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Americans See Spread of Disease as Top International Threat, Along With Terrorism, Nuclear Weapons, Cyberattacks

Most say cooperation with other countries is important in dealing with global threats, especially on the spread of infectious diseases

BY *Jacob Poushter and Moira Fagan*

FOR MEDIA OR OTHER INQUIRIES:

Jacob Poushter, Associate Director, Global Attitudes Research
Stefan Cornibert, Communications Manager

202.419.4372

www.pewresearch.org

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How we did this

As the coronavirus outbreak [continues to unfold](#) in the United States, Americans have grown increasingly concerned by the [threat posed](#) to the country's population, economy and personal finances. This analysis focuses on perceptions of international threats to the U.S., including views of the threat posed by the spread of infectious diseases. Many of these questions have been asked previously, including in the U.S. [in 2019](#) and globally [in 2018](#). The analysis also includes Americans' views of international cooperation on many of the same threats facing the global community, including the spread of infectious diseases.

For this report, we used data from a survey of 1,000 U.S. adults conducted over the phone from March 3-29, 2020.

Here are the [questions](#) used for the report, along with responses, and the survey [methodology](#).

Table of Contents

Overview: Americans See Spread of Disease as Top International Threat, Along With Terrorism, Nuclear Weapons, Cyberattacks	4
Concern about disease threat high among all Americans, but especially those with less education and lower incomes	8
Worries about the spread of disease intensified through March	9
Infectious disease, terrorism, nuclear weapons and cyberattacks are top concerns	10
Older Americans more likely to see major threats, except in case of climate change	11
More now say climate change is a major threat	12
Americans generally favor international cooperation to counter threats, but partisan divides persist	13
Appendix	15
Acknowledgments	16
Methodology	17
Topline questionnaire	18

Americans See Spread of Disease as Top International Threat, Along With Terrorism, Nuclear Weapons, Cyberattacks

Most say cooperation with other countries is important in dealing with global threats, especially on the spread of infectious diseases

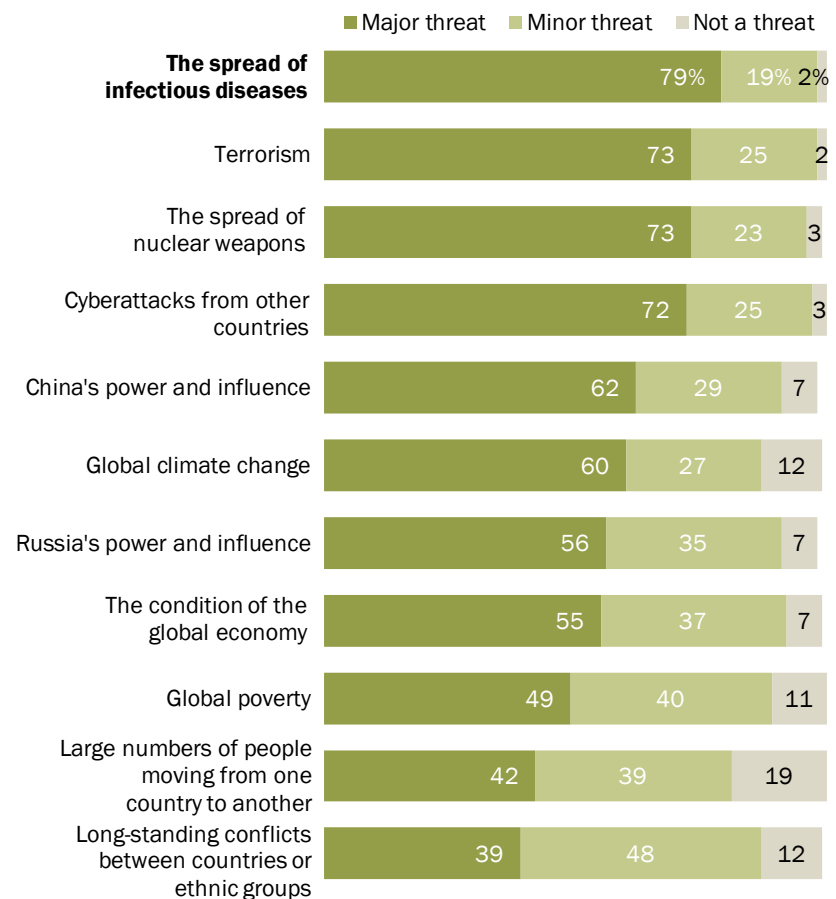
Americans continue to see many international issues – including terrorism, the spread of nuclear weapons and cyberattacks – as major threats to the well-being of the nation. But as the COVID-19 pandemic [sweeps the globe](#), the greatest threat named by Americans in a March 3-29 Pew Research Center survey is the spread of infectious diseases.

Nearly all U.S. adults (98%) say this is at least a minor threat, with roughly eight-in-ten (79%) naming outbreaks of disease as a *major* threat to the country. This is 27 percentage points higher than the level of concern about infectious disease in the midst of [West Africa's Ebola outbreak](#) in 2014.

