

Public Opinion on Congressional Approval for Military Force

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KEY FINDINGS

- **Americans consistently want presidents to obtain congressional approval before military action.**

Across more than four decades of survey data, majorities of the public say that presidents should seek congressional authorization before using military force. In 2026, about 70% of Americans hold this view.

- **Partisan differences have widened in recent years.**

In the 1990s and early 2000s, differences between Democrats and Republicans were modest and often shifted from one presidency to the next. Over the past decade, however, Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to support requiring congressional approval, with a gap of roughly 40 percentage points in the most recent data.

- **Support for obtaining congressional approval varies depending on which party controls the presidency.**

Both Democrats and Republicans are more likely to favor requiring congressional approval when the opposing party controls the presidency, and less likely to do so when their own party is in power.

- **Support for obtaining congressional approval declines after military action begins—especially among co-partisans.**

In the two most recent conflicts, Republican support for requiring congressional approval drops sharply after military action has occurred (e.g., from about 59% before action to 26% after), while Democratic support remains consistently high.

INTRODUCTION

Questions about presidential war powers sit at the center of the American constitutional system. Although the Constitution vests Congress with the sole authority to declare war, modern presidents have used military force without explicit congressional authorization. These actions have prompted debate over how much authority the executive should have in matters of war.

Recent U.S. military action against Iran has brought these questions back into focus, with renewed debate over whether presidents should obtain congressional approval before initiating the use of force. This data brief examines public opinion on that question over time. Drawing on nationally representative surveys spanning more than four decades, it compiles multiple question series—asked in both general terms and in the context of specific conflicts—to assess whether Americans believe presidents should be able to launch military operations without congressional approval.

One pattern is clear: Americans generally believe presidents should obtain congressional approval before military action. This view, however, is not politically neutral. It varies sharply by party, depends in part on which party controls the presidency, and, in recent conflicts, declines substantially among Republicans once military action is already underway.

SUPPORT FOR CONGRESSIONAL APPROVAL HAS REMAINED HIGH OVER TIME—BUT PARTISAN DIVISIONS HAVE WIDENED

Individual survey questions provide useful snapshots, but they vary in frequency, context, and wording, making it difficult to track trends in opinion over time.¹ To track how public opinion has evolved over time, we combine six unique survey time series spanning 47 survey measurements—drawn from general questions about presidential authority as well as items tied to specific military actions—into a single long-run estimate of public support for requiring congressional approval before the use of military force.² Although wording and context vary, each question captures the same core distinction between unilateral presidential authority and congressional involvement.

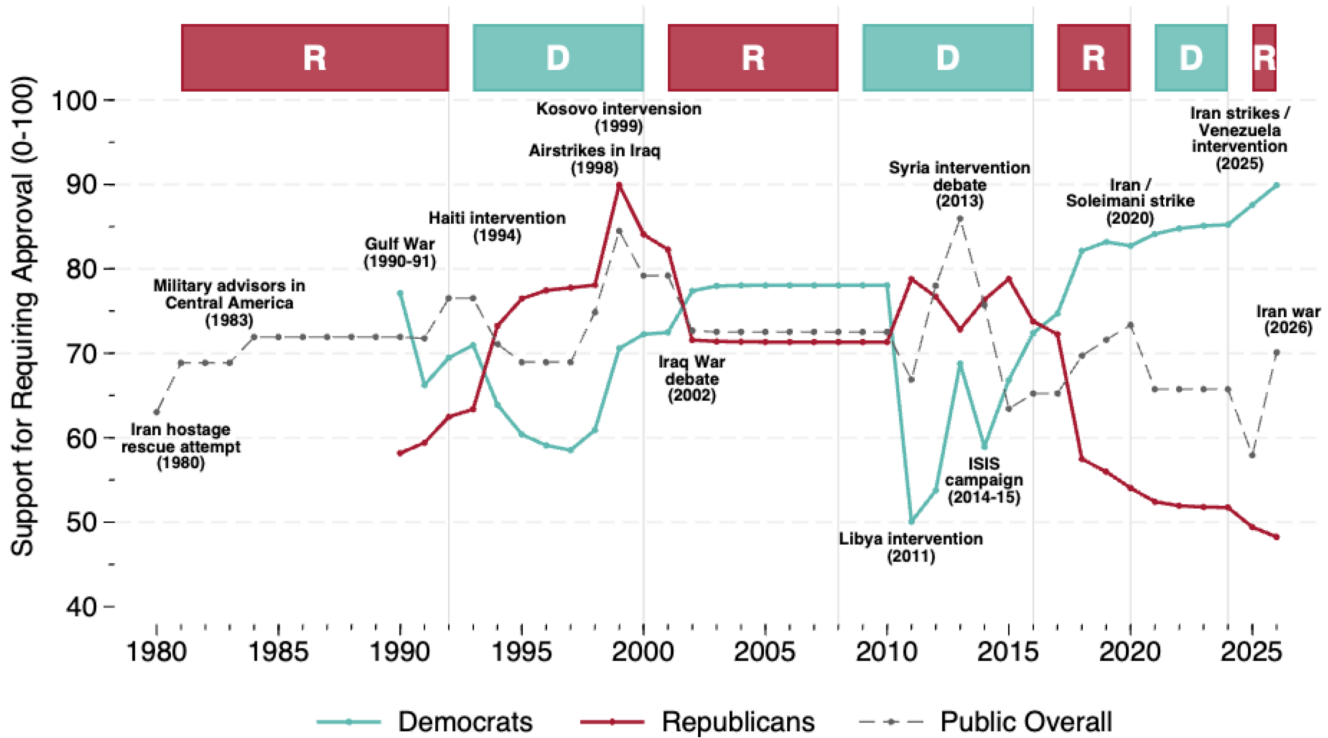
Figure 1 shows long-run trends in support for requiring congressional approval before military action, for the public overall and by party. The values can be interpreted as the average level of support for requiring congressional approval across the available surveys in each year.

