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NATO in the USA after the end of the bipartisan consensus

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Introduction

In 1949, the Truman Administration definitively broke with the isolationist past of the United States, and for the first time in its history, united the destiny of its country to that of other nations with its participation in an alliance of a permanent, regional and military nature. Since then, relations with its allies have not been without ups and downs, as differences in defense spending are joined by different conceptions of security and definition of interests. Even so, the transatlantic relationship was never in doubt. But the breakdown of bipartisan consensus on many issues has ended up affecting NATO as well. The Trump Administration sounded the alarm for many European governments, but as we will see below, this is not only a passing episode resulting from an atypical President. The questioning of U.S. permanence has a wide audience in the United States, on both sides of the political spectrum. Precisely, how this skepticism towards the Atlantic Alliance evolves will depend on the role it plays in the year 2050.

Initial debates

Among the reasons that drove the creation of the Atlantic Alliance by the United States was the need to recover the European balance of power in order to share the burdens of the anti-communist struggle, that is, to make it less costly for Washington.

But the conviction that underpinned the project of a security alliance with its allies was much deeper, in reality, the United States had to leave behind its traditional isolation, because as Henry L. Stimson, former Secretary of State and War, warned:

*what we stake in world peace and freedom is not a limited responsibility... the problems of Europe and Asia are not other people's problems, they are ours... there are no foreigners... Never again. Foreign affairs are now our most intimately domestic concern.*¹

This awareness of the new international reality, and of the role that the United States should play in it, was combined with its classic idealism embodied in the defense of freedom as the basis of the new American commitment. For Truman:

only democracy can offer the vital force to involve the peoples of the world in triumphant action, not only against their human oppressors, but also against their old enemies, hunger, misery and despair...

*Events have led our American democracy to new influence and new responsibilities.*²

In the end, the debate on the approval of the Treaty of the North Atlantic Organization revolved around two main issues, the first, of a constitutional nature, encompassed fears that Congress would see its foreign policy powers usurped by a presidency protected by the terms of that same Treaty. This was the issue of main concern for the minority of isolationists, around the ten, who were completely opposed to the Treaty, who even though they were fervent anti-communists would not allow any automatism in the use of force for fear that the President would use it to usurp the constitutional prerogatives of Congress. Moreover, as an effect of such constitutional

¹ STIMSON, Henry L., "The Challenge to Americans" October 1947, *Foreign Affairs*.

² TRUMAN, Harry S., inaugural speech of January 20, 1949, text consulted in www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?month=01&year=1949.

subversion, the United States would lose its independence by tying its interests to those of other nations.

While the second issue, specific to the Atlantic Alliance, and which ultimately became the focus of the debate, consisted of opposition to Article 3 of the Treaty, which stipulated mutual aid for the proper functioning of the organization.

Not surprisingly, that was the main argument put forward by the majority of those who opposed the drafting of the Treaty presented by the Truman Administration, around twenty Republican Senators, because they saw no need for American obligations to go beyond political guarantees, and feared that military aid would turn the Atlantic Alliance into a mere military union.

For one of his most prominent voices, Senator Robert A. Taft, while in favor of deterring the Soviet Union, was not in favor of doing so through a multilateral alliance, but rather, in his view, it would be sufficient for the United States to extend the Monroe Doctrine to Europe unilaterally, without the need to elaborate a multilateral pact or involve any reciprocal aid. In addition, the possibility of U.S. aid ending up in the hands of socialist and communist governments should be anticipated, given the turbulent political landscape in post-war Europe.

In practice, what was settled by the debate on Article 3 of the Treaty was whether to help Europe first to prevent the attack or to liberate it after it. In his defense, for Secretary of State Dean Acheson, it was clear that the key to American security lay in Europe, hence the need for the military aid program.

