

War with No Rally-Round-the-Flag: A Review of US Polling on the Iran War, March-April 2026

By Gregory Clay Ramsay, PhD and Nancy Gallagher, PhD

Abstract

A review of publicly available US polling during the first phase of the Iran War from March-April 2026 finds no rally-round-the-flag effect that reached majority levels. Initial support approached 50 percent in some polls and declined after the first week. Public rejection of the war went well beyond a reaction to rising gas prices. Majorities said that (1) the diplomatic path had not been exhausted before the United States and Israel attacked Iran on February 28; (2) the war was not going well militarily and would drag on for months; and (3) there was little to no advance planning for the likelihood that Iran would close the Strait of Hormuz. Majorities expected full negotiations to be lengthy, and said that in the meantime, any reasonable deal that stopped hostilities and reopened the Strait would be worth taking.

Introduction

The rally-round-the-flag effect, a concept first popularized by Robert Mueller in the early 1970s, describes a short, sharp spike in public approval for national leaders during an international crisis or war as citizens unite to face a foreign threat. Commonly cited examples include a 26-point jump in approval for President Carter after the 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, a 30 percent rise for President George H.W. Bush following rapid victory in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and a 39-point surge up to 90% for President George W. Bush after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. While scholars debate the causes and significance of this pattern, the phenomenon is generally accepted, to the point where some people speculate that a president might start a war to distract from domestic troubles or increase electoral success.

The lack of a rally-round-the-flag effect in the United States at the start of the Iran War has been widely noted. According to the New York Times' daily tracker of [President Trump's approval rating](#), the decline in average approval rates from 50% at his 2025 inauguration leveled off around 44% for a few months after he bombed Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025, then resumed its slide after the government shutdown started in September. It was at 41% right before the United States and Israel launched their full-scale attack on Iran and killed its Supreme Leader on February 28, 2026, then fell to 39% by April 7, when a two-week partially effective ceasefire was announced. Trump's approval rate stayed flat for several months as the shaky ceasefire was

repeatedly extended. After Trump imposed a naval blockade on Iran on April 13, Iran reversed its pledge to reopen the Strait of Hormuz to commercial traffic. Sporadic diplomacy had no effect on Trump's approval rating, which started dropping again in late July after increased military strikes by both sides led to several U.S. fatalities.

The Trump administration took other unpopular actions over this period, including imposing major global tariffs and using lethal violence against U.S. citizens protesting against its aggressive immigration enforcement, so the effects of the Iran war on Trump's overall approval rating cannot be neatly isolated. Therefore, the absence of a rally-round the flag effect in response to the war has generally been inferred from poll questions that are the most basic measures of support (support-oppose, approve-disapprove). News articles about the unpopularity of the Iran war most prominently attribute that negative sentiment to [rising gas prices](#) caused when Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz. It would be a mistake to stop there.

During the first two months of the war, when a rally-round-the-flag effect would have been most likely, numerous polls asked questions about different aspects of the conflict. Results of individual surveys have been reported, but Iran-war-related questions have not been examined across all high-quality surveys. This fund of survey data is sufficient to answer important questions. First, do responses to these questions all track together? If not, there might have been a submerged rally-round-the-flag effect that went unnoticed. Second, and more important, what was the overall state of U.S. public opinion during the first phase of the war? Did the public come to judgment on the war quickly or did negative attitudes coalesce over time? Which elements of the war were clear to the public from the outset, and which left it in confusion? Was there a majority with a clear preference for the way forward?

The polls examined here were all conducted over February 28-April 30 by organizations that post complete questionnaires with methodological information, as required by AAPOR standards. In some cases, the questionnaires provided demographic and political breakouts. Links to poll questionnaires are provided in "Works Cited" at the end.

The review is divided into three parts, with most questions that name Trump saved for the third section. This is done so that responses to questions in sections I and II are free (to the degree possible) from the respondents' political views of Trump being cued by question wording. However, a few questions on seldom-asked topics covered in sections I and II do mention Trump and must be compared with others on that topic.

- I. *Broad measures*, including support or approval of the war; evaluations of cost vs. benefit and right or wrong; and the role of Congress

- II. Situational questions, a category that has received too little attention. These include military assessments; questions on Iran and Iranians; whether to negotiate; whether to escalate; the Strait of Hormuz; nuclear issues; and Israel
- III. Political indicators. The first part of this section groups together questions that name Trump to see how cueing might affect responses. The second briefly analyzes political and demographic subgroups, with the emphasis on the composition of those who hold the majority's view of the war.

Reviewing the body of poll questions fielded during the two-month period reveals important limitations, ambiguities, and possible solutions they did not raise. While these gaps are regrettable, polls at the time were trying to record reactions to a surprise attack for which the industry, like the public, had received no preparation whatsoever from the administration.

