

Abstract

There is always one question that always arises in times of war: what should a country protect? This question is answered in many different ways depending on the circumstances and who is being asked. The government, military and the citizens of the United States will generally have different ideas of what sorts of infrastructure must be protected. These gaps in knowledge between the upper levels of leadership and the civilian population need to be filled so that the country will be fully prepared to defend itself.

The gaps that do exist first need to be identified. This can be done using the materials that are released by the United States government and military, and by polling the general population. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has identified 16 key sectors that U.S. defense policy must focus on. CISA has conducted reviews of each of these areas and has determined which ones need bolstering. Gaps between administrative planning and military execution of these defense measures can be found by looking at each of these key areas.

The gaps in knowledge that exist between those in government and the general population of the United States can be identified by conducting a random poll utilizing proper polling techniques. Here, there will be certain aspects of defense that may not be considered by the military or government, yet remain important to the people. Once identified, these gaps can be filled through education of the public on the relative importance of certain threats.

For this project, a survey was distributed via email to the students, faculty and staff of Iowa State University. The survey asked a series of 12 questions ranging from general information such as age and military service, to the respondent's views on prioritizing the defense of certain critical infrastructure sectors during times of war. The survey cannot represent the whole American public as it was conducted purely on a single college campus, which does not encompass the whole demographic cross-section of the United States, however it does represent the opinions of those Americans attending college.

What Should the US Defend?

The survey, titled “What Should the US Defend?” was distributed via a mass email to the students, faculty and staff of Iowa State University. The survey was distributed on June 9th, 2022 and was closed on June 26th, 2022. It collected 1200 responses and included only those who identified themselves as United States citizens and were over 18 years of age. The survey cannot represent all American citizens as it was conducted on a single college campus, however it does provide a glimpse into the opinions of those Americans currently attending college as students or those who work at universities in a faculty or staff role. The main goal of the survey was to determine which critical infrastructure sectors the respondents believed were most vital to defend in times of war, or if they believed that there should be no distinction between the sectors. Other questions asked the respondents about their opinions on the US media and how much they trusted various media platforms.

The survey brought up some interesting questions about the knowledge gaps between the US government and college educated Americans. A knowledge gap exists when the perception of a single topic differs between two groups of groups of people due to a lack of knowledge in one or both of the groups. In the case of the government and the people, this could be due to many different factors. These gaps must be filled if the government and people are to work together in times of crisis. In a changing world where new enemies are rising and the global environment is no longer conducive to a permissive combat environment for the US military, it is more vital than ever to ensure that Americans are armed with the knowledge necessary to enter this new environment prepared for all outcomes.

There were several takeaways from the responses collected. Firstly, many respondents thought that all or most critical infrastructure sectors were of high to medium priority and there seemed to be a reluctance to apply the label of “lowest priority” to any of the sectors. Secondly, the plurality of respondents thought that China is the greatest threat to the United States,

however nearly 10% of respondents thought that internal threats were the greatest threat to the country. Thirdly, 56% of respondents answered that they get their information on current events from social media, however that platform was by far the least trusted. This information can help to determine the best ways of distributing information about US defense and increasing trust in the institutions charged with defending the United States

When looking at the infrastructure that needs to be defended in times of war, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has identified 16 critical infrastructure sectors that the government believes are the most important.¹ Question 1 of the survey asked respondents “What potential targets within the country do you think the United States should prioritize defending in the event of war with a nation that DOES possess nuclear weapons?” The sectors given in the survey were slightly different from the ones identified by CISA and the exact wording can be seen in the survey report.² This question was intended to try and determine if respondents thought that some sectors should be prioritized over others, or if they would be more likely to label all of the sectors as “highest priority”. This was something that several respondents commented on, believing that they should not have been able to label all sectors as “highest priority”. This shows that some respondents are aware that not all sectors can be defended equally.

This observation is quite important as the government looks at these critical sectors. Based on the results, the assumption that the military is able to defend all of these sectors at least somewhat equally appears to be common. The top three most important sectors in a nuclear conflict were, according to the respondents, energy infrastructure, military and defense infrastructure, and food and agriculture infrastructure.³ The top three for a conventional conflict (non-nuclear armed enemy) were energy, food and agriculture, and military and defense

¹ CISA, “Critical Infrastructure Sectors | CISA,” Cisa.gov, 2019, <https://www.cisa.gov/critical-infrastructure-sectors>.

² Question List

³ Table 1

infrastructure.⁴ These were labeled “highest priority” by over half of respondents. In contrast, the lowest ranked choices, education systems and commercial, business and finance infrastructure were labeled “lowest priority” by only around 10-15% of the respondents.⁵

This part of the survey does reveal a small gap in knowledge between the government and the public. The military understands that not all critical sectors can be defended equally and that resource allocation is a difficult question. It is interesting that respondents thought energy infrastructure was the most important sector, but ranked internet infrastructure so low. The military and government consider cybersecurity to be a vital part of national defense. According to Statista, US spending on cybersecurity has been increasing over the last five years, with the military having requested over \$18 billion for cybersecurity spending in 2021, up from \$13 billion in 2017.⁶ Gaps like these exist across the defense sector. It is probably most advantageous to ensure that the public is aware that the military does indeed need to make these choices and that defense of the homeland does not mean absolute, impregnable protection of the entirety of American territory and infrastructure. Educating the public about the realities of war is difficult to face, but is necessary if the government wants to increase the resiliency of the country as a whole.

Closely related to this are Questions 4 and 5, which asked respondents if they felt that the US military was able to defend the homeland, and if they felt informed about the effects of a nuclear attack on the United States respectively.⁷ There was very high confidence in the military, as is shown in nearly every poll where this type of question is asked. 78% of respondents said that they believed the US military is “probably” or “definitely” able to defend the country.⁸ In contrast to this, only 35% of respondents stated that they felt “probably” or “definitely” informed

⁴ Table 4

⁵ Table 1, Table 4

⁶ Joseph Johnson, “U.S. Government: Proposed Cyber Security Spending 2021,” Statista, January 25, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/675399/us-government-spending-cyber-security/>.

⁷ Question List

⁸ Table 8

about the effects of a nuclear attack.⁹ These two questions show that the public does trust the military to be able to stop an enemy, but are unaware of what may happen to them personally during an attack.

High confidence in the military means that it will be able to conduct its job without interference from the public, however the lack of preparedness on the civilian front means that the chaos caused by a nuclear attack could severely hinder the military response. In 2018, a false missile launch alert in Hawaii showed the potential consequences of this lack of knowledge. Those who were in Hawaii at the time were interviewed by the BBC, who wrote that people "spoke of hysteria and panicked evacuations."¹⁰ This chaos would be a massive problem in the event of an actual nuclear strike which could lead to far more casualties and a far more difficult rescue and rebuild effort. In cases such as these, simple education in schools would greatly decrease the amount of panic experienced by civilians.

For a solution to this problem, governments across the US should look to countries in Europe which face the threat of invasion every day. Public awareness campaigns such as the ones that have been established in Finland since the end of WWII could do much to help civilians keep calm and to know how to prepare for attack. USA Today says that "since war broke out in Europe, thousands of Finns have signed up with training associations to sharpen their military skills or learn new ones such as first aid."¹¹ Finland's culture of national defense preparedness allows them to be much more resilient in a conflict. Finns are well aware of what the consequences of invasion are. In contrast, the majority of respondents to the survey stated they did not feel prepared and they were unaware of what the effects of a nuclear attack would be. By adopting a Finnish model of encouraging national preparedness and educating the

⁹ Table 9

¹⁰ "Hawaii Missile False Alarm Triggers Shock, Blame and Apologies," BBC News, January 14, 2018, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42680070>.

¹¹ Tami Abdollah, "Guns, Bomb Shelters and Anti-Radiation Meds: More People in Finland Prepare for War with Russia," MSN, May 12, 2022, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/guns-bomb-shelters-and-anti-radiation-meds-more-people-in-finland-prepare-for-war-with-russia/ar-AAWahxQ>.

public, the resiliency of the American people can be greatly increased and thus we can avoid a repeat of the panic and chaos of the 2018 Hawaii false alarm.

Encouraging the public to take simple measures like maintaining a stock of non-perishable food and potable water does help, however these measures are not always enough, especially in large cities. Survey respondents placed population centers sixth on the list of critical infrastructure. It should be noted that the survey was conducted in Ames, Iowa, exactly 30 miles from Des Moines, the nearest city. If the survey had a wider reach and included respondents living in large urban areas, population centers may have been higher on the list. Unfortunately, many population centers in the US are currently unprepared for war. Disaster preparedness expert Irwin Redlener stated in 2019: “There isn't a single jurisdiction in America that has anything approaching an adequate plan to deal with a nuclear detonation.”¹² Adopting another measure from the Finns could be beneficial in this area as well by ensuring that bomb shelters are well-maintained, clearly labeled and the public is made aware of their locations and procedures. Simply updating a city's disaster plan to account for modern nuclear conflict would go a long way.