Finally, on July 21, 1949, with 82 votes in favor, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was approved. Only fourteen Senators opposed him, among them one Democrat, E. Johnson of Colorado, the Progressivist G. Taylor, and eleven Republicans, Taft, Langer, Jenner, Cordon, Donnell, Flanders, Kem, Malone, Martin, Schoeppel, Watkins, Wherry, Williams and Young. Thereafter, the Republican Party was divided between its internationalist majority and its neo-isolationist minority.

Current debates

As Ireland indicates (1981, 137)

the North Atlantic Treaty was the instrument through which the United States wished to provide the necessary sense of security for the recovery of Western Europe, the reintegration of West Germany into the political system of Western Europe, and the restoration of the balance of power on the European continent.

In practice, the creation of NATO meant the materialization of the new role of the United States in the world that emerged after World War II.

Today, Western Europe, brought together within the European Union, has not only recovered, but has become one of the poles of greatest economic development in the world, largely due to the success of Germany's integration and full participation in its midst. Therefore, of the three variables that encouraged the creation and participation of the United States in NATO, the balance of power in Europe remains to be achieved, as the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation that began in February 2022 has reminded us.

As for the role of the United States in the world, today there is no longer the post-war political consensus on the role that the country should play on the international scene, and the different interpretations of it have a direct impact on the opinion of transatlantic relations in general, and the survival of NATO in particular.

This situation was readily apparent during the presidency of Donald J. Trump, whose attacks on his European allies on their economic and commercial advantages derived from a globalization detrimental to American interests, was joined by the open questioning of NATO's usefulness, the first time that a White House tenant had questioned the existence of the organization since its creation in 1949.

The concern aroused by Donald J. Trump's Presidency was such that in July 2018 the Senate approved, by 97 votes in favor to just 2 against, a motion in support of NATO. Among the

intentions of its promoters was the need to calm those partners concerned by the public displays of contempt, if not rejection, of the new American Presidents towards the Alliance.³

Only a year later, the House of Representatives passed the NATO Support Act, devised to deny public funding for any action aimed at withdrawing the United States from the Alliance. The negative votes then totaled 22, all of them Republicans. As Republican Senator John McCain stated, in the spirit of the law was the urgent need to "ensure that no President can withdraw the United States from NATO without the required constitutionally sanctioned advice and consent to the Senate."⁴

Thus, until very recently, support for the Alliance was a bipartisan issue, with only a few lonely discordant voices. But there is now a growing Republican minority that opposes the official narrative on transatlantic ties, under a leadership skeptical about NATO and ambivalent about the threat Russia poses to American interests.⁵

The latest chapter in this disagreement between the most unilateralist ranks of the Republican Party and NATO is found in the recent congressional vote on the resolution called "Defending the founding democratic principles of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the establishment of a Center for Democratic Resilience". The resolution contained the following main points in response to "external threats from authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China and internal threats from defenders of illiberalism (...):

1. Reaffirms its unequivocal support for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) as an alliance founded on democratic principles;
2. Urges NATO to continue to provide unwavering support to the people of Ukraine, as they fight for their sovereignty, territorial integrity and democratic future;
3. Calls on the President to use the voice and vote of the United States to adopt a new Strategic Concept for NATO that is clear about its support for shared democratic values

³ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/10/politics/senate-nato-vote-trump/index.html>

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/bipartisan-bill-would-prevent-trump-from-exiting-nato-without-senate-consent/2018/07/26/4ca1b206-9106-11e8-bcd5-9d911c784c38_story.html

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/06/house-gop-nato-support/>

and commits to NATO's ability to strengthen democratic institutions within NATO members, its partners and its aspirants; and

4. Calls on the President to use the voice and vote of the United States for the establishment of a Center of Excellence for Democratic Resilience within NATO Headquarters."⁶

Although the Resolution passed with 362 Members of Congress voting in favor, it was opposed by 63 Republicans, including Warren Davidson, Ohio, who justified his no vote on the inclusion of the third and fourth clauses as "U.S. sovereignty is non-negotiable. I suspect other countries will feel the same (...). We should be strengthening the Alliance, not reimagining it as a tool to interfere in the domestic policies of others."⁷

