

PUBLIC VIEWS ABOUT RUSSIA AND THE IMPORTANCE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY

National Security Survey: 2016

Highlights

- Recent changes in Russian nuclear posture have generated significant attention in the U.S.
- These changes have caused shifts in public perceptions about Russia and beliefs about the role and importance of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security policy.
- Shifts in public perceptions and beliefs are subject to polarization—Clinton and Trump voters hold significantly different perceptions and beliefs about Russia and nuclear weapons.

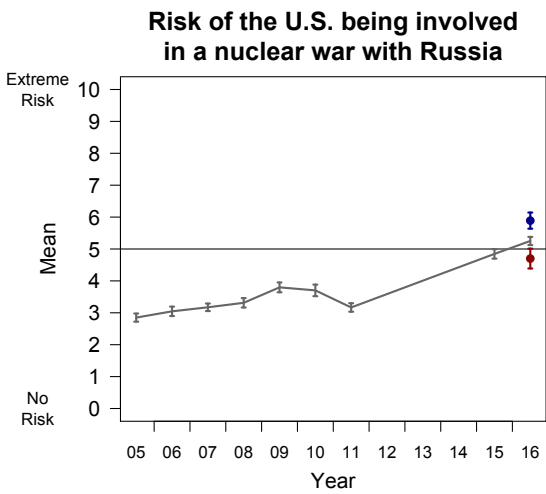
For the first time since the Soviet era, Russia is challenging international norms and long-standing nuclear agreements with the United States. In the last few months alone, Russia backed out of three nuclear agreements with the U.S.

and started investing in nuclear weapons modernization and missile defense technology, rather than arms reduction (Brookings Institute, 2016). As noted in Figure 1, this shift in Russian nuclear posture has generated significant attention in the U.S., causing some to re-evaluate their perceptions about Russia, and their beliefs about the importance

of nuclear weapons in modern security policy. To measure these changes, the Center for Energy, Security, & Society (CES&S) at the University of Oklahoma implemented their annual “National Security Survey” in November 2016, a week after the presidential election. Results indicate significant departures from long term trends that were remarkably stable in the decade(s) leading up to the election.



For instance, one question asks survey participants to “rate the risk of the U.S. being involved in a nuclear war with Russia in the next 10 years.” As shown in Figure 2, perceptions of risk are at an all time high.

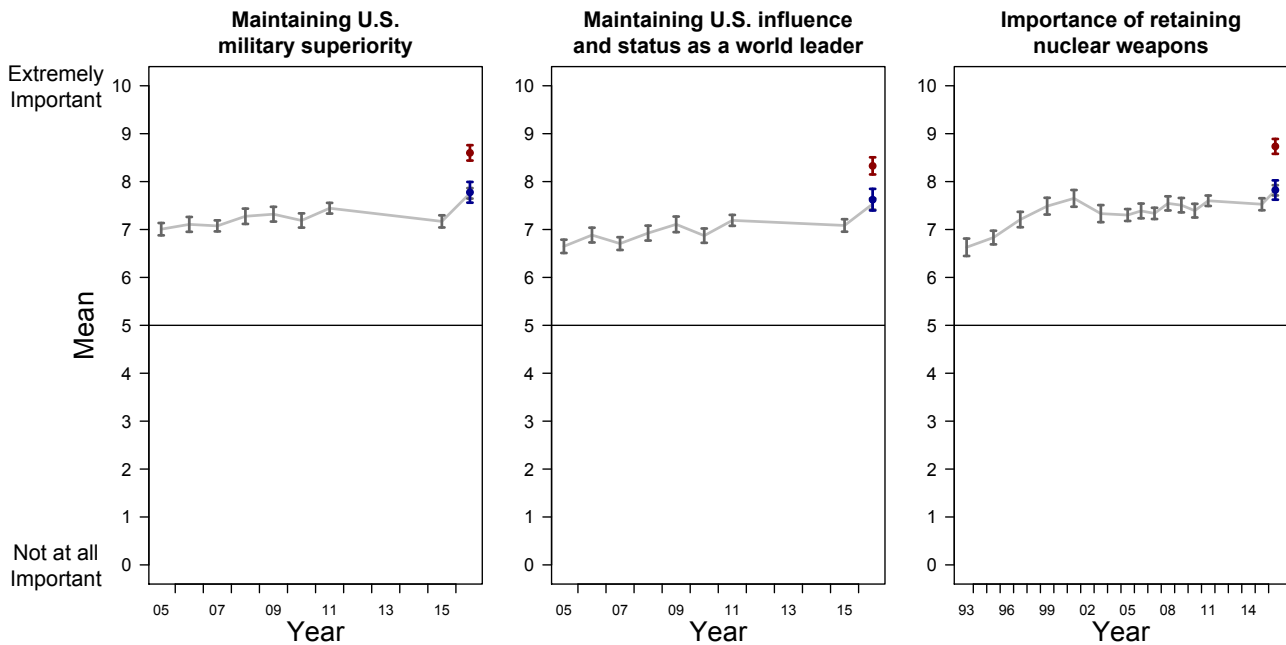


The mean on the 0-10 scale is above mid-scale (5) for the first time since 2005; 63% of survey respondents in 2016 rated the risk as 5 or higher, up 7% from 2015, and 39% from 2005. This change indicates that some Americans are re-evaluating their perceptions about Russia.

The blue and red dots that are above and below the 2016 average (the average is shown in grey), indicate that some of this re-evaluation is filtered by partisan differences. Clinton and Trump voters expressed significantly different views about Russia and the risk of nuclear war. In line with their candidate’s rhetoric on

Russia, voters who strongly supported Trump are significantly less worried about Russia than voters who strongly supported Clinton. On average, the Clinton voters were well above the scale mid-point on perceived risks posed by nuclear war with Russia.

Broader public beliefs about the role and importance of U.S. nuclear weapons as a component of U.S. security are changing as well. We asked respondents to assess the importance of nuclear weapons for “maintaining U.S. military superiority” and for “maintaining U.S. influence and status as a world leader.” Then, we ask respondents to indicate “how important it is for the U.S. to retain nuclear weapons today.” As shown in Figure 3, responses to the first two questions reached a 10 year high in 2016, and responses to the third question reached a 23 year high in 2016, after remarkable stability



over the last 10 years. In 2016, approximately 90% of respondents rated the importance of nuclear weapons for maintaining U.S. military superiority and status above mid-scale (5) and roughly 30% rated them as “extremely important” (10). These percentages jump to 93% and 35% when respondents are asked to reflect on the overall importance of nuclear weapons today.

Again, however, these changes are filtered by partisan (and candidate) affiliation. Trump voters are well ahead of the national average in their beliefs about the continued importance and relevance of nuclear weapons in today’s security environment. Clinton voters, by comparison, are closer to the national average.

These findings have several implications for national security and nuclear weapons policy. Trump’s policy statements, and the preferences of his supporters, stand in stark contrast to the policies pursued by the Obama administration. Strong partisan divides regarding key national security questions such as the role of nuclear weapons in the U.S. security policy, as well as marked differences in perceived threats posed by peer adversaries like Russia, can stimulate significant policy shifts in the national security domain as party control of major political institutions - like the White House - change hands.

Survey Methods: Results for this analysis are based on a web-based national survey conducted November 15-19, 2016, with a sample of 3,000 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. For results based on the total sample of national adults, the margin of sampling error is ± 2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Results are weighted by region to match U.S. Census estimates for age, gender, race, ethnicity.