

Democrats Face an Economic Trust Gap in 2022



Ryan Pougiales
Former Deputy Director of Politics
[@RyanPougiales](https://twitter.com/RyanPougiales)



Lanae Erickson
Senior Vice President for Social Policy, Education & Politics
[@LanaeErickson](https://twitter.com/LanaeErickson)

Third Way's [latest national survey](#) with ALG Research finds that Democrats suffer from an economic trust gap that may impact the party at the ballot box if action is not taken ahead of the 2022 midterm election. This trust gap is the belief among voters that Republicans instead of Democrats are best able to manage the economy. But this survey also points to initial steps that Democrats can take to address the trust gap: Run as “Biden Democrats,” talk more about the economy, and talk about it in a way that centers on the majority of voters who identify as working and middle class. Here’s more of what we found:

- **Democrats’ economic trust gap stands at 12 points, a perilous position heading into the midterms.** Voters trust Republicans over Democrats by 12 points on the party best able to manage the economy. And Democrats are just tied on the House generic ballot (46–46%), which is a tenuous position ahead of 2022.

- **The economic trust gap extends to key voter groups.** Latino and Black voters were oversampled in this survey. Latinos are split on the party best able to manage the economy, and only 59% of Black voters side with Democrats. Persuadable 2022 voters back Republicans on the economy by 29 points.
- **Run as “Biden Democrats” on the economy 2022.** A majority approve of President Biden on the economy (50–48%), while voters disapprove of Democrats in Congress by a 41–55% margin. Biden’s margin is 31 points higher than the party’s with persuadables, 21 points with Latinos, and 24 points with Black voters.
- **Democrats need to talk more about the economy.** By a 60–26% margin, voters say Democrats are focused on social and cultural issues over economic ones, while they want Democrats to focus on the economy by a 73–15% margin.
- **Most voters identify as working or middle class and respond to policy messages centered on them and core economic values.** Eighty-four percent of voters identify as working or middle class, and messages that reference these voters and economic values like hard work perform on average 14 points better than other messages in conveying support for working- and middle-class communities.

