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Trump Draws Stronger Support From Veterans Than From the Public on Leadership of U.S. Military

Many veterans say Trump relies too little on military leaders in making national security decisions

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Trump Draws Stronger Support From Veterans Than From the Public on Leadership of U.S. Military

Many veterans say Trump relies too little on military leaders in making national security decisions

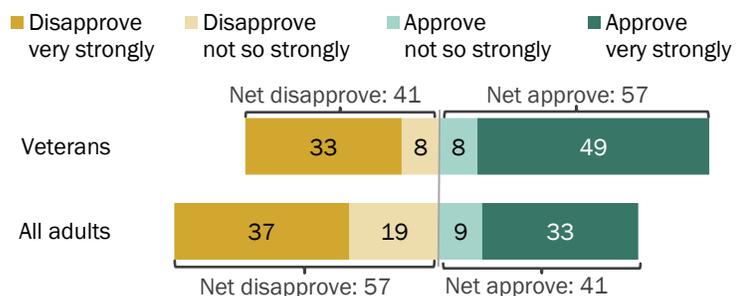
U.S. military veterans are largely **supportive of the way Donald Trump is leading the nation's** armed forces. A new Pew Research Center survey of veterans finds that a majority (57%) approve of the way Trump is handling his duties as commander in chief, with about half (48%) saying his administration's policies have made the military stronger. Veterans' assessments of the president on these and other military-related issues are more positive than those of the general public.

Even so, significant shares of veterans are dissatisfied with **Trump's** leadership. Nearly **half (45%) say he doesn't** listen enough to military leaders in making national security decisions, and a similar share say they have little trust in him to make the right decisions about the use of military force.

There are deep partisan divisions among veterans on these issues, just as there are [within the public](#). Veterans who identify as Republican or Republican-leaning have a **much more positive view of Trump's leadership of the military than their Democratic** counterparts. They are more likely to favor Trump-supported policies, such as the ban on transgender people serving in the military and the deployment of troops to the U.S.-Mexican border, and they are more likely to approve of Trump's approach to dealing with key allies and adversaries.

A majority of veterans approve of Trump as commander in chief

% of U.S. veterans/adults saying they ___ of the way Donald Trump is handling his duties as commander in chief of the military



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.

Source: Surveys of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019 and U.S. adults conducted May 14-24, 2019.

"Trump Draws Stronger Support From Veterans Than From the Public on Leadership of U.S. Military"

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The gap in views between veterans and the general public in part reflects the fact that veterans as a group are more likely to identify with or lean toward the Republican Party.¹ Roughly six-in-ten veterans (59%) identify as Republican or Republican-leaning, compared with 44% of all U.S. adults. Meanwhile, 39% of veterans identify as Democrats or lean toward the Democratic Party, compared with 51% of all adults.

Even after taking these partisan differences into account, veterans stand out from the public in **some instances, with Republican veterans particularly enthusiastic about the president's leadership on military issues.**

These findings come from two new surveys: one of 1,284 U.S. military veterans, conducted May 14-June 3, 2019, and a parallel survey of 1,087 U.S. adults, conducted May 14-24, 2019.

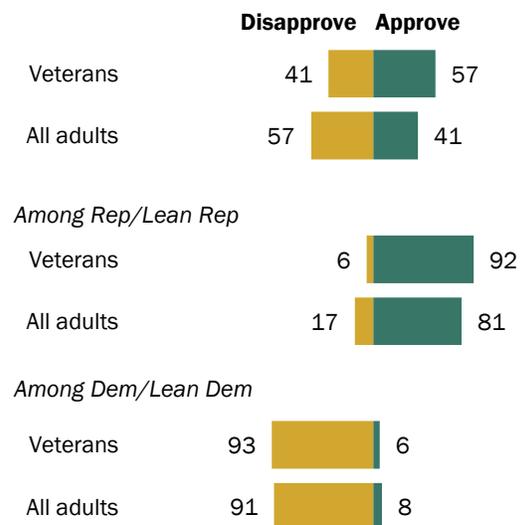
About nine-in-ten Republican veterans approve of Trump as commander in chief

Veterans give Trump higher ratings in handling the job of commander in chief of the military than members of the public overall. About six-in-ten veterans (57%) approve of the job Trump is doing as commander in chief, compared with 41% of Americans who say the same. Still, roughly four-in-ten veterans (41%) disapprove of the job Trump is doing in this role, including a third who strongly disapprove.

