



The Clash of Generations? Intergenerational Change and American Foreign Policy Views

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Since World War II the United States has maintained an active foreign policy agenda, deeply engaged in both the economic and military domains. Many observers over the past few years, however, have begun to voice doubts about public support for the critical pillars of American internationalism. Some have argued that the American public has lost its appetite for military intervention after more than 15 years at war in the greater Middle East. Others have suggested that Donald Trump's election revealed weakening support for free trade and for the global alliance system the United States built after World War II.

Many observers have worried, in particular, about whether younger Americans will be willing to take up the mantle of global leadership. This question matters a good deal in light of the fact that the Millennial Generation, those born between 1981 and 1996, is now the largest generation of Americans. Like the Baby Boomers before them, Millennials have already had an outsized impact on American culture. As they age and begin to take leadership positions in business, government, and across society, their views – not those of their parents and grandparents – will be decisive.

Those worried about Millennials' willingness to embrace the traditional liberal internationalism of the post-World War II era may find some evidence for their concerns in survey data. As the 2012 Chicago Council Survey report noted,

“Millennials...are much less alarmed about major threats facing the country, particularly international terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and the development of China as a world power, and are less supportive of an activist approach to foreign affairs than older Americans.”

In order to understand where foreign policy attitudes are headed, we employ a generational perspective to analyze a wide range of survey data collected by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs since 1974. The findings reveal that generations share many opinions about international threats, foreign policy goals, and the best approaches to engaging the world. Yet, each generation from the Silent Generation onward entered adulthood somewhat less supportive of expansive American internationalism, with more recent generations expressing lower support for militarized approaches to achieve foreign policy goals.

Today, each successor generation is less likely than the previous to prioritize maintaining superior military power worldwide as a goal of US foreign policy, to see US military superiority as a very effective way of achieving US foreign policy goals, and to support expanding defense spending. At the same time, support for international cooperation and free trade remains high across the generations. In fact, younger Americans are more inclined to support cooperative approaches to US foreign policy and more likely to feel favorably towards trade and globalization.

Key Findings

- Each generation since the Silent Generation reports less support than its predecessors for taking an active part in world affairs, as measured by responses to the standard Chicago Council Survey question: “Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs?”
- Sometimes, this difference split Millennials from older Americans; at other times, Millennials and Gen Xers both differ from prior generations.
- Long-term shifts in ideology and party identification mean that younger Americans today are more liberal than their elders, less likely to identify as Republican, but also more likely not to identify with either party.
- Because ideology and partisanship exert such powerful influences on public opinion, these trends play a significant role in explaining the size and direction of generation gaps on foreign policy issues.
- Yet even when the pull of partisanship and party loyalty is greatest, the differences across generations remain visible and large enough to be politically significant.

It is difficult to predict how much these generation gaps will influence the direction of US foreign policy. As younger Americans continue to replace older Americans, especially at the voting booth, shifting demographics and attitudes are likely to influence debates about how the United States should engage the world. As younger Americans move through the stages of life it will be interesting to see if these generational differences result in a permanent break from previous patterns of foreign policy attitudes.

Introduction: What are Generations and Why Do They Matter?

What makes generations worth studying? Some might argue that generations are simply arbitrary categories with little objective meaning. Why does the Millennial Generation begin in 1981 and not 1982? Does a Baby Boomer born in 1964 differ in any meaningful way from a member of Generation X born in 1965? Is there a magic dividing line that affects a person's attitudes and behavior?

Though generational boundaries are indeed somewhat arbitrary, the benefits of studying the evolution of attitudes over time are significant. Research has long shown that a person's age is a powerful predictor of many behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes. But no one needs an academic study to tell them that their grandparents held very different attitudes and beliefs from their grandchildren. That much is obvious. Nor is it particularly important exactly where we draw the generational dividing lines. The underlying questions remain the same: How do opinions change over time and why do we see different opinions among younger and older Americans today?

Public opinion research provides three potential explanations. The first explanation is what are called "aging effects." As people get older certain attitudes and behaviors tend to change in predictable patterns. Most people, for example, become more attentive to public affairs and more likely to vote as they enter middle age. Thus, we would expect to see attitude gaps across the generations on issues wherever aging effects are at work.

A second explanation for generation gaps is "cohort effects." Cohort effects refer to the differential impact that historical changes in technology, social norms, and culture as well as major events like war, recessions, or political upheaval have on people of different ages. Though major events affect the attitudes of everyone for a time, research has shown that they can produce more pronounced and permanent effects on young people's attitudes.¹ For example, research has shown that people who come of age during the presidencies of popular presidents are more likely to vote for that president's party throughout their lifetimes.² Likewise, major international events experienced during young adulthood can affect views of foreign affairs. The Great Depression and World War II, for example, helped mold the foreign policy views of the Greatest Generation. More generally, since each generation experiences a different mix of events during their young adult years, we can expect that some of the attitude gaps among generations are the result of cohort effects as well as potential aging effects.

¹ See, for example, Howard Schuman and Amy Corning, "Generational Memory and the Critical Period: Evidence for National and World Events," *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 76, No. 1 Spring 2012, pp. 1-31

² Yair Ghitza and Andrew Gelman, "The Great Society, Reagan's Revolution, and Generations of Presidential Voting," *Columbia University Working Paper* July 7, 2014. See: Michael X. Delli Carpini, "Age and History: Generations and Sociopolitical Change," in Roberta S. Sigel, Ed., *Political Learning in Adulthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1989)

A final potential explanation for generation gaps is social and demographic change. Since World War II the American public has changed considerably in ways that could affect support for internationalism. Compared to their elders, younger Americans are less likely to be white, more likely to be immigrants or the children of immigrants, more likely to be liberal, more likely to go to college, less likely to identify as Republican, but also more likely not to identify with either political party – 15 percent of Millennial respondents in the 2017 Chicago Council Survey indicated “Other” on the party identification question, twice as many as any other generation.³ Polling data reveal that liberalism and higher rates of education, for example, are both linked to greater support for internationalism.⁴ Other demographic changes may work in the opposite direction. For example, polls find that younger Americans have less interest in foreign policy as a whole. A spring 2018 Chicago Council survey found that 18 percent of Millennials, compared to 29 percent of Gen Xers, 42 percent of Baby Boomers, and 44 percent of the Silent generation, report being very interested in news about US relations with the rest of the world. Over time, these changes will impact overall public opinion more fully as older Americans die and are replaced by younger Americans.

For researchers, the trick is to determine how much impact each of these factors has on attitude change. Making this difficult is the fact that all three effects operate simultaneously. And just to make it even more interesting, short-term period effects – the contemporaneous effects of events and social forces on the opinions of people of all ages – can mask long term trends. Teasing out the respective influences of these different effects requires careful analysis of polling data over time.

The bottom line is that generations function much like other well-known concepts in the study of public opinion, such as race or partisan identification. Not all people of a given race, for example, hold the same opinions. And racial categories are certainly fuzzy at the boundaries as are generations. Nonetheless, for many purposes knowing a respondent’s race can help us understand patterns of opinion formation and change.⁵ Likewise, even though generations encompass a multitude of people, many of whom hold different opinions, they provide a useful framework for helping us think about public opinion change over time.

A Snapshot of the Generations

Six generations of Americans currently make up the nation’s population. The oldest of these is the Greatest Generation (or the GI Generation), those born before 1928. The Silent Generation includes people born between 1928 and 1945. The Baby Boomer generation starts in 1946 and ends with those born in 1964. Generation X, the smallest generation, runs from 1965 to 1980. The oldest of the Millennial Generation, now the largest generation, were born in 1981 while the youngest – according to a

³ The question is: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?”

⁴ Kertzer, Joshua D. “Making sense of isolationism: foreign policy mood as a multilevel phenomenon.” *The Journal of Politics* 75.1 (2013): 225-240.

⁵ Vincent L. Hutchings and Nicholas Valentino, “The Centrality of Race in American Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 7, pp. 383-408.

new cutoff suggested by the Pew Research Center, were born in 1996. The newest group of Americans – Generation Z – are those born from 1997 onward. Since there aren't many members of the Greatest Generation responding to surveys at this point, and most of Generation Z is too young to answer surveys (just 102 were sampled in the 2017 survey), our study focuses on the four generations in between.

As noted, the rising Millennial Generation and Generation Z also reflect a number of important demographic changes reshaping the composition of the public. In 1947, 58 percent of American adults had not finished high school and only eight percent of Americans had a college degree. By 2016 those figures had almost reversed: just eight percent had not finished high school and 35 percent had college degrees. The Millennial generation is poised to become the most-educated cohort in American history. Table 1 summarizes some of these changes.

Table 1. The Changing Composition of America

	Silent	Boomer	Gen X	Millennial	Net Change (Silent - Millennial)
Party ID					
% Republican	33	29	26	22	- 11
% Democrat	34	34	39	36	+ 2
% Independent	29	28	26	26	- 3
% Other	3	6	7	15	+ 12
Ideology					
% Conservative	46	37	35	27	- 19
% Moderate	31	37	38	39	+ 8
% Liberal	22	24	25	32	+ 10
Other					
% White	83	71	61	56	- 27

Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

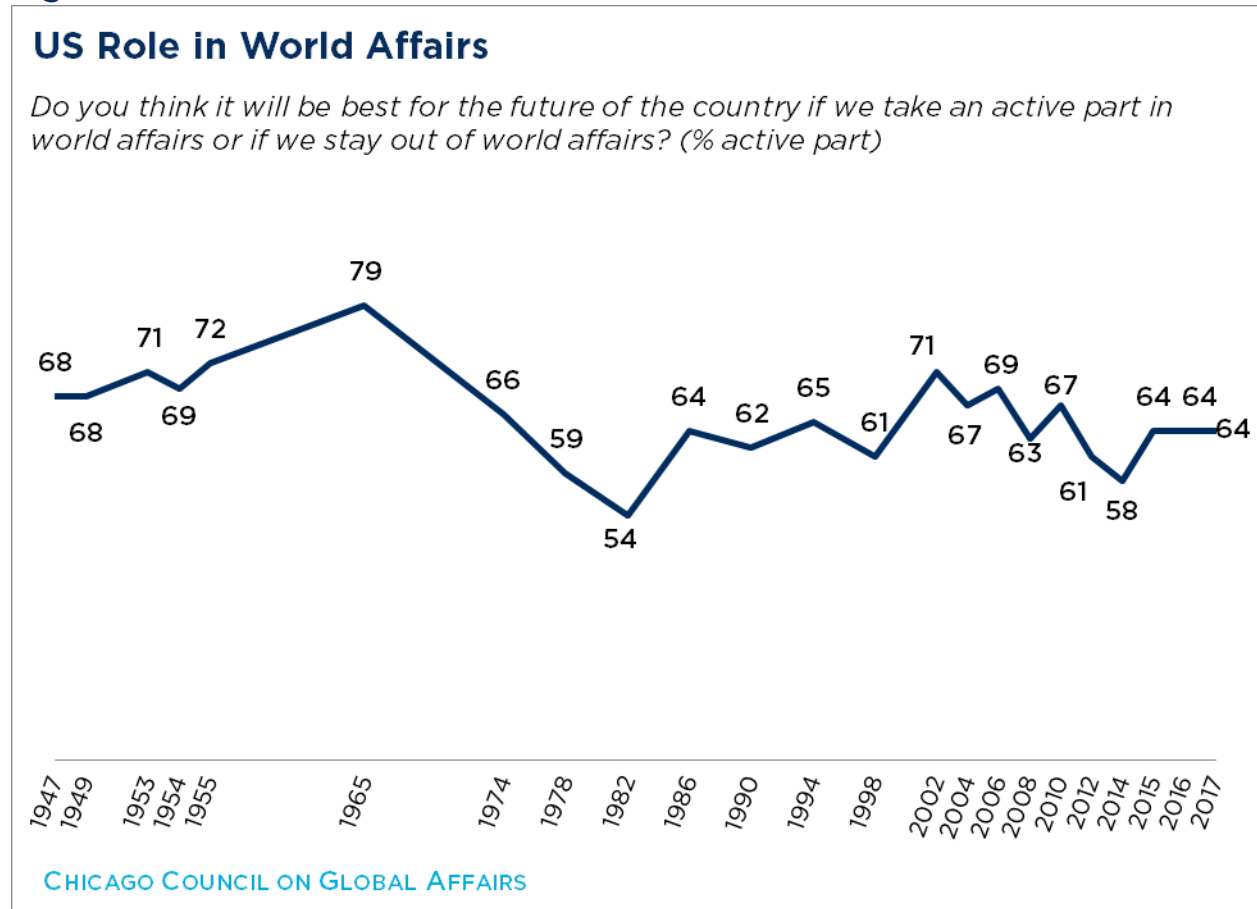
Thanks to the combination of demographic change and generational replacement, the United States is undergoing a watershed transition as the Baby Boomers slowly make way for Millennials and younger Americans. The 2016 election foreshadows a tipping point of potentially greater change. It was the first presidential election in which Millennial and Generation X voters outnumbered voters from previous generations. And whereas a majority of older voters voted for Donald Trump, a majority of voters under 45 voted for Hillary Clinton.

The Millennials have recently overtaken the Baby Boomers as the largest generation. Hot on the Millennials' heels is Generation Z, the oldest members of which are now 20 years old. With Silent and Baby Boomer generation members dying at a rate of roughly two million per year, the views of younger Americans will take on even greater weight as they increase their participation in the political process.

I. SHIFTING VIEWS OF AMERICA'S ROLE IN THE WORLD

Public opinion researchers have measured support for American involvement in international affairs since World War II. As Figure 1 illustrates, that support has been remarkably steady over the decades, with an average of 71 percent saying the United States should take an active part in world affairs between 1947 and 2017.

Figure 1



Though a majority of Americans of all generations have always responded that the United States should take an active part in world affairs, the stability of mass opinion masks important intergenerational differences in attitudes. As Figures 2 and 3 show, while support for internationalism rose between the Lost Generation (those born between 1893 and 1908) and the Silent Generation, since the Silent Generation support for internationalism is lower across successive generations. Americans in Generation X and the Millennial Generation exhibit the least support for the United States taking an active part in world affairs.

