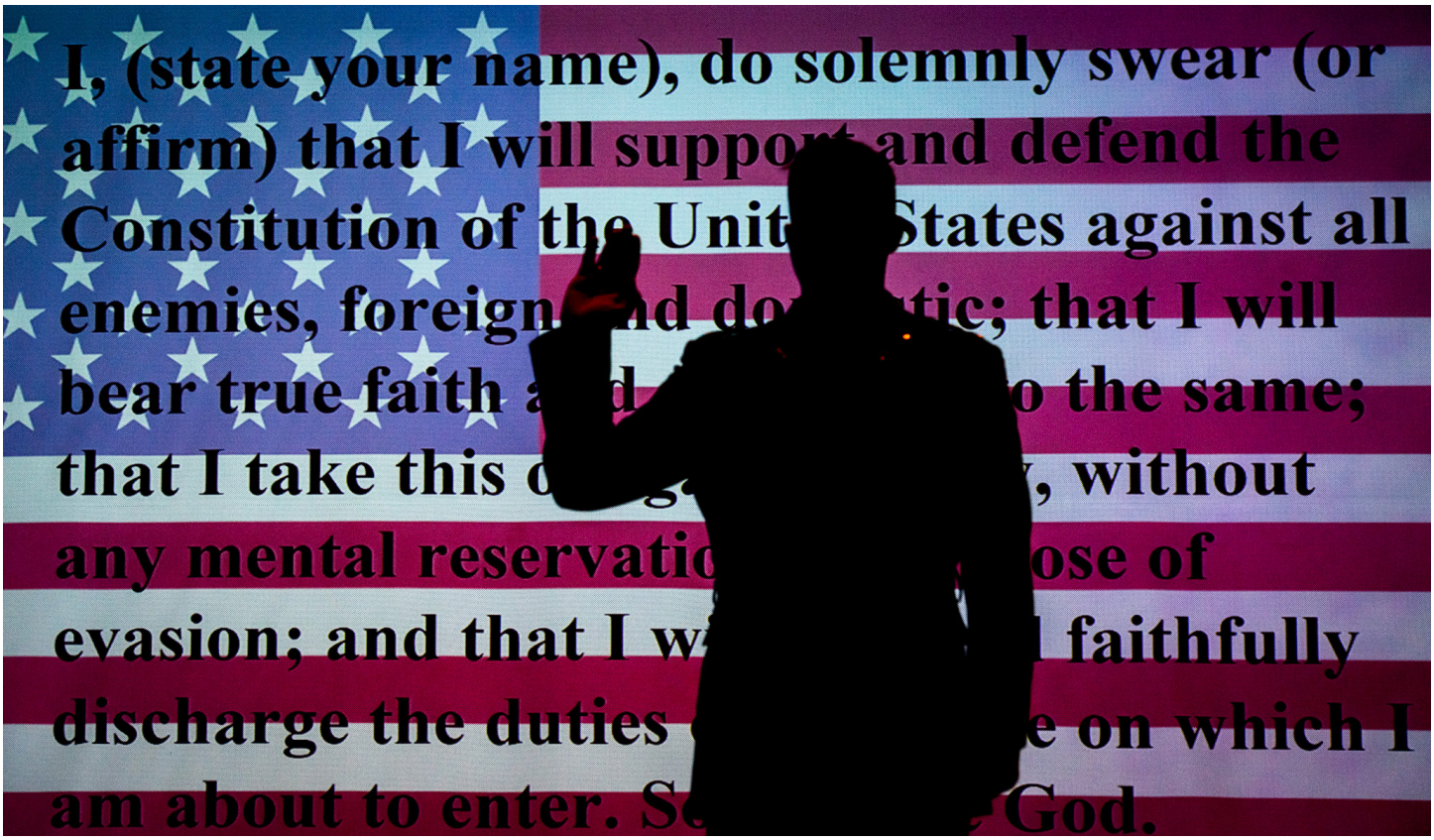


October 2026

Survey: Trust in the Military Depends on Lawful, Ethical, and Responsible Operations

By Carrie A. Lee and Loren Voss

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US President Donald Trump and his administration have repeatedly suggested that they are considering using military forces around the midterms to ensure the elections' security. The president has also admitted that he regrets not using the National Guard to seize ballot boxes in the 2020 election. Yet the introduction of military forces into any election in the United States—a scenario that has not been seen in roughly 150 years—could do significant and irreparable harm to the legitimacy of the vote. Critically, new research also indicates that exposure to news about domestic military intervention and potential abuses of power significantly reduces confidence in the military itself.