Republican veterans are far more approving of Trump than their Democratic counterparts. Roughly nine-in-ten veterans (92%) who identify as Republican or who lean toward the Republican Party approve of Trump as

Republican veterans more approving of Trump than Republicans overall

% of U.S. veterans/adults in each group saying they _____ of the way Donald Trump is handling his duties as commander in chief of the military



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown. Source: Surveys of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019 and U.S. adults conducted May 14-24, 2019. "Trump Draws Stronger Support From Veterans Than From the Public on Leadership of U.S. Military"

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¹This analysis is based on a logistic regression of several variables correlated with approving of Donald Trump's performance as commander in chief of the military. In addition to veteran status and partisanship, the model controlled for age, gender and race and ethnicity. Due to survey design, the regression analysis is based only on the survey of U.S. adults conducted May 14-24, 2019.

commander in chief, compared with just 6% of veterans who identify as Democrats or lean Democratic.

Republican veterans are also more supportive of Trump than Republicans overall – 81% of Republicans in the general public approve of the way Trump is handling his role as commander in chief. By contrast, Democratic veterans and Democrats in the general public have similar assessments of the president. Just 6% of Democratic veterans and 8% of Democrats overall **approve of Trump’s leadership of the military and 93% and 91%, respectively, disapprove.**

The partisan divide in views of Trump among the military and all Americans mirrors the partisan divide in views of Barack Obama when he was commander in chief. A [2011 Pew Research Center survey of veterans](#) found that 77% of Democratic veterans approved of Obama’s performance as commander in chief, as did 78% of Democrats overall. Among Republican veterans, 81% disapproved of Obama’s handling of the military as did 69% of Republicans overall.

Among today’s veterans, approval of Trump does not differ significantly by era of military service. Looking specifically at veterans who served before 9/11 and those whose service extended beyond 9/11, nearly identical shares say they approve of the way Trump is handling his job as commander in chief. In addition, there is no significant gap in views between veterans who served as commissioned officers, non-commissioned officers or those who were enlisted.

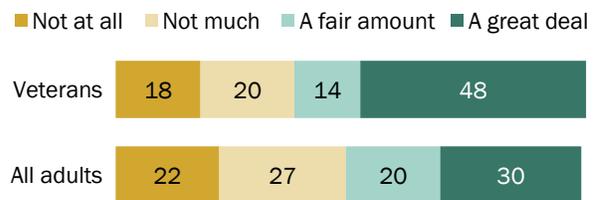
Veterans are more likely than members of the public to say Trump respects military veterans. About half (48%) say Trump respects veterans a great deal, compared with 30% of all

Americans. An additional 14% of veterans say Trump respects veterans a fair amount while about four-in-ten say Trump does not respect veterans much (20%) or at all (18%).

Older veterans are more likely than their younger counterparts to say Trump respects veterans a great deal. Some 54% of veterans ages 65 and older say this, compared with 40% of those younger than 50. Male veterans are 17 percentage points more likely than their female counterparts to say Trump respects veterans a great deal (50% vs. 33%).

About half of veterans say Trump respects veterans ‘a great deal’

% of U.S. veterans/adults saying Donald Trump respects the country’s military veterans ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn’t offer an answer not shown. Source: Surveys of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019 and U.S. adults conducted May 14-24, 2019.

“Trump Draws Stronger Support From Veterans Than From the Public on Leadership of U.S. Military”

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Here, again, partisanship sharply divides veterans' views. Fully 78% of Republican veterans say Trump respects the country's veterans a great deal, compared with just 4% of Democratic veterans who say this. Instead, a majority of Democratic veterans say the president doesn't respect veterans much (43%) or at all (43%).

