

America's Will to Win: Polling Insights on US Clean Energy Competitiveness with China



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Takeaway

- 82% of Americans view China as either a competitor or an enemy, and very few consider the country a reliable trade partner, especially for key sectors like clean energy.
- 72% of Americans think that the US can challenge China's market dominance in clean energy and should keep trying.
- Voters trust Republicans more to handle competition with China—but Democrats can take back the advantage by being firm, pragmatic, and proudly patriotic.

- Bottom Line: Voters are sick of defeatist narratives on competition with China and rally behind homegrown clean energy as a tool to boost domestic manufacturing and energy independence.

Clean energy is the key to fighting climate change and is the future of our electric grid. But it's also at the heart of tomorrow's economy, and both the United States and China hope to lead the clean energy transition. But right now, China leads the world in clean energy manufacturing and deployment—and that's a problem for America's economy and national security. To understand how Americans feel about competition between the US and China, Third Way partnered with Impact Research to conduct both an online focus group on the Remesh platform and a nationwide quantitative survey of 800 likely voters.

Fielded in the aftermath of an increase in anti-Asian violence in the US, both our focus group and our survey took pains to understand the impact of rhetoric that is critical of China on East Asian Americans. We oversampled East Asian American voters both to understand their feelings on competition with China and to ensure pro-competition language did not perpetuate harmful anti-Asian biases.

Below, we highlight key findings from our research and offer thoughts on how to inspire Americans to care about US leadership in the clean energy space.

Americans of All Backgrounds Are Skeptical About China's Intentions—and Eager for US Independence

Many Americans have personal experience with the rise of China as an economic superpower and, by extension, deeply held personal beliefs about China's role in the global economy.

Our data showed that, across the political spectrum and demographics, the vast majority of respondents (82%) view China as either a competitor or an enemy. A similar majority of voters (75%) believe the US is too reliant on trade with China, with most (67%) seeing the US-China trade relationship as imbalanced in China's favor.

This holds true with East Asian Americans—more than 62% view China as an enemy or competitor, and more than 57% of Chinese American voters feel similarly. When asked if language encouraging competition with China is harmful to Asian Americans, a plurality responded that such language is not harmful and would support further economic competition between the US and China.

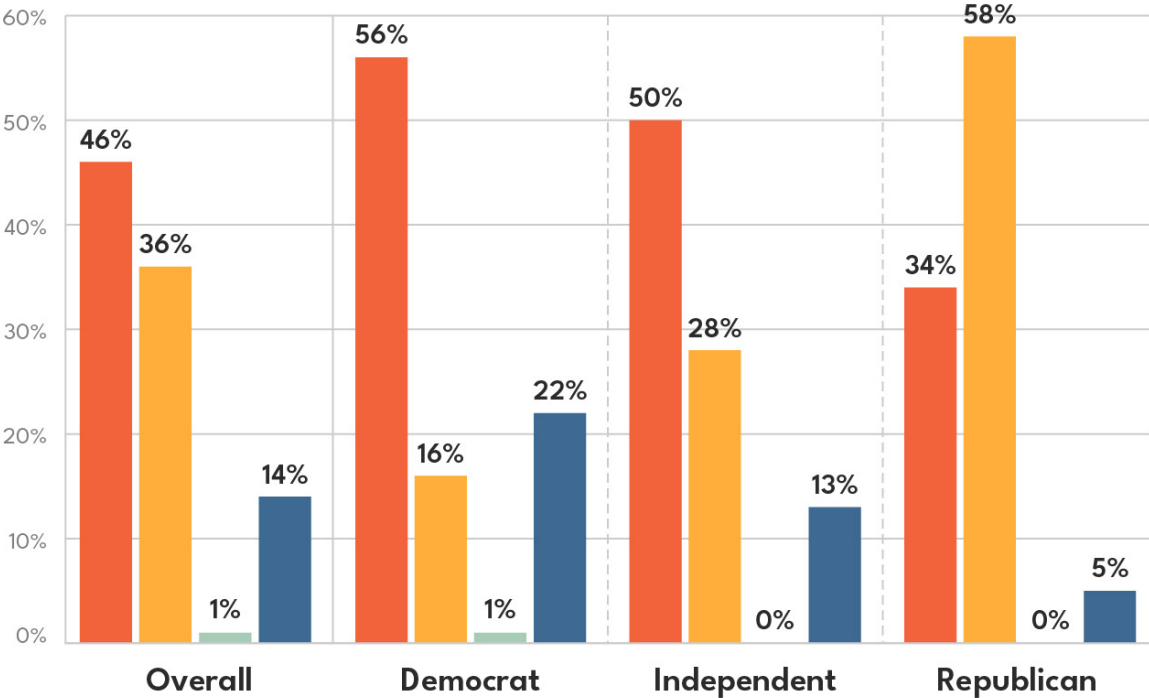
When asked open-ended questions about which foreign countries they viewed as the biggest threat to America’s economy and national security, the majority of respondents, across all political affiliations and demographics, pointed the finger at China.



