

20/20 Vision: What It Will Take to Close the Sale in the Suburbs



Democrats' mission to make Donald Trump a one-term president will succeed or fail based on their performance in the increasingly diverse suburbs of battleground states. In 2016, Hillary Clinton lost the battleground states of Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin by a combined 455,204 votes; she lost the suburban counties in those states by 560,412 votes. In short, winning the suburbs would've meant winning the White House.

Right now, Joe Biden is in a promising position in the battleground state suburbs, and our recent survey of more than 3,400 voters in those decisive places revealed that he can close the deal by winning over the one-in-five voters who are **undecided** or **leaning toward Biden**. This research, performed by [Avalanche Insights](#), focused on a key question that these voters are weighing as they make their choice: what are Biden's and Trump's visions for the country? Both those who are undecided and those leaning Biden define Trump's vision as self-serving and divisive. But they are split on defining Biden's; leaners say they are clear on his vision, but most undecided voters say they are not.

This survey of suburban voters in the battleground states found:

1. Biden starts with a base of support from 39% of suburban voters, compared to 28% for Trump. An additional 22% are leaning toward Biden (9%) or undecided (13%), with nearly half of lean-Biden voters identifying as people of color. This means Biden could win a decisive majority in the suburbs without pursuing a single Trump-leaning voter.
2. There is consensus across the suburbs on Trump's vision: in an open-ended question, 40% of undecideds and 60% of Biden leaners volunteered that Trump's vision is self-serving and divisive.
3. What separates undecideds and Biden leaners is their clarity on Biden's vision. Seventy percent of Biden leaners say they are clear on his vision, while 71% of undecided voters say they are not.

Based on these findings, we recommend that Democrats take two steps to help lock up a decisive suburban majority. First, spend more time and resources communicating Biden's vision – what he and they are for – especially to undecided suburban voters; his vision has broken through with Biden leaners but not with enough undecideds. Second, continue to highlight Trump's divisive and self-serving nature – and explicitly connect it to the harm it is causing voters in their own lives and communities. This is a crucial part of a pro-active Democratic defense against a Trump revival. These two steps can help close the sale with suburban swing voters, flipping the script and denying Trump the suburban majority that delivered the White House to him in 2016.

Methodology

Our motivation for focusing on Trump's and Biden's visions in this survey was a preceding round of qualitative research we conducted with David Binder Research that identified presidential vision as integral to persuadable suburban voters' decision-making this year. It was clear from that research that we needed to understand voters' perceptions of the candidates' visions *in their own words* to map the current landscape and path to beating Trump in November.

This challenging research task led us to partner with the firm Avalanche Insights on a mixed method "listening survey," which offered a more holistic look at how voters perceive of candidates' visions than is possible through a focus group or survey alone. This methodology presented open- and closed-ended questions to a large sample of 3,474 suburban voters in the states that will determine the Electoral College victor. Responses to open-ended questions were then run through a natural language processing system to identify voters' priorities, values, and emotions around both Trump's and Biden's visions.

Third Way and Avalanche Insights conducted this survey of suburban registered voters in Arizona, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin online from May 27–29,

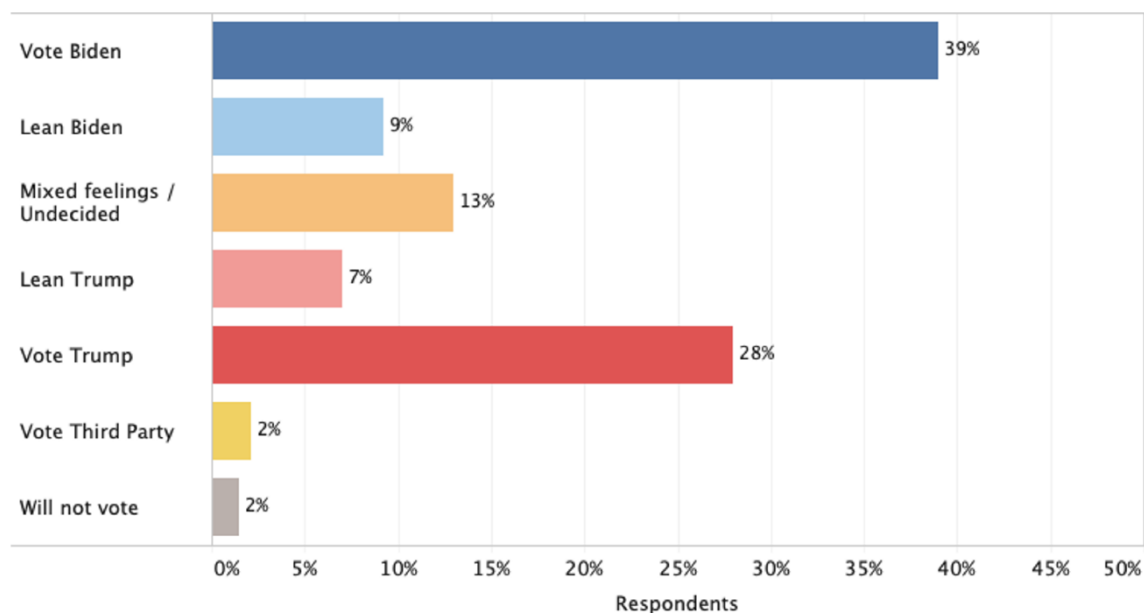
2020. The sample is demographically representative of suburban communities across these states.

