

# What Democrats Can Do to Close the Security Gap



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## Takeaways

1. The security gap between Democrats and Republicans has returned, it's bigger than ever, and it matters in elections.
2. Swing voters doubt Democrats' commitment to securing the country, viewing them as indecisive.
3. Swing voters want more clarity and specificity on how leaders see the threats to the country and how they will be addressed.

## Introduction

2014 was a bad year for Democrats on national security. To understand just how bad, Third Way analyzed public opinion

data and conducted focus groups of swing voters both before and after the election.<sup>1</sup> In this memo, we lay out the disturbing trends we discovered, what they mean for Democrats, and how the Party can address security challenges going forward.

# **I. The Electoral Impact of the National Security Gap is Significant**

## **The Security Gap is Back**

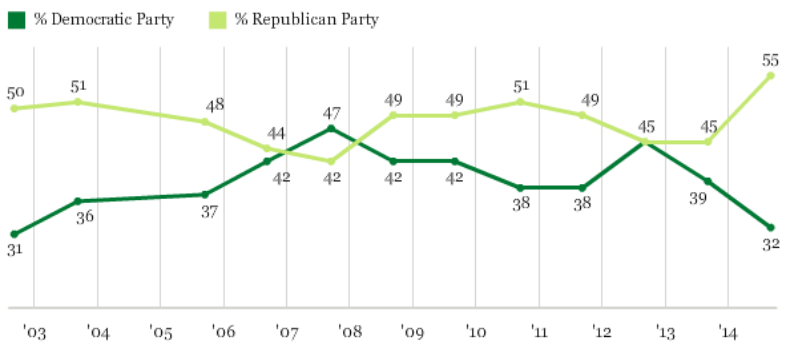
The public opinion gap between Republicans and Democrats on national security has existed to varying degrees for decades. But it is larger now than it was even just after 9/11.

Since 2002, Gallup has annually asked survey respondents “which political party do you think will do a better job of protecting the country from international terrorism and military threats—the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?”<sup>2</sup> In 2002, Republicans had a 19-point advantage, but this gap began to close with Bush’s disastrous war in Iraq; by 2007, Democrats actually held a 5-point advantage over Republicans.

However, since the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, the favorability of Democrats on national security has plummeted, while that of Republicans has soared. Today’s 23-point difference is the largest national security gap in the history of Gallup’s polling on this question.

#### *Party Better Able to Protect U.S. From Terrorism, September 2002-September 2014*

Looking ahead for the next few years, which political party do you think will do a better job of protecting the country from international terrorism and military threats -- [the Republican Party or the Democratic Party]?



GALLUP

Moreover, a Third Way analysis of National Election Studies (NES) data revealed that this gap has existed for more than fifty years.<sup>3</sup> In every election since the 1960s, the NES has asked respondents “Is there anything in particular that you do (don’t) like about the Republican (Democratic) party?”<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, for every Republican that says they like Democratic foreign policy, there are six who say they don’t. A similar pattern holds for Independents, who favor Republicans by a 2:1 margin.

By contrast, Republican foreign policy has broad appeal. Republicans support their Party’s foreign policy by a 3:1 margin. A majority of Independents favor Republican foreign policy. And, shockingly, even Democrats are more likely to say they prefer the Republicans’ foreign policy to that of their own Party.

## **The Security Gap Mattered in 2014**

It is well understood that foreign policy was not the decisive issue for most voters in 2014. According to exit polls, just 13% said that foreign policy was “the most important issue facing the country today.” But the partisan gap on national security is much larger than the partisan gap on the economy. And our analysis shows that the huge security gap did have an impact on the outcome in 2014.

