DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

DEMOCRATS ON OFFENSE

MESSAGES THAT WIN

NOVEMBER 2022
POST-ELECTION NARRATIVE
PROJECT REPORT

3

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MESSAGES THAT WIN

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6 Executive Summary

In the 2022 midterm elections, Democratic candidates defied expectations, outperforming in tough swing districts up and down the ballot and across the country. Ahead of these midterms, Data for Progress conducted **77,197 respondent interviews** to examine the effect of messages and issue positions from previous and current Democratic Senate and House candidates. Based on these findings, we make the following recommendations to Democratic stakeholders ahead of the 2024 election:

- Democrats should prioritize raising the salience of issues where they have a trust advantage — specifically healthcare, Social Security, climate change, and abortion. In particular, Democrats should communicate about these issues with messages that not only appeal to our existing base, but also to a growing electoral coalition.

- Democratic candidates should highlight contrasts with the most unpopular Republican positions and hold their opponents accountable on issues where they are out of step with the electorate — like restricting voting rights, banning abortion, and privatizing Social Security.

- The most effective Democratic **messages** featured lowering costs; creating new jobs; spurring domestic manufacturing; taking on Big Pharma; protecting Social Security; highlighting the economic benefits of clean energy production; and defending abortion rights by emphasizing bodily autonomy, personal privacy, and government interference.

- The most effective Democratic **policies** featured protecting and expanding Social Security; reforming prescription drug pricing; increasing the minimum wage to $15 an hour; improving infrastructure; raising taxes on individuals making more than $1 million a year; and requiring a background check for every gun purchase.

In addition, it's critical for Democrats to understand these key demographics ahead of the 2024 election:

— Voters under the age of 45 indicated that the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision, which overturned *Roe v. Wade*, made them more motivated to vote by margins around 10 points higher than among voters ages 45 and up. While voters consistently viewed the economy as the top issue ahead of the election, it's clear that the *Dobbs* decision raised the importance of abortion access with voters, and young voters in particular.

— Asian American, Latina/o, and Black voters were most concerned about issues like inflation (34%), gun control (34%), and jobs and the economy (33%), followed by abortion rights (29%), which was the top issue for Asian Americans and second-most important issue for Black voters.

— Heading into November, 54% of all national likely voters thought that the next generation of Americans will have fewer rights than the current generation.

Data for Progress polling and message testing found that Democrats can combat Republican extremism and run on progressive policies using a disciplined messaging strategy that unites a broader coalition of voters, including rural and suburban voters in red and purple districts.

We encourage Democrats to heed these takeaways to prepare for another tough battle in 2024. **Ultimately, the most effective way to create progressive change is to elect and expand a governing majority that will deliver progressive policy reforms. That means using messaging that is proven to be more effective at securing Democrats a wider governing majority is critical for progressive and moderate Democrats alike.**

10 Introduction
Democrats Defied Gravity

On November 8, 2022, Democrats defied the laws of political gravity and clinched seats across the country that few thought were possible in a midterm election environment, where backlash against the incumbent party is the historical norm. The incumbent party — defined as the party that holds the presidency heading into a midterm election — has retained or expanded its congressional margins in midterm elections just twice before in modern political history, each following major historical events: the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and the attacks on September 11, 2001. The 2022 election has clearly become a similarly historical moment for the president's party. The cause? Most likely, the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

While voters in midterm elections typically attempt to reel in the party in power, 2022 was unique in that many voters perceived the ***minority*** party as the one overreaching with its agenda. As we outline in this report, Republican overreach on reproductive rights — and other fundamental democratic rights like voting access and Social Security — was *the* crux of Democrats' electoral success this year.

There was widespread consensus that Democrats faced fierce headwinds ahead of the 2022 midterms; in addition to their historical disadvantage as the party in power, they were also grappling with uncertain economic conditions. Gas prices, which reached record highs just months ahead of the election, were above the national average in key battleground states like Arizona, Nevada, and Pennsylvania heading into Election Day. Inflation also hit battleground states particularly hard: Just two months before Election Day, the U.S. Board of Labor Statistics' September Consumer Price Index (CPI) found Phoenix and Atlanta had the two highest inflation rates in the country. Yet at the same time, unemployment rates were at their lowest in decades.

Meanwhile, President Biden's approval rating sat at 38 percent, on par with former President Trump's approval when Republicans lost 40 seats in the House in 2018. Despite these factors, Democrats massively overperformed expectations.

This report aims to provide a data-backed assessment of the messaging and policy positions that resonated the most among voters and helped Democrats defy the odds. We look at the specific efficacy of Democratic communications on different issues throughout the 2022 election and highlight some of the most successful examples of Democratic issue positioning and messaging this fall — and explain how these successes can be replicated moving into the 2024 general election.

The importance of voters' decision to clearly repudiate Republican extremism this cycle cannot be overstated. But while Democrats' massive overperformance should be celebrated, **Democrats cannot coast on these gains.** To secure enduring governing majorities and fight back against Republican extremism, Democrats must continue to instill the message discipline we saw in this cycle.

In this report, we lay out Data for Progress polling and message testing that supports our recommendations, as well as examples of this strategy in action during the 2022 election.

First, we break down our polling conducted throughout 2022, highlighting the issues that mattered most to midterm voters. We analyze a series of 32 surveys, conducted from February to November, in which Data for Progress asked more than 450 policy-focused questions of over 35,000 national likely midterm voters to understand what issues were most motivating them this fall. Next, we explore the results from a new conjoint experiment led by Data for Progress and Dr. Brian Schaffner, professor of political science at Tufts University, in which we conducted more than 77,000 respondent interviews to determine which message and policy priorities best improve Democratic performance against Republicans. We discuss in detail the messages that most effectively increased Democratic vote share across six relevant policy areas: abortion, the economy, healthcare, Social Security, climate and clean energy, and crime. Lastly, we include examples of Democratic advertisements that utilized effective messaging, particularly from candidates who succeeded in battleground races across the country. For this analysis, Data for Progress reviewed more than a hundred unique television advertisements from this cycle.

Both progressive and moderate Democrats alike can agree that the stakes of the 2024 election could not be higher: In addition to a general election in which it is all but guaranteed that the Republican nominee will be a 2020 election denier, Democrats face an uphill battle for the Senate. Democrats will once again be defending seats in battleground states (Wisconsin, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Nevada), in addition to several states Trump carried in 2020 (West Virginia, Ohio, and Montana). Quite simply, the country — and our democracy — may not withstand another attempt to overturn an election and subvert the will of the people should Republicans succeed in 2024. Democrats' only option is to ensure the Republican Party experiences sustained electoral defeats — and to use every single tool in our toolbox to make that happen.

14 Polling and the Issues that Mattered

Despite economic concerns, Democrats greatly overperformed on Election Night, maintaining control of the Senate and avoiding major losses in the House.

Throughout the summer and fall of 2022, Data for Progress conducted polling on issue importance, voter attitudes, and voter perceptions of the Democratic and Republican parties. Our polling found that likely voters largely approved of Democrats' legislative accomplishments and disapproved of the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, and that voters overwhelmingly trusted Democrats over Republicans on the issue of abortion. High prices and inflation also weighed heavily on the minds of Independent and swing voters, who generally trusted Republicans to improve economic conditions. Despite economic concerns, Democrats greatly overperformed on Election Night, maintaining control of the Senate and avoiding major losses in the House.

In this section, we highlight key Data for Progress polling that demonstrates the conditions impacting the 2022 midterms, tracking how the economy, abortion rights, and perceptions of each political party influenced voter decisions at the ballot box. Additionally, we break down our surveys of young voters — a population that initial analysis suggests turned out for Democrats in historic numbers this cycle — and attitudes among Black, Latina/o, and Asian American voters to analyze the factors that may have influenced these key constituencies.

Overall, we find a common theme throughout our polling and message testing: Voters saw that Democrats are delivering for them on the issues they care about, and they largely approved of the landmark legislation that Democrats delivered in Congress. Additionally, voters opposed Republican attacks on democracy and bodily autonomy and their overall culture wars — especially abortion bans. Democrats' legislative accomplishments, youth turnout, and Republican extremism contributed to such a historic performance for Democrats. Throughout 2023 and 2024, Democrats would do well to continue passing — and promoting — popular policies to the best of their ability.

16 Issue Importance

Throughout 2022, economic conditions dominated headlines as the war in Ukraine and the lasting impact of COVID-19 influenced the cost of energy and consumer goods. Data for Progress polling in the summer showed that nearly half of respondents (48%) said that the rising price of food and gas was the most important issue to their decision to vote in the midterms. In polling we conducted in the last two months leading up to the election, we saw an 8-point increase from September to October in the percentage of voters who ranked inflation as a top issue.

The economy was also a top issue for key constituencies, including women. Nearly half (46%) of women in our October survey said inflation was a top issue, and 27% said the same about jobs and the economy. However, 24% of women also ranked abortion rights in their top three most important issues.

In the same survey, we also found that Democratic voters ranked key Democratic priorities with similar importance to inflation: 36% viewed abortion rights as the top issue, while 35% said the same of inflation. Climate change and gun control were viewed equally among self-identified Democratic voters at 34% each. Among Independents, inflation and jobs and the economy were also top issues at 46% and 34%, respectively.

Lastly, there was significant reporting on the impact of gas prices throughout the 2022 campaign. Data for Progress testing since November 2021 has demonstrated a strong correlation between the price of gas and presidential approval rating, indicating that voters may direct frustrations about high costs at the pump toward the political party in power (see our blog from August 2022 for an updated analysis). This finding is not unique to the 2022 midterm election cycle when placed in a historical and global context.

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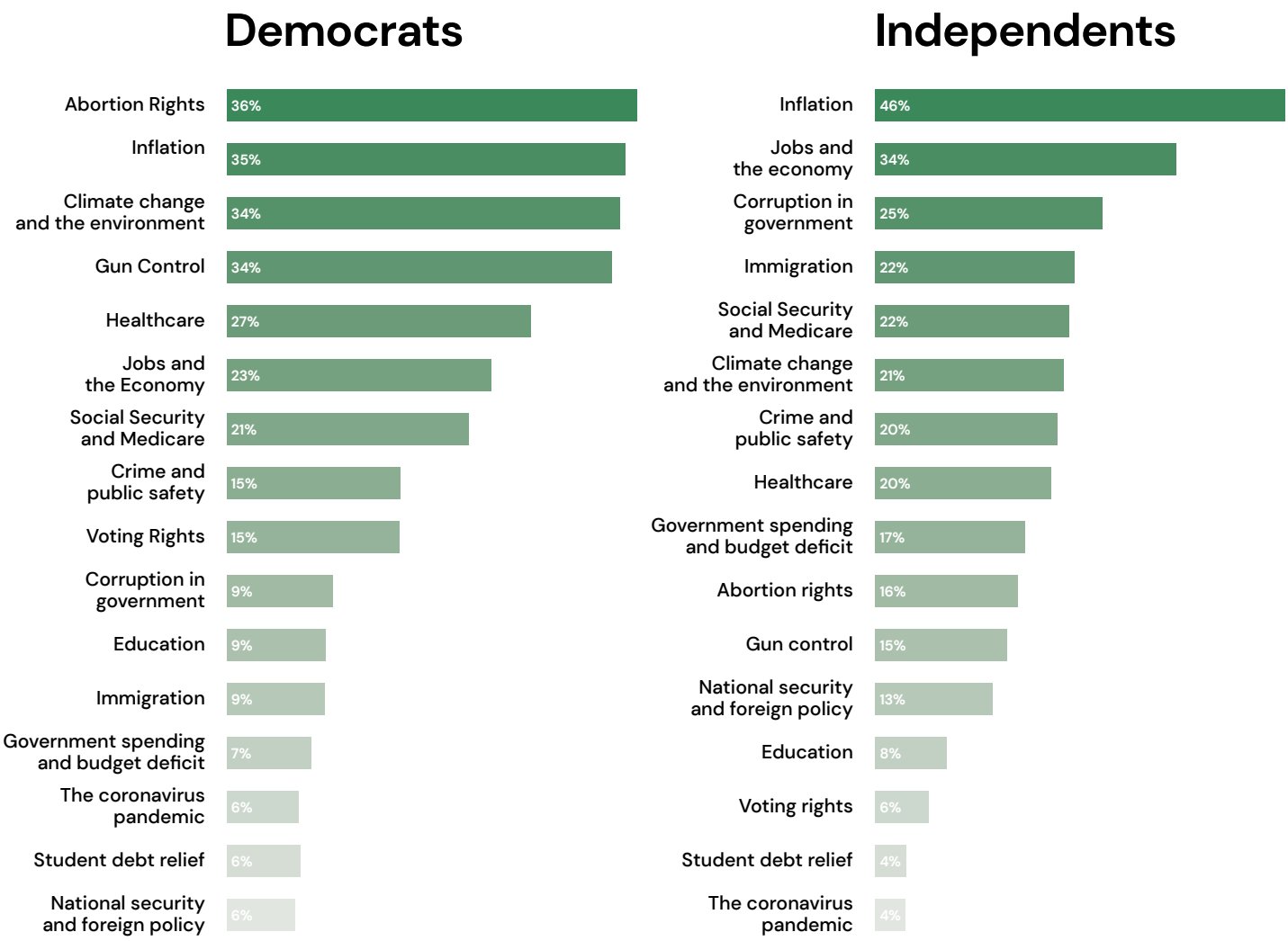
Of the choices listed below, which do you think are the top three most important issues for a candidate for Congress to focus on?



Data for Progress October 14–18, 2022 survey of 1,095 likely voters

In spite of historical trends and polling this cycle showing the economy as important to voters across demographic groups, Democrats outperformed in the midterm elections in reaction to a Republican platform that is out of touch with what voters want.

18 Abortion Rights

Immediately following the Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, salience around abortion increased among voters. In a June pre-*Dobbs* poll, Data for Progress asked voters to choose which out of 11 issues was the most important to their decision to vote in the midterms. Prior to *Roe* being overturned, a plurality of voters (48%) said the economy was their singular top issue — including 59% of Republicans and 35% of Democrats. Only 6% of likely voters viewed abortion rights as the most important factor in their vote.

However, in a July survey conducted soon after the Supreme Court's reversal on *Roe*, we found that 13% of likely voters viewed abortion rights as the most important contributor to their vote — a 7-point increase in issue importance. The most notable shifts were by partisanship, gender, and age. Prior to the *Dobbs* decision, 11% of Democrats, 9% of women, and 9% of voters under 45 selected abortion rights as their most important issue. Following the Supreme Court's decision, nearly a quarter of Democrats (23%), 17% of women, and 22% of those under 45 indicated abortion rights as the top issue affecting their vote in November.

Abortion is a particularly salient issue among young voters: 82% of voters under the age of 45 considered abortion rights to be a "somewhat" or "very" important issue to their vote, and only 8% did not see it as important at all. Young people have lived their entire lives with *Roe v. Wade* considered settled law, and a majority of young Americans viewed its reversal as a sign that they may grow older with fewer rights than their parents and grandparents had. While we don't have the full numbers yet, researchers say that this midterm had the second highest turnout of voters under 30 in several decades.

Throughout the fall, Data for Progress worked to further understand the impact that the *Dobbs* decision could have on midterm turnout. Across a series of 14 surveys conducted between September 14 and November 7, we found voters
under the age of 45 consistently indicated that the *Dobbs* decision made them more motivated to vote by margins around 10 points higher than among voters ages 45 and up. While voters consistently viewed the economy as the top issue ahead of the election, it's clear that the *Dobbs* decision elevated the importance of abortion access with voters, and younger voters in particular.

Immediately after the *Dobbs* decision was released, Data for Progress launched a poll into Kansas on behalf of Families United for Freedom, a group that supports the pro-choice side of ballot measures in states across the country. In the two Kansas surveys, the polling told a consistent story: First, that the pro-choice side, the

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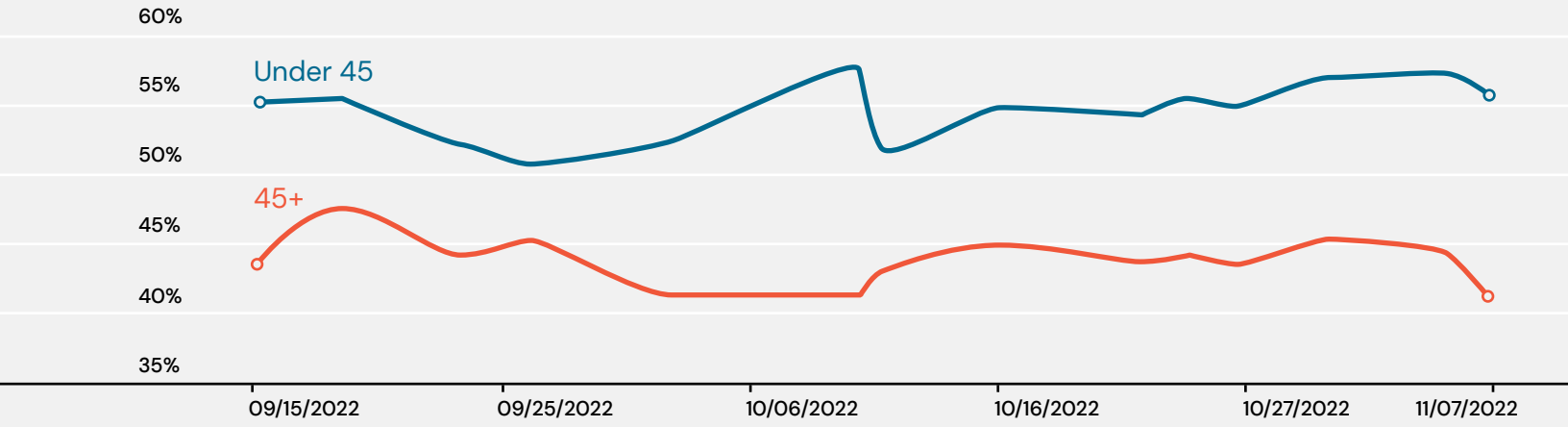
Young Voters Reported Higher Motivation to Turn Out Over Abortion Access

Does the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* make you more or less motivated to vote in the November general election?



Data for Progress, Sept. 14–Nov. 7, 2022 surveys of 17,054 likely voters

"No" side in this contest, had a clear path to victory; and, second, that while voters in conservative states may have conflicting views about abortion, progressives can win if the debate is reframed as one between criminalizing abortion and protecting highly regulated abortion access. The Kansas campaign resulted in a stunning victory, with the "No" side defeating a well-organized and well-funded opposition by 18 percentage points (in a state that Biden lost in 2020 by about 14 points).

Following the Kansas initiative, Data for Progress — again working with Families United for Freedom — also polled races in Michigan, Montana, and Kentucky. In Kentucky, Data for Progress conducted polling for Protect Kentucky Access, the state's pro-choice ballot measure committee, which went on to win by around 4 percentage points. In Montana, the pro-choice side went on to win by around 5 points, a result that reflected just how disciplined and rigorously message-tested the campaign was.

Abortion is often treated as a partisan issue. These campaigns were effective, however, because at every step of the process, the messaging subverted the typical polarizing Democrat vs. Republican framing. In Kentucky, the ads featured religious leaders and emphasized that a victory by the "Yes" side would lead to a total ban on abortion and more government mandates. In Montana, the ad campaign did not mention the word abortion and instead focused on the cruelty of the initiative. These messages were nonpartisan in their appearance and focused on protecting personal liberty and reproductive rights for women. Those shared American values united voters, regardless of their self-identified partisanship. While many Americans view abortion as a morally complicated issue, few want it banned outright, as reflected by the success of abortion ballot measures this fall.

