

Taking on Trump: It's the Economy and COVID-19, Stupid



Third Way



David Binder Research

Donald Trump is trailing in the suburbs, and as a result, he is losing this election right now. In Third Way's latest battleground suburbs survey with David Binder Research, Joe Biden leads Trump by a 46–30% margin (55–39% including leaners). Biden leads in the suburbs with women by 26 points, 51 points with people of color, and 11 points with voters over 65. Trump leads with non-college whites in the suburbs by only two points.



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But what happens if the economy starts to recover?

To answer that question, this survey focused on voters' sentiments around the economy in the battleground suburbs that will decide the election at the top of the ticket on down and explored how Biden and Democrats can counter Trump's economic pitch. This inquiry required that we ask voters to assume signs of a recovery before Election Day (not a foregone conclusion). But we know that Trump is already using anecdotal evidence, like individual jobs reports, to claim the country is headed toward a recovery—and to attempt to take credit for it. So, no matter how real a recovery is before November, it is still crucial to be armed with messages for countering his narrative. We found:

- **Trump's most favorable terrain is on the economy alone—but only when it is decoupled from COVID-19.** His overall approval rating is just 39%, and it falls to 34% on handling the virus. But on the economy alone, it is comparatively strong at 48%.
- **Trump could be aided by voters' low expectations for the economy, as any gain may be seen as progress.** The share of voters who say the economy is "good" or "excellent" is 30%, and this share increases only three points to 33% when asked about their expectations for the economy by Election Day.
- **The debate over a recovery will be waged on the unemployment rate and what voters see in their community (incl. COVID-19).** Fifty-seven percent say unemployment is a top indicator of the economy when given a long list of possible metrics. But 54% also say they will look to what's going on in their community over government statistics.
- **Voters trust Biden over Trump on most individual economic priorities, but Trump is stronger on a handful of topics.** Biden leads on priorities that focus on supporting workers and the middle class, but his advantage narrows or reverses on longtime Trump focuses like standing up to China, rebuilding manufacturing, and creating jobs.
- **The top way to counter Trump on a recovery: he has shown he can't handle the virus.** Among Biden voters, 80% "strongly agree" with a message that the economy would be better today if Trump had taken the virus seriously from the start, and with persuadable voters, 52% "strongly agree." However, with messages that focus on only the economy (and didn't tie it to the virus), strongly agree numbers drop 20 points.

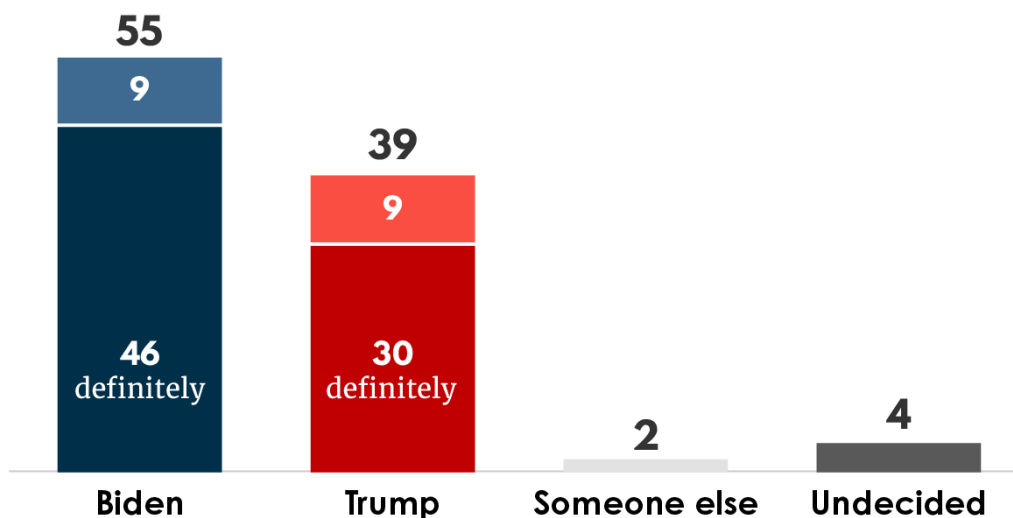
Trump's best shot back into the race is convincing suburban voters we are in, or he can lead us to, an economic recovery. But Biden and Democrats' best counter is that the economy can't get on the right track until we address COVID-19—and Trump has shown he can't handle the virus. Whoever sets the terms of the recovery debate will be best positioned to win it.