In the same vein, Congressman Andy Harris had rejected the Resolution as a provocation to the governments of Hungary and Poland, accused in recent years of degrading the democracy in their respective countries. For Harris, there is no doubt that Russia poses a threat to Europe's democracies, the problem with the resolution lies in its reference to illiberal domestic forces, an expression harris considers

*like a whistle whistle for progressive and left-wing dogs aimed at Poland and Hungary. How is it possible, when Russia is attacking Ukraine, and Poland is the center of delivery of our military aid to Ukraine, in the preamble it seems that we are attacking one of our NATO allies? That is unnecessary. That is foolish ... the preamble includes inflammatory language against two of our best allies in NATO: Poland and Hungary.*⁸

Therefore, the creation of the Center of Excellence for Democratic Resilience became the main reason for discord, being considered a distraction from NATO's main mission, as stated by Republican Congressman Chip Roy, who warned of the possibility that "the center will be used as a weapon against member states – such as the United States – that adopt policies contrary to

⁶ Congressional Record-House, April 5, 2022, H4177.

⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/06/house-gop-nato-support/>

⁸ Congressional Record-House, April 5, 2022, H4179.

the leftist orthodoxy that unfortunately now permeates much of Western Europe."⁹ For Roy, "NATO should focus on military strength – not on empowering international organizations to target the internal activities of sovereign nations under the vague guise of illiberalism or human rights."¹⁰

On the other hand, for the proponents of the Resolution, it is a matter of reinforcing the democratic component that is included in the preamble to the NATO Treaty, because as Democratic Congressman Gerry Connolly (President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly) said during the debate on the approval of the Resolution,

*the strongest weapon we have to effectively contain the authoritarianism of Putin and Xi (Jinping) is a vibrant, robust and immutable expression of the liberal and democratic values that unite us (...) We must respond by uniting around and strengthening our commitment to our shared democratic values and rules-based order. The NATO treaty is clear: we are an alliance of democracies.*¹¹

The timing would be opportune because, as Congressman Brendan F. Boyle stated, democratic values "are at stake today as they have not been since the fall of the Berlin Wall. And in some sense, they weren't under this kind of attack since 1945,"¹² so "this can't just be an alliance based on our common interest, but it must be an alliance based on our shared values."¹³ A point on which Congressman González-Colón would insist, for whom "unity does not only mean presenting a united front. It means being united in spirit and purpose,"¹⁴ a unity more important than ever after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

⁹ <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/04/06/congress-nato-support-texas-representatives/>

¹⁰ *Ibíd.*

¹¹ Congressional Record-House, April 5, 2022, H4178.

¹² Congressional Record-House, April 5, 2022, H4179.

¹³ *Ibíd.*

¹⁴ *Ibíd.*

In any case, and despite the fact that all the Democratic Congressmen voted in favor of the Resolution, we cannot forget that within the six most important political families within the Democratic Party, the socialist, of which Bernie Sanders is a part and is led by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez under the Democratic Socialists of America, has not hesitated to demand the exit of the United States from NATO, calling its expansion into the countries of Eastern European countries "an imperialist expansionism that has set the stage for this conflict (the Russian invasion of Ukraine)."¹⁵ In any case, unlike its Republican rivals, for the moment the most radical Democratic wing is content with rhetoric, without dissociating itself in practice from the Party's orthodoxy.

As can be seen from the debate on the Resolution in support of NATO's democratic nature, two essential points of friction can be distinguished with regard to the relationship between the United States and the Atlantic Alliance.

First, if foreign affairs have become a domestic concern, as Henry L. Stimson claimed in 1949, the elimination of the boundary between foreign and domestic policy has a twofold effect. On the one hand, foreign affairs cease to be a mere matter of foreign relations to become as internal a concern as unemployment or civil rights. But on the other hand, debates on foreign affairs will be affected by the diatribes of domestic politics, thus hindering its character as a state policy by ideologizing its content.