The survey also asked respondents to identify which country they believe to be the greatest threat to the United States. The top choice was China, with 46% of the respondents believing it to be the greatest threat, followed by Russia at 39%.¹³ It is notable that the survey was conducted in June of 2022, several months after the February invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Despite this, China remains the number one choice. Respondents were also given the option to choose the “other” category and write-in what they thought was the greatest threat to the country. 10% of respondents chose this option, 63 of the 83 who chose this option wrote in

¹² Aria Bendix, “A Nuclear Attack Would Most Likely Target One of These 6 US Cities — but an Expert Says None of Them Are Prepared,” Business Insider, December 17, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/nuclear-bomb-targets-cities-us-disaster-plan-2019-12?op=1>.

¹³ Table 7

some variation of “United States” or “ourselves”.¹⁴ This number actually exceeds the number who identified either North Korea or Iran as the greatest threat.

Internal conflict seems to be at the forefront of a lot of political discussion and it appears that a significant number of university attendees believe it to be the number one threat to the country. The question of trust in institutions will be addressed later in this paper, however it must be noted here that if a large number of people believe internal threats are the most dangerous threats to the country, they may be less likely to believe information given to them by sources they don’t already trust. Those in the military and government working to increase military readiness should keep this in mind when tailoring their messaging to ensure they reach as many Americans as possible without that audience tuning them out.

The responses to question three may reveal another gap in knowledge between the government and the people. On June 29th, 2022, NATO released a statement saying that Russia is the greatest threat to its members' security.¹⁵ This could be due to Americans believing that the economic threat posed by China is greater than the potential military threat that Russia poses to the United States. If the United States military and government agree with NATO, that Russia poses the most significant threat to the American people in the homeland, then it needs to reexamine how it portrays these countries. The military has already taken steps in this direction, such as discontinuing the use of the term “great-power competition” and replacing it with “strategic competition”.

In the past few decades, Russia has been characterized as a “former superpower” by many in the United States. This may have an effect on how Americans view Russia, no longer seeing it as a “great power”. A 2017 PBS article states “President Barack Obama recently

¹⁴ Text Responses to Q3

¹⁵ Jill Lawless, Joseph Wilson, and Sylvie Corbet, “NATO Deems Russia Its ‘Most Significant and Direct Threat,’” Los Angeles Times, June 29, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-06-29/nato-deems-russia-its-most-significant-and-direct-threat>.

derided Russia as a 'smaller,' 'weaker' nation.”¹⁶ The Soviet Union was considered to be a threat because it was the only other superpower in the world. Now, Russia is no longer considered to be one, but China is seen as a rising superpower that may come to threaten the United States' position as the leader of the world's economy. Perhaps the divide between the government and the people in this case is one of timescales. If the American people are generally thinking of threats in the long-term, they will probably settle on the idea that China is the bigger threat since they believe that the threat posed by Russia is not one that can be sustained long term.

NATO does not necessarily represent the views of the entire United States government though, and may only reflect the priorities of the current administration. A poll of government agencies conducted by the Government Accountability Office in 2019 found that these agencies considered “Chinese global expansion” to be the greatest threat to the United States.¹⁷ This idea may have changed in light of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, but if this is the case, public sentiment possibly has not shifted along with the government, creating a wide gap between the two groups. If the government does indeed believe that Russia is truly the greatest threat, it will have to convince the American people of this fact.

Question 6 asked respondents from which platform they normally get their information about current events.¹⁸ Question 7 asked them how much they trust each platform.¹⁹ Obviously, if the government is to convince Americans that its view of the global situation is correct, it must distribute information through the channels that will enable the information to be accessed by the largest number of people. In the modern world this is not so simple since there is so much distrust in information disseminated through certain channels. For instance, the top three

¹⁶ Larisa Epatko, “Once a Superpower, How Strong Is Russia Now?,” PBS NewsHour, January 13, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/how-strong-is-russia-now>.

¹⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “National Security: Long-Range Emerging Threats Facing the United States as Identified by Federal Agencies,” Gao.gov, no. GAO-19-204SP (2018), <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-204SP>.

¹⁸ Question List

¹⁹ Question List

platforms identified by respondents were, in order, online news organizations, social media and TV news.²⁰ These three platforms were also the three least trusted platforms.²¹ Dissemination of information through these channels are probably the most likely to reach the largest audiences, however it is highly likely that the information is less likely to be believed by those audiences.

The results show that social media campaigns are probably the least effective way to distribute information on defense preparedness. It may reach a very large audience, but it seems that very few people would actually heed advice they receive on this platform and may be more likely to disregard important information if presented to them on social media. The same is probably true for other forms of online information dissemination since printed newspapers, despite often containing the same information as their online counterparts, were significantly more trusted. Turning back to the idea of adopting Finnish methods of defense preparedness, the best option for the government to distribute information might be through the school system and normal government distribution methods as these were the two most trusted platforms, and because nearly all Americans attend school. The Finnish method of comprehensive defense, according to Deutsche Welle, creates a society of people who are ready and willing to defend their nation in times of war. They state that a "...2015 Gallup poll showed 74 percent of Finns said they'd be willing to take up arms to defend their country."²² Using these already well established institutions will greatly increase trust in the information provided to the people who are involved with them and will probably increase the likelihood that defense preparedness advice will be followed.

The survey offers a good look at the attitudes towards national defense of a section of the American public, however it could be greatly improved. Firstly, a wider distribution is needed. To be an accurate reflection of the entire population, the survey would need to be conducted

²⁰ Table 10

²¹ Table 13

²² Deutsche Welle, "Finland Wins Admirers with All-Inclusive Approach to Defense," DW.COM, October 4, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/finland-wins-admirers-with-all-inclusive-approach-to-defense/a-40806163>.

across the country, not just confined to a single university. It would also be beneficial to conduct several rounds over a few years to determine trends in the data. By doing this, a better understanding of respondents' changing view of Russia could be obtained. Several questions could be modified slightly to make them more clear. For example, in question 3, the option "internal threats" should be added to the list of choices. It would have been beneficial to know how many respondents would have chosen that option if it was presented to them. The same question should also be changed to specify a "military threat". These and other changes would have to be made before the survey can be conducted again.

The results of the survey show that the US government and military need to work on increasing public awareness of national defense issues. They need to focus on informing the public about the necessity of prioritizing certain infrastructures sectors over others, ensuring that the American people are aware of which threats the government considers to be the greatest, and it needs to ensure that this information is being distributed effectively. Public awareness is crucial to the success of national defense preparedness and the United States must wake up to the reality of the new international landscape.

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<https://www.dw.com/en/finland-wins-admirers-with-all-inclusive-approach-to-defense/a-40806163>.

Question List

Q1 - What potential targets within the country do you think the United States should prioritize defending in the event of war with a nation that DOES possess nuclear weapons?

Q2 - What potential targets within the country do you think the United States should prioritize defending in the event of war with a nation that DOES NOT possess nuclear weapons?

Q3 - What country do you view as the biggest threat to the United States right now?

Q4 - Do you believe that the United States government and military are currently able to defend the United States against a foreign, hostile country?

Q5 - Do you believe that you have been well informed about the effects of a nuclear attack on the United States?

Q6 - From where do you normally get your information about current events? Choose all that apply.

Q7 - How much do you trust each of these sources of information?

Q8 - Do you believe that the United States education system is under threat from, or is potentially influenced by foreign countries?

Q9 - Are you a current or former member of the United States military?

Q10 - What is your age range?

Q1 - What potential targets within the country do you think the United States should prioritize defending in the event of war with a nation that DOES possess nuclear weapons?