The State of the Race

Biden has a sizable lead with battleground suburban voters, and if he wins over persuadable voters, he could secure a decisive majority in the suburbs. Biden leads Trump by a 46–30% margin, and including those leaning toward a candidate, his lead is 55–39%.



Biden Can Secure a Decisive Suburban Majority



Source: Third Way/David Binder Research battleground suburbs survey, 1,200 likely voters, conducted online in English and Spanish using a survey panel from July 22–26, 2020.

Fourteen percent of suburban voters fall into a persuadable category for the Democratic Party. Persuadable is defined here as those who are undecided, lean toward Biden, or just recently came to support Biden. A plurality of these voters identify as Democrats (41%), nearly two in three are moderates (61%), and they are more likely to be millennials/Gen Zers (29%) and male (51%) than solid Biden voters.

The Landscape: The Economic Recovery Debate

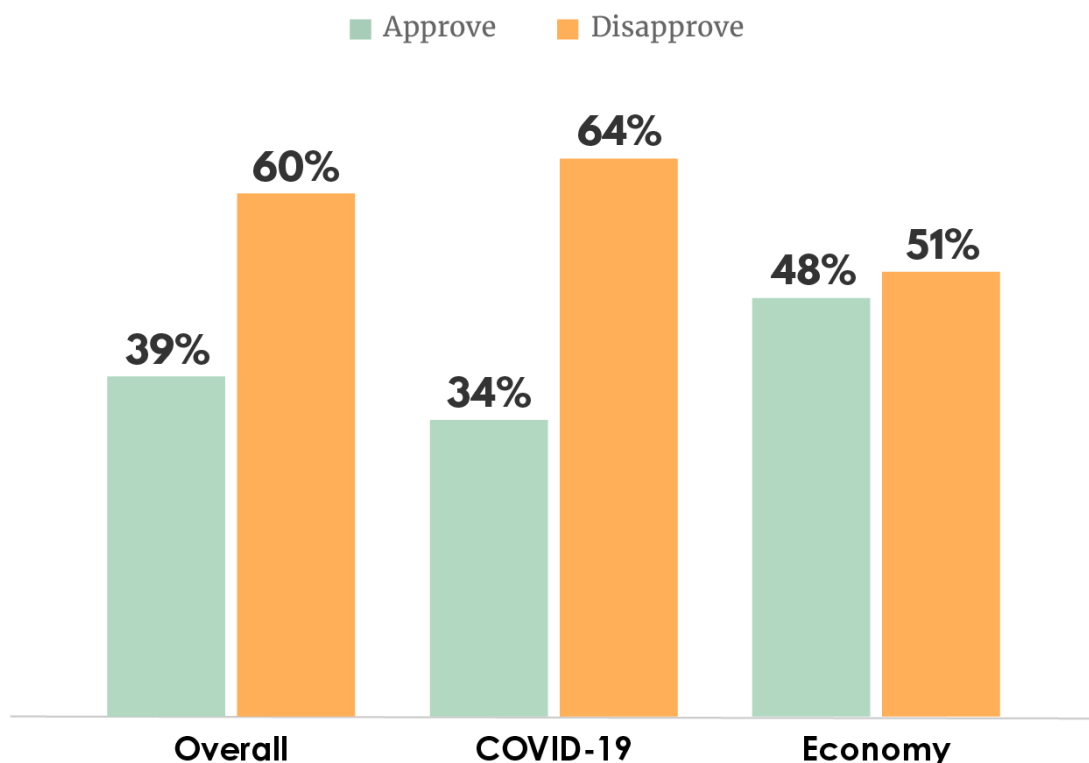
Before testing messages on countering Trump on an economic recovery, this survey explored voters' sentiments about the economy now and expectations for the near future, as well as how they're evaluating the economy's trajectory, and which candidate they trust more on economic priorities. This is the landscape upon which Trump and Biden will debate a recovery or early signs of one.