But infectious disease is not the only issue where Americans see a growing threat. Concerns about China and the condition of the global economy have also been on the rise. The survey,

Americans see many threats, but fears about the spread of infectious diseases top the list

% who say ___ is a major threat, minor threat or not a threat to the United States



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

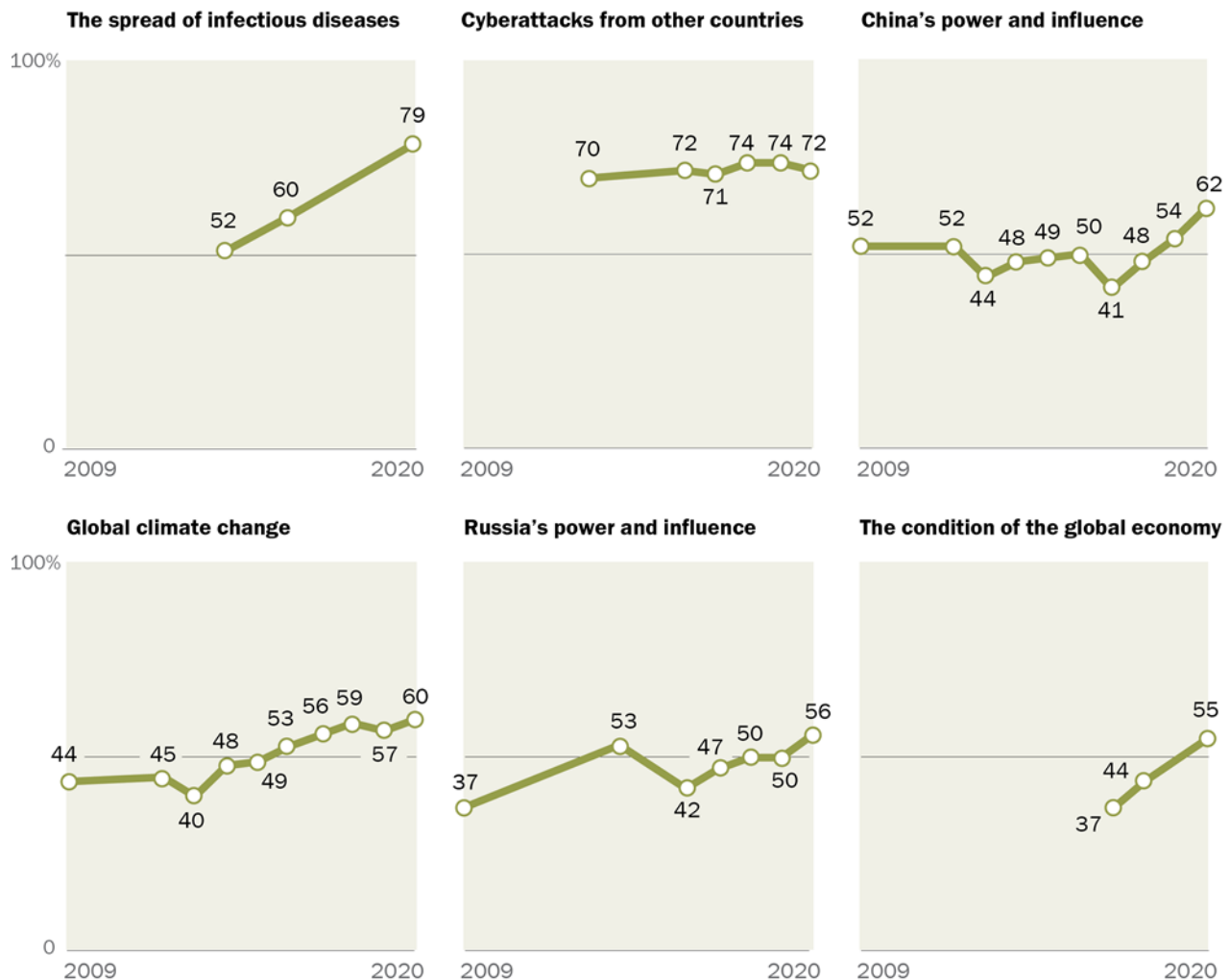
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 3-29, 2020. Q12a,c, Q13a-i. "Americans See Spread of Disease as Top International Threat, Along With Terrorism, Nuclear Weapons, Cyberattacks"

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conducted at a time of [surging COVID-19 cases](#) in the United States, found that worries about both the threat of infectious diseases and the condition of the global economy rose after President Donald Trump declared a [national emergency](#) on March 13.

Americans express growing concern about spread of infectious diseases, China's power and influence and condition of the global economy

% who say ___ is a *major* threat to the United States



Note: "Russia's power and influence" asked as "tensions with Russia" in 2016; in 2014 and 2009, asked as "growing tension between Russia and its neighbors." In 2014 and 2009, "China's power and influence" asked as "China's emergence as a world power." In 2016 and prior, "the spread of infectious diseases" asked as "the rapid spread of infectious diseases from country to country." For full trends, see Appendix. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 3-29, 2020. Q12a,c, Q13a,c,d,& f.

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Overwhelming majorities of Americans say cooperation with other countries is important when dealing with each of the international issues tested, and this is especially true of the spread of infectious diseases. On this issue, 86% say it is *very* important to cooperate with other countries, and 97% say it is at least somewhat important to cooperate.