About half of veterans say the policies of the Trump administration have made the military stronger

In thinking about the policies of the Trump administration, a sizable share of veterans (48%) say that they have made the U.S. military stronger. About one-quarter (23%) say his policies have made the military weaker, and 28% say they have not made much of a difference. By comparison, the general public is **less upbeat about the impact Trump's policies** have had on the military. About three-in-ten Americans (31%) say these policies have made the military stronger, and 27% say they have made it weaker. Four-in-ten Americans say they **haven't made much difference**.

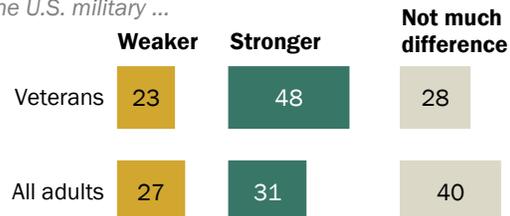
Among veterans, those who served before 9/11 are more likely than those who served after to say that Trump administration policies have made the military stronger (50% vs. 40%). This pattern holds when controlling for differences in partisanship between the two groups.

Still, many veterans say the president has not listened to military leaders enough when it comes to national security decisions. Nearly half of veterans (45%) say Trump listens to military leaders too little. A similar share says Trump listens about the right amount (50%). The public is somewhat more likely than veterans to say the president listens to military leaders too little (51%) and less likely to say the

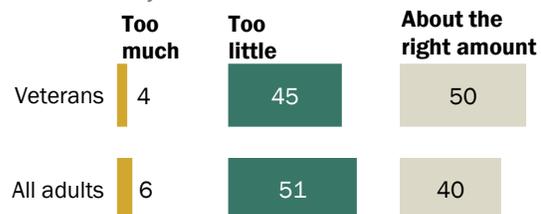
Many veterans say Trump has made the military stronger but wish he would rely more on military leaders

% of U.S. veterans/adults saying ...

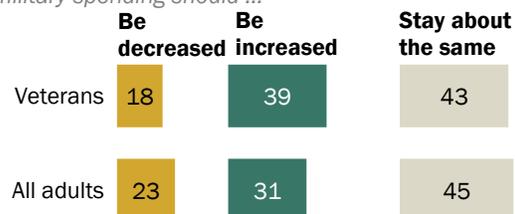
the policies of the Trump administration so far have made the U.S. military ...



when making important national security decisions, Trump relies on military leaders ...



given the competing demands on the federal budget military spending should ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown. Source: Surveys of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019 and U.S. adults conducted May 14-24, 2019. "Trump Draws Stronger Support From Veterans Than From the Public on Leadership of U.S. Military"

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right amount (40%). Just 6% of Americans and 4% of veterans say Trump listens to military leaders too much.

When it comes to military spending, more veterans say it should be increased (39%) than say it should be decreased (18%). A sizable share of veterans (43%) say military spending should stay about the same as it is now. The public is somewhat more likely to want a decrease in military spending. The survey finds that 23% of Americans think military spending should be decreased, 31% would like to see it increased, and 45% think it should stay about the same as it is now.

Here, too, views divide sharply by partisanship. The vast majority of Republican veterans think military spending should be increased (48%) or stay the same (47%). Among Democrats, 25% would like to see spending increased, 37% want a decrease, and 38% think it should stay about the same.

