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PUBLIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE US INTERCONTINENTAL BALLISTIC MISSILE FORCE

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Background & Context

The Pentagon is currently planning to replace its current arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) with a brand-new missile force, known as the [Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent](#), or [GBSD](#).

The GBSD program consists of a like-for-like replacement of all 400 Minuteman III missiles that are currently deployed across Colorado, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming, and will also include a full set of test-launch missiles, as well as upgrades to the launch facilities, launch control centers, and other supporting infrastructure.

The GBSD program will keep ICBMs in the United States' nuclear arsenal [until 2075](#), and is estimated to cost approximately [\\$100 billion](#) in acquisition fees and [\\$264 billion](#) throughout its life-cycle.

However, critics of the GBSD program are noting a growing number of concerns over the program's [increasing costs, tight schedule, and lack of 21st century national security relevance](#). Many argue that the GBSD's price tag is too high amid a plethora of other budgetary pressures. Many also say that alternative deterrence options—such as life-extending the current Minuteman III ICBM force—are available at a much lower cost.

On behalf of the [Federation of American Scientists](#), [ReThink Media](#) conducted a [national survey of 800 registered voters](#) between [12-28 October 2020](#), with the purpose of exploring Americans' opinions about US nuclear posture in general, and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in particular. The survey included an [oversample of 200 registered voters in “nuclear sponge” states](#) (Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming), in order to gain deeper insight into how residents of the “nuclear sponge” think about the weapons that their states are hosting.

The survey was conducted online using a panel provided by Qualtrics, and has a confidence interval (similar to a margin of error) of $\pm 3.4\%$. The data were weighted slightly by gender, age, race, educational attainment, party ID, vote history, and region to be representative of the registered voter population.

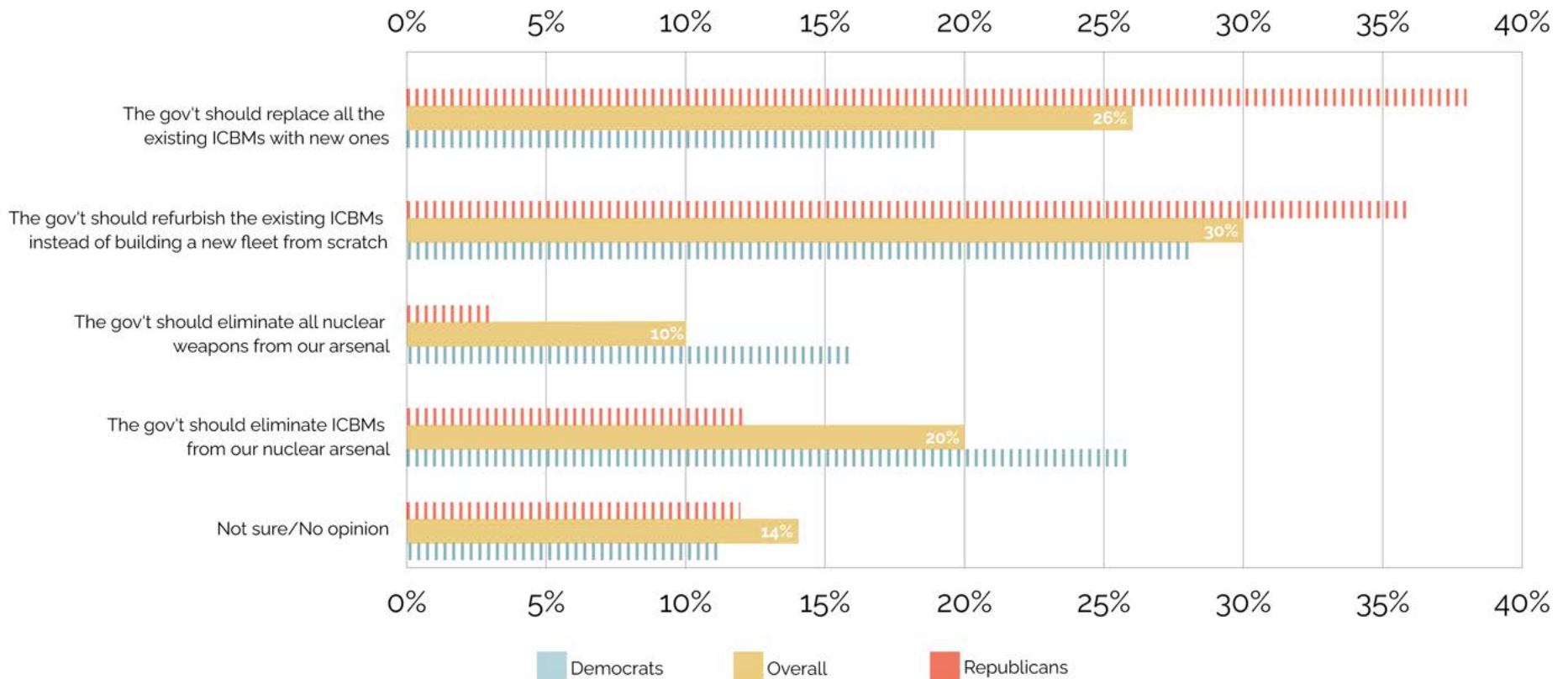
To the authors' knowledge, this is [one of the most in-depth US-based surveys ever conducted about ICBMs](#), and therefore, the results shed significant light on how Americans perceive ICBMs and their role in US nuclear doctrine, and whether they ultimately support continued investment in this particular weapon system in the form of the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD).