Trump benefits if a debate over economic recovery is decoupled from the COVID-19 crisis.

Trump is deeply unpopular in the battleground suburbs. Overall, his approval rating is 39%. But there is a divergence on his handling of the two issues that will decide this election: COVID-19 and the economy. On the virus, Trump's approval dips to 34%. But on the economy, his approval is stronger at 48%. It is clear that a recovery debate focused on the economy alone—decoupled from COVID-19—would be more beneficial for Trump. And it is equally clear that Democrats need to remind voters that getting the virus under control is inseparable from economic recovery and should never be talking about the latter without the former.



A Recovery Debate on the Economy Alone is Safer Ground for Trump



Source: Third Way/David Binder Research battleground suburbs survey, 1,200 likely voters, conducted online in English and Spanish using a survey panel from July 22–26, 2020.

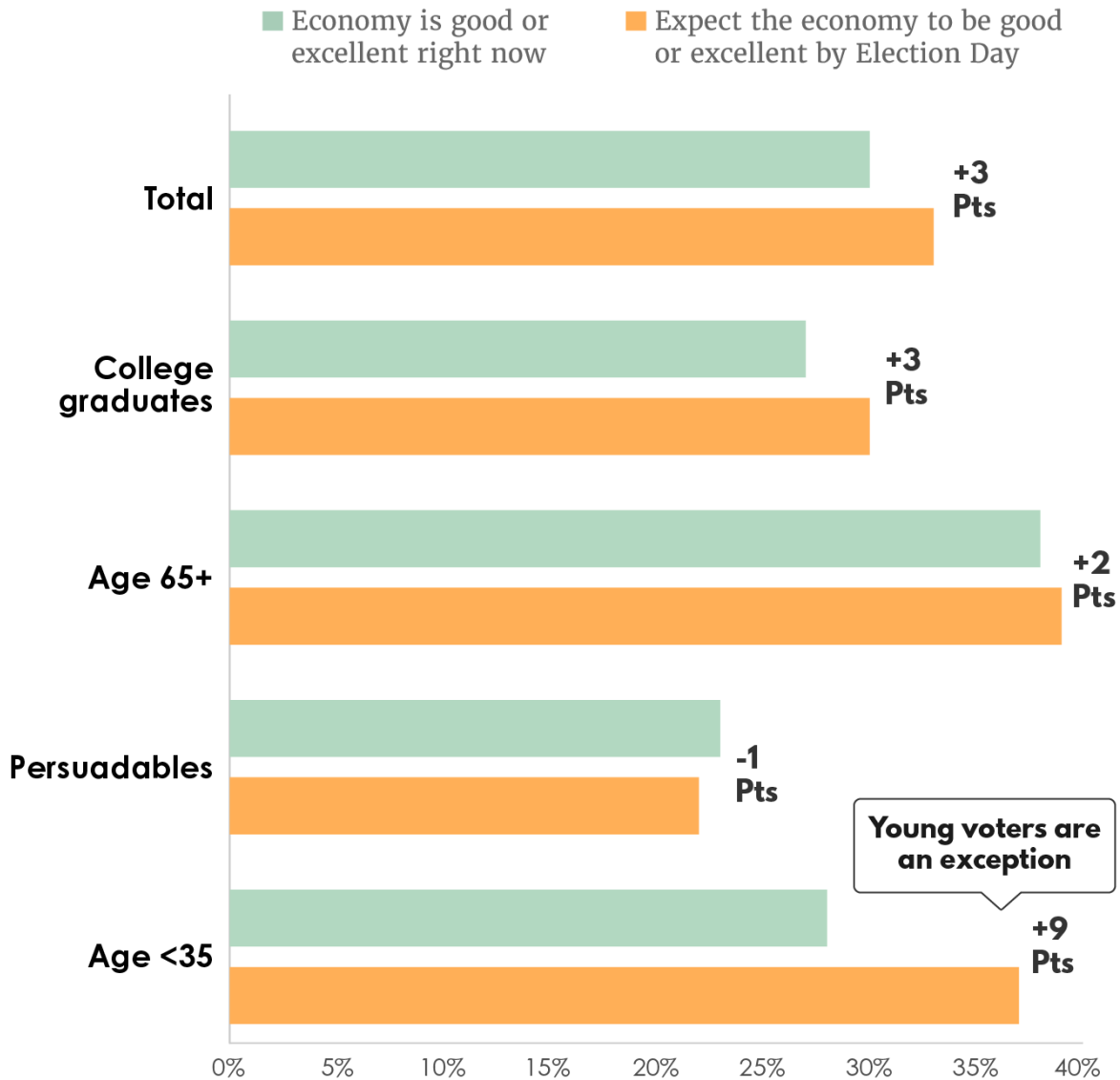
The trend of Trump's divergent approval ratings extends to key voter groups in the suburbs. His overall approval rating is 34% with women in the suburbs, 22% with voters of color, and 35% with college-educated whites. On COVID-19, his approval drops to 29% with women, 16% with voters of color, and 31% with college-educated whites. But on the economy, it rebounds to 42% with women, 25% with voters of color, and 48% with college-educated whites.