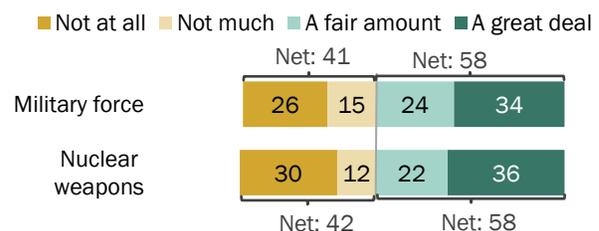
Many veterans question Trump’s ability to make wise decisions about the use of force, nuclear weapons

A majority of veterans say they trust Trump to make the right decisions about the use of military force and nuclear weapons. Roughly a third (34%) say they trust the president a great deal to make the right decisions about the use of military force, and an additional 24% say they trust Trump a fair amount when it comes to these decisions. Roughly four-in-ten veterans do not trust Trump much in making these decisions, including 26% who say they do not trust the president at all when it comes to the use of military force.²

Similarly, a majority of veterans say they trust Trump a great deal (36%) or a fair amount (22%) to make the right decisions about nuclear weapons, **while 42% say they don’t trust him much to make these decisions.** Notably, 30% of veterans say **they don’t trust Trump at all to make the right decisions about using nuclear weapons.**

About one-third of veterans trust Trump a great deal to make the right decision on military force, nuclear weapons

% of U.S. veterans saying they trust Donald Trump _____ to make the right decisions about the use of ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019.
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² This survey was taken entirely before recent tensions between the U.S. and Iran, including the downing of a U.S. military drone.

The public is less trusting of Trump when it comes to these decisions. Roughly four-in-ten adults say they trust him a great deal (22%) or a fair amount (20%) to make the right decisions on the use of military force, and a similar share trust him a great deal (21%) or a fair amount (20%) to make **the right decisions about the use of nuclear weapons. Majorities say they don't trust him much or** at all to make these types of decisions.

Among veterans, those who served before 9/11 are more likely to trust Trump when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons than those who served more recently. While 38% of pre-9/11 veterans say they trust the president a great deal to make the right decisions on the use of nuclear weapons, 30% of post-9/11 veterans say the same. This pattern holds, even when taking into account the differences in partisanship between the two groups.

Veterans who say they had an emotionally traumatic experience while in combat are less likely to **trust Trump in making decisions about the use of force than are those who didn't have that type of** experience (27% and 37%, respectively say they have a great deal of trust). The pattern is similar when it comes to Trump making decisions on the use of nuclear weapons.

Republican veterans are more approving of Trump's military policies than Republicans overall

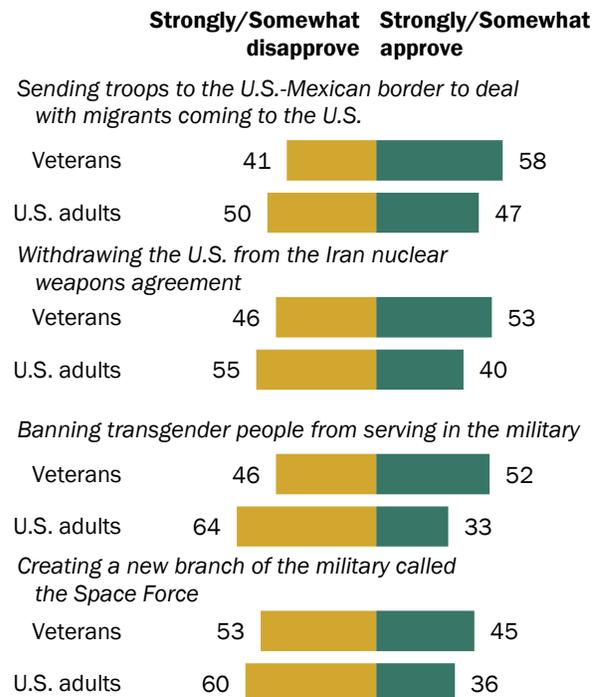
Veterans are divided over some of Trump's specific military policies, but in each case, they are more supportive than the general public. Veterans also have a more positive view than **Americans overall about Trump's approach in dealing with North Korea, Russia and America's NATO allies.** Even after accounting for differences in partisanship between the groups, **Republican veterans are generally more supportive of Trump's positions than Republicans overall.**

A majority of veterans (58%) approve of sending troops to the U.S.-Mexico border to deal with migrants coming to the U.S., including 42% who strongly approve of this policy. The public is more evenly split: 47% approve (including 28% who strongly approve) and 50% disapprove.