20 Demographics of the Midterms

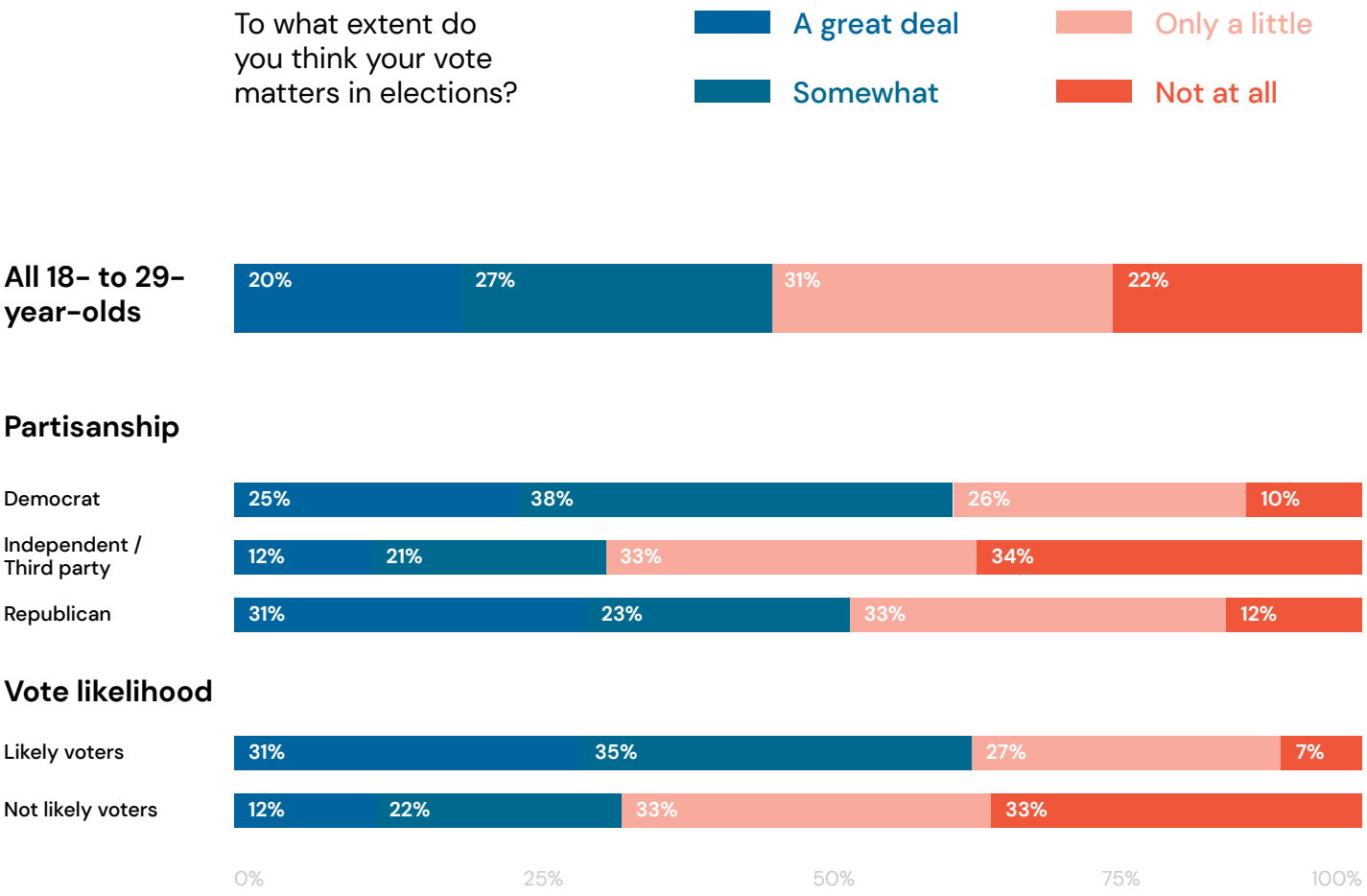
Youth Voters

To understand the voting decisions, political attitudes, and policy preferences of young voters — a key voting bloc for Democrats — ahead of the 2022 election, Data for Progress conducted a survey sampling both voters and nonvoters between the ages of 18 and 29 between September 21 and October 3. We found that more than half of young people (53%) believed their vote matters "only a little" or "not at all," and nearly three-quarters of young people (70%) believed that Congress represents their generation "only a little" or "not at all."

Young voters are cynical about politics; a Democratic male respondent said, "A lot of politicians are out of touch. Congress is less about democracy and more about 'winning.'" Another respondent added, "I feel that career politicians have no concern for the people they represent and that the average American has little or no say or representation in the current political system."

"I feel that career politicians have no concern for the people they represent and that the average American has little or no say or representation in the current political system." —Independent male respondent

21 Around Half of Young People Worried Their Vote Doesn't Matter in Elections



Data for Progress Sept. 21–Oct. 3, 2022 survey of 801 18- to 29-year-olds

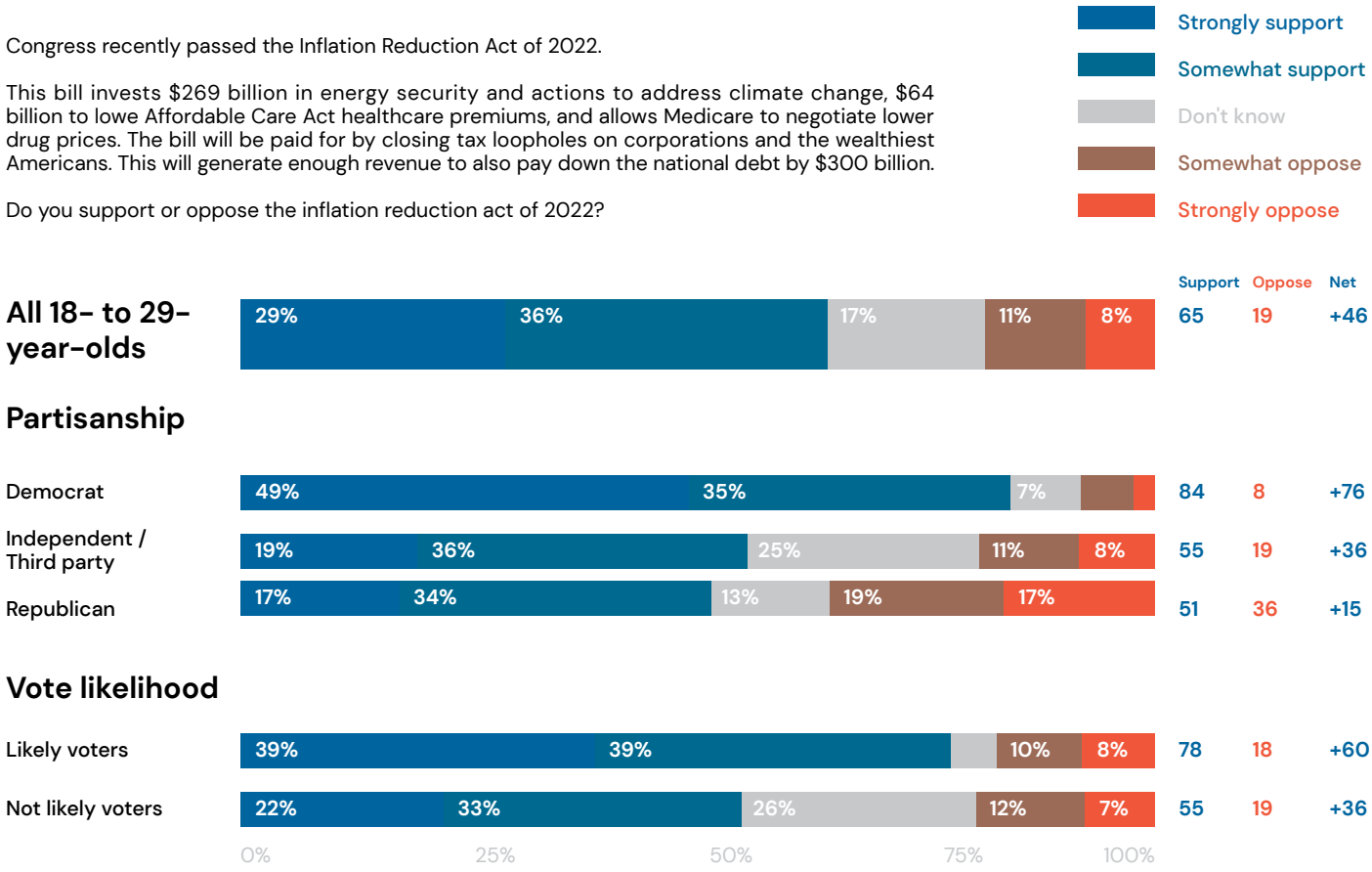
However, despite their disillusionment with our current political system, young Americans still responded favorably to policies passed under the Biden Administration. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents, **including 78% of likely youth voters,** supported the Inflation Reduction Act when informed about its commitments to lowering healthcare costs and addressing climate change. This support included a majority of young voters and nonvoters across party lines, with 51% of Republicans, 55% of Independents, and 84% of Democrats backing the bill. However, **only 16% of young voters reported having heard "a lot" about the Inflation Reduction Act** prior to taking this poll, similar to our national polling of voters of all ages, suggesting a huge gap in knowledge about the legislative achievements made under the current administration and Congress.

22 A Majority of Young People Supported the Inflation Reduction Act

Congress recently passed the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022.

This bill invests $269 billion in energy security and actions to address climate change, $64 billion to lowe Affordable Care Act healthcare premiums, and allows Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices. The bill will be paid for by closing tax loopholes on corporations and the wealthiest Americans. This will generate enough revenue to also pay down the national debt by $300 billion.

Do you support or oppose the inflation reduction act of 2022?



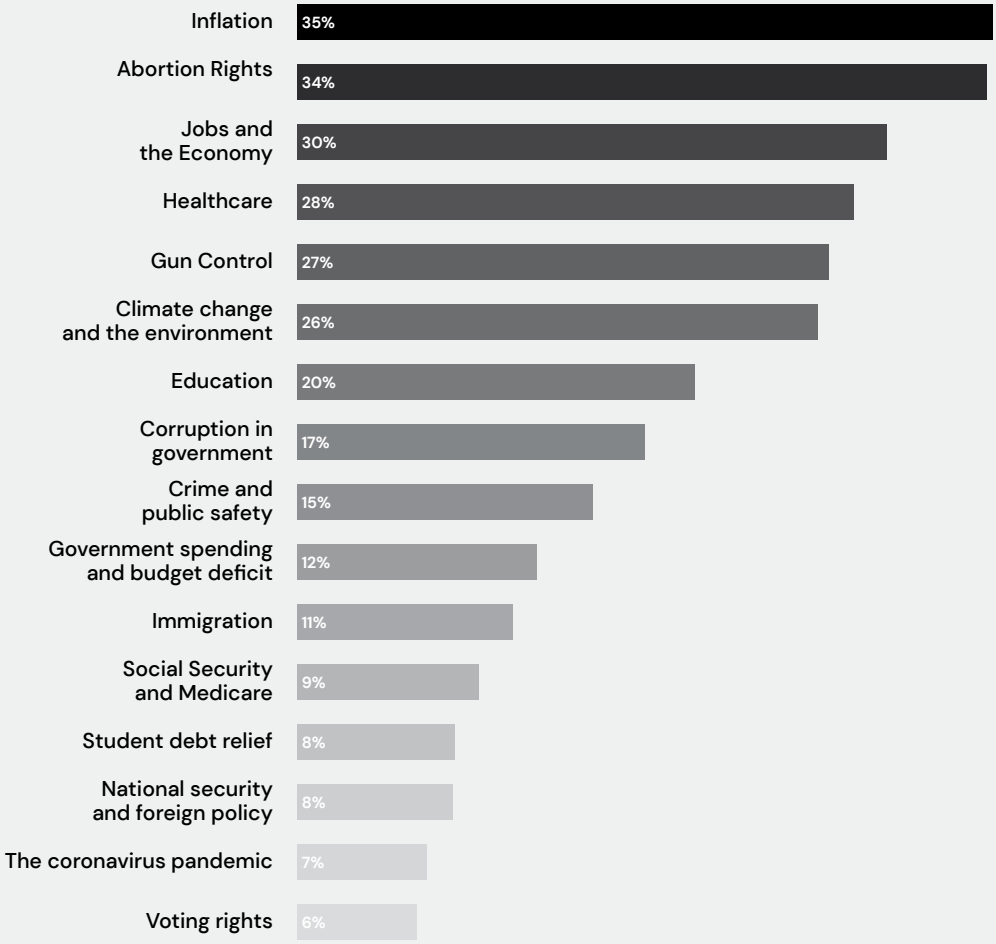
Data for Progress Sept. 21–Oct. 3, 2022 survey of 801 18- to 29-year-olds

Like the rest of the electorate, young voters ahead of the midterms identified economic concerns as their top priorities. When asked to choose the top three issues for a candidate for Congress to focus on, 35% of likely young voters selected inflation and 30% selected jobs and the economy. Two of the top three most important policy areas for young Americans related to economic concerns, while "inflation and rising prices" was the most reported issue (48%) that youth voters said made them more likely to turn out in the midterm elections. Among the respondents we spoke to, these sentiments were common. When asked how politicians could win their vote, an Independent female voter said politicians should "address the current concerns that affect the majority of Americans' everyday lives, inflation, and cost of living," while a Republican voter stated that political figures should "promise to help inflation crises, protect abortion rights, act on climate change, and protect our citizens."

In these findings, there is a clear throughline motivating political concern and participation, and it starts with a voter's wallet.

23 Young Voters Ranked Economic Concerns Among the Top Issues Congressional Candidates Should Address

Of the choices listed below, which do you think are the top three most important issues for a candidate for Congress to focus on?



Data for Progress Sept. 21–Oct. 3, 2022 survey of 334 likely youth voters

Abortion rights were also a significant priority for young voters: 70% of likely voters identified as pro-choice, a +48-point margin over respondents who identified as pro-life, and 34% selected abortion rights as one of the top three issues for a candidate for Congress to focus on.

In fact, Data for Progress found in a June 2022 survey that 54% of all likely voters thought that the next generation of Americans will have fewer rights than the current generation. As a Democratic female respondent in our youth poll said, "I am upset that my rights are infringed upon in my state. Sometimes abortion is necessary and we need to address that it's wrong to force women to have children who do not want them."

Democrats often try to tailor their messaging to young Americans by communicating about issues they believe matter most to this constituency, including climate change and student debt. While these issues are still salient with young people — who represent a generation that is broadly more progressive than the preceding generation — this generation is also significantly impacted by economic pressures. Young Americans have been hit especially hard by rising costs of living, and have pessimistic views of their economic futures: Over half (57%) of likely youth voters said they are only "a little confident" or "not at all confident" they will be able to retire by age 65.

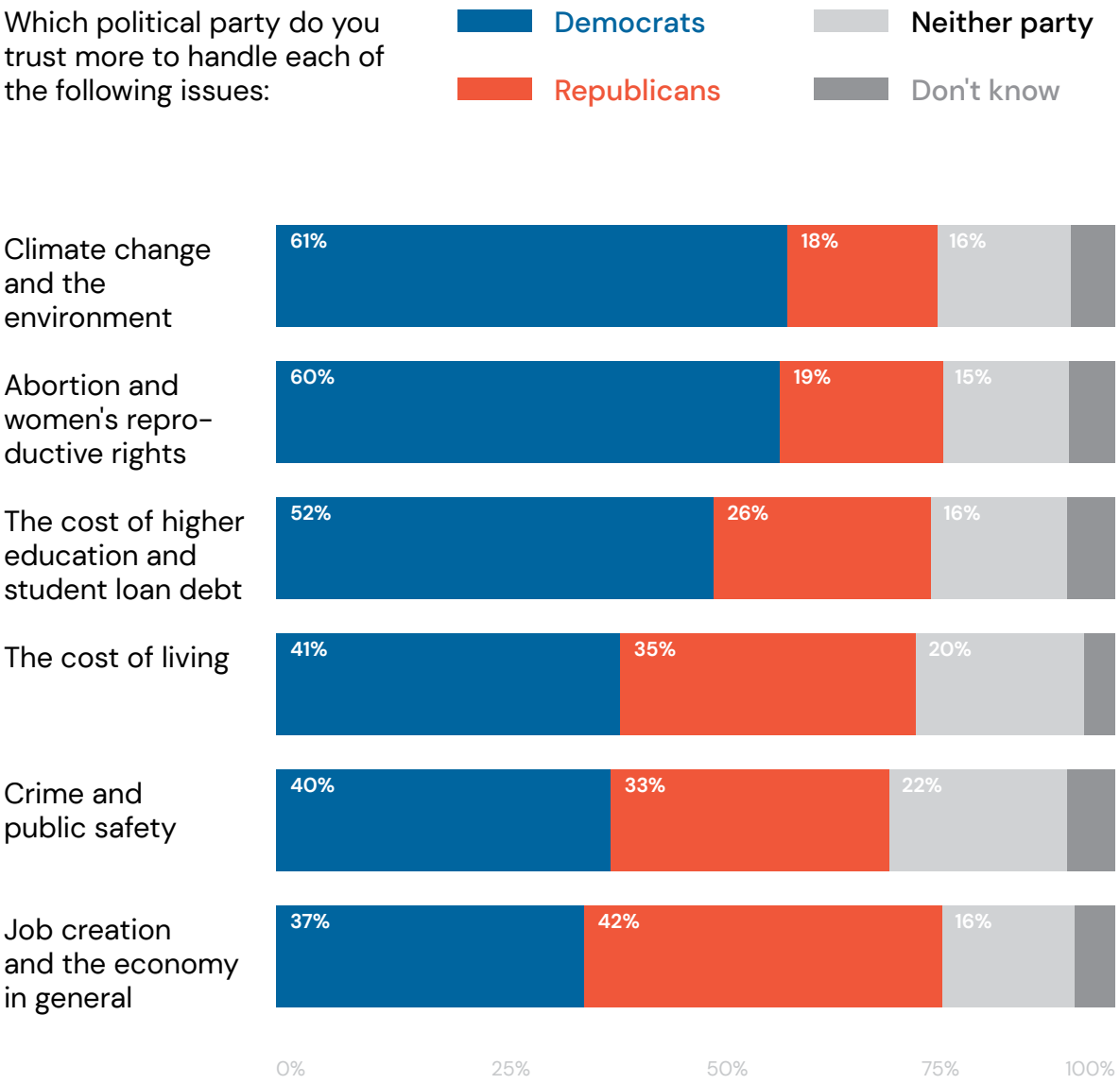
“I am upset that my rights are infringed upon in my state. Sometimes abortion is necessary and we need to address that it’s wrong to force women to have children who do not want them.”

—Female Democratic survey respondent

 Photo by Josh Barwick for Unsplash

However, while Republicans held a trust advantage with young people on the economy and inflation, we also found that young voters trusted Democrats by a +6-point margin on the cost of living specifically. These findings indicated that kitchen-table concerns are a key area where **Democrats can lean into messages about their efforts to lower costs.**

Democrats Were More Trusted by Young Voters on Top Policy Priorities



Data for Progress Sept. 21–Oct. 3, 2022 survey of 334 likely youth voters

26 Demographics of the Midterms

Black, Latina/o, and Asian American Voters

Data for Progress also conducted a poll of 627 likely Asian American, Latina/o, and Black voters — crucial voting blocs for Democrats — between October 27 and November 2, just ahead of the midterm elections. Examining party trust, issue priorities, general election attitudes, and policy preferences, we found these voters were most concerned about issues like inflation (34%), gun control (34%) and abortion rights (29%). Abortion rights was the top issue for Asian Americans and second-most important issue for Black voters.

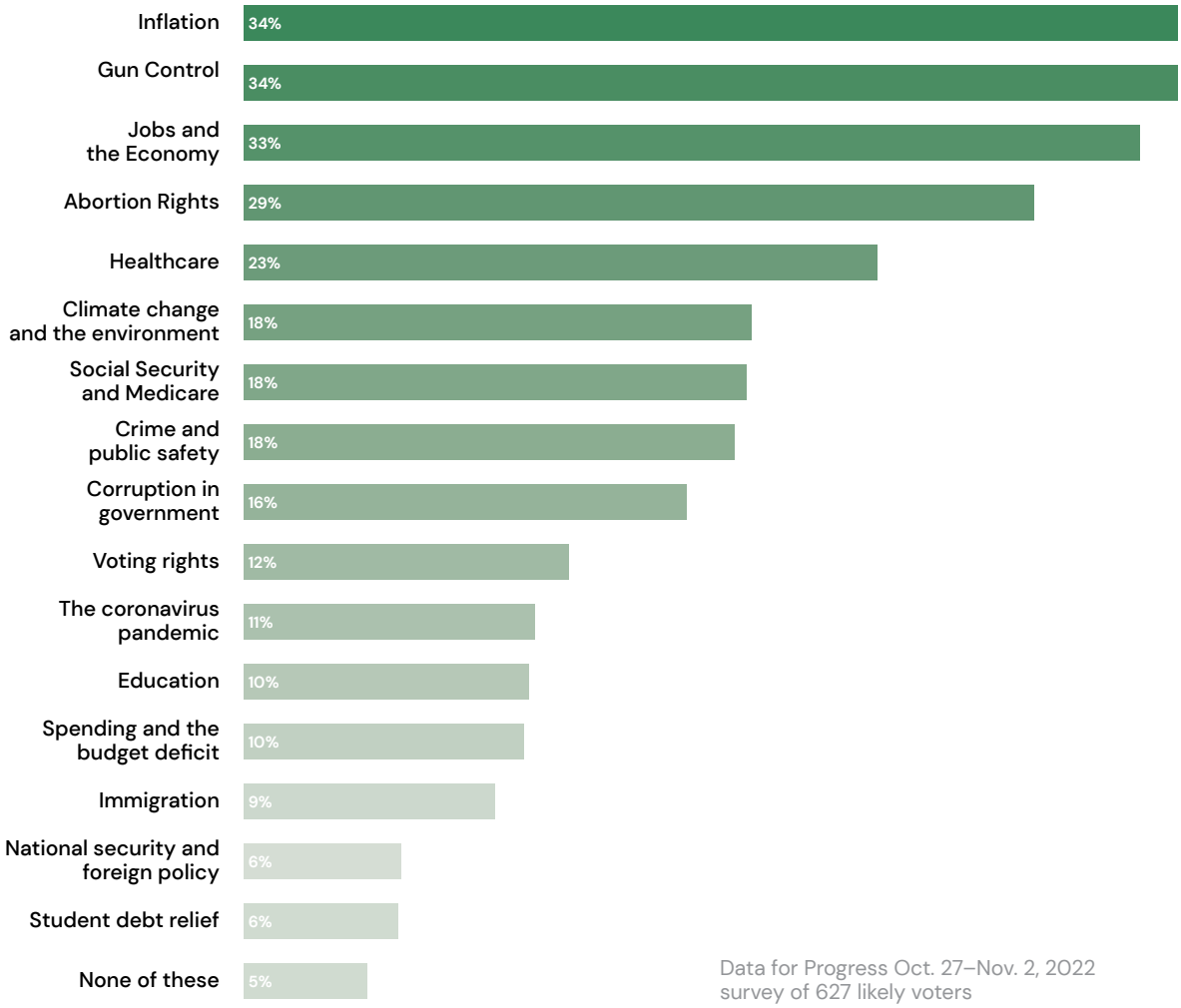
Notably, gun control featured as a more important issue for Black, Latina/o, and Asian American voters than for national likely voter surveys — and it was the top issue for Latina/o voters, on par with inflation. This may suggest high-profile mass shootings impacting communities of color in 2022 – including in Uvalde, Texas, and Buffalo, New York – increased the salience of this issue for this part of the electorate.