Democrats Can Close the Deal in the Suburbs by Winning Over Undecideds and Biden Leaners

Biden is currently in a promising position across the battleground suburbs: 39% of voters are solidly supporting him right now, compared to 28% for Trump. Among solid supporters, Biden has a 15-point edge with women, he's up nine with voters over 55, he's dominating by 39 points with voters of color, and he's tied with those who have only a high school degree but up by 18 points with college graduates.



Biden is in a Promising Position Across the Battleground Suburbs



Source: Third Way/Avalanche Insights survey battleground suburbs survey, 3,474 registered voters, conducted online May 27-29, 2020.

An additional 22% of voters in the suburbs currently fall into the lean Biden (9%) or undecided (13%) categories. This means that Biden can put together a decisive suburban majority if he can build upon his existing 39% of supporters to include the 9% of Biden leaners and a healthy share of the undecideds. As it stands now, he can unite this decisive suburban majority without wooing a single Trump-leaning voter, an important benchmark.

The persuadable voters in these suburbs do not fit the swing voter stereotype. Lean-Biden and undecided voters are majority female, especially undecideds at 61%. Pluralities of both groups are under 35, most notably 41% of Lean-Biden voters. And while voters of color make up 19% of voters across the battleground suburbs, this share jumps to 45% in the lean-Biden segment.

Biden has the makings of a decisive suburban majority in his grasp, but there's work to be done to close the deal.

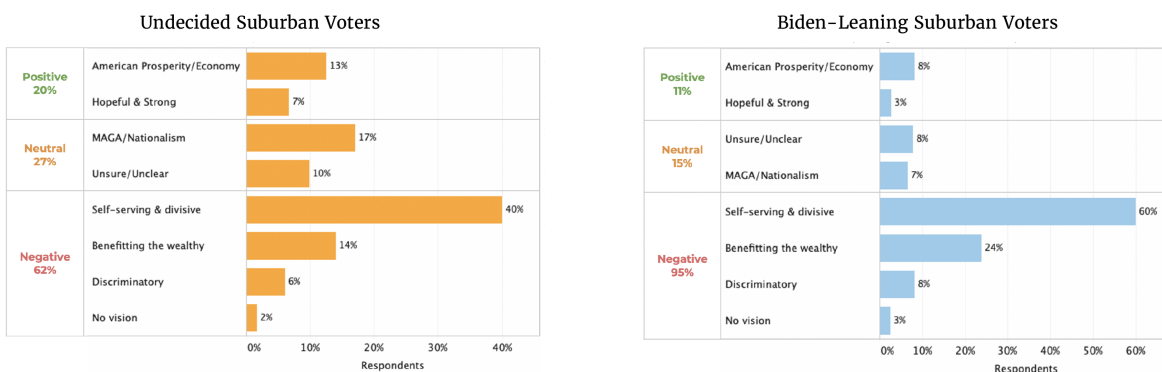
Trump: Undecided and Lean-Biden Voters Define Trump's Vision as Self-Serving and Divisive

An important component of forging a decisive suburban majority is defining what four more years under Trump would mean for voters. In our research, respondents were asked to describe Trump's and Biden's visions for America in one sentence. "Vision" was defined as "where the leader is going to take the country, and what will happen if they are successful." The 3,474 responses that voters provided in their own words were then grouped into themes.