The Democracy and Security Network at the German Marshall Fund of the United States partnered with NORC at the University of Chicago to conduct a survey of 2,800 Americans, half of whom were veterans. We over-sampled on veterans to analyze the perspective of those who have served in the US armed forces, but all overall results are weighted to be nationally representative, where veterans represent approximately 6% of the population. We asked respondents to provide their views on a number of scenarios and statements that covered military interventions into domestic affairs (and elections in particular), unlawful orders, and trust and confidence in the military. This survey is unique. Among other innovations, it separated out different parts of the military (such as politically appointed leaders versus the rank-and-file enlisted members), asked about trust in a variety of actions (such as willingness to disobey a clearly unlawful order), and measured beliefs about who is responsible for ensuring that the military obeys the law.

Our survey found that Americans overwhelmingly believe that the military should follow the law and be held accountable for unlawful conduct. In particular, the public expects Congress to play a significant role in checking abuses of power over the military and ensuring that unlawful orders are not followed. However, the public does not necessarily trust the military to follow the law when deployed domestically. It further finds that domestic deployments to polling sites do not have majority support from members of either party. Support for domestic troop deployments is generally low, even when military leaders try to mitigate the effect of the deployment. Finally, the survey revealed that interventions into elections could significantly reduce overall public confidence in the military as an institution.

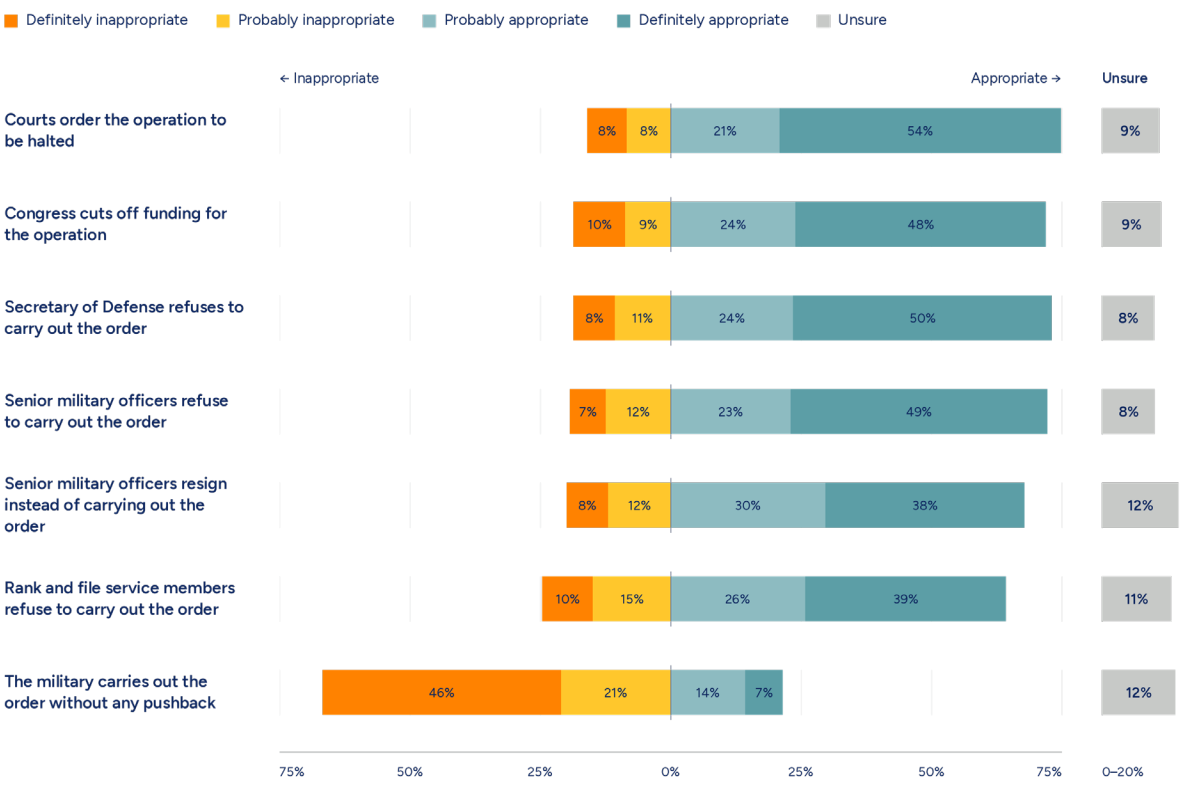
Americans Want a Military That Follows the Law and Institutions That Check Executive Power

Respondents overwhelmingly believe that the US military should follow both domestic and international law. Some 85% declared that it was important for the US military to obey the laws of war, and 72% believed it would be appropriate for a senior military leader to refuse to execute an order they knew was unlawful. Moreover, three in four respondents answered that the president should stop a military action if a federal court ruled it illegal.

Americans surveyed also assign responsibility broadly for failures to follow the law. More than 80% of respondents believed that civilian leaders, military leaders, and military lawyers should be held responsible if the military were found to have executed an illegal operation. They also believe that multiple groups are liable for judging whether an order is lawful: Half of those surveyed responded that the Supreme Court, federal courts, military lawyers, and Congress all have responsibility for determining the legality of a military order.