Table 1

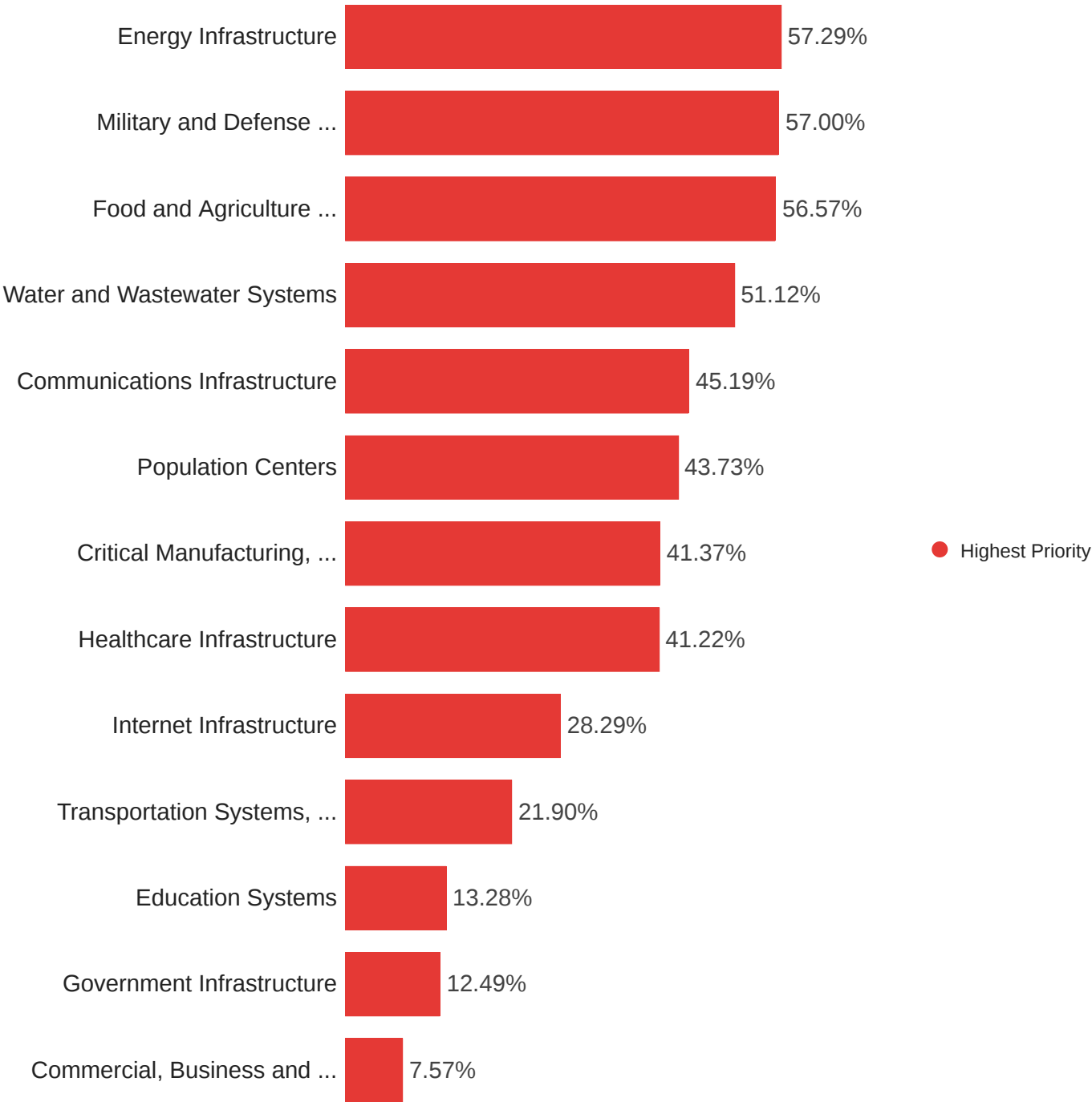


Table 2

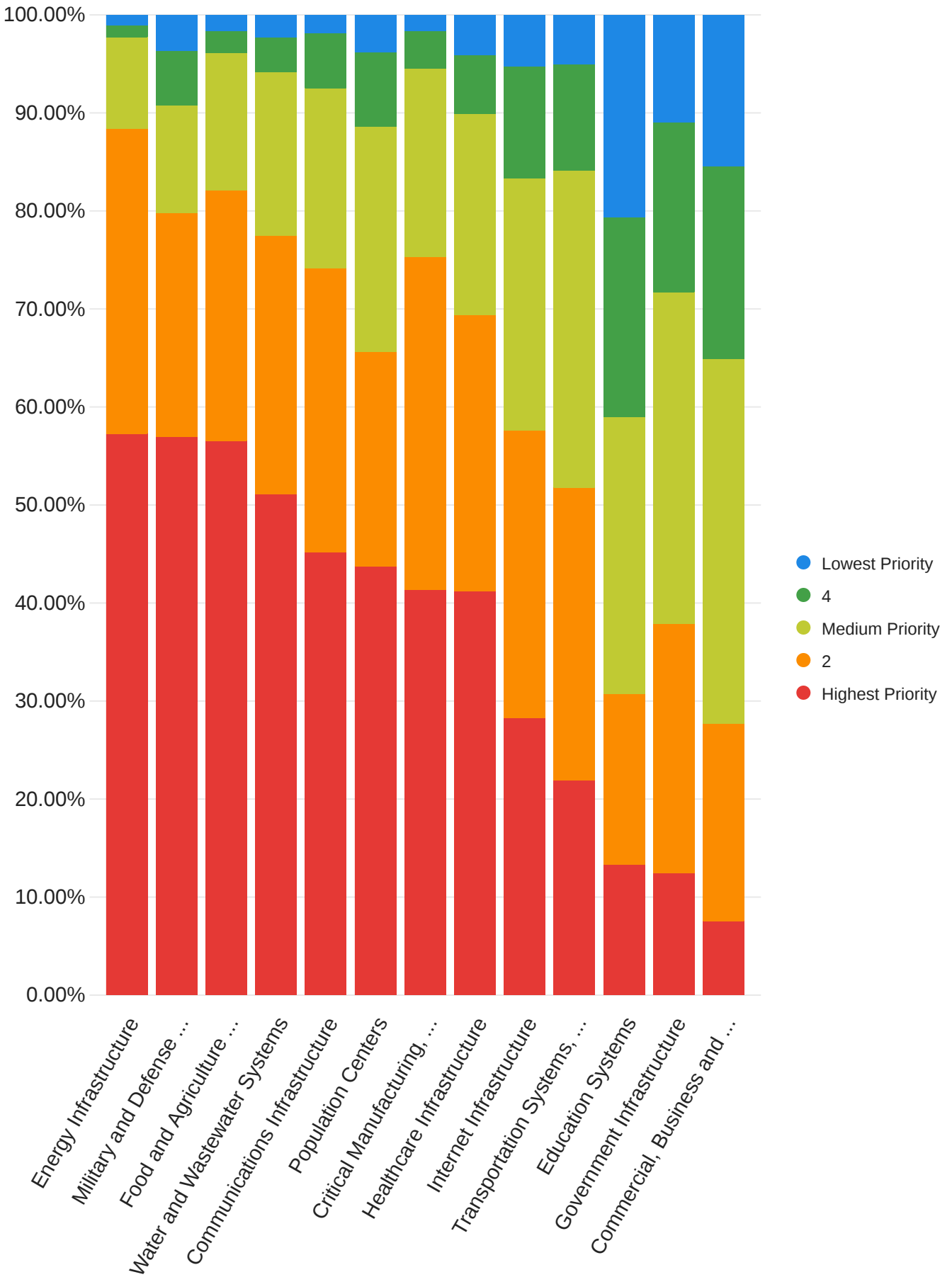


Table 3

Field	Highest Priority	2	Medium Priority	4	Lowest Priority
Energy Infrastructure	562	305	92	12	10
Military and Defense Infrastructure	558	223	108	54	36
Food and Agriculture Infrastructure	555	250	138	22	16
Water and Wastewater Systems	501	258	164	35	22
Communications Infrastructure	442	283	180	55	18
Population Centers	429	215	225	75	37
Critical Manufacturing, Including Chemicals, Oil and Gas, Metals, Electronics and Transportation Vehicles	405	332	188	38	16
Healthcare Infrastructure	404	276	201	59	40
Internet Infrastructure	277	287	252	112	51
Transportation Systems, Including Airports and Seaports, Highways, Trains and Busses	214	292	316	106	49
Government Infrastructure	122	248	331	169	107
Education Systems	130	171	276	200	202
Commercial, Business and Finance Infrastructure	74	197	364	192	151

Q2 - What potential targets within the country do you think the United States should prioritize defending in the event of war with a nation that DOES NOT possess nuclear weapons?