I. Broad Measures

Support or Approval

In the earliest polls four in ten approved of the war—variously described. Most polls did not use the word “war” in their trend questions—only YouGov did so. The terms used instead were “military action” or “military strikes”. “War” was the term that evoked the least support. The questions that follow are characterized by the level of support; across all of them, opposition was in a range between 49 and 60%. In only one poll at the start of the war (Fox News, Feb. 28-March 2) was opposition equal to support; in all the others, supporters were outnumbered.

In the earliest polls, Fox News found a 50-50 split in approval for “the current U.S. military action.” In a poll ending March 1, CNN found 41% approving of “the US decision to take military action in Iran,” with 60% disapproving. The idea of “the US trying to overthrow the Iranian government” did slightly better, with 44% in favor. The Marist poll ending March 4 found 44% in favor of “United States military action.” Quinnipiac’s poll ending March 9 found 40% of registered voters supporting “the US military action”.

While polls that left the field after March 4 continued to find considerable variation in overall support, none reached the 44% level found by Marist in the first few days. At no point did public support *increase in reaction* to actions taken or explanations given by the Trump administration for the war.

A poll sponsored by the Institute for Middle East Understanding that ended on March 8 found 43% approval of “the United States’ recent military strikes against Iran”, while Emerson College found 40% approval on March 20.

All other general approval questions asked after the first week of the war found approval rates in the 30s. In IPSOS polls, approval of “U.S. military strikes against Iran” went from 38% on March 13-15 to 35% in a March 27-29 Reuters/Ipsos poll. A YouGov online poll (fielded in one day, March 17) found 35% supporting “attacks on Iran.” By April 7 YouGov (asking about “the war with Iran”) found 34% support, and by April 20, it found 31%.

Evaluations: Costs and Benefits, Right or Wrong

Some poll questions ask for evaluation of costs and benefits, either retrospective or forward looking, as distinct from asking about overall support or approval. A basic and important retrospective example is whether “the US made the right decision or the wrong decision in using military force in Iran” (Pew, 3/16-3/22). Three in five (59%) concluded, after only three weeks of war, that the US had made the wrong decision (right, 38%). When CBS/YouGov asked almost the same question over April 17-20, 51% called it the wrong decision, 30% the right decision; the rest did not know. By April 28, 61% called “using military force...a mistake” (36%, the “right thing”) in an ABC/Washington Post poll.

A majority was also pessimistic about the international consequences. Reuters/Ipsos (March 27-29) asked whether “as a result of military action in Iran...stability in the Middle East” would get better or worse. Fifty-two percent said it would be worse. Only 21% said it would be better, suggesting that over a third of the war’s supporters did not want to make this claim. In the April 28 ABC/Washington Post poll, 56% thought “the U.S. military action in Iran” had increased the risk of “weakening relationships with U.S. allies” (12% decreased it, 30% no difference).

Considering the effects at home, three in five (61%) in the same poll thought U.S. military action had increased both the risk of terrorism against Americans, and the risk of the U.S. entering a recession (60%). Asked by the March 27-29 Reuters poll about gas prices in the U.S., two thirds (66%) said they would get worse, and in the same poll 56% expected a negative impact on their “own financial situation.”

By April 8 YouGov found 53% saying “the US war with Iran has made the US worse off” (better, 18%; not much difference, 12%).

The Issue of Congressional Approval

Negative public attitudes about the war go well beyond its effects on pocketbook issues and national interests. From the outset of the war, a majority disapproved of Congress being sidelined in key decisions about the war.

Three questions were asked about congressional approval. One short question was *prospective*, about what should be done next, while another was *retrospective*, about what should have been done before. A longer question provided much more information, without offering arguments pro

and con. Interestingly, while all three questions found a majority for requiring congressional approval, the two short questions found larger majorities, while the information-laden question found only a bare majority.

At the start of the war (Feb. 28-Mar. 1), CNN asked the prospective question: “Do you think Trump should or should not be required to get congressional approval for any further military action in Iran?” Sixty-two percent said yes, only 23% said no, and 16% were not sure. On March 6-8—one week into the war—Quinnipiac asked the retrospective question: “Do you think President Trump should have received approval from Congress before taking military action against Iran, or not?” Fifty-nine percent said yes, he should have done so, while 38% said no.

Over the same days that Quinnipiac was asking its question, a poll sponsored by the Institute for Middle East Understanding asked the following (quoted in full):

President Trump has not received authorization from Congress to declare war on Iran. Some Members of Congress have introduced legislation, called a war powers resolution, that would restrict the President's ability to order further military action against Iran without congressional approval, in accordance with the Constitution. It would also require the removal of troops that have been deployed in the region specifically for military action against Iran without congressional approval. Do you support or oppose Congress passing the war powers resolution?

This question found 51% in support of the resolution (36% strongly), and 44% opposed (26% strongly). One possible explanation for the smaller majority is that the question mentioned operational difficulties in bringing a major war to a halt, once it has been set in motion by the executive.