These responses revealed that both undecided and Biden-leaning suburban voters are united in the belief that Trump's vision is self-serving and divisive. There was wide agreement here, particularly as voters were providing their own descriptions rather than choosing from a menu of options on a multiple-choice question: 40% of undecideds describe Trump's vision as self-serving and divisive, and this share grows to 60% with Biden leaners. This perception of Trump's vision is so engrained that it has become a defining feature of how voters view the current occupant of the White House.



Persuadable Voters: Trump's Vision for the Country is Self-Serving and Divisive



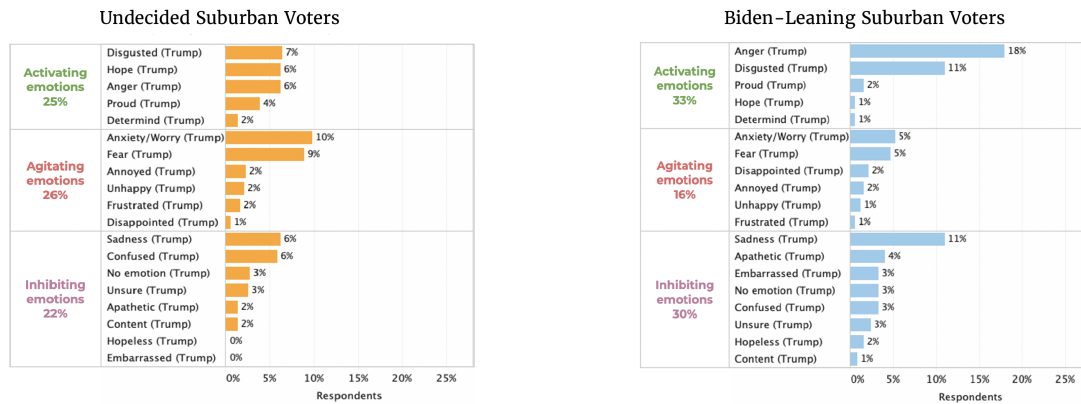
Source: Third Way/Avalanche Insights survey battleground suburbs survey, 3,474 registered voters, conducted online May 27-29, 2020.

Trump's self-serving and divisive vision elicits negative emotions with both undecided and lean-Biden voters, but it strikes different emotional chords with these groups. Undecided voters express equal parts *agitating*, *activating*, and *inhibiting* emotional themes, with the most

frequently referenced emotion being anxiety. Biden-leaning voters' emotional response to Trump's vision takes a more *activating* form, with the top emotion being anger, although sadness is also a major response.



Trump's Vision Produces Intense and Negative Emotions

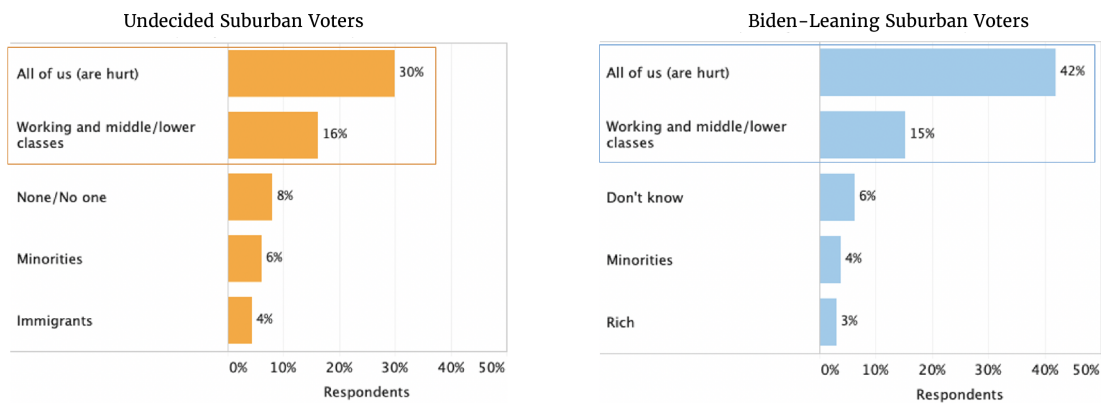


Source: Third Way/Avalanche Insights survey battleground suburbs survey, 3,474 registered voters, conducted online May 27-29, 2020.