Table 4

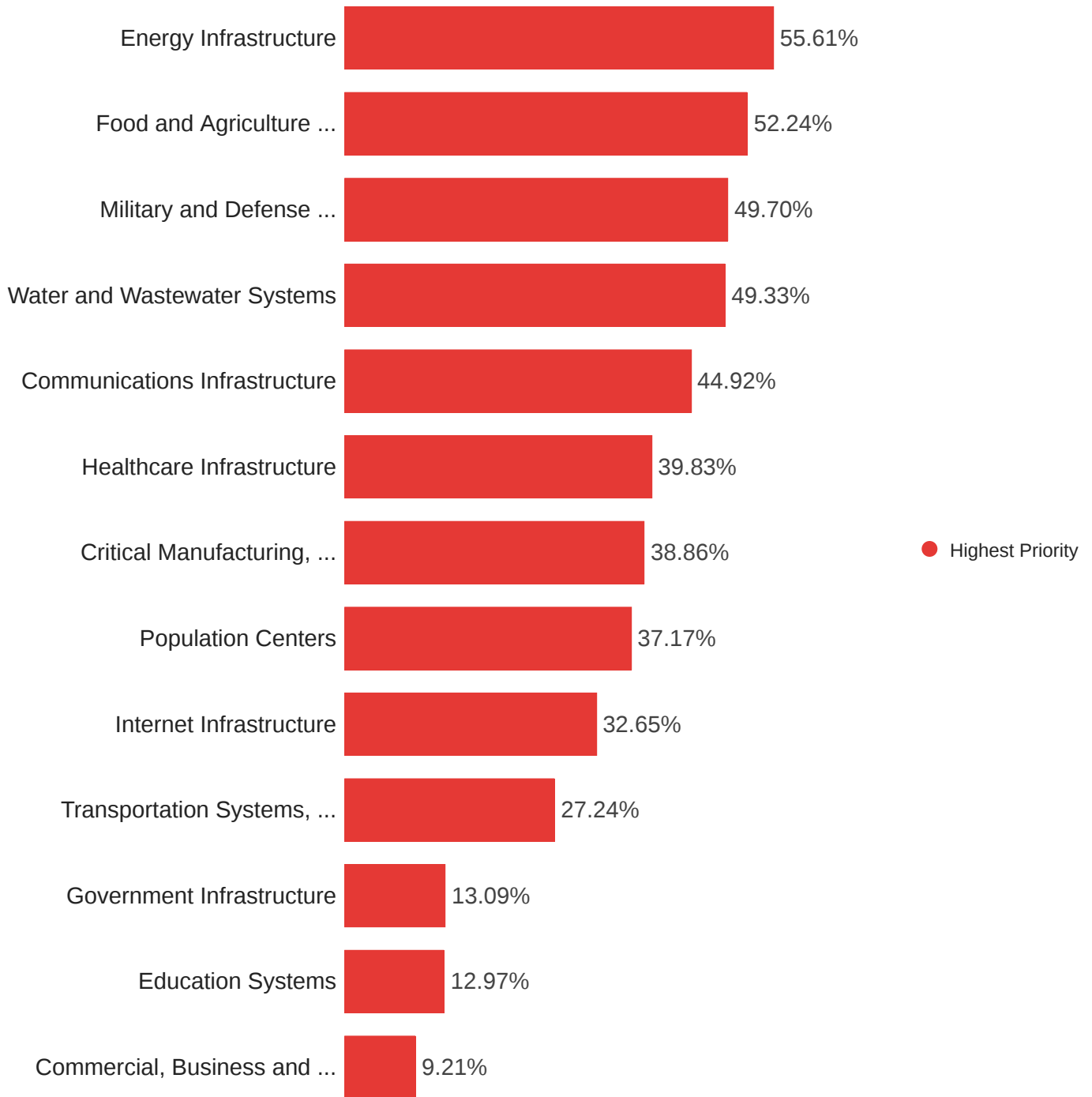


Table 5

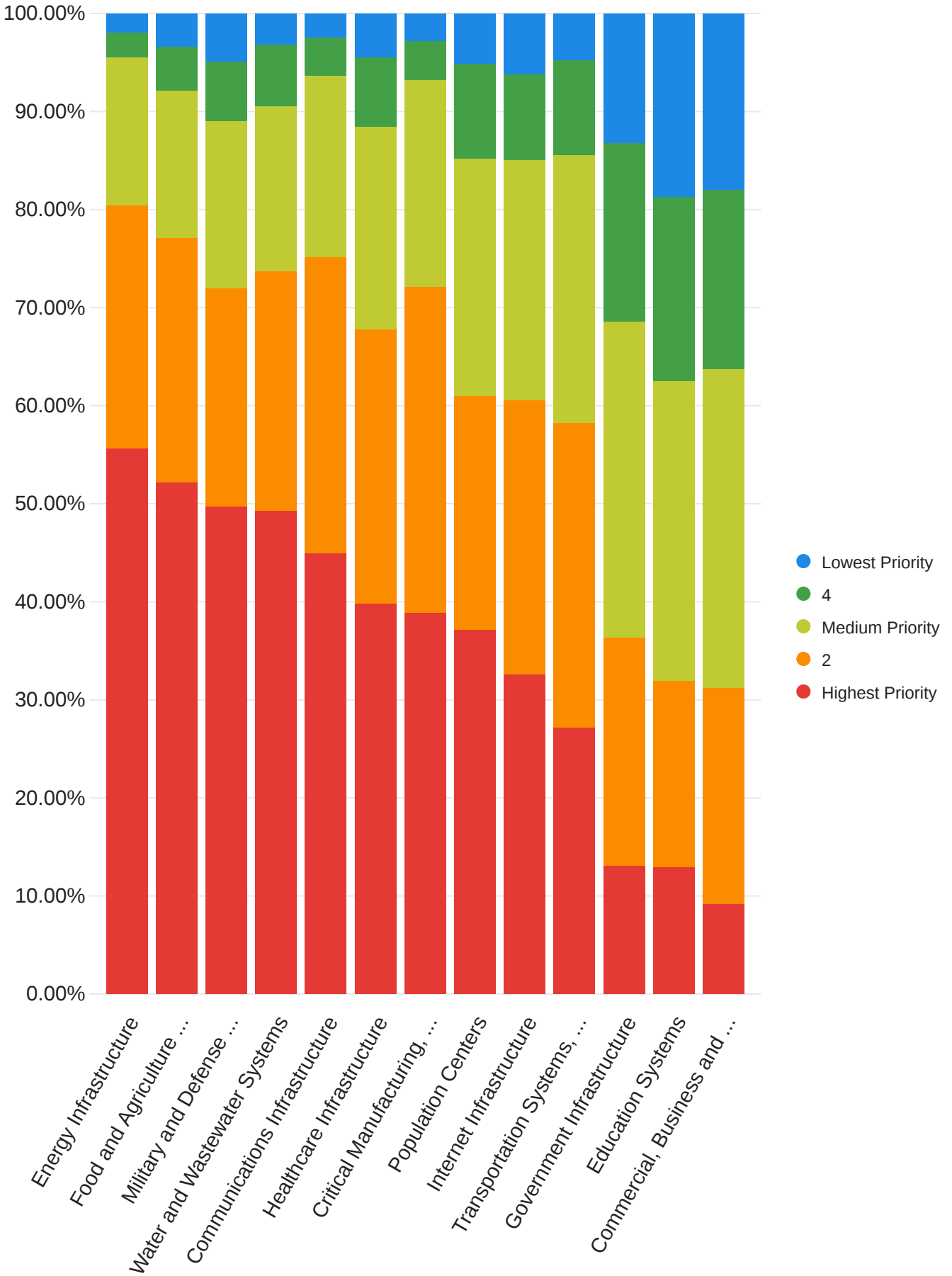
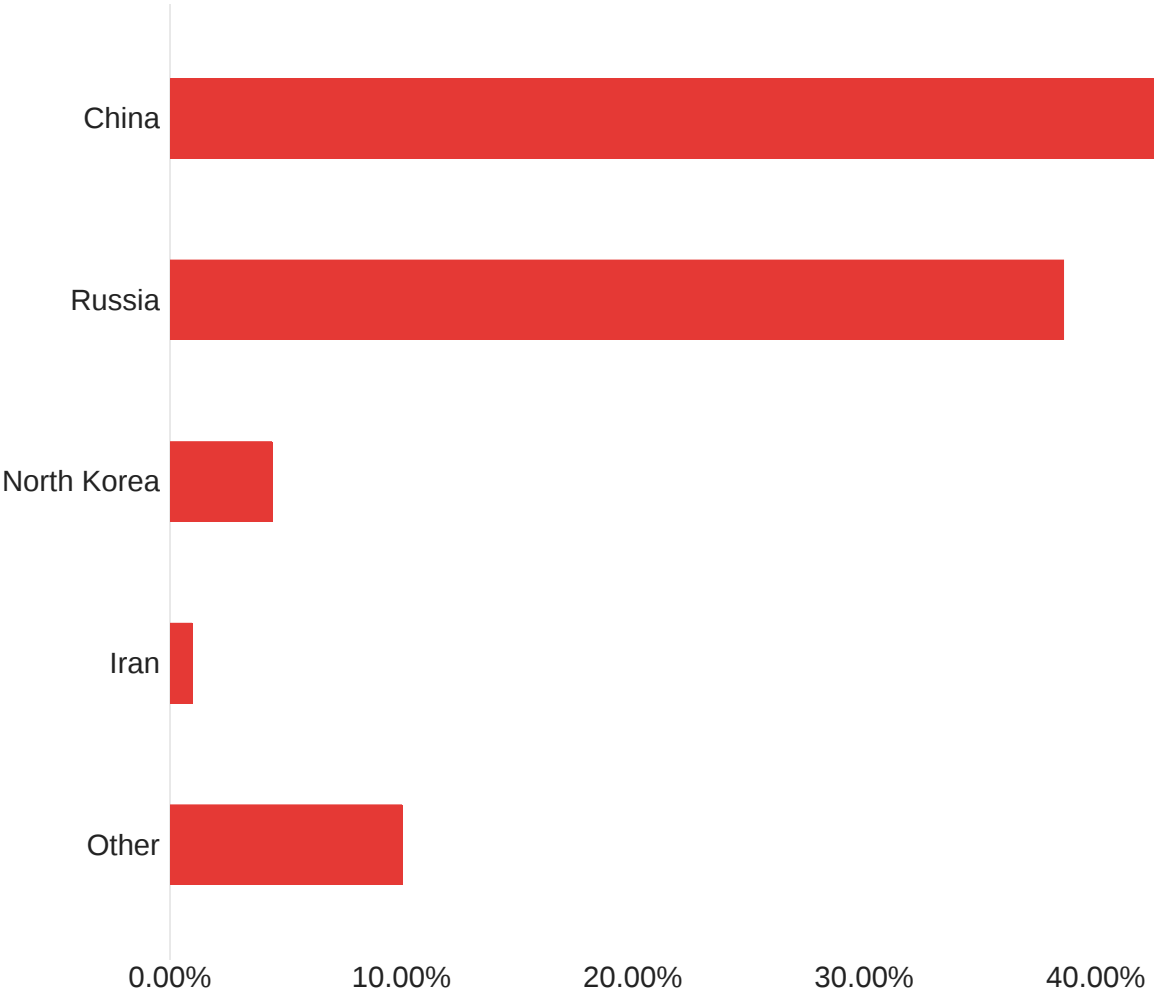


Table 6

Field	Highest Priority	2	Medium Priority	4	Lowest Priority
Energy Infrastructure	461	206	125	21	16
Food and Agriculture Infrastructure	432	206	124	37	28
Military and Defense Infrastructure	410	184	141	50	40
Water and Wastewater Systems	408	202	139	52	26
Communications Infrastructure	371	250	153	32	20
Healthcare Infrastructure	329	231	171	58	37
Critical Manufacturing, Including Chemicals, Oil and Gas, Metals, Electronics and Transportation Vehicles	321	275	174	33	23
Population Centers	307	197	200	80	42
Internet Infrastructure	269	230	202	72	51
Transportation Systems, Including Airports and Seaports, Highways, Trains and Busses	225	256	226	80	39
Education Systems	107	157	252	155	154
Government Infrastructure	108	192	266	150	109
Commercial, Business and Finance Infrastructure	76	182	268	151	148

Q3 - What country do you view as the biggest threat to the United States right now?