Trump could be helped by voters' low expectations for the economy through the election.

Suburban voters have a poor view of the economy today, and their expectations for the near future through Election Day are not much better. Thirty percent rate the economy as “excellent” or “good” right now, and come November, 33% expect it to be “excellent” or “good.” Voters’ low expectations could benefit Trump, as anecdotal or early signs of an economic recovery could be perceived as progress.

Voters with the lowest expectations for a recovery may be most impressed by marginal economic progress. The share of persuadable voters expecting the economy to become “excellent” or “good” between now and November actually shrinks by one point. This share increases two points among seniors and three points with college graduates. By contrast, those under 35 who say the economy will become “excellent” or “good” increases by nine points.

Few Expect the Economy to Improve Before Election Day



Source: Third Way/David Binder Research battleground suburbs survey, 1,200 likely voters, conducted online in English and Spanish using a survey panel from July 22–26, 2020.

Voters will judge a recovery on the unemployment rate and what they see in their community.

Suburban voters have a bifurcated framework for evaluating the economy and a potential recovery. A majority, at 57%, say that they look at the unemployment rate when evaluating the economy, followed by business openings/closings (39%), and economic growth statistics

(39%). But by a 54–41% margin, when asked to choose one or the other, voters say they prioritize personal reflections on their community over government statistics.

The Unemployment Rate is the Top Individual Indicator for the Economy

(Multiple response, up to three answers)

| | | |
|----|-----------------------------|----|
| 1 | Unemployment Statistics | 57 |
| 2 | Businesses Opening/Closing | 39 |
| 3 | Economic Growth Statistics | 39 |
| 4 | Dow/NASDAQ | 32 |
| 5 | Health Care Costs | 23 |
| 6 | Salary Statistics | 22 |
| 7 | Cost of Living | 16 |
| 8 | Account Balance | 14 |
| 9 | Stories from Family/Friends | 9 |
| 10 | Rent Prices | 7 |
| 11 | Help Wanted Signs | 5 |
| 12 | New Construction | 5 |

Source: Third Way/David Binder Research battleground suburbs survey, 1,200 likely voters, conducted online in English and Spanish using a survey panel from July 22–26, 2020.



An open-ended question on how voters evaluate the economy brought to the surface the importance of COVID-19. On personal reflection, voters indicated that they prioritize the state of the virus over measures related to making ends meet. This prioritization of COVID-19 is most pronounced with voters of color (18 points) and persuadable voters (11 points), and it remains but narrows with white voters (two points) and independents (one point).

Biden has the edge over Trump on most economic priorities, but Trump plays to his strengths.

