

# Uncovering the Paradox of National Security Public Opinion

**Ben Freeman**

Former Deputy Director  
of the National Security  
Program

**Mieke Eoyang**

Vice President for the  
National Security  
Program

[@MiekeEoyang](https://twitter.com/MiekeEoyang)

National security has emerged as a vitally important issue to voters across all partisan groups, second only to the economy. But most Democratic officials and candidates treat national security as if it were a third-tier concern of the electorate. This is an enormous mistake.

While Democrats seized the advantage on national security during the nadir of the Iraq War in 2006, they now face the biggest deficit on the issue—a “security gap”—that we have seen in the modern era. They currently trail Republicans among all voters by 19%, and they are losing Independent voters on this issue by a margin of two-to-one.

The paradox in these data is that voters actually believe Democrats are more like them on security than are Republicans. But they clearly want elected leaders who are tougher than they are to guarantee their safety. Thus, if Democrats follow the isolationist tendencies of the voters, they actually alienate those same voters on national security.

From June 22–26, Third Way fielded a national online survey of 1,200 registered voters (through Gerstein, Bocian, Agne

Strategies). The goal was to understand how voters perceive the political parties when it comes to national security. The results confirm a number of voter concerns that we have previously documented.<sup>1</sup> Most notably, national security is a top priority for voters, and they simply don't trust Democrats when it comes to protecting the country.

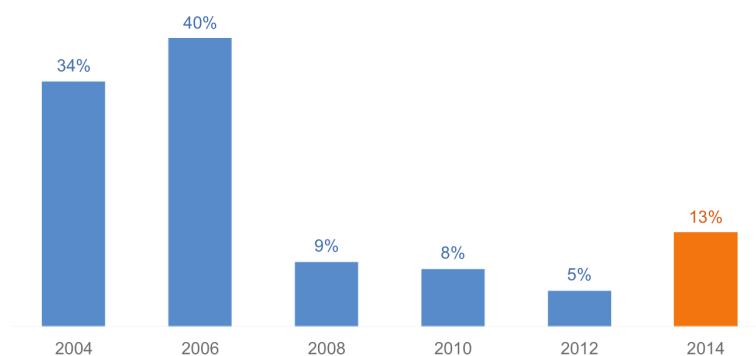
But our data reveals another startling fact: a conventional political approach to closing the security gap—convincing voters that Democratic candidates are more like they are than are the Republicans—will not work. Indeed, it would almost certainly make matters worse.

## How Important is National Security to Voters?

### The Rising Salience of Security

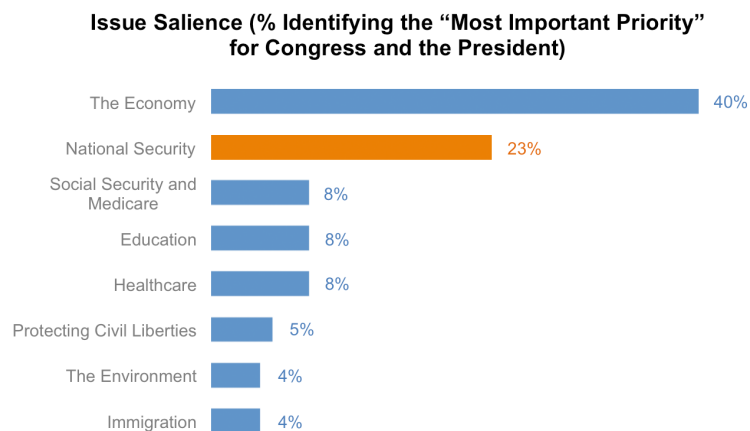
Voters' view of the importance of national security tracks current events. Following the Republican missteps in Iraq and Afghanistan, the salience of national security soared in the 2006 elections, when 40% of voters declared it to be the most important issue in CNN exit polls. The salience of security quickly diminished in subsequent elections, settling to a peacetime norm of 5% in the 2012 elections. But in 2014, with the rise of ISIS and the Ebola scare in the months preceding the election, this figure more than doubled, with 13% of voters saying it was the most important issue. With the continued threat from ISIS and general instability across the world, all the evidence pointed to this trend continuing, and it did.

% of Voters that said National Security was the Most Important Issue in Exit Polls



# National Security Now is the Second Most Important Issue

Third Way's survey from late June found that national security was the second most important issue for all partisan groups, trailing only the economy. Overall, 23% of respondents identified security as their most important issue, a 10% increase since the 2014 midterm elections. 35% of Republicans, 21% of Independents, and 17% of Democrats listed national security as the most important issue. Independents chose it more than twice as often as any issue except the economy. In fact, more independent voters selected national security as the most important issue than those that selected education (8%), healthcare (7%), and the environment (5%) *combined*.