Public Preferences on Institutional Checks and Balances

Question: If the president gives the military an order that is clearly unlawful, would the following actions be appropriate or inappropriate?



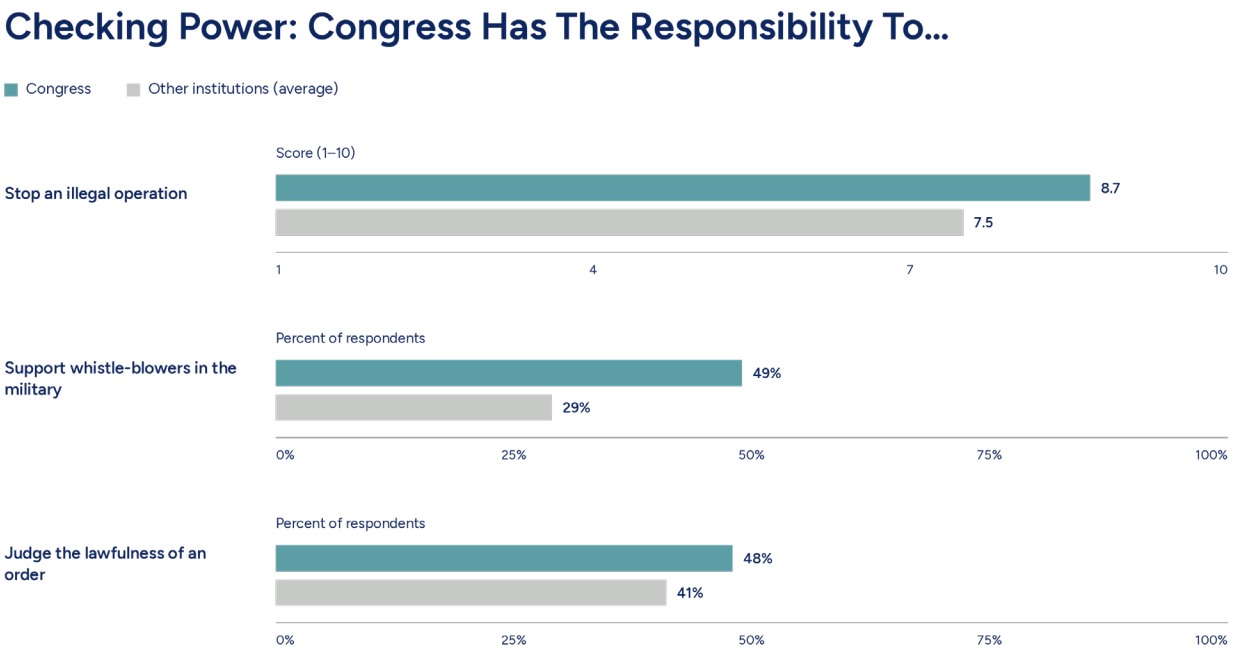
Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States. N = 2800 respondents via NORC AmeriSpeak panel. Sampling error measured at +/- 2 pts.

Share of respondents (%), rounded to whole percentages. Rounding may cause totals to differ from 100%. Segment widths are normalized to 100%. "Unsure" is shown on a separate 0-20% scale and is not a midpoint. Left and right indicate response levels, not negative values.

Finally, the survey found that Americans believe that it is appropriate for institutions to resist unlawful orders. The 76% of respondents who answered that the president should not be allowed to continue a military action that a court has found unlawful assigned disproportionate responsibility to Congress, the courts, and senior military leaders to actively stop the president from continuing the operation (compared to other groups such as voters or individual service members). And more than 70% of respondents—including more than 60% of Republicans—saw actions such as court orders, withdrawal of Congressional funding, and military disobedience as appropriate responses to a clearly unlawful order.

Americans Voice Strong Support for Congressional Oversight

In particular, the survey found that Americans believe that Congress has a critical role to play in pushing back against executive abuses of power and unlawful military orders. Of the institutions seen as responsible for stopping the president, respondents gave Congress the highest level of responsibility—higher even than the courts. Some 72% of respondents, including 65% of Republicans, voiced support for Congress to hold the president accountable by cutting off funding for illegal operations. Moreover, when presented with a scenario in which a senior commander was given an order they simply **believed** to be unlawful, approximately half of Americans surveyed voiced support for that commander to go to Congress with their concerns. Notably, the survey revealed that in these contexts, confidence in Congress appears to rise: Some 19% of respondents expressed confidence in Congress after being presented with a situation in which the military was deployed to address election threats, compared with the 9% confidence rating found by Gallup earlier this year.