Black, Latina/o, and Asian American voters also highly trusted the Democratic Party to do a better job addressing the issues they viewed as most important in this election cycle, such as abortion rights at 67%. Black voters were the most trusting of the Democratic Party regarding abortion rights (77%), followed by Asian Americans (73%). The Democratic Party was also perceived to do a better job than the Republican Party by a +23-point margin on inflation, a top issue for Black, Latina/o, and Asian American voters. Black voters in particular strongly thought the Democratic Party would do a better job on inflation at 69%.

Notably, gun control featured as a more important issue for Black, Latina/o, and Asian American voters than for national likely voters — and it was the top issue for Latina/o voters, on par with inflation

Asian American, Black, and Latino Voters Viewed the Economy, Gun Control, and Abortion Rights as Top Issues

Of the choices listed below, which do you think are the top three most important issues for a candidate for Congress to focus on?



Data for Progress Oct. 27–Nov. 2, 2022 survey of 627 likely voters

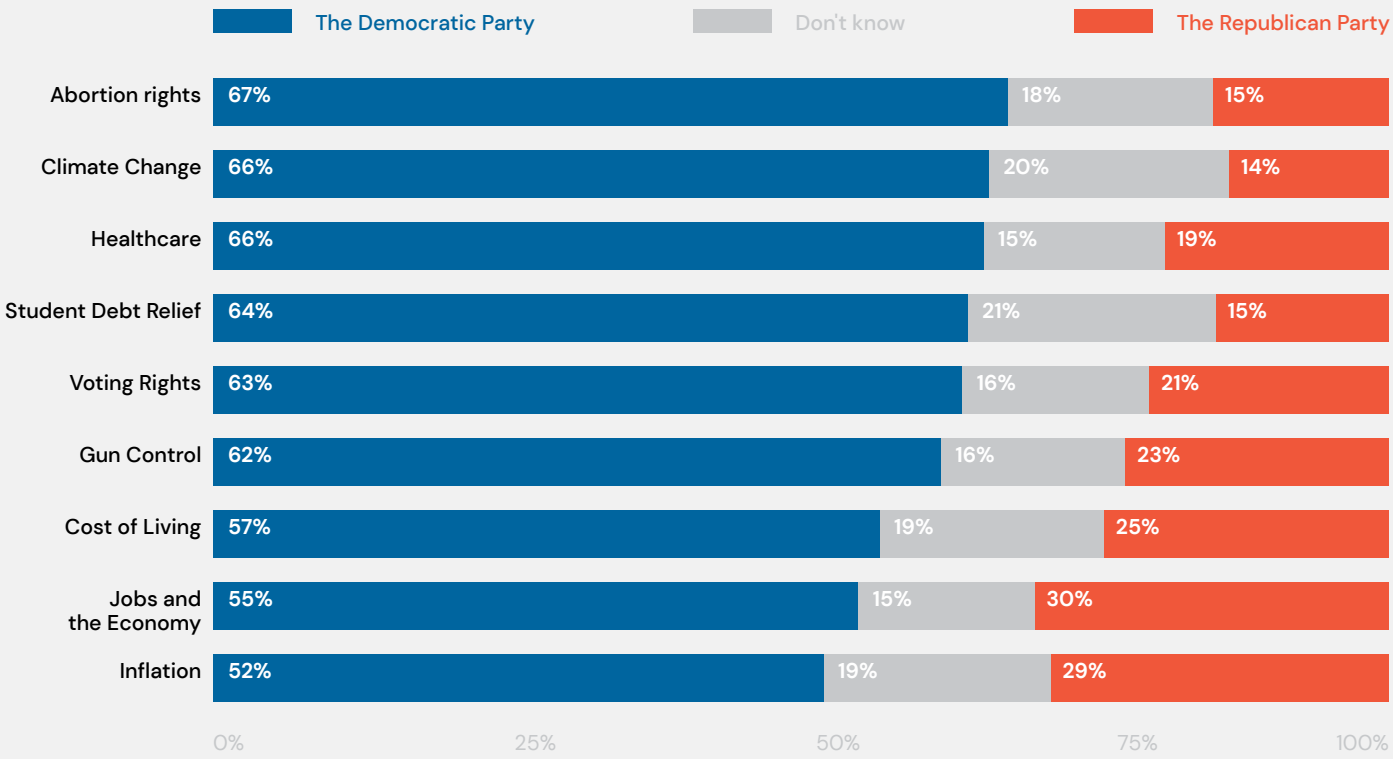
On jobs and the economy, an issue where Republicans traditionally hold an upper hand, Black, Latina/o, and Asian American voters thought the Democratic Party would do a better job by a +25-point margin. Black voters (69%) and Asian Americans (67%) especially trusted the Democratic Party on jobs and the economy.

In addition to issues that concerned voters the most, Asian American, Black, and Latina/o voters also overwhelmingly thought Democrats do a better job on a range of issues, including:

- Climate change by a +52-point margin
- Student debt relief by a +49-point margin
- Healthcare by a +47-point margin
- Voting rights by a +42-point margin
- Gun control by a +39-point margin

Black, Latina/o, and Asian American Voters Trusted Democrats on a Range of Issues, Including the Economy

Which party do you think would do a better job addressing the following issues?

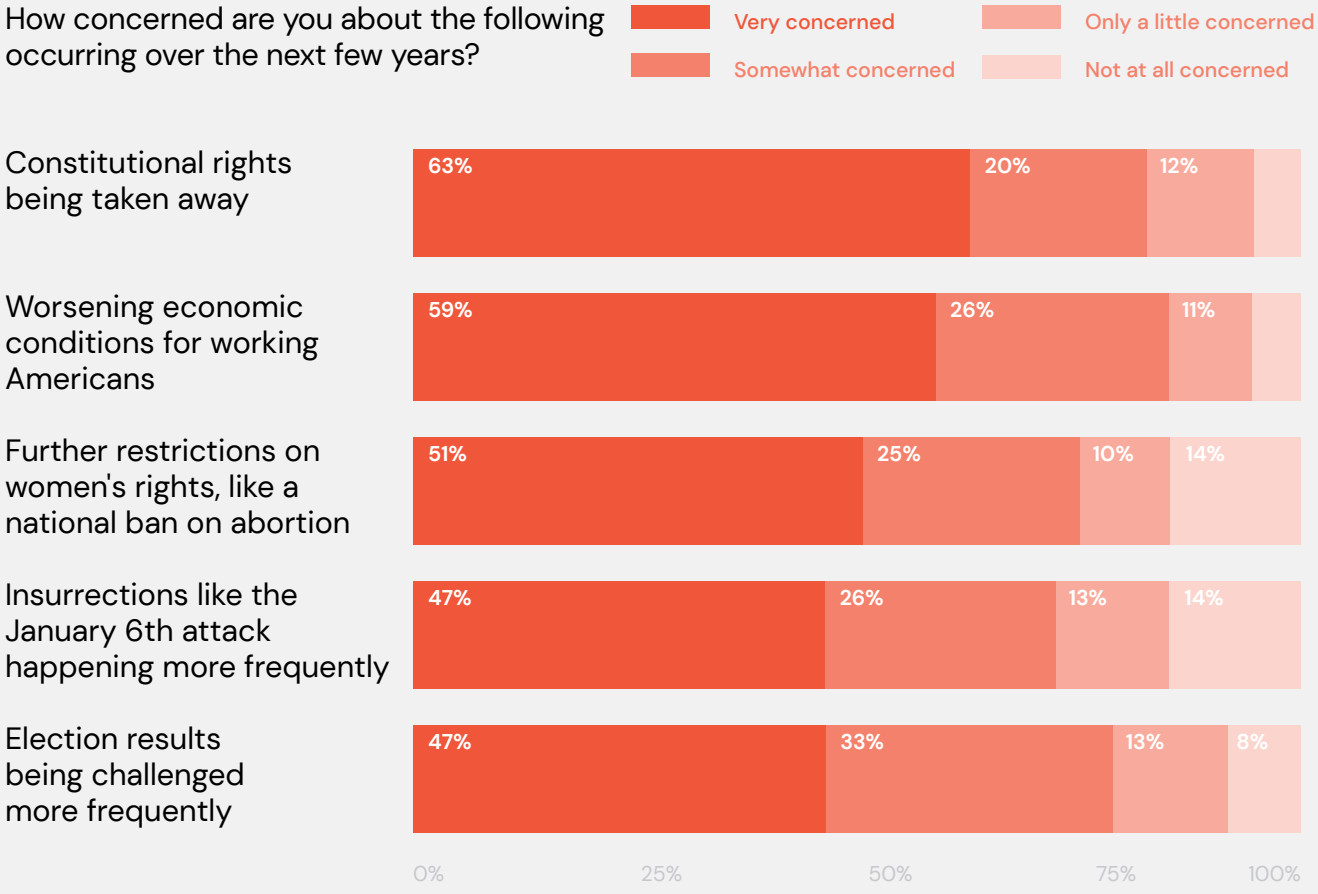


 Data for Progress Oct. 27–Nov. 2, 2022 survey of 627 likely voters

When asked to express their concern over possible risks that the U.S. faces in future years, Black, Latina/o, and Asian American voters strongly agreed they were "very concerned" about constitutional rights being taken away (63%). A similar proportion (59%) worried about worsening economic conditions for working Americans over the next few years, while just over half (51%) were "very concerned" that further restrictions on women's rights, like a national ban on abortion, could take place.

Asian American, Black, and Latina/o Voters Were Very Concerned About Constitutional Rights Being Taken Away, Worsening Economic Conditions, and Further Restrictions on Women's Rights

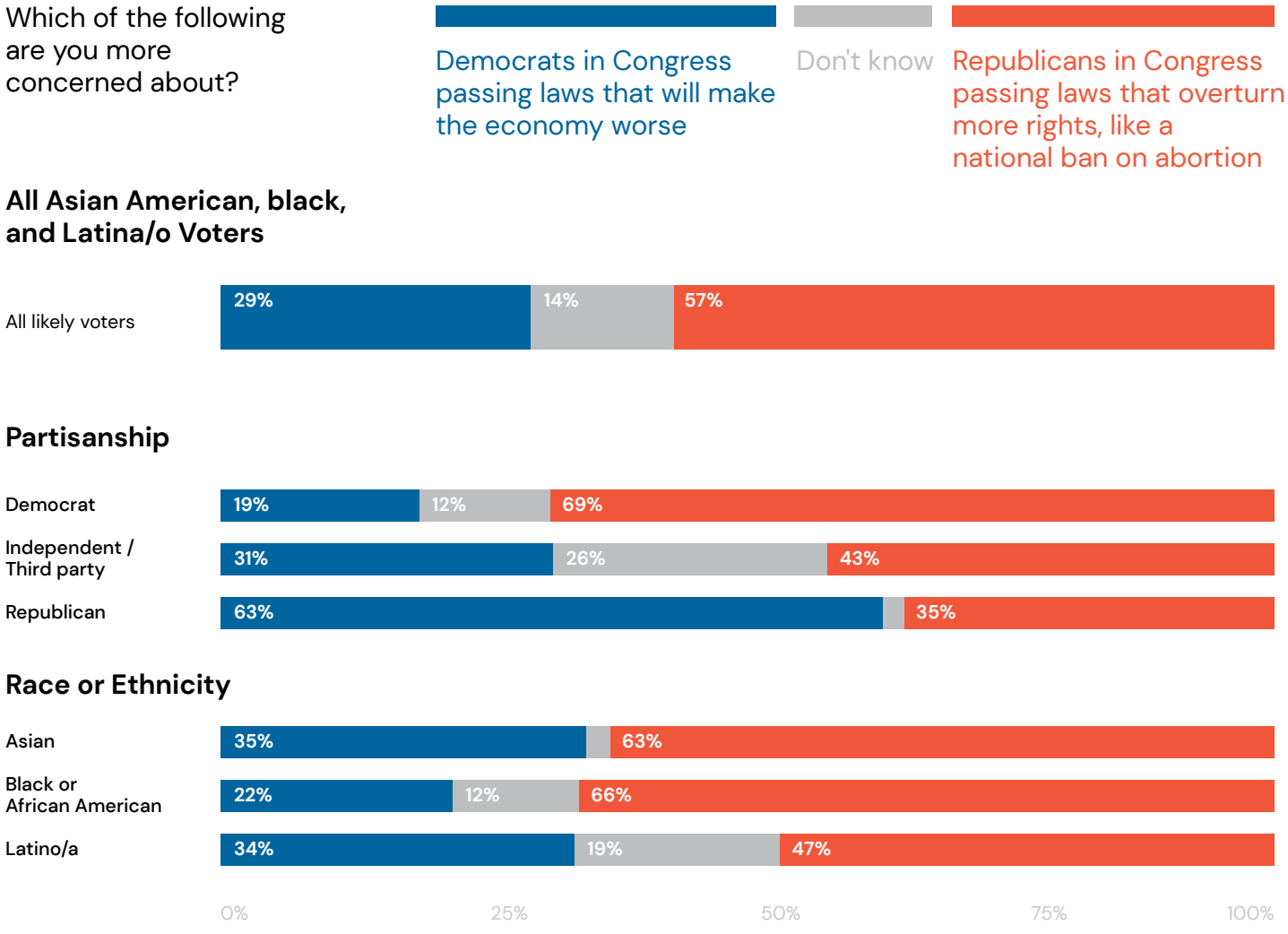
How concerned are you about the following occurring over the next few years?



Data for Progress Oct. 27-Nov. 2, 2022 survey of 627 likely voters

Asian American, Black, and Latina/o voters were resoundingly more concerned about Republicans restricting rights (57%) than they were about Democrats making the economy worse (29%). Black voters (66%) and Asian Americans (63%) were the most likely to report being more concerned about Republicans restricting rights.

Asian American, Black, and Latina/o Voters Were More Concerned About Republicans Overturning More Rights



 Data for Progress Oct. 27–Nov. 2, 2022 survey of 627 likely voters

Asian American, Latina/o, and Black voters are a vital part of the Democratic Party coalition. Photo by Gayatri Malhotra.

Asian American, Latina/o, and Black voters are a vital part of the Democratic Party coalition. While economic conditions were a top concern, Black, Latina/o, and Asian American voters bucked national trends by trusting the Democratic Party to address kitchen-table issues like inflation and costs of living. They were also more concerned about Republican overreach on constitutional rights than Democratic policies hurting the economy, and voted correspondingly.

32 Demographics of the Midterms

Voter Trust of the Democratic and Republican Parties

In 2018, healthcare was the most important issue going into the midterms. Half of ad spending for federal campaigns went to healthcare-related ads. Republicans, who championed a strategy of "repeal and replace" but lacked a concrete healthcare plan, were put in a tough position, especially considering they were already at a disadvantage as the incumbent party. Ultimately, voters sent a message to Republicans that they wanted Congress to protect the Affordable Care Act, maintain protections for preexisting conditions, and work to make healthcare coverage more affordable. They voted for the party they trusted most on the issue most important to them at the time and ushered in the "Blue Wave."

Four years later, pundits speculated that Democrats would struggle to reclaim that trust for what voters believed was the most important issue for the 2022 midterm elections: the economy. In fact, in the last Data for Progress poll ahead of the election, voters indicated they trusted Republicans more than Democrats to address three of the top five issues most concerning to them: inflation, jobs and the economy, and immigration. Specifically, voters trusted the Republican Party to address jobs and the economy by a +10-point margin and to address inflation by a +15-point margin. Only 35% of likely voters — and 27% of Independents — believed the Democrats would do a better job on inflation.

Additionally, voters tended to trust Republicans more on issues related to crime and safety. Data for Progress polling revealed that 46% of voters thought the Republican Party would do a better job at handling crime, while only 37% thought the same of the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, 42% of voters blamed Democrats for increased crime rates, and only 18% had heard "a lot" about Democratic plans to reduce crime. A plurality of voters thought that Democrats would make crime worse, while Republicans would improve public safety. Clearly, this is an issue where Democrats are on the back foot.

Whereas voters trusted Republicans more on the economy, inflation, and crime, they did trust Democrats on other issues that were also important to voters in this election cycle. Data for Progress polling found that voters thought Democrats would do a better job addressing climate change by a +23-point margin, abortion rights by a +20-point margin, student debt relief by a +21-point margin, and healthcare by a +8-point margin. Voters also thought Democrats would do a better job protecting Social Security by a +4-point margin and addressing gun control by a +3-point margin.

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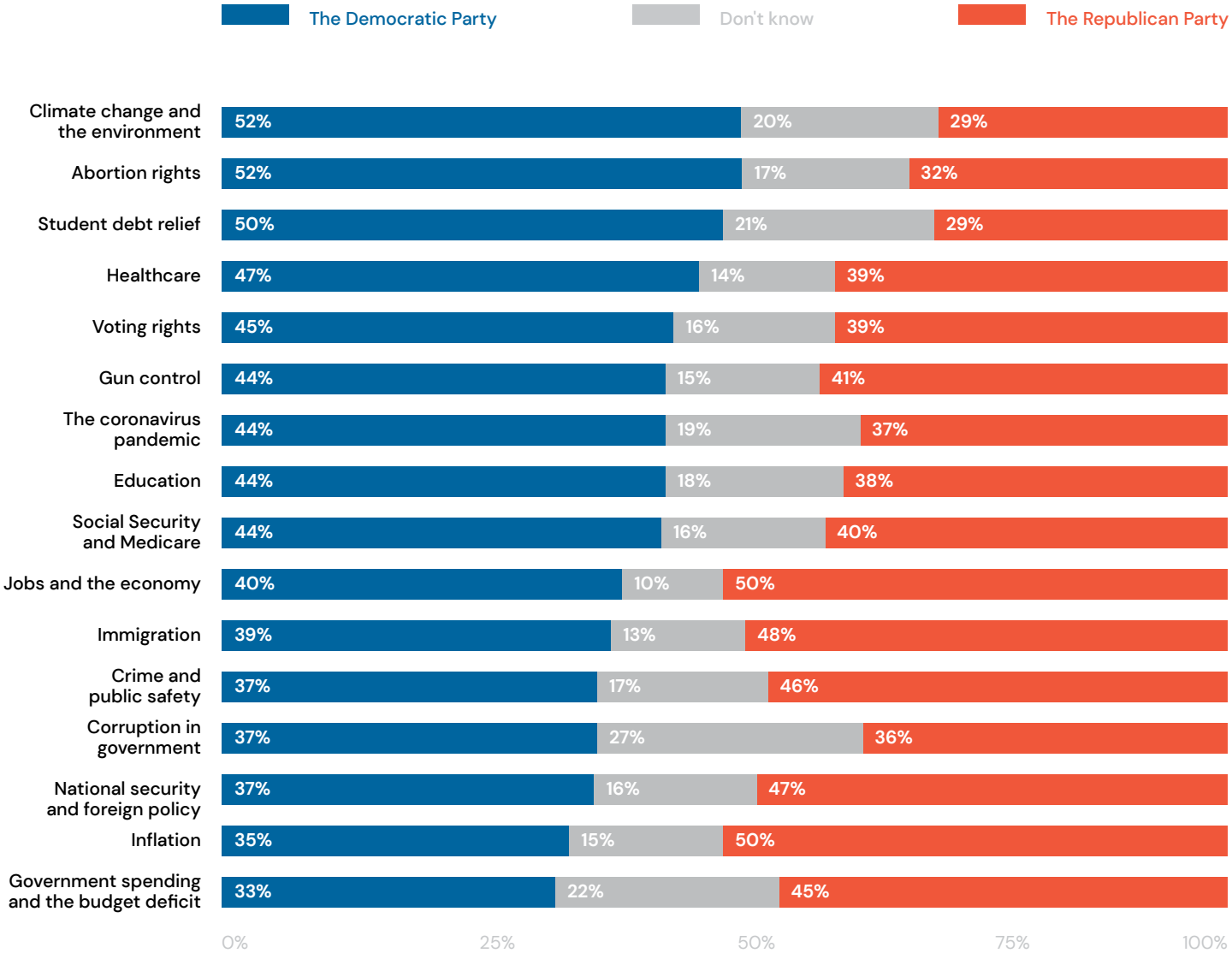
Democrats Were Perceived as Stronger on Issues Like Climate Change, Abortion Rights, Student Debt Relief, and Healthcare

Which party do you think would do a better job addressing the following issues?