II. Situational Questions

Assessment Questions About Military Progress

Polls frequently ask the public to make military assessments. The language of such questions can be broad and vague. Only when they are collected and examined can one see how well majorities sort through them, often making assessments that are more realistic than what they are being told by official sources. Majorities consider Iran a security threat, but they keep this in proportion and doubt that military force will lessen the threat. Only minorities ever believed the war would be over quickly. Asked in the vaguest language to assess success in a situation that is ongoing, large numbers find ways not to answer. On the rare occasions when the public is asked a more contextual military question, its answers show considerable realism.

Iran as Security Threat to the United States

When asked at the beginning of the war, three in five (61%) agreed that “Iran poses a real national security threat to the United States” (Fox, February 28-March 2). In a Marist poll of March 2-4, 44% called Iran “a major threat,” 40% a minor threat, and 15% not a threat; hence a large majority (84%) agreed that Iran is a security issue, while another overlapping majority (55%) saw it as a minor threat or less. When respondents were asked at the start of the war whether Iran had posed an “*imminent* military threat” (*italics added*), 59% said no (Quinnipiac, March 6-8).

At the beginning of the war CNN found a 54% majority who thought the “US military action” would make Iran more of a threat to the United States (less, 28%, neither, 18%). Expectations that the war will make the US safer were limited to 34% in Quinnipiac’s March 6-8 poll. A little under half (47%) thought the war would have the opposite effect.

Pew asked in mid-March: “In the long run, do you think US military action against Iran will make the world a safer place?” Fifty-two percent said it would either make the world less safe (33%) or leave things the same (19%); 27% thought it would make the world safer. Asked the same question about homeland security, respondents were notably more pessimistic: 60% thought the United States would be either less safe (40%) or the same (20%), and only 22% felt it would be safer. This indicates that some portion of the war’s supporters must have thought that, at best, the war would have no effect on the United States’ own safety.

In a more extreme question as part of its March 16-17 poll about Iran, Emerson College asked: “How likely do you think it is that there will be a world war within four years?” The response was pessimistic: a large majority thought this likely (63%, 30% very), while 37% did not.

Expected Length of the War

From the beginning, 56% thought a “long-term military conflict” was likely (very, 24%; CNN/SSRS Feb.28-Mar.1). By March 9—within the war’s first ten days—71% described the war as taking months or longer (over a year, 26%); only 21% believed that the war’s length would be counted in weeks (Quinnipiac). In a trend question that Reuters/Ipsos asked three times in March, those who thought “U.S. military involvement in Iran will go on for an extended period of time” grew from 60 to 65%, while those who expected it to be over “in a matter of weeks” declined from 36 to 31% by March 29.

Assessments of Success in Ongoing Operations

From March 16 on, polls began to ask general questions about the progress of the war, such as: “How well do you think the US military action against Iran is going?” That many felt reluctant to judge is evident in the results. Pew (March 16-22) asked this on a five-point scale, providing ‘somewhat well’ as the midpoint. Twenty-six percent thought the war was going better than

‘somewhat well’, 28% said ‘somewhat well’, and 41% said worse than ‘somewhat well.’ By this reading, a majority (54%) felt the war was going somewhat well or better. In the same poll, though, the same 54% majority thought the war would take more than six months.

Assessments were more negative when a similar question was asked with a neutral mid-point for the five-point scale. In a poll conducted on March 17, YouGov asked, “How well or badly do you think the US conflict with Iran is going?” Eleven percent chose the midpoint of “neither well nor badly”. Twenty-eight percent picked a more positive response; 45% a more negative response. On April 8 YouGov asked, “Who do you think is currently winning?” Thirty-four percent said the US was; just as many said neither; 17% said Iran was, and the rest were unsure (50% of respondents either said “neither” or were unsure).

By April 8 (YouGov) four in ten preferred not to pass judgment when asked: “Regardless of what you think of the decision to use military force, do you think U.S. actions in Iran this year have been successful, not successful, or is it too soon to tell?” Forty-one percent took the last option; 39% said they were unsuccessful; and 19% called them successful. By the end of the two-month period (April 28-30), when Marist asked whether operations had done “more good than harm or more harm than good”, 61% chose the latter.

Effectiveness of 2025 Strikes; Level of Advance Planning

A few questions asked about the ongoing campaign in a larger context. Given Trump’s claims the previous summer that U.S. airstrikes had “obliterated” Iran’s nuclear program, Fox News asked at the start of the 2026 war: “Do you think the U.S. strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities in June 2025 were mostly a success, mostly a failure, or is it too soon to say?” There was no majority response, but 30% called it a success, 31% a failure, and 37% that it was too soon to say.

In a rare question about advance preparation, YouGov asked (April 8): “Before the conflict with Iran began, how much do you think the Trump administration had planned for a potential closure of the Strait of Hormuz? Forty-two percent thought there had been no planning at all; 16%, a little planning; and 18%, a lot of planning.

Questions on Iran and Iranians

Interestingly, survey researchers asked respondents very few questions about the adversary. This may reflect the limited quantity and quality of information about Iran known to researchers and respondents alike.