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Image credit: Nuclear Missile Silo: Titan II ICBM in an underground complex. Photo by [Steve Jurvetson via Flickr](#). Edited.

A majority of Americans (60%) support alternative policy options to the GBSD program of record.

What do you think the government should do about ICBMs?*



Support for GBSD among
 Democrats: 19%
 Republicans: 38%

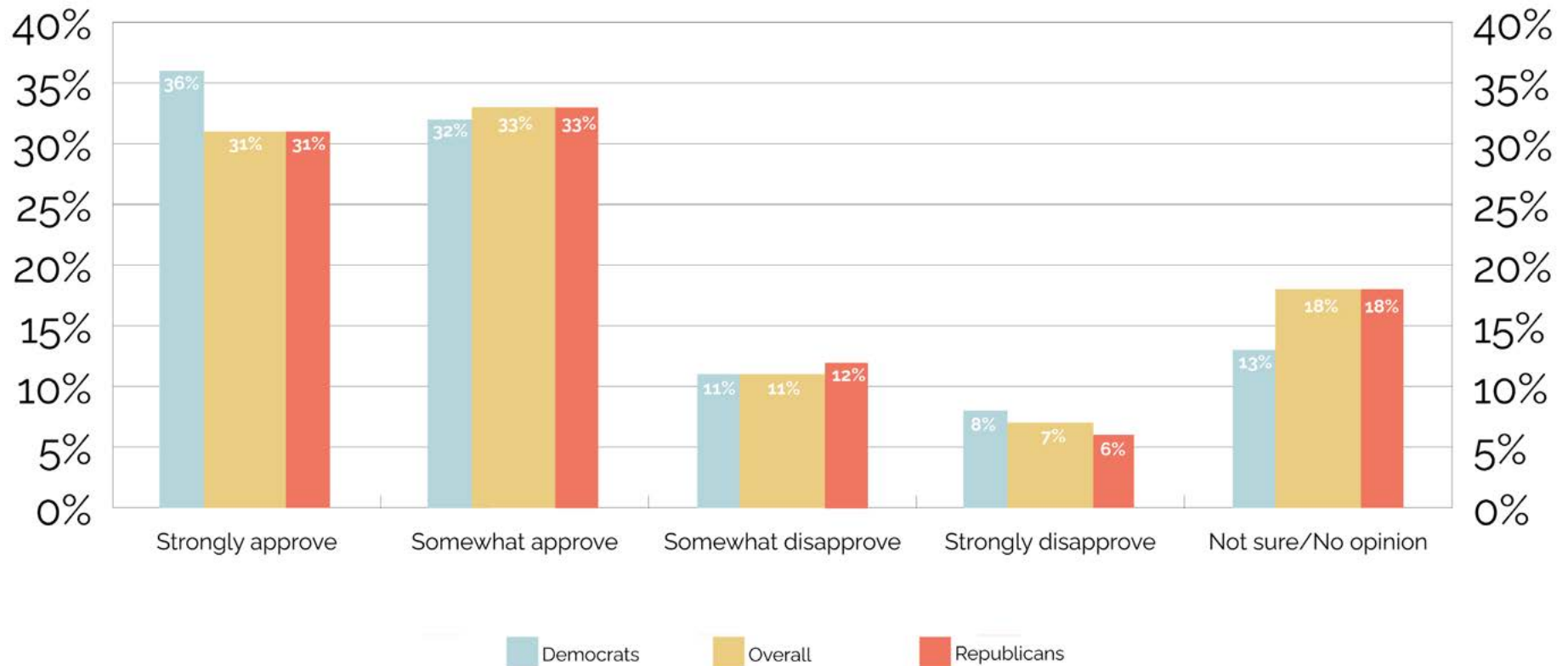
Support for *alternative* policies among
 Democrats: 70%
 Republicans: 50%