If in 1949 the concern was that military assistance could fall into the hands of socialist and communist governments, today the main concern of its detractors is that the idealistic component of NATO, that reference to a community of democracies, serves to attack governments of a certain political sign, akin to the representatives of American nationalist unilateralism, who denounce the progressive ideological bias behind such claims.

Second, referring to a debate present in U.S. political life since its independence, the dispute, as Emma Ashford points out, "has become a conversation about whether the United States should be in the world to defend human rights and promote democracy,"¹⁶ that is, "is America in the

¹⁵ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10561299/AOC-Bernies-Democratic-Socialists-group-blames-Russia-invasion-demands-end-NATO.html> dsa on nato

¹⁶ <https://www.vox.com/22900113/nato-ukraine-russia-crisis-clinton-expansion>

world to protect its own security or to be a crusader force fighting for good?"¹⁷ Of course, supporters of Trump's nationalist unilateralism have the clear answer, no more commitments that entangle the country in conflicts that do not affect its vital interests.

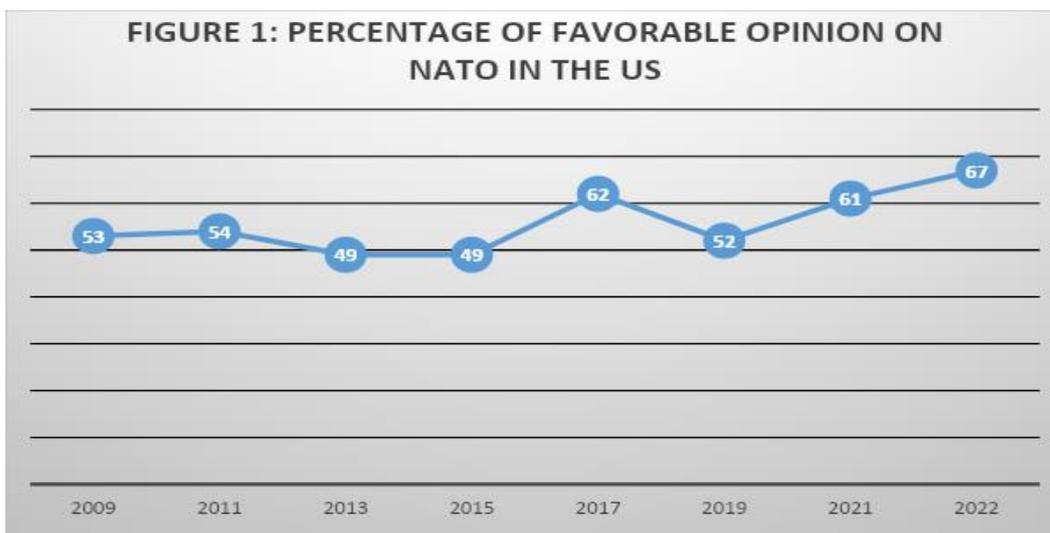
As can be seen, in a way, unilateralism is the crack that isolationism has found to penetrate the wall of internationalism, a wall that until very recently seemed solid, but that is beginning to crack without remedy. In just three years, from 2019 to 2022, the number of Congressmen opposed to full NATO support has almost tripled, a drift that does not depend so much on political leadership as on a real feeling within American public opinion, as we will see in the following section.

Public opinion and NATO

Taking into account the wishes of public opinion is important for their political representatives, otherwise questioning the legitimacy of their actions and decisions could provoke a systemic crisis. But neither can political representatives be guided solely by the results of the polls, not to mention the powerful forces capable of shaping that same public opinion in order to gain political influence.