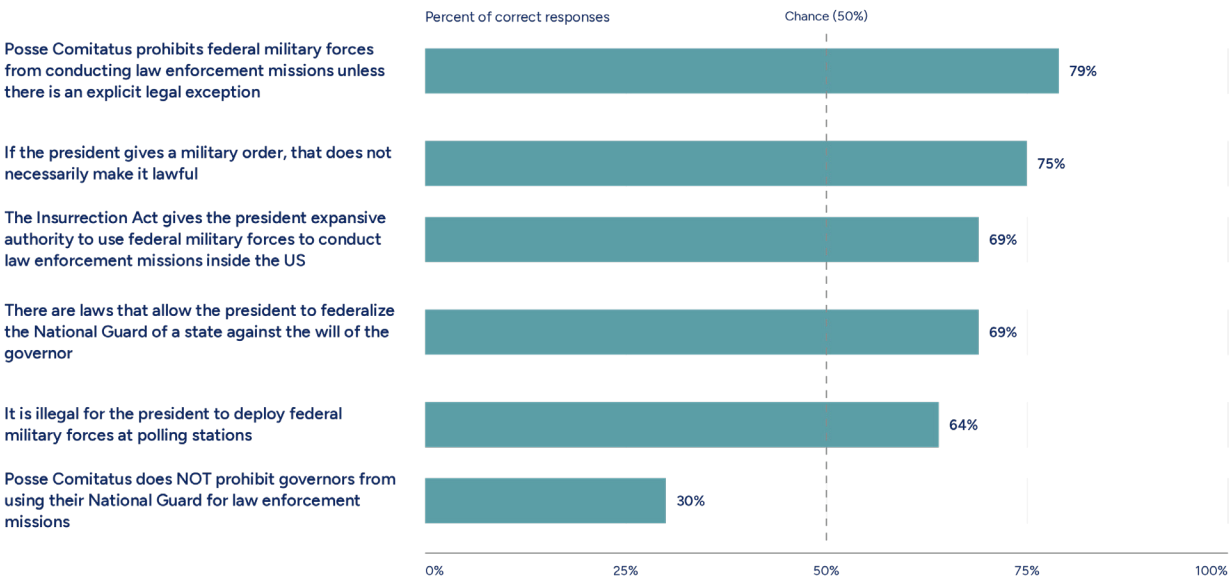
Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States. N = 2,050, 1400, and 2800 respondents, respectively via NORC AmeriSpeak panel. Sampling error measured at +/- 2 pts.

Share of respondents (%), rounded to whole percentages. Rounding may cause totals to differ from 100%.

Knowledge Gaps: Americans' Knowledge of the Law is Uneven

Although the survey shows that they feel strongly about having a force that is ethical and subject to the law, Americans' knowledge of the laws governing domestic military operations is uneven. For example, 79% of Americans surveyed knew that the Posse Comitatus Act prevents the federal government from using federal military forces to conduct law enforcement missions in the United States. However, only 30% of respondents knew that the act does not apply to a governor's ability to use their National Guard. There is a partisan split in knowledge, but which party has better knowledge depends on the question.

Did You Know? Public Knowledge of Law Governing Domestic Military Deployments



Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States. N = 2800 respondents via NORC AmeriSpeak panel. Sampling error measured at +/- 2 pts.

Note: Phrases re-written from original survey to all be true. Actual survey presented respondents with a mix of true and false statements

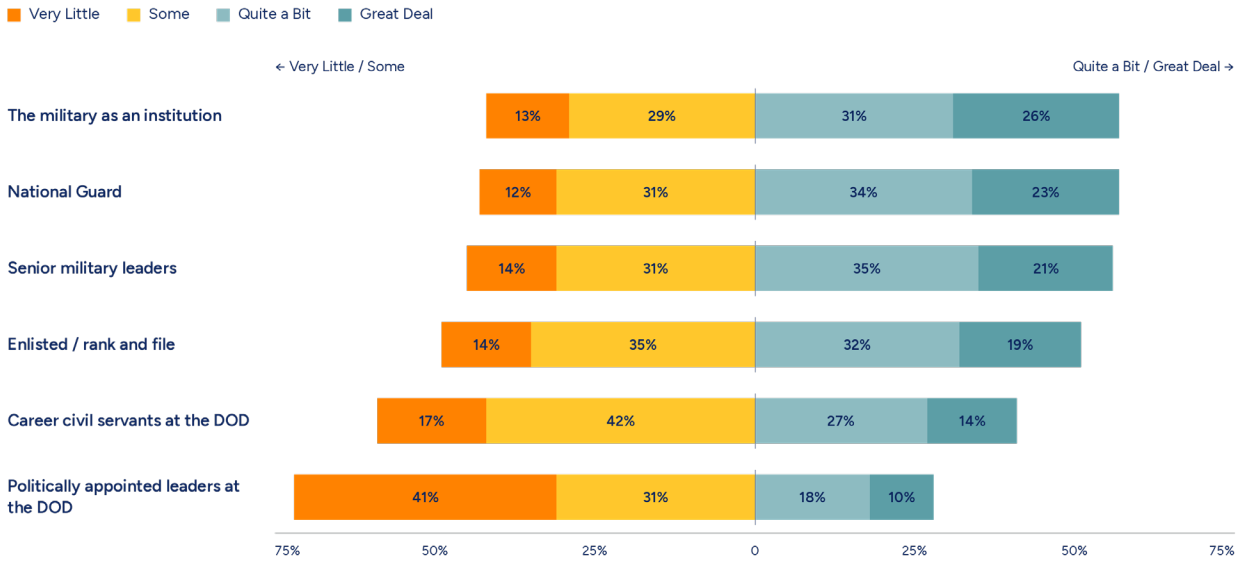
While there is an explicit law against the presence of federal troops at polling places, only 64% of Americans knew of this legal prohibition. There is also a legal requirement for military members to refuse to follow a patently unlawful order, yet only 66% of Americans surveyed were aware of this obligation. These were also the two questions with the largest partisan split in knowledge. Of the Democrats surveyed, 77% knew about the prohibition against troops at polls while only 42% of Republicans did, and 82% of Democrats were aware of the duty to refuse patently unlawful orders, while only 54% of Republicans were aware. Increasing knowledge of the legal bounds of domestic actions, for both the American public and members of the military, would help ensure that unlawful orders are recognized and that the public can hold leaders accountable when those boundaries are crossed.