Quinnipiac’s poll one week into the war (March 6-8) offered two of the very few questions that showed a plurality supporting some aspect of the war. Respondents were told, “As you may know, Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and more than 40 other Iranian leaders

were killed in the joint U.S./Israel military action against Iran,” and were then asked, “Do you think those killings were justified, or not?” Almost half—48%—called the killings justified, while 43% said they were not. Almost as many (44%) thought it likely that “Iran will form a new government that is favorable to the United States,” although 49% disagreed. These two findings (48 and 44%) are among the highest numbers in support of the war in the two-month period.

Near the end of March (Mar. 27-29) Reuters/Ipsos asked: “As a result of U.S. military action in Iran, do you think the quality of life for people in Iran will get better or worse over the next year?” About half (49%) thought it would get worse; only 21% expected it to get better, and 13% thought it would be about the same.

By mid-April it was clear that Iran had made replacements in its leadership and that the decapitation strategy had fallen short of its goals. CBS/YouGov asked over April 17-20: “Compared to before the war began, do you think Iran’s current leadership is better or worse?” Faced with this vague question (i.e., ‘better’ in what sense?), 33% were unsure or declined to answer. Thirty-nine percent responded that the leadership was about the same; 21% called it worse, and only 7% said it was better.

Attitudes toward Negotiating

Seven questions about negotiations were asked over the two-month period. The public entered the war with only about a quarter believing that the diplomatic path had been exhausted. While the questions asked are too fragmentary to show what a coherent majority position would look like, it is clear that very few believed any settlement could be reached quickly. There was some appetite (possibly half the public) for trying to use targeted military strikes to make coercive diplomacy work, but far less for open-ended warfare. A majority was either favorable towards, or unsure about, an agreement that did not require Iran to give up its enriched uranium.

At the very start of the war (Feb. 28-Mar. 1, CNN) four in ten (39%) already believed that the US had not “[made] enough of an effort at diplomacy with Iran before using military force.” Twenty-seven percent thought the US had done enough, and a third (33%) were not sure.

In mid-March (Reuters/Ipsos, Mar. 17-19) two thirds (66%) preferred that the US “work to end US involvement in the conflict quickly, even if it means we do not achieve all of our goals in Iran,” while only 27% preferred that it “work to achieve all of our goals in Iran, even if it means US involvement in the conflict continues for an extended period of time.”

The type of initial off-ramp that a large majority supported was indicated by YouGov’s April 8 question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the US agreeing to a two-week ceasefire if Iran reopens the Strait of Hormuz?” Two thirds (66%) approved of this, 41% strongly, and only 10% disapproved; 23% were unsure.

Little credence was given to the idea that negotiations could rapidly reach an agreement. In mid-April (Apr. 17-20, CBS/YouGov), when asked “What do you think are the chances that the U.S. will reach an agreement with Iran to end the war during the next two weeks?” almost half (48%) thought this unlikely, while another 41% gave it a fifty-fifty chance. Only 9% credited the occasional optimistic statements from the administration at the time.

A question asked by ABC/Washington Post at the end of April got a divided response. About half (48%) wanted to “make a peace deal with Iran, even if it results in a worse deal for the U.S.”, while about as many (46%) wanted to “push Iran for a better deal, even if it means resuming US military action against Iran.” Comparing this to the similar question asked while intense fighting was occurring in mid-March suggests that more respondents could live with “not achiev[ing] all of our goals” to stop the bombardment than could live with explicitly getting “a worse deal” from negotiations during a ceasefire; and more could live with “resuming US military action” than with the idea of continuing intense fighting “for an extended period of time.”

By April 17-20, when the conflict was past the six-week mark, 70% said ‘yes’ to the CBS question: “Do you think we should make a deal to end the war in Iran as quickly as possible?” Ten percent said no and 20% were unsure. Everyone except the 10% who had said ‘no’ were then asked a question that imposed a cost, “Would you favor making a deal with Iran now, even if it does not require Iran to give up its enriched uranium?” Of the full sample, 35% would be in favor, 24% would not, 30% were unsure, and 10% were not asked. Given the vague question wording, one could surmise that majority approval of a deal allowing Iran to keep some enriched uranium would depend on details that were not being publicly discussed at this time, such as whether the deal would include limits and transparency arrangements consistent with Iran keeping only low-enriched uranium for peaceful purposes, as the Obama-era nuclear deal did.

Attitudes toward Escalation

There was a notable lack of public enthusiasm for military escalation to achieve one or more US war goals. Only one question, about the instituting of a naval blockade of Iran, found support from about a third of the public.

AP/NORC asked on March 19-23 (three weeks into the war) whether “military action against Iran has gone too far, not gone far enough, or been about right?” and found 59% saying it had gone too far. Twenty-six percent called it about right; only 13% said it had not gone far enough.