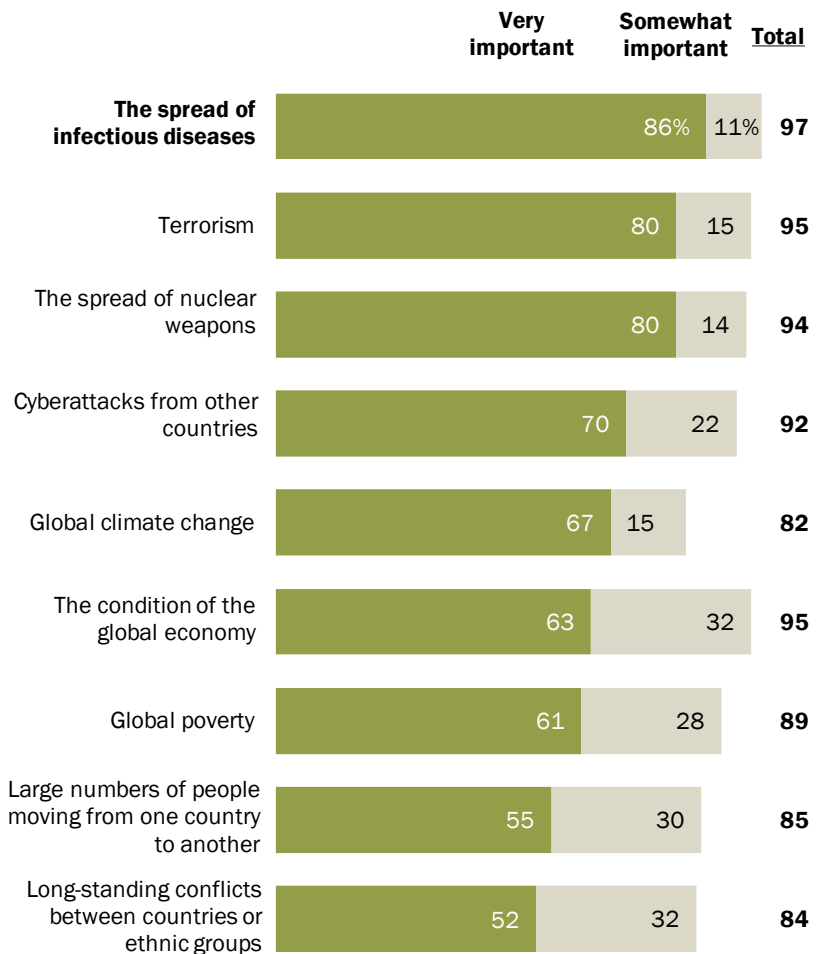
The new strain of coronavirus is [thought to have](#) originated in Wuhan, China. The past year has seen tensions between Beijing and Washington on a [number of topics](#), including the current pandemic, trade and economic issues. Roughly six-in-ten Americans (62%) name China's power and influence as a major threat, a figure that has increased sharply in recent years. By comparison, in 2017, 41% said China was a major threat to the U.S.

And as the [economic fallout](#) from the COVID-19 crisis becomes clearer, Americans increasingly see the condition

of the global economy as a threat. Since 2017, concerns about the state of the world economy have risen 18 percentage points, from 37% saying it was a major threat in 2017 to 55% who say so today.

Overwhelming majorities of Americans say cooperation with other countries is important, especially on the spread of infectious diseases

% who say cooperation with other countries is ___ when dealing with ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 3-29, 2020. Q10a-i. "Americans See Spread of Disease as Top International Threat, Along With Terrorism, Nuclear Weapons, Cyberattacks"

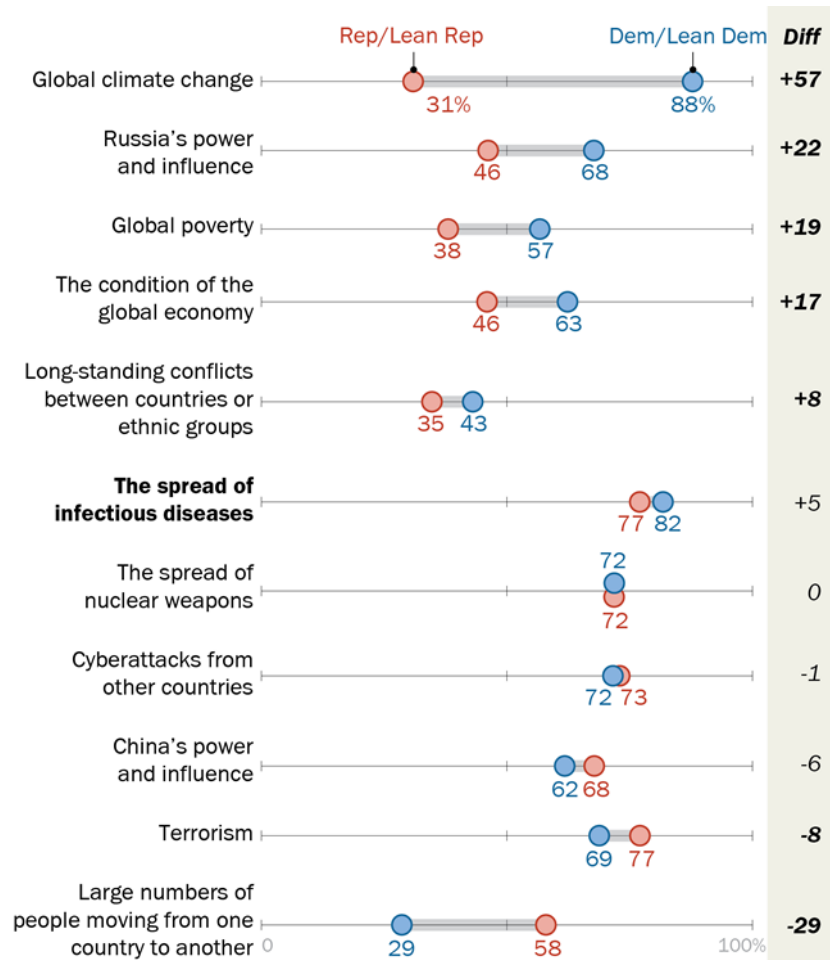
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A majority of Americans also see global climate change and Russia's power and influence as major threats, although stark partisan divides characterize each of these issues.

