

HOW DIFFERENT AUDIENCES CONSIDER NUCLEAR WEAPONS POLICY

A SUMMARY OF PUBLIC OPINION

In the Spring of 2019, ReThink Media conducted a final round of quantitative research following nearly two years of both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Our previous findings steadily narrowed in on a potential “slate” of inter-connected nuclear policies, with the country in a Presidential election cycle. This final phase further examined voters’ views within key demographics and in states that will disproportionately influence public debate.

On key demographics, we compared how 1) men and women 2) Republicans and Democrats 3) the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials, and 4) Black and Latinx voters view nuclear weapons policies. Regarding influential states, we focused on California, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Texas because they are either key primary states and/or reflect a disproportionate number of activist small donors to political campaigns. We included the more conservative Texas as a control.

We do not support or oppose any candidate or political party but, given that there will be thorough debate amongst Democrats, we determined this constituency would be the best area of focus.

TOPLINES

- ◆ Democratic voters strongly support progressive arms control goals nationally, in every key state, and in every demographic group.
- ◆ Contrary to common assumptions, on the issue of nuclear weapons spending, support is stronger for messages that look at comparative defense programs rather than military/civilian trade-offs. This is true for every demographic except Millennials.
- ◆ Women are more receptive than men to budget arguments about nuclear weapons overall, but they too prefer messages about comparative defense programs.
- ◆ Black and Latinx voters are the least supportive of arms reductions, No First Use, cutting nuclear weapons spending, etc. They are also uniquely skeptical regarding bipartisan cooperation or the notion that Republican president have previously made progress on arms reductions.
- ◆ Differences across age groups are marginal overall, with modest exceptions: older voters are more willing to accept the possibility of bipartisan cooperation on arms reductions and Millennial voters are the only demographic that responds better to the issue of military/civilian budget trade-offs than to comparative defense programs.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Democratic constituencies overwhelmingly support an overall slate of progressive nuclear weapons policies—nationally and in every key state.

Although it is unlikely that a large percentage of voters would choose a candidate solely on the basis of their approach to nuclear weapons policy, support for the “slate” of nuclear policies that we tested is overwhelming. While we have not conducted a comparative study with other issues, the near unanimity of support likely outperforms other areas of contested public policy.

We asked respondents to consider the following question:

Here are two simplified policy agendas. Which one makes more sense to you (even if neither one is exactly right)?

We should 1) Work together with other countries to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world through deals that make sure no one is cheating; 2) Lower the risk of a nuclear war by declaring that the US will not be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict; and 3) Spend only the amount of money we need to maintain a strong defense.

We should 1) Plan for our security alone and not put our faith in international agreements; 2) Keep our enemies guessing about when and where we'd be willing to use nuclear weapons; and 3) Spend whatever it takes to make sure that our nuclear arsenal is always the biggest and most modern.

A staggering 88% of Democratic voters chose the first set of policies. By generation, **Baby Boomers** led the way with 90% support, followed by **Silent Generation** (74+) voters who support this slate by 88%. Both **Gen-X** and **Millennial** voters supported this approach by 85%, perhaps in part because they are less familiar with the specifics of nuclear policy.

Men and women also supported this slate equally, with 88% support from each.

Geographically, the support was overwhelming as well as consistent across the country. In the critical primary state of **Iowa**, support stood at 88%, with 87% support in **New Hampshire**, and 88% support in **California** (also polled due to its disproportionate donor base). The donor-heavy state of **Massachusetts** had the highest level of support at 90%, but the more conservative bellwether of **Texas** also logged very strong support at 85%.

The lowest levels of support, amongst **Black voters** at 72% and **Latinx voters** at 73% still reflected commanding majorities.

2. Democrats strongly favor limiting nuclear weapons spending across all demographic groups, but prefer a message addressing security trade-offs.

We tested two messages on the subject of nuclear weapons spending.

In the first, adopting language from older research, we framed nuclear weapons as an “old technology” and juxtaposed so-called “modernization” spending with other security concerns.

We should only spend what we need to maintain a strong enough nuclear arsenal to maintain a credible threat and deter attacks. Nuclear weapons are an old technology and we'd be better off spending the money to address other types of modern threats like cyberattacks and terrorism.

In the second, we elucidated the scale of spending and suggested places where those funds would be better spent.

That is way too much money to spend on nuclear weapons. It's about \$5,000 for every man, woman, and child in America. We'd be much better off making our country stronger by investing in infrastructure, education, healthcare, and new technologies.

Democratic voters supported both messages by large majorities, although the first message performed better with every demographic grouping. This partly contradicts the common assumption that military/civilian budget juxtapositions are the way to Democrats' hearts and instead suggests that they weigh competing security expenditures. This was especially true with voters of color. Black voters preferred the first message by 78–69%. The pattern repeated with Latinx voters who supported the first by 82–74%.

The pattern continued: **Silent Generation** voters supported the first by 90–83%; **Baby Boomers** were 89–84%; **Gen X** voters were 87–81%. The only exception to this trend were **Millennials**, perhaps reflecting their overall trend toward support public spending, with 87% support for both messages.