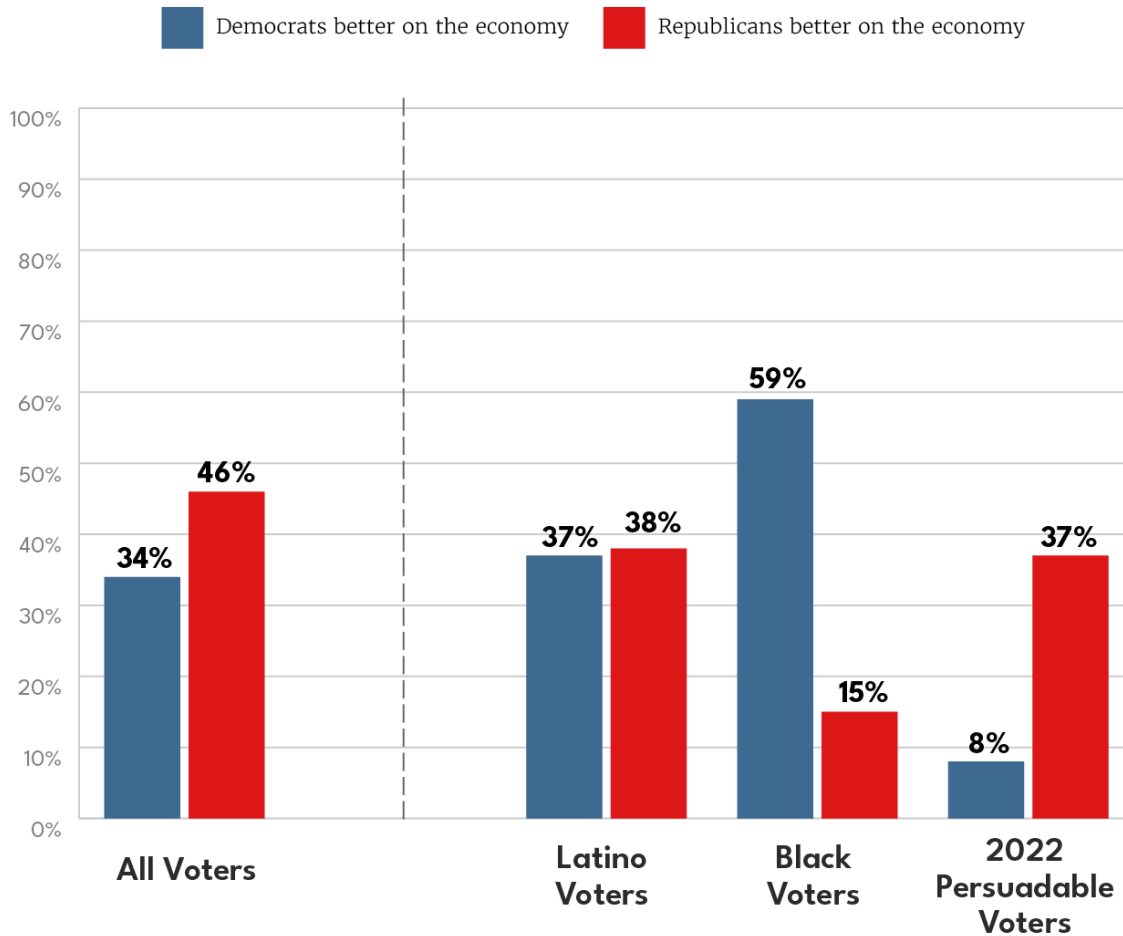
Democrats have a wide economic trust gap, and this gap is imperiling the party’s electoral position. This survey builds on previous focus groups, but it is not conclusive on the sources or solutions to Democrats’ trust gap; our research into it is continuing. But Democrats can begin to address it by positioning themselves as “Biden Democrats,” talking more about the economy, and focusing policy content and messages on the supermajority of voters who identify as working and middle class. These actions won’t wholly bridge Democrats’ economic trust gap, but they are necessary steps forward.

Democrats risk falling into their economic trust gap in 2022.

Democrats are going into the 2022 midterm election facing a daunting economic trust gap, which is the margin by which voters trust Republicans over Democrats on managing the economy. Our June 2021 survey puts Democrats’ economic trust gap at 12 points. Democrats trail by 29 points with 2022 persuadable voters, they’re just tied among Latinos, and only 59% of Black voters side with the party on the economy. Democrats’ trust gap was a narrower seven points in a March 2021 ALG Research survey. As we emerge from the pandemic, the rising salience of the economy is compounding Democrats’ problem; a plurality now rate it as their top issue.

Democrats' Economic Trust Gap is in Double Digits with Voters

Q: Which party does a better job managing the economy?



Source: Third Way and ALG Research conducted a national survey of 1,000 likely 2022 voters from June 2–8, 2021 via online and text-to-web interviews. The margin of error is $\pm 3.1\%$. This survey also included oversamples of 200 Black and Latino likely voters, each.

Democrats' trust gap is not a new phenomenon, but there is increased urgency to address it ahead of the midterm election. Democrats are just tied with Republicans on the generic ballot, a result, if it holds up, which would unquestionably lead to Republican majorities after 2022. Democrats lead with Latinos by 15 points and Black voters by 68 points. But, according to [data from Catalyst](#), Democrats won these groups by 35 and 82 points in 2018 House races.

On the positive side, this survey did find that voters trust Democrats more on some kitchen-table issues like raising wages, supporting working parents, and making necessities like health care

affordable. But it's a different story on traditional economic issues, like managing the economy, creating jobs, and fighting outsourcing.

Democrats face a significant deficit to Republicans on voters' top issue as we head toward the midterms. Unlike recent elections, Democrats do not have an advantage on the generic ballot to help mitigate their perceived weakness on the economy. Democrats' economic trust gap is an urgent problem that requires attention right now.