In general, Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents tend to be more concerned than Republicans and Republican-leaning independents about each threat tested on the survey. But this is especially true on the threat of climate change, where there is a 57 percentage point difference between the shares of Democrats (88%) and Republicans (31%) calling climate change a major threat. Partisan differences of this nature are seen on other issues tested, including Russia's power and influence (Democrats are 22 points more likely to say this is a major threat), global poverty (19 points) and the condition of the global economy (17 points).

Democrats and Republicans similarly concerned about spread of diseases, but Democrats show more worry on climate and Russia, Republicans on migration

% who say ___ is a *major* threat to the United States



Note: Statistically significant differences in **bold**.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 3-29, 2020. Q12a,c, Q13a-i.

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Republicans, however, are more concerned about the large numbers of people moving or migrating from one country to another and terrorism than are Democrats.

Democrats and Republicans are equally concerned about the threat of disease, and this was largely true in 2014 and 2016 as well.

Roughly half of Americans or fewer are very concerned about global poverty, migration and long-standing conflicts between countries or ethnic groups. Still, majorities name these as at least minor threats.

These are among the major findings of a Pew Research Center survey of 1,000 U.S. adults conducted by telephone from March 3-29, 2020. The survey took place as COVID-19 spread across Asian and European countries, and then across the U.S. During the fieldwork period, President Trump [declared a major national emergency](#) and the economy endured major shocks, including plummeting stock prices; the closure of many retail, travel and food sectors; and a major drop in the price of oil.

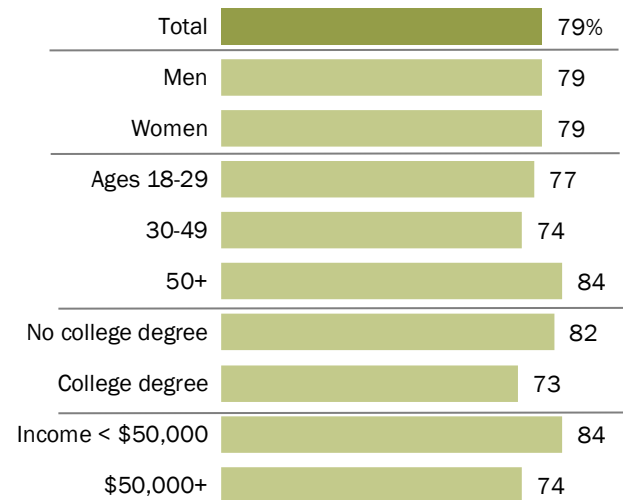
Concern about disease threat high among all Americans, but especially those with less education and lower incomes

With most Americans worried about the spread of infectious disease, differences among demographic groups are relatively narrow. Still, some groups register particularly high levels of concern.

For example, Americans with less than a college degree are 9 percentage points more likely to be concerned about the threat of infectious disease than those who have a college degree or more education. Similarly, those who have incomes of less than \$50,000 per year are 10 points more concerned about the threat posed by infectious diseases than those with higher incomes.

Americans with less education and lower incomes more likely to say the spread of diseases is a major threat

% who say the spread of infectious diseases is a major threat to the United States



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 3-29, 2020. Q13d. "Americans See Spread of Disease as Top International Threat, Along With Terrorism, Nuclear Weapons, Cyberattacks"

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Worries about the spread of disease intensified through March

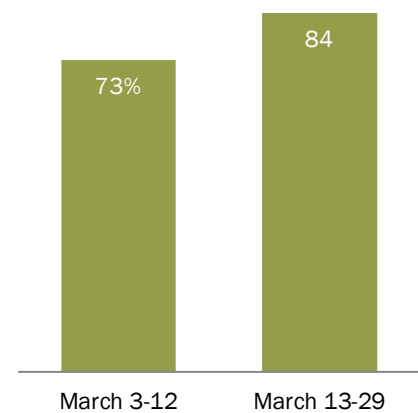
As the COVID-19 outbreak developed across the country, concerns about the threat posed by the spread of infectious diseases grew rapidly as well.