Why this matters: Pressure is mounting on the Biden administration to delay, cancel, or reduce the scope of GBSD, with many influential figures and former top military officials speaking out against the program. These results suggest that doing so would be broadly supported on a bipartisan basis.

*This question was asked six times throughout the course of the survey, but the following results are taken from the final ask, after the respondents received the totality of the information provided during the survey.

A bipartisan majority of Americans (64%) support delaying the GBSD program, continuing to life-extend the Minuteman III ICBMs, and launching a review of the GBSD program. Only 18% of respondents were opposed.

Would you approve or disapprove of delaying the GBSD program while it undergoes a review, and continuing to refurbish the existing ICBM arsenal in the meantime?

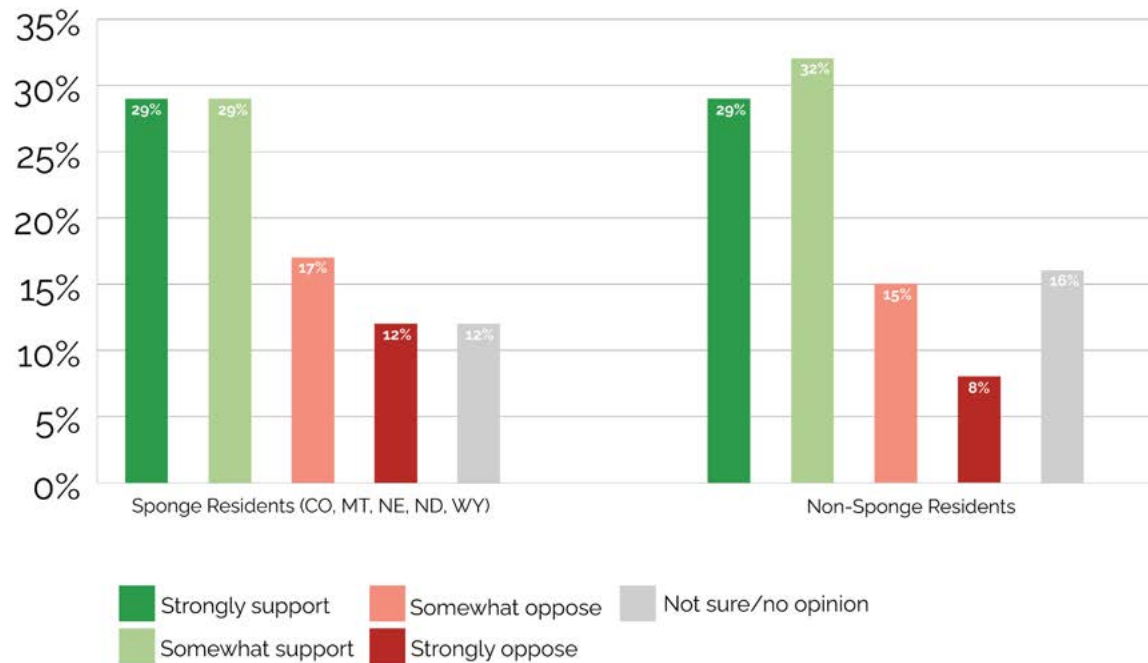