When we dug in with these suburban voters on who they think Trump's vision hurts or helps, many undecided and Biden-leaning voters volunteered that Trump's vision hurts all Americans, but Democrats have work to do to make this harm resonate as personal to voters. Nearly half of undecided voters volunteer that Trump's vision hurts all of us (30%) or the working and middle class (16%). Among Biden leaners, 57% say Trump's vision hurts all of us (42%) or the working and middle class (15%). Yet, respondents had trouble explicitly connecting the harm Trump's vision inflicts on us collectively to how it might hurt them as individuals.



Trump's Vision for America Hurts All Americans



Source: Third Way/Avalanche Insights survey battleground suburbs survey, 3,474 registered voters, conducted online May 27-29, 2020.

Overall, suburban voters perceive of Trump's vision as self-serving and divisive, it stirs negative emotions in them, and they believe it's hurting the people of this country. But this

research also shows that Democrats have to complete the story for voters in a way that grounds this abstract harm in their everyday lives. (For example, Trump is slowing down coronavirus testing to help his re-election bid, which means he is putting you and your family at risk because he believes more positive tests hurt him.)

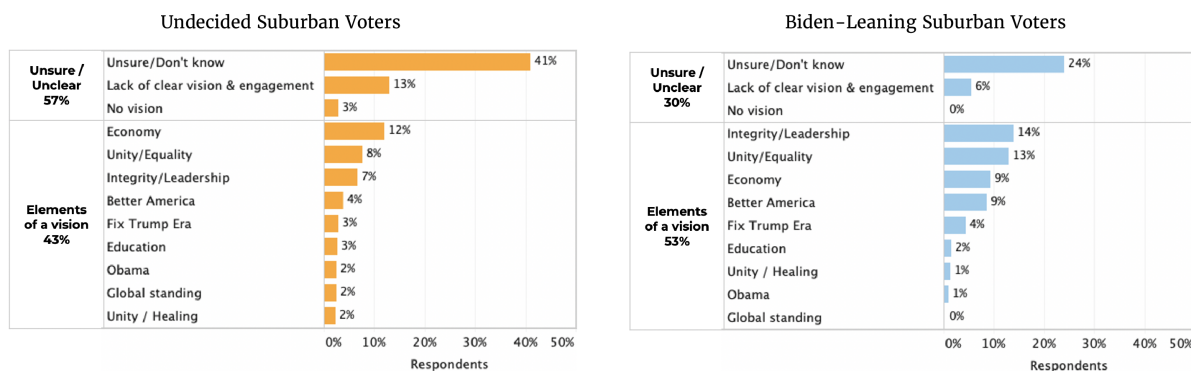
Biden: The Leaners Understand His Vision, But There's Work to Do With Undecided Voters

The second half of Democrats' ability to build a decisive suburban majority depends upon articulating Biden's vision for the country to voters. Our earlier qualitative research showed that some persuadable suburban voters were not clear on where Biden planned to take the country if elected president. This lack of clarity was holding them back from declaring their support for him.

In this round of research, we found that 70% of Biden-leaning voters say that Biden has conveyed his vision for the country to them, but the share of undecided voters who say the same is 29%. This is a departure from the consensus between these two groups on Trump's vision, and it presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Even in a referendum election, voters need to know what the challenger is offering and what it means for them. Reinforcing Biden's alternative vision is a crucial pathway to moving Biden leaners to the solid Biden category and true undecideds closer to supporting the former vice president.

Even among those who are leaning toward support for Biden, his vision is still fairly loosely defined. These leaners most frequently define Biden's vision in terms that are similar to the qualities he conveys; nearly a third say that it represents a return of leadership (14%) or national unity (13%). Another 18% say it is about a better America (9%) or the economy (9%). But 30% are unable to articulate any specific tenets of Biden's vision. Undecided voters are less clear still; 57% are unable to name an element of Biden's vision. Those who *can* most frequently cite the economy (12%). At this point, undecided voters are only about half as likely as Biden leaners to reference leadership and national unity as part of Biden's vision.