The Vast Majority of Americans View China as a Competitor or Enemy

How do you view China in relation to the US?

Competitor Enemy Ally Trade Partner



Source: Third Way and Impact Research conducted polling via professional telephone interviews and a text-to-web survey of 800 likely 2024 general election voters, with an oversample of 200 East Asian American voters, from July 13-19, 2023. The confidence interval is +/- 3.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

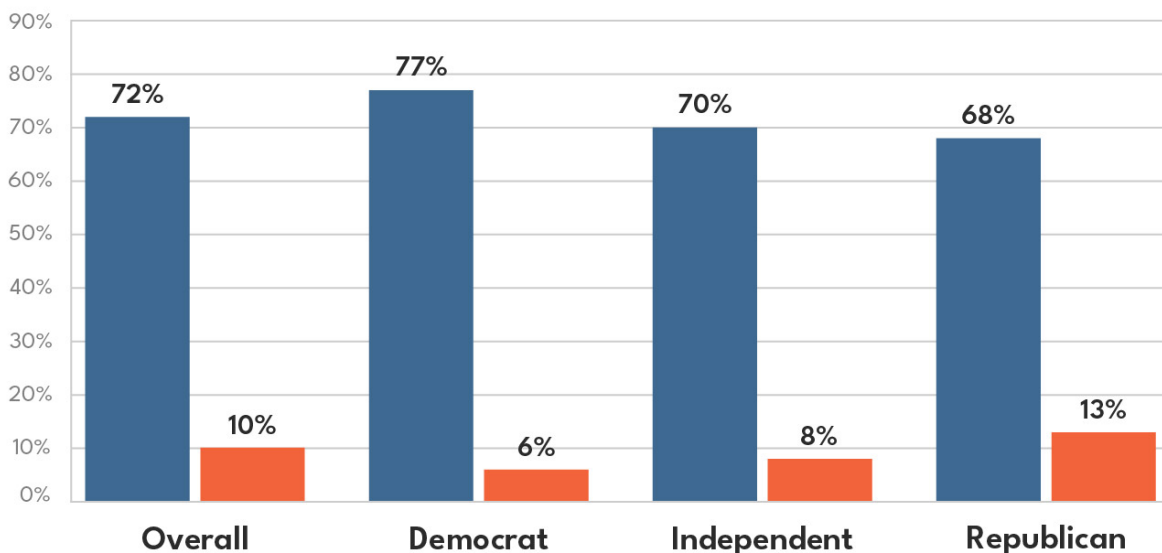
Voters Believe the US Can Rival China’s Economy

Voters on both sides of the aisle overwhelmingly (72%) agree that the US can stand up to and eventually eclipse China’s market dominance and that we should not give up the race for leadership in clean energy. Across demographics, all Americans, and, importantly, the majority of Chinese Americans (56%), agree that the US can compete with China and should keep trying to dominate the clean energy sector. Americans are rallying against complacency and the defeatist narrative promoted by some US politicians. We want to compete—and we’re confident that we have what it takes.

Voters Overwhelmingly Agree that America Can Compete With China on Clean Energy and Should Not Give Up

Which of the following comes closest to your point of view?

- China has a significant lead in clean energy markets, but if the US steps up and tries to compete, we can outcompete them.
- China’s dominance over the world’s clean energy technology market is not something the US can overcome. We should accept that and turn to other areas that we can excel in.



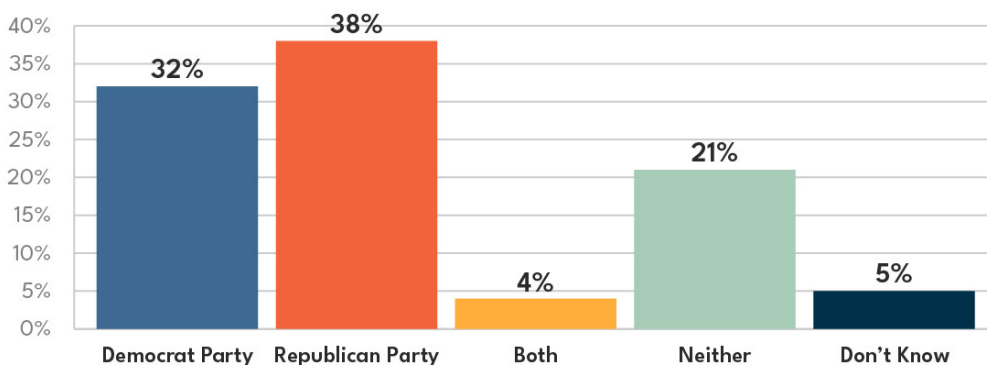
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Democrats Trail Republicans on China—For Now

Voters say they trust Republicans more than Democrats by a 6-point margin to handle the US relationship with China. That’s a meaningful—but not insurmountable—margin. Crucially, 48% of Independent voters trust neither party. Democrats have the opportunity to pick up support and build trust by appealing both to those who already trust them and to voters who feel that neither party is really taking competition with China seriously.