This pattern primarily held in key states as well. **New Hampshire** Democrats preferred the first message by 88–84%; **California** 89–83%; **Massachusetts** 91–84%; **Texas** 86–82%. Out of every group tested, the sole place where support was stronger for the first message was **Iowa**, at 86–89%.

KEY FINDINGS

3. The framing of budget arguments is critical to Republican support.

There is a significant difference between **Republican** and **Democratic voters** on nuclear weapons spending. While Democratic constituencies demonstrated solid (though smaller) support for the second message (focused on military/civilian budget juxtapositions), support for this message was much lower among Republicans. A solid 59% majority of Republicans supported the first message, suggesting security trade-offs, but dropped precipitously to 43% for the second message, comparing nuclear weapons spending with other government spending.

4. Overall differences between Democratic men and women are negligible, excepting the budget arguments—where women are slightly more persuaded.

In our national survey, 84% of **Democratic women** and 82% of **Democratic men** supported the following statement:

Negotiating international treaties to reduce the world's nuclear arsenal makes the United States safer and more secure. As long as we can verify that no one is violating these treaties, it is in our national security interest to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and reduce the chances that they can be used.

Considering the overall “slate” addressed in Finding #1 above, 88% of **Democratic men** and 88% of **Democratic women** similarly preferred the progressive policy agenda.

The following statement on bipartisan nuclear arms reductions also enjoyed nearly identical levels of support between **Democratic men** (82%) and **Democratic women** (83%).

Since the end of the Cold War, both Republican and Democratic administrations have worked to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world. Republican presidents have actually gotten rid of many more nuclear weapons than Democrats. Elected officials from both parties should get back on that track, put political partisanship behind them, and work together to reduce the threat that nuclear weapons pose to all Americans.

The gender gap widened slightly on budget issues, however, with 90% of **Democratic women** supporting the message addressing security trade-offs, compared to 84% of **Democratic men**. Similarly, the argument articulating military/civilian budget juxtapositions was supported by 85% of **Democratic women**, compared to 80% of **Democratic men**.

5. Black and Latinx voters were the least supportive overall, and they are significantly more skeptical of the possibility of bipartisan progress.

On the question of supporting nuclear arms reductions (above), **Black voter** support was 70% and **Latinx voter** support was 74%, compared to the **Democratic voter** average of 83%.

On the overall slate of progressive nuclear weapons policies (above), **Black voter** support was 72% and **Latinx voter** support was 73% compared to the **Democratic voter** average of 88%.

On the question of security trade-offs, **Black voter** support was 78% and **Latinx voter** support was 84%, compared to the **Democratic voter** average of 88%.

On the question of military/civilian budget juxtapositions, **Black voter** support was 69% and **Latinx voter** support was 74%, compared to the **Democratic voter** average of 84%.

On the question of adopting a No First Use, policy, **Black voter** support was 59% and **Latinx voter** support was 54%, compared to the **Democratic voter** average of 68%.

Among the messages we tested, **Black** and **Latinx voter** support sharply departed from the Democratic majority on the question of bipartisanship. 82% of **Democratic men** and 83% of **Democratic women** agreed with the message that:

Since the end of the Cold War, both Republican and Democratic administrations have worked to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world. Republican presidents have actually gotten rid of many more nuclear weapons than Democrats. Elected officials from both parties should get back on that track, put political partisanship behind them, and work together to reduce the threat that nuclear weapons pose to all Americans.

In contrast, a dramatically lower 66% of **Black voters** and 76% of **Latinx voters** agreed with that statement. We infer that fewer of these voters either acknowledge that Republicans have made progress on arms reductions or believe that a bipartisan path is possible, or both.

KEY FINDINGS

6. Support is very strong across every generation. There are minor generational differences on arms reductions and military/civilian budget trade-offs.

On the message noted above (“Negotiating international arms treaties...make the US safer and more secure...”) **Silent Generation voters** supported the message by 83%. **Baby Boomers** were the most supportive at 87%. **Gen-X voters** were the most skeptical at 76% and **Millennials** were at 84%.

On the overall slate of progressive nuclear weapons policies (above), **Silent Generation voters** supported the message by 88%. **Baby Boomers** were the most supportive at 90%, and **Gen-X voters** and **Millennial voters** were at 85%.

On the question of security trade-offs, **Silent Generation voters** were the most supportive at 90%, followed by **Baby Boomers** at 89%, **Gen-X voters** at 87%, and **Millennial voters** at 85%.

On the question of military/civilian budget juxtapositions, **Silent Generation voters** supported the message at 83% and **Baby Boomers** at 84%. **Gen-X voters** were the least persuaded at 81%, and **Millennial voters** most strongly supported moving funds to civilian programs, at 87%.

On the question of adopting a No First Use policy, the differences were marginal with **Silent Generation voters** supporting at 66%, **Baby Boomers** at 65%, **Gen-X voters** at 70%, and **Millennial voters** at 69%.