Figure 2

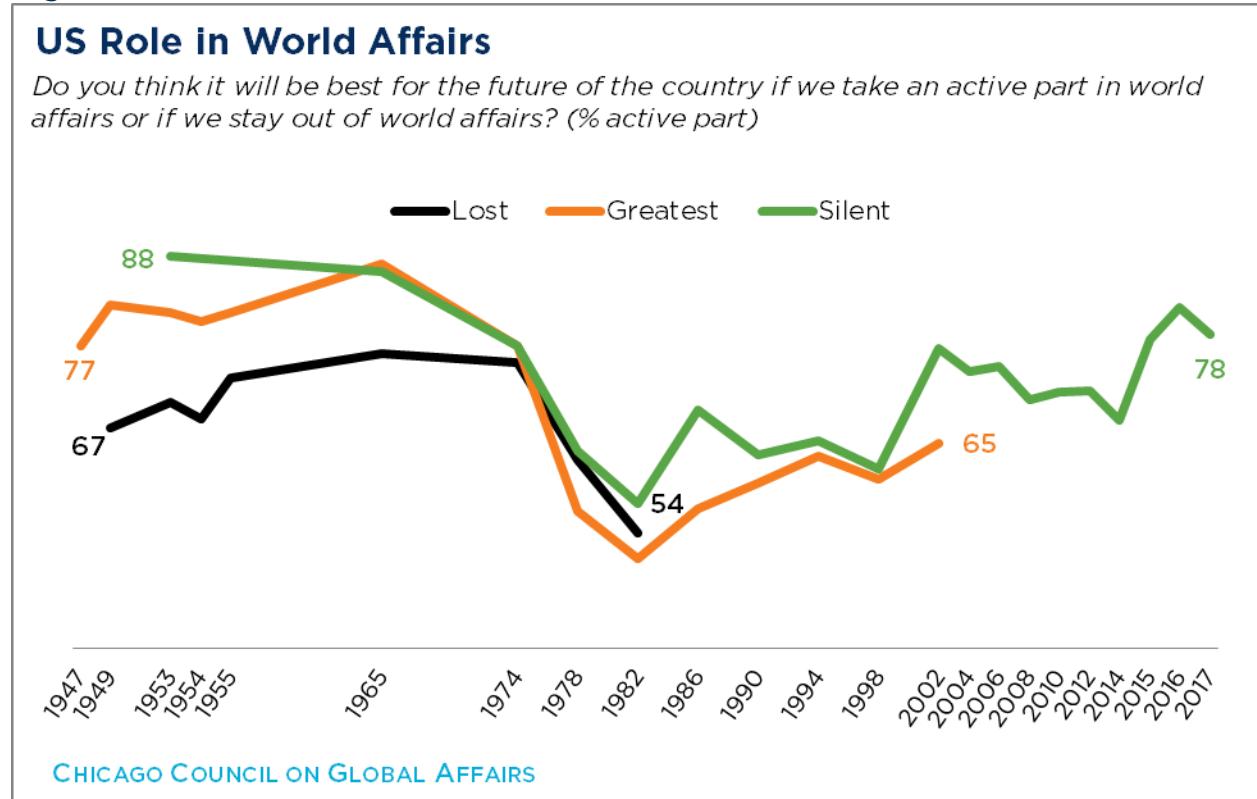
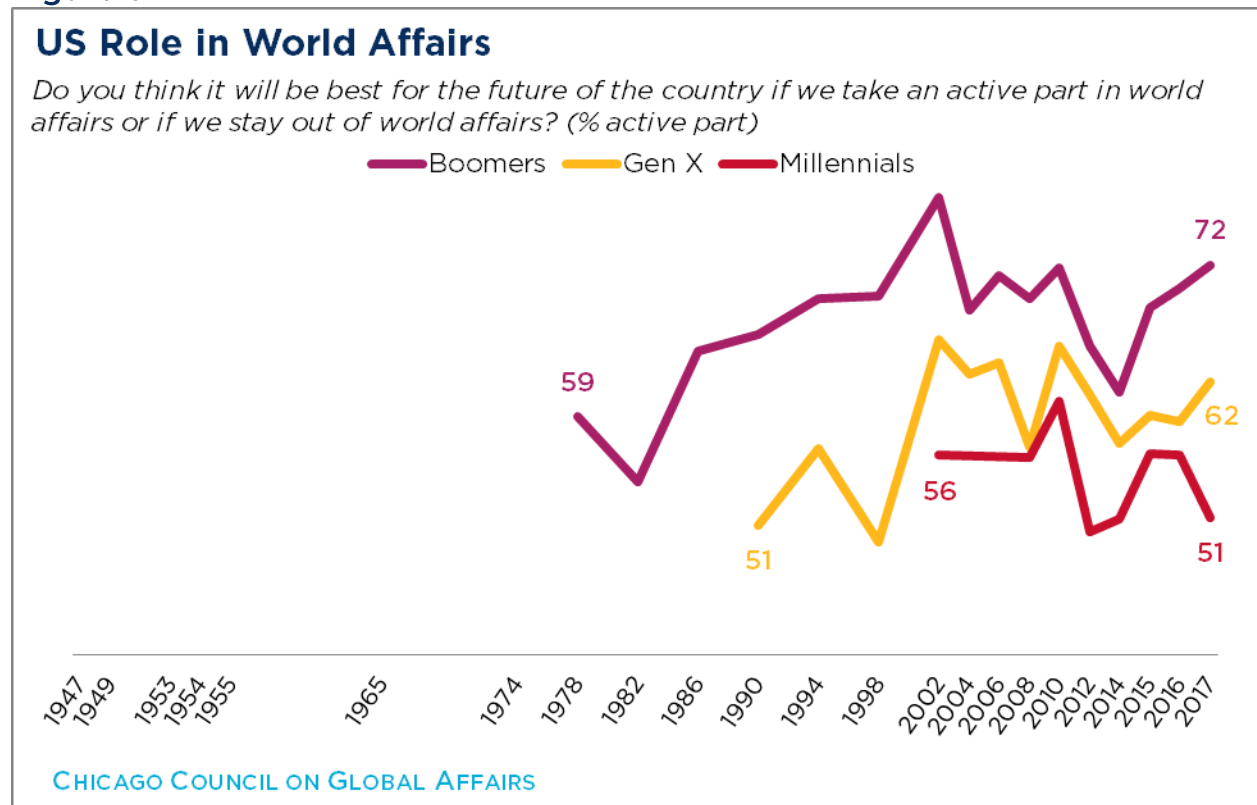


Figure 3



Previous investigation by the Council using open-ended follow-up questions has found that respondents mean many different things when they say the United States should stay out of, or take an active part in, world affairs. As the Council reported in 2012:

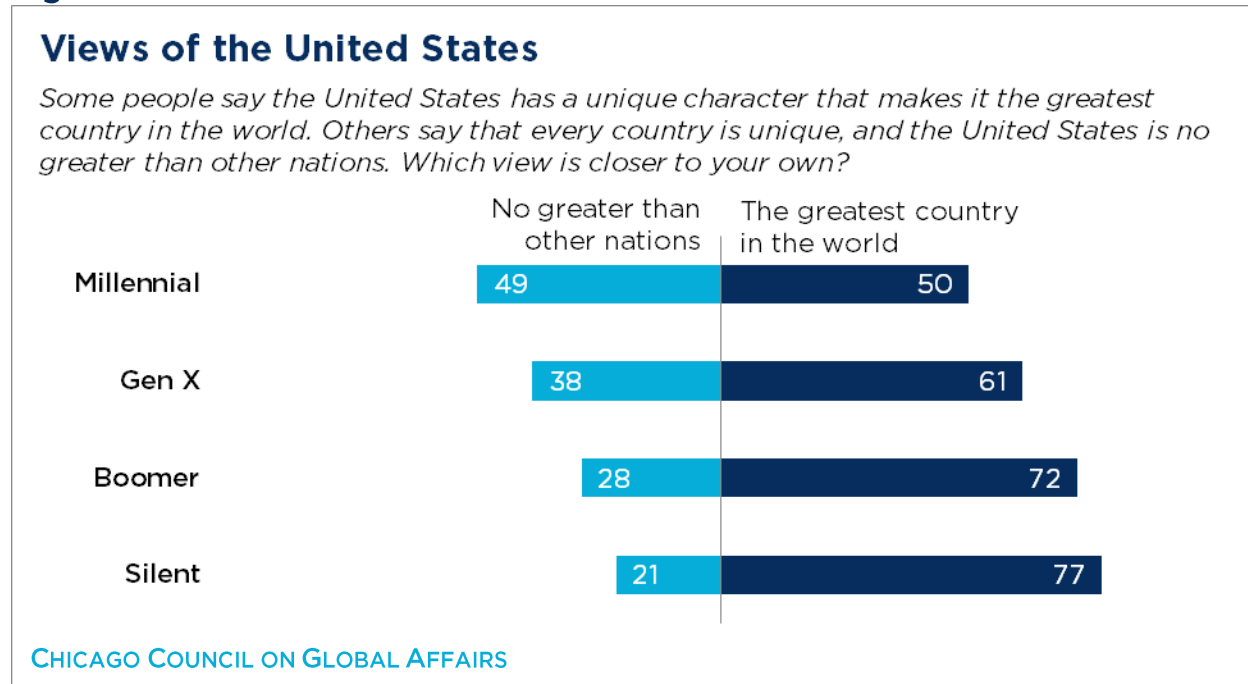
Among those who prefer to stay out of world affairs, several emphasize the need to focus instead on domestic problems, such as needing to “get our people back to work, stop spending money we don’t have, and get out of debt.” Others express a desire to avoid interfering in other countries: “It isn’t any of our business. Not every country wants to be like America.” Dependence upon the United States is also a theme: “It is time that other countries try to help themselves instead of wanting ... a handout.”

Those who support an activist stance often mention national security: “It’s in our national interest in terms of economic growth and national security.” Some talk about being part of a “complex, global, and interdependent world” and providing support and leadership to other nations: “Many countries look to us for answers to their problems.” Still others believe that US participation in global affairs makes a positive difference in the world by protecting “human and civil rights around the world,” supporting “policies to make the world a better place,” and leading by example: “I really think that we are a shining beacon of light for individual freedoms.” Some feel the United States has an obligation to play a role: “As one of the most powerful nations in the world, we need to use our influence to help shape the world into a safe place.”

Generational gaps are also visible in the 2017 Chicago Council Survey on the question of US exceptionalism. As shown in figure 4, younger Americans are much less likely than older Americans to say that the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world, and instead are more likely to say that every country is unique and that the United States is no greater than other nations. This trend aligns with findings from the American National Election Study, which found in 2014 that 81 percent of the Silent Generation “love America” while just 58 percent of Millennials do.⁶ The same study found that though 79 percent of the Silent Generation considers their identity as Americans to be extremely important, just 45 percent of Millennials do.

⁶ Lynn Vavreck, “Younger Americans Are Less Patriotic. At Least, in Some Ways.” *The New York Times*. July 4, 2014.

Figure 4

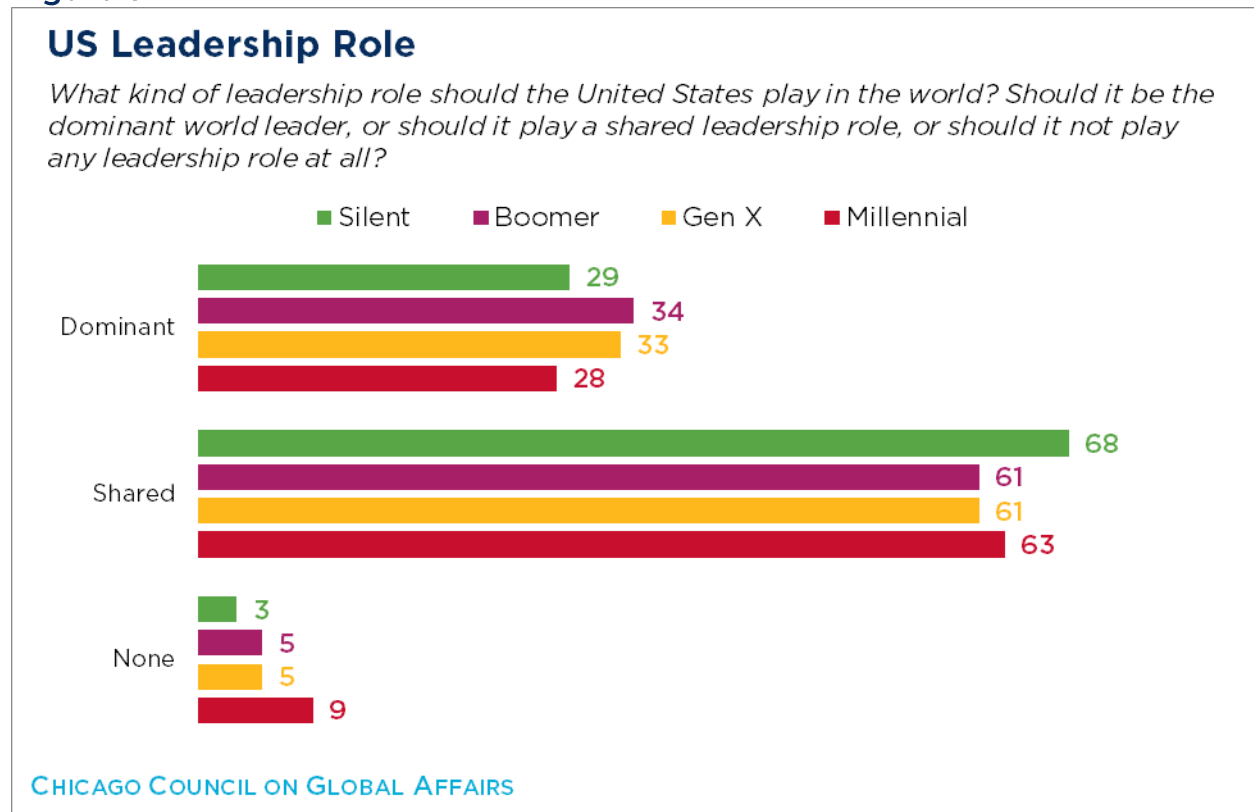


Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Additionally, while younger Americans say the United States is the most influential country around the world, they rate its influence lower than older generations. On a 0 to 10 scale, with 0 meaning the United States is not at all influential and 10 meaning it is extremely influential, Millennials rate the United States an 8.0, below Gen Xers (8.1), Boomers (8.5), and Silents (8.7).

However, despite these differences, there is greater intergenerational agreement when it comes to what form American leadership should take. As Figure 5 shows, all generations tend to favor the United States playing a shared leadership role rather than a dominant one, while few say the United States should not have a global leadership role.

Figure 5



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

New Patterns of Internationalism?

Though the intergenerational divides on the character of the United States and whether the United States should play an active role in world affairs are clear, they are impossible to interpret without digging deeper. Do the trends suggest a specific pattern of changing support and opposition to different elements of internationalism and American foreign policy? We can account for most of these specific concerns by looking at three fundamental dimensions of internationalism: support for military power and the use of military force; support for the use of diplomacy and international collaboration of various kinds; and support for international trade.

As the following sections investigate in detail, the generation gap in internationalism is not evenly distributed across the three major areas. Though support for internationalism writ large has declined over the generations as measured by the “stay out” vs. “active part” question, that decline appears to be due primarily to changes in the interpretation of what an “active part” in world affairs means, as well as differences between generations’ most favored approaches to foreign policy, rather than to a general abandonment of all forms of international engagement. Indeed, support for international cooperation and free trade is somewhat higher among younger Americans than their elders.

II. SUPPORT FOR THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE

The most significant differences in foreign policy attitudes across the generations are those regarding the use of military force and the role of the military in US foreign policy. On average, younger Americans are less persuaded that maintaining military superiority is an important goal and are less confident in using military force as a general tool of foreign policy. Young Americans are also less supportive of the hypothetical use of military force in many specific instances like defending allies, and in turn, less supportive of expanding defense spending.

Research has shown that support for the use of military force reflects a complicated web of political ideology, moral considerations, beliefs about the effectiveness of using force to solve problems, as well as perceptions of the costs and benefits of military action in a given situation.⁷ Conservatives are more likely to support the use of military force in more scenarios than liberals, for example—and Millennials are less likely to identify as ideologically conservative than older generations.

Another important factor is the public's perception of the threats facing the United States. Over time, threat perceptions rise and fall with events, shifting political agendas, and other changing conditions. Threat perceptions also vary considerably across generations. Table 2 reveals that younger Americans, on balance, are less likely to name a variety of foreign threats as critical threats.⁸ At the same time, Americans across generations share a set of common concerns: international terrorism, cyberattacks, North Korea's nuclear program, and the spread of nuclear weapons are all top concerns regardless of generation. After those top four concerns, however, generational differences once again assert themselves: Millennials and Gen Xers are more concerned about climate change than older Americans, while older Americans are more concerned about political instability in the Middle East.

⁷ Jon Hurwitz and Mark Peffley, "How Are Foreign Policy Attitudes Structured? A Hierarchical Model," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 81, 1987, pp. 1099-1120; Joshua D. Kertzer et al, "Moral Support: How Moral Values Shape Foreign Policy Attitudes," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 76, 2014, pp. 825-840

⁸ Chicago Council Surveys from 1974-2017 show, for example, that the 18 to 29-year-old cohort has always been less likely to sense threats than their elders.