Republicans Are Slightly More Trusted on Handling China than Democrats

In general, which party do you trust more to handle the US's relationship with China?



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In our polling, Democrats stood out for their balanced and level-headed approach compared to Republican extremism. Their moderation is their edge. By spotlighting and contrasting themselves with Republican extremism, Democrats can recapture support from voters who are disillusioned by both parties and maintain support from their base.

Democrats Need to Be Loud, Firm, and Pragmatic on China

Our data paints a clear picture: the majority of voters (80%) are passionate about bringing manufacturing back to the US, and they want energy that's domestically made (81%). They're not nearly as interested in climate benefits (54%) as they are in satisfying these goals. And, crucially, they express disinterest in radical politics and chaotic, unpredictable relationships with other countries. This creates considerable potential for Democrats, who are seen as more measured than their Republican counterparts and have already made significant investments in domestic manufacturing through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Inflation Reduction Act, and the CHIPS and Science Act.

To capture support from voters, our polling shows that Democrats must be firm, yet pragmatic when it comes to China. That means being vocal about holding Chinese companies accountable for intellectual property theft, national security risks, unfair trade practices, and human rights abuses.

At the same time, voters have made it clear that they aren't interested in the chaos and radicalism the Right has exhibited in their approach to foreign relations. Americans are supportive of efforts to shift supply chains from China to the US and our allies, but they want an approach that is measured, thoughtful, and doesn't disrupt their daily lives.

Democrats must be laser-focused: when we home-shore clean energy technologies, we are protecting industries that are critical to American national security and energy independence. And we need to make that clear to voters who desperately want the US to reduce its dependence on China and resume its position at the top of the global economy.

Perhaps most importantly, Democrats have to *talk* about the positions outlined above. They cannot ignore competition with China or quietly pursue these positions in the background. Voters respond to a vocal, strong, and methodical approach to our number one trade competitor. They view silence as a sign of weakness, not a cautious strategy.

Clean Energy is Patriotic—and Democrats Should Own That

Democrats have been called unpatriotic and beholden to the Chinese government for supporting clean energy—accusations that are flatly untrue. Democrats have to stand up to those claims, refute them, and emphasize that support for clean energy is evidence of their commitment to bolstering American energy independence.

Democrats must emphasize that *any* engagement with a Chinese firm in the clean energy space, even if it is simply to fill a small supply chain gap, is leveraged to the maximum benefit of the American people. They must make it clear that the US is working to secure American intellectual property, enhance technical skill training programs, build up our manufacturing capacities, and extract other benefits that are critical to developing America's economy and workforce. Most importantly, every investment is designed to help the US outpace, outgrow, and out-perform unreliable foreign countries like China, Russia, and those in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Some conservative policymakers have pointed to China's success in clean energy production to argue that the US should abandon efforts to manufacture and deploy clean energy here at home. They claim the Chinese government is too far ahead for America to compete. But these attacks represent a fundamental misunderstanding: investing in clean energy manufacturing and deployment in the US is the *opposite* of capitulating. It's positioning us to break Beijing's grip on global supply chains, cultivate energy independence, and invest in US communities.

The clean energy transition is the key to restoring America’s leadership in the global economy. And to be successful, it needs to be popular. Americans must see clean energy as more than an environmentalist talking point. They need to recognize investments in these technologies as a practical decision that positively impacts their finances, their security, and their personal well-being. It is vital that we address the American public’s real concerns about the Chinese government if we hope to make US clean energy policies durable.

Methodology

Third Way and Impact Research conducted polling via professional telephone interviews and a text-to-web survey of 800 likely 2024 general election voters, with an oversample of 200 East Asian American voters, from July 13-19, 2023. The margin of error for the main sample is +/- 3.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of error for subgroups varies and is higher. The quantitative survey builds on a previous online qualitative/quantitative hybrid focus group, called a ReMesh, with 50 2024 likely voters on May 24, 2023. Participants included a mix of ages, genders, educational attainment levels, races, and regions, including East Asian and Chinese American voters.

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