Since 1980—when 63% of respondents in a Gallup survey said President Jimmy Carter should have consulted Congress before attempting a military operation to rescue American hostages in Iran—public support for requiring congressional approval has remained consistently well above 50 percent.

Support has varied across periods, ranging from a low of 58% in 2025 to a high of 86%

in 2013. In the most recent data (2026), support stands at an average of 70% across surveys.

Figure 1. Trends in Support for Requiring Congressional Approval of Military Action, by Party



Note. Lines show estimated trends for Democrats, Republicans, and the public overall. Estimates are derived from a Stimson dyadic ratios model combining six survey time series spanning 1980–2026 for the public series and 1990–2026 for the Democrat and Republican series. Values represent a smoothed index (0–100) of support for requiring congressional approval before the use of military force, with higher values indicating greater support. Colored strips above the figure indicate the party holding the presidency during each period (blue = Democratic president; red = Republican president). Labels are included to mark major military conflicts or policy debates referenced in the underlying survey items.

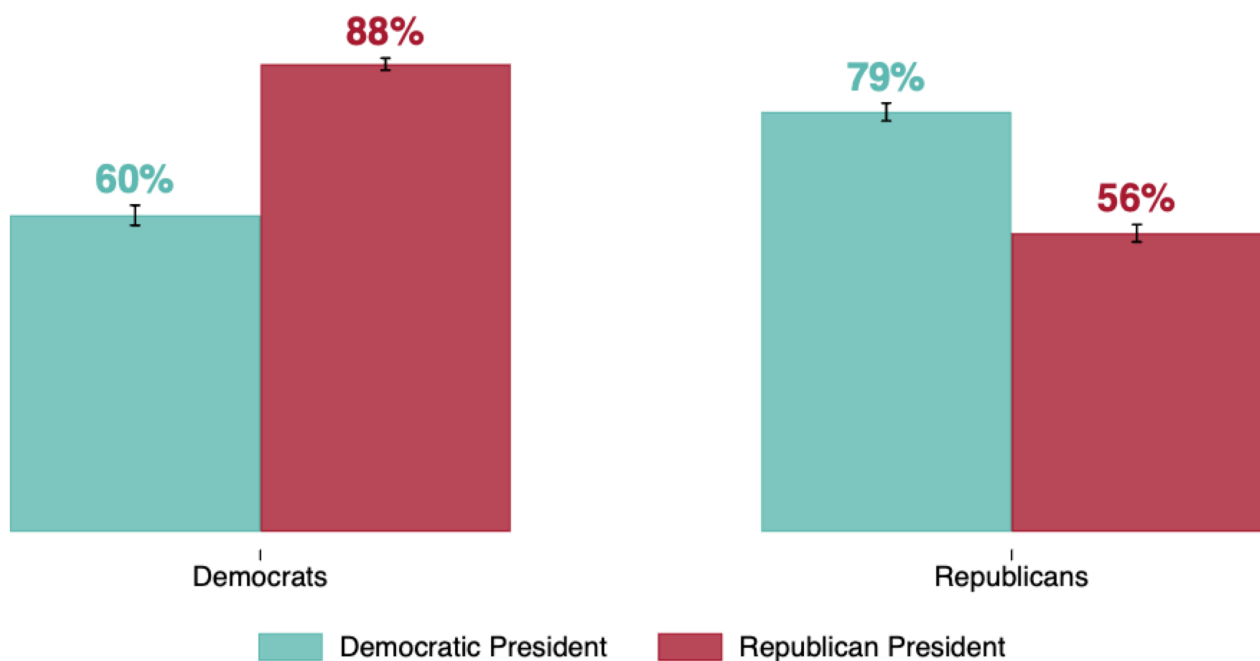
At the same time, the data reveal growing partisan differences.³ In the 1990s and early 2000s, differences between Democrats and Republicans were modest and tended to shift in response to which party controlled the presidency. During the Bush Sr. administration, which encompassed the first Gulf War, Democrats were more supportive than Republicans of requiring congressional approval. During the Clinton administration, which conducted military operations in Haiti and Kosovo, this pattern reversed, with Republicans more likely than Democrats to say Clinton should obtain congressional approval first. In both periods, these differences were typically small—in the range of the single digits to the mid-teens.