Table 2. Critical Threats to Vital US interests

Below is a list of possible threats of the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all (% very important)

	Silent	Boomer	Gen X	Millennial
1	North Korea's nuclear program 83	North Korea's nuclear program 82	North Korea's nuclear program 74	International terrorism 68
2	International terrorism 82	Cyberattacks on US computer networks 81	Cyberattacks on US computer networks 73	Cyberattacks on US computer networks 67
3	Cyberattacks on US computer networks 80	International terrorism 81	International terrorism 72	North Korea's nuclear program 64
4	The possibility of any new countries (friendly or unfriendly) acquiring nuclear weapons 64	The possibility of any new countries (friendly or unfriendly) acquiring nuclear weapons 67	The possibility of any new countries (friendly or unfriendly) acquiring nuclear weapons 61	The possibility of any new countries (friendly or unfriendly) acquiring nuclear weapons 55
5	Political instability in the Middle East 58	Political instability in the Middle East 54	Climate change 46	Climate change 54

Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Americans' perceptions of threats help shape their views of the top goals for US foreign policy. Across generations, Americans generally share a common set of foreign policy goals for the United States, including protecting the jobs of American workers, preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, securing adequate supplies of energy, and improving America's standing in the world.

However, there are notable generational differences over the importance of military superiority. Figure 6 shows that from the Silent generation onward, each succeeding generation is somewhat less likely to respond that maintaining US military superiority is a very important foreign policy goal for the United States. Indeed, with the exception of the post-9/11 survey of 2002, a majority of Millennials have never seen maintaining US military superiority as a very important goal for US foreign policy. Notably, Millennials are also the lone generation for which combating world hunger ranks among their top five foreign policy goals (Table 3).

Figure 6

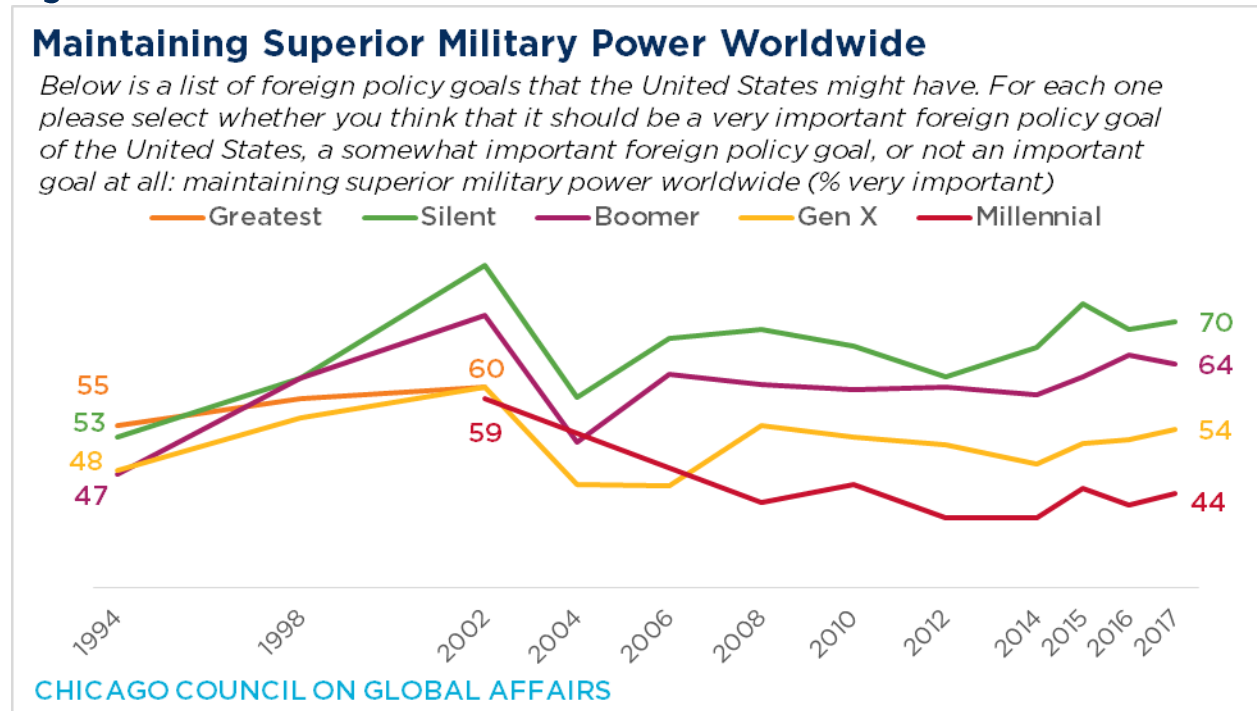


Table 3. US Foreign Policy Goals

Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all (% very important).

	Silent	Boomer	Gen X	Millennial
1	Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons 87	Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons 83	Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons 73	Protecting the jobs of American workers 70
2	Protecting the jobs of American workers 76	Protecting the jobs of American workers 77	Protecting the jobs of American workers 72	Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons 64
3	Maintaining superior military power worldwide 70	Maintaining superior military power worldwide 64	Securing adequate supplies of energy 59	Securing adequate supplies of energy 59
4	Securing adequate supplies of energy 64	Securing adequate supplies of energy 62	Maintaining superior military power worldwide 54	Improving America's standing in the world 52
5	Improving America's standing in the world 63	Improving America's standing in the world 59	Improving America's standing in the world 52	Combating world hunger 47

Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

That generational split on the importance of maintaining superior military power worldwide carries over into views on the effectiveness of US military superiority as a means of achieving US foreign policy goals. Whereas US military superiority is deemed a very effective approach by Silents (62%) and Boomers (56%), only minorities of Gen Xers (45%) and Millennials (35%) agree. Millennials and Gen Xers are both more likely to point to maintaining existing alliances as a very effective approach to US foreign policy, and Millennials additionally name forming new alliances with other countries (40%).

Table 4. Top Foreign Policy Approaches

How effective do you think each of the following approaches are to achieving the foreign policy goals of the United States? (% very effective)

	Silent	Boomer	Gen X	Millennial
1	Maintaining US military superiority 62	Maintaining US military superiority 56	Maintaining existing alliances 48	Maintaining existing alliances 49
2	Maintaining existing alliances 53	Maintaining existing alliances 50	Maintaining US military superiority 45	Building new alliances with other countries 40
3	Building new alliances with other countries 40	Building new alliances with other countries 34	Building new alliances with other countries 37	Maintaining US military superiority 35
4	International agreements 33	International agreements 31	International agreements 31	International agreements 34
5	Participating in international organizations 31	Participating in international organizations 25	Participating in international organizations 24	Participating in international organizations 31

Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

As Table 5 shows, Americans of all generations are more likely to support the use of force for humanitarian purposes than to support the use of force to defend allies or to conduct regime change. Younger Americans in particular are the least supportive on average, though majorities of older and younger generations usually agree, either in support of the use of force (such as to defend South Korea from North Korea or to fight violent Islamic extremist groups) or in opposition (such as using US troops to defend Ukraine from Russia or to remove Assad from power in Syria).

Table 5. Support for the Use of Force

Survey Question	Silent	Boomer	Gen X	Millennial
Conducting airstrikes against President Bashar al-Assad's regime	59	49	48	35
The use of US troops if North Korea invaded South Korea	72	68	60	54
Conducting airstrikes against violent Islamic extremist groups	79	74	65	62
The use of US troops if China initiates a military conflict with Japan over disputed islands	48	44	39	33
The use of US troops if Russia invades a NATO ally like Latvia, Lithuania, or Estonia	56	53	52	49
The use of US troops to deal with humanitarian crises	70	68	68	65
The use of US troops to fight against violent Islamic extremist groups in Iraq and Syria	65	64	64	60
Conduct airstrikes against North Korea's nuclear production facilities	41	42	44	36
The use of US troops if Russia invades the rest of Ukraine	41	39	35	38
The use of US troops to stop or prevent a government from using chemical or biological weapons against its own people	74	76	73	73
Sending combat troops into Syria to fight violent Islamic extremist groups	39	36	48	41
Sending combat troops into Syria to forcibly remove Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power	24	32	23	30
Send US troops to destroy North Korea's nuclear facilities	19	27	31	28

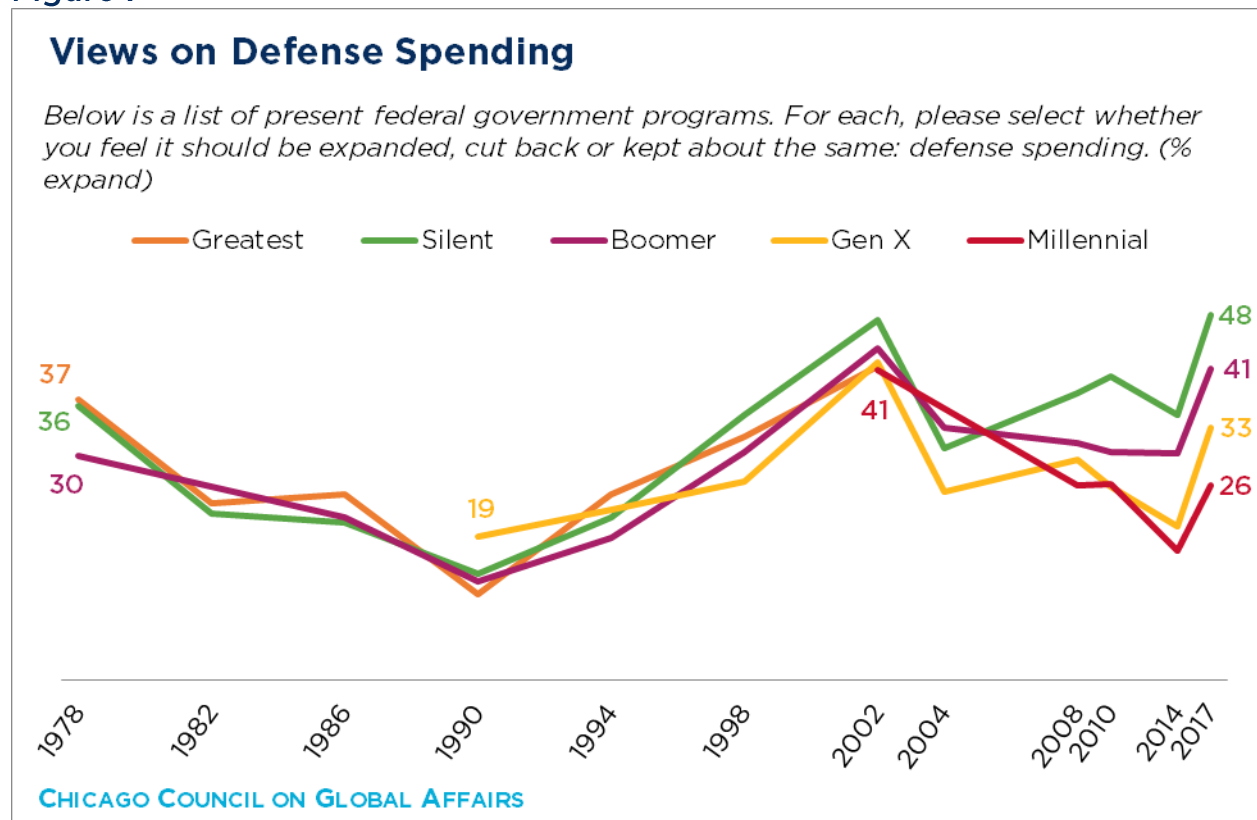
Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Another way to measure support for the military dimension of international engagement is to look at support for defense spending. Logically, those who favor the frequent use of military force should approve of higher levels of defense spending than those who do not. Consistent with that logic, as Figure 7 shows, we find that in almost every Council survey older Americans are considerably more likely to want to expand defense spending than are younger Americans. Figure 7 also reveals that although support for defense spending rises and falls for each generation as circumstances change, the gaps among them have widened since 9/11.

Millennials, in particular, seem less enthusiastic about spending more on defense. In 2017 theirs was the only generation in which more people actually supported cutting

back on defense spending than expanding it, by a nine percentage-point margin (35% to 26%). Generation X, on the other hand, favored expanding over cutting by roughly the same margin (34% to 25%), while Boomers were +22 (41% to 19%) and Silents were +34 (48% to 14%) in favor of expanding over cutting.

Figure 7



III. SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Research has shown that support for American engagement with cooperative mechanisms like international organizations and treaties is distinct from support for the use of military force.⁹ People who support international cooperation generally have confidence in the effectiveness of international organizations and treaties and believe that multilateral action is typically the most desirable way to solve global problems. Though some people support both forms of internationalism, the two have different sources and often correlate with different general views of the world. Liberals, for example, tend to be more supportive of international cooperation than conservatives.

Paralleling the public’s general support for cooperative foreign policy approaches, such as maintaining existing alliances and building new alliances with other countries, support for cooperative international engagement does not vary as much across generations as does support for more military-focused methods. There is little difference in attitudes about the desirability of American participation in the Paris climate treaty or the Iran nuclear deal (Table 6), or the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement (Figure 12).

Table 6. Support for Participation in International Agreements

% Support US participation

Survey Question	Silent	Boomer	Gen X	Millennial
The Paris Agreement that calls for countries to collectively reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases	76	69	69	74
The agreement that lifts some international economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for strict limits on its nuclear program for at least the next decade	63	56	62	62

Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

And despite elite concern about the state of the American alliance system, younger Americans also remain confident about the benefits of alliances and are committed to NATO, in particular. Two-thirds (67%) of Millennials still see the organization as beneficial to the United States, along with 68 percent of Gen Xers and 69 percent of Boomers. Only the Silent Generation differs much, at 76 percent. Additionally, those who want to keep the support to NATO the same or increase it has risen steadily since the late 1970s and early 1980s, with barely a majority of respondents then to more than three-quarters now. There is essentially no difference in support levels across the different generations. Clearly, most Americans of each generation remain supportive of keeping the US commitment to NATO.

⁹ Eugene Wittkopf, *Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Duke University Press 1990).

Figure 8

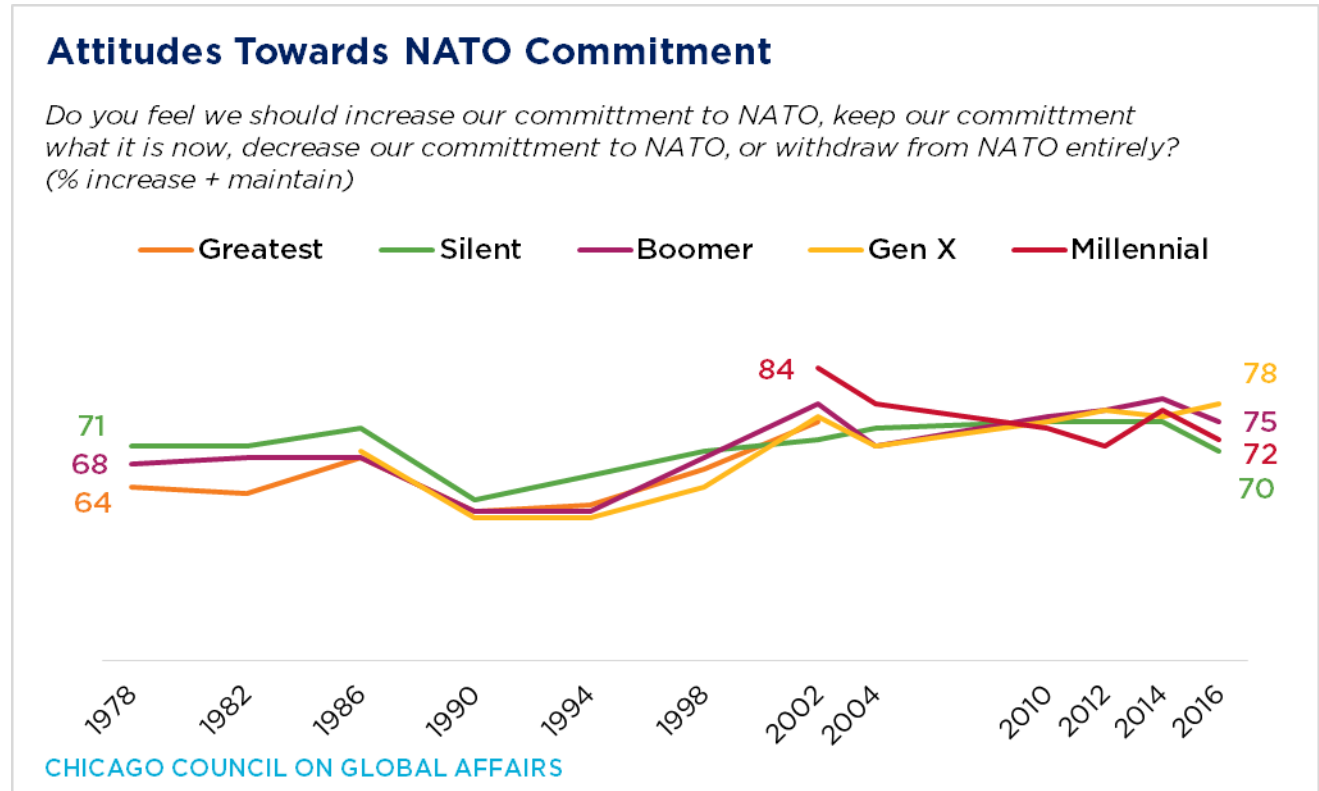


Table 7. Who Benefits from Alliances?