A Trust Deficit: Confidence in the Military Is Weakest Where Restraint Is Required

DSN's polling examined trust in the military beyond trust in the institution as a whole and found significant differences across the groups that make up the military (ranging from politically appointed leaders to rank-and-file enlisted members) and across a variety of actions the military may be expected to take. Trust in all groups and actions is lower than necessary to sustain healthy civil-military relations.

DSN's survey indicated that confidence in the military as an institution was at 58%, which aligns with a long-term trend of declining trust. Among the groups that make up the military, confidence in Department of Defense's politically appointed leaders was by far the lowest at 29%. Confidence in the National Guard and senior military leaders was the highest, at 57% and 56%, respectively.

Confidence Levels in the Military, by Subgroup

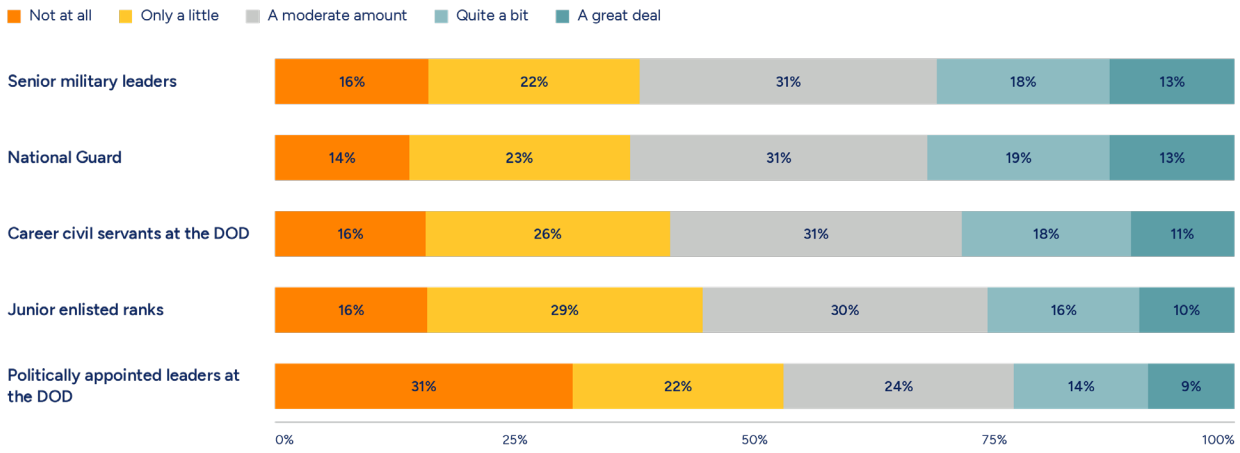


Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States. N = 2800 respondents via NORC AmeriSpeak panel. Sampling error measured at +/- 2 pts.

Share of respondents (%), rounded to whole percentages. Rounding may cause totals to differ from 100%. Segment widths are normalized to 100%. Left and right indicate response levels, not negative values.

The survey further asked Americans how much confidence they had that the different groups of the military would refuse a clearly unlawful order. Only 31% of Americans surveyed have significant confidence that senior military leaders will refuse such an order, which was the highest across groups. The poll also asked Americans how much confidence they had that the various military groups' treatment of American citizens would remain in line with constitutional rights if deployed inside the United States. The National Guard was rated the highest, with a confidence level of just 42%.