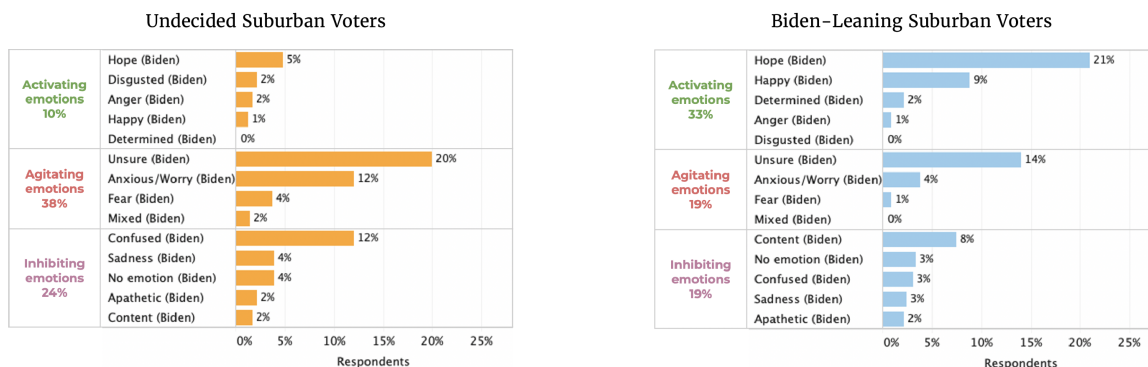
Biden’s Vision Still Loosely Defined Even for Those Who Say They Understand It



Source: Third Way/Avalanche Insights survey battleground suburbs survey, 3,474 registered voters, conducted online May 27–29, 2020.

Not surprisingly, Biden leaners have a positive emotional response to Biden’s vision, but undecided voters have a scattered reaction. Biden-leaning voters respond to his vision with *activating* emotions while *agitating* and *inhibiting* emotions lag behind. Their most frequently referenced individual emotion is hope. But undecided voters’ emotional response is reversed, with most citing *agitating* or *inhibiting* emotions and few relaying emotions that would *activate*. The most commonly referenced emotion when undecideds are asked how Biden’s vision makes them feel is “unsure.”

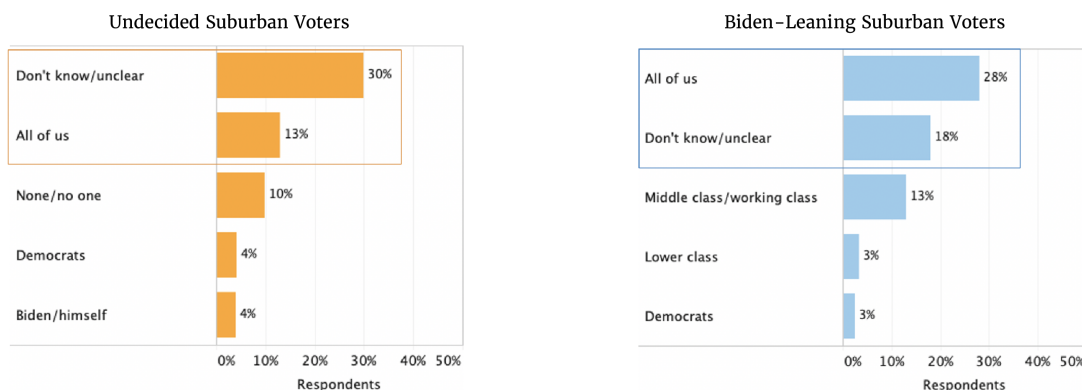
The Clearer Voters Are on Biden’s Vision the More Positive Their Emotional Response



Source: Third Way/Avalanche Insights survey battleground suburbs survey, 3,474 registered voters, conducted online May 27–29, 2020.

Because of undecided voters’ lack of clarity on Biden’s vision, they struggle to articulate who would benefit from it. At 30%, a plurality of undecideds say that they do not know who would benefit from Biden’s vision. Smaller shares say that all of us (13%) and no one (10%) would benefit. By contrast, Biden leaners have positive associations when asked who benefits from Biden’s vision. Twenty-eight percent say that his vision benefits all of us, and an additional 16% name the middle/working class or lower class. Just 18% report that they do not know who benefits from Biden’s vision.

Voters Who Internalize Biden’s Vision Believe It Will Include and Help Them



Source: Third Way/Avalanche Insights survey battleground suburbs survey, 3,474 registered voters, conducted online May 27–29, 2020.

It seems that Biden has been effective at sharing his vision with persuadable voters who are leaning his way, even though many struggle to define the specifics of it. The task before Biden and Democrats now is to communicate his vision to those undecided voters who are reportedly unclear on it. There are significant secondary benefits of articulating Biden’s vision. It could shape voters’ response to his candidacy toward *activating* rather than *agitating* or *inhibiting* emotions, and it could lay plain how we all would benefit from his vision. Ultimately, if Biden can convey his vision to these voters, many will support him this November.