Over the past decade, however, the parties have moved in opposite directions. Since 2011, Democratic support for requiring congressional approval has risen steadily—from an average of 50% for Obama’s Libya intervention to 75% at the beginning of the first Trump administration to 90% today. During the same time period, Republican support declined from 79% in 2011 to 48% today. Thus, in the most recent data (2026)—which encompass military interventions in Venezuela and the ongoing conflict with Iran—the difference between Democrats (90%) and Republicans (48%) stands at more than 40 percentage points, the largest gap observed in the available data.

AMERICANS ARE LESS SUPPORTIVE OF CONGRESSIONAL CONSTRAINTS WHEN THEIR PARTY HOLDS THE PRESIDENCY

Partisan differences in support are closely related to which party controls the presidency.⁴ Figure 2 shows how support for obtaining congressional approval for military campaigns varies depending on whether respondents share the president’s party.⁵

Figure 2. Support for Requiring Congressional Approval by Party and Presidential Control (1990-2026)



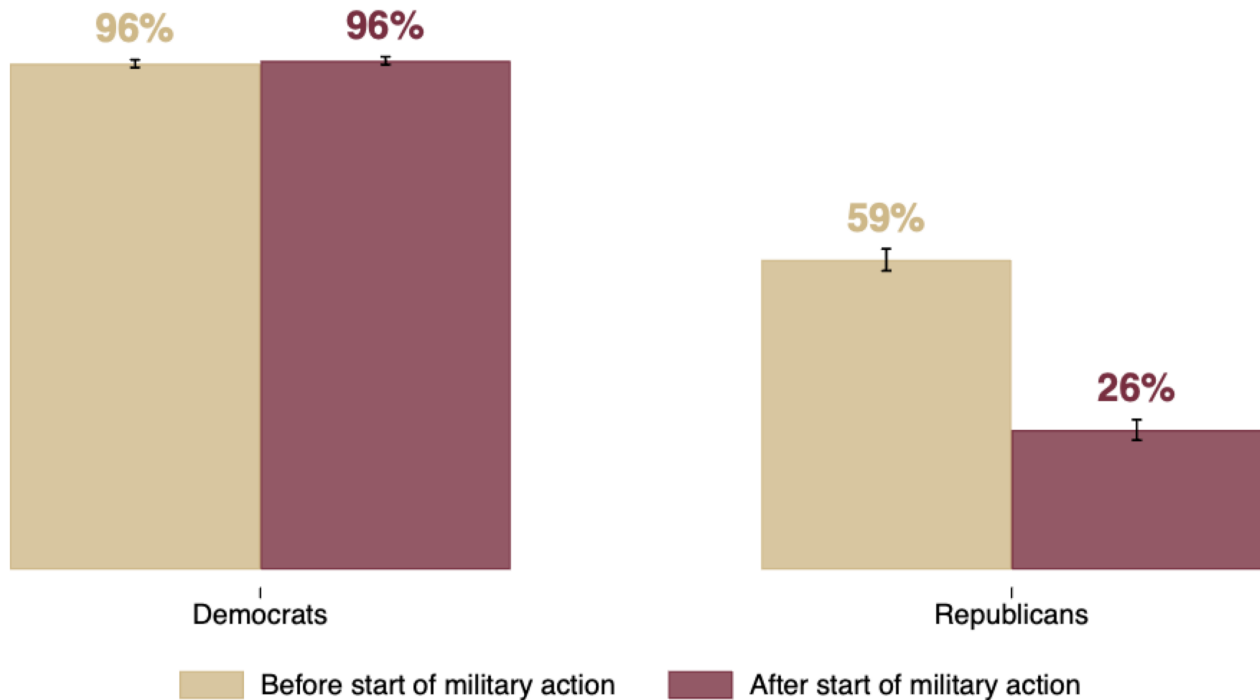
Note. Bars show estimated levels of support for obtaining congressional approval before the use of military force, by party identification and presidential party control. Estimates are derived from individual-level regression models of pro-approval responses pooling multiple survey items across time (1990-2026) and conflict contexts. Values represent predicted probabilities (in percent) with 95% confidence intervals.