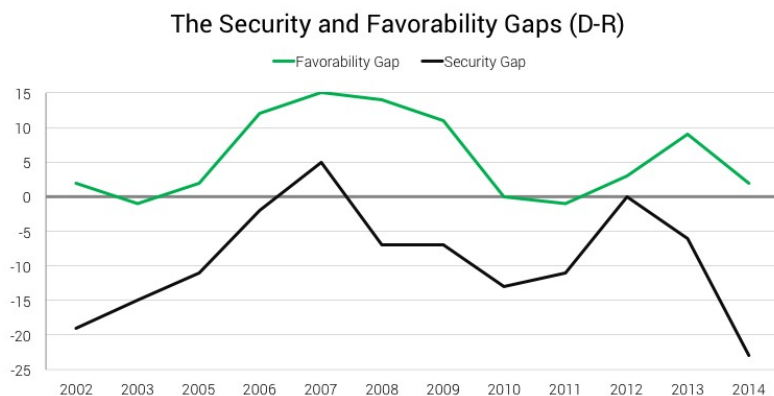
In the American Values Survey, 65% of voters who listed national security as their most important issue chose Republican candidates, compared to just 27% that voted for

Democrats.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, 62% of those that said immigration was their top issue voted for Republicans. The partisan gap amongst those that said the economy was the most significant issue, however, was considerably smaller, with 50% voting for Democrats and 43% voting for Republicans.<sup>6</sup>

The net effect is that the Democrats' advantage on the economy earned them just a 2.6% vote advantage, while national security and immigration cost them nearly 5% each.

## National Security is a Leading Indicator of Party Favorability

Third Way analysis of Gallup data from 2002 to 2014 found a strong correlation between the security gap and the overall favorability gap between the Democratic and Republican parties. In fact, our statistical analysis revealed that the security gap is an even stronger predictor of the favorability gap in the following year. **In other words, when the security gap drops, the favorability gap typically drops by a roughly proportional amount a year later.** Nate Silver's 538 found a similar correlation between President Obama's overall approval and his foreign policy approval.<sup>7</sup>



As these data indicate, Democrats can't simply stay the course if they hope to regain the confidence of voters. To begin to understand what changes are needed, we conducted focus groups of college-educated swing voters in Colorado and Iowa. In the next two sections, we draw upon findings from these focus groups to explain what swing voters want when it comes to foreign policy and how the Democratic Party, as they see it, differs from this ideal.

## II. Swing Voters Want Clarity in National Security Policy

America's post-Iraq war weariness is well-documented. But we risk over-interpreting those data and assuming that the American public now supports an isolationist foreign policy. Our focus group participants want a balance between a domestic focus and international involvement, and they want to know the plan.

These swing voters believe the U.S. must engage internationally, for financial, military, and humanitarian reasons. But they want to see American interests protected first. They want a strong America that leads and works through alliances—and they define leadership as convincing others to support our foreign policy goals. They are concerned that in any international crisis, “just call America” is the global response.

Focus group participants want more details about foreign endeavors. While policymakers sometimes assume that the public neither cares about nor wants to know specifics of foreign policy, these respondents say the opposite. In Iraq and Afghanistan, they feel our goals and timeline were not clear. One Colorado woman noted, “In the ‘80s it was the Soviets, and you knew who the bad guys were. But now we don't know.”

These swing voters want answers: Is it cost-effective? Would drones or Special Operations work better? Can airstrikes get the job done? They aren't looking for more open deliberation, just a clear description of the facts and concerns.

These voters understand that every situation is unique. But they crave standards that could apply broadly to determine whether the U.S. should get involved in foreign entanglements, and they are willing to grant considerable leeway to experts in helping to define threats. Thus, when proposing international action, Democrats must clearly lay out the threat to the United States. They must then describe

our goals, present steps to accomplish those goals, and produce a reasonable analysis of timing and costs.

### **III. Swing Voters Are Critical of Democrats but Like Hillary Clinton**

Our focus group participants described Democrats primarily as diplomats and humanitarians. They used phrases such as “weigh both sides,” “diplomacy, actually thinking before they act,” and “desire to remain peaceful with nations who have different values” as positive attributes of the Party. Democratic leaders cultivated this image in response to the perceived recklessness of the Bush Administration. And the message has gotten through: participants praised Democrats for humanitarian efforts, noting that they provided aid for “education, health, and financial growth” abroad.

But they were also critical of the Party and the President, with several participants noting that what Democrats got right on national security could also be turned into what they get wrong. As we have heard in focus groups in past years, Democrats were described as soft, focused too much on diplomacy and peaceful resolution, and too late to act. One younger woman in Iowa noted that Democrats are “too concerned with being fair or polite.” Some worried that sending people to fight Ebola in Africa would result in the disease coming to the U.S.