Veterans are more evenly divided in their views on the U.S. withdrawing from the Iran nuclear weapons agreement: 53% approve of this decision, while 46% disapprove. Roughly four-in-ten veterans (38%) strongly approve of this policy. Among the public, a majority (55%) disapproves of the U.S. withdrawing from the Iran agreement, while 40% approve of this move. Veterans are twice as likely as the public to say they strongly approve of this policy (38% of veterans vs. 19% of all adults).

Veterans generally approve of three out of four Trump-linked military policies

% of U.S. veterans/adults saying they ____ of each of the following



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Surveys of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019 and U.S. adults conducted May 14-24, 2019.
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Veterans are also somewhat divided in their views on banning transgender people from serving in the military: 52% of veterans approve of this Trump-supported policy (with 35% saying they **strongly approve**), while 46% disapprove. Veterans' opinions diverge significantly from the public on this issue. Only a third of Americans approve of banning transgender people from the military, with 64% disapproving of the measure.

Of the Trump-supported policies asked about in the survey, the only one which veterans disapprove of, on balance, is the idea of creating a new branch of the military called the Space Force: 45% of veterans approve of this proposal and 53% disapprove. Just 15% of veterans strongly approve of creating this new branch of the military. The public is even less enthusiastic about the possibility of creating a Space Force, with 36% of all adults approving and 60% disapproving.

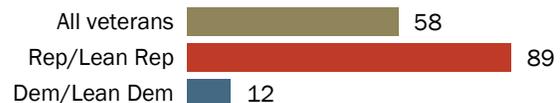
On each of these issues, veterans' opinions differ significantly by party with Republicans much more supportive than Democrats. For example, 89% of Republican veterans approve of sending troops to the U.S.-Mexico border; only 12% of Democratic veterans approve. Similarly, 82% of Republican veterans approve of withdrawing the U.S. from the Iran nuclear deal; only 11% of Democratic veterans feel the same.

These party differences are also seen in public views on these issues, although in each case, Republican veterans are even more supportive of Trump policies than Republicans overall. The largest differences between Republican veterans and Republicans overall can be seen on banning transgender people from serving in the military (78% of veterans approve vs. 57% of all Republicans) and withdrawing from the Iran nuclear weapons deal (82% approve vs. 65%).

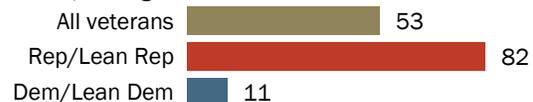
Wide partisan gaps among veterans across four military policies tested

% of U.S. veterans saying they strongly/somewhat approve of each of the following

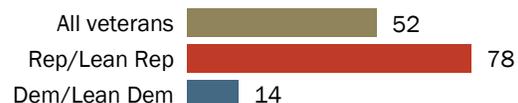
Sending troops to the U.S.-Mexico border to deal with migrants coming the U.S.



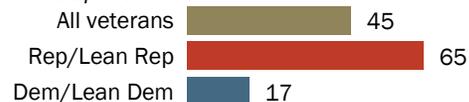
Withdrawing the U.S. from the Iran nuclear weapons agreement



Banning transgender people from serving in the military



Creating a new branch of the military called the Space Force



Source: Survey of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019. "Trump Draws Stronger Support From Veterans Than From the Public on Leadership of U.S. Military"

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Veterans are divided on how Trump is dealing with Russia, while Americans overall disapprove

A majority of veterans (60%) approve of Trump's dealings with North Korea (including 35% who strongly approve), while 40% disapprove. Among all Americans, more disapprove than approve of Trump in this regard (53% vs. 44%).