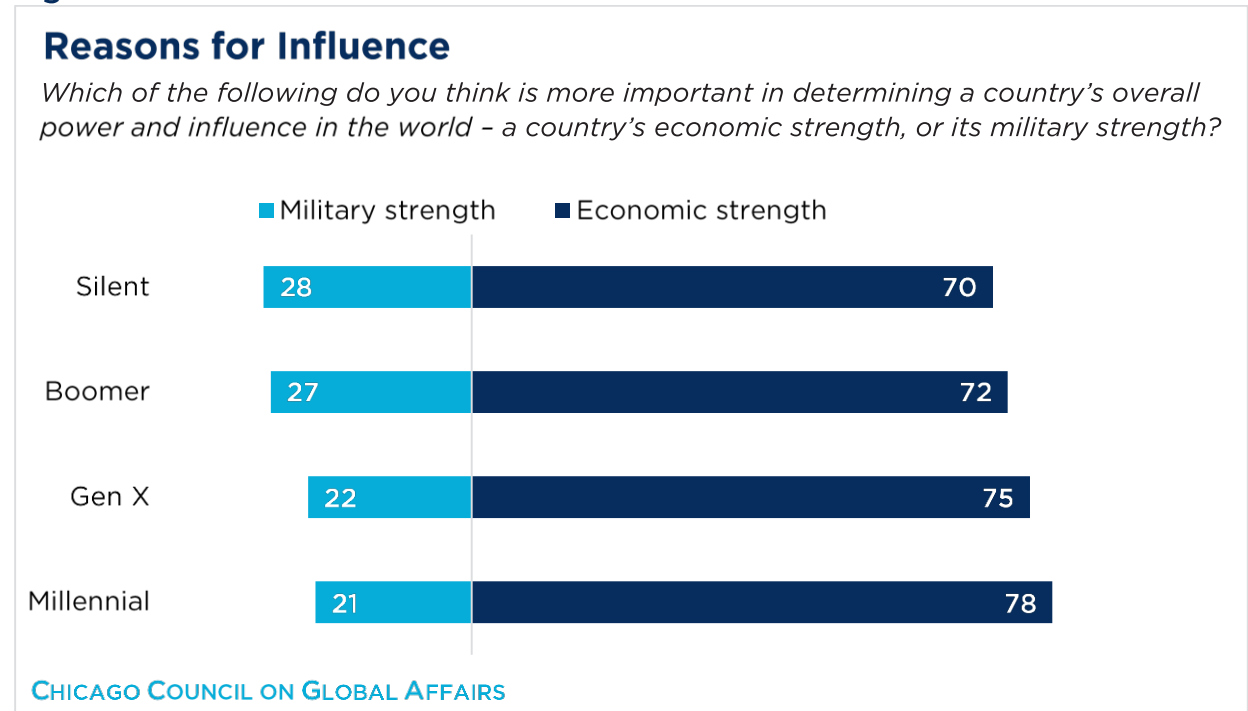
Which of the following comes closest to your view on US security alliances in _____. Do they mostly benefit the US, mostly benefit our allies, benefit both the US and our allies, or benefit neither? (% benefit both United States and ally + mostly benefit the US)

Region	Silent	Boomers	Gen X	Millennials
East Asia	47	61	57	64
Europe	57	63	65	60
Middle East	52	53	42	47

Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Another critical aspect of cooperative internationalism is support for international trade. Trade issues are somewhat unique in American foreign policy, given their scale and importance as well as their unique political nature. Americans also see economic strength, more so than military strength, as vital to a nation’s overall power and influence in the world. This is true across generations, with between seven and eight in ten seeing economic strength as the more important determinant of national power.

Figure 9



Source: 2016 Chicago Council Survey

After World War II, the United States helped create and promote institutions of free trade in the belief that a liberalized global economy was in the best interests of all nations. Still, Americans have often worried about economic threats from other nations like Japan and China. Although specific trade deals such as NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership have spurred vigorous debate, for most of the past 70 years public support for free trade has been relatively stable.

Support for international trade is also stable across the generations. Given the somewhat precarious economic situation they encountered in early adulthood, some may find it surprising to learn that Millennials are the most likely to believe that globalization has been a positive force for the United States (Figure 10). For younger Americans, the Internet, the steady flow of iPhones, computers, and other products from abroad, and the expansion of global travel may have all contributed to a rising comfort level with the rest of the world generally, and to the acceptance that international trade is simply part of the fabric of the modern world.

Figure 10

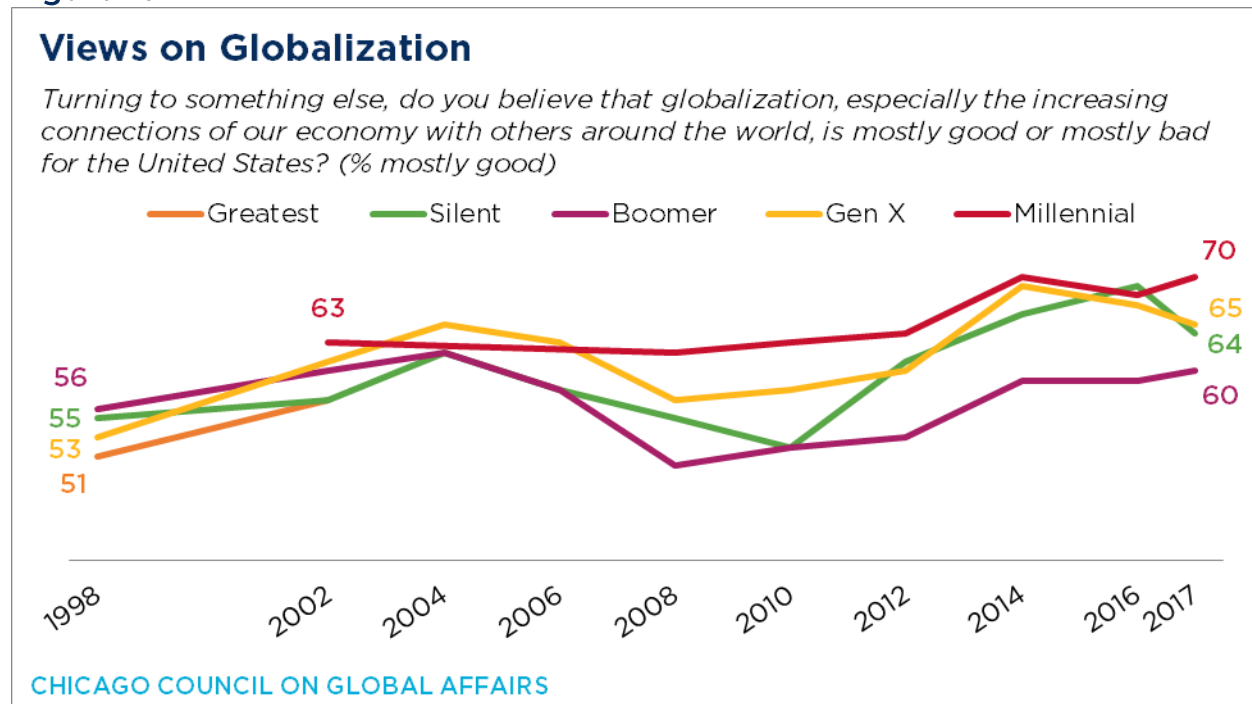


Figure 11 shows that there is not much difference across the generations on the question of whether international trade has been good for the economy, jobs, and consumers. Large majorities from all four generations report that international trade is good for the economy and consumers, while somewhat smaller majorities believe the same is true with respect to American jobs.

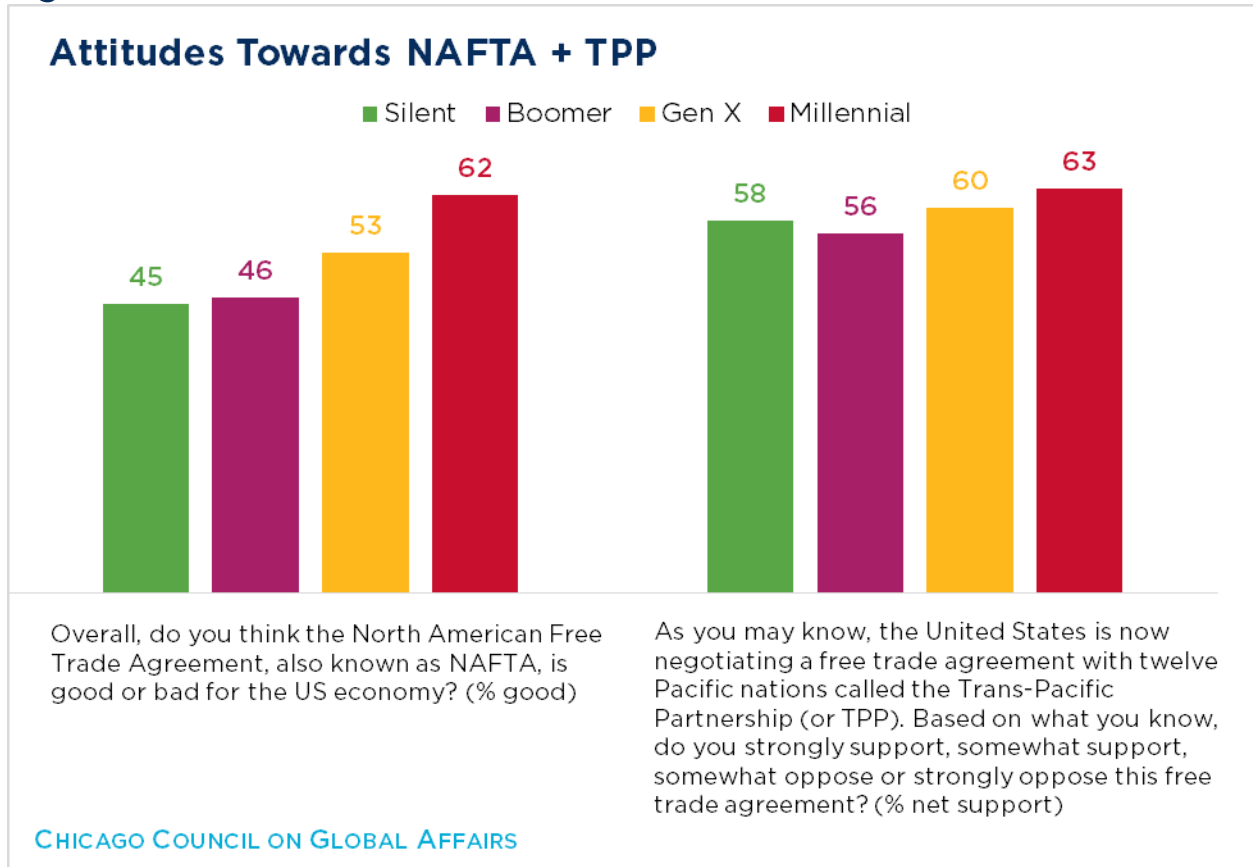
Figure 11



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Further, younger Americans are, on balance, more supportive of free trade agreements, both in theory and practice. Nearly eight in ten Millennials (79%) say that signing free trade agreements is an effective way of achieving US foreign policy goals, as do at least seven in ten Silents (75%), Gen Xers, and Boomers (both 71%). Figure 12 reveals that Millennials are the only generation in which a majority consistently support NAFTA, while majorities of all four generations supported American participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership that President Trump pulled out of early in 2017.

Figure 12



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey (NAFTA) and 2016 Chicago Council Survey (TPP)

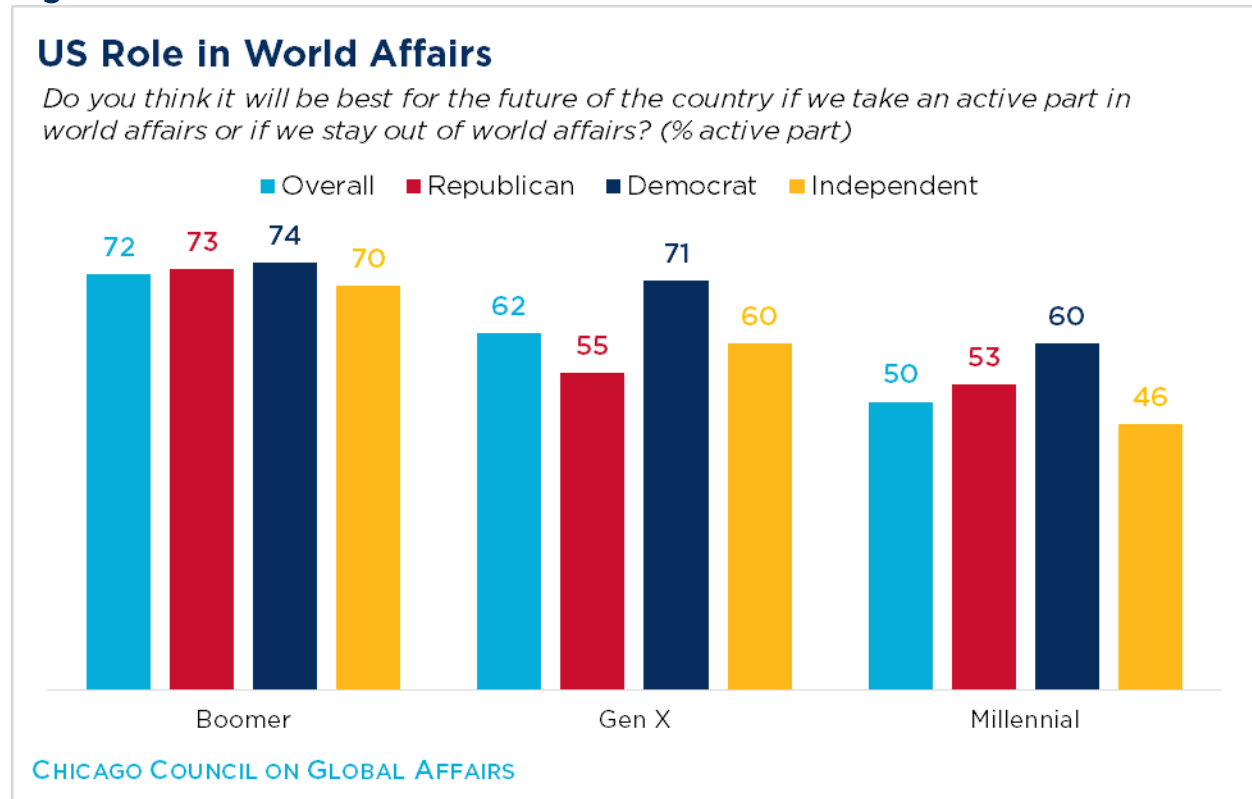
IV. GENERATIONS AND PARTISAN POLITICS

Differences in attitudes and opinions across the generations must be viewed within the broader context of party politics and political ideology. Party identification and political ideology both reflect deeply held beliefs and worldviews and combine to create a powerful lens that shapes people's interpretation of the political world, including foreign affairs. We also know that patterns of partisan identification and ideological leanings have changed over time. From the Silent Generation onward, each generation has been less likely to identify as Republicans or Republican-leaning and more likely to identify as Democratic or Democratic-leaning than the one before. Interestingly, the shift toward increasing liberalism is far more pronounced among women than men. While Millennial men are less likely than their elders to identify themselves as conservative, they are still slightly more likely to identify themselves as conservative than liberal. Millennial women, on the other hand, are significantly more likely to identify as liberal than conservative.