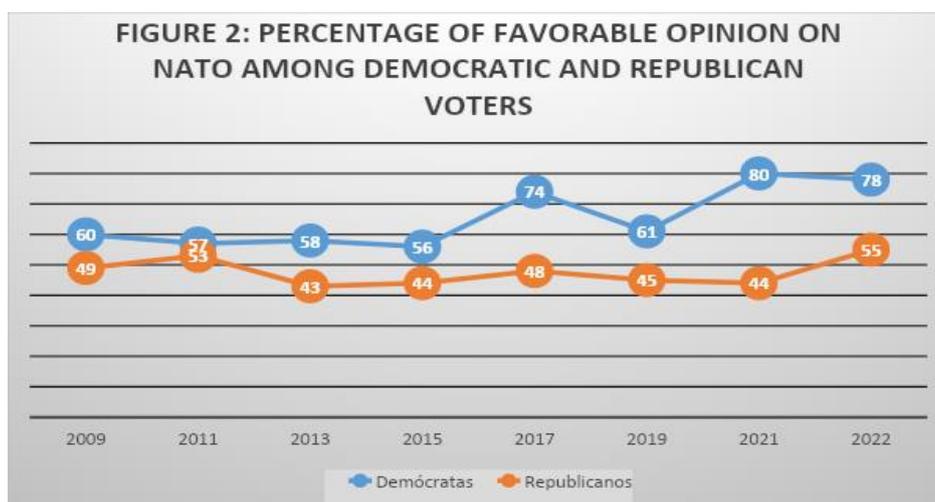
In any case, public opinion is a useful tool for ascertaining the values and attitudes of citizens on certain issues. In the case of NATO, thanks to surveys we can draw a picture about the opinion of the American people on the Atlantic Alliance, which, as can be seen in the following graph, is mostly positive.

¹⁷ *Ibíd.*

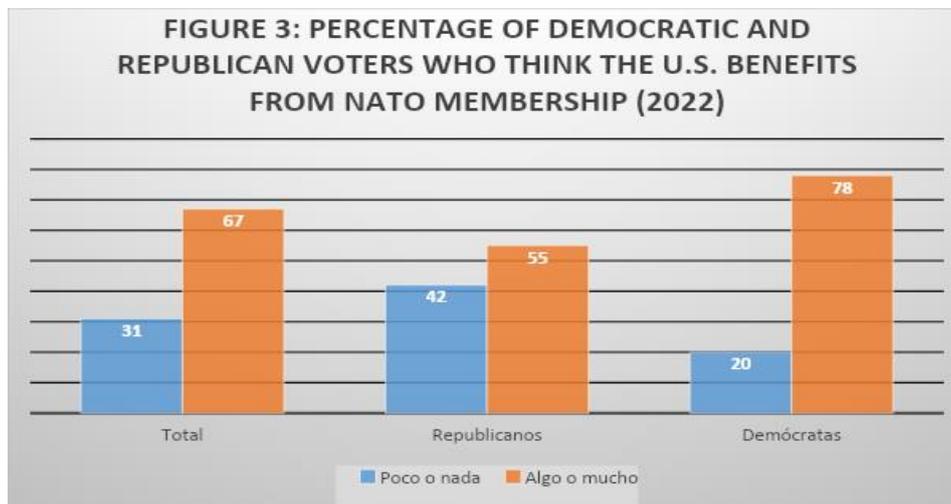


Source: own elaboration from www.pewresearch.org

If we take into account political values and ideology we will begin to get a picture closer to reality, because as we see in the second graph, Democratic voters tend to have a more favorable opinion of NATO than Republicans (23 points difference in 2022, and an average of almost 18 points since 2009). Therefore, the rupture of the bipartisan consensus around NATO is not only a fact perceived in Washington, but it is evident in the American street.