Among respondents who took the survey from March 3-12, before the declaration of a national emergency and the suspension of most professional and collegiate sports seasons, 73% said the spread of infectious diseases was a major threat. But once the declaration was made on March 13, as cases of the novel coronavirus increased across the U.S., more became concerned about the issue. Among those surveyed between March 13-29, 84% named spreading disease as a major threat.

Concerns about the condition of the global economy and global poverty also saw increases during the field period. About halfway through the dramatic slide in stock market prices from March 3-12, 48% of Americans saw the condition of the global economy as a major threat. But between March 13-29, as businesses began to close due to the crisis and Italy went into lockdown, major concern about the global economy rose to 60%.

As COVID-19 spread, concerns about infectious diseases rose

% who say the spread of infectious diseases is a major threat to the United States



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 3-29, 2020. Q13d.
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Infectious disease, terrorism, nuclear weapons and cyberattacks are top concerns

Americans are most likely to consider the spread of infectious diseases as a major threat to the nation. However, majorities rate eight out of the 11 threats tested on the survey as major threats.

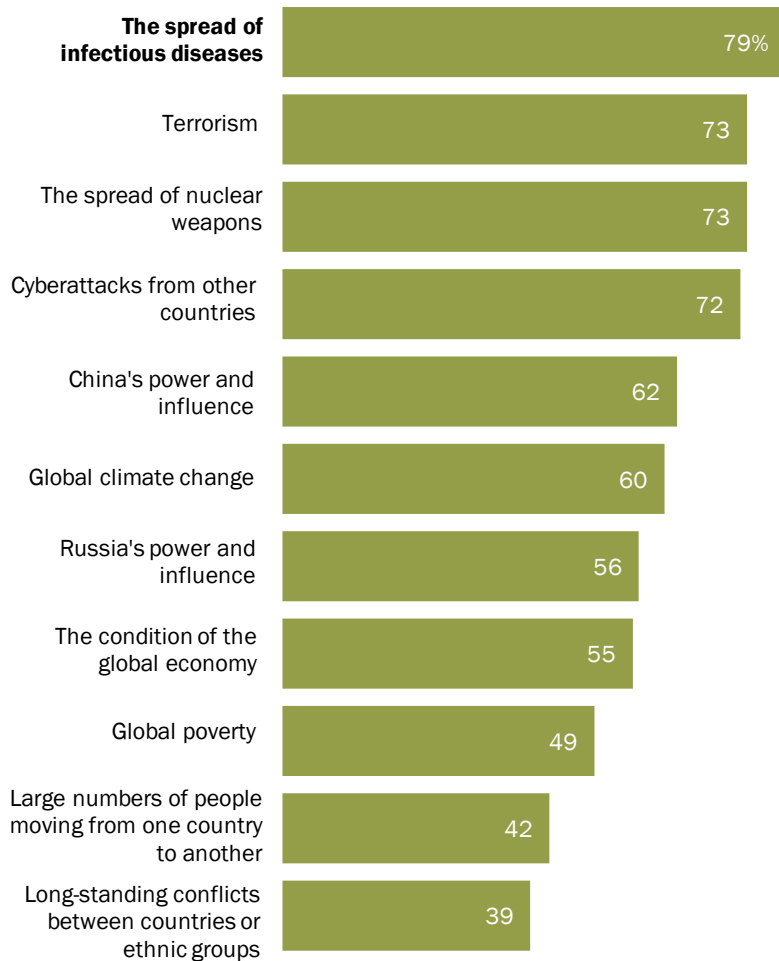
At least seven-in-ten Americans also name terrorism, the spread of nuclear weapons and cyberattacks from other countries as major threats to the U.S.

Only about four-in-ten Americans say that large numbers of people moving from one county to another or long-standing conflicts between countries or ethnic groups pose major threats to the country.

Nearly one-in-five (19%) say the movement of people is not a threat, the largest share across all threats included in the survey.

Americans see wide range of threats facing the nation

% who say ___ is a major threat to the United States



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 3-29, 2020. Q12a,c, Q13a-i. "Americans See Spread of Disease as Top International Threat, Along With Terrorism, Nuclear Weapons, Cyberattacks"

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Older Americans more likely to see major threats, except in case of climate change

Across most of the international issues tested in the survey, older Americans express greater concern than those in younger age groups.

The difference is largest on the issue of migration: Half of those ages 50 and older say the large numbers of people moving from one country to another is a major threat, compared with 22% of those ages 18 to 29. Large gaps are also seen between older and younger Americans on the threats posed by cyberattacks, Russia, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, China and long-standing international and ethnic conflicts.

The reverse is true on the issue of global climate change: Younger Americans are more likely to say this is a major threat compared with their older counterparts. About seven-in-ten (71%) 18- to 29-year-olds say climate change is a major threat, compared with 54% of Americans 50 and older.

With exception of climate change, older Americans see higher levels of threat

% who say ___ is a major threat to the United States

	18-29 %	30-49 %	50+ %	Oldest- youngest diff
Large numbers of people moving from one country to another	22	41	50	+28
Cyberattacks from other countries	58	67	81	+23
Russia's power and influence	44	51	66	+22
Terrorism	62	69	80	+18
The spread of nuclear weapons	65	68	81	+16
China's power and influence	52	61	68	+16
Long-standing conflicts between countries or ethnic groups	29	40	43	+14
The spread of infectious diseases	77	74	84	+7
Global poverty	49	44	52	+3
The condition of the global economy	54	56	55	+1
Global climate change	71	62	54	-17

Note: Statistically significant differences in **bold**.