It is important, therefore, to consider the complementary effects of partisanship and generational differences on foreign policy attitudes. As Figures 13 and 14 show, for example, both are at work with respect to fundamental principles and beliefs about the United States and how it should engage the world.

When it comes to the role of the United States in world affairs—either playing an active part or staying out—differences emerge along both partisan and generational lines. Among Boomers, support for an active part in world affairs is consistent across partisan lines. But this changes with Gen Xers and Millennials: across these generations, Democrats are more likely than Republicans or Independents to support taking an active part in world affairs. This also indicates that shifting patterns of support for active international engagement is not simply a matter of younger Americans holding different ideological views than their elders, since the generation gaps appear for Republicans, Independents, and Democrats.

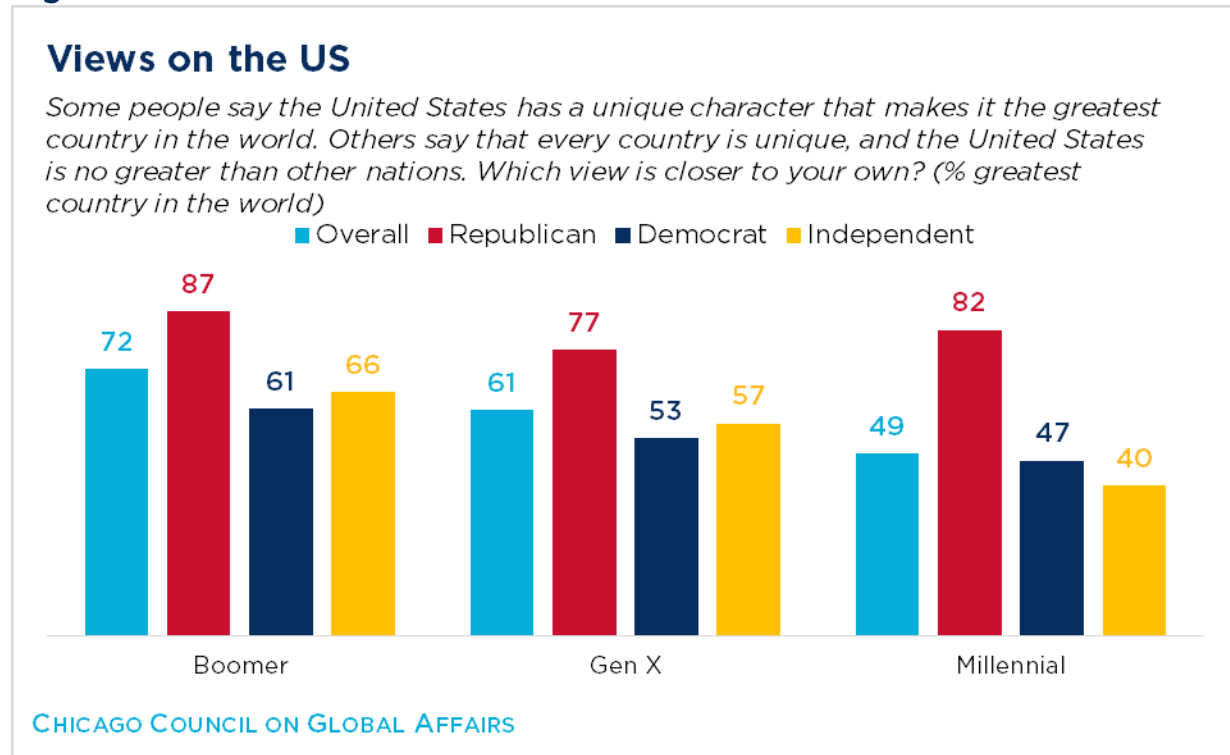
Figure 13



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

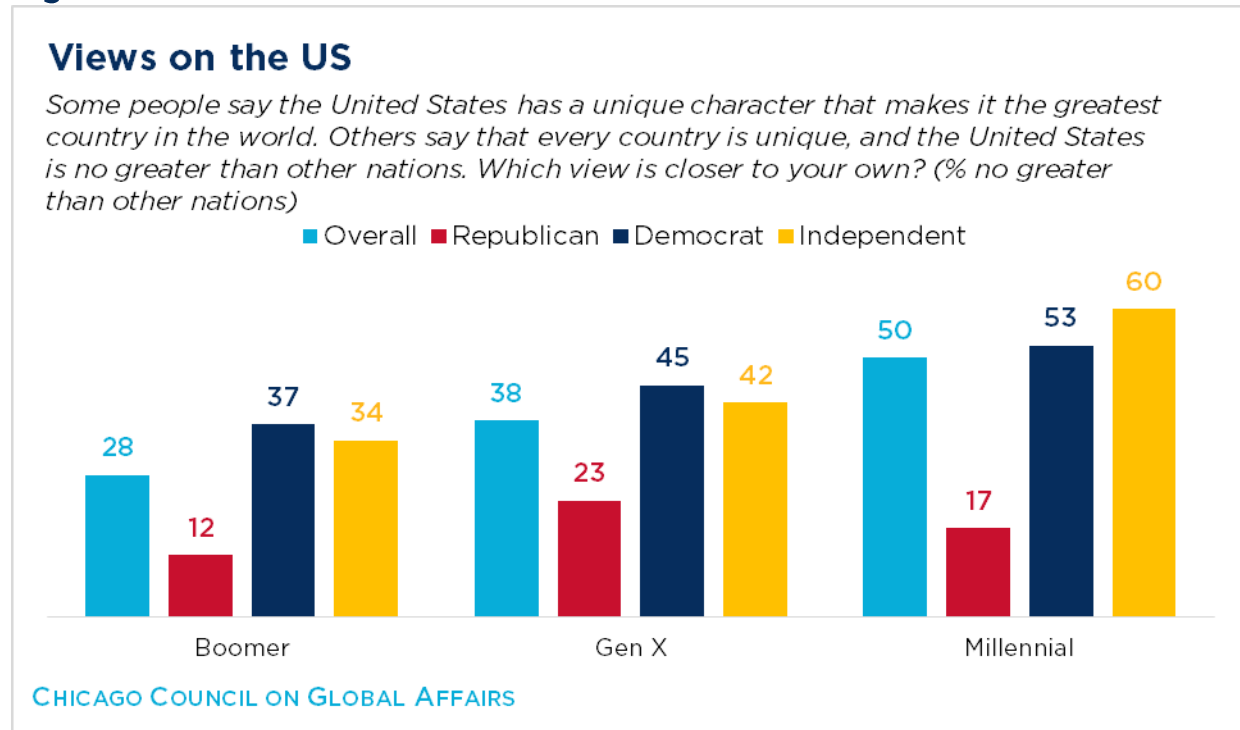
Views of American exceptionalism are also affected by both generational and partisan affiliation. Republicans, across generations, overwhelmingly say that the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world. For Democrats and Independents, however, the majority opinion changes across generations. Boomers are more likely to say the US is the greatest country in the world, and Gen Xers narrowly agree. But both Democratic and Independent Millennials say that every country is unique, and the United States is no greater than other nations.

Figure 14



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

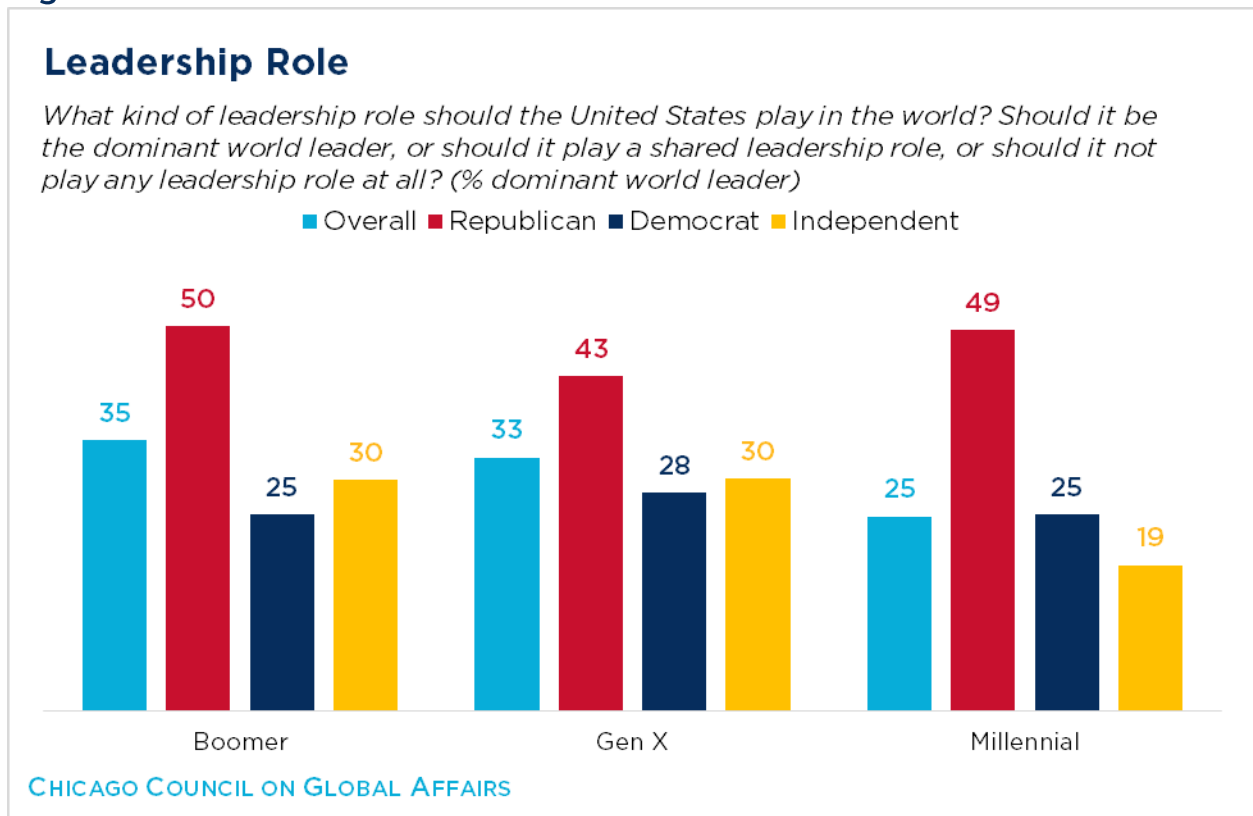
Figure 15



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Figure 16 shows a different pattern, with only Millennial Independents exhibiting a significant deviation from previous generations with respect to their preferred leadership role for the United States. Millennial Independents are 11 percentage points less likely than Gen X and Boomer Independents to prefer a dominant world leadership role, while Republicans of all age groups are most likely to prefer dominant leadership and seven in ten Democrats across generations favor a shared leadership role.

Figure 16



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

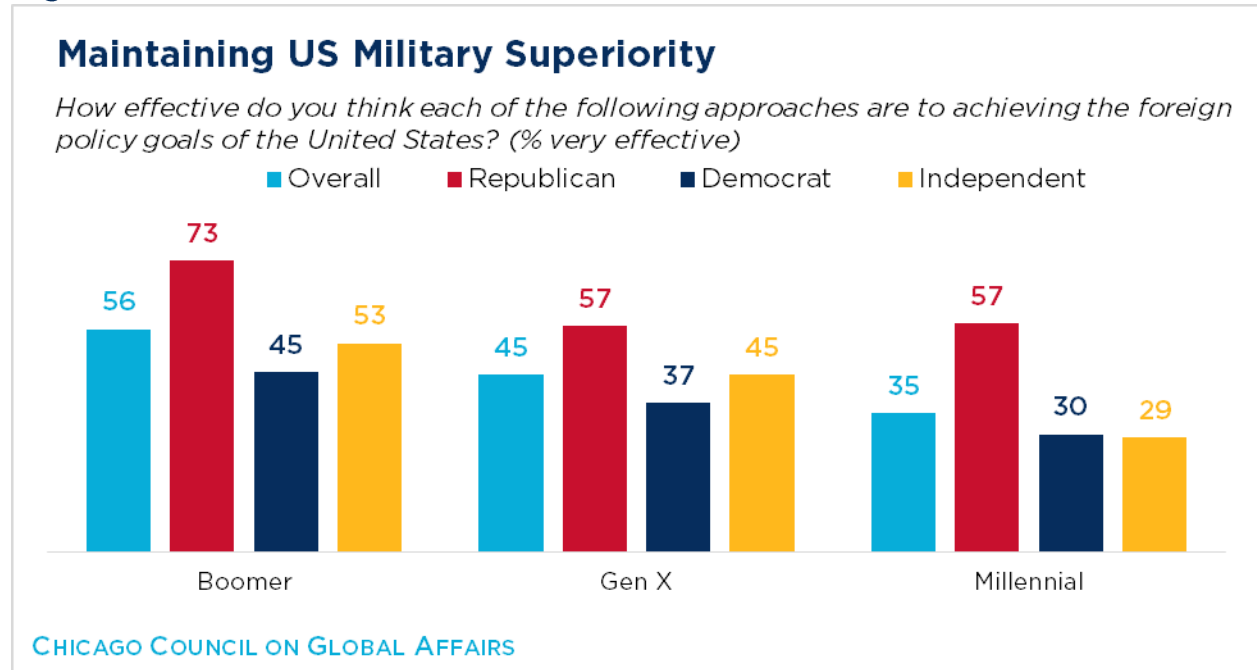
Beyond these general views about the United States’ role in the world, both partisan affiliation and generation also affect attitudes on key issues of internationalism, both militant and cooperative.

Republicans are much more inclined than Democrats or Independents to prioritize the importance of US military superiority, with majorities across generations saying it is a very effective approach to achieving US foreign policy goals. While partisanship is the clearest cleavage, there is an additional difference among the generations. Across party lines, Gen Xers and Millennials are less likely than Boomers to name military superiority as a very effective approach.