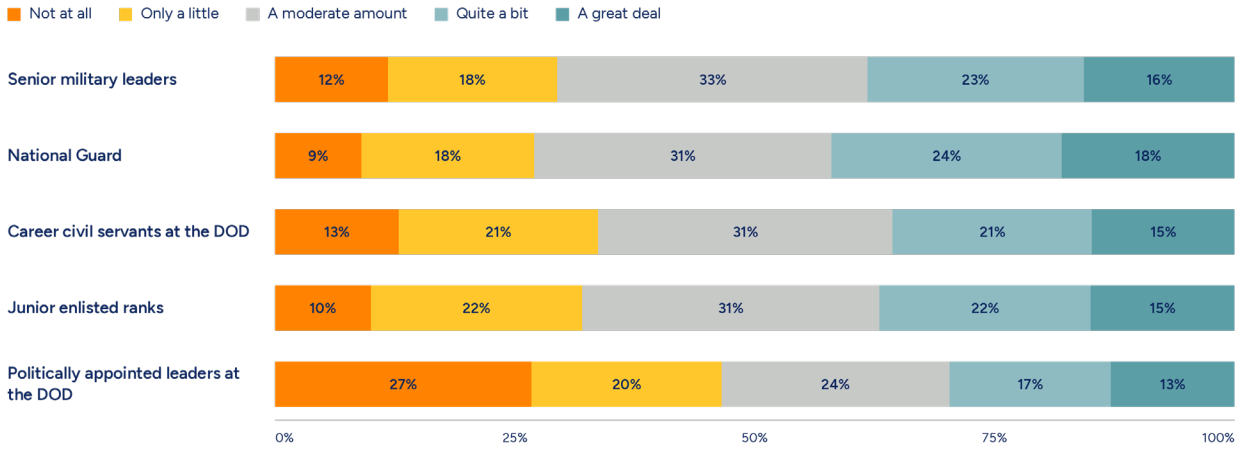
Public Trust in Willingness to Refuse a Clearly Illegal Order, by Subgroup



Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States. N = 2800 respondents via NORC AmeriSpeak panel. Sampling error measured at +/- 2 pts.

Share of respondents (%), rounded to whole percentages. Rounding may cause totals to differ from 100%. Segment widths are normalized to 100%.

Public Trust in Military Respect for Constitutional Rights During Domestic Deployments



Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States. N = 2800 respondents via NORC AmeriSpeak panel. Sampling error measured at +/- 2 pts.

Share of respondents (%), rounded to whole percentages. Rounding may cause totals to differ from 100%. Segment widths are normalized to 100%.

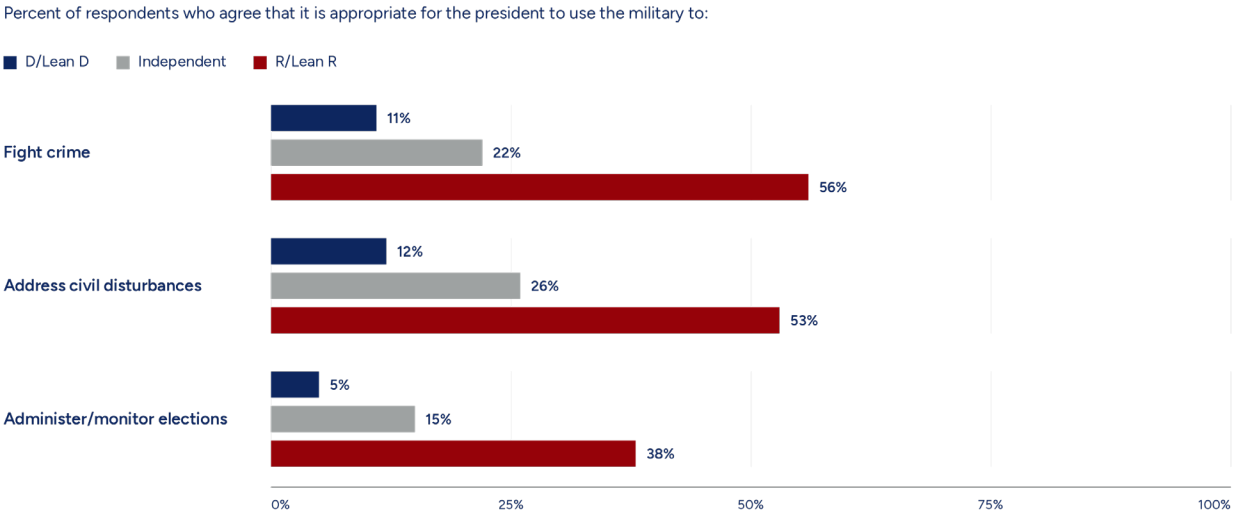
Veterans' confidence was higher than that of the general population, which indicates that those with direct military experience have more confidence in the military than does the average American. Yet veterans' highest level of confidence across all groups is still relatively low. Just 45% of veterans have confidence that senior military leaders will refuse patently unlawful orders, and only 55% believe that senior leaders' treatment of Americans will remain in line with constitutional rights when they are deployed domestically.