Source: own elaboration from www.pewresearch.org



Source: own elaboration from www.pewresearch.org

Among the Republicans, as can be seen in the third graph, the most conservative are even more skeptical of NATO, since 42% think that their country benefits little or nothing from its membership of the Alliance, while 55% do appreciate NATO's contribution to the well-being of the nation (among moderate and more liberal Republicans the figures are significantly different, because only 38% do not see great benefits, for the 61% who do recognize them). Something similar occurs among the Democrats, where their most progressive branch observes benefits in 78% of respondents, for only 20% who do not see them (for moderates and conservatives that figure rises to 24%, for 75% who do appreciate benefits).¹⁸

If we take into account age, those who have a more favorable view of NATO are those over 65 years of age, with 73% (for 25% who say they have a negative opinion about the Alliance), the rest of the age groups show a more moderate support, between 63 and 66%, and a more negative vision, between 31 and 34%.¹⁹

The age pyramid is important since the forecasts of the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by 2050 the population over 65 years of age will outnumber those under 18 years of age, exceeding

¹⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/04/06/seven-in-ten-americans-now-see-russia-as-an-enemy/>

¹⁹ *Ibíd.*

85 million individuals and reaching 22% of the total American population.²⁰ It is therefore to be hoped that its majority favorable view of NATO will tip the national balance on the side of support for the Atlantic Alliance.

If we take into account the level of education, the differences are again remarkable, and a clear positive relationship can be established between this variable and support for NATO. Thus, among those with a postgraduate degree, 80% have a favorable opinion of NATO, for only 19% who say they have it negative. At the opposite pole are those with secondary education or less, since only 59% have a positive image of the Alliance, for a negative 37%. In the middle are those who have a university education, for those who have a university degree 73% have a favorable opinion of NATO, by 24% negative; while for those who have a university degree, the percentages are 64% for those who view NATO positively, and 33% negatively.²¹

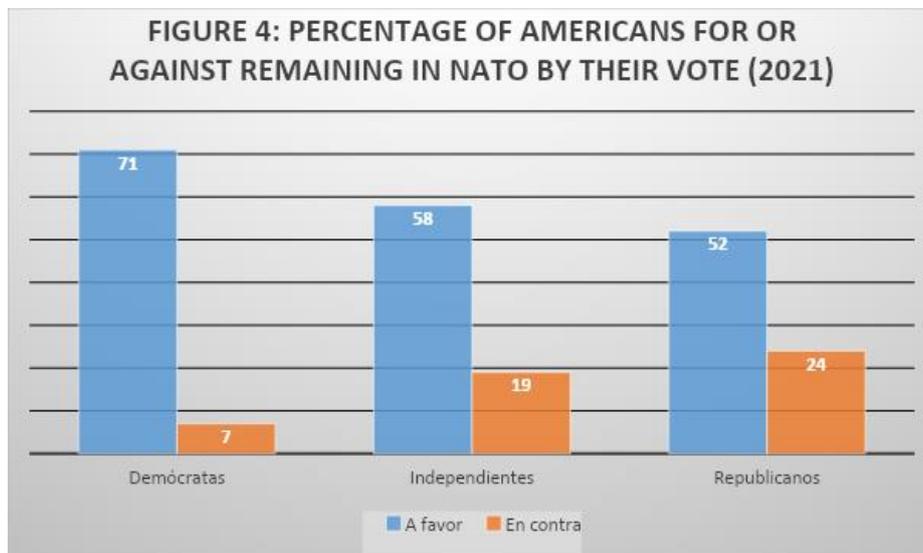
In terms of racial composition, 84% of white citizens would be in favor of remaining in NATO, just three points above the 81% of Hispanics surveyed who said the same, both figures well above the 73% of African Americans who agreed with remaining in the Alliance.²²

As reflected in these percentages, and confirmed in graphs 5 and 6, although minority, the percentage of Americans who are in favor of leaving NATO in its current configuration is not negligible, a reality that does not escape the supporters of nationalist unilateralism, who find in the criticism of NATO one more argument to win the support of popular discontent, mostly within the Republican ranks.