Maintaining US alliances, on the other hand, shows greater continuity across generations and partisan lines. Though Democrats are consistently the most likely to name maintaining existing alliances a very effective approach to achieving US foreign

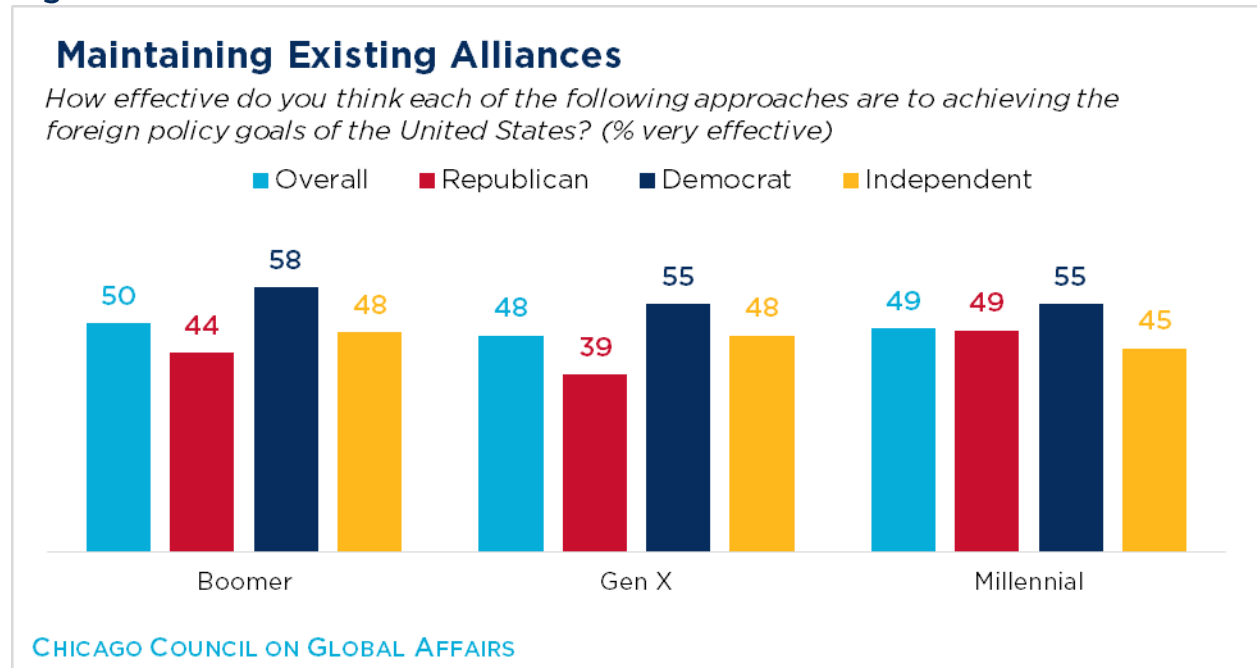
policy goals, with a majority of each generation saying so, roughly half of Independents across generations say the same. Among Republicans, Millennials are the most likely to agree with their Democratic and Independent cohorts, with nearly half (49%) saying maintaining existing alliances is very effective.

Figure 17



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Figure 18

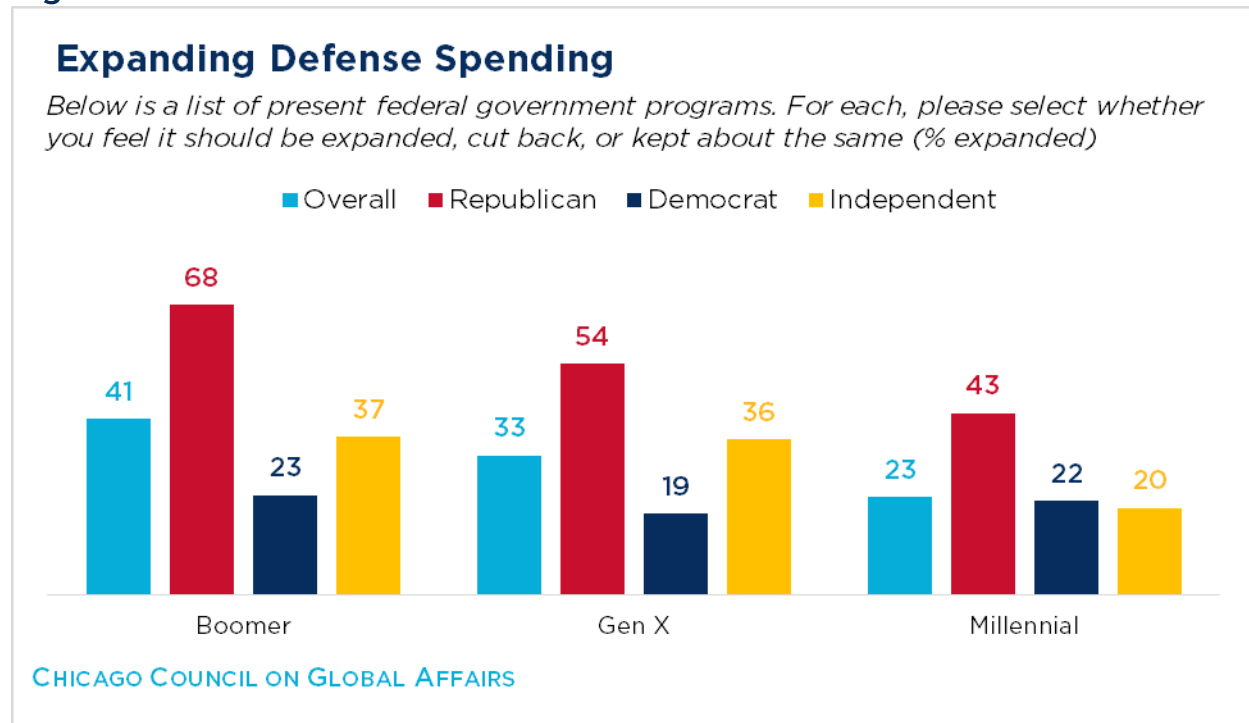


Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Views on US defense spending also show strong partisan and generational differences. Republicans are consistently more likely to support expanding US defense spending, but at lower levels among younger generations: though two-thirds of Republican boomers support increasing defense spending, that falls to half of Republican Gen Xers (54%) and a plurality of Republican Millennials (43%).

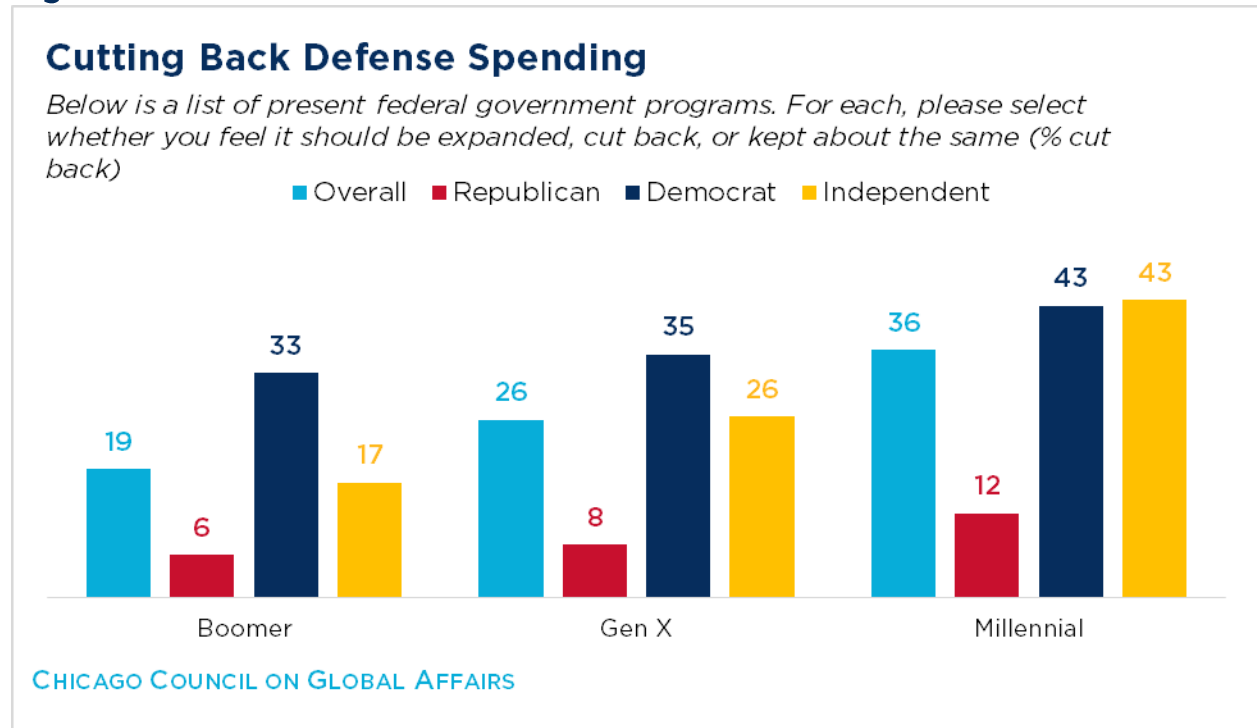
Democratic and Independent views also show generational effects. Democrats are generally split between wanting to cut and wanting to maintain current levels of defense spending, but among Democratic Millennials, a plurality (43%) prefer to cut, rather than maintain (28%), defense spending. Independents show a similar trend, with Millennial Independents more likely to support cutting defense spending (43%) rather than maintaining (26%) or increasing (20%) it.

Figure 19



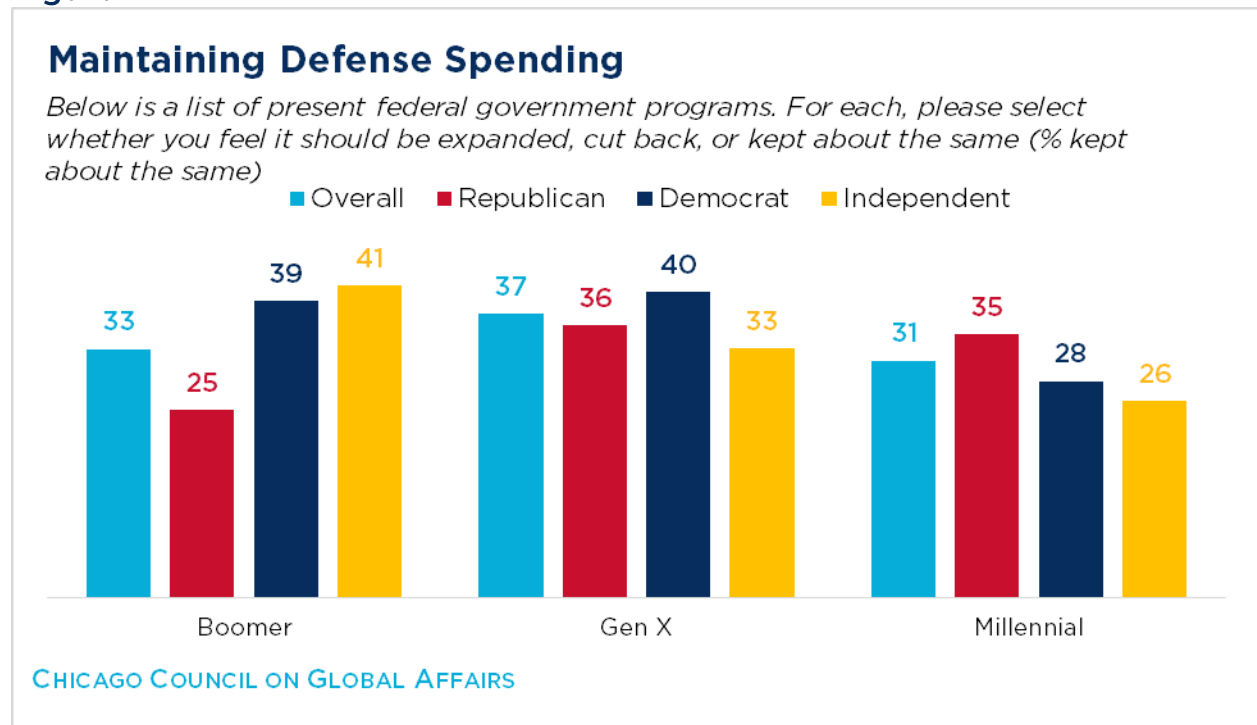
Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Figure 20



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

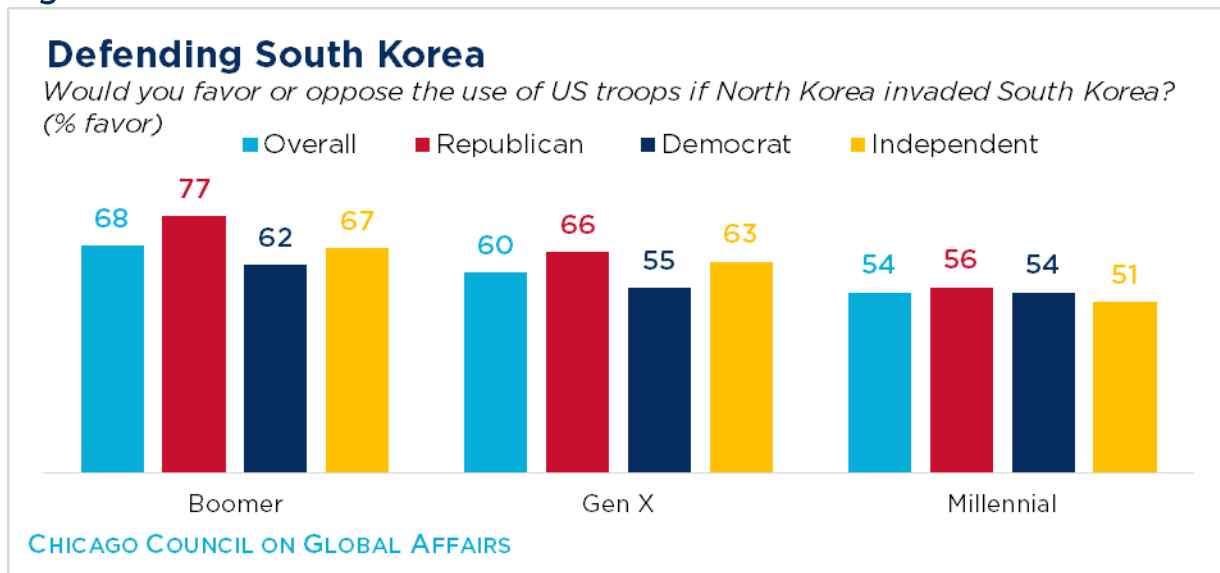
Figure 21



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

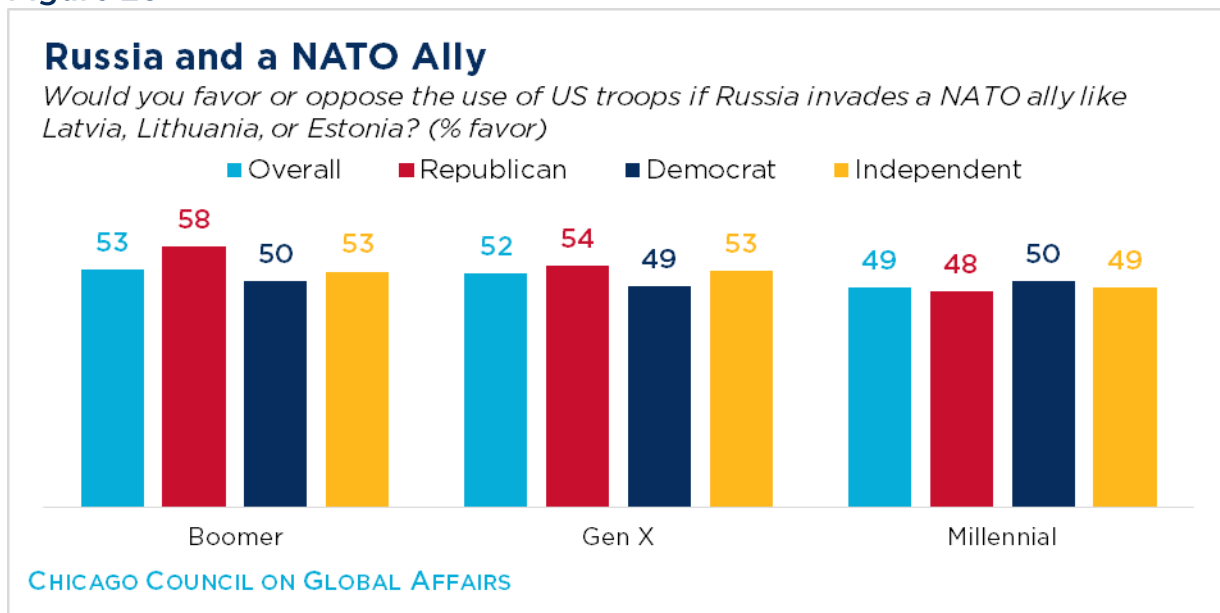
These partisan and generational trends also affect views on the use of US troops abroad. Though Americans across partisan and generational groups support using US troops to defend South Korea from North Korean invasion, younger Americans are somewhat less likely to support doing so. That trend is particularly notable for Republicans, where each subsequent generation is roughly 10 percentage points less likely to support the use of US troops. But not all uses of US troops shows such a strong pattern across generations. When it comes to defending a NATO ally from Russian invasion, roughly half of Americans favor the use of US troops, with relatively little variation across partisan and generational groupings.