Immigration—which to these voters is clearly a national security issue—is a big concern. Democrats are seen as “too accepting of anyone who wants to come in, no questions asked.” A Colorado woman said, “Borders are a huge risk, but I'm not worried about Mexico. I'm worried about immigration from ISIS because sometimes they send people here under a mask and they are infiltrating us.” When these voters hear Democrats talk about a path to citizenship, they hear a humanitarian response. But in the immigration debate, they are not hearing that Democrats worry about our own national security. As one woman noted, Democrats are “not as good at

prioritizing the greater risk. They were quicker to respond to Ebola than ISIS. They respond to humanitarian things not direct threats.”

To be clear, our participants say they personally feel safe in the U.S. Few think they are directly under threat from attack or that they or their families will be harmed. But they express a real concern about terrorists entering the U.S. and operating within our country, especially when they see reports of American citizens going overseas to train and become radicalized so they can attack America. When asked about President Obama, participants say he is too academic in his approach to international affairs, overly cautious, focused on deliberation and not on action—“analysis paralysis” as one Colorado man noted. Another man said that Putin “punked” President Obama, and he just allowed it to happen. When asked to name a single thing the President had done right on security policy, they struggle. Even the bin Laden raid has faded in their memory—a group of Colorado women talked about “that guy, they made a movie about him. You know the skinny guy with the beard.” No one could recall bin Laden’s name.

These swing voters seek a Goldilocks approach to security policy. They view former President Bush as too proactive and aggressive and President Obama as too reactive and deliberative. Hillary Clinton may be the one to get it just right. Participants describe the former Secretary of State as “more experienced”, “quicker to make decisions,” and more confident than President Obama. And compared to Democrats overall, Secretary Clinton is viewed as more hawkish and authoritative, but, as one woman put it, “not aggressive. She exhibits strength without being pushy.”

## **Recommendations**

- 1. Acknowledge the threats to America.** Voters see an increasingly complex and dangerous world full of threats but devoid of clear enemies. Dismissing these fears devalues the voters’ concerns.

**2. Be clear about how we should respond.** Americans want to know that our leaders have a plan that is clear, well-considered, targeted, and limited in scope.

**3. Proactively engage national security issues.** Every Member of Congress, regardless of committee assignments or region of the country, is charged with the protection of the United States. Democrats have a particular need to ensure that voters know that they are totally committed to fulfilling that responsibility.

#### TOPICS

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#### END NOTES

- 1.** GBA Strategies conducted four sets of focus groups for Third Way—two in Colorado and two in Iowa. Participants were college graduates and swing voters.
- 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.** Poll, American National Election Studies, 1948-2012. Accessed February 2, 2015. Available at: [http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/download/datacenter\\_all\\_NoData.php](http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/download/datacenter_all_NoData.php).
- 4.** The NES asks this as an open-ended question. The NES then codes the answers. One of the categories for possible answers is “foreign policies”. Third Way compiled and analyzed the data for all foreign policy responses.



- 5.** “2014 Post-Election American Values Survey, ‘What Motivated Voters During the Midterm Elections?’” Poll, Public Religion Research Institute, November 11, 2014. Accessed on February 2, 2015. Available at: <http://publicreligion.org/research/2014/11/survey-2014-post-election-american-values-survey-what-motivated-voters-during-the-midterm-elections/>.
- 6.** The American Values Survey data is used for illustrative purposes given that it was the only public available panel survey, to our knowledge, that questioned the same voters before and after the election. However, this same pattern of vote choice by issue was found in the exit polls, with the only exception from the general pattern being that Republicans had a 2% advantage on the economy. For more information on the exit poll results see: Poll, CNN, November 4, 2014, accessed February 2, 2015. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/election/2014/results/race/house#exit-polls>.
- 7.** Harry Enten, “Americans Sour on Obama’s Foreign Policy,” Poll, FiveThirtyEight.com, 2009-2014, Accessed February 2, 2015. Available at: <http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/americans-sour-on-obamas-foreign-policy/>.