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More now say climate change is a major threat

The belief that climate change is a major threat has increased steadily in the United States over the past seven years. Six-in-ten Americans see climate change as a major threat to the country today, up from a low of 40% who said the same in 2013.

Views of climate change have been consistently partisan over the past decade. Now, Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents are more than twice as likely to say climate change is a major threat than Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (88% vs. 31%).

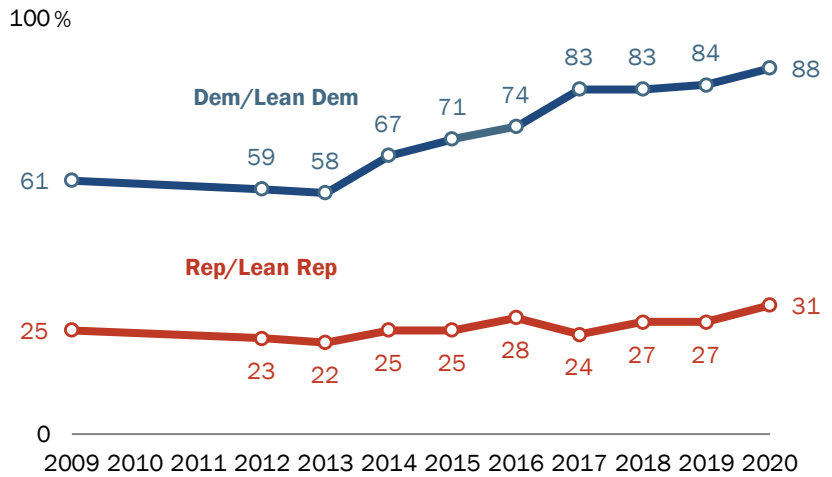
The share of Democrats who

believe climate change is a threat has risen from 61% in 2009, while Republican views on this issue have remained relatively steady.

Democrats are also more likely than Republicans to say Russia's power and influence poses a major threat. Nearly seven-in-ten Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (68%) said this of Russia, compared with 46% of their Republican counterparts, a difference of 22 percentage points. This partisan difference has been consistently wide since Trump's election; before that, partisan views of Russia were less pronounced and [mostly moved in tandem](#).

Democrats grow more likely to say climate change is a major threat; Republican views remain mostly stable

% who say global climate change is a major threat to the United States



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 3-29, 2020. Q13a.

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Americans generally favor international cooperation to counter threats, but partisan divides persist

Americans overwhelmingly say that cooperation with other countries is important when dealing with major international threats. This is especially true on the preeminent international issue of early 2020, the spread of infectious diseases. Here, 86% say it is very important to cooperate with other countries when dealing with disease outbreaks, and fully 97% say it is at least somewhat important to cooperate.

Indeed, an overwhelming majority of Americans think cooperation with other countries is important for dealing with all the major international issues polled. But there is variation on whether people say cooperation is *very* important. For example, eight-in-ten Americans say cooperation on terrorism and the spread of nuclear weapons is very important, compared with only 55% and 52%, respectively, who do so on the issues of migration and long-standing conflicts between countries.

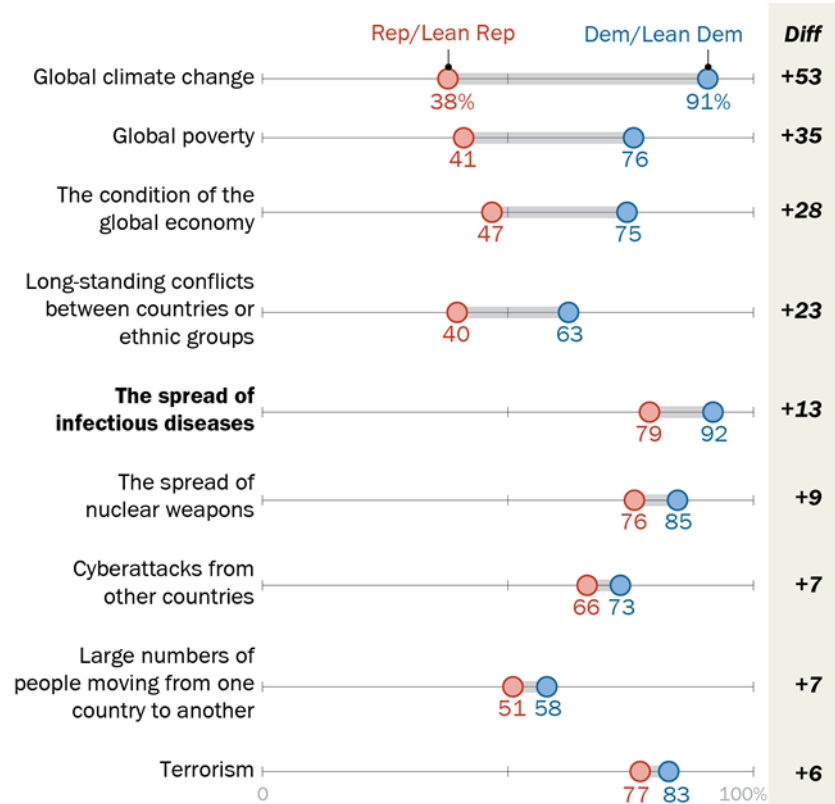
However, Americans are more likely to say these major issues require cooperation than they are to say they see them as threats. When comparing whether these issues are seen as major threats and whether cooperation to deal with them is very important, Americans tend to be more likely to say they require cooperation. For example, 55% of Americans see cooperation with other countries as very important for dealing with migration, but only 42% of Americans see migration as a major threat.