Several intersectional issues helped color the narrative leading up to this election. **And while voters perceived Republicans as stronger on issues related to inflation and the economy, they perceived Democrats as stronger on issues like abortion, student debt relief, and climate change. Democrats' comparative strength on these key issues helped them overperform this cycle, especially among key constituencies.**

Data for Progress Oct. 14–18, 2022 survey of 1,095 likely voters

Voter Approval of the Biden Agenda and Reaction to Republican Extremism

After securing a trifecta in the White House and Congress, Democrats accomplished a series of historic legislative wins that were not only overwhelmingly popular with voters, but also transformative for the U.S. domestic policy landscape. Namely, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), CHIPS and Science Act (CHIPS), and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) represent historic investments to scale clean energy production and lower energy costs, create good-paying American jobs, improve the country's crumbling infrastructure, increase domestic manufacturing, stabilize healthcare costs, and reduce pollution in disadvantaged communities. In tandem, these pieces of legislation unlock new investments that offer solutions to a number of voters' top issues.

In midterm elections, voters often react to the party in power's legislative record, and they historically vote against the incumbent party. However, if Biden's low approval numbers were a consequence of an unpopular domestic agenda, as opposed to rising prices and economic conditions, we would have expected to see some kind of backlash to the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act. Leading up to November, Data for Progress polling found that voters overwhelmingly supported some of the biggest accomplishments of the Biden Administration, including the Inflation Reduction Act, CHIPS and Science Act, student debt relief, and the federal marijuana pardon. We also found that voters were particularly averse to items in the Republican agenda that reflected GOP overreach.

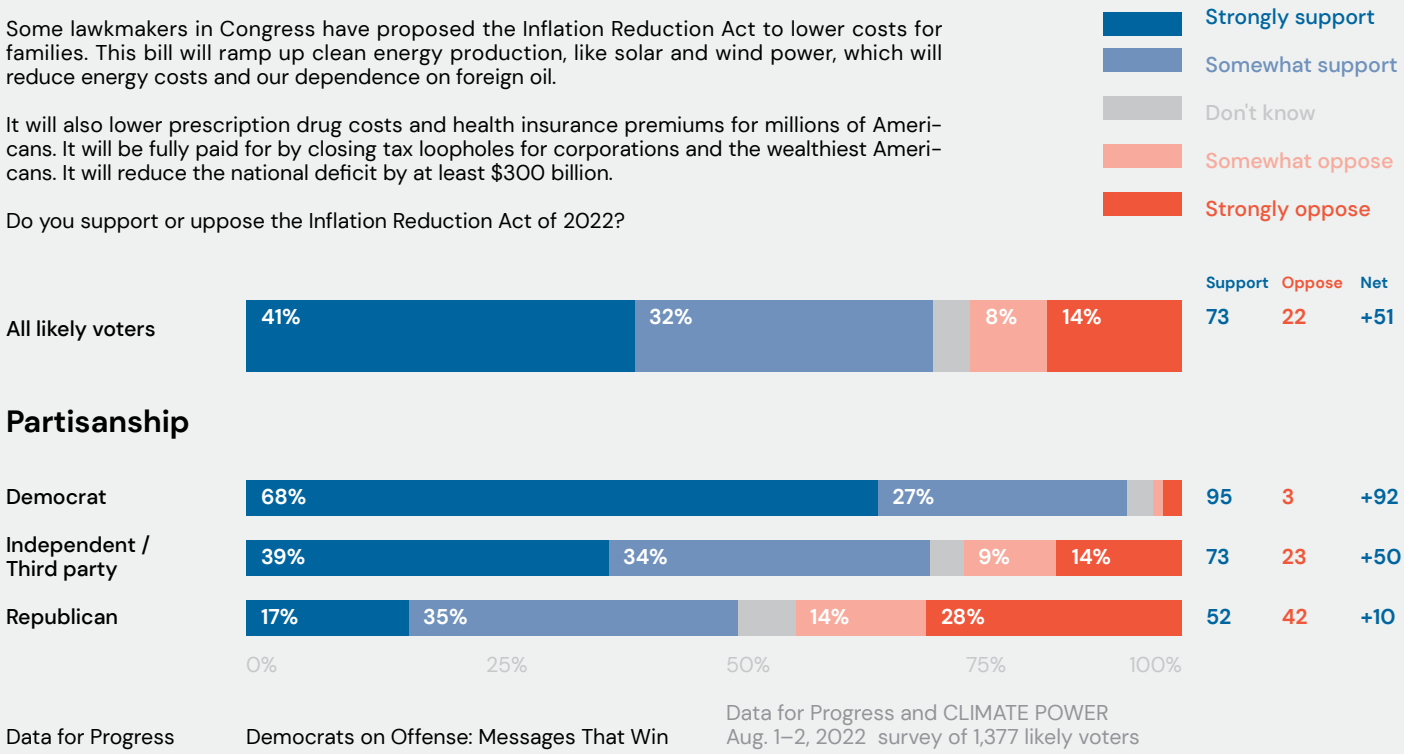
The Inflation Reduction Act was one of Biden's strongest legislative achievements. Our polling with Climate Power has not found the same mobilization against the Inflation Reduction Act as there was against the Affordable Care Act. In fact, when given a description of the bill in August, likely voters overwhelmingly supported the IRA by a +51 point margin at 73%. Additionally, Data for Progress found that a wide majority of voters across the political spectrum in swing states like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Arizona supported the Inflation Reduction Act.

A Majority of Voters Supported the Inflation Reduction Act

Some lawkmakers in Congress have proposed the Inflation Reduction Act to lower costs for families. This bill will ramp up clean energy production, like solar and wind power, which will reduce energy costs and our dependence on foreign oil.

It will also lower prescription drug costs and health insurance premiums for millions of Americans. It will be fully paid for by closing tax loopholes for corporations and the wealthiest Americans. It will reduce the national deficit by at least $300 billion.

Do you support or uppose the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022?

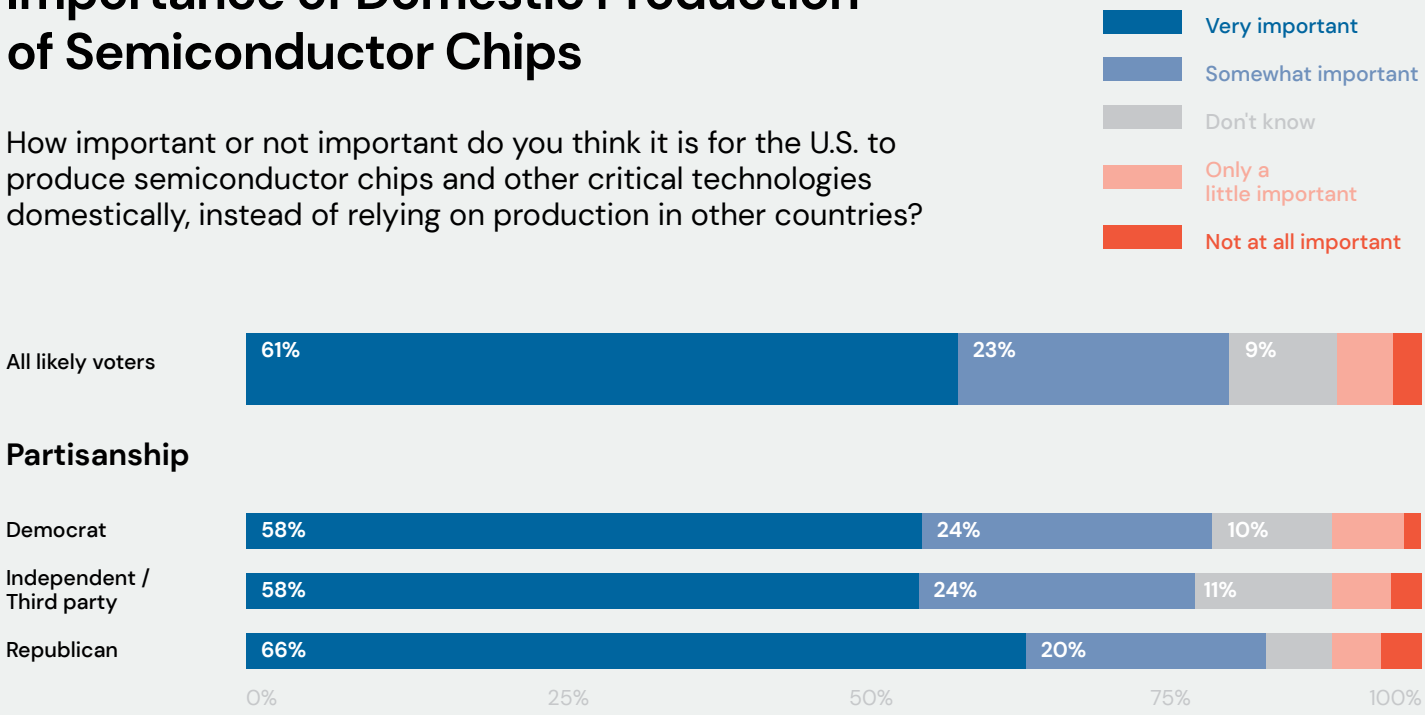


Data for Progress and CLIMATE POWER
Aug. 1–2, 2022 survey of 1,377 likely voters

Voters were also supportive of the bipartisan CHIPS and Science Act, a landmark piece of legislation that invested $280 billion in American semiconductor research, development, and production. Data for Progress polling from July 22–25 found that a majority of voters agreed it was important for the U.S. to produce semiconductor chips and other critical supply chain components domestically. Overall, voters this cycle reacted positively to industrial policy and a commitment from candidates to spur domestic manufacturing. In fact, industrial policy messages were some of the top messages that overperformed in our conjoint experiment (see page 54).

Voters Overwhelmingly Agreed on Importance of Domestic Production of Semiconductor Chips

How important or not important do you think it is for the U.S. to produce semiconductor chips and other critical technologies domestically, instead of relying on production in other countries?



Data for Progress July 22–25, 2022 survey of 1,353 likely voters

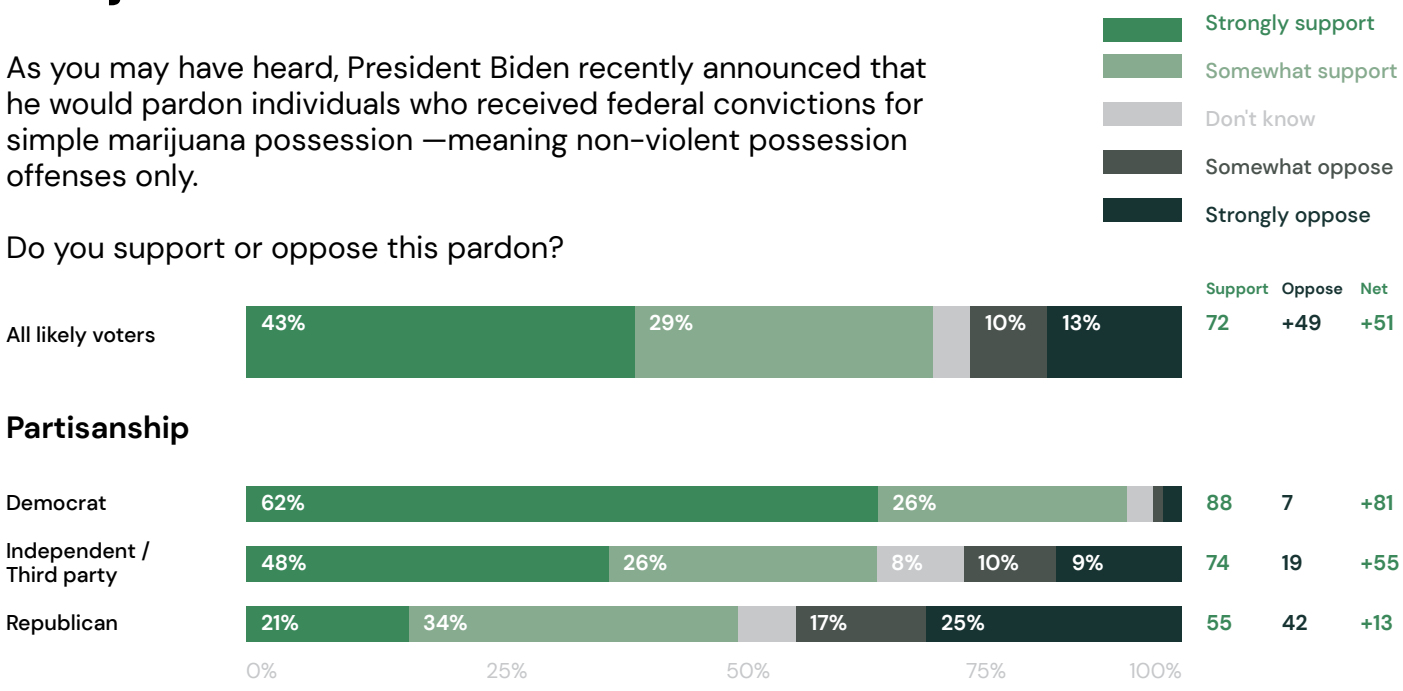
Where Democrats continued to fall short, however, was in communicating these legislative accomplishments to voters. Though the provisions outlined in the Inflation Reduction Act enjoyed overwhelming bipartisan support, voters were unaware that these laws had been signed. In the weeks leading up to the midterms, Data for Progress polling found that just 32 percent of voters knew that the Inflation Reduction Act had been signed into law. Moreover, voters struggled to differentiate key policy provisions of the bill from other policies that Democrats have championed since Biden took office.

Other high-profile Biden policies such as his federal marijuana pardon and student debt relief reinforce the popularity of the president's agenda. Both actions were widely supported by voters nationwide: Voters supported Biden's federal marijuana pardon by a +49-point margin, including Republicans, who supported the pardon by a +13-point margin.

A Majority of Voters Across Party Lines Supported Biden's Pardon for Marijuana Possession Offenses

As you may have heard, President Biden recently announced that he would pardon individuals who received federal convictions for simple marijuana possession —meaning non-violent possession offenses only.

Do you support or oppose this pardon?

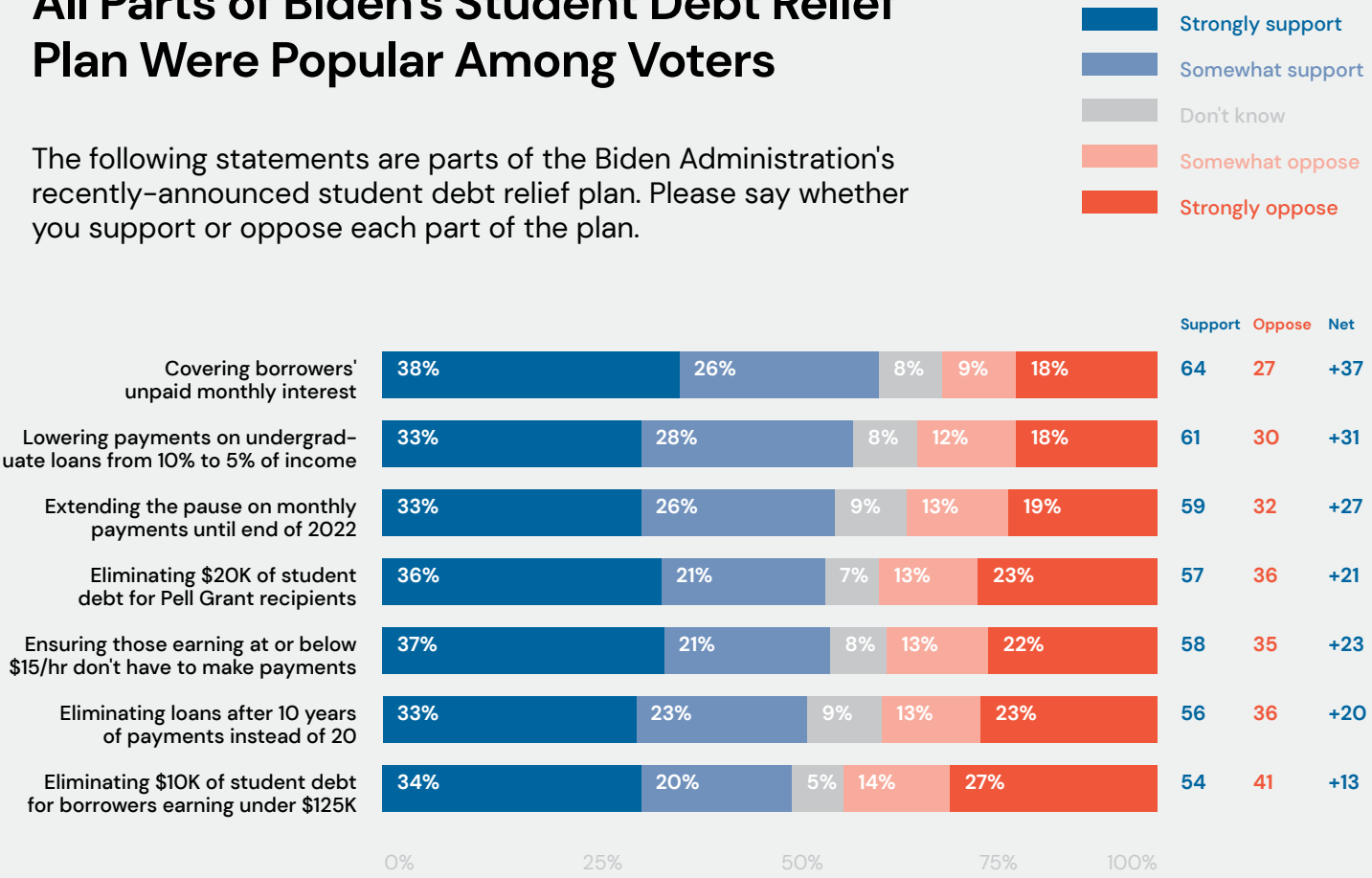


Data for Progress Oct. 7–11, 2022 survey of 1,219 likely voters

Voters also supported Biden's student debt relief plan by a +13-point margin, including Independents by a +5-point margin. Several specific provisions in the plan were also very popular, including covering borrowers' unpaid monthly interest (+37-point margin), lowering payments on undergraduate loans from 10% to 5% of income (+31-point margin), and ensuring those earning at or below $15/hour don't have to make payments (+23-point margin).

All Parts of Biden's Student Debt Relief Plan Were Popular Among Voters

The following statements are parts of the Biden Administration's recently-announced student debt relief plan. Please say whether you support or oppose each part of the plan.



Data for Progress August 26–28, 2022 survey of 1,244 likely voters

The takeaway is clear: Biden's struggles with voter approval — and those of Democrats by extension — appear to be mostly unrelated to his domestic policy agenda. But for Democrats to take the full legislative victory lap on these policy successes, they have to ensure voters know about the passage and provisions of these policies — as well as Democratic lawmakers' role in achieving these wins.

Voter Rejection of Republican Extremism

At the same time, voters largely disapproved of the GOP's policy priorities and held the Republican Party accountable for its increasingly extreme agenda. Throughout 2022, Republicans consistently made threats to LGBTQ+ healthcare, school curriculums, and, of course, abortion that were out of touch with public opinion. For example, Herschel Walker, who ran a pro-life campaign and is anti-abortion with no exceptions (despite having encouraged and paid for abortions himself) and also spread conspiracies about the 2020 election, alienated Georgia Senate voters with his extremist stances. Doug Mastriano, the Republican candidate for governor in Pennsylvania, is an election denier who was at the Capitol on January 6, also opposes abortion with no exceptions, and opposes marriage equality. He, too, alienated moderate and Independent voters with his positions. This rhetoric was deeply unpopular with the electorate, which viewed these threats as serious government overreach.

Data for Progress polling from June 15-21, for example, showed that 51% of likely voters thought that Trump Republicans' efforts to contest the 2020 election were an attempt to overturn the will of the people and, additionally, that 60% of voters supported the investigations by the U.S. House of Representatives into the January 6 attack and the events leading up to it. On transgender healthcare, a Data for Progress poll from February 25-27 found that even Republican voters were split on whether the government should prevent trans youth from accessing healthcare: 46% of likely Republican voters said the government should leave decisions about gender-affirming care to families and their doctors, and 11% said they weren't sure. On book bans, a Data for Progress poll from February 11-13 found that 71% of likely voters, including 66% of Independents and 64% of Republicans, believed that local school boards should not have the authority to ban books from school curriculums.

Voters were also incredibly averse to Republican efforts to cut or slash programs like Social Security and Medicare. High-profile Republicans repeatedly made threats to Social Security during this election cycle: In early 2022, Sen. Rick Scott, who chairs the National Republican Senate Committee, released an 11-point plan to "Rescue America," which included "sunsetting" (i.e., ending) Social Security and Medicare after five years, and forcing Congress to reauthorize Social Security every year; in June, Sen. Lindsey Graham alluded that Republicans would work to slash Social Security in the next Congress, suggesting seniors might have to "take a little less and pay a little more in;" and in August, Sen. Ron Johnson said that Social Security should be discretionary, subject to debate by Congress each year.

