

NO FIRST USE

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC OPINION

TOPLINES

- ◆ Americans overwhelmingly agree that the US nuclear arsenal is only for deterrence. 92% of Democrats and 88% of Republicans hold this view.
- ◆ A strong majority of 79% of Americans are concerned about the President's "sole authority" to launch a nuclear strike. Among the 79% that express this opinion, 71% see a No First Use (NFU) policy as a practical remedy. "Sole authority" is perceived as concentrating too much power in the hands of a single, fallible person.
- ◆ People are initially cautious about a No First Use policy, although about 58% of Democrats support the idea (65% of Republicans oppose).
- ◆ When we describe what a No First Use policy means and explain that using nuclear weapons first would result in retaliation and/or escalation, Democrats are much more likely to support a NFU policy. Democratic support rises to 64%, while Republican opposition declines to 62%.
- ◆ This data suggests that describing how a No First Use policy makes America safer or creates greater international stability would increase support for the policy. Noting that other countries have NFU policies may have a similar effect on public thinking.
- ◆ Pairing arguments about the pending price tag for nuclear "modernization" with No First Use likely strengthens support for adopting a NFU policy.
- ◆ Strong majorities from both major parties (80% of Democrats; 64% of Republicans) favor bipartisan cooperation to "reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world."
- ◆ A policy slate including No First Use, negotiated weapons reductions, and spending only what is required for deterrence is supported by 87% of Democrats and 54% of Republicans.

KEY FINDINGS

1.

Americans reject the status quo on nuclear decision-making.

Nearly 80% of the general American public, across demographic lines including race, age, political affiliation, education level, and region, find the following statement concerning:

"As you may know, the President has the legal power to order a nuclear missile attack without consulting Congress or other government officials, regardless of whether the United States is attacked."

While we can't say this definitively, we believe that the issue of "sole authority" informs how people perceive other nuclear policy issues and especially No First Use. At the same time, many people do not know that sole authority is the current policy and others resist that information.

2.

Strong majorities see deterrence as the sole purpose of nuclear weapons.

When given the two policy choices below, Americans of both parties strongly believe that deterrence is the sole purpose of the US nuclear arsenal.

Which statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

The sole purpose of the US nuclear arsenal should be to deter any other country from attacking our nation, because if they did, we'd retaliate with overwhelming force. D – 92%, R – 88%

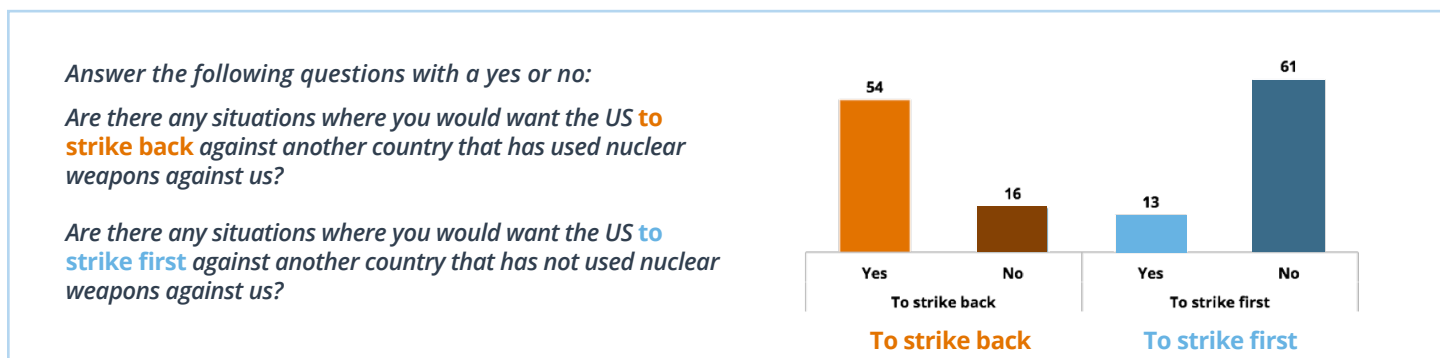
The US should be willing to use nuclear weapons in any circumstances authorized by military commanders. D – 8%, R – 12%

KEY FINDINGS

3.

The public largely supports a No First Use policy already.