Figure 22



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

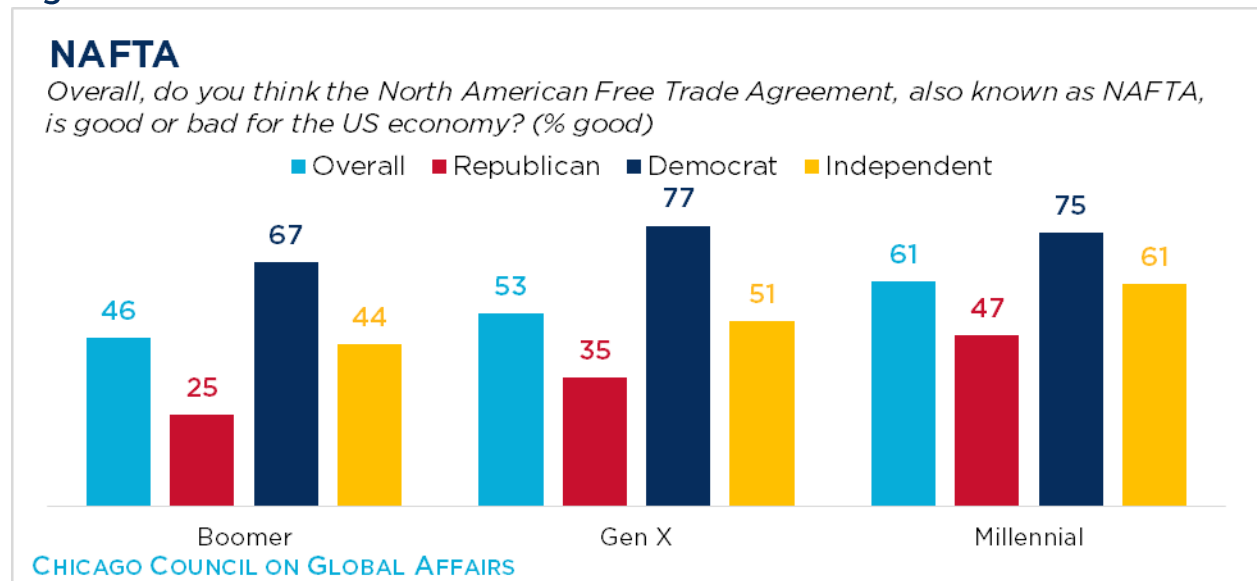
Figure 23



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

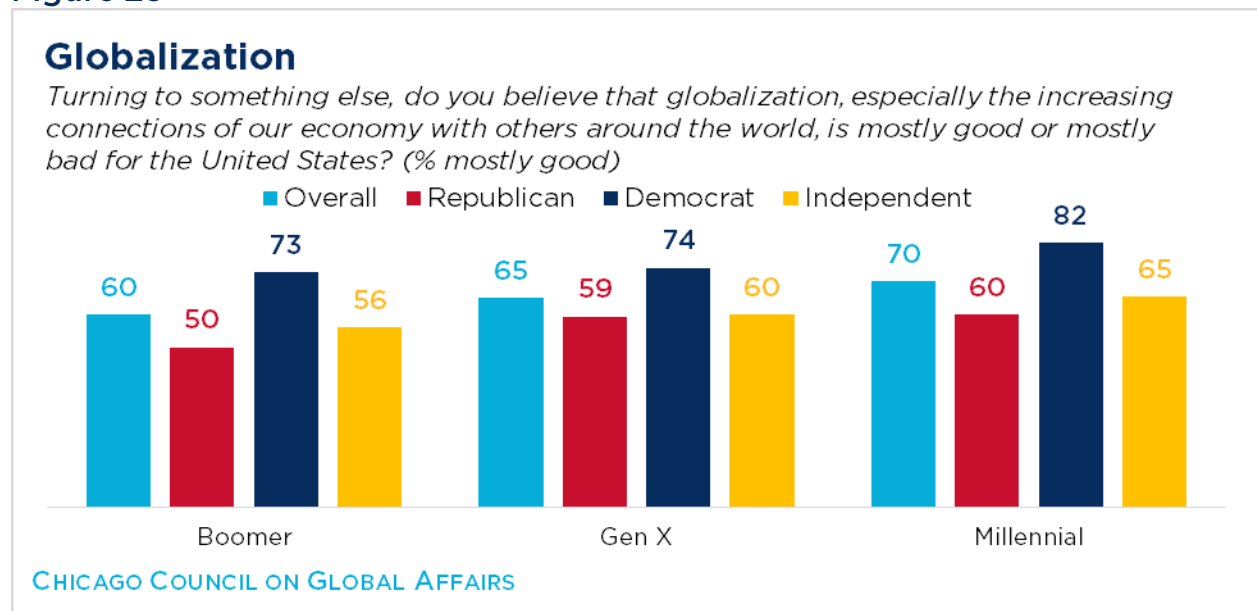
Both generational and partisan trends also affect Americans' views of trade and globalization. Democrats, across generations, are broadly more inclined to say NAFTA is good for the US economy and more likely to say globalization is mostly good for the United States. Though Republicans are less supportive of trade and globalization, generational patterns are evident, with younger Republicans more favorably inclined. This is particularly notable when it comes to NAFTA: while only one in four Republican Boomers (25%) say NAFTA is good for the US economy, that rises to one in three Republican Gen Xers (35%), and nearly half among Republican Millennials (47%).

Figure 24



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

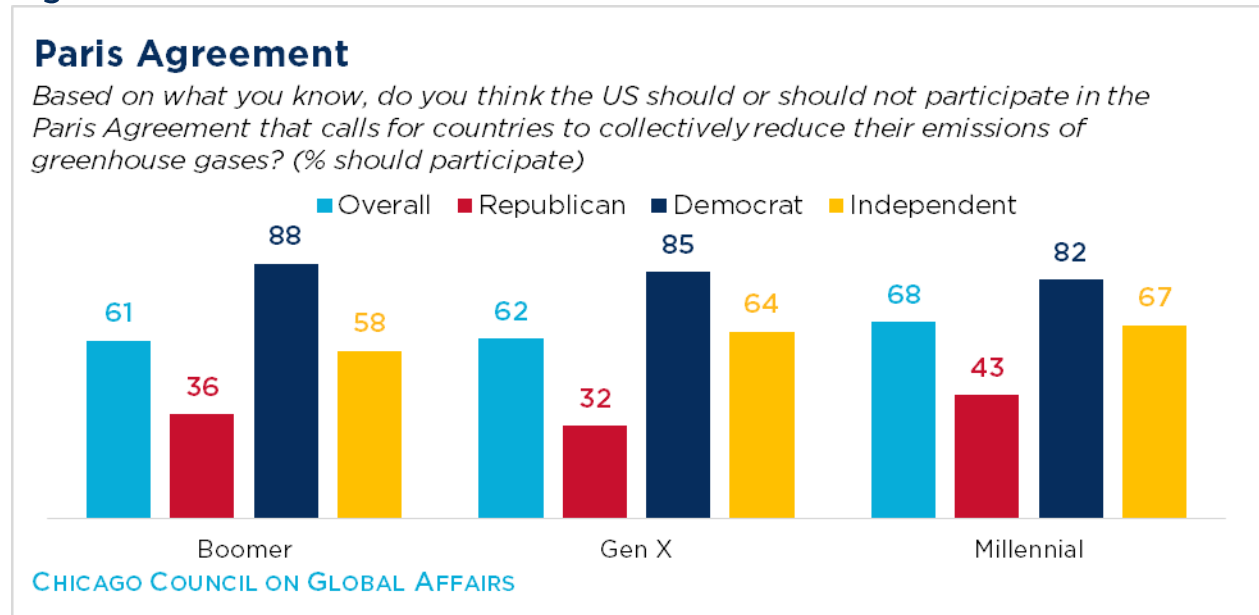
Figure 25



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

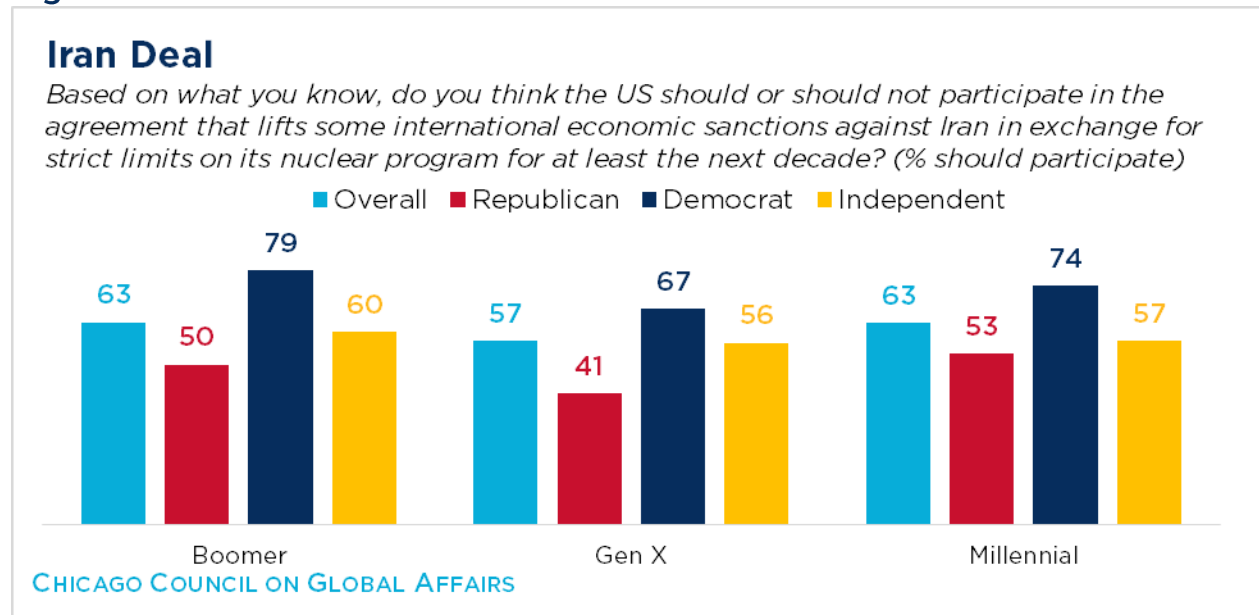
Partisan attitudes also affect Americans' views on other forms of cooperative internationalism such as international agreements. While more than four in ten of Democrats across generations say that international agreements are a very effective means of achieving US foreign policy goals, only about two in ten Republicans agree. This view of the value of international agreements extends to specific agreements such as the Paris agreement on climate change and the Iran nuclear deal. In both cases, there is little generational variation, with Democrats more likely than Republicans or Independents to favor US participation in both agreements.

Figure 26



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Figure 27



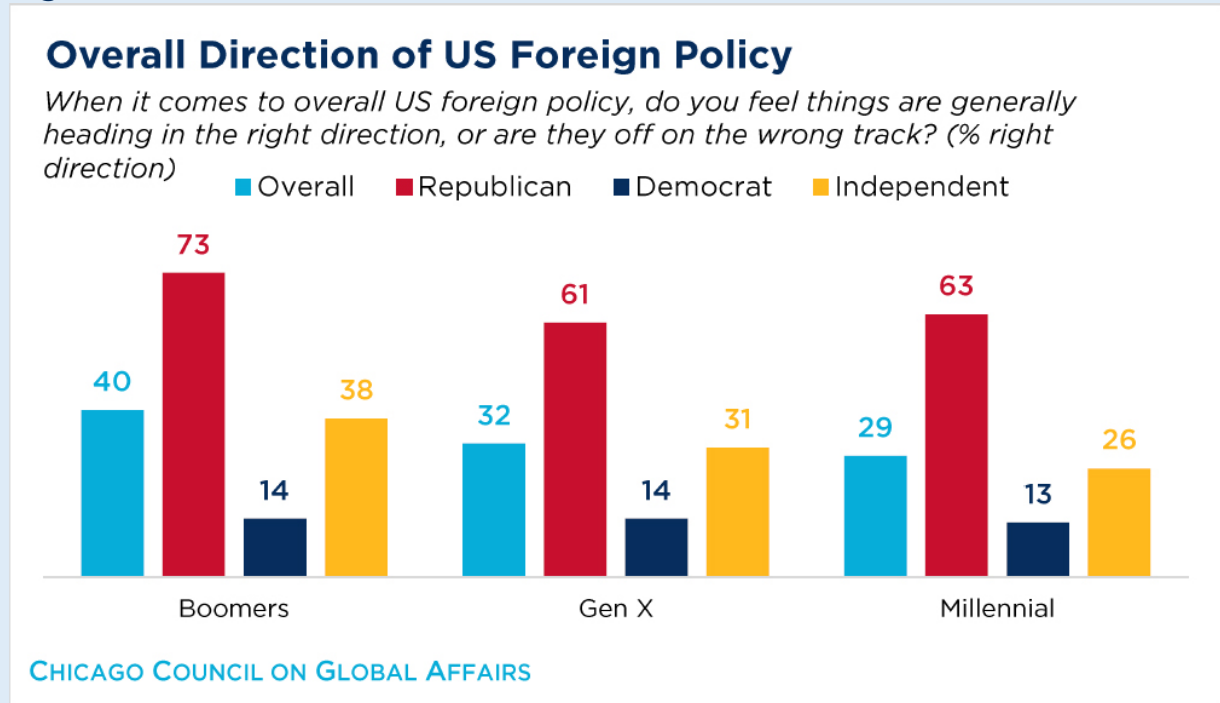
Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

The Direction of Foreign Policy Today

Finally, the importance of considering partisanship is also clear when we look at opinions about the general direction of foreign policy today. The era of bipartisan consensus on foreign policy, to the extent that it previously existed, has been fraying since the US intervention in Iraq in 2003. Today, as previous Chicago Council Survey reports have detailed, partisan differences on foreign policy are more frequent and have grown wider on many issues. And because foreign policy so often involves the president very directly, attitudes on many issues reflect a heavy dose of party loyalty and the president's favorability ratings. This dynamic has taken on even greater importance of late as American politics have become more polarized.

Unsurprisingly, then, when asked whether US foreign policy under President Trump is headed in the right direction or wrong direction, 68 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents think it is headed in the right direction, while only 12 percent of Democrats and Democrat-leaning Independents do. Due to the changing composition of the electorate and the growing percentage of Democrats among Millennials, Figure 28 reveals significant differences between younger and older Americans on this question, in particular a considerable gap between older and younger Republicans about the direction of US foreign policy today.

Figure 28



Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

An important implication of this exercise is that the changing partisan composition of the generations is one part of the story about foreign policy attitudes, and that generational attitude shifts within each group of partisans is another part of the story. Even when the pull of partisanship and party loyalty is greatest, the differences across generations remain visible and large enough to be politically significant.