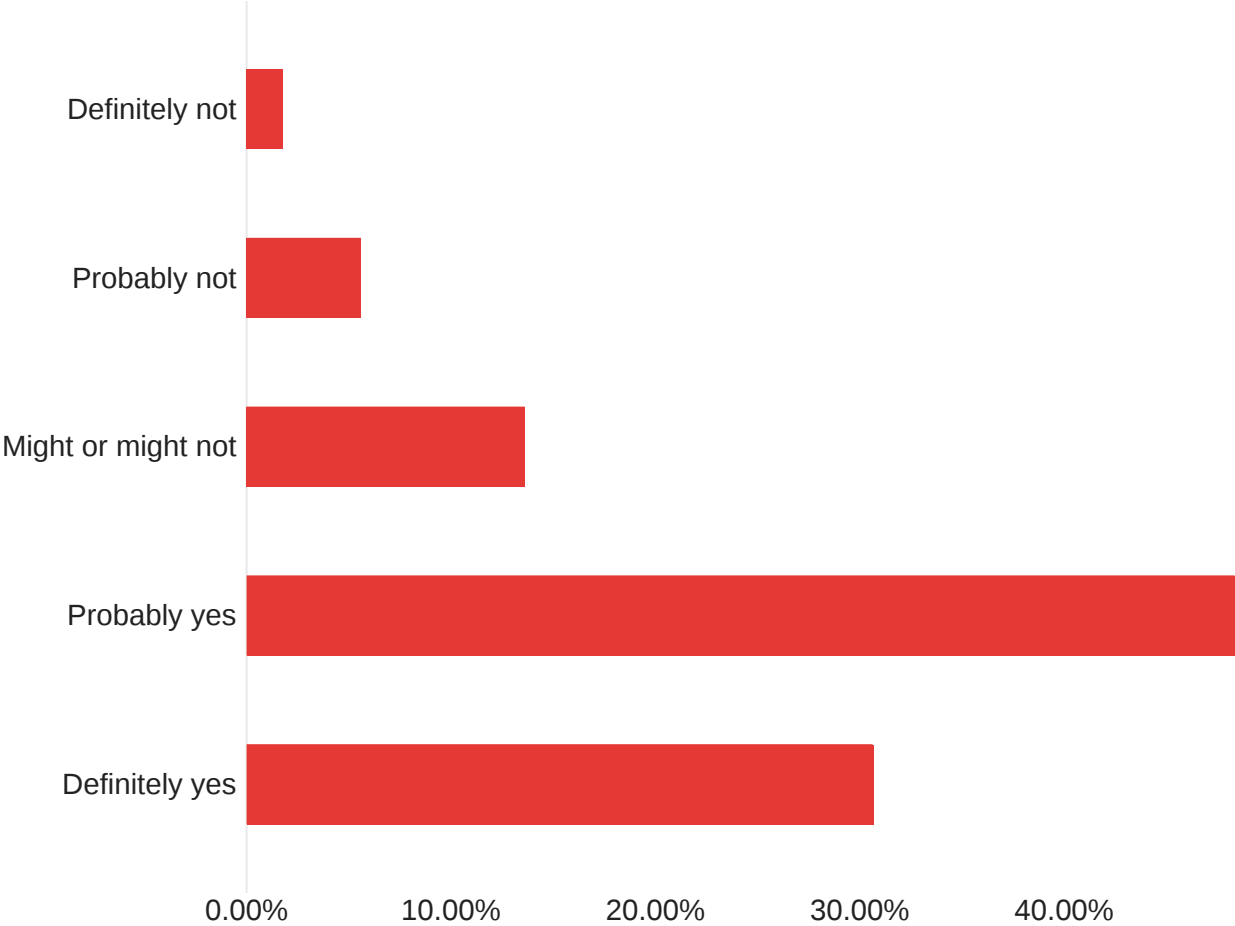
Table 7



Field	Percentage
China	46.00%
Russia	38.59%
North Korea	4.42%
Iran	0.96%
Other *	10.04%

Q4 - Do you believe that the United States government and military are currently able to defend the United States against a foreign, hostile country?

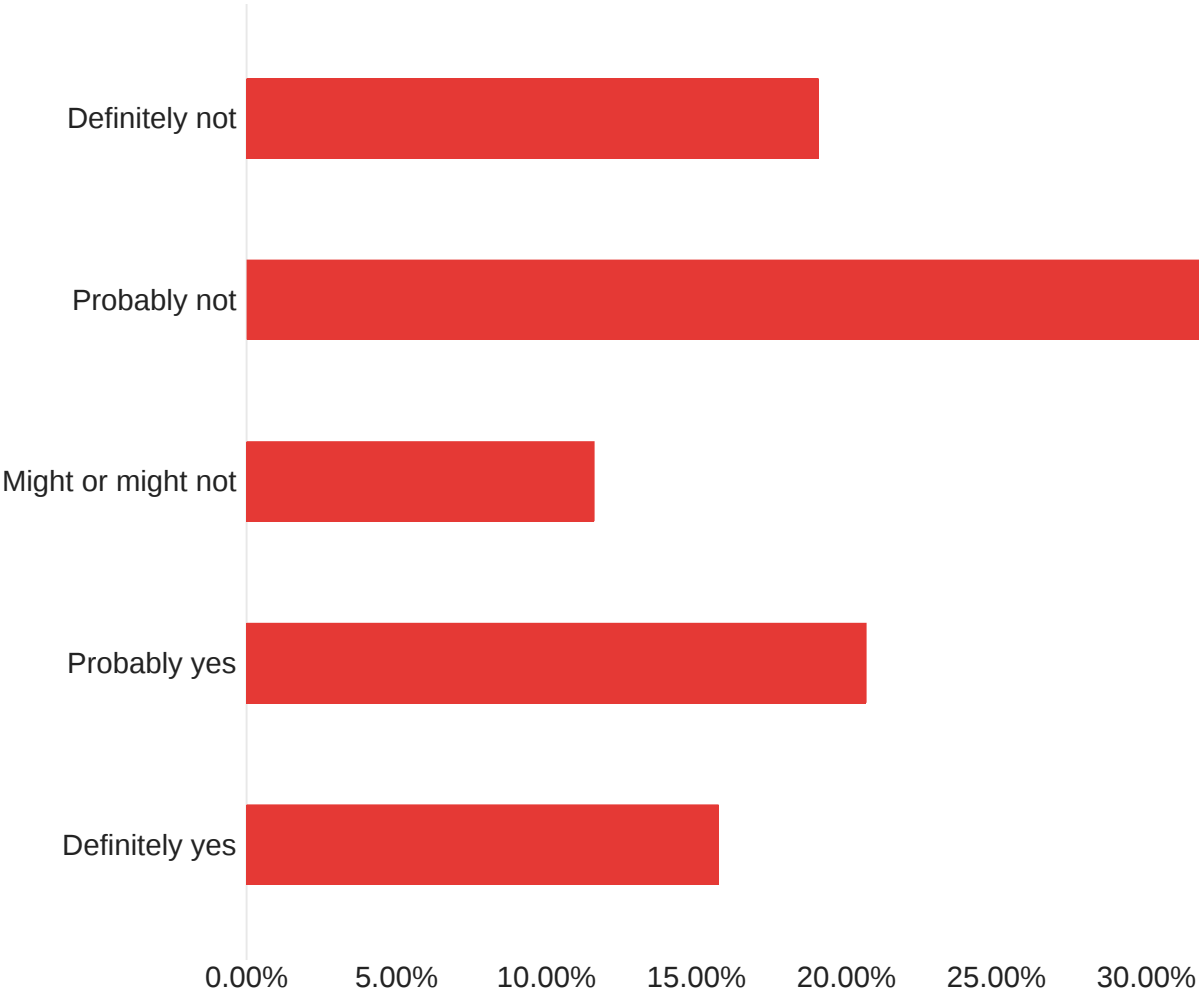
Table 8



Field	Percentage
Definitely not	1.79%
Probably not	5.61%
Might or might not	13.60%
Probably yes	48.33%
Definitely yes	30.67%