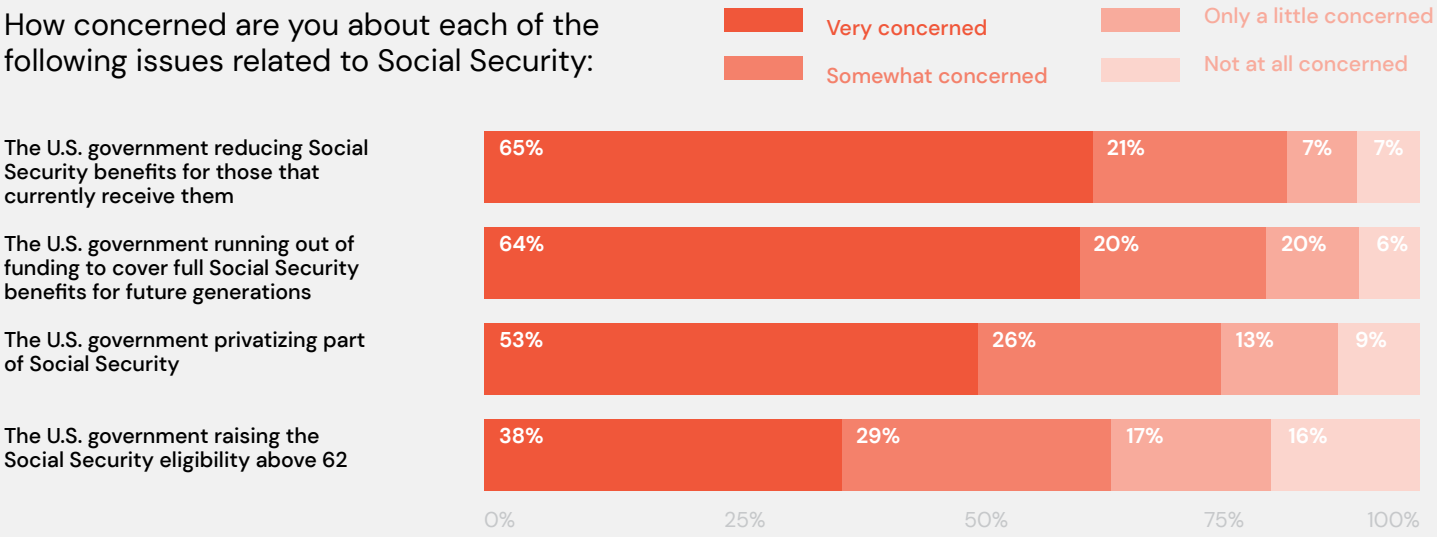
But Data for Progress polling has repeatedly found that a majority of likely voters (including Republicans) overwhelmingly support protecting and expanding Social Security.

A Data for Progress poll from June 17–21 found that 84% of voters were "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned" that the government will run out of funding to cover Social Security benefits for future generations, and 79% were "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned" that the U.S. government will privatize part of Social Security.

Voters Were Very Concerned About the U.S. Government Cutting Social Security Benefits

Data for Progress June 17–21, 2022 survey of 1,244 likely voters

How concerned are you about each of the following issues related to Social Security:



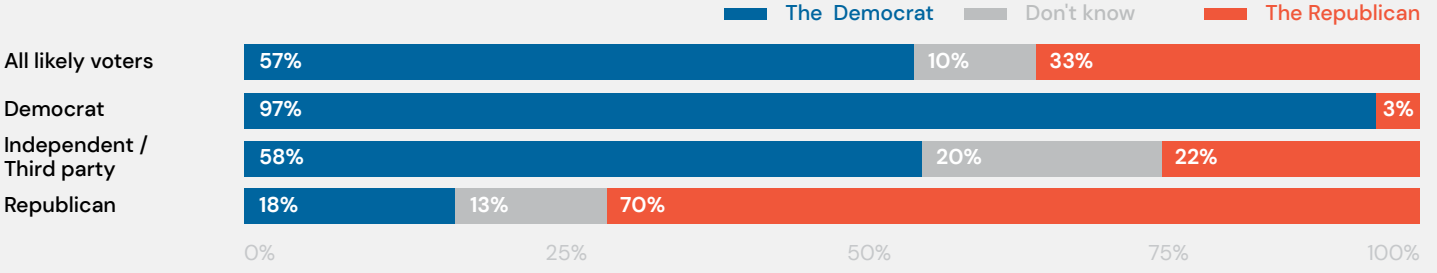
In a later survey, conducted from September 23-27, we found that a plurality of voters associated the Republican Party with wanting to end Social Security benefits in the next five years (39%) and changing Social Security so that Congress has to approve funding for it each year (44%).

This association impacted voters' preferences later in the same survey, when a majority of likely voters indicated by a +24-point margin that they preferred a Democratic candidate who wants to expand Social Security rather than a Republican candidate who wants to require Congress to approve funding for Social Security every year.

Voters Preferred Democrats Who Want to Expand Social Security Over Republicans Who Want to Require Congress to Approve Social Security Funding Every Year

Democrats in congress are proposing to expand Social Security benefits for all beneficiaries to address the higher cost of living. Republicans in Congress want to change Social Security so that Congress has to approve funding for it every year.

If the election for U.S. Congress in your district was held today, which of the following candidates are you most likely to vote for?



Data for Progress Sept. 23-27, 2022 survey of 581 likely voters

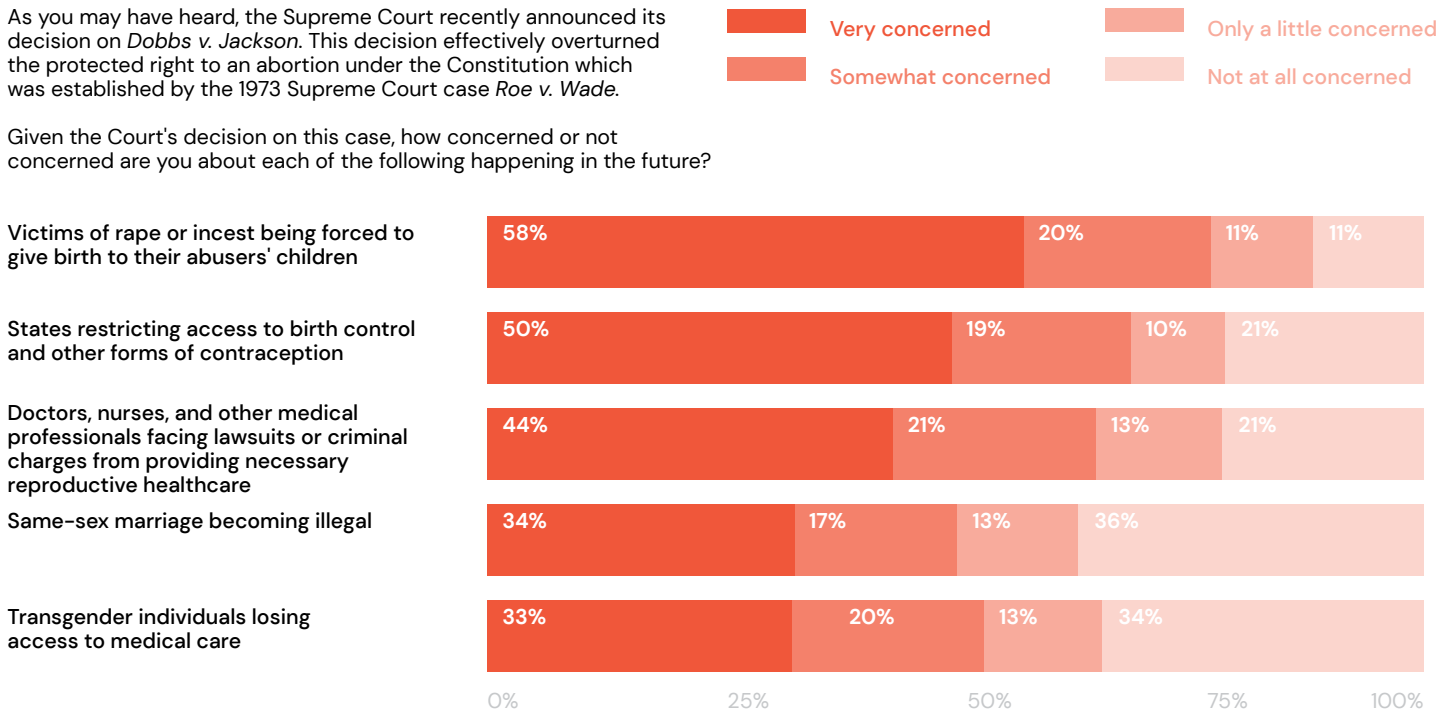
Democrats also maintain a unique trust advantage on this program — especially with older voters, a demographic that repeatedly turns out to vote in elections. Data for Progress polling in October found nearly half of Independent voters (47%) associated the Democratic Party with supporting the expansion of Social Security benefits for all beneficiaries, and just 12% of Independents associated those efforts with Republicans.

Finally, voters resoundingly disapproved of Republicans' stance on abortion. Back in 2021, Data for Progress found that a national abortion ban was wildly unpopular with likely voters in all 50 states. Data for Progress polling before and after the *Dobbs* decision also found that the majority of likely voters opposed overturning *Roe v. Wade*. What's more, voters were also fearful that Republicans posed a threat to other rights and freedoms in the future: In a Data for Progress poll from July 1-5, a majority of likely voters reported feeling "somewhat concerned" or "very concerned" about same-sex marriage becoming illegal (51%); states restricting access to birth control and other forms of contraception (69%); doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals facing lawsuits or criminal charges from providing necessary reproductive healthcare (65%); victims of rape or incest being forced to give birth to their abusers' children (78%); and transgender individuals losing access to medical care (53%).

After the *Dobbs* Decision, Voters Were Concerned About Losing Additional Rights and Freedoms

As you may have heard, the Supreme Court recently announced its decision on *Dobbs v. Jackson*. This decision effectively overturned the protected right to an abortion under the Constitution which was established by the 1973 Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*.

Given the Court's decision on this case, how concerned or not concerned are you about each of the following happening in the future?



 Data for Progress July 1–5, 2022 survey of 1,295 likely voters

The *Dobbs* decision and the subsequent abortion bans that went into place across the country were a signal to voters that Republicans could easily become more extreme and continue to encroach upon basic rights and freedoms if given the power. Americans resoundingly voted against GOP extremism in the 2022 midterms, putting their faith in Democrats to address other top concerns, like the economy and inflation.

Takeaways

The extremist policies touted by Republicans are overwhelmingly out of touch with what voters want. While economic conditions and inflation were top issues leading up to November — and ones on which Republicans did hold a trust advantage — voters were also highly concerned about Republican overreach and voted accordingly. Voters trusted Democrats to protect these rights; perceived Democrats to be stronger on addressing critical issues like climate change, healthcare, and gun control; and largely approved of the policies passed by the Biden Administration to address these issues — all factors which led to Democrats' historic overperformance.

Methodology

Polling results come from Data for Progress surveys of likely voters nationally using web panel respondents, except where otherwise specified for our youth poll, our survey of Black, Latina/o, and Asian American likely voters, and state-level polling. Samples were weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, geography, and voting history. The surveys were conducted in English. Margins of error for topline results are approximately ±3 percentage points and larger for subgroups.

42 Message and Issue Testing

We found that Democrats' strategic messaging on policies like the economy, healthcare, infrastructure, Social Security, and trade and manufacturing deeply resonated with voters.

Introduction

Building upon Data for Progress polling this cycle, which analyzed the issues that mattered most to voters both across the electorate and within specific constituencies, we undertook an experimental analysis of voter preferences at the macro level.
For this experiment, we tested the effectiveness of the messages and policies that voters actually heard from candidates on the campaign trail with a more robust sample size and a more comprehensive slate of messages tested than in our previous work.

We found that Democrats' strategic messaging on policies like the economy, healthcare, infrastructure, Social Security, and trade and manufacturing deeply resonated with voters. Democrats used strong, effective messages on issues where they had a trust advantage (like healthcare, Social Security, and abortion) and avoided weak messaging on issues that are typically harder for Democrats to campaign on (like crime and criminal justice). Ultimately, Democrats won through strong message discipline that both emphasized core Democratic accomplishments and commitments, and also held Republicans accountable for their extreme positions on key issues.

Within a highly polarized political environment, even minor changes in messaging or campaign focus can impact voter turnout and marginally shift the results of a tight election. Uncovering the unique factors that shape these marginal advantages required surveying a far greater number of voters than our traditional sample size. To this end, Data for Progress conducted a massive survey experiment of more than 77,000 registered voters in order to offer campaigns and movements the leverage, sophistication, and precision to run winning races in future elections.

Ahead of the midterm elections, we undertook a collaborative conjoint study of the American electorate with Dr. Brian Schaffner, professor of political science at Tufts University. Our analysis focused on two particular outcomes of interest:

1 To understand how specific messaging and policies appealed to voters across the electorate in this midterm cycle.

2 To develop a set of recommendations on messaging and policy strategy for Democratic Party stakeholders ahead of the 2024 general election.

In service of these aims, this section explores the methodology and major findings of our national conjoint analysis, before providing more specific recommendations and insight across six major issue domains — the economy, healthcare, Social Security, crime, climate and clean energy, and abortion — that featured prominently in the 2022 midterm election cycle.

Methodology

To analyze the political effectiveness of Democratic messages and policy positions, we fielded an online survey of 90,782 American adults with a sample obtained from Lucid Marketplace. For our analysis, we focused on the 77,197 respondents who were registered voters. The sample of registered voters was weighted to be representative of national registered voters by age, gender, education, race, the interaction of education and race, and 2020 presidential vote.

Our experiment provided respondents with a series of six hypothetical head-to-head matchups between a Democratic and Republican candidate running for Congress. For each set of Democratic and Republican profiles, the candidate's age, race, gender, and years of political experience were randomized. Each candidate was also given a randomized policy position and a randomized line of messaging from their party.

The following page shows an example of what our survey respondents saw:

45

Which of the following individuals would you be more likely to vote for?

PARTY	Republican	Democrat
DESCRIPTION	39 year old White man	42 year old White woman
EXPERIENCE	24 years in politics	16 years in politics
ISSUE PRIORITY	Enact a ban on Critical Race Theory	Make it easier to change identification documents to reflect a person's gender identity
RECENT QUOTE	For too long, the U.S. government has been spending more than it takes in. To set the nation on a more stable financial path, it is critical for Congress to set sustainable funding levels for the federal government and reduce overall spending levels.	Offshore wind is essential to our economic and national security and clean energy future. Investing in offshore wind will combat climate change, create good-paying jobs, and end our dependence on foreign energy.

In total, this provided us with a sample size of 463,182 hypothetical vote choices made by registered voters. Because each matchup compared a Democrat and a Republican candidate, this set-up mirrored the real-world impact of messages and policies on vote choice.

And because partisanship predicts over 90% of vote choice, our large sample size is necessary to be able to detect small effects — even just a couple of percentage points — that could meaningfully swing close future elections.

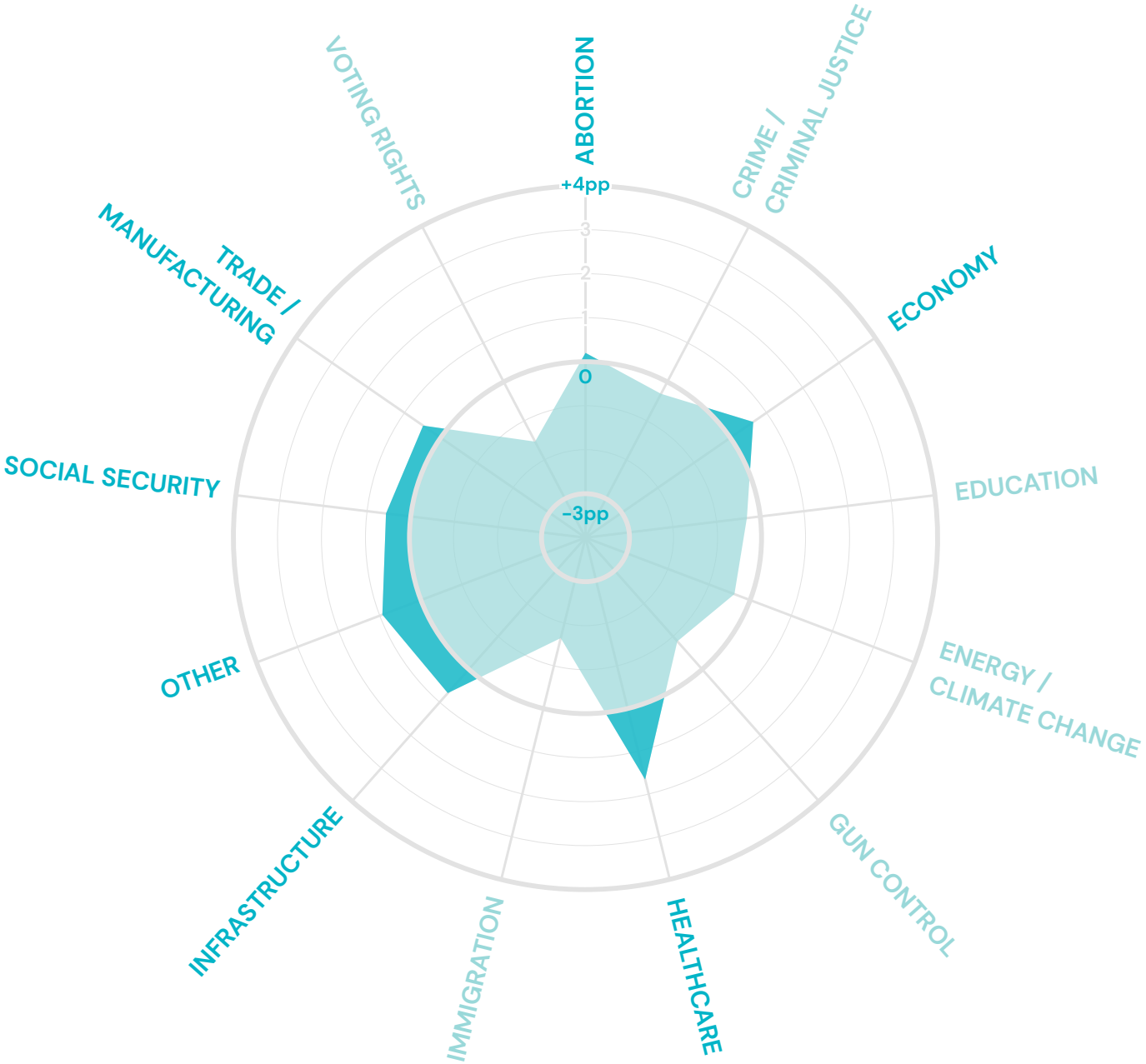
46 Summary of Findings

33 of the 135 Democratic **messages** tested produced significant electoral **overperformance** in our experiment (meaning that when the Democratic candidate was assigned to use one of these messages, they performed significantly above the average Democratic candidate).

- Among these 33 messages, there were almost no cases where the message led to significant underperformance with a key Democratic constituency.
- Registered voters were especially receptive to certain messaging topics, with messages on **healthcare, infrastructure, the economy, Social Security, and trade and manufacturing** overperforming.
- Of the 33 overperforming Democratic messages, 18 mentioned economic conditions in some way, focusing on tackling the high prices of everyday goods and healthcare, as well as creating new jobs and spurring domestic manufacturing.
- Given that Democrats faced a trust deficit on the issues of inflation and the economy as compared to issues like abortion and climate change, Democratic messages on economic conditions were particularly effective, especially among swing voters who disproportionately cited inflation as their top electoral issue.
- Additionally, 10 of the overperforming messages centered on healthcare, with top messages emphasizing lowering costs, taking on Big Pharma, and investing in mental health care.
- Social Security is a key issue area for Democrats because it is one for which there is general consensus between progressives and moderates in defense of Republican attacks. Many frontline Democrats deftly utilized messaging on Social Security in 2022 — and it's an issue the party should make a priority on its legislative agenda and on the 2024 campaign trail.
- Although the highest overperforming message for Democrats centered on crime, the second-most underperforming message also centered on crime, demonstrating the importance of smart, effective messaging on this issue.
- The most effective Democratic messages on climate and energy centered on the economic benefits of domestic energy production, such as utilizing diverse energy resources, growing the clean energy economy, and prioritizing America's energy security.
- On abortion, messages emphasizing bodily autonomy, personal privacy, and government interference connected best with voters.