²⁰ <https://info.nicic.gov/ces/domestic/population-demographics/demographic-turning-points-united-states-population-projections>

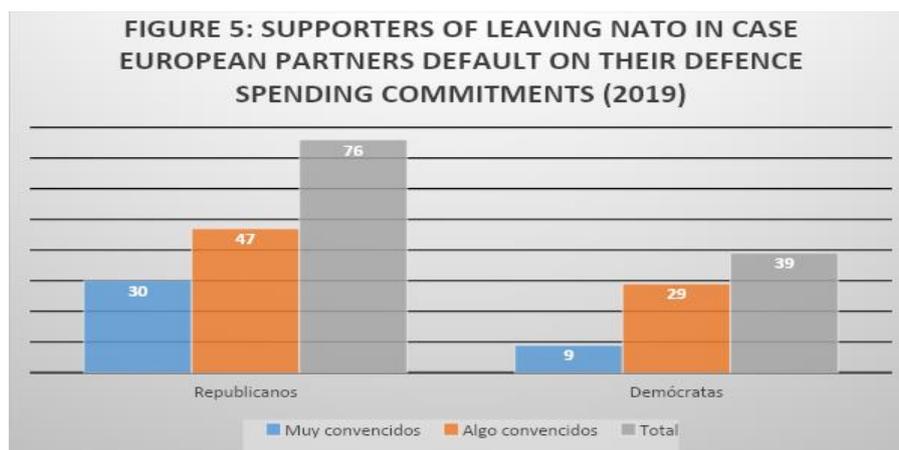
²¹ *Ibíd.*

²² https://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NATO_Demo_Membership.jpg



Source: own elaboration from <https://today.yougov.com>

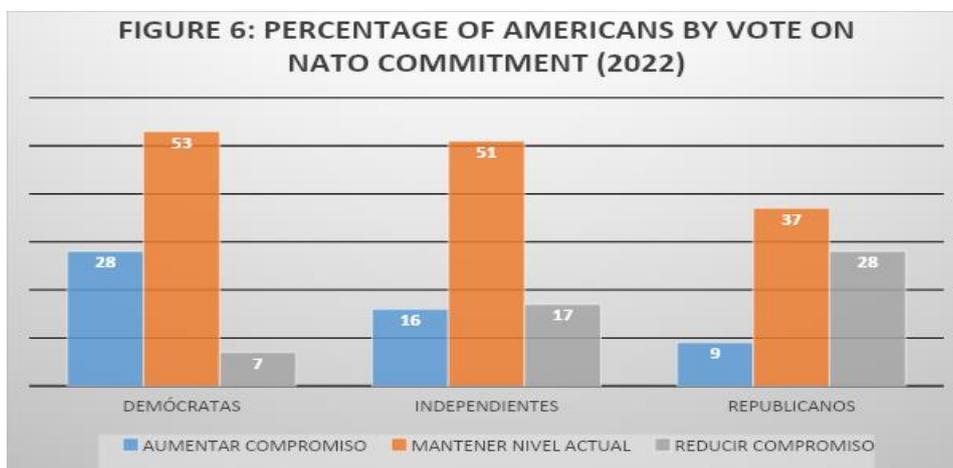
In the United Kingdom, in May 2022, only 7% of respondents said they were in favor of leaving NATO, a figure to take into account after the victory of BREXIT, and only 3 points lower than the 10% of Americans opposed to the permanence of their country in NATO. In any case, the rejection of NATO in the United States is lower than the average of the member countries, which stands at around 12%, with Slovakia at the front, with 32% rejection, followed by Montenegro with 30%, Bulgaria with 28%, Slovenia with 26% and Norway with 22%.²³



Source: own elaboration from Americans on NATO (Kull 2019).

²³ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_184687.htm

Moreover, as can be seen in graph number 5, to that minority but significant percentage that rejects the permanence in NATO, we should add those who have a more contractual than ideal vision of the transatlantic relationship. 76% of Republicans are in favor of leaving NATO if their European partners do not meet their defense spending commitments, for only 39% of Democrats who think the same. That is, the vindication discourse that characterized the Trump Administration is not only the result of his explosive personality, but responds to a broad sentiment among his voters.