The public already tacitly agrees with a No First Use policy. While the graph on the left is unsurprising, the results on the right are more striking. This language test demonstrated latent support for a No First Use policy.



The public is initially cautious about adopting a No First Use policy. When asked to choose between adopting a NFU policy and not declaring anything about our potential use of nuclear weapons, a majority of Democrats and about half of Independents favor NFU, while only 35% of Republicans support that position. When presented with a message that explains why the implied possible first use of nuclear weapons is destabilizing and risks rapid escalation, support for NFU rises in each partisan group. This suggests that explaining the potential US security benefits of a NFU policy is critical.

Which statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

It should be the policy of the United States that we will never be the first to initiate a nuclear weapons launch against an adversary in a conflict. D – 58% I – 48% R – 35%

The United States should not declare anything about the circumstances under which we will use our nuclear weapons arsenal. D – 42% I – 52% R – 65%

Again, support grows significantly when the message includes the consequences of likely escalation and/or retaliation.

Which of the following statements is more convincing to you?

The US should never use nuclear weapons in a military conflict, unless retaliating against some other country that has used them first. As soon as one country uses nuclear weapons, the entire conflict could escalate into a devastating nuclear war. No matter where on earth it happens, the use of nuclear weapons is a threat to American security. D – 64% (6 point gain), I – 52% (4 point gain), R – 38% (3 point gain)

We should never prohibit the use of nuclear weapons in a crisis. Threatening to retaliate with nuclear weapons or keeping our enemies guessing about whether we will use them can scare adversaries away from taking aggressive military actions of any kind and therefore they can help keep the peace. D – 46%, I – 48%, R – 62%

4.

The enormous cost of nuclear “modernization” strengthens the case for No First Use.

A No First Use policy would have significant implications on the size of our nuclear arsenal, because a deterrence-only policy would require a substantially smaller number of weapons and exclude the production of more “usable” weapons.

A solid majority of Americans agree that we should only spend enough on our nuclear arsenal for deterrence purposes and that we could be spending any additional funds addressing other threats.

In exploring this topic, our survey provided the following context statement: *Currently, the United States is planning to spend about 1.5 trillion dollars to build new nuclear weapons to replace the old ones over the next few decades.*

After hearing this context, Republicans and Democrats both strongly favor reallocating funding toward other perceived defense needs.

Which of the following statements is more convincing to you?

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. D – 87%, R – 60% support

The US should spend what it takes to replace our nuclear arsenal and make sure that we have as many weapons as any other country. D – 13%, R – 40%

Democrats also strongly favor reallocating the funds toward other spending priorities. Republican support for this proposition is lower.

Which of the following statements is more convincing to you?

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. D – 84%, R – 45%

The US should spend what it takes to completely replace our nuclear arsenal and make sure that we have as many weapons as any other country. D – 16%, R – 55%

AUDIENCES AND NO FIRST USE

ReThink Media conducted message testing with significant over-samples among key demographic groups with the aim of informing constituency building strategies. Wherever possible, we also identified differences by age and by gender. And finally, we tested by political affiliation.

86% of **Black** voters affirmed that deterrence was the sole purpose of US nuclear weapons—a solid majority, but lower than Latinx, Democratic, Republican, and Republican-leaning audiences. **Latinx** voters, by contrast were more supportive, with 91% describing deterrence as the sole purpose of US nuclear weapons. Overall, 93% of **Democratic** voters and 88% of **Republican** voters held this view.

When presented with the No First Use argument that articulated the likelihood of escalation and retaliation in the event of nuclear weapons being used, 59% of **Black** voters and 54% of **Latinx** voters supported a No First Use policy—significantly lower than the Democratic average of 67%, but also considerably higher than the Republican average of 39%.

While **Democratic men and women** were statistically tied in their perception that nuclear weapons were solely for deterrence (92%/93%), **Democratic women** favored No First Use more strongly than **Democratic men** (68%/64%).

Americans support a platform of nuclear weapons policy change.

An arms control and disarmament policy slate that includes No First Use, amongst other issues, enjoys majority support from Republicans and Democrats alike, with very strong support among Democrats.

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. D – 88%, I – 69% R – 54%

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. D – 12%, I – 31% R – 46%

Among **Black** voters, 72% support this platform, as do 73% of **Latinx** voters. Among **Democratic women** and **Democratic men**, both express 88% support.