Why this matters: An exhaustive review of the GBSD program is long overdue, and would help both Congress and the Biden administration determine the best course of action for either delaying, canceling, reducing, or ultimately proceeding with the GBSD program of record.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that cancelling the program and continuing to life-extend the current ICBM force would save approximately \$120 billion through 2046.

A majority of Americans inside and outside the “nuclear sponge” support phasing out the ICBMs, provided that the government provides economic offsets to ICBM communities.

Some people have proposed a phase-out of ICBM activities in silo states—Colorado, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming—with a guaranteed job and income for anybody whose job is displaced in doing so. Generally speaking, would you support or oppose this proposal?



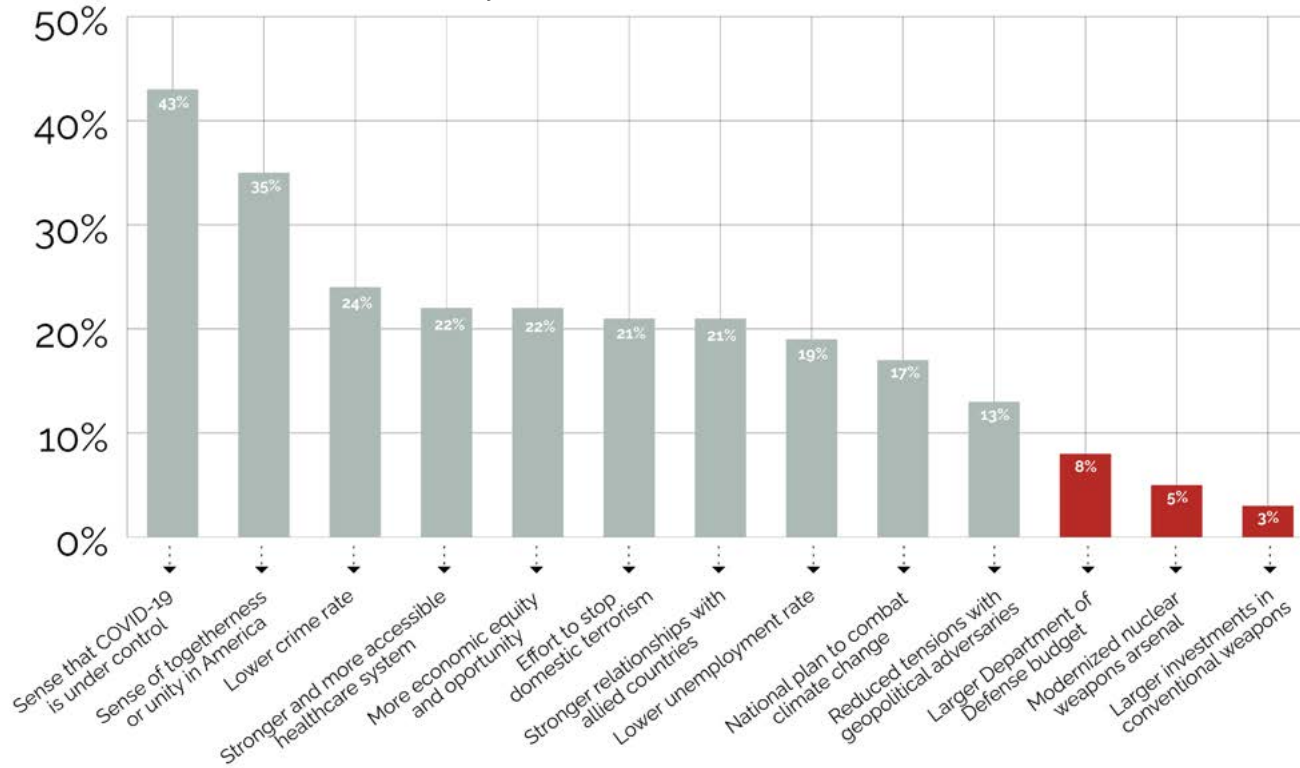
Why this matters: Congresspeople from “nuclear sponge” states (the five Midwestern states that host ICBMs) generally oppose any cuts to the ICBM force, out of fear of losing votes from their constituents.