Voter Persuasion by Message Topic

Marginal Mean Democratic Vote Share



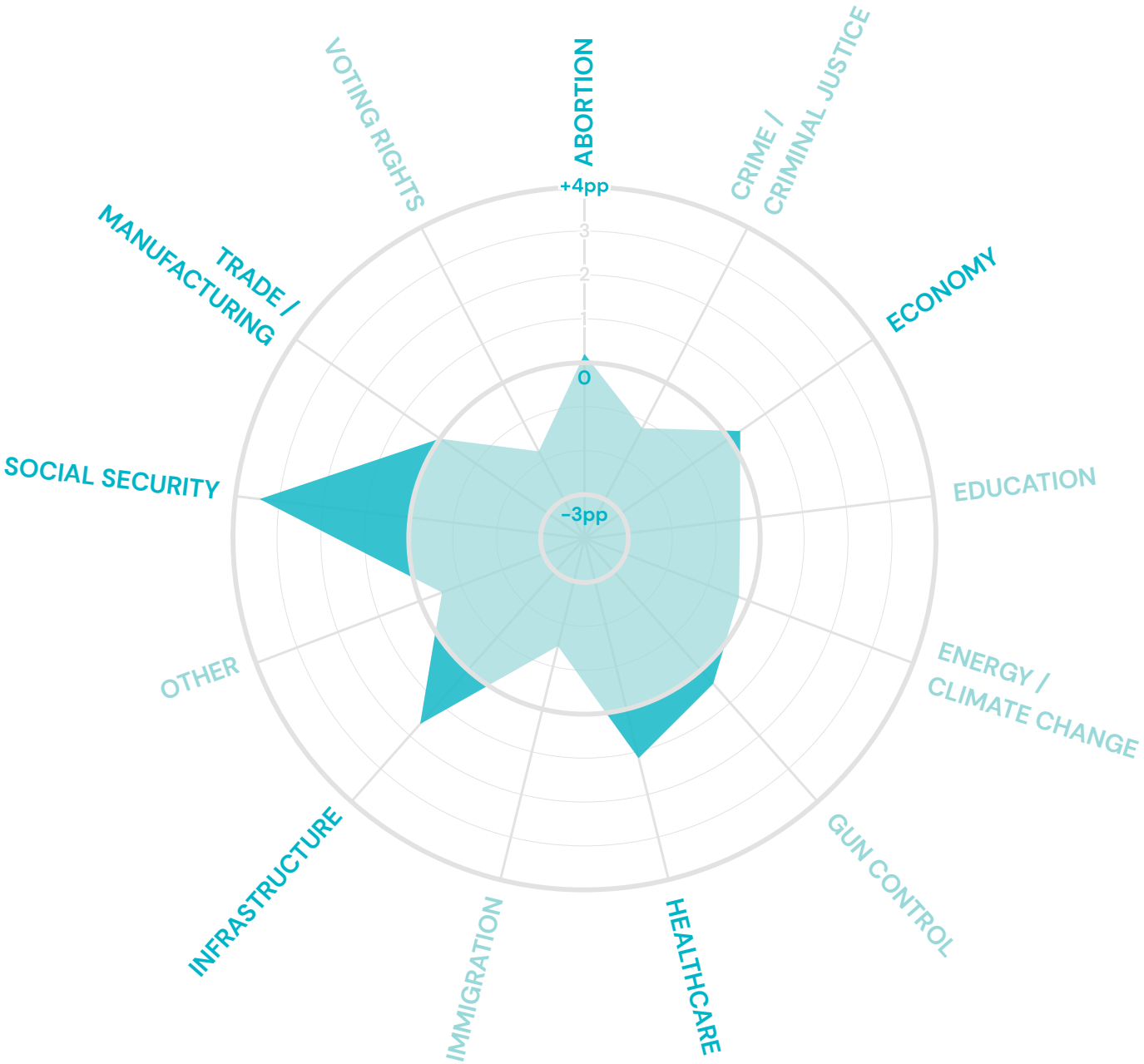
Overperforming Policy Underperforming Policy

30 of the 117 Democratic **policy** priorities tested produced significant electoral **overperformance** in the experiment.

- Once again, there were almost no cases where a policy priority that overperformed among all registered voters underperformed among a key constituent group.
- Registered voters were especially receptive to Democratic policies on Social Security, infrastructure, and healthcare. Notably, Social Security was the top performing issue area among the 12 discrete priorities that we tested.
- In some topic areas, moderate Democratic messaging (messaging that we identified as moderate or that came from a moderate Democratic lawmaker) was more effective than its progressive counterpart. Moderate messages performed significantly better than progressive messages on immigration and gun control, and the differences were especially stark with respect to crime and policing. For example, a Democratic candidate promoting a moderate message on crime and policing received about 55% of the vote compared to less than 51% of the vote for a Democratic candidate promoting a progressive message on crime and policing.

Voter Persuasion by Policy Topic

Marginal Mean Democratic Vote Share



Overperforming Policy Underperforming Policy

+4.5pp

50

Top 5 Most Persuasive Messages

+4pp

Amongst 135 Democratic messages, the following five were most effective:

+3.5pp

My number one priority is improving our economy. I'm focused on creating jobs, and I'm pushing for skills training programs, supply chain relief, support for small businesses, and more to ensure our economy continues to create opportunities for families.

I passed a law to ban surprise medical billing. I also passed major prescription drug reform that will allow Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices with pharmaceutical companies and will cap out-of-pocket expenses for seniors. I will also always protect Social Security to make sure seniors have the benefits they've earned.

+3pp

+2.5pp

Fighting inflation and lowering costs starts with making more stuff in America and bringing jobs home. We don't need to be outsourcing any more jobs and production to China. There is no reason that the next generation of technology-from defense to clean energy to the microchips that power our cell phones-can't be manufactured right here.

I helped pass legislation to support manufacturing and strengthen our ability to outcompete China. I'm working to bring good-paying jobs home and to support the next generation of entrepreneurs right here in America. Reducing our reliance on other countries and bringing jobs back to America is a win - no matter what party you're in.

I worked hand-in-hand with law enforcement to crack down on crimes and keep our communities safe. I led the fight to combat sex trafficking, helped protect victims of sexual assault, and passed legislation to combat law enforcement suicide. I've worked tirelessly to get law enforcement the support and resources they need to keep our communities safe.

Photo by Piron Guillame

In the sections that follow, we discuss in detail which messaging themes and policy positions were effective for Democrats across six major topics: **abortion, the economy, healthcare, Social Security, climate and clean energy, and crime.**

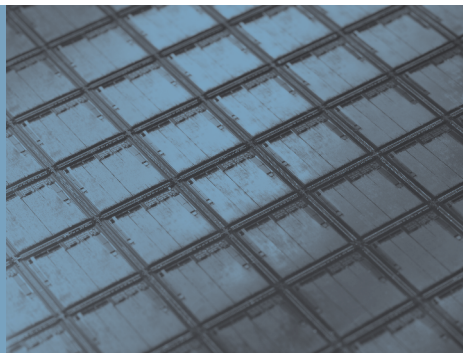


Photo by Laura Ockel

Photo by Nicholas Doherty

Photo by Campbell Jensen

Abortion

Throughout 2022, Data for Progress conducted a multitude of message tests around abortion, both before and after the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision. We consistently found that messages that focused on bodily autonomy, personal privacy, and government interference were the most effective messages on this issue (see page 18). The findings from this experiment mirrored previous Data for Progress message testing, demonstrating that frames highlighting personal freedoms connect best with voters.

It's clear that abortion was a motivating issue for voters this election — particularly young voters. Even in deep red Kentucky, voters rejected a ballot measure which would have denied constitutional protections for abortion. And in red and purple states where abortion was on the ballot, messages about the importance of protecting personal liberty and reproductive rights for women were broadly communicated in a nonpartisan way. Message discipline on this issue from Democrats was a contributing factor in their wins.

Our most popular message on abortion from this round of testing (notably, the only abortion message in this test that overperformed with voters) came from Pennsylvania Senator-elect John Fetterman. His message focused on bodily autonomy and protecting access to safe and legal abortions:

> **A woman's right to make her own health care decisions is sacred and non-negotiable. I will vote to enshrine access to safe and legal abortion into federal law. I believe that if you are not willing to do whatever it takes to protect abortion rights when they are on the line, then you cannot call yourself pro-choice. It's that simple.**

This messaging mirrored previous Data for Progress findings, where we've tested nearly 400 different messages on abortion from influential figures in the Democratic and Republican parties. The most effective messages that emerged from that research included messages that emphasized bodily autonomy, government interference in private medical decisions, and lifesaving medical care in the case of severe pregnancy complications.

In this conjoint experiment, abortion similarly overperformed when framed as "guaranteeing reproductive health coverage as part of all health coverage." It was especially resonant with swing voters, improving Democratic vote share from Independents by 7.3 percentage points.

Democrats across the country ran heavily on abortion this cycle. As we explore later in this report, Democrats spent more on abortion advertisements ($103 million) than any other issue area. Overall, the most effective messaging on abortion centered on bodily autonomy and government interference in personal medical decisions, and Democrats should stick to this framing when communicating about abortion to voters.

Economy

As outlined in Section 1, in the weeks leading up to the election, Data for Progress polling found that voters overwhelmingly identified inflation and overall economic conditions as the most important issues for candidates to focus on. Thus, it came as no surprise that inflation and job-focused messages were among the most effective statements we tested. Out of the 33 Democratic messages that overperformed in this experiment, 18 mentioned economic conditions in some way, focusing on tackling the high prices of everyday goods and healthcare, as well as creating new jobs and spurring domestic manufacturing. Democrats were specifically effective at championing industrial policy and emphasizing the impact of U.S. investments in manufacturing and supply chains.

The most effective message on the economy, from New Hampshire Senator Maggie Hassan, was also the second-most effective Democratic statement of the 135 we tested. It focused on job growth and bringing jobs home to America from overseas:

> **I helped pass legislation to support manufacturing and strengthen our ability to outcompete China. I'm working to bring good-paying jobs home and to support the next generation of entrepreneurs right here in America. Reducing our reliance on other countries and bringing jobs back to America is a win, no matter what party you are in.**

Four of the top performing economic messages focused on strengthening domestic jobs and manufacturing, with three mentioning China specifically. While many of the candidates this cycle focused on China as a foil to American manufacturing, we found that Democratic messages that highlighted competitiveness with other countries in general, including European ones, performed well with voters.

The second-best performing economic message, and the third-most effective overall, also referenced domestic manufacturing. Notably, this message from Fetterman featured the CHIPS and Science Act, one of the marquee achievements of the current Democratic trifecta. Messaging on the CHIPS Act highlighted Democrats' actions to lower costs and create jobs, all while appealing to voters' preference for American-made goods:

> **Fighting inflation and lowering costs starts with making more stuff in America and bringing jobs home. We don't need to be outsourcing any more jobs and production to China. There is no reason that the next generation of technology, from defense to clean energy to the microchips that power our cell phones, can't be manufactured right here.**

Other messages on the economy focused more on kitchen-table economic issues relevant to voters. Our third-most effective economic message, which came from Kansas Governor Laura Kelly, highlighted her bipartisan efforts to end the sales tax on food — an example of how Democratic leadership lowered costs for everyday Americans:

> **Groceries cost way too much — plain and simple. Ending the sales tax on food is a tax cut that helps every family, saving them hundreds of dollars per year. I worked with both parties to get it done.**

Additionally, several overperforming messages focused on the economy more broadly, with specific callouts to skills training programs, supply chain relief, and support for small businesses — such as this message, from Nevada Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, which improved Democratic vote share among swing voters by 11.8 percentage points:

> **My number one priority is improving our economy. I'm focused on creating jobs, and I'm pushing for skills training programs, supply chain relief, support for small businesses, and more to ensure our economy continues to create opportunities for families.**

Trade and manufacturing overall is one of the most effective issue areas for Democrats to focus on, especially during a period when voters were primarily concerned about the state of the economy. However, the following message from Democratic Representative and Senate candidate Tim Ryan that referenced his votes with Trump was not as effective:

> **I agreed with Trump on trade. I voted against outsourcing every single time. We've got to get tough on China, and I'll work with anyone to fix our supply chains and bring manufacturing home. Let's make things in America again.**

While highlighting policy positions similar to those of Trump may have been unpersuasive to many Democratic-leaning respondents in our national survey, Ryan's overperformance in a state that Trump won by 8 points likely can be attributed to his willingness to fine-tune his messaging to the preferences of Ohio voters.

Economy

Many of the top policy issues tested in this experiment centered on the economy. Raising the minimum wage to $15, a policy championed by progressive Democrats like Senator Bernie Sanders and Senator-Elect Fetterman, was the fifth-most popular policy of more than 100 policies tested. Data for Progress polling last year also found that 57% of likely voters supported raising the federal minimum wage from $7.25 per hour to $15 per hour. Additionally, 61% of voters supported gradually increasing the minimum wage to $15 by 2025 and then indexing it to median income. Fetterman, a strong supporter of the $15 minimum wage, continually advocated for it throughout his successful Senate campaign this cycle. With the economy and inflation on the top of voters' minds, reminding them that Democratic candidates want to fight to raise their wages is an example of how advocating for popular, progressive policies represents a strong way for Democrats to connect successfully with voters on economic issues.

Another progressive policy, increasing taxes on individuals earning more than $1 million per year to reduce the national deficit, was the most popular policy tested among swing voters. Other economic policies that overperformed relative to others tested in this experiment included cutting the food tax (as championed by Gov. Kelly) and giving tax breaks to small businesses.

This cycle, voters were not just concerned about the cost of everyday goods. Prescription drug prices, as well as other inflated healthcare costs, continued to weigh heavily on the minds of voters. In addition to the economy, the issue of healthcare — which helped carry Democrats to victory in the 2018 midterms — also proved to be one of the most important themes that resonated with voters.

Photo by Vidar Mathisen

Raising the minimum wage to $15, a policy championed by progressive Democrats like Sen. Sanders and Senator-Elect Fetterman, was the fifth-most popular policy of more than 100 policies tested.

Photos by Ehimetalor Akhere Unuabona

Healthcare

Democrats maintain a unique trust advantage over Republicans on healthcare: Leading up to the 2022 election, our polling found that voters closely associated Democrats with expanding Medicare, allowing Medicare to negotiate prescription drug costs, and capping insulin prices. This positive association was likely, in part, the result of advocacy leading up to passage of the Affordable Care Act, and a fierce, cohesive Democratic effort to protect the ACA when Republicans tried to repeal it. Moreover, Democrats delivered handily with prescription drug reform in the Inflation Reduction Act, and capped the price of insulin at $35 for Medicare beneficiaries. Voters in our experiment responded overwhelmingly to messages on healthcare: 10 of the 33 Democratic messages that overperformed focused on healthcare.

One of the top performing messages, which came from Hassan, tapped into this hard-earned trust from voters on healthcare and conveyed her commitment to healthcare reform, particularly through the framework of lowering costs:

> **I have a long record of working to lower health care costs and protect coverage for Americans. I was a deciding vote to save the Affordable Care Act, I took on Big Pharma and passed a law to allow Medicare to negotiate drug prices, and I stood up to health care companies and worked with a Republican senator to pass landmark legislation to ban the absurd practice of surprise billing.**

Lowering costs was a significant focal point in messages about healthcare, a reflection of our finding that rising costs and inflation were the top issues for voters going into the election. Another strong example of a message addressing rising costs that overperformed on healthcare came from Ryan:

> **In the richest country on Earth, it is unacceptable that anyone should go broke because they had to go to the hospital or pay for a prescription. I'm committed to bringing down health care costs and giving Americans more options for how they get the care they need, especially in underserved and rural areas.**

We also saw messages that pledged to take on Big Pharma perform well, such as the following statement from Wisconsin Senator Tammy Baldwin:

> **Families across America are facing skyrocketing prescription drug prices — but in Washington, it's the drug corporations who get their way. I'm taking on Big Pharma to do right by Americans who should never be forced to choose between groceries and medicine.**

Finally, we saw voters responded well to messages that promised to invest in and expand mental health care, like the following statement from Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear:

> **Mental health care is just as important as physical health care. We must require all health care plans to cover behavioral health treatments, mental health inpatient services and substance abuse treatment.**

Overall, we found healthcare reform is widely popular across the spectrum, particularly with Independents. Three of the top five performing policy issues focused on healthcare, specifically protecting Social Security and Medicare from cuts, allowing Medicare to negotiate lower prescription drug costs, and protecting Americans' ability to stay on their insurance plan without sharp increases to their premiums. But while we saw a lot of Democrats tap into the popularity of these issue areas and utilize their trust advantage on healthcare, we saw fewer Democrats capitalize on the popularity of Social Security, making Social Security a major issue area to emphasize in future election cycles.

Photo by Ante Samarzija

60 Social Security

Though Social Security is just one part of Democrats' social policy platform, we highlight it as its own unique section because of its remarkable overperformance relative to other issues. Social Security was the top performing issue area among 12 that we tested, and the majority of Social Security messages tested overperformed with voters. This validated previous message testing we've conducted: Social Security messages comprised half of the top 40 performing messages that emerged from dozens of message tests and more than 3,000 unique statements that we tested throughout 2022. This demonstrates that Democrats should continue to expand their use of Social Security messaging as the 2024 election cycle approaches.

Throughout our message testing in this experiment and our independent message testing over the past several months, we repeatedly found that messages about Social Security improved Democratic vote share. Voters responded well to the idea that Democrats will protect and expand the program, and they were particularly responsive to the idea that Republicans want to reform or slash Social Security. Specifically, we saw messages that combined healthcare reform with Social Security perform well, such as in this statement from Arizona Senator Mark Kelly:

> **I passed a law to ban surprise medical billing. I also passed major prescription drug reform that will allow Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices with pharmaceutical companies and will cap out-of-pocket expenses for seniors. I will also always protect Social Security to make sure seniors have the benefits they've earned.**

The other top performing messages on Social Security emphasized that seniors deserve to retire in dignity; American citizens have paid into the program their entire lives; and seniors deserve Social Security as an earned benefit, not an entitlement. Social Security is a key issue area for Democrats because it is one for which there is general consensus between progressives and moderates in defense of Republican attacks. In fact, the second-most effective message on Social Security came from Sanders:

> **Our job must be to expand Social Security so that every senior citizen in America can retire with the dignity they deserve. And we will do that by demanding that the wealthiest people in America finally pay their fair share of taxes. It is absurd that a billionaire in America today pays the same amount of Social Security taxes as someone making $147,000 a year.**

This message reiterated the belief that seniors deserve to retire in dignity and then pledged to tax the rich to expand Social Security benefits, using two effective arguments in one clear statement.

Our findings demonstrate that, in future cycles, progressives and moderates alike should be more vocal about protecting and expanding Social Security, and make it a significant priority of their campaigns. They should also contrast their efforts with Republican threats to cut the program, painting a stark contrast between themselves and their opponent that reflects the most unpopular provisions in the GOP agenda. This is especially relevant considering that two of the three top performing policy issues in this test were protecting Social Security and Medicare from cuts and increasing Social Security benefits for lower-income families, women, people with disabilities, public sector workers, and people of color. The latter policy performed particularly well with undecided/swing voters, improving Democratic vote share by 7.7 points. Overall, Democrats should hammer home that they'll protect Social Security and Medicare from Republican attempts to slash it and will help American citizens — particularly those most impacted by inflation — fight rising costs.

Social Security is a key issue area for Democrats because it is one for which there is general consensus between progressives and moderates in defense of Republican attacks.

Climate and Energy

Voters gravitated toward building new renewable energy sources rather than eliminating fossil fuels.

While the economy, healthcare, and Social Security yielded some of the top performing messages for Democrats, we also tested several climate and energy messages from candidates across the country. Democrats delivered significant legislative wins for climate and energy in the 117th Congress; between the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act, the U.S. made its biggest investment to address climate change in history. But with gas prices and home energy costs rising across the country, we found that the strongest Democratic messages tested on climate and energy did not emphasize Democrats' efforts to tackle climate change or the explicit climate benefits of renewable energy — but rather the economic benefits.

The most effective Democratic messages on climate and energy centered on utilizing diverse energy resources, growing the clean energy economy, and prioritizing America's energy security, similar to the statement below:

> **America should embody an all-of-the-above energy strategy and I've been a champion of our nation's abundant natural energy resources. I'll keep working to keep our country on the cutting edge of diverse energy production that will grow our energy economy, protect our national security, and help to make America energy independent.**

These findings are on par with past Data for Progress research that found the most effective Democratic messaging on climate and energy focused on affordability, economic benefits, and domestic energy security.

Additionally, of all the climate and energy policy issues that we tested in this study, voters gravitated toward building new renewable energy sources rather than eliminating fossil fuels. Namely, "investments in renewable energy, offshore wind, biofuels, and carbon capture storage technologies" overperformed relative to other climate and energy policies tested. This aligned with previous Data for Progress polling, which has found that voters across party lines express favorability toward renewable energy, in part driven by the relatively cheap cost of renewable energy and rapid job growth in the renewable energy sector across the country. This framing of "made clean in America" is particularly effective, even among voters who may be hesitant to fully embrace climate action.