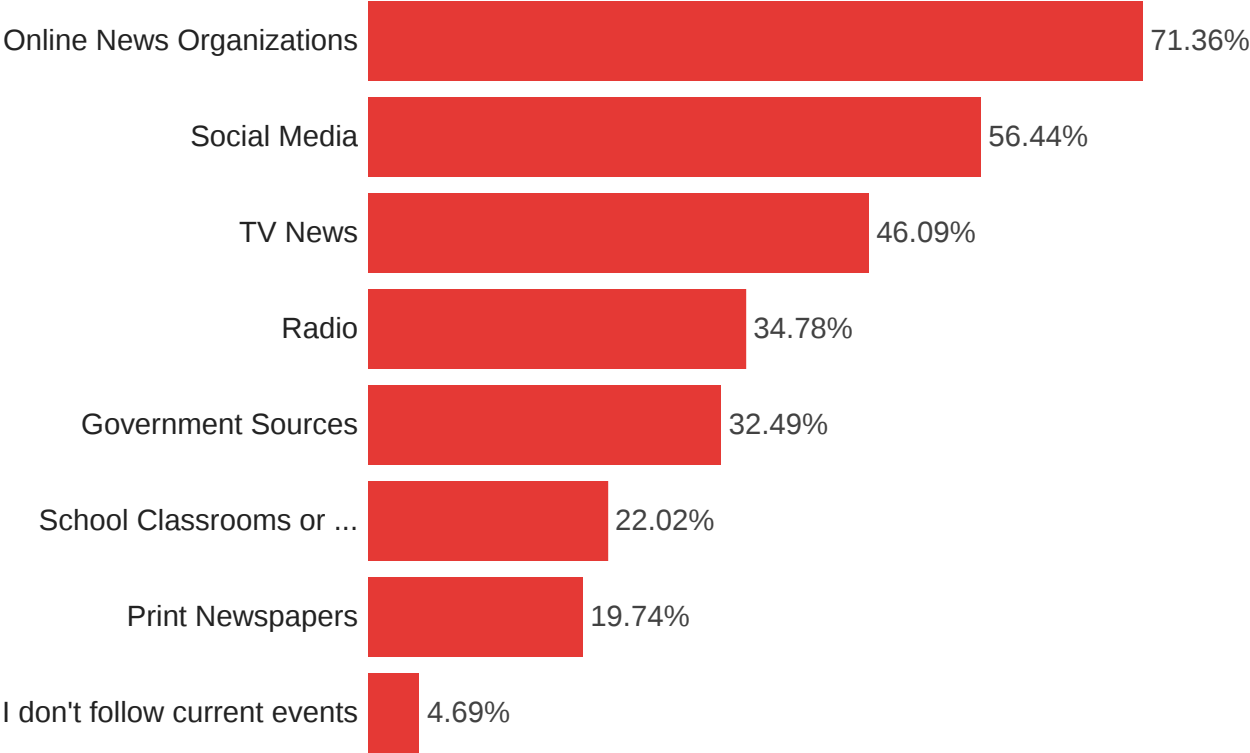
Q5 - Do you believe that you have been well informed about the effects of a nuclear attack on the United States?

Table 9



Field	Percentage
Definitely not	19.09%
Probably not	32.94%
Might or might not	11.58%
Probably yes	20.64%
Definitely yes	15.75%

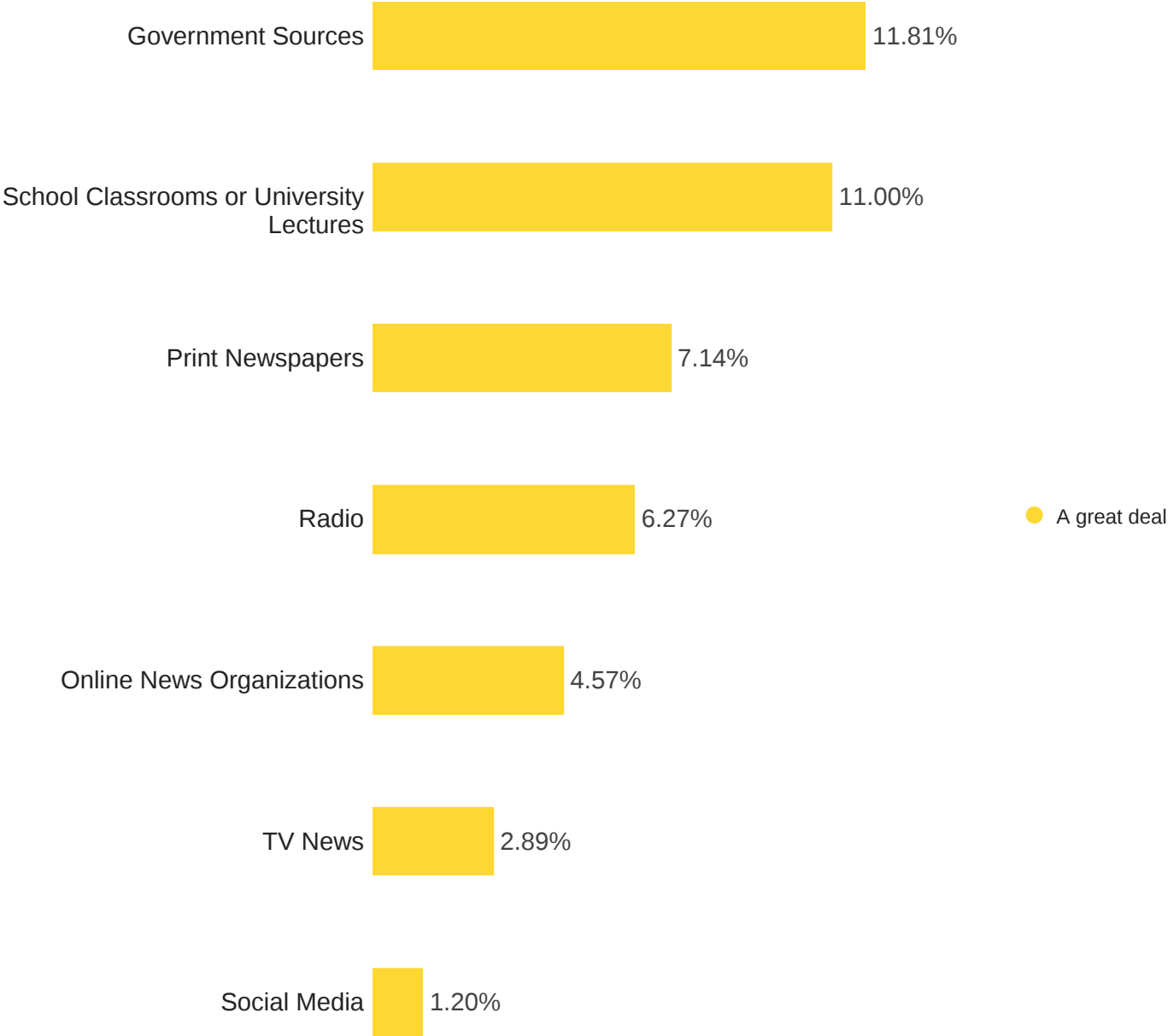
Q6 - From where do you normally get your information about current events? Choose all that apply.



Field	Percentage of Responses
Online News Organizations	71.36%
Social Media	56.44%
TV News	46.09%
Radio	34.78%
Government Sources	32.49%
School Classrooms or University Lectures	22.02%
Print Newspapers	19.74%
I don't follow current events	4.69%