The most frequently asked poll questions about specific escalatory options regarded “the US sending ground troops into Iran.” These show substantial majorities opposed, though they varied in a wide band, from 60% to 78%. The 60% finding came at the start of the war (CNN, Feb. 28-

Mar. 1), while the 78% finding was from the end of March (Reuters/Ipsos, Mar. 27-29). One cannot confirm clear change over time since some or all of the variation could be due to house effects (minor variations in methods among polling agencies). The best conclusion may be that around two-thirds were opposed to introducing ground troops.

An AP-NORC poll (March 19-23) asked about some military steps that had already been taken, but could be presumably ramped up, and did not get clear responses. For each step, around a quarter said they neither favored nor opposed them. “Conducting air strikes against military targets inside Iran” had 33% in favor and 39% opposed; “conducting targeted airstrikes to kill Iranian leaders” had 31% in favor and 39% opposed. “Deploying US troops on the ground to fight Iran” had only 12% in favor and 62% opposed—with a quarter opting out. Since this was the last step offered in the battery, the increased opposition may have come primarily from respondents who had just assented to the other steps.

Only one CBS poll (April 17-20) asked about the naval blockade—as follows: “Last Sunday, the U.S. announced a blockade of all ships entering and exiting Iranian ports. Do you support or oppose the blockade?” The blockade garnered only 36% support. This is the highest support rate for a proposed escalatory step in the surveys reviewed here—with 44% opposed and 20% not sure.

Strait of Hormuz

Just as Iran’s closure of the Strait of Hormuz at the beginning of the war came as a surprise to the administration, the public was also unprepared for it. Only three poll questions mentioned it, all asked by YouGov, and in each case about a quarter of respondents did not answer. Almost half of respondents were understandably unclear about whose responsibility reopening the Strait would be.

On March 15 President Trump asked NATO countries to use their navies to open the Strait. Two days later YouGov offered three statements about the Strait closure and found no majority view:

- Other countries have a responsibility to help the U.S. military stop Iran from closing the Strait of Hormuz to oil-tanker traffic
- Only the U.S. has a responsibility to stop Iran from closing the Strait of Hormuz to oil-tanker traffic
- Neither the U.S. nor other countries have a responsibility to stop Iran from closing the Strait of Hormuz to oil-tanker traffic

The most common answer (35%) was that other countries have a responsibility. Nineteen percent thought the responsibility lay only with the U.S., and 18% said no country has a responsibility. Three in ten (29%) did not respond.

On April 7, YouGov asked how much the Trump administration had planned for a potential closure of the Strait—the kind of question which the public was not then in a position to answer (since then it has been documented that the Trump administration dismissed the possibility, since Iran had not closed the Strait before). Twenty-four percent did not respond, while 42% thought there had been “no planning at all.” Eighteen percent thought there had been a lot, and 16% a little planning. At the same point in time, as mentioned above, Trump agreed to a two-week ceasefire if Iran opened the Strait (which Iran conditioned on hostilities in Lebanon also stopping). When YouGov asked about this, two thirds (66%) approved of it, 41% strongly. Only 10% disapproved.

The nuclear issue

Questions on this central topic were sparse and two were mentioned above for other types of relevance they have. When the war started, the need to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons was announced as one of the reasons for starting it. This clashed with the administration’s prior claim that U.S. bombing had already obliterated Iran’s nuclear program. Trump’s rhetorical use of the nuclear issue was never joined to any substantial detail, at least not in public. Only three questions in the two-month period brought up the nuclear issue; the public showed little confidence that any resolution would be reached.

Fox News asked (Feb.28-Mar.2): “Do you think the U.S. strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities in June 2025 were mostly a success, mostly a failure, or is it too soon to say?” The public divided three ways (30% success, 31% failure, 37% too soon to say).

By April 17-20, when the conflict was past the six-week mark, 70% said ‘yes’ to the CBS question: “Do you think we should make a deal to end the war in Iran as quickly as possible?” Almost all those asked (excluding the 10% who had said ‘no’) were then asked, “Would you favor making a deal with Iran now, even if it does not require Iran to give up its enriched uranium?” Of the full sample, 35% would be in favor, 24% would not and 30% were unsure.

At the end of April, ABC/Washington Post asked “How confident are you that an agreement to end the war with Iran will prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons?” Over three in five had low confidence that this would succeed (39% not very confident, 27% not at all). Thirty-two percent expressed confidence (very confident, 8%).

Israel

Israel, the United States' ally in the war, was mentioned in just three questions during the two-month period, each time with a negative framing. It is worth noting that two out of these three questions used the word "war," which (as shown above) was more often avoided in favor of euphemisms like "military action." To the degree these questions can be indicative, they show the balance of opinion shifting against Israel in the context of the Iran war.

A poll in the war's first week (March 6-8) sponsored by the Institute for Middle East Understanding asked: "Do you think that launching a war against Iran generally benefits the United States or Israel more?" (leaving out the possibility that these interests may overlap). A 56% majority said the war benefits Israel more (U.S. more, 29%).