In contrast, the least effective messaging on climate and energy focused on coal and ensuring that coal miners are not left behind in the clean energy transition, as demonstrated by this statement from Sen. Joe Manchin:

> **Coal will continue to be an important piece of our nation's all-of-the-above energy policy for many years to come, and we must ensure that our coal miners are not left behind as America transitions to a cleaner energy future.**

Despite using the phrase "all-of-the-above energy policy," which was used in the most effective climate and energy message, Manchin's laser focus on coal and coal miners underperformed with voters at a national level. This is consistent with Data for Progress polling, which has shown that voters overwhelmingly support focusing on expanding clean energy production. That said, Manchin's willingness to tailor his messaging to his West Virginia constituents' preferences on energy resources has allowed him to overperform and retain his Senate seat in a predominantly Republican state. Rep. Jared Golden employed a similar messaging strategy regarding energy resources this cycle and, like Manchin, he overperformed expectations in a Trump-leaning electoral environment in Maine.

These findings demonstrate that when communicating about climate and energy investments, Democrats should use messaging explicitly focused on reducing costs and creating jobs. Most voters may not be attuned to the nuances of phrases like "parts per million" and "tons of carbon dioxide," but they are to dollars and cents. While climate change may not be one of the top issues driving voters to the ballot box this election or in 2024, the cost of energy certainly will be. Democrats should not be afraid to go on offense on energy prices, as a climate message can also be an economic message — a winning combination.

Crime

Another issue area where Democrats have room for improvement on messaging is crime and criminal justice. In the weeks leading up to the election, the Republican Party synthesized its advertisements around this issue. Republicans spent $50 million on crime ads during the election, their fourth-highest ad spend after ads on taxation, inflation, and Biden. Republicans' investment in crime messaging reflected a growing voter concern: A Data for Progress survey from October 14-18 found that crime and public safety were among the top four issues voters wanted candidates for Congress to address. Moreover, previous Data for Progress polling from July 8-10 found 51% of Black voters and 53% of Latina/o voters felt "very concerned" about gun violence in their communities. And as crime grew in salience, so did Republicans' favorability on the issue: Our October polling also found that Republicans held a +9-point advantage in trust on crime and public safety over Democrats. Although several Republican candidates were unsuccessful in their attempts to run on crime, it's an important issue area where Democrats should further develop clear policy solutions and deploy a unified messaging framework.

Democrats already have a strong track record to amplify with regards to reining in crime: The bipartisan gun safety bill, which passed into law in June, contained several key provisions to reduce gun violence and was widely supported by voters. Data for Progress polling from June 15-21 found that nearly all likely voters — 92% — supported the bill's provisions to crack down on individuals who traffic guns and transport and sell them outside legal purchases. Similarly, 91% of voters supported cracking down on criminals who illegally avoid gun licensing requirements, and 85% supported closing the "boyfriend loophole" by banning the sale of guns to individuals with a criminal history of domestic abuse.

It's also important that Democrats develop a unified, disciplined messaging framework around criminal justice that advances Democratic policy priorities and works as a buffer against Republican attacks on crime. We found that the single-most overperforming Democratic message out of the 135 we tested centered on working with law enforcement to reduce crime (from Cortez Masto, page 51). Overall, the most effective Democratic messages on crime emphasized collaboration with members of law enforcement to provide the resources to reduce violent crime and solve cases, while also featuring police accountability, like in this statement from Fetterman:

Everyone has the right to feel safe in their communities. I worked with the Chief of Police, our police officers, and the community to reduce violent crime. I've worked hand-in-hand with the police and I understand the challenges our police forces face and how to support them to make communities more safe. I will make sure law enforcement has the resources necessary to do their job, but I will also prioritize oversight, accountability, and violence prevention.

Although the most overperforming message for Democrats centered on crime, the second-most underperforming message also centered on crime, demonstrating the importance of smart, effective messaging on this issue. Crime messages which focused on more fundamental justice system reform — including "defund the police" and messages that articulated the need for immediate decarceration — underperformed relative to other messages tested. Specifically, messages that called to defund the police and reinvest these funds in social services resulted in a Democratic vote share 16.1 points lower than the average among swing voters, demonstrating that Democrats seeking to mobilize voter support from across the electorate should avoid "defund" framing like in the message below:

We need to defund the police and make sure that money goes back into the communities that need it. We have to end the militarization of police and stop racial profiling. Throwing money at the problem will not solve it.

That said, voters recognized that America's law enforcement is far from perfect and were widely receptive to improvements. The most effective Democratic policy tested on criminal justice focused on making reforms to address police misconduct and to hold police forces accountable to the communities they have sworn to serve. Other somewhat effective policies tested included establishing an alternative to incarceration by providing access to addiction treatment instead of sending individuals to jail for simple drug offenses, as well as requiring background checks for gun purchases.

In polling from July 8-10, when presented with two statements — "We should provide more resources to community violence intervention workers to stay in touch with victims of violence long-term and connect them to support programs like job readiness and housing" and "We should not spend more taxpayer money on wasteful social programs and instead simply increase the presence of law enforcement, which is the best response" — 62% of likely voters preferred the former statement over the latter (28%). Notably, these policies did not present the tradeoff of defunding police in exchange for criminal justice reform, but rather left an opportunity for candidates to endorse an all-of-the-above approach to find effective criminal justice and public safety solutions.

Takeaways

Our message testing has found that Democrats have strong messaging and policy frameworks on abortion, the economy, healthcare, Social Security, and climate and energy — and that certain framings for talking about these topics are more effective than others.

It is crucial to note that we do not argue that Democrats should shy away from talking about polarizing issues altogether. In fact, we argue it is unrealistic to advise campaigns or candidates to never speak about certain issues — something that only allows Republicans to define our positions for us. Rather, we argue candidates should be thoughtful about how they communicate on these issues and use rhetoric that allows us to persuade as many voters as possible. In the next section, we lay out examples of 2022 candidates who deployed this strategy and may serve as a model for Democratic messaging over the next two years.

Ultimately, every opportunity a politician, candidate, party, or campaign has to communicate with voters is an opportunity to persuade them. We have a moral obligation to make the most of each of these opportunities. Whether it is a tweet, press release, local interview, or interaction on the street, it is critical that Democrats optimize their messaging and raise the salience of issues where they have won voters' trust.

68 Paid Media Analysis

The Messages That Work *at* Work

Introduction

Although a completely accurate picture of the 2022 electorate has yet to form, it appears that Democratic overperformance in the midterms was largely driven by persuasion of Independent and swing voters, along with higher-than-average turnout among young voters. As a result, it is likely that strategic, effective Democratic messaging on popular policies and Republican extremism made the difference between a "red wave" and a red ripple in this election.

In the 2022 midterms, Democratic messaging was largely focused on abortion, Republican extremism, and cost reduction, while Republicans prioritized attacks on the economy and crime. One Washington Post analysis demonstrated the scope of the ad landscape leading into the election: 197,000 Democratic ad airings post-Labor Day mentioned abortion, while 84,000 airings were devoted to healthcare, the next-most common topic. Meanwhile, Republicans invested a significant chunk of money in campaign ads devoted to crime — including "defund the police," immigration, and cash bail policies — as well as taxes and inflation (see adapted data on the following page).

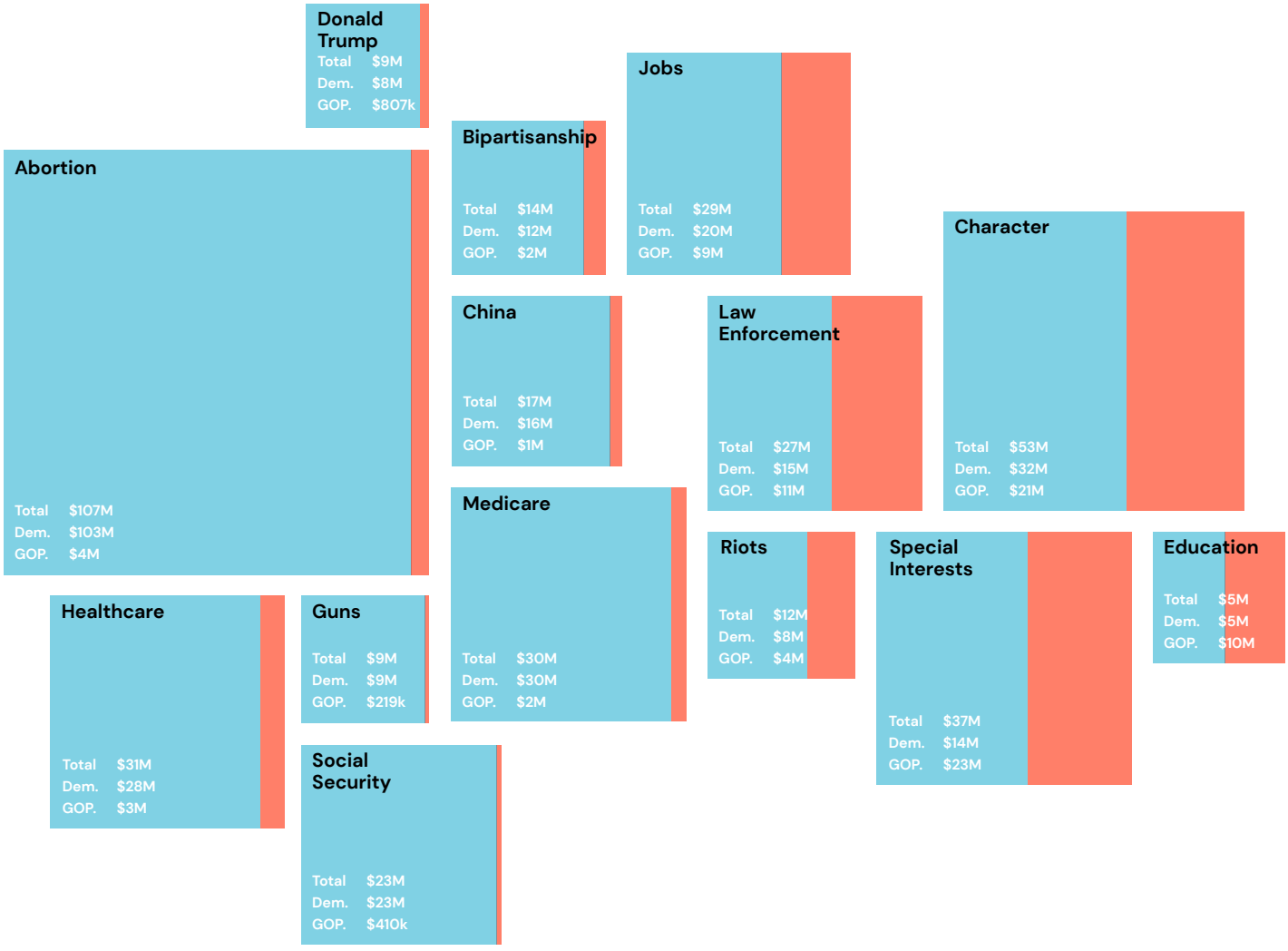
In the end, the Republican attacks largely fell flat — concerns over crime and inflation did not outweigh voters' rejection of *Dobbs* — and Democrats deployed strong messaging that reframed economic conditions through a lens of corporate greed, domestic manufacturing, and job growth. It's a positive sign for the Democratic agenda, and a signal that bold legislation on popular policies can improve the party's chances in the 2024 election.

In Data for Progress message testing throughout 2022, as well as the messages tested in this report's conjoint experiment, we consistently found that messages focused on cost reduction, Social Security, and bodily autonomy were the most effective at moving voters toward Democrats. In this section, we highlight advertisements that utilized the most effective messaging we've found on these topics, as well as candidates who distinguished themselves from unpopular policy positions on either side of the aisle. We hope these advertisements can serve as a model for Democrats running in 2024, and support a path toward strategic Democratic message cohesion around the concerns that matter most to voters.

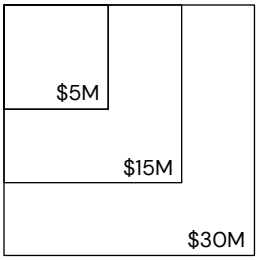
70 Dominant Issues

Midterm Advertising From Labor Day to Election Day

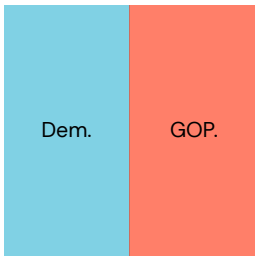
This chart below shows money spent on midterm election ads from Labor Day to Election Day, sorted by the issue the ad focused on and partisan affiliation of the ad. Data are sourced from AdImpact



More Democratic



Total ad spending



Share of spending

Adapted from the Washington Post.

Lobbying
Total $11M
Dem. $6M
GOP. $6M

Defund the Police
Total $29M
Dem. $8M
GOP. $21M

Taxation
Total $115M
Dem. $26M
GOP. $89M

Immigration
Total $30M
Dem. $2M
GOP. $27M

Criminal Justice Reform
Total $21M
Dem. $0
GOP. $21M

Crime
Total $85M
Dem. $36M
GOP. $49M

Economy
Total $21M
Dem. $5M
GOP. $16M

Inflation
Total $64M
Dem. $10M
GOP. $53M

Joe Biden
Total $66M
Dem. $3M
GOP. $63M

Nancy Pelosi
Total $37M
Dem. $300k
GOP. $37M

Energy
Total $29M
Dem. $9M
GOP. $20M

More Republican

Abortion Rights

Immediately following the Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, prioritization around the issue of abortion significantly increased among likely voters. We can see that voters were especially motivated on this topic, and that emphasizing Republican overreach and illustrating the stakes of the election around bodily autonomy was effective at moving voters this cycle.

With voters suddenly prioritizing abortion in light of *Dobbs*, especially in the first few months after the decision was released, Democratic campaigns invested heavily in abortion advertisements. In fact, Democrats in congressional races spent more on abortion than on any other issue area. But these ads greatly varied in language and theme, which we iteratively analyzed through message testing. Our message tests repeatedly found that the top performing abortion messages — messages that most improved Democratic vote share and ultimately landed in the top 10 percent of messages across every issue area — emphasized bodily autonomy, privacy, and government interference.

In Alaska, Rep. Mary Peltola used nearly this exact messaging in her ad, "Right to Make Choices." Peltola stated that "nearly 4,000 miles away, six Supreme Court justices took away one of Alaskans' most fundamental freedoms — our right to choose." Additionally, Peltola described herself as an "advocate for personal privacy rights" and said that "the federal government has no business taking away our freedoms," highlighting opposition to government interference and support for personal privacies and freedoms — two of the best performing frames on abortion.

In Wisconsin, Future Forward's ad "Different Plans" contrasted Tim Michels and Gov. Tony Evers while highlighting Republicans' overreach on abortion and Democrats' plan to lower costs: "Tim Michels wants to ban abortion, including in cases of rape or incest. Tony Evers wants to get costs down. Michels would jail the doctors that perform abortions. Evers would lower costs." The ad concluded by emphasizing the contrast plainly: "So here's the choice: Tim Michels' plan for fewer rights and more division, or Tony Evers' plan to drive costs down, down, down." With the economy ranking the highest amid voters' concerns this cycle (see page 17) — and Republicans' positions on abortion being increasingly out of step with the American people and their own party — creative that contrasts Democrats' cost-saving measures with Republicans' extremity is an interesting model for Democrats to build upon.

In California, Rep. Katie Porter's ad "Extreme" exemplified how many Democrats successfully messaged on abortion this cycle: "The Supreme Court has taken away our right to choose. Giving politicians the power to control women's most personal health decisions. In Washington, they're planning a nationwide ban on abortion, no exceptions, not for rape or incest." Porter further highlighted the extreme nature of Republican plans around abortion and her own commitment to preventing a nationwide ban: "The word extreme gets tossed around a lot, but making it illegal to have an abortion, no exceptions, truly is extreme. I'm Katie Porter, I'll fight any attempt at a nationwide abortion ban." Emphasizing the government overreach pursued in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision, as well as highlighting the danger of a nationwide abortion ban and her commitment to fight against it, was an effective way to move voters and reiterate the extreme nature of Republican positions.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal demonstrated how blue-state Democrats can carry this mantle of Republican overreach. In "Outraged," Blumenthal highlighted that "Mitch McConnell wants Republicans to take control of the Senate and pass a national ban on abortion. That would erase Connecticut's law which protects a woman's right to choose," making clear the stakes of the election for Connecticut voters and the country overall. "He's only one seat away from control, Connecticut could be the deciding vote. We need to stop them." It's clear that abortion was a mobilizing factor in the outcome of this election, and emphasizing the threat of Republican abortion bans and illustrating the stakes of the midterms was an effective strategy.

74 Inflation and the Economy

Throughout the summer and fall of 2022, Data for Progress polling consistently found that inflation and the economy were the top issues for likely voters in the midterm elections. Early exit polls from CNN and NBC News underscored the importance that many voters placed on inflation and economic conditions while casting their ballots. In a period of poor economic conditions, many voters will naturally blame the party in power, and many voters trusted Republicans more to handle the issue of inflation. But this cycle, Democratic candidates went on the offense and refused to let Republicans dominate the economic narrative.

Data for Progress message testing has found that statements focusing on Democratic plans to lower costs were among the most effective for moving voters toward Democrats. Effective advertisements this cycle did not deflect from economic conditions, but rather addressed the economy head-on, focusing on how Democrats were delivering for voters by bringing down costs, creating new jobs, expanding domestic manufacturing, and fighting corporate greed.

Though the CHIPS and Science Act was arguably one of the most significant and popular achievements of the 117th Congress, the bill was largely overshadowed in earned media by other achievements like the Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. However, the CHIPS Act served as a critical opportunity to address economic concerns in television ads this cycle: By linking the semiconductor shortage to high prices,

Democrats could divert economic blame and show voters how they were bringing down everyday costs.

In "Microchips," a direct-to-camera ad in Nevada, Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto told voters to "go down to your local car dealership," where voters could find "lower supply, higher prices, all because we don't make enough semiconductor chips here in America." Cortez Masto touted her vote for the bill, highlighting that it will lower prices and create thousands of new jobs. This mirrored the most effective messages we tested on the economy, which were also the most effective messages across all issue areas: messaging that emphasized job growth, lowering costs, and bringing manufacturing home from overseas (see page 54).

Other CHIPS Act advertisements took on a "pro-America" frame, celebrating American manufacturing and competitiveness with China. In a direct-to-camera ad, "Made in America," Sen. Hassan framed CHIPS manufacturing through American-Made rhetoric, stating that "we're starting to make progress bringing manufacturing jobs overseas, strengthening our supply chains by taking on China … because Made in America is the way it should be." This shouldn't be a surprise: The top performing economic message we tested as part of our conjoint experiment was also from Hassan (see page 54), in which she advocated for legislation to "support manufacturing and strengthen our ability to outcompete China."

Similar messaging was used in frontline House races — specifically in Rust Belt areas, where Democrats held onto more seats than many anticipated. One House Majority PAC ad for Rep. Frank Mrvan, who represents former steel powerhouse city Gary as part of Indiana's 1st District, highlighted Mrvan's efforts to ensure that "American-made infrastructure is made with American-made steel." In Pennsylvania's 8th District, frontliner Rep. Matt Cartwright promoted a new "alternative gas plant" in his state that would create "thousands of jobs and cheaper gas prices." Cartwright, who also defended PA-08 in 2020, represents one of 13 House districts that elected or defended a Democrat in 2020 while also breaking for Donald Trump. Cartwright was reelected by a margin of 2.4 points, in part because of his strong messaging on lowering gas prices and creating jobs.

But ads focused on domestic manufacturing weren't just effective in the Rust Belt. Rep. Sharice Davids, who narrowly defeated her Republican opponent in Kansas' 3rd District, shared a direct-to-camera testimonial from a local small business owner who "produces face shields and respirators that keep first responders safe." The constituent praised Davids for "getting our government to buy from small businesses like ours first, and working to bring our supply chain back home." Meanwhile in Wisconsin, Senate candidate Mandela Barnes explained how creating goods in America means "our shelves are stocked and (we) create jobs you can raise a family on."

Georgia Sen. Raphael Warnock also leaned into messages about corporate greed, blaming big companies for raising prices while making record profits in "Hold Them Accountable."

Interestingly, while Democrats ran largely positive ads focused on manufacturing, several candidates used the issue in negative spots about their opponents. Tim Ryan consistently blasted wealthy politicians who "handed our manufacturing jobs to China" as part of attack ads against opponent J.D. Vance. Ryan also attacked Vance for "[leaving] Ohio for San Francisco, where he made millions investing in companies that outsourced jobs to China," rhetoric that seemed to be noted in the media and among voters. While Ryan ultimately lost, he overperformed expectations in a state that Trump won by a +8-point margin. Across the Ohio border in western Pennsylvania, Representative-Elect Chris Deluzio used similar messaging — criticizing his opponent for "making his fortune from a corporation creating jobs in China." Deluzio won what was considered one of the most competitive districts in the country by more than 6 points, massively overperforming expectations to win Pennsylvania's 17th District.

Some ads may also offer a recipe for Democrats to effectively paint Republicans on the side of corruption and large corporations more broadly. In "Fighting Corporate Greed," a direct-to-camera contrast ad from Rep. Susan Wild in Pennsylvania's 7th District, Rep. Wild emphasized her efforts to address rising prices by "cracking down on price gouging by oil and drug companies," and accused her opponent of shutting down a local plant and "outsourcing local jobs to China" while taking "millions in tax dollars meant to protect local jobs." In California, Rep. Mike Levin cast Republicans' plans to fight inflation as "a bunch of bull," emphasizing their intentions for "massive tax cuts for billionaires and giant corporations."