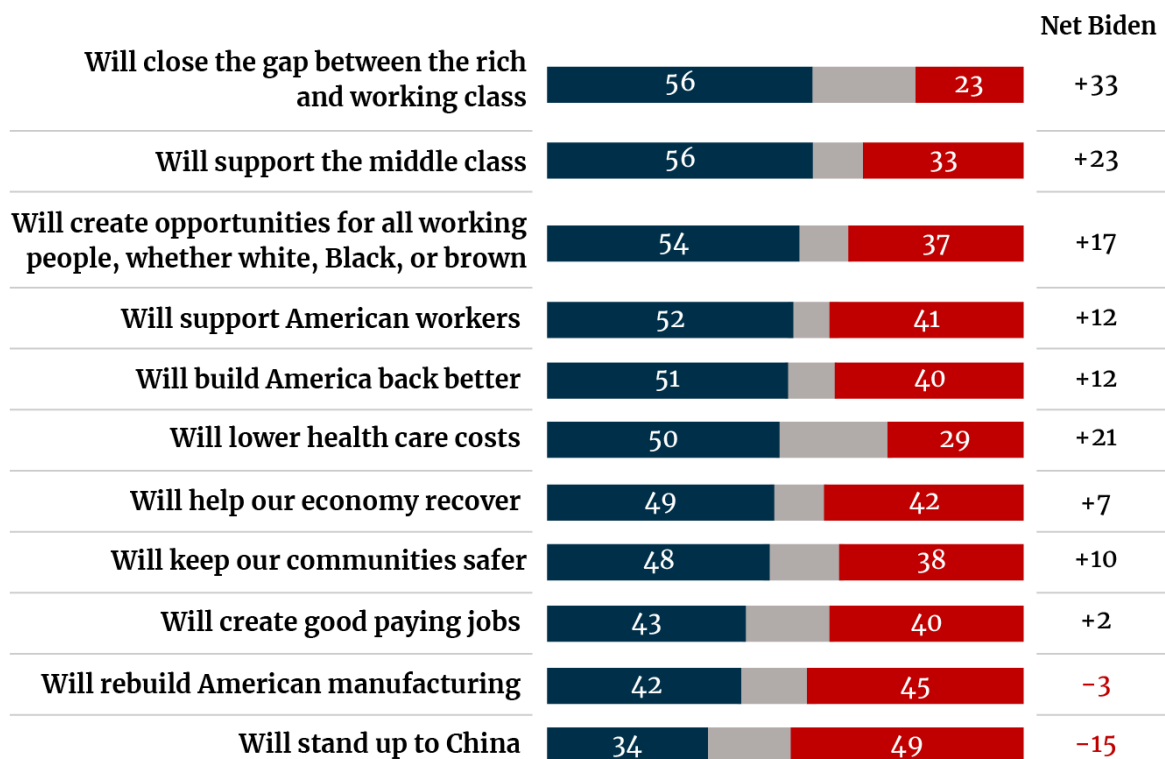
The battleground suburban voters in our sample were asked about a series of economic priorities and whether Biden or Trump would do a better job on each of them. Biden leads on nine of 11 priorities, with his largest margins on those related to supporting workers and the middle class. But his advantage disappears or reverses on longtime Trump focuses like

standing up to China, rebuilding manufacturing, and creating jobs. Biden may have an edge on many priorities in an economic debate, but Trump is clear on where his advantage lies—and he consistently drives the debate to those places.



Biden Leads On Most Economic Priorities, but Trump Drives the Debate to His Strengths

■ Biden ■ Don't Know ■ Trump



Source: Third Way/David Binder Research battleground suburbs survey, 1,200 likely voters, conducted online in English and Spanish using a survey panel from July 22–26, 2020.

Persuadable voters are even more inclined than all voters to believe that Biden will do a better job than Trump on most economic priorities. Their preference for Biden is most pronounced on supporting the middle class (63–12%) and creating opportunities for all working people, whether white, Black, or brown (62–14%). And he leads with persuadable suburban voters on who would help our economy recover by a 46–24% margin. But persuadable voters prefer Trump on China, while pluralities are unsure of who would be better for jobs and manufacturing.

All of these sentiments shape the economic landscape upon which Biden and Trump will debate a recovery this fall. The terrain is mixed for Biden and Democrats. They benefit from voters' focus on COVID-19 and preference for Biden on many economic priorities. But Trump's shot back into the race is attempting to focus the debate on the economy alone (decoupled from the virus) and capitalizing on voters' low expectations for a recovery. Whoever sets the terms of the debate over a recovery—if one is underway or emerging this fall—will have the advantage in it.

