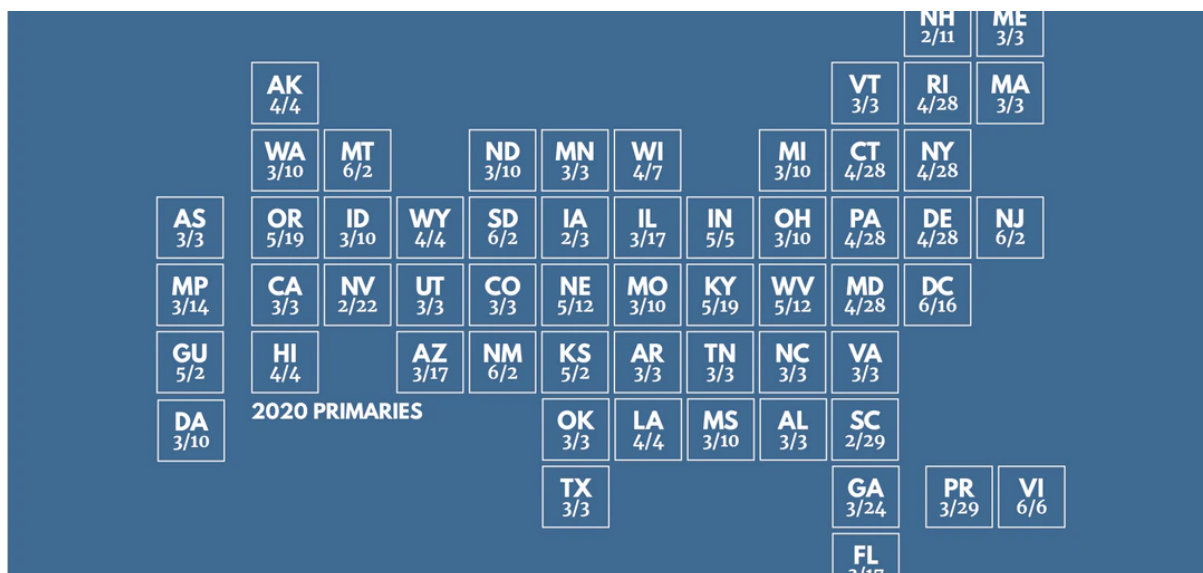


The Question of “Electability”



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There is an underlying tension shaping the Democratic presidential primary. Ninety-seven percent of Democratic primary voters say it is extremely or very important to beat Donald Trump, but less than half think it is extremely or very likely that we will do so. The effect of this divergence is that these voters are extremely anxious and laser-focused on one criterion for the field of Democratic candidates: who is best positioned to beat Trump in 2020?

Perceptions of who can beat Trump are often summarized in the term *electability*. A formal definition of electability could be *the inherent and adoptable candidate characteristics perceived as necessary for being elected to office*. The word “perceived” is key in that description. A candidate’s “electability” is subjective; it is not fact-based. Some have also argued that perceptions of electability are driven by who has been elected before, and specifically, that female candidates’ gender undercuts their perceived electability in the minds of many voters. At least one recent [public analysis](#) found that female candidates’ gender does indeed negatively affect their perceived electability. Yet even if it isn’t fair or advisable, the fact remains that many primary voters are considering

electability as they decide which candidate to support, so it seems important to better understand what they are thinking about as they ponder it.

We undertook a deep research project to do just that. In it, we tested how adoptable characteristics like qualities or ideology affect perceived electability. While perceptions of electability will undoubtedly be colored by inherent characteristics like race and gender, we focused on adoptable characteristics because candidates actually have agency to amplify them in a way that can improve their perceived electability. We partnered with the firm Avalanche Strategy on a mixed methods “listening survey” to gain a more complex understanding than is possible to get through a focus group or traditional poll. This survey presented open- and closed-ended questions to a representative sample, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, and then responses were run through a natural language processing system to identify respondents’ priorities, values, and emotions to better understand how they are analyzing which candidates could beat Trump.

The findings show that voters believe four categories of adoptable characteristics shape electability: qualities (e.g., integrity), actions (e.g., uniting), issues (e.g., health care), and ideology (e.g., progressive). From this typology, voters say candidates’ actions and qualities are two and three times more important to electability than issue priorities, and compared to ideology, actions and qualities are five and 10 times more important. But ultimately, candidates will need to amplify all four categories and strike a balance between them or risk falling flat in a dynamic 2020 primary field.

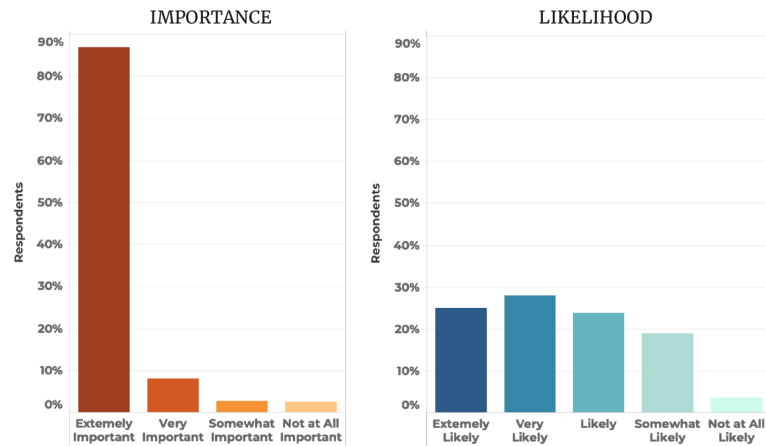
The Tension Amplifying Electability in 2020

The notion of electability is driving many Democratic primary voters’ decision-making because beating Trump is of utmost importance to them, but they also have real uncertainty that it will happen in 2020. The listening survey showed that 97%

of primary voters believe it is extremely or very important to beat Trump—but just half think it is extremely or very likely that Democrats will do so.



Divide between Importance & Likelihood that Democrats Win in 2020