Georgia Sen. Raphael Warnock also leaned into messages about corporate greed, blaming big companies for raising prices while making record profits. In "Hold Them Accountable," Warnock skewered big shipping companies for price gouging while "prices have been skyrocketing," pushing to "investigate their greed … to help lower costs for families and small businesses."

Overall, Democratic efforts to promote domestic manufacturing, create jobs, and crack down on corporate greed allowed candidates to push back against Republican attacks, drawing their own narrative about the economy.

Lowering Healthcare Costs

Lowering healthcare costs is a bipartisan winner — and one that congressional Democrats used their legislative power to deliver for Americans. But in polling conducted by Data for Progress from October 28–31, just before the November election, less than half (44%) of likely voters knew that the Inflation Reduction Act would allow Medicare to negotiate drug prices. Only 24 percent of voters remembered seeing an ad about the IRA, and those who did reported seeing a mix of positive and negative ads about the bill.

Some of the most effective campaigns this cycle made an effort to raise the salience of how the Inflation Reduction Act would reduce costs: In New Hampshire, Hassan promoted cost-saving measures in multiple spots, including "Worth Winning," a direct-to-camera ad in which she linked inflation and healthcare costs to the bill, saying she "worked with Republicans to punish drug companies for raising their prices faster than inflation."

On the other side of the country in Washington, Sen. Patty Murray used similar messaging to highlight her bipartisan efforts to ban surprise medical billing against opponent Tiffany Smiley's siding with "big drug companies." Tying Smiley to the Senate minority leader — among the most unpopular politicians in the U.S — the ad highlighted how Smiley "stood with Mitch McConnell and big drug companies to oppose lowering the costs of prescription drugs." While contrast ads were demonstrably effective, it's notable that

many ads talked about how Democrats finally delivered. Warnock used this theme In a personal testimonial TV spot, "Got It Done," in which a Georgia voter shared her struggles with prescription drug prices and praised Warnock for finally allowing Medicare to negotiate drug prices after years of inaction. "Senator Warnock not only cares about seniors, but he actually got something done for us," the woman said.

In a direct-to-camera ad from New Hampshire, Rep. Chris Pappas, who held onto his swing seat this cycle, opened by stating, "Some politicians just love to fight with each other, but that gets in the way of the fights that really matter." He touted his legislative wins for New Hampshirites, including "capping insulin at $35, limiting out-of-pocket expenses, and finally letting Medicare negotiate lower prices."

In New Jersey, Rep. Andy Kim's ad "Start Small" mimicked Kim facilitating a town hall with senior residents in his district and taking their feedback on "getting crushed by the cost of medicine" up to Capitol Hill to write a bill that reduces prescription drug costs. He also proudly reflected on his success standing up to Big Pharma to get the bill passed into law, calling into play another effective message: holding corporations accountable. This ad expertly reflected what it looks like when a representative works for their constituents, and it emphasized some of Kim's most important achievements on the Hill.

These ads, which emphasized specific efforts to lower healthcare costs, mirrored overperforming messages on the topic of healthcare in our conjoint experiment (see page 59). One especially effective message, also from Hassan, called out specific wins that she delivered for her constituents: "I was a deciding vote to save the Affordable Care Act, I took on Big Pharma and passed a law to allow Medicare to negotiate drug prices, and banned the absurd practice of surprise billing." Healthcare is one of the many inflated costs voters face in their day-to-day lives. Democrats would do well to emphasize specific legislative actions that they have taken to reduce those prices — and do everything in their power to raise the salience of healthcare issues in 2024 so Democrats are fighting on the most beneficial terms for our party.

80 Social Security

While some of the most effective ads this cycle addressed economic concerns head-on and communicated about abortion using persuasive, disciplined messaging, we also saw considerable success from candidates who ran ads contrasting Democratic and Republican plans for Social Security.

Because Social Security is such a widely popular program and because Democrats maintain a trust advantage on the issue, this election cycle was ripe for Democratic attacks against Republicans on Social Security. Successful Democratic candidates capitalized on this overwhelming support for Social Security and ran effective advertisements pledging their commitment to protecting it and highlighting their opponents' threats to cut the program. Democrats particularly synthesized their campaigns around Social Security at the tail end of their campaigns: According to research from the Winning Jobs Narrative Project, in the final week before the election, 15% of Democratic ads mentioned Social Security, up from 9% between August and October. In fact, in the final week of the election, Democrats aired seven ads on Social Security for every one Republican spot.

In Arizona, Sen. Mark Kelly's campaign smartly hammered opponent Blake Masters for threatening to privatize Social Security, using a sound bite of Masters during a Republican primary debate from June. In the DSCC ad "Privatize Social Security," voters learned that Masters wants to cut taxes for the wealthy and pay for it by privatizing Social Security. Kelly also ran Social Security ads against Masters in Spanish, like "Encuentra Soluciones," which helped paint a contrast between himself and his Republican opponent for Arizona's significant Spanish-speaking population. By making Social Security a focal point of his campaign, Kelly was able to tap into a significant issue priority for Arizona voters and effectively challenge his opponent's extremism.

Hassan also seemed keen to tap into Social Security this cycle. Her "Time to Compare" ad addressed her efforts to lower prescription drug costs and cap insulin prices while attacking Republican opponent Don Bolduc for his threat to "eliminate Social Security and decimate Medicare." Critically, Hassan's messaging did not carry Republicans' framing of "sunsetting" Social Security, but made clear that this would eliminate the program: a distinction that Data for Progress message testing found was significantly more effective in swaying voters.

In Pennsylvania, Cartwright also leveraged Democrats' trust advantage on Social Security. In "I've Been Here," a direct-to-camera attack ad, Cartwright painted a contrast between his life in the district vs. his opponent's career as a corporate lobbyist in D.C. fighting to cut Social Security and Medicare. Social Security — combined with pledges to protect and expand Medicare — became a powerful focal point for frontliners like Cartwright.

In the future, Democrats should lean heavily into the trust advantage they have on Social Security and Medicare, and use creative media to highlight stories from their state, contrast their opponents' stance, and highlight their own record on Social Security and Medicare. It's clear it's not just a top issue for the American electorate (see page 17) — it's an issue Democrats have a significant advantage on that they should leverage ahead of 2024, especially to help capture an older demographic that reliably turns out.

Climate and Energy

As outlined on page 16, Data for Progress polling found the rising price of oil and gas tracked closely with voter approval of Biden's presidency. However, this did not materialize as a Democratic defeat — evidence that Democratic candidates effectively communicated their plans to address energy costs. Data for Progress has found that championing energy innovation and production as a way to lower costs, create domestic jobs, and secure American energy independence can be an effective way to break through the noise.

With gas prices continuing to be higher than average and energy concerns on the horizon, highlighting corporate price gouging and building new energy sources — rather than eliminating fossil fuels — are effective rhetorical messages Democrats can carry into 2024.

Several candidates this cycle promoted innovation in American energy, highlighting the domestic development of clean energy technologies. In his "Back to the Future" ad, Warnock stood on the floor of "America's largest solar panel manufacturer," pointing to his work in helping pass the Inflation Reduction Act to "make historic investments to fight climate change while helping create Georgia jobs." In "Fighting Back," Rep. Marcy Kaptur of Ohio's 9th District directly called out Biden for "letting Ohio's solar manufacturers be undercut by China." In the contrast advertisement, she highlighted her efforts to protect jobs while attacking her opponent for "opposing Marcy's all-of-the-above energy plan."

Other Democrats in swing districts chose to respond to high energy prices by highlighting their opposition to a gas tax, including California Rep. Josh Harder. Since California's gas tax was enacted in 2017, Harder has been a strong opponent of it. In 2020, he was reelected as one of the Democrats' most overperforming candidates, running ahead of Biden by 5 points. Though the votes in California are still being tallied at the time of this report's publication, Harder will likely outperform Biden's margin in this election as well. As energy prices soared this cycle, Harder reiterated his opposition to the California gas tax in a contrast advertisement, in which he blamed his Republican opponent for casting "the deciding vote to raise the gas tax."

Meanwhile, many campaigns in both safe blue and swing state seats focused on corporate price gouging. In his ad, "Oil and Gas," Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon specifically called out the discrepancy between the price of oil and the price of gasoline, highlighting legislation to "crack down on price gouging by Big Oil" with "stiff fines when they manipulate the market." Additionally, a Nevada attack ad against Cortez Masto's opponent, Adam Laxalt, highlighted that he "found a way to profit from our pain," tying the Republican to the oil executives who "spent millions to elect him."

In his ad "Oil Giants," Kelly took his criticism of oil and gas price gouging one step further by explicitly calling for more domestic oil production, as oil majors have hesitated to expand U.S. drilling in their pursuit of record-high profits. Though in the Senate Kelly is a staunch champion of climate and conservation initiatives, he astutely appealed to voters who are supportive of an "all-of-the-above" approach to energy production that includes both clean energy and fossil fuels. With gas prices continuing to be higher than average and energy concerns on the horizon, highlighting corporate price gouging and building new energy sources — rather than eliminating fossil fuels — are effective rhetorical messages Democrats can carry into 2024.

Crime and Public Safety

This cycle, Republican candidates devoted millions of dollars to attack Democrats on the issue of crime, dishonestly accusing their opponents of defunding law enforcement and supporting soft-on-crime policies. Fortunately, these attacks did not appear to land with voters, who were more concerned about the real threat to bodily autonomy than exaggerated claims about the crime rate. But with crime and safety ranking as a top issue for likely voters, Democrats could not shy away from addressing public safety.

In our message testing, we found that voters were most swayed by messages that showed cooperation with law enforcement and plans to protect both communities and police. The best performing message on crime, which was also the best performing message overall, emphasized working "hand-in-hand with law enforcement to crack down on crimes and keep our communities safe." Effective Democratic advertisements showcased cooperation with police while promoting Democratic solutions to public safety.

In one ad, Pennsylvania Governor-elect Josh Shapiro displayed his hand-in-hand relationship with direct-to-camera testimony from law enforcement officers — including local sheriffs, state troopers, district attorneys, and police officers. In the ad, they all shared their support for Shapiro, emphasizing his endorsements from "prosecutors from both parties, Pennsylvania state troopers, and 15,000 local police officers." Gov. Jared Polis of Colorado took a similar approach in his ad, "Good Leader," in which multiple sheriffs celebrated Polis' plans to put funding into mental health resources, expand background checks, and "keep firearms out of the hands of people that are going through mental health crisis."

While not a crime-specific message, a message that focused on expanding access to mental health care ranked in the top 10 messages of our conjoint experiment. Highlighting mental health treatment can be an effective way to display efforts to combat crime, as Gov. Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan showed in her ad "A Safer Michigan." In the ad, Whitmer told voters that they "have the right to feel safe in your home, in your car, or walking down the street," which is why she devoted millions to "increasing mental health services, to get people help before a crime happens."

Democratic efforts to improve the country's broken criminal justice system were a frequent target by Republicans this year, especially in the Senate race between John Fetterman and Mehmet Oz. Throughout the campaign, Oz leaned into exaggerated attacks that framed Fetterman's clemency policies as "soft on crime." But from the start of the race, Fetterman took crime head-on, emphasizing his efforts to reduce gun violence and work with local police while not shying away from his pardons for wrongfully convicted Pennsylvanians.

In "Stopped Gun Deaths," Fetterman stated that "public safety is why I ran for office," promoting his record of working "side-by-side with police," showing up at crime scenes and doing "whatever it took to fund our police" while stopping gun deaths in his hometown. He also contrasted his experience taking on crime with his opponent's in a contrast ad, stating that "Oz never fought crime, and he won't fight for us."

The specific circumstances of Fetterman's campaign were unique — not every candidate will tattoo the dates of murders in their district — but it demonstrated that having a proactive message on crime can help blunt Republican attacks. Rather than walking back his criminal justice work, Fetterman proposed his own solutions without shying away from the issue, even as Republicans held a trust advantage on crime and safety. Crime and safety is a perennial Republican talking point, and Democrats would do well to take action on popular policies that can reduce violence.

86 Republican Extremism

In midterm elections, voters typically cast their ballot against the party in power as pushback against legislative action or poor economic conditions. But this election, voters by and large chose to send Democrats back to D.C. in an apparent repudiation of Republican extremism and overreach. Although Democrats had a governing trifecta, the Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson* represented one of the largest Republican victories in decades. That decision, combined with the poor quality of extreme, Trump-endorsed candidates, led many 2022 voters to cast their ballot against the Republican Party.

Across the country, Democrats seized on this reality, spending millions of dollars on ads pointing out Republican extremism. Character attacks were some of the most common ads this cycle, with Democrats highlighting unpopular Republican views on abortion, election security, Social Security, and more.

Shapiro, whose opponent promoted QAnon conspiracy theories and was present during the January 6 riots, aired multiple ads that emphasized Doug Mastriano's radical beliefs. Shapiro shared testimony from multiple lifelong Republicans in "Uncertain Times," in which Pennsylvania voters shared their opposition to Mastriano. "I voted for Donald Trump twice, and I cannot support Mastriano," one Republican voter said, while another stated, "When I found out that Doug Mastriano was part of QAnon, that scared me." Mastriano's positions were so extreme and unpopular that Senate candidate Fetterman was also able to capitalize, saying that Oz would "let politicians like Doug Mastriano ban abortion without exceptions … Oz is too extreme for Pennsylvania."

Other advertisements highlighted the extreme Republican views on abortion and Social Security. In Virginia, Rep. Abigail Spanberger's ad "Shocked," featured a Republican police officer who criticized her opponent for her extreme views: "She doubts rape leads to pregnancy … she bashed the FBI and defended those who attacked our Capitol." Spanberger went on to win reelection with 52% of the vote, a +1.2-point increase over her margin in 2020. In New Hampshire's First District, House Majority PAC labeled Rep. Pappas' Republican opponent, Karoline Leavitt, as "Dangerous for [Voters'] Retirement," using her own comments on privatizing Social Security. Seth Magaziner, who captured an extremely close toss-up House seat in Rhode Island, attacked his opponent over his support for Rep. Kevin McCarthy, "who's determined to cut Social Security and Medicare, and supports outlawing abortions."

Negative ads like these were common in close races around the country, helping to reemphasize the stakes in the midterm election.

Republican positions on abortion and Social Security are incredibly unpopular — and Democrats should continue to ensure voters hear about their extreme, dangerous views.

88 Constituents Over Party

While pointing out Republican extremism worked well for Democrats across the country, we also saw several Democrats in Republican-leaning battleground environments run television spots emphasizing their commitment to their constituents over their political party. In essence, these ads firmly placed these candidates in the center of the political spectrum, where they could confidently defend their records against both the far-right and the far-left.

For example, Rep. Jared Golden made the case in the direct-to-camera ad "Independent" that he's not afraid to stand up to Biden or the Democratic Party agenda. He immediately opened the ad by reflecting on three of the most important issues to voters this cycle: inflation, supply chains, and rising gas prices, followed by the assurance that he understands what it's like to be a Mainer facing tough costs. He reminded viewers that he's an "independent voice taking on his own party to stand up for Maine families," specifically calling attention to his vote — the only Democratic vote — against the American Rescue Plan. At the same time, Golden used this ad to reiterate his commitment to key Democratic priorities and accomplishments, including reducing prescription drug costs and protecting Social Security and Medicare.

Arizona Sen. Mark Kelly's ad "Labels" offered a model that Democrats across the ideological spectrum can embrace.

In the ad "Labels," Kelly said that he "stands up to the left when they want to defund the police, and I stand up to the right when they want a national abortion ban" — highlighting two of the most unpopular positions with voters from each ideological wing (see pages 65 and 40, respectively). In a midterm election, when voters typically vote against the party in power, making a clear distinction between a candidate and their national party is critical in tough battleground states. Kelly also called out the president by name, saying that "when Joe Biden gets it wrong, I call him out. Because when you boil it down, I'm on Arizona's side, no matter what."

Kelly's ad also highlighted not just what he's against, but what he's for: "closing gaps in the border wall, saying no to raising taxes on middle-class families, and fighting to end corrupt stock trading in Congress" — a fascinating mix of ideologically moderate and progressive policies. Kelly's ad reinforced the idea that he is for Arizonans, not Washington, D.C. It also offered a model that Democrats across the ideological spectrum can embrace: Highlight the most effective policies from each wing of the party.

Kaptur took a similar approach while defending Ohio's 9th District, a Trump 2020 district, focusing on uniting America and distinguishing herself from "extremists" in both parties. In a direct-to-camera advertisement, she called for a meeting in "the Big Middle" — a focal point between both ends of the political spectrum. In disavowing the actions of her Republican opponent J.R. Majewski, Kaptur condemned him for "threatening violence and joining an angry mob that assaults the police," making it clear that her platform stands for peace and on the side of police officers. Kaptur also pushed back on what she called "the Extreme Left," stating that "we should always stand for the national anthem" and reaffirming her support for police officers by saying "defunding the police is ridiculous." As progressives, we are reluctant to embrace this specific messaging when not absolutely necessary — but its efficacy is clear in Kaptur's race: She carried her district by 13 points this cycle.

Democratic overperformers also weren't afraid to lean into uniquely popular local issues. Rep. Joe Courtney branded his Connecticut district the "Submarine Capital of the World" in "Working Together," in which he boasted that he doubled the Navy submarine budget. Peltola's pro-fish campaign centered "Salmon" as fisheries collapsed across Alaska.

Regardless of how they did it, it's clear that Democrats did well by separating themselves from a national brand, and using messages and issue differentiation to demonstrate to voters that they are willing to put their constituents over their party.

#BLM

Takeaways

Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each election cycle on advertisements and paid media; ensuring that these dollars are used to highlight the most persuasive messages is key for optimizing Democrats' electoral outcomes. While an effective paid media and creative strategy will look different depending on the dynamics of each race, this cycle demonstrated the power of running on candidates' most popular policies in contrast to their opponents' unpopular extremism. In particular, we recommend Democrats continue to use paid creative that emphasizes lowering drug and energy costs, creating domestic jobs, protecting Social Security, and preserving personal freedoms.

Final Takeaways

Passing popular policies, optimizing messaging, and pushing those messages through paid media are the most powerful tools that party leaders and candidates have to shape and optimize electoral outcomes. Democrats made significant headway in the past two years with signature legislation, including the Inflation Reduction Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. With broad support across the electorate for these laws, which will combat inflation, bolster domestic manufacturing, deliver lower healthcare costs, strengthen our infrastructure, and provide relief to American families, Democrats can point to these wins as they look ahead to 2024. Celebrating the successes of the past two years should also be a key priority to motivate the electorate for the 2024 general election, in which Democrats are poised to face a difficult battle to defend current seats and pick up new ones in the Senate.

Mobilizing the Democratic base and convincing voters across the country to turn out for Democratic candidates in 2024 will require building upon the wins in these key pieces of legislation. As federal funds from the IRA, IIJA, and CHIPS and Science Act flow to the states, Democratic candidates should highlight how these investments are strengthening the economy, creating new jobs, and delivering a higher quality of life for their constituents.

But we cannot simply coast on these gains. At a time when extremist Republicans are threatening our democracy, Democrats must be willing to do everything in our power to defeat them at the ballot box. The decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson* upended the typical midterm environment and enabled Democrats to exceed expectations as the party in power. While Democrats successfully seized on this moment and repudiated Republican extremism, a success like this can only be replicated by continuing to create clear contrasts between the two parties. Strong Democratic messaging on the economy, manufacturing, Social Security, and abortion helped secure Democratic victories that defied historical trends and shattered expectations. In order to replicate our gains in 2024, Democrats must continue to hone our message and focus on the issues that speak to voters.

Many parts of our experiment and analysis offer progressives unique opportunities to push the party in a more liberal — and persuasive — direction. Specifically, policies like a $15 minimum wage and Social Security expansion provide a critical opportunity for progressives to seize in the coming two years, and serve as an important reminder that economic populism is one of the most popular tenets of the Democratic Party writ large.

The Democratic Party is the "big tent party" for a reason. It is crucial to note that this report does not advocate for eliminating parts of our agenda, nor refusing to discuss or continually dodging critical parts of our platform that are contentious in the public discourse. Rather, we posit that there is an urgent need for Democrats to continue to use *the most persuasive messages* to win in November 2024 on the issues that impact voters the most. Democrats must raise the salience of their most popular stances — and Republicans' least popular stances — and make sure that voters across the country can see themselves in our message and our party.

We also argue that it is our duty as progressives to use the most effective tactics possible to protect our country and our democracy from the Republican Party — even when that means using rhetoric that does not appeal to us personally. In short, not using the tools we can to appeal to every *potential* Democratic voter and make progress on issues we care about means we are often, albeit indirectly, harming the very people we claim to be fighting for.

While institutional Democrats have long believed the Republican Party's "fever" would eventually break, we believe even in the wake of widespread electoral defeats that Republicans will only double down on their extremist and hateful rhetoric ahead of 2024. It is why we argue that it is absolutely critical for progressive and moderate Democrats alike to focus on the most popular parts of the Democratic agenda — and force our opponents to answer for their overreach. With our democracy at stake, defeat is not an option.

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