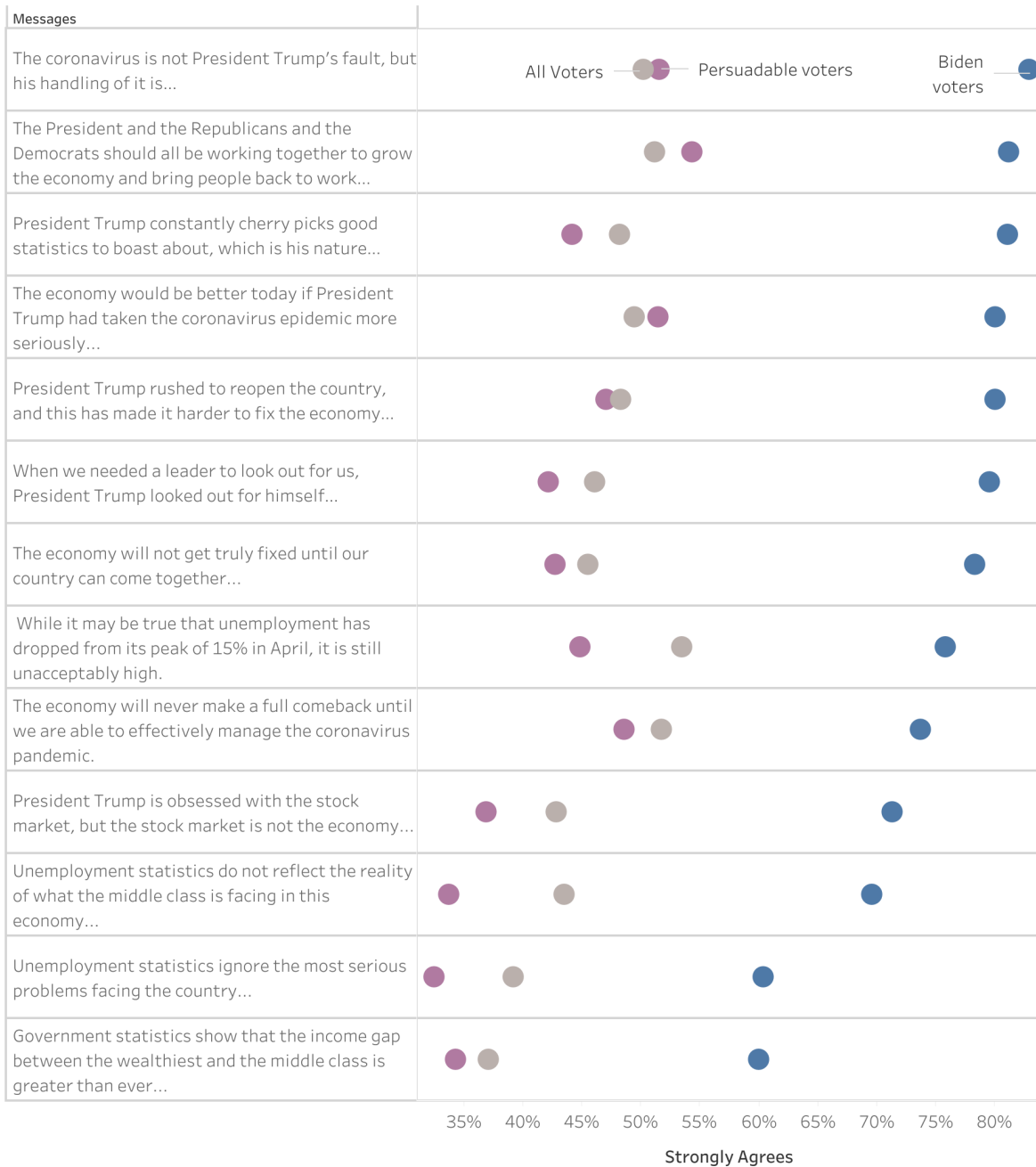
The Message: Countering Trump on a Recovery

There is no doubt that Trump will frame the country as in an economic recovery—no matter if it is real, emerging, or imagined—through Election Day. He's already doing it, despite double-digit unemployment. This survey presented suburban voters with hypothetical recovery scenarios and then tested a dozen messages that Biden and Democrats could deploy to counter Trump's narrative.