Conclusion

Four months out from Election Day, Biden is in a promising position in the diverse battleground state suburbs that will decide the election. But he can close the deal by winning over the one-in-five suburban voters who are undecided or currently leaning toward him as their choice. Presidential vision will be key to achieving this outcome, and the task is two-fold. First, Democrats must be unrelenting in portraying Trump’s vision as self-serving and divisive. Voters know it’s true, but they need help completing the story on who his selfishness harms. And second, Democrats must illuminate Biden’s vision for the country to those undecided suburban voters who remain unclear on it. Many of them are ready to turn away from Trump, but they need an alternative path to embrace. If Biden brings the undecided and lean-Biden voters examined in this analysis into his coalition, he’ll be on his way to a decisive suburban majority.

Post-Script

This research’s principal focus was on the undecided and lean-Biden voters in the suburbs who will determine the outcome of the presidential election. But there are races around the

country where voters leaning toward Trump will be important targets for Democratic campaigns down-ballot. This post-script includes additional analysis on the lean-Trump voters in this research.

Demographics

According to this round of research, voters who are leaning toward Trump currently make up 7% of suburban voters. This group differs demographically from the undecided and lean-Biden groups. Eighty-seven percent of lean-Trump voters are white, while only 6% are Black and 8% Hispanic. Although Trump typically shows more strength with male voters, 60% of lean-Trump voters in the suburbs are female. These voters are fairly evenly spread across age groups, educational attainment, and income brackets.

Trump's Vision to Trump Leaners

A large majority of lean-Trump voters say that Trump's vision for America is clear, with 27% believing it is very clear and 56% indicating it is somewhat clear. When describing his vision, a majority (58%) convey it in positive terms. Almost a third (31%) say his vision is about nationalism or patriotism, and 20% repeat Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again." Eighteen percent see Trump's vision as hopeful and strong. Interestingly, only 9% see it as focused on the economy.

When asked how Trump's vision makes them feel, 16% of Trump leaners respond that they feel hope, while 8% feel proud and 7% sad. A plurality (43%) generally feel positive emotions, and about the same share feel emotions that are activating (33%) and inhibiting (34%). Less than a quarter (24%) of Trump leaners feel negative emotions around Trump's vision.

Lean-Trump voters feel that Trump's vision benefits all Americans. More than half (55%) say it benefits all of us. Ten percent say his vision benefits the rich, while 7% think it benefits workers. Only 5% point to Trump's vision as benefiting Trump himself. There is little consensus among lean-Trump voters about who is hurt by Trump's vision. Twelve percent believe all of us are hurt by it, and 11% feel the lower class is hurt.

Biden's Vision to Trump Leaners

Biden's vision is extremely undefined for suburban voters leaning toward Trump. Only 6% say Biden's vision is very clear, and 16% believe it is somewhat clear. A plurality (43%) say it is somewhat unclear, and over a third (36%) feel it is very unclear.

Lean-Trump voters are largely rendered mute when asked about the content of Biden's vision. A small plurality (14%) say it is about restoring or repairing America. Another 7% think his vision is related to the economy. Although lean-Trump voters are mostly unable to describe Biden's vision, it nonetheless evinced negative emotions, with 53% naming a negative

emotion when asked how Biden's vision makes them feel, and only 6% sharing positive emotions. Eleven percent say his vision makes them feel anxious, and 9% feel fear.

Lean-Trump voters are also unable to name who benefits from Biden's vision. Just 8% say all of us benefit. And 6% believe Biden himself benefits from his vision, which is just above the share saying Trump benefits from his own vision. But lean-Trump voters struggle to name a specific group that is hurt by Biden's vision. Nearly a third (32%) believe that all of us are hurt by it. Some (7%) feel workers are hurt, and 5% say Biden's vision hurts Trump.

Conclusion

Lean-Trump voters are generally positive about Trump's vision for America. They believe his vision is clear, and it evokes positive emotions for them. Most feel his vision benefits all of us, and in contrast to undecided voters and those who lean Biden, they do not view it as self-serving. Because of this positive assessment, negative campaigning against Trump's vision is unlikely to strike a chord with lean-Trump voters. Democratic candidates who need to appeal to this group may want to exercise care in how they criticize it.

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