There are also partisan differences on whether cooperation is important in dealing with international threats. On each issue, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to say that cooperation with other countries is *very* important. The differences are especially large (over 20 percentage points) on global climate change, global poverty, the condition of the global economy and conflicts between other nations.

On the spread of infectious diseases, Democrats are also more likely than Republicans to say cooperation is very important, although partisan differences are not as stark as on climate change. Roughly nine-in-ten Democrats (92%) say cooperation with other countries is very important for dealing with the spread of disease, compared with 79% of Republicans.

On a list of threats, Democrats are more likely to say international cooperation is very important than are Republicans

% who say it is *very* important to cooperate with other countries when dealing with ...



Note: All differences shown are statistically significant.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 3-29, 2020. Q10a-i.

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Appendix

Threat perception over time in the U.S.

% who say ___ is a *major* threat to the United States

	'99	'01	'05	'06	'08	'09	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
The spread of infectious diseases	-	66	-	-	-	-	-	-	52	-	60	-	-	-	79
Terrorism	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	73
The spread of nuclear weapons	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	73
Cyberattacks from other countries	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	70	-	-	72	71	74	74	72
China's power and influence	53	51	52	47	50	53	52	44	48	49	50	41	48	54	62
Global climate change	-	53	-	-	-	44	45	40	48	49	53	56	59	57	60
Russia's power and influence	-	-	-	-	44	38	-	-	53	-	42	47	50	50	56
The condition of the global economy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	37	44	-	55
Global poverty	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	49
Large numbers of people moving from one country to another	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	42
Long-standing conflicts between countries or ethnic groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	39

Note: "Russia's power and influence" asked as "tensions with Russia" in 2016; in 2014 and 2009, asked as "growing tension between Russia and its neighbors." In 2016 and prior, "China's power and influence" asked as "China's emergence as a world power." In 2016 and prior, "the spread of infectious diseases" asked as "the rapid spread of infectious diseases from country to country." In 2014, 2009 and 2008, "Russia's power and influence" asked as "growing tension between Russia and its neighbors." In 2001, "global climate change" asked as "global environmental problems."

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 3-29, 2020. Q12a,c, Q13a-i.

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Jacob Poushter, *Associate Director, Global Attitudes Research*

Moira Fagan, *Research Analyst*

James Bell, *Vice President, Global Strategy*

Alexandra Castillo, *Research Associate*

Jeremiah Cha, *Research Assistant*

Aidan Connaughton, *Research Assistant*

Stefan S. Cornibert, *Communications Manager*

Claudia Deane, *Vice President, Research*

Kat Devlin, *Research Associate*

Janell Fetterolf, *Research Associate*

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David Kent, *Copy Editor*

Nicholas O. Kent, *Research Assistant*

Colin Lahiff, *Communications Associate*

Gar Meng Leong, *Communications Associate*

Clark Letterman, *Senior Researcher*

J.J. Moncus, *Research Assistant*

Martha McRoy, *Research Methodologist*

Mara Mordecai, *Research Assistant*

Patrick Moynihan, *Associate Director, International Research Methods*

Stacy Pancratz, *Research Methodologist*

Audrey Powers, *Senior Operations Associate*

Shannon Schumacher, *Research Associate*

Laura Silver, *Senior Researcher*

Richard Wike, *Director, Global Attitudes Research*

Methodology

About Pew Research Center's Spring 2020 Survey

Results for the survey are based on telephone interviews conducted under the direction of Abt Associates. The results are based on national samples, unless otherwise noted. More details about our international survey methodology and country-specific sample designs are [available here](#).

Topline questionnaire

**Pew Research Center
Spring 2020 Survey
April 13, 2020 Release**

Methodological notes:

- Survey results are based on national samples. For further details on sample designs, see our [international survey methods database](#).
- The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the United States in the survey:

Group	Unweighted sample size	Weighted %	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	1,000		3.7 percentage points
Rep/Lean Rep	429	42	5.6 percentage points
Dem/Lean Dem	487	48	5.5 percentage points

- Due to rounding, percentages may not total 100%. The topline “total” columns show 100%, because they are based on unrounded numbers.
- Not all questions included in the Spring 2020 Survey are presented in this topline. Omitted questions have either been previously released or will be released in future reports.