The central lesson from this message testing is that the best counter to Trump on a recovery is **that the economy can't get back on track until we get COVID-19 under control**. And he has shown he can't do it. Intuitively, this makes sense; Trump's approval rating on the virus (34%) is fourteen points lower than on the economy (48%), so linking the two makes an effective counterargument. And it fits with how voters are simultaneously experiencing the virus and the economic downturn. By contrast, messages on the economy alone are less effective for Democrats. Messages that remind suburban voters of the inextricable link between the economy and COVID-19 squarely place the recovery debate on the terrain in which Trump is most vulnerable.

Messages that counter Trump on the economy *and* the virus are persuasive with Biden voters and persuadable voters, but those on the economy alone are not as convincing. Eighty-three percent of Biden voters and 52% of persuadable voters “strongly agree” with a message that emphasizes Trump's failed handling of the virus and “going from an awful economy to a bad one now is nothing to celebrate.” Along with other virus-related messages, a message on Trump's failure to bring the parties together and lack of accountability is also compelling. But only 60% of Biden voters and 33% of persuadable voters “strongly agree” with an economy-only message on unemployment and other economic challenges. Simply put, countering Trump on an economic recovery with a message on the economy alone would be letting him off the hook.

Messages that link COVID-19 and the economy are best for countering Trump on a recovery



In addition to linking the response to COVID-19 and the state of the economy, the most persuasive messages countering Trump include one or more of the following themes: his failure to lead, the recklessness of his virus response, and his lack of accountability.

Across multiple rounds of our research this summer, suburban voters have referenced leadership as a key criterion in making their choice for president. Persuadable voters, especially, have criticized Trump for his **failure to lead** on a range of issues. The below

message, which 83% of Biden voters and 52% of persuadable voters “strongly agree” with, goes after Trump on his leadership by calling out his failure to act to contain COVID-19 at the beginning. Hammering Trump on his failure to lead—on the virus and hence on fixing the economy—is an effective counter.

The coronavirus is not President Trump’s fault, but his handling of it is. He failed to take steps at the beginning to contain the virus. Going from an awful economy to a bad one now is nothing to celebrate.



A related concern consistently raised by voters in the suburbs is Trump’s **recklessness**. While many perceive him as “decisive,” the flip side of this characteristic is the baked-in perception that he acts recklessly and without consulting experts. On this, 80% of Biden voters and 52% of persuadable voters “strongly agree” with a message that the economy would be better today if Trump had listened to health care experts. Messages that turn Trump’s “decisiveness” into a vulnerability by highlighting his recklessness hit home with suburban voters.

The economy would be better today if President Trump had taken the coronavirus epidemic more seriously from the start, and more consistently listened to the advice of health care experts.



Another point of frustration with suburban voters is Trump's general **lack of accountability**, but especially on the virus and the attendant economic downturn. As tens of millions of Americans experience personal and financial pain, Trump's lack of any level of accountability just exacerbates these emotions. Eighty-one percent of Biden voters and 54% of persuadable voters "strongly agree" with a message that Trump should be bringing the parties together to solve the crisis, but instead, he is just blaming others. Trump will never take responsibility for his failures, and so it is up to Biden and Democrats to hold him to account with these voters.

The President and the Republicans and the Democrats should all be working together to grow the economy and bring people back to work. **President Trump is always blaming others** and not helping to bring all sides together with a plan to bring back jobs and businesses.



This message guidance is not about debating the economy generally; it is centered on how to counter Trump on his claims of an economic recovery at this moment in history. And the lesson is clear: When Trump pounds the message that the economy is in a recovery (whether it is or not) and that he deserves credit, Biden and Democrats' best response is that the economy can't get on track until we get this virus under control—which Trump has proven himself incapable of doing. This fits with suburban voters' perception of the crisis, and their perception of the failures of this president.