But there are important distinctions in the data. When broken down by ideology, only 14% of liberals rank national security as the most important issue, while 21% of moderates do. Thus, the voters that Democrats hear from most view national security as less salient than do the moderates who are crucial to Democrats winning a governing majority.

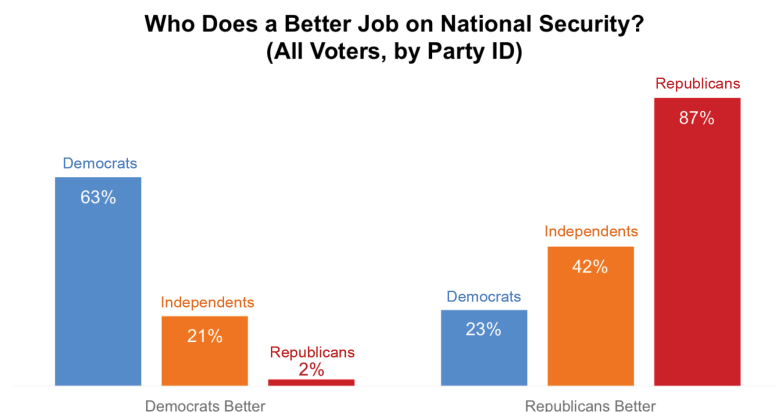
## What is the Perception of Democrats on National Security?

### Democrats at a disadvantage on National Security

The challenge for Democrats with the rising salience of national security is that our survey showed Republicans enjoyed a 19% advantage on this issue, the same advantage they held over Democrats right after 9/11.<sup>2</sup> Worse yet, for voters ranking national security as their most important issue, the partisan gap was 43%. By comparison, while 40% of respondents still identified the economy as their most important issue, Democrats only enjoyed a 3% advantage on that issue.

## Losing Independents on National Security by a 2:1 Margin

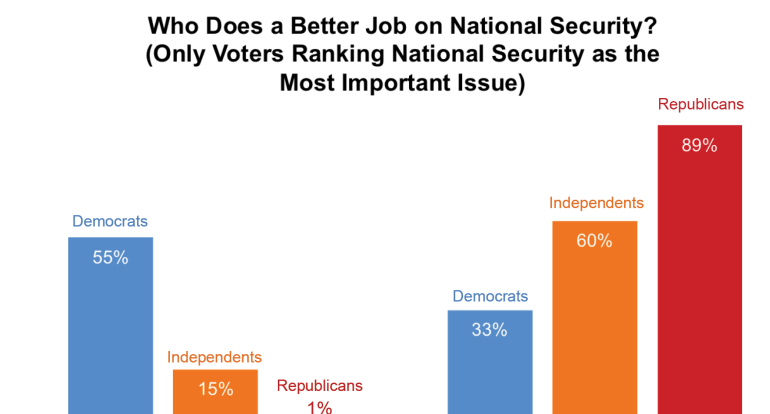
Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Republicans (87%) said that Republican elected officials do a better job on national security. Somewhat more surprisingly, 23% of Democratic voters *agreed* that Republicans are better at security. But most surprising—and troubling—of all, the gap on this issue for those in the middle was enormous. By a two-to-one margin (42% to 21%), Independents said that Republicans do a better job than Democrats on national security.



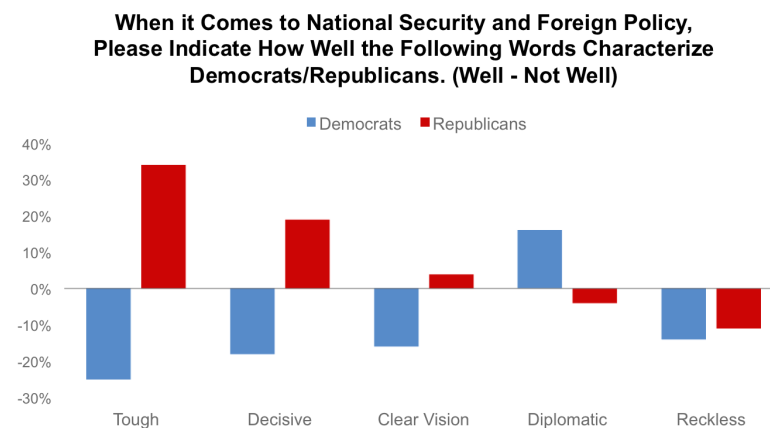
For voters who ranked national security as the most important issue, this ratio was even higher—15% of security-minded Independents said Democrats do a better job on national security, while 60% prefer the Republicans. Moreover, Democrats are struggling even with their own security partisans. Among Democratic respondents who rated national security as the most important priority, only 55% said their own party did a better job on national security, and a third of such Democrats preferred the Republicans.