Later in March (Mar. 19-23) AP-NORC asked about military aid to Israel: "When it comes to the war in Iran, do you favor, oppose, or neither favor or oppose...sending government funds to aid Israel's military?" (rather than simply saying "sending military aid"). Forty-eight percent were opposed, only 20% in favor, and 30% opted for neither.

Finally, in late April ABC/Washington Post asked: "Do you think Israel had too much influence on Trump's decision to launch strikes against Iran, too little influence, or about the right amount?" A 52% majority said Israel had too much influence; 37% said "the right amount"; and 7% said Israel had too little influence. The question would have been more balanced had it described both parties as states, speaking of "the U.S. decision" rather than "Trump's decision."

III. Political Indicators

Questions Naming Trump

There was a widely noted decline in support when questions named Trump and asked approval levels on Iran. From the start of the war to about March 23, support stayed in the 36-38% range, while in polls in the second half of April, it was in the 33-35% range. Disapproval was more variable—between 54 and 62% in the early period and 55 and 66% in the later period. The decline in approval numbers suggests that instead of the expected rally-round-the-flag phenomenon of temporarily decreasing partisan differences by garnering at least temporary support from Trump's critics, the Iran war was a slight drag on the support from a consolidated and intensely loyal base, even in the early period.

Consistent with this, Quinnipiac asked (Mar. 6-8), "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as Commander in Chief of the U.S. military?" In the absence of the word "Iran", Trump received four points' higher approval (42%) and two points' less

disapproval (57%) than he did in the same poll where, in a different question, “Iran” was in the wording.

CNN asked at the start of the war (Feb. 28-Mar. 1): “How much do you trust Donald Trump to make the right decisions about US use of force in Iran?” Forty percent trusted him “a great deal” (20%) or “moderately” (20%); 59% trusted him “not much” (16%) or “not at all” (43%).

AP-NORC in mid-March (Mar. 19-23) asked “In general, how much do you trust Donald Trump to make the right decisions” in three weighty policy areas, each asked separately: the use of nuclear weapons, the use of military force outside the U.S., and relationships with U.S. adversaries. Interestingly, the responses to all three were so similar that they varied only by a point or two. Trusting him “a great deal” or “quite a bit” were 26-27%; 17-19% trusted him “a moderate amount”; and 53-55% trusted him “a little” or “not at all.” The absence of differentiation among issues suggests that respondents were answering based on their general judgments about Trump.

Polls have also asked whether Trump personally had a plan for the Iran war. These questions emerged very early, with CNN asking from the first day (Feb. 28-Mar. 2): “Do you think Donald Trump does or does not have a clear plan for handling the situation in Iran?” Forty percent said he did and 60% that he did not. On April 7, when the war was about five weeks old, YouGov asked, “How well do you understand what Trump’s objectives are in Iran?” Forty-two percent said they understood the objectives well (17%, very well) and 57% said they didn’t (not very well, 23%; not well at all, 34%). CBS/YouGov asked over April 17-20 whether respondents thought “Trump has a clear timeline and goals for the U.S. military operation against Iran?” Thirty-two percent thought he did (strongly, 12%) while 57% thought he did not (strongly, 40%).

Flowing naturally from having objectives and a plan is the issue of communicating with the public. Quinnipiac asked, as the war entered its second week (March 6-8): “Do you think the Trump administration has provided a clear explanation of the reasons behind the United States’ military action against Iran, or not?” Thirty-five percent said Trump had explained the reasons, but 62% said he had not. In relation to this, one of Trump’s social media comments was tested in a poll, when ABC/Washington Post asked respondents whether they had a positive or negative reaction to “Trump posting ‘A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again’ if Iran did not make an agreement with the US.” Three in four (75%) had a negative reaction (53% strongly); only 20% had a positive reaction. This remark clearly was problematic for almost half of Trump’s supporters.

Those who may not follow Middle Eastern affairs closely still are concerned whether Trump’s approach is leading to greater safety for the U.S. itself. Fox News at the war’s start (Feb. 28-Mar. 2) asked: “Do you think President Trump’s handling of relations with Iran has made the

U.S. safer, less safe, or has it not made much of a difference either way?” Only 29% thought the US was safer, while 19% thought little had changed. A bare majority (51%) thought the U.S. was less safe as a result.

Emerson College has also asked more general questions about Trump’s approach to foreign affairs in polls where questions about Iran were interspersed. In a mid-March poll (Mar.16-17) respondents were asked to rate Trump’s handling of foreign policy. With the word “Iran” not in the question, 42% rated Trump’s foreign policy favorably (24%, excellent) while 59% did not (poor, 49%). The same poll asked whether respondents believed “Trump is putting America first” (echoing the controversy among influencers on this subject). While 53% said that he was not putting America first, 42% said that he was—indicating no break in supporters’ ranks, as long as Iran is not named.