Source: own elaboration from <https://news.gallup.com>

The problem lies in the fact that if we add up the percentage of Republicans who are in favor of reducing the American commitment to NATO with that of the supporters of abandoning it directly, we have that half of the Republicans are in favor of a lower commitment to the Atlantic Alliance or of leaving it, thus surpassing the 46% who say they are in favor of maintaining the current level of commitment or even expanding it. In the case of the Democrats, the figures are not only reversed, but only 7% of their voters would be in favor of that reduction of the commitment or the exit, by 81% in favor of maintaining or increasing the current commitment with the rest of the allies.²⁴

²⁴ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/390140/public-sees-russia-ukraine-conflict-critical-threat.aspx>

Therefore, as can be seen in the different graphs, there is a clear divergence between Republican and Democratic voters about NATO. That is to say, that the position of the Republican representatives of nationalist unilateralism has numerous followers among their voters, which reinforces their confrontational positions and ensures their survival at least in the medium term.

Possible scenarios

Taking into account the current ideologization of the political debate on international issues, and in particular on transatlantic relations and NATO, and surveys of American public opinion, we can highlight the following factors as the most important in determining the position of the United States towards NATO for the year 2050:

- The evolution of domestic debates: if the United States continues along the path of increasing political polarization through which it has been traveling since the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is to be expected that transatlantic relations will be affected by issues of domestic debate, especially if the unilateralist and nationalist side that characterized the Trump Administration takes hold within the Republican Party and the socialist strand within the Democratic Party continues to seduce its younger voters, precisely the least seduced by the permanence of the United States in NATO.
- Demographic forecasts: if by 2050 the United States is an older country, it is to be expected that support for NATO will be consolidated, since it is those over 65 who see the most benefits in remaining in the Alliance. However, this trend can be altered by two issues. First, the effect of increasing ethnic and racial diversity in the U.S. on U.S. opinion of NATO remains to be seen, for as the white, Anglo-Saxon majority cedes ground to minorities, other international issues are likely to change, Other international issues can be expected to creep onto the public agenda, potentially pushing transatlantic relations into the background, especially, and here we come to the second issue, as new generations with no vital ties to the Cold War replace the older ones.
- The international scenario: if in 2050 the global environment experiences a situation of conflict or at least of growing polarization and competitiveness, it is expected that support

for NATO will continue to be the majority in the United States, both among its political class and among its public opinion, as has been demonstrated after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In any case, that support will not only depend on the global situation, it will also be affected by how the participation of its European partners in NATO is perceived in the United States. If the perception that it is the United States that carries the weight of the Alliance in the face of the passivity of the rest of the allies is maintained, the percentage of skeptics and the front of rejection of the permanence in NATO will undoubtedly grow. On the other hand, if the European countries members of the Alliance finally comply with their commitments, they will have defused one of the main arguments against it. In any case, it must also be taken into account that NATO enlargement has had negative effects on NATO support in the United States, because, as Lake (1999, 197) points out, "instead of strengthening existing security relations and uniting the United States more firmly to the policy of international security cooperation, in the end, NATO's expansion has prompted it to retreat, once again, in unilateralism."

Thus, we can observe both positive and negative trends in the relationship between the United States and NATO for the year 2050. It will all depend on the whimsical way the different variables combine by then. But if the Russian invasion of Ukraine has made anything clear, NATO will be as necessary in 2050 as it was a century ago. Whether the Alliance's idealistic component, embodied in the claim of its democratic identity, or the more prosaic one of mutual defense, will be the least important, since both elements are closely intertwined at the core of its constitution. What will determine its future will be that both our political classes and ourselves, the citizenry, continue to see NATO as an effective instrument for the survival of our societies.

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