Conclusion

Whether grounded in reality or not, Trump will continue to make the case that he has spurred an economic recovery up through Election Day. And he has good reason to pursue this strategy as his only hope back into contention in this race. Suburban voters have a more favorable opinion of him on the economy than on other issues, and their low expectations for a recovery mean that any improvement could be seen as progress. But Democrats and Biden have an airtight counterpoint that capitalizes on what those voters already know and believe: that the economy can't get back on track until we contain this virus. These messages are persuasive with Biden voters, as well as with the persuadable voters Biden needs to win a decisive suburban majority. If Democrats and Biden can define the terms of this debate, Trump's campaign will have no path to recovery.

Appendix

Messages that address the economy and COVID-19 perform better than those focused on the economy alone

■ High % strongly ■ Medium % strongly agree ■ Low % strongly agree

| Messages | All Suburban Voters | Persuadable Voters | Biden Voters | Women | People of Color | College-educated Whites |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|--------------|-------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| While it may be true that unemployment has dropped from its peak of 15% in April, it is still unacceptably high. | 53% | 45% | 76% | 56% | 59% | 57% |
| Unemployment statistics do not reflect the reality of what the middle class is facing in this economy. Unemployment may be coming down from its record high, but a lot of people are still unemployed and even if they have a job, it often doesn't pay enough. | 43% | 34% | 70% | 49% | 54% | 45% |
| Unemployment statistics ignore the most serious problems facing the country, such as the high cost of health care and education, and the fact that salaries are not increasing as much as the cost of living. | 39% | 33% | 60% | 45% | 43% | 40% |
| President Trump constantly cherry picks good statistics to boast about, which is his nature. But the fact is, the American economy is in trouble and many working class American families are struggling, despite what the President says. | 48% | 44% | 81% | 54% | 56% | 51% |
| Government statistics show that the income gap between the wealthiest and the middle class is greater than ever. The economy will not work until the wages of workers begins to grow at the same pace as the wages of the top 1%. | 37% | 34% | 60% | 41% | 43% | 38% |
| The President and the Republicans and the Democrats should all be working together to grow the economy and bring people back to work. President Trump is always blaming others and not helping to bring all sides together with a plan to bring back jobs and businesses. | 51% | 54% | 81% | 56% | 55% | 55% |
| The economy will never make a full comeback until we are able to effectively manage the coronavirus pandemic. | 52% | 49% | 74% | 55% | 54% | 55% |
| The economy would be better today if President Trump had taken the coronavirus epidemic more seriously from the start, and more consistently listened to the advice of health care experts. | 49% | 52% | 80% | 55% | 57% | 54% |
| The economy will not get truly fixed until our country can come together. But President Trump is using the unrest and pandemic to divide Americans rather than unite us. | 46% | 43% | 78% | 50% | 55% | 49% |
| When we needed a leader to look out for us, President Trump looked out for himself. He slowed down testing to help his re-election, and now we're having to shut the economy down again just as some businesses were opening. | 46% | 42% | 80% | 51% | 58% | 51% |
| The coronavirus is not President Trump's fault, but his handling of it is. He failed to take steps at the beginning to contain the virus. Going from an awful economy to a bad one now is nothing to celebrate. | 50% | 52% | 83% | 55% | 60% | 54% |
| President Trump is obsessed with the stock market, but the stock market is not the economy. The president should care more about creating jobs on Main Street than big profits for Wall Street. | 43% | 37% | 71% | 48% | 60% | 43% |
| President Trump rushed to reopen the country, and this has made it harder to fix the economy. Other countries are getting back to normal because they contained the virus, but we keep losing ground because we reopened without a plan. | 48% | 47% | 80% | 53% | 60% | 51% |

Source: Third Way/David Binder Research battleground suburbs survey, 1,200 likely voters, conducted online in English and Spanish using a survey panel from July 22–26, 2020.

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Methodology

Third Way and David Binder Research partnered to conduct a survey of 1,200 suburban 2020 likely voters in Arizona, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. This gave a margin of error of 2.8% on the full sample. Suburbs were defined using a zip-code level classification compiled by the Department of Education. The survey was conducted online using a panel matched to vote history, in English and Spanish, from July 22 to 26, 2020.