However, these results demonstrate that Americans living inside and outside the “nuclear sponge” are overwhelmingly in favor of phasing out ICBMs, provided that job and income guarantees could be provided as economic offsets to those communities.

This suggests that most Americans—including those living closest to the missiles themselves—believe more in the ICBM force’s perceived benefits to economic security, rather than to national security.

Americans overwhelmingly do not derive their sense of safety from military investment.

Regardless of how secure you feel the United States is currently, which of the following would make you feel more safe? Choose up to three.

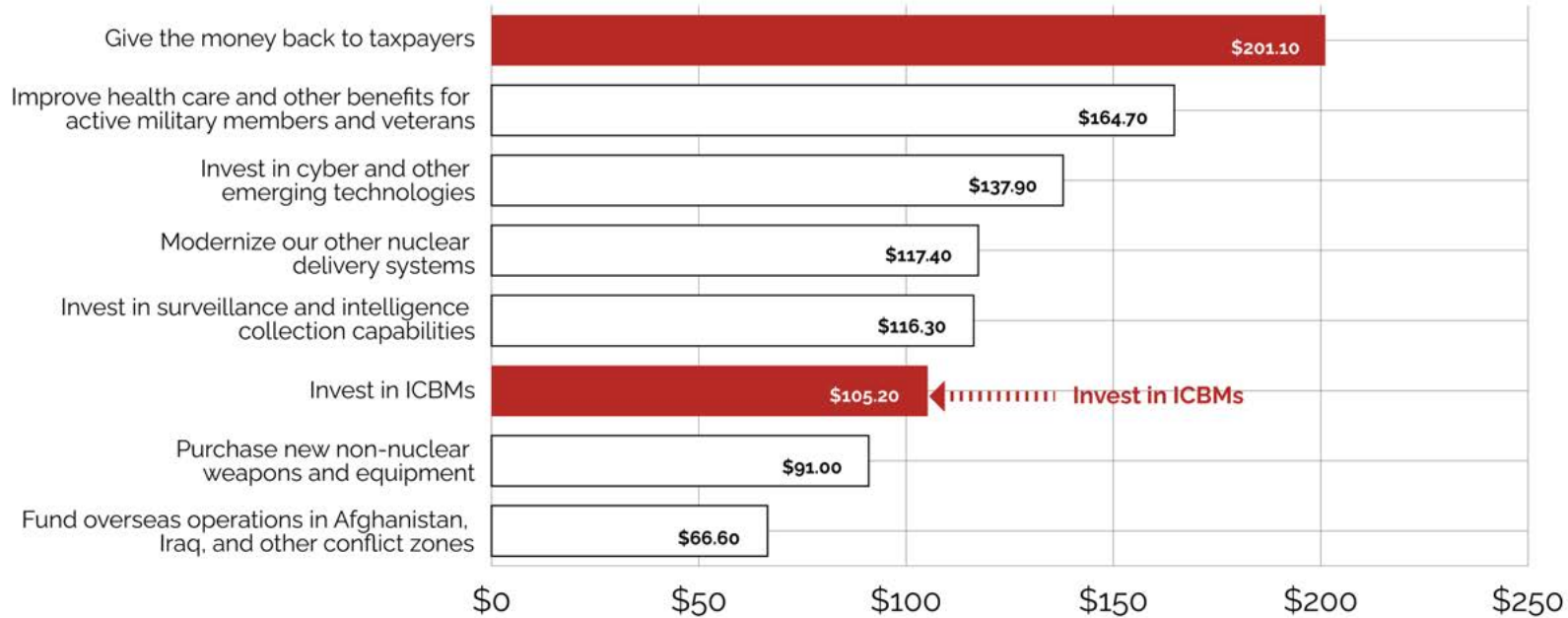


Why this matters: The GBSD program of record is projected to cost \$264 billion through 2075. However, these results demonstrate that military investment in general—and nuclear modernization in particular—contributes very little to Americans' feelings about personal safety.

These results suggest that reallocating a portion of those funds towards more everyday safety priorities—such as combatting Covid-19, reducing crime and domestic terrorism, and fostering a sense of national unity—would be broadly supported by Americans on both sides of the political spectrum (only 3% of Democrats and 6% of Republicans ranked a “modernized nuclear weapons arsenal” in their top three safety priorities).

Americans would prefer that the government simply **not spend money**, rather than spend it on the military.

Imagine that the Pentagon budget was \$1,000. How would you spend that money?



Why this matters: When given the choice between prioritizing ICBMs and alternative military capabilities, respondents overwhelmingly chose to simply “give the money back to taxpayers.” In conjunction with the results of the previous survey question about personal safety, this suggests that most respondents would choose to reduce the \$740 billion Pentagon budget if given the chance.

Interestingly, it also appears that Americans believe that the government should prioritize investing in more modern and emerging technologies—such as cyber and surveillance capabilities—than older weapons systems like ICBMs.

Americans also chose to allocate more money towards modernizing other elements of the US nuclear arsenal, suggesting that they see more value in US bombers and submarines than in ICBMs.

Americans would prefer that the government spend money on **domestic priorities**, rather than spend it on the military.