		Q10a. Is cooperation with other countries very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important when dealing with...? a. Global climate change					
		Cooperation is very important	Cooperation is somewhat important	Cooperation is not too important	Cooperation is not at all important	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	67	15	8	9	0	100

		Q10b. Is cooperation with other countries very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important when dealing with...? b. Terrorism					
		Cooperation is very important	Cooperation is somewhat important	Cooperation is not too important	Cooperation is not at all important	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	80	15	1	4	0	100

		Q10c. Is cooperation with other countries very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important when dealing with...? c. The condition of the global economy					
		Cooperation is very important	Cooperation is somewhat important	Cooperation is not too important	Cooperation is not at all important	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	63	32	3	2	1	100

		Q10d. Is cooperation with other countries very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important when dealing with...? d. The spread of infectious diseases					
		Cooperation is very important	Cooperation is somewhat important	Cooperation is not too important	Cooperation is not at all important	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	86	11	1	2	0	100

		Q10e. Is cooperation with other countries very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important when dealing with...? e. The spread of nuclear weapons					
		Cooperation is very important	Cooperation is somewhat important	Cooperation is not too important	Cooperation is not at all important	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	80	14	2	3	1	100

		Q10f. Is cooperation with other countries very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important when dealing with...? f. Cyberattacks from other countries					
		Cooperation is very important	Cooperation is somewhat important	Cooperation is not too important	Cooperation is not at all important	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	70	22	3	4	1	100

		Q10g. Is cooperation with other countries very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important when dealing with...? g. Large numbers of people moving from one country to another					
		Cooperation is very important	Cooperation is somewhat important	Cooperation is not too important	Cooperation is not at all important	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	55	30	7	7	2	100

		Q10h. Is cooperation with other countries very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important when dealing with...? h. Global poverty					Total
		Cooperation is very important	Cooperation is somewhat important	Cooperation is not too important	Cooperation is not at all important	DK/Refused	
United States	Spring, 2020	61	28	6	4	0	100

		Q10i. Is cooperation with other countries very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important when dealing with...? i. Long-standing conflicts between countries or ethnic groups					Total
		Cooperation is very important	Cooperation is somewhat important	Cooperation is not too important	Cooperation is not at all important	DK/Refused	
United States	Spring, 2020	52	32	8	6	1	100

		Q12a. I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for (survey country). Do you think ___ is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to (survey country)? a. China's power and influence					Total
		Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	DK/Refused		
United States	Spring, 2020	62	29	7	2	100	
	Spring, 2018	48	38	10	4	100	
	Spring, 2017	41	45	11	3	100	
	Spring, 2013	44	38	13	6	100	

		Q12c. I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for (survey country). Do you think ___ is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to (survey country)? c. Russia's power and influence					Total
		Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	DK/Refused		
United States	Spring, 2020	56	35	7	2	100	
	Spring, 2018	50	36	9	4	100	
	Spring, 2017	47	41	9	3	100	

		Q13a. I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for (survey country). Do you think ___ is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to (survey country)? a. Global climate change					Total
		Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	Don't know (DO NOT READ)	DK/Refused	
United States	Spring, 2020	60	27	12	1	0	100
	Spring, 2018	59	23	16	0	2	100
	Spring, 2017	56	26	16	0	2	100
	April, 2016	53	30	15	0	3	100
	Spring, 2013	40	37	20	0	3	100
	May, 2012	45	32	19	0	3	100

		Q13b. I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for (survey country). Do you think ___ is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to (survey country)? b. Terrorism					Total
		Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	DK/Refused		
United States	Spring, 2020	73	25	2	0	100	

		Q13c. I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for (survey country). Do you think ___ is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to (survey country)? c. The condition of the global economy				
		Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	55	37	7	1	100
	Spring, 2018	44	36	16	4	100
	Spring, 2017	37	45	14	4	100

		Q13d. I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for (survey country). Do you think ___ is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to (survey country)? d. The spread of infectious diseases				
		Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	79	19	2	0	100

		Q13e. I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for (survey country). Do you think ___ is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to (survey country)? e. The spread of nuclear weapons				
		Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	73	23	3	1	100

		Q13f. I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for (survey country). Do you think ___ is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to (survey country)? f. Cyberattacks from other countries				
		Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	72	25	3	1	100
	Spring, 2018	74	20	4	2	100
	Spring, 2017	71	23	3	2	100
	April, 2016	72	22	3	3	100

		Q13g. I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for (survey country). Do you think ___ is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to (survey country)? g. Large numbers of people moving from one country to another				
		Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	42	39	19	1	100

		Q13h. I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for (survey country). Do you think ___ is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to (survey country)? h. Global poverty				
		Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	49	40	11	1	100

		Q13i. I'd like your opinion about some possible international concerns for (survey country). Do you think ___ is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to (survey country)? i. Long-standing conflicts between countries or ethnic groups				
		Major threat	Minor threat	Not a threat	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	39	48	12	2	100

		d_ptyid_us. In politics TODAY, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat or Independent?							
		Republican	Democrat	Independent	No preference (DO NOT READ)	Other party (DO NOT READ)	Don't know (DO NOT READ)	DK/Refused	Total
United States	Spring, 2020	27	31	38	2	1	1	1	100

		d_ptylean_us. As of today do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?					Total
		Republican	Democrat	Other (DO NOT READ)	Don't know (DO NOT READ)	Other/DK/Ref used	
United States	Spring, 2020	36	41	10	8	5	100