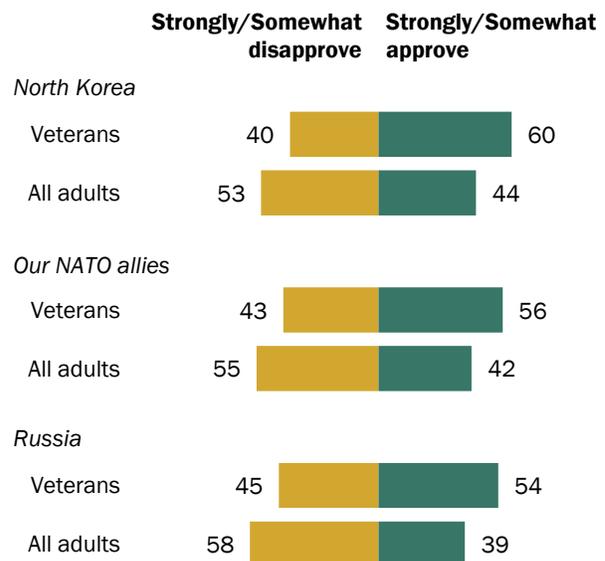
Views on the way Trump is dealing with America's NATO allies follow a similar pattern. A slight majority of veterans (56%) approve of Trump's dealings with NATO (34% strongly approve), while 43% disapprove. Among the public, opinion tilts toward disapproval: 55% disapprove while 42% approve.

Veterans are more likely to approve of how Trump is dealing with Russia than to disapprove (54% vs. 45%). The opposite is true among Americans overall, where a majority (58%) disapproves of his dealings with Russia, while only 39% approve.

Here again, Republican veterans are more likely than Republicans in the general public to approve of Trump's dealings with all three entities. There are fewer differences among Democratic veterans and all Democrats, with similar shares approving of Trump's performance.

Majorities of veterans approve of Trump's dealings with North Korea, NATO allies

% of U.S. veterans/adults saying they ___ of the way Donald Trump is dealing with each of the following



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Surveys of U.S. veterans conducted May 14-June 3, 2019 and U.S. adults conducted May 14-24, 2019.
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This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals. Find related reports online at pewresearch.org/socialtrends

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Methodology

Overview

This study included both a general population sample of U.S. adults and a sample of U.S. military veterans. The sample of U.S. adults (n=1,087) was fielded using the KnowledgePanel, which is a probability-based online survey panel maintained by Ipsos. The target population for the general population sample was non-institutionalized adults age 18 and over, living in the US, including Alaska and Hawaii.

In order to achieve a reliable sample size of U.S. veterans, two online probability-based based were **used: both KnowledgePanel and Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel. The subsample** from the ATP was selected by sampling all active panelists who reported being a veteran in the **annual profile survey. All active panelists from Ipsos’ KnowledgePanel that reported being a** veteran were sampled. KnowledgePanel veterans were screened and allowed to fully complete the survey if they confirmed they were a veteran that served after September 11 (post-9/11). In total, 1,284 veterans responded to the survey.

The general population survey was conducted May 14 to May 24, 2019 and the veteran survey was conducted May 14 to June 3, 2019. Interviewing was conducted in both English and Spanish.

About the Ipsos KnowledgePanel

KnowledgePanel members are recruited through probability sampling methods and include those with internet access and those who did not have internet access at the time of their recruitment (KnowledgePanel provides internet access for those who do not have it, and if needed, a device to access the internet when they join the panel). A combination of random-digit dialing (RDD) and address-based sampling (ABS) methodologies have been used to recruit panel members (in 2009 KnowledgePanel switched its sampling methodology for recruiting members from RDD to ABS). KnowledgePanel continually recruits new panel members throughout the year to offset panel attrition as people leave the panel.

About the American Trends Panel

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. Panelists participate via self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access at home are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by Ipsos.

The ATP was created in 2014, with the first cohort of panelists invited to join the panel at the end of a large, national, landline and cellphone random-digit-dial survey that was conducted in both English and Spanish. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Across these three surveys, a total of 19,718 adults were invited to join the ATP, of which 9,942 agreed to participate.