Imagine that the federal budget was \$1,000. How would you spend that money?



Why this matters: When given the choice between investing in ICBMs or domestic initiatives, respondents overwhelmingly chose the latter. In conjunction with the results of previous questions, this suggests that legislative efforts to redirect funding away from GBSD and towards more domestic priorities would be very popular.

These efforts would be particularly popular among younger voters: respondents aged 18-29 allocated only \$65.0 on average—by far the least amount of money—towards ICBMs, compared to respondents over the age of 65, who allocated an average of \$152.0, the second-most amount of money.

Instead of ICBMs, younger voters preferred that the government invest in clean energy alternatives (\$169.2), lower health care costs (\$167.4), and lower education costs (\$152.0), whereas older voters overwhelmingly preferred that the government ensure that social security is fully funded for decades to come (\$216.3) before investing in ICBMs.

Topline Summary of FAS/ReThink Media Polling on US Nuclear Policy

Oct. 2020

A *majority of Americans* support alternative policy options to the GBSD program of record (i.e. life-extending the current Minuteman III ICBMs, or eliminating the ICBM force altogether).

A *bipartisan majority of Americans* support delaying the GBSD program, continuing to life-extend the Minuteman III ICBMs, and launching a review of the GBSD program.

A *majority of Americans* inside and outside the “nuclear sponge” support phasing out the ICBMs, provided that the government provides economic offsets to ICBM communities.

Americans overwhelmingly *do not* derive their sense of safety from government investment in nuclear or conventional weapons.

Americans would generally prefer that the government simply give their tax dollars back to them, unless they are spending it on crucial domestic priorities like health care or social security. In reality, *Americans want the government to spend taxpayer dollars—just not on the military.*

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a city, likely Los Angeles, showing a dense grid of buildings and streets. On the right side of the image, a large, circular stadium is visible, partially illuminated from above. The overall color palette is dark and monochromatic, with shades of blue and grey.

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