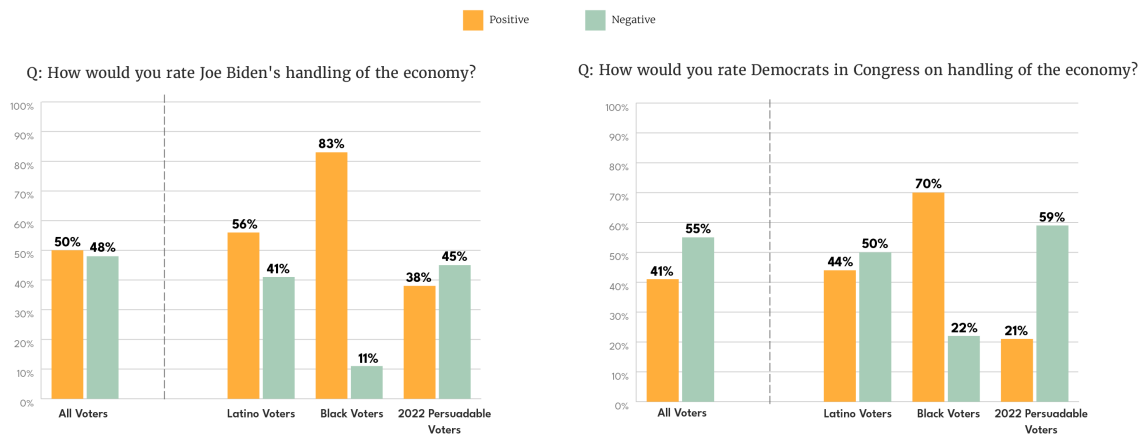
Voters have more faith in President Biden than the Democratic Party on the economy.

On the economy, voters feel positive about President Biden and pessimistic about the Democratic Party. In response, Democrats running in 2022 can bolster their position on economic issues by aligning themselves with Biden's mainstream platform. A slate of "Biden Democrats" can be part of the party's path to retaining power in 2022.

Biden is in positive territory on the economy: 50% rate him positively and 48% negatively. Biden's numbers grow among Latinos and Black voters, who give him margins of +15 and +72, respectively. He is moderately underwater with persuadable voters at 38–45%. But for Democrats in Congress, just 41% rate them positively on the economy to 55% negatively. Democrats' deficit compared to Biden on the economy becomes even more consequential among key subgroups. Latinos give them a negative 44–50% rating, while Black voters are more favorable at 70–22%. By a 21–59% spread, persuadable voters rate Democrats negatively.



Voters Have More Faith in Biden on the Economy than Democrats in Congress



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Being a Biden Democrat means supporting big, popular, and mainstream ideas. It's about being for policies that make a difference for the country and peoples' everyday lives. It's championing achievements like the American Rescue Plan, fighting for proposals like the American Jobs Plan, and looking ahead to new ways to build back better. It's not about diminishing this agenda or

proclaiming it small ball. Democrats should run toward—not away from—Biden on the economy in 2022.

A key step toward closing the economic trust gap is for Democrats to simply talk more about the economy.

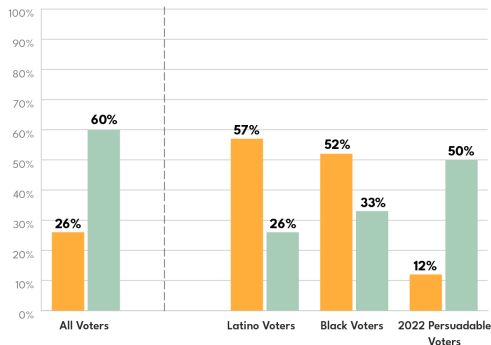
There is a damaging perception that Democrats do not sufficiently focus on economic issues. By a 60–26% margin, voters say that Democrats are focused on social and cultural issues instead of economic issues. But when asked their preference, voters want Democrats to focus on economic issues by a 73–15% margin. Latino voters want Democrats to focus more on economic issues by 55 points, Black voters by 26 points, and persuadables by 57 points. Republicans, despite their conspiracy theories and demagoguery, are perceived as focusing on economic issues over social and cultural ones by a 56–20% spread. Democrats cannot (and should not) neglect cultural and social issues, but voters need more from Democrats on their economic priorities.