This low confidence among veterans indicates that the concern among the general population does not just reflect a lack of knowledge of the military. Critically, however, the survey does not measure beliefs about intent: Some respondents may believe that military members would purposefully violate legal obligations, while others might argue that introducing military forces into domestic scenarios—where they receive little to no formal training—increases risk. Nevertheless, these are exactly the kinds of missions that appear to be on the rise for the military, which raises questions about long-term trends in confidence levels.

Domestic Military Deployments Are Unpopular, Especially in Election Scenarios

Our survey found that despite the administration's increasing use of the military for domestic missions—for example, the deployment of National Guard troops in Washington, DC, and expansion of military jurisdiction along the border—Americans nevertheless remain generally opposed to the use of troops at home. According to the survey findings, less than 40% of the American public believes that the US military is well prepared to conduct law enforcement missions inside the United States, with veterans being especially skeptical of the military's preparedness. Moreover, less than one-third of Americans surveyed believe that domestic deployments to address crime and civil disturbances are an appropriate use of the military. This aversion holds across partisan identities: Despite strong signals and messaging from the administration that domestic military deployments will increasingly be the norm, only about half of Republicans surveyed see these missions as appropriate.

Public Views of Appropriateness of Domestic Military Deployments



Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States. N = 1400 respondents via NORC AmeriSpeak panel. Sampling error measured at +/- 2 pts.

Share of respondents (%) who answered Agree / Strongly Agree, rounded to whole percentages. Rounding may cause totals to differ from 100%.

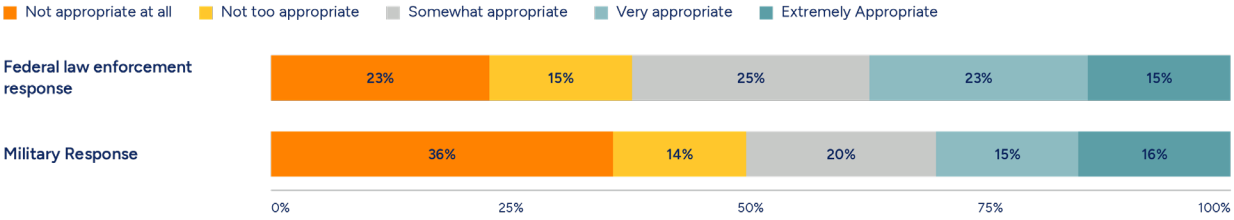
Note: Phrases re-written from original survey to reflect support for domestic deployments. Respondents were presented with a mix of choices to support or not support.

The survey found that Americans are especially averse to domestic uses of the military in election scenarios. Indeed, a full 59% of respondents agreed that the president should not use the federal military to monitor or administer elections. Importantly, while Republicans were less willing to condemn this use, generating outright support for these operations remained difficult: Fewer than 4 in 10 Republicans (38%) supported the use of the military to observe elections.

Even when presented with a scenario that included widespread violence and property damage, respondents were not eager to see the military play a role in election security. Less than 30% of our sample considered the deployment of military forces to be appropriate. Indeed, when asked, respondents expressed significantly more comfort with the use of federal law enforcement as opposed to use of the military to address election security issues. (Note: It is illegal for federal "armed men", for example FBI special agents, to be at the polls as well.)

Public Support for Election-Related Deployments: Scenarios

Percent of respondents who agree that it is appropriate for the president to use the military to:



Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States. N = 2103 (military deployment) and 544 (FBI deployment) respondents via NORC AmeriSpeak panel. Sampling error measured at +/- 3 pts.

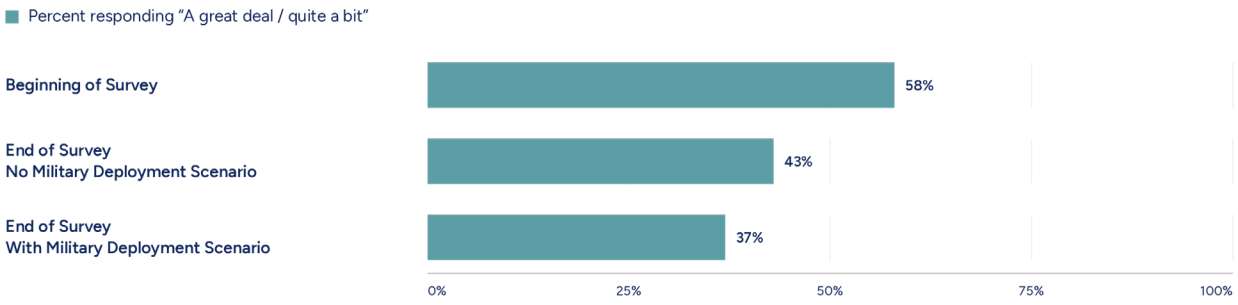
Share of respondents (%), rounded to whole percentages. Rounding may cause totals to differ from 100%. Segment widths are normalized to 100%.

