion of the Trump administration’s policies towards Iran, Syria, and Afghanistan, several trends become clear. First, while Americans are hesitant to commit military force to Middle Eastern conflicts, they are also unsupportive of the rapid withdrawal of American troops from northern Syria. As the impact of the withdrawal on America’s Kurdish allies became apparent, and Republican opposition grew more vocal, so too did the public’s disapproval.

Secondly, Americans are vigorously opposed to using military force against Iran, sense that a conflict with Iran is growing more likely, and identify the administration's policies as the source of these growing tensions.

Finally, even after nearly twenty years of conflict in Afghanistan, Americans are hesitant to withdraw from the country. Likewise, they remain hesitant about the idea of negotiating with the Taliban. As a general theme, we can say that these results suggest that, regardless of party, Americans are hesitant to commit troops to new conflicts overseas, but are also reserved to withdrawing when counseled on the potential negative effects of leaving.

Survey Methodology (September 2019)

The survey was carried out September 3-20, 2019 online from a nationally representative sample of Nielsen Scarborough's probability-based panel, originally recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of adults. The national poll was conducted among 3,016 respondents, with a margin of error of +/- 1.78%. Overall, the sample was adjusted to reflect population estimates (Scarborough USA+/Gallup) for Americans. The survey variables balanced through weighting were: age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, level of education, census regional division, and political party affiliation.

Survey Methodology (October 2019)

The survey was carried out October 4-10, 2019 online from a nationally representative sample of Nielsen Scarborough's probability-based panel, originally recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of adults. The national poll was conducted among 1,260 respondents (958 for the Syria question), with a margin of error of +/- 2.76%. Overall, the sample was adjusted to reflect population estimates (Scarborough USA+/Gallup) for Americans. The survey variables balanced through weighting were: age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, level of education, census regional division, and political party affiliation.

To view the full questionnaire for this poll, please click here. For more information, please visit:

criticalissues.umd.edu

Note: These questions were fielded as part of a larger poll on foreign and domestic issues. Participants in this study were provided by Nielsen from Nielsen's sample of respondents.