Composition of the antiwar majority

Broadly, four in five Democrats and three in five independents did not support the war in the March-April period. Even a majority of Republicans had qualms, despite their overall support: they expected the war to last some months longer (55%) and would make a deal to end the war in Iran as quickly as possible (54%, Economist/YouGov April 17-20). The minority of the general public that supported the war was overwhelmingly Republican, and around half of those lived in expectation of a managed exit.

It is important to note that there was no sign in these polls that leading figures in the Democratic Party took many positions on Iran that would help their electoral chances. They concentrated on measures with broad popular support, such as requiring Congressional approval to continue military operations, without saying how they would handle Iran if they regained political power. Especially, Democrats shunned any discussion of how to arrive at a cease-fire with durability, or what steps the US and Iran could take to prepare the ground for a lasting diplomatic resolution.

Democrats did not propose any alternatives to military action—such as reciprocal confidence-building steps to lower the temperature with Iran—much less a broad roadmap to follow in negotiations. Navigator’s poll of registered voters (April 23-27) asked “who [do] you personally trust more to handle...the conflict with Iran?” While only 36% said “Donald Trump and the Republican Party” --a level consistent with most of the polls reviewed here—a lower 33% said the Democratic Party. Twenty-four percent did not trust either party on Iran and 8% declined to answer. In the Navigator poll, 65% of Democrats said they trusted their own party on Iran; only 45% of African Americans did, and only 34% of Hispanics did.

ABC/Washington Post asked the same type of question (Apr. 24-28) and got very similar results: “Which political party...do you trust to do a better job handling...the situation with Iran?” Thirty-four percent said the Democrats, 32% the Republicans, 4% said their trust in the parties

was equal, and 29% said neither. These results are what might be expected, given Democrats' anxiety about the imagined risks of differentiating their party from Republicans on Iran issues.

The basic political pattern of those rejecting the war—about four in five Democrats and three in five independents—can be illustrated by many examples drawn from polls that provided breakdowns. Here are six examples:

- Ipsos (March 27-29) asked whether the Iran war would “go on for an extended period of time” or “end pretty quickly in a matter of weeks.” Those who thought the war would go on for an extended period included 89% of Democrats, 70% of independents, and 40% of Republicans.
- In the same poll, those who said they were *very* concerned about “the financial costs of the war with Iran” included 72% of Democrats, 51% of independents, and 21% of Republicans.
- Still in the same poll, in a choice between two statements, those who chose “Work to end U.S. involvement in the conflict quickly, even if it means we do not achieve all of our goals in Iran” included 91% of Democrats, 74% of independents, and 40% of Republicans.
- On April 7 YouGov found that those who thought the war had “made the US worse off” included 79% of Democrats, 60% of independents, and 21% of Republicans.
- Over April 17-20, Economist/YouGov found 89% of Democrats, 66% of independents, and 20% of Republicans opposed the war. The *lowest* demographic category for opposition was those 65 and over, with 53% opposed; in all other demographics given, opposition was higher.
- By April 27 (Navigator), those who said the US made “the wrong decision...in the first place” to start the war with Iran included 80% of Democrats, 51% of independents and 25% of Republicans. Among racial demographics the lowest was Whites, with a plurality saying the decision was wrong (49 to 42%).

Some Conclusions

There was no *rise* in support for President Trump or his Iran policies after the public woke up on Saturday, February 28 to find the United States fighting a full-scale air war. The peak of support—in the 45-to-50% range—was recorded in polls that were already in the field, or went immediately into the field, when the attacks began. After that, the numbers declined. There was no rally-round-the-flag effect that reached majority support, however slim. Majority public

attitudes regarding the war were in place almost immediately rather than coalescing through a psychological process that unfolded over time. Majorities thought that Iran was not the type of security threat that warranted an offensive war and that it certainly was not an imminent threat. Less than three in ten believed at the start that the diplomatic path had been exhausted before attacks began. From the beginning, majorities thought Trump had no coherent war plan and was giving no clear explanation of what he was doing.

Trump's much-advertised claim that the war would be short never gained close to majority credence, nor did the idea that the war's outcome would benefit Iranians. There was no majority support for escalatory steps, including for the U.S. naval blockade of Iran. The minority with confidence in Trump on the war shrank notably over March and April. Even many of his own supporters expected the war to be lengthy and hoped for a deal that would allow a rapid exit.

In the months since the polls reviewed here were fielded, a combination of diplomatic maneuvering, economic coercion, and military strikes have been tried by both sides, but the war seems to be no closer to a resolution than it was in late April. Strains on the US economy have been contained by a Trump tactic comparable to one he uses regarding tariffs. On any given day, the war policy may be "on", or "off", or simply unclear. In the markets, momentary optimism spikes and returns to a baseline of chronic unease.

Trump's approval rating in mid-August remains five points lower than it was before the war started. The most recent Quinnipiac poll (released July 29) finds 60% against the war and only 30% for it, the lowest level of support on this trendline question. The same poll found that 55% now expect the war to last about a year or longer and nearly two-thirds (66%) say the war has not been worth fighting.