Among Democrats, support for requiring congressional approval is substantially lower on average when a Democrat holds the presidency (60%) than when a Republican is in office (88%). Among Republicans, the pattern is reversed: support for obtaining congressional approval is higher when a Democrat is president (79%) and lower when a Republican holds the presidency (56%).

SUPPORT FOR CONGRESSIONAL APPROVAL DECLINES AFTER MILITARY ACTION BEGINS FOR CO-PARTISANS

In addition to presidential party control, partisan support for obtaining congressional approval also appears to be influenced by the timing of the survey—i.e., whether they were asked before or after the start of military operations.

Figure 3. Support for Requiring Congressional Approval Before and After Military Action, by Party



Note: Bars show estimated support for obtaining congressional approval before the use of military force, comparing responses collected before and after military action begins. Estimates are derived from individual-level regression models of pro-approval responses. Estimates pool responses across two closely timed cases: Venezuela (late 2025–early 2026) and Iran (2026). For Venezuela, “before” includes surveys fielded in November–December 2025 through January 2, 2026 (prior to the January 3 intervention), and “after” includes surveys fielded January 3–31, 2026. For Iran, “before” includes surveys fielded in January–February 2026 (prior to the onset of hostilities on February 28), and “after” includes surveys fielded in March–April 2026. Values are predicted probabilities (in percent) with 95% confidence intervals.

The data available for this analysis are limited to recent (2026) military operations against Venezuela and Iran. Because these events occurred in rapid succession, Figure 3 presents pooled estimates across both conflicts. “Before” questions ask whether the president should seek congressional approval prior to using force, while “after” questions ask whether the president should have sought approval following an actual military action.

Among Democrats, support for requiring congressional approval remains consistently high regardless of timing. Approximately 95–96% of Democrats say the president should seek—or should have sought—congressional approval, with little difference between before and after measures.

Among Republicans, however, the pattern differs markedly. In surveys conducted before the start of military actions, an average of 59% wanted Trump to obtain congressional approval. But in surveys conducted after, the percentage drops to 26%.

While limited to the most recent data, these findings indicate that support for congressional authorization is not fixed. Instead, it shifts Republicans depending on whether the president already undertook military action. Once action is underway, Republicans become significantly less likely to say that congressional approval should have been required, while Democratic support remains consistently high.

Because comparable before-and-after measures are not available for earlier conflicts, it is not possible to assess whether a similar shift occurs among Democrats when a Democratic president initiates military action.

CONCLUSION

Public support for requiring congressional approval before the use of military force is both widespread and persistent. Across decades of survey data, majorities of Americans say presidents should seek congressional authorization before initiating military action.

This support, however, is not politically neutral. It varies systematically by party, shifts depending on which party controls the presidency, and—at least in recent conflicts—declines among Republicans once military action is already underway.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while Americans broadly endorse congressional involvement in decisions about war, how that principle is applied in practice depends in part on who holds power and when those decisions are made.

¹ See Section A of the Appendix for a list of all survey items, their question wording, and the surveys from which they originate. See Section C to download a dataset containing all individual survey items, metadata, and available covariates.

² These estimates are generated using a Stimson dyadic ratios algorithm, which models latent public opinion by combining multiple survey series with varying question wording and field dates. By leveraging overlapping observations across surveys, the method produces a smoothed and comparable estimate of underlying opinion over time. The resulting estimates account for 81% of the variation across the six time series for the overall public, and 96% and 89%

for Democrats and Republicans, respectively. See Section B of the Appendix for additional methodological details and a downloadable dataset containing the Stimson estimates.

³ Many historical surveys only reported aggregate (sample-level) results, leaving fewer data points with breakdowns by party identification.

⁴ Analyses incorporating measures of congressional control show no consistent independent effects once presidential party control is taken into account.

⁵ The association between presidential party control and support for congressional approval remains robust when controlling for conflict context and survey year. Estimates from individual-level models indicate that the observed partisan differences are not driven by specific conflicts or time periods.