Lake Research Partners worked with Foreign Policy for America to conduct two virtual focus groups among key swing voters to explore how the public understands and talks about America’s economic position in the world. The focus groups asked swing voters about the role they want the U.S. to play on the global stage, the connections they perceive between foreign and domestic policy, and the ways in which they relate U.S. foreign policy to their own economic situations. Below are summary findings from a research study of the focus group discussions, which were held in April 2021 among noncollege, independent white and Latinx men and women on global competitiveness.

Based on the discussions, key findings include:

- While strong partisans were excluded from the groups, Trump’s four years in the White House is the prism through which many participants view America’s foreign policies, leadership posture, and position on the global stage.
- The definition provided for global competitiveness receives mixed reactions, particularly from the women who associate competition with conflict and aggression. Neither group thinks competition alone is the best policy in foreign affairs, but instead see a usefulness for cooperation, competition, and as a last resort, confrontation.
- COVID-19 highlighted the fragility of the global markets and supply chain for essential goods for voters, who were faced with empty shelves due to shortages of goods manufactured abroad. Women participants spoke of their concerns around supply chains and the U.S. being too dependent on foreign manufacturing throughout the group.
- Women strongly support investments and policies that would enable the U.S. to be self-sufficient, volunteering domestically oriented policy solutions. Though they do not want the U.S. to be isolationist, they want the U.S. to benefit from global policies and agreements.
- While self-sufficiency is a desire, voters also believe it is in the U.S.’s national interest to be active globally. Although participants are not well-versed in specifics when it comes to foreign

---

1 Foreign Policy for America is a national membership-based advocacy organization working to strengthen support for principled American engagement in the world.

2 Lake Research Partners conducted two focus groups: one among 9 noncollege white or Latina women who self-identify as independents or soft Democrats under 55 years old across Eastern and Central states on April 13th and one among 8 noncollege white or Latino men who self-identify as independent or soft Democrats under 55 years old across Pacific and Mountain states on April 15th on behalf of Foreign Policy for America. The participants participated in a group session that lasted about two hours and participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

In opinion research, qualitative research seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. Because of the limited number of respondents and the restrictions of recruiting, this research must be considered in a qualitative frame of reference. This study cannot be considered reliable or valid in the statistical sense. This type of research is intended to provide knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and opinions about issues and concerns. The following limitations are inherent in qualitative research and are stated here to remind the reader that the qualitative data presented in this memo cannot be projected to any universe of individuals. Participants who respond to the invitation of a stranger to participate in this research show themselves to be risk takers and may be somewhat more assertive than non-participants. Some participants speak more often and more forcefully in focus group sessions than other participants, so their opinions tend to carry more weight in the findings. Participants “self-select” themselves. Participants were not selected randomly; as a result, each person in the pool of possible participants did not have an equal chance to be selected. Additionally, as this is just two groups, we should not draw definitive conclusions based on participants’ responses.
relations between the United States and other countries, they share a desire for cooperation and helping others in need when necessary.

- Some voters understand that the way in which the U.S. interacts globally impacts the country’s economy, and therefore their personal lives. Though they struggle to provide examples of how international relations may impact their personal jobs or wallets directly, they have a broad understanding that the way in which the U.S. handles itself on the world stage impacts their personal opportunities.

- There is a gender gap. Where women see competition in more win/lose and aggressive terms, men see a way to compete and cooperate at the same time. Both men and women made it clear throughout the groups that they are open to and supportive of healthy competition, not zero-sum competition.

- Throughout the discussion, women share domestically oriented views and are responsive to “America First” rhetoric. On the other hand, the men seemed more engaged or knowledgeable of the economic and global implications of policies related to global competitiveness. In both groups, however, all participants were clear in their desire for global partnerships, rejecting the idea of the U.S. “going it alone.”

- Climate change is a top-of-mind issue among participants in the men’s group. They see a strong connection between climate change, investing in environmentally friendly infrastructure policies and initiatives, and the overall U.S. economy.

- Though most participants are not well-versed in any specifics when it comes to foreign relations between the United States and others, they share a strong desire for renewed and repaired relationships with other countries. Instead of conflict, participants want to see countries working together to solve issues related to climate change and human rights.

- America’s domestic well-being and successes affect its external image and strength. Voters respond well to messaging focused on creating jobs and boosting the economy. They support investments in policies that will strengthen the U.S. economy and workforce both domestically and abroad.

- It is important to keep in mind that foreign policy and issues related to international development and the global economy are not necessarily top of mind for the general public. As evidenced throughout the discussions, participants have limited knowledge on these topics and are deferential to leadership. They need a definition and examples to fully understand the benefits of global competitiveness.