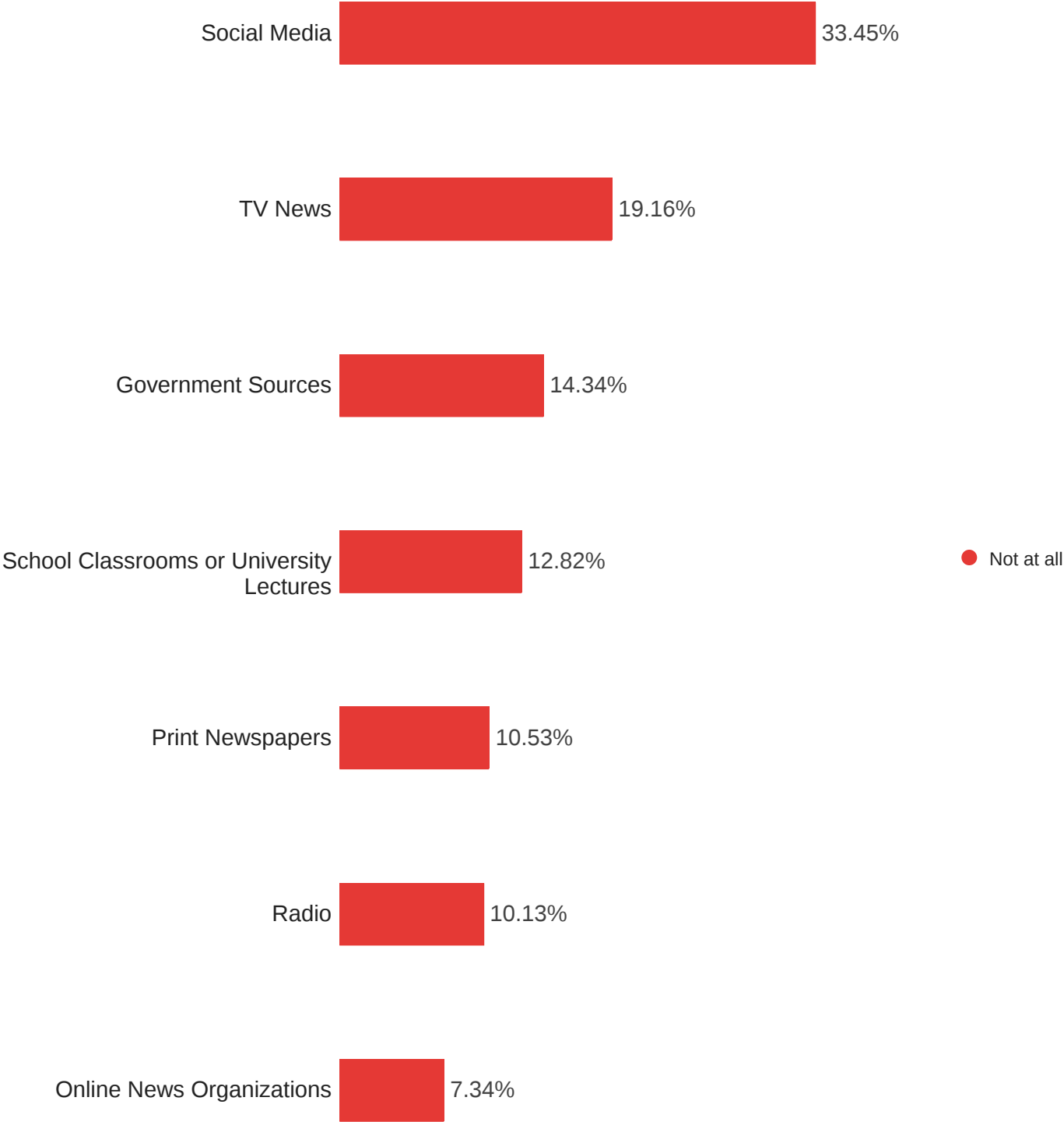
Q7 - How much do you trust each of these sources of information?

Table 11



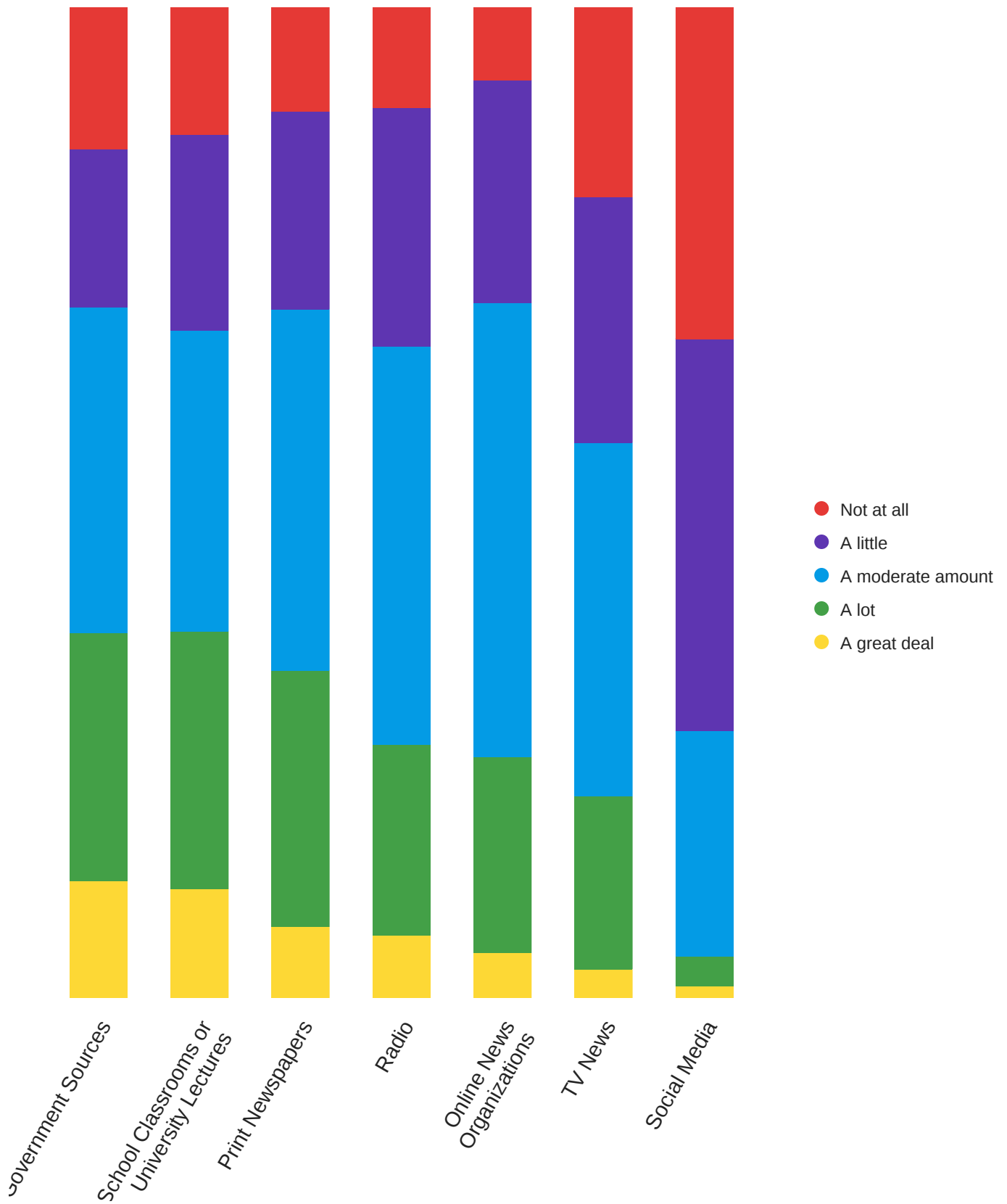
Q7 - How much do you trust each of these sources of information?

Table 12



Q7 - How much do you trust each of these sources of information?