Conversely, nearly 89% of security-first Republicans said that Republicans do a better job on the issue.

## Negative Perceptions of Democrats



Underlying this deficit were voter perceptions that Democrats lack the characteristics needed to be trusted with our nation's security. For example, Republicans were seen as both tougher and smarter than Democrats when voters were asked to explain how well the words describe each party (the partisan gaps are 30% and 3%, respectively). And Republican negatives appear to have faded. Third Way's polling previously found that Republicans were seen as "reckless" on security matters.<sup>3</sup> It is unclear if voters still blame Republicans for the ill-fated decision to invade Iraq, but voters no longer associate the word "reckless" with the Republican Party. In our poll, 48% said the word "reckless" describes Republicans "not too well" or "not well at all," whereas only 37% of voters said "reckless" describes Republicans "well" or "very well."



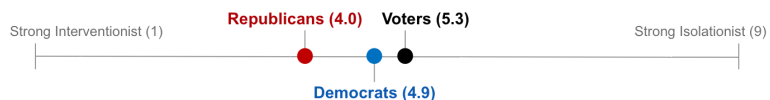
On the other hand, 54% of respondents said “stubborn” describes Republicans well, compared to 34% who said it did not. This was, by far, the largest negative for Republicans. Moreover, Independents and moderates cut against Republicans on “stubborn” by an approximately 2:1 margin. Even among Republican voters, this was seen as their greatest vulnerability.

## How Did it Get this Bad?

### The Paradox

Most importantly, our survey revealed a paradox that may be at the heart of the Democratic Party’s national security problem. While voters overwhelmingly favored Republicans on national security, they viewed Democrats as much more like themselves on national security.

To make this determination, we asked respondents to place Democrats and Republicans on a scale from 1 (Strong Interventionist) to 9 (Strong Isolationist). In response, voters put Democrats in the middle (4.9), themselves slightly isolationist (5.3), and Republicans as decidedly interventionist (4.0).<sup>4</sup> The divide between where voters saw themselves and Republicans was very significant—a 1.3 difference in a 9-point scale is huge. *Across all socioeconomic and demographic subsets of voters that we polled, not a single group believed they are more interventionist than the Republican Party.*



The paradox is that, unlike most issues, where conventional wisdom suggests that a candidate should move towards the voters, our survey, and nearly all national security surveys, showed that voters prefer the Party they view as tougher than they are.

As further evidence of this phenomenon, in our survey we asked voters to rank the persuasiveness of national security messages, and the isolationist message (“Instead of serving

as the world's policeman and putting American troops at risk, it is time for us to reduce our international involvement and instead invest at home") was the least preferred message for moderate voters (out of 10 choices).

On the other hand, we also tested a hyper-interventionist message ("9/11 taught us that we must take the fight to the enemy before they reach us. We put America at risk if we do not confront bad actors. In order to keep us safe, we must pre-emptively deal with emerging threats.") This message finished second to last for moderates and was the least preferred message amongst all voters.

The lesson from all of this is clear—voters don't want reckless interventionism, but they want to know that those representing them aren't afraid to intervene. If the Democratic Party moves more towards isolationism, it will sow the seeds of its own continued national security deficit.

## END NOTES

1. Ben Freeman and Michelle Diggles, "What Democrats Can do to Close the Security Gap," Third Way, February 6, 2015. Accessed September 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.thirdway.org/report/what-democrats-can-do-to-close-the-security-gap>.
2. Frank Newport, "Republicans Expand Edge as Better Party Against Terrorism," Poll, Gallup, September 4-7, 2014. Accessed February 2, 2015. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/175727/republicans-expand-edge-better-party-against-terrorism.aspx>.
3. Matt Bennett, Jeremy Rosner, and Sean Barnery, "Winning on National Security: Results of New Public Opinion Research," Memo, Third Way, September 2008. Accessed on September 18, 2015. Available at: <http://blogs.trb.com/news/politics/blog/2008/09/06/Greenberg%20national%20security%20poll.pdf>.

- 4.** Voters were asked “Using the scale below, please indicate where you would put yourself and Democrats and Republicans on the spectrum from interventionist to isolationist.” They were given a definition of Strong Interventionists— “Interventionists believe in a foreign policy where the U.S. often gets involved in the affairs of other countries and uses the military to protect U.S. interests, attack terrorists, defend democracy, or stop humanitarian crises” —and Strong Isolationists —“Isolationists believe in a foreign policy where the U.S. rarely intervenes in the affairs of other countries and rarely uses military force, focusing more on affairs at home.”