NUCLEAR WEAPONS SPENDING

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.
- The public strongly believe we should only spend what is necessary for an effective deterrent.
- Democrats and Republicans alike favor re-directing nuclear weapons spending toward other perceived national security priorities.
- Democrats favor redirecting nuclear weapons spending to other domestic priorities.
- Beltway "insiders" know little about the projected expense of nuclear "modernization."
- 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 strongly agree that we should *only* spend enough on our nuclear arsenal for deterrence.

An enormous 92% of Democrats and 88% of Republicans agree with the following statement:

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.

2.
A strong bipartisan majority supports redirecting funds from nuclear weapons programs to other perceived national security priorities.

With this in mind, respondents from both political parties favor spending only what is required for deterrence and 80% feel we could be spending any additional funds addressing other threats, agreeing with the following:

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.

Although Republicans are significantly less likely to support our message here, majorities across the political spectrum lean in our direction.

3.
A large majority of Democrats favor reallocating funds from nuclear weapons to other domestic priorities. Republicans are split on this question.

Americans agree that we'd be better off investing in other areas than spending $5,000 for every man, woman, and child on nukes. Agreement here was not quite as strong as with the previous message but still about 70-30 in our favor overall.

Partisanship is a significant factor. Democrats and D-leaners favor the message below by a roughly 80-20 split, but Republicans and R-leaners are closely divided.

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.

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KEY FINDINGS

4.

Military validators strongly influence public and partisan perception on "modernization."

A message citing an Air Force study which concluded that a much smaller nuclear force would safely meet our deterrence needs was very persuasive.

Comparing this Air Force assessment to our current nuclear arsenal was the #2 best-performing message overall among the those we tested on all topics, with 88% support. What's more, this message is very persuasive with voters of all political stripes, with very little partisan drop-off.

According to what [an Air Force study] says we needs to meet our national defense goals, we have nearly four times as many nuclear weapons as required. Instead of replacing every weapon we have, we should build what's needed and use the savings for other defense priorities.

This indicates that respondents, unsure of their own knowledge, are very comfortable turning decision-making authority over to military figures. This presents a strategic challenge with regard to Department of Defense opposition to some reductions in nuclear weapons spending, but reflects a strategic opportunity with regard to elevating other studies and select validators.

5.

Nuclear weapons are viewed as a source of strength, but their cost is poorly understood.

Based on focus groups of Republican and Democrat defense influencers, both view nuclear weapons as an important source of military strength for the United States.

However, both reflected very little awareness that the US is set to spend $1.5 trillion on nuclear weapons over the next 30 years. The $1.5 trillion price tag surprised—and alarmed—many of these "insiders" and was roundly viewed as "unrealistic" given other procurement and operational priorities.

AUDIENCES AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS SPENDING

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.

As a reminder, our message testing on nuclear weapons spending was preceded by this neutral context statement: *The US is currently planning to spend about $1.5 trillion to rebuild the nuclear arsenal over the next 30 years.*

Presented with the following "defense trade-offs" argument, opinions varied.

> *We should only spend what we need to maintain a strong enough nuclear arsenal to pose 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.*

78% of **Black** voters agreed, relative to 82% of **Latinx** voters, and 88% of **Democrats**. A solid 59% of **Republicans** held this view. **Democratic women** outpaced **Democratic men** (90%/84%) in supporting this argument and **Democratic women** expressed the strongest support on budget arguments overall.

The "domestic tradeoffs" message produced weaker, though still majority, support among all but Republicans.

> *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.*

Among **Black** voters, this framing was 9 points lower than the "defense trade-off," with 69% agreed and it was 8 points lower with 74% of **Latinx** voters agreeing. Among **Democrats**, it was 5 points lower with 83% in agreement. This message was 16 points less persuasive to **Republicans**, with only 43% supporting. Once again, **Democratic women** outpaced **Democratic men** (85%/80%).

AUDIENCES AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS SPENDING

The message below, invoking a military assessment about what level of armament is needed, produced the strongest support overall.

> *According to what [an Air Force study] says we needs to meet our national defense goals, we have nearly four times as many nuclear weapons as required. Instead of replacing every weapon we have, we should build what's needed and use the savings for other defense priorities.*

Black voters found this the most persuasive argument with 82%, as did **Latinx** voters with 84%, **Democrats** with 92%, and **Republicans** with 77%. **Democratic women** outpaced **Democratic men** here too (94%/88%), and expressed the strongest deference to military authority overall.

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%**
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> > *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.