Table 13

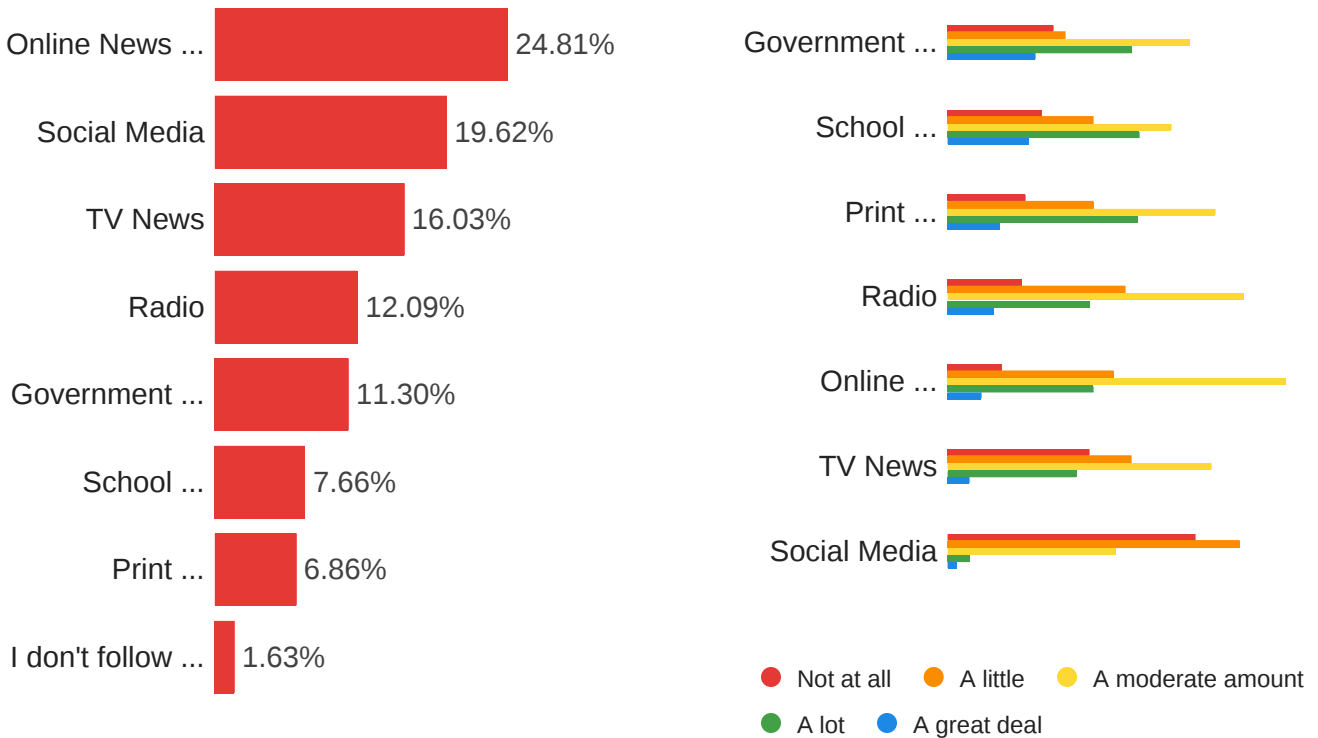


Q7_1 - Social Media, number of respondents

Table 14

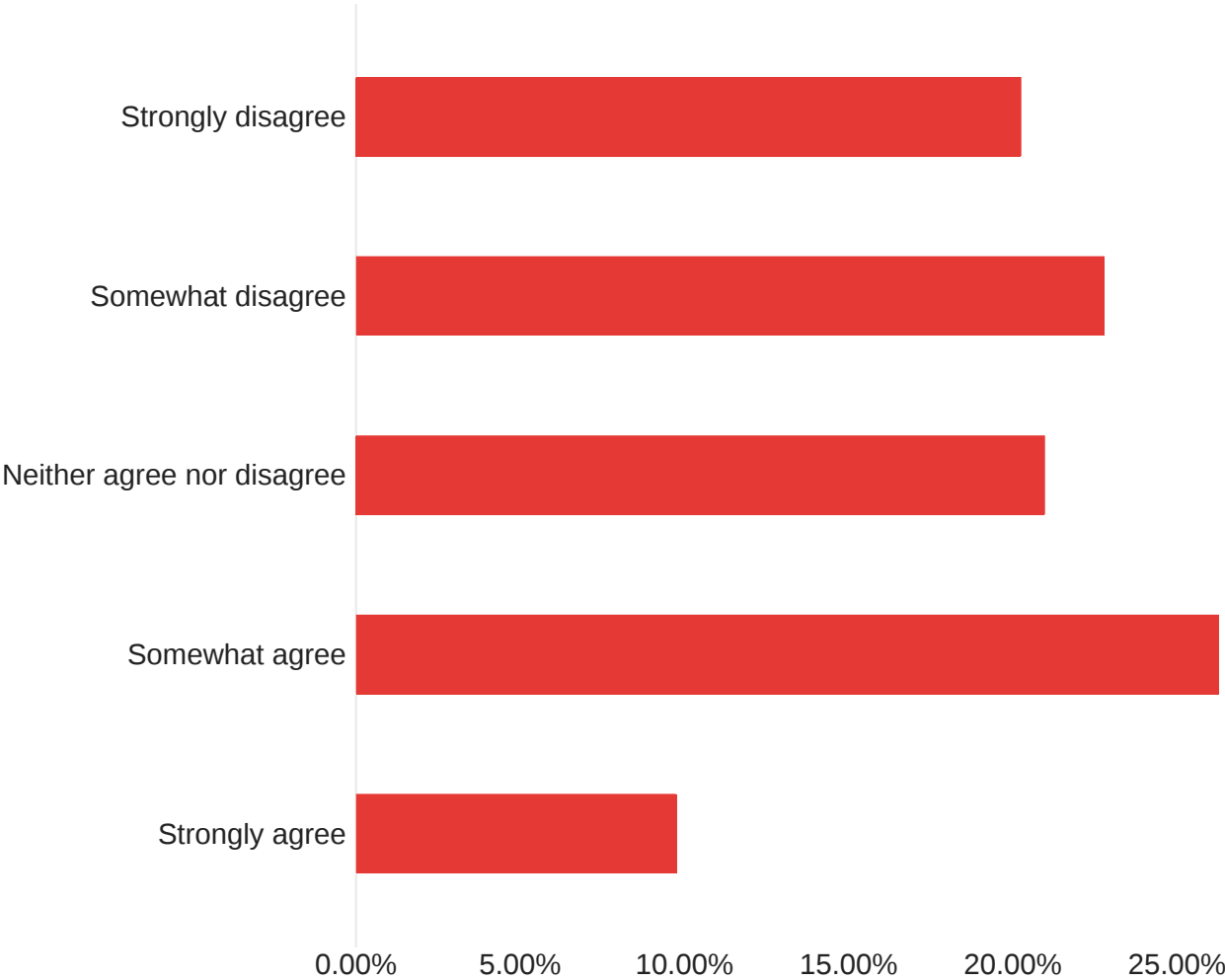
Field	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	Not at all
School Classrooms or University Lectures	91	215	251	164	106
Government Sources	98	208	273	132	119
Print Newspapers	59	214	301	165	87
Radio	52	160	333	200	84
Online News Organizations	38	164	381	187	61
TV News	24	145	296	206	159
Social Media	10	25	189	329	278

Where respondents get their information on current events (right) vs how many trust these platforms (left).



Q8 - Do you believe that the United States education system is under threat from, or is potentially influenced by foreign countries?

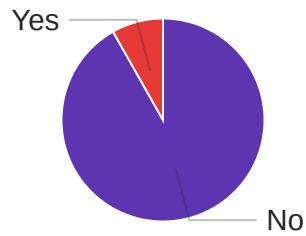
Table 15



Field	Percentage
Strongly disagree	20.24%
Somewhat disagree	22.77%
Neither agree nor disagree	20.96%
Somewhat agree	26.27%
Strongly agree	9.76%

Q9 - Are you a current or former member of the United States military?

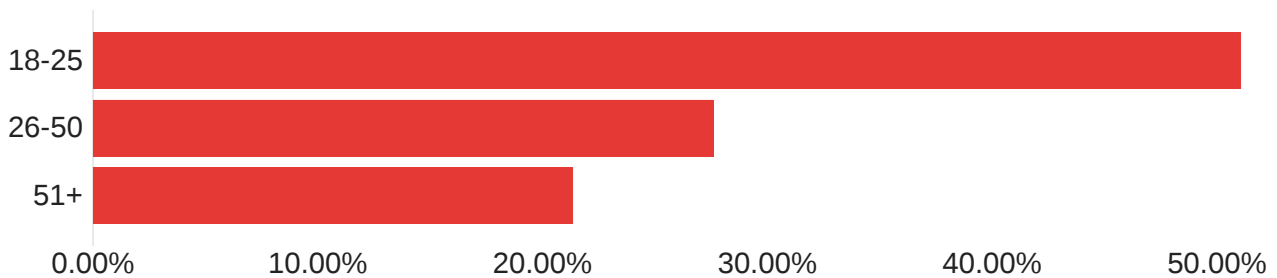
Table 16



Field	Percentage
Yes	8.19%
No	91.81%

Q10 - What is your age range?

Table 17



Field	Percentage
18-25	51.05%
26-50	27.62%
51+	21.34%

Text Responses to Q3

1. Ourselves.
2. The United States itself
3. Ourselves, Imao. We are the Imperial core of the world. We regularly attack and drone strike nations incapable of retaliation (other than in acts of terrorisms) and no other OECD nation stops us. Any threat to the US is propaganda.
4. Canada
5. United States
6. The United States of America
7. ourselves
8. The United States.
9. the United States is the biggest threat to itself, sadly
10. I don't believe that the United States is in any sort of danger from other countries.
11. Ourselves
12. United States
13. I do not view other countries as threats to the United States
14. The United States
15. Ourselves
16. Ourselves
17. The United States
18. Biggest over all threat is China, threat of war, North Korea
19. The United States
20. UAE
21. No one is a threat. Mutually assured mass destruction exists
22. The United States
23. Itself
24. Domestic Threats are the biggest concern
25. The United States
26. the United States government
27. The United States, itself.
28. United States
29. United States
30. Threat is a rather vague term, so this question is hard to answer. China is certainly eclipsing us in major areas of technology and science due to the way that we have funneled money away from important projects and into military spending.
31. none
32. I don't think any of them are threats to US sovereignty. China is a threat to our influence abroad, but not really an existential threat at all (well, not any more than any other nation with nuclear arms).
33. None
34. America itself, we are dangerously split into two different versions of ourselves
35. Itself
36. Internally- economy, domestic terrorism

37. I don't know
38. U.S. arrogance and aggressiveness
39. The United States
40. Ourselves (US)
41. I'm from Buenos Aries and I say kill 'em all
42. N/A
43. United States
44. United States
45. The united states
46. United States
47. The United States
48. United States
49. United States
50. Perhaps the biggest threat is internal, from right-wing extremists who are armed to the teeth and fueled frequently by white nationalism, racism, homophobia, and misogyny.
51. United States
52. The US political system. Civil war seems more likely than an external invasion.
53. United State
54. I think the us is most under danger of internal issues
55. Ourselves, current government spends too much and has no care about people except themselves
56. United States
57. Ourselves - civil war
58. none
59. Ourselves
60. Israel
61. Both Russia and North Korea
62. Our own foolishness
63. the United States
64. The government of the United States
65. China, Russia, and North Korea are all threats to world peace
66. United States
67. The United States
68. The United States itself
69. Itself, clearly
70. Ourselves - the United States
71. United States
72. Both Russia and North Korea for different reasons
73. United States
74. Don't know
75. internal far-right groups
76. The United States itself
77. Honestly, it's us.
78. internal political corruption and top 1% rich folks

- 79. Biggest threat comes from traitors within
- 80. the United States
- 81. None
- 82. The United States is the biggest threat to itself
- 83. the United States