V. CONCLUSION

Viewing support for US foreign policy from a generational perspective reveals areas of consistency as well as a number of important differences of opinion. Older and younger Americans are in relative alignment over most aspects of cooperative internationalism such as the effectiveness of international agreements and the benefits of alliances, while younger Americans appear somewhat more supportive of free trade than older Americans. On the other hand, younger Americans tend to feel somewhat less threatened by the world than their elders and are significantly less supportive of the use of military force, defense spending, and other forms of militant internationalism.

Documenting the generation gaps is straightforward. Explaining the differences among generations, however, is much less so. Untangling the varying impacts of aging effects, cohort effects, and demographic change would require more analysis than this report can provide. Even so, based on the public opinion literature we can make some educated guesses about how these various forces might be shaping foreign policy attitudes across the generations.

First, it seems likely that recent social and demographic shifts have produced effects on support for active international engagement. Younger Americans are far less likely to be white and more likely than older Americans to be immigrants or children of immigrants. Additionally, previous research has generally found education to be an important predictor of support for active engagement and younger Americans are on course to be the most-educated Americans in history.¹⁰

Over the past several generations, Americans have also tended to be more liberal than their elders. Liberal ideology has also correlated with somewhat higher support for active international engagement generally, and in particular with support for cooperative as opposed to military forms of engagement with the world. To the extent that these political inclinations continue, a growing preference for relying on cooperative rather than militant internationalism will continue.

Second, aging effects may help explain some of the patterns we see here. Public opinion research has shown, for example, that most people tend to be relatively uninterested in public affairs when they are young but start paying more attention as they reach middle age.¹¹ This dynamic in turn provides a hypothesis for how aging may affect internationalism. As people start to care more about public affairs they

¹⁰ Kertzer, Joshua D. "Making sense of isolationism: foreign policy mood as a multilevel phenomenon." *The Journal of Politics* 75.1 (2013): 225-240.

¹¹ Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 1997).

are likely to learn more about the world, America's role in the world, and the threats to those interests, and thus form more specific views about American foreign policy.

Finally, even on issues that elicit strong partisan divides, age remains a unique factor in determining attitudes toward key foreign policy positions. There are clear generational differences even when accounting for partisanship on issues as wide-ranging as the role of the United States in world affairs, defense spending, the use of force, and international agreements. These patterns suggest that cohort effects may also be at work producing attitude gaps between the generations.

In short, there are many forces at play shaping public attitudes about foreign policy and it is important to note that none of these explanations are mutually exclusive. Though in some cases the dynamics may work to cancel each other out, in other cases they likely amplify each other's impact. A final reckoning about the patterns of generational similarities and differences and whether they will persist, however, must wait for additional research. For now it is enough to conclude that to the extent that younger Americans' attitudes and preferences differ - and remain different - from those of older Americans. Generation gaps will have important ramifications for the public's support for foreign policy for decades to come.

VI. METHODS

This report is based on the results of the Chicago Council Surveys on American attitudes towards US foreign policy.

The 2017 edition of the survey is the latest effort in the series and was made possible by the generous support of The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Charles Koch Foundation, the Korea Foundation, and the personal support of Lester Crown and the Crown Family.

The 2017 survey was conducted from June 27 to July 19, 2017, among a representative national sample of 2,760 adults. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 2.1 , including a design effect of 1.3018. The margin of error is higher for partisan and generational subgroups.

Partisan identification is based on respondents' answer to a standard partisan self-identification question: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?"

The 2017 survey was conducted by GfK Custom Research, a polling, social science, and market research firm in Palo Alto, California using a randomly selected sample of GfK's large-scale nationwide research panel, KnowledgePanel® (KP). The survey was fielded to a total of 5,145 panel members yielding a total of 3,009 completed surveys (a completion rate of 58.5%). The median survey length was 22 minutes. Of the 3,009 total completed surveys, 249 cases were excluded for quality control reasons, leaving a final sample size of 2,760 respondents:

Respondents were excluded if they failed at least one of three key checks:

- Respondents who completed the survey in 8 minutes or less.
- Respondents who refused to answer half or more of the items in the survey.
- Respondents who failed two or three of the following checks:
 - Did not accurately input "4," refused or skipped the question that was specifically designed to make sure respondents were paying attention. ("In order to make sure that your browser is working correctly, please select number 4 from the list below.")
 - Refused one or more full lists that included five items or more (of which there were 13 such lists).
 - Respondents who gave exactly the same answer ("straight-lined") to every item on one of the four longest lists in the survey (Q5, Q7, Q8, or Q12).

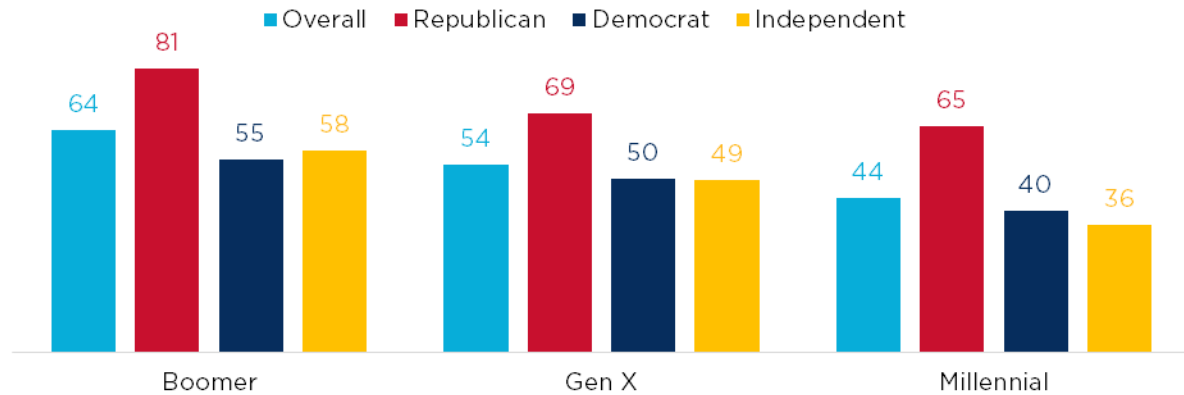
A full listing of questions asked in the 2017 Chicago Council Survey, including details on which questions were administered to split samples and the complete dataset, is available online at www.thechicagocouncil.org. Information on previous surveys, including questionnaires, methodologies, and datasets, is also available online.

Please note that data from surveys conducted prior to 1978 lack weights, and are thus reported in unweighted form.

VII. APPENDIX

Maintaining Superior Military Power Worldwide

Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals the United States might have. For each one, please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an

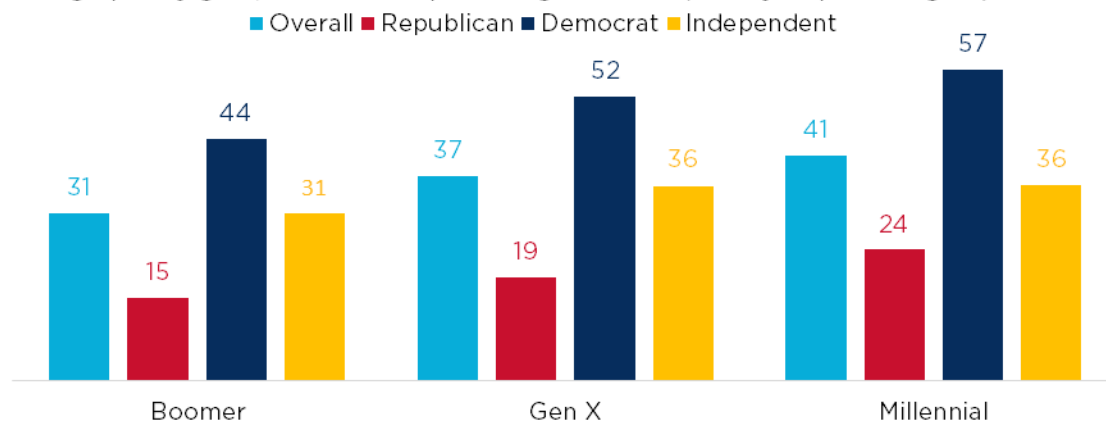


CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Promoting and Defending Human Rights in Other Countries

Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one, please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all. (% very important goal)

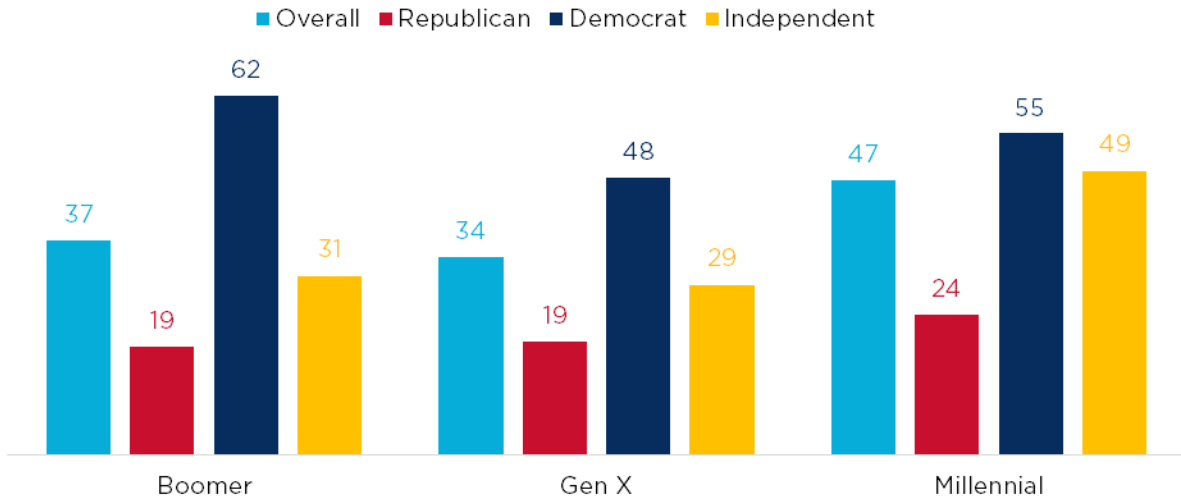


CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Combating World Hunger

Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals the United States might have. For each one, please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all. (% very important goal)

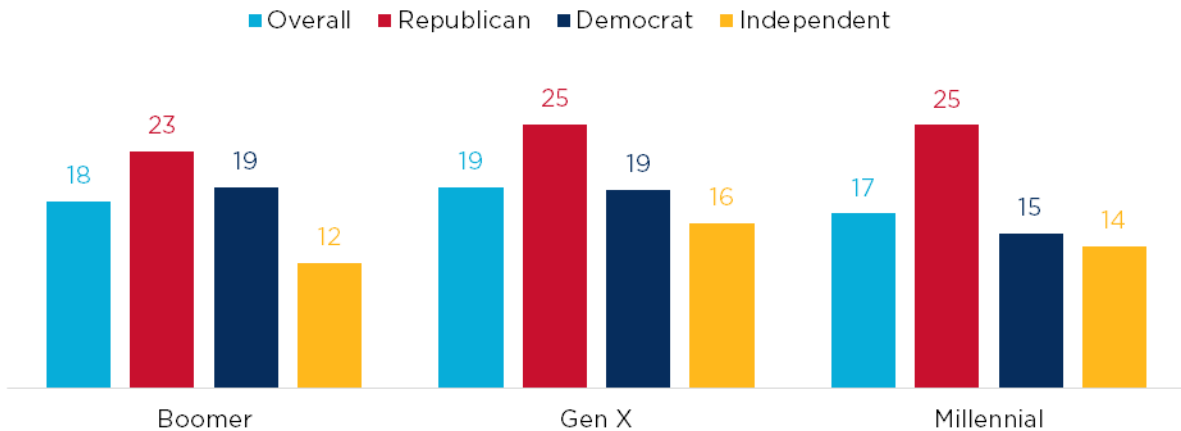


CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Military Intervention

How effective do you think each of the following approaches are to achieving the foreign policy goals of the United States? (% very effective)

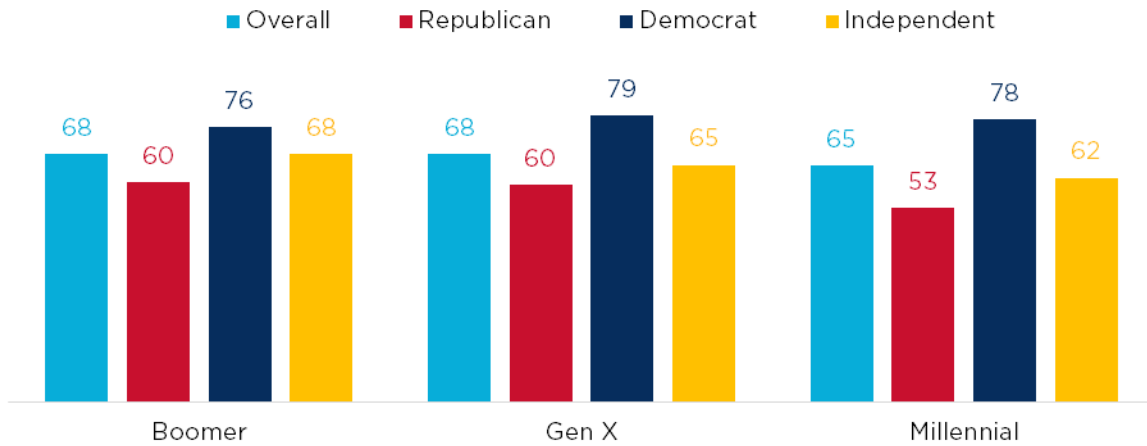


CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Humanitarian Crises

Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops to deal with humanitarian crises? (% favor)

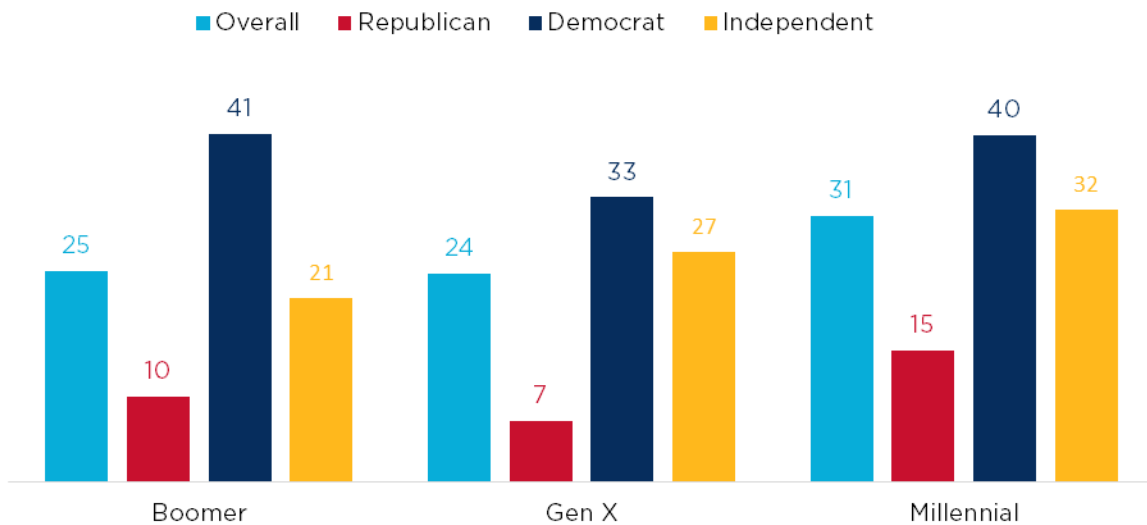


CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

Participating in International Organizations

How effective do you think each of the following approaches are to achieving the foreign policy goals of the United States? (% very effective)



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Source: 2017 Chicago Council Survey

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