Perhaps most importantly, there appears to be little that military leaders can do to change public attitudes about the deployments. When respondents were presented with a scenario in which military leaders questioned the lawfulness of an order or took steps to coordinate with state and local law enforcement and reduce escalation, these actions had no effect on respondents' perceptions of the appropriateness of the mission.

Abuses of Power Reduce Trust in the Military, But Senior Leaders Can Curb This Decline by Signaling Responsible Behavior

Perhaps the most striking finding from the survey was what it revealed about how exposure to news and information about domestic deployments and abuses of power shape public confidence in the military as an institution. DSN found that simply asking Americans to contemplate the prospect of unlawful orders and domestic military deployments reduced confidence in the military by a full 15%. Notably, when respondents were presented with a scenario that included military intervention in response to possible election threats following earlier protester violence, confidence in the military decreased by more than 20 percentage points from the already low figure of 58% to just 37%.

Confidence in the Military as an Institution, Before and After Survey



Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States. N=2800, 544 (no military deployment scenario), and 2103 (military deployment scenario) respondents respectively via NORC AmeriSpeak panel. Sampling error measured at +/- 3 pts.

Share of respondents (%), rounded to whole percentages.

This precipitous drop in confidence—a by-product of individuals taking a 12-minute survey based on hypothetical situations—strongly suggests that military and political leaders should be extraordinarily wary of using the military for operations that are highly polarized and politicized. Our survey clearly shows that the consequences of such interventions go beyond the popularity of the deployment and instead reduce confidence in the institution itself.

Yet there may be some opportunity for military leaders to curb the decline in trust if they are in fact ordered to conduct domestic operations. In particular, when respondents were presented with a civil disturbance scenario in which military leaders were careful to coordinate with local law enforcement and took measures to prevent escalation, trust in the military fell less sharply (even as attitudes about the appropriateness of the mission remained the same). In civil disturbance cases, at least, it appears that when military leaders publicly signal their intent to show restraint and coordinate with local officials, it can calm many of Americans' worst fears about the military.

Recommendations: Education and Accountability Are Key to Keeping Public Trust

Education Can Reduce Mistrust

Previous research shows that Americans' trust in the military is informed by a number of factors, including professional ethics. Our survey shows that when military ethics are compromised because of either unlawful or so-called "lawful but awful" orders (such as highly polarized domestic deployments), public trust declines. Yet public knowledge of the law is uneven, which may lead to public misconceptions about the duties of officers, and to misplaced mistrust of the military or its missions.

Veterans, civil society groups, and political leaders should therefore work to ensure that Americans know what the legal obligations of service members are, the laws that govern domestic deployments, and the civil-military norms that support professional military ethics. They can do this by focusing on critical laws, such as the Posse Comitatus Act or 18 USC Section 592 (also known as "Troops at Polls"), which forbids federal military forces from being present at polling sites. Civil society and veteran organizations should also acknowledge, however, that there are cases where the legal boundaries are less clear and society must instead rely on civil-military norms that emphasize prudence and restraint to ensure appropriate behavior.

Accountability Can Deter Abuses of Power

Our survey also shows that in general the public believes that certain institutions have a responsibility to push back against unlawful orders. Congress in particular has an important role to play in providing oversight and accountability. Members of Congress should increase their level of engagement with the military and create additional opportunities for military members to communicate their concerns. If and when there are legitimate reasons to believe an unlawful order has been given, Congress can leverage its oversight authority to hold hearings on the issue. This ensures that civilian leadership can be held accountable and also signals to the rest of the force that there will be consequences for unlawful operations. Members of Congress also have leverage via the appropriations and authorization processes, as well as their obligations to provide advice and consent on all military promotions.

Military commanders must also be made more aware of both the conditions in which a service member is obligated to disobey an unlawful order (the person "knew the orders to be unlawful" or "a person of ordinary sense or understanding" would know), and what their options are when they are faced with a potentially unlawful order. In particular, they should consult with their Judge Advocate General (JAG) and bring their concerns to the chain of command. Providing concerns and feedback in writing is also widely considered a best practice, and ensures that all parties have an opportunity to think through and review any legal or ethical concerns in a transparent fashion. If there is still no change in the order and the commander knows it to be unlawful, they must then consider raising the issue even higher up the chain of command, contacting the Inspector General or Congress, or refusing the order outright.

Leaders Should Have a Plan to Mitigate the Worst Effects

Finally, military commanders, federal officials, and state leaders should consider the effects of domestic military operations on public trust. Leaders should assess the risk that any operation poses to the reputation of the military—and the long-term effects that declines in public trust can have on recruiting, retention, public support for military budgets, and public support for the use of force broadly. And if military commanders are indeed ordered to engage in domestic missions—particularly around elections—they should take care to work in close coordination with state and local officials, and make every effort to act in a responsible, restrained fashion, ensuring that public messaging and engagement reflects transparency.