The lack of public support during the most intense phase of the war to date has important implications for a U.S. decision to resume large-scale warfare. The absence not only of majority support but even of a willingness to give the administration some initial benefit of the doubt, as has often occurred in previous wars, make it increasingly dangerous to demand sacrifices from the public for a war that lacks a realistic strategy for achieving widely supported objectives.

As far as the home front is concerned, the political consequences of continuing economic warfare through means that further reduce global energy supplies or resuming large-scale military operations depend somewhat on domestic dissent's ability to find effective channels for expression. Consistently and increasingly negative attitudes toward the war seem to be stoking support for Democratic congressional candidates beyond the normal pattern of opposition parties picking up seats in mid-term elections, but the magnitude of those effects are not yet clear (<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/23/us/politics/midterms-feel-like-2006-all-over-again.html>). Popular opposition to increased military spending for the war and military escalation without

Congressional approval are predictable, but their effects on Trump's decision-making about the war are not.

The public's rejection of the Iran war would be more likely to shift to the type of opposition dynamic that would affect Trump's calculations if Democrats began to formulate and explain an alternate policy on Iran—one that breaks with the simple demonization that has long been a bipartisan staple. They have not yet made a compelling case for a package of detailed diplomatic measures that could reopen the Strait of Hormuz and prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons on terms that both the American public and the Iranian leadership would support. Trump's ability to ignore dissent could change if there was a positive alternative for dissenters to support.

Works Cited

ABC/Washington Post/Ipsos: full poll questionnaire, April 24-28, 2026.

https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2026-05/ABC%20News-Washington%20Post-Ipsos%20April%20Poll%20To*pline%205.3%20release_0.pdf

Associated Press (AP-NORC): The March 2026 AP-NORC Center Poll. Fielded March 19-23, 2026.

<https://apnorc.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/March-W2-2026-Topline.pdf>

CBS/YouGov: CBS News Poll, Adults in the U.S. March 17-20, 2026. [Only one Iran question: see Q5.]

<https://data.ddhq.io/polls/2026/03/22/YouGov/CBS-News-National-2026-03-17-2026-03-20>

CBS/YouGov: CBS News Poll, Adults in the U.S. April 17-20, 2026.

https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/econTabReport_I24AWdp.pdf#page=37

CNN/SSRS: Poll questionnaire, February 28-March 1, 2026. [Subgroup breakouts are on pp. 7-16.]

<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/27693899-rel3a-iran/>

Economist/YouGov poll: April 7, 2026.

<https://yougov.com/en-us/articles/54484-us-war-with-iran-remains-unpopular-april-3-6-2026-economist-yougov-poll>

Emerson College: CP_National_3.20.26 (spreadsheet). March 20, 2026.

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1EfOmL-oir8Qp12WCByOuqB2fRRqtrr11/edit?gid=586600673#gid=586600673>

Fox News: February 28-March 2, 2026.

https://static.foxnews.com/foxnews.com/content/uploads/2026/03/fox_feb.-28-mar.-2-2026_national_topline_march-3-release.pdf

Institute for Middle East Understanding (IMEU) / Demand Progress / Data for Progress: March 6-8, 2026.

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/667c26da581c496ab9d4df6e/t/69b2d7e06926182a8a8b3920/1773328352850/dfp_imeu_national_iran_release_toplines.pdf

Mueller, John E. *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*. New York: Wiley, 1973.

Navigator Research poll, April 23-27, 2026.

<https://navigatSorresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Navigator-Toplines-04.27.26.pdf>

National Public Radio–NPR/PBS/Marist College Poll: March 2-4, 2026.

https://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/NPR_PBS-News_Marist-Poll_USA-NOS-and-Tables_Iran_202603050823.pdf

National Public Radio–NPR/PBS/Marist College Poll: April 27-30, 2026.

https://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/NPR_PBS-News_Marist-Poll_USA-NOS-and-Tables_202605011058.pdf

Pew Research Center: American Trends Panel, wave 189, March 16-22, 2026.

https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2026/03/PP_2026.3.25_iran_topline.pdf

Quinnipiac University Poll: March 6-8, 2026 (registered voters).

https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us03092026_upip88.pdf

Quinnipiac University Poll: July 9-13, 2026 (registered voters).

<https://poll.qu.edu/poll-release?releaseid=3964>

Reuters/Ipsos: March 27-29, 2026 (general population).

<https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2026-03/Ipsos%20Iran%20Poll%20Topline%203.31.2026.pdf>

University of Texas/Texas Politics Project Poll, April 10-20/2026 (registered voters).

https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/files/202604_POLL_TOPLINES-1d319c0b.pdf

YouGov poll: March 17, 2026.

<https://yougov.com/en-us/daily-results/20260317-c8568-2>

YouGov poll: April 8, 2026.

<https://yougov.com/en-us/daily-results/20260408-b1f71-3>