In August 2018, the ATP switched from telephone to address-based recruitment. Invitations were sent to a random, address-based sample (ABS) of households selected from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence

File. In each household, the adult with the next birthday was asked to go online to complete a survey, at the end of which they were invited to join the panel. For a random half-sample of invitations, households without internet access were instructed to return a postcard. These households were contacted by telephone and sent a tablet if they agreed to participate. A total of 9,396 were invited to join the panel, and 8,778 agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. Of the 18,720 individuals who have ever joined the ATP, 13,462 remained active panelists and continued to receive survey invitations at the time this survey was conducted.

The U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File has been estimated to cover as much as 98% of the population, although some studies suggest that the coverage could be in the low 90% range.³

Response Rate

Out of 7,570 who were sampled, 3,758 were eligible to take the survey, out of which a total of 2,371 panelists responded, for a response rate of 63.1%. This included 971 ATP members and 1,400 **respondents sampled from Ipsos' KnowledgePanel. This does not include seven respondents who were removed from the data due to extremely high rates of refusal or straightlining and two who were removed after they were deemed ineligible based on an open-ended response given when asked which branch of the military they served in.** The cumulative response rate accounting for

American Trends Panel recruitment surveys

Recruitment Dates	Mode	Invited	Joined	Active panelists remaining
Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014	Landline/ cell RDD	9,809	5,338	2,504
Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015	Landline/ cell RDD	6,004	2,976	1,465
April 25 to June 4, 2017	Landline/ cell RDD	3,905	1,628	801
Aug. 8, 2018–Oct. 31, 2018	ABS/web	9,396	8,778	8,692
	Total	29,114	18,720	13,462

Note: Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves or who did not complete an annual profiling survey are removed from the panel. Panelists also become inactive if they ask to be removed from the panel.

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³ AAPOR Task Force on Address-based Sampling. 2016. "AAPOR Report: Address-based Sampling."

nonresponse to the recruitment surveys and attrition is 1.6%. The break-off rate among panelists who logged onto the survey and completed at least one item is 1%. The margin of sampling error for the sample of 1,284 veteran respondents is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points. The margin of sampling error for the sample of 1,087 general population respondents is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

Weighting

The final survey dataset contains two sample weight variables: one for the total general population adult sample and one for the total combined ATP+KP veteran sample. Each weight was created with a base weight reflecting the probability of selection followed by calibration to known demographics of the target population.

Veterans Weight

For the Veterans weight, Ipsos scaled the KP and ATP base weights proportional to effective sample size. Then they downweighted the combined ATP and KP post-9/11 Veterans to be 19.42% of the combined sample (based on ACS benchmark). Finally, the weight was raked to benchmark veteran population demographic targets computed from the 2017 American Community Survey.

Raking Dimensions and Source for Population Estimates for Veterans Weight

Raking Dimension [^]	Source
Era Served (2)	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS
Gender(2) x Era Served (2)	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS
Age(4,5) x Era Served (2)*	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS
Education(3) x Era Served (2)	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS
Race/Ethnicity (4) by Era Served (2)	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS
Region(4) by Era Served (2)	2017 American Community Survey 1-Year PUMS

[^] The numbers of categories (prior to any collapsing from small cell size) are shown in parentheses.

*note that the age split differed by Era Served

Weights were scaled to sum to the unweighted sample size of qualified veterans. Weights were then trimmed separately among post and pre-9/11 veterans.

General Population Adult Weight

For the general population weight, Ipsos started with the KnowledgePanel base weights and then raked to national demographic targets for the age 18+ population on the following variables computed from the Current Population Survey and the American Community Survey:

Raking Dimensions and Source for Population Estimates for General Population Adult Weight

Raking Dimension ^	Source
Gender(2) x Age(4)	2018 March CPS
Race/Ethnicity (5)	2018 March CPS
Region (4) x MSA (2)	2018 March CPS
Education (4)	2018 March CPS
Income (6)	2018 March CPS
Language Proficiency (4)	2017 American Community Survey

^ The numbers of categories (prior to any collapsing from small cell size) are shown in parentheses.

Weights were scaled to sum to the unweighted sample size of the general population adult respondents.

Precision of estimates

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Veteran sample	1,284	3.9 percentage points
Gen Pop sample	1,087	3.1 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

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