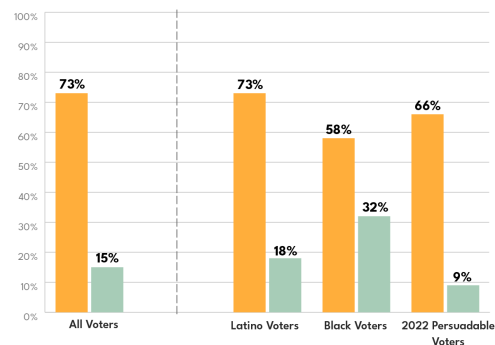
Voters Perceive that Democrats are not Focusing Enough on the Economy

Economy/jobs Cultural/Societal Issues

Q: Do Democrats focus more on economy/jobs or cultural and social issues?



Q: Should Democrats focus more on economy/jobs or cultural and social issues?



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A part of Democrats’ answer to the economic trust gap should be to talk more about the economy. By emphasizing the economy, Democrats can better convey that they understand voters’ priorities.

Most voters identify as working or middle class and respond to policy messages centered on them and core economic values.

In addition to talking more about the economy, this survey also pointed to how Democrats can talk about the economy to help address the economic trust gap: focus messages on working- or middle-class communities and elevate core economic values.

Eighty-four percent of voters in this survey identified themselves as part of the working or middle class. Most voters from households making under \$40,000 a year identify as working or middle class, but this also holds for households making over \$150,000. And so, it makes sense to explicitly call out working- and middle-class communities in Democratic policy messages. Elevating these voters does not mean marginalizing our most vulnerable communities, and Democrats should continue to fight for the poor and disadvantaged. It is about meeting voters where they are and how they identify themselves.

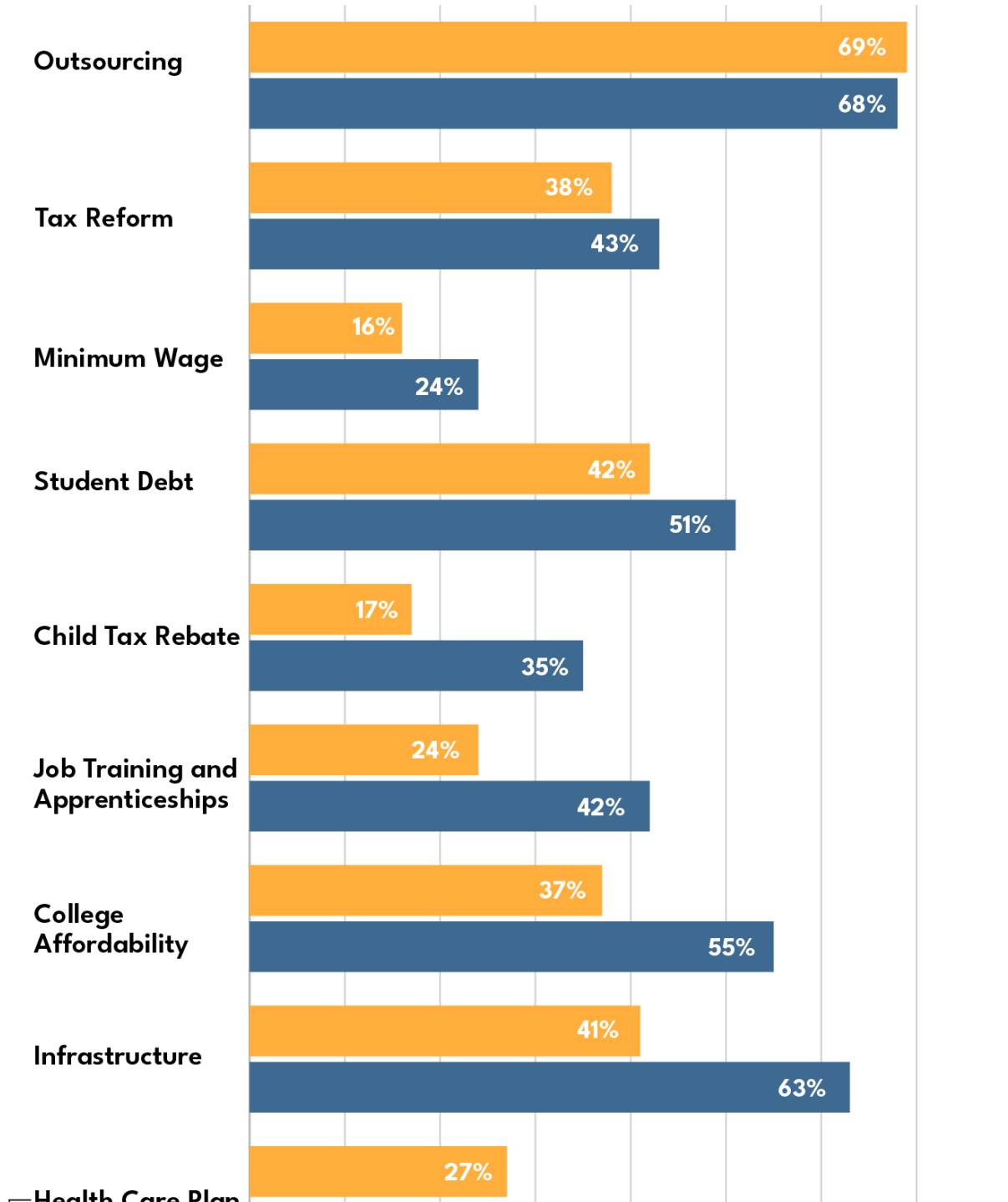
The survey evaluated this message framing approach by including a split-sample experiment where several Democratic policy proposals were presented in two ways. One split used middle- and working-class framing and elevated core economic values like hard work, creating opportunity, fairness, and entrepreneurialism. The other split used message framing that focused more on the most vulnerable communities. The metric we used to evaluate these messages was how well they communicated support for working- and middle-class communities (since this is how an overwhelming majority of voters identify themselves).

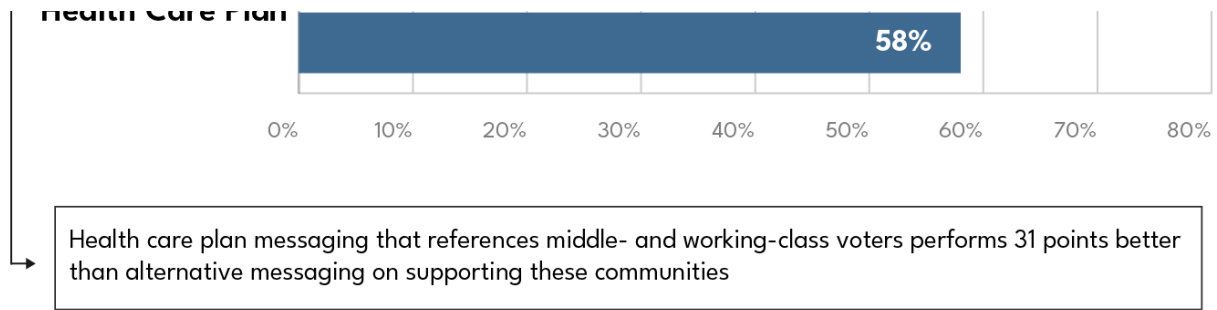
The results of this message testing were striking. Messages that referenced working- and middle-class communities and the highlighted economic values scored, on average, 14 points better than alternative messages on helping the working and middle class. Respondents were also questioned before and after the message testing on who benefits from Democrats' overall policy agenda. Among the split that saw the middle- and working-class message framing, the share saying the working and middle class benefit most increased 10 points from 40% before the message testing to 50% afterward.

Messages that Reference Middle- and Working-Class Voters and Key Economic Values Connect with These Communities

Q: Would [proposal] help the middle and working class the most?

 Most vulnerable message framing  Middle- and working-class message framing





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When a Democratic health care proposal is framed around helping “low-income families,” a plurality at 44% say that it most helps the poor to 27% who say it benefits the working and middle class. But sentiments shift when the framing is tweaked to reference “working families,” and 58% indicate that the working and middle class would benefit most. On Democratic priorities like infrastructure, framing a message around putting people to work and supporting businesses dramatically outperforms an alternative message framing. The critical distinction in this message testing experiment is not policy goals—since both splits describe the same policies—it is the communities and values centered in the messages.

Most Vulnerable Message Framing	Middle- and Working-Class Message Framing
A plan to limit and cap out-of-pocket health care costs so low-income families can finally afford health care.	A plan to limit and cap out-of-pocket health care costs so working families can finally afford health care.



Nearly the entire American electorate identifies as working or middle class, so it is crucial to frame Democratic policies around these communities. The message testing experiment in this survey found that messages that explicitly reference the working and middle class and core economic values best signal support for these communities.

Conclusion

Progress by Democrats on narrowing the economic trust gap now and through November 2022 could make the difference between sustained majorities or a Republican wave election. This survey found that initial steps that Democrats can take include running as “Biden Democrats,” talking more about the economy and talking about it in a way that centers working- and middle-class voters. There should be an urgency to direct these efforts toward Latino and persuadable voters,

subgroups which are especially unsatisfied with Democrats on the economy. Black voters, while less negative, also rate the party lower on the economy than Democrats would hope. Democrats' task for the next 16 months isn't to overcome their economic trust gap; it's simply to not plunge into it.

Appendix

Message Testing Appendix

Issue	Message Framing	Message	Would help the working and middle class most
Child tax rebate	Most vulnerable	A child tax rebate of \$300 per month that will cut child poverty in half.	17%
	Middle and working class	A child tax rebate of \$300 per month to help working parents afford the cost of raising a child.	35%
Health care plan	Most vulnerable	A plan to limit and cap out-of-pocket health care costs so low-income families can finally afford health care.	27%
	Middle and working class	A plan to limit and cap out-of-pocket health care costs so working families can finally afford health care.	58%
Tax reform	Most vulnerable	Raise taxes on big businesses and the rich, because they should start paying their fair share.	38%
	Middle and working class	Raise taxes on big business and the rich, because they can afford to help us invest in better education, infrastructure, and health care.	43%
Student debt	Most vulnerable	Forgive up to ten thousand dollars in student debt to help people trapped in poverty by college debt.	42%
	Middle and working class	Forgive up to ten thousand dollars in student debt to help working young people buy homes and get loans to start new businesses.	51%
Minimum wage	Most vulnerable	Increase the minimum wage to cut poverty.	16%
	Middle and working class	Increase the minimum wage so no one has to work two jobs just to make ends meet.	24%
College affordability	Most vulnerable	Make four-year college cheap enough so that everyone can afford a degree.	37%
	Middle and	Make four-year college cheap	

	working class	enough that students can afford to work part-time and pay all their bills.	55%
Job training and apprenticeships	Most vulnerable	Increase job training programs and apprenticeships to help the poor who are trapped in low-wage jobs.	24%
	Middle and working class	Increase job training programs and apprenticeships so that people who are willing to work hard can get the skills to get a raise or a good-paying job.	42%
Infrastructure	Most vulnerable	Rebuild our infrastructure, so that we can take on climate change and help struggling communities most affected by it.	41%
	Middle and working class	Rebuild our infrastructure to put people to work and make American businesses more competitive.	63%
Outsourcing	Most vulnerable	Bring manufacturing supply chains back to America to stop corporate outsourcers from profiting off sending blue-collar jobs overseas.	69%
	Middle and working class	Bring manufacturing supply chains back to America to create more good-paying jobs for Americans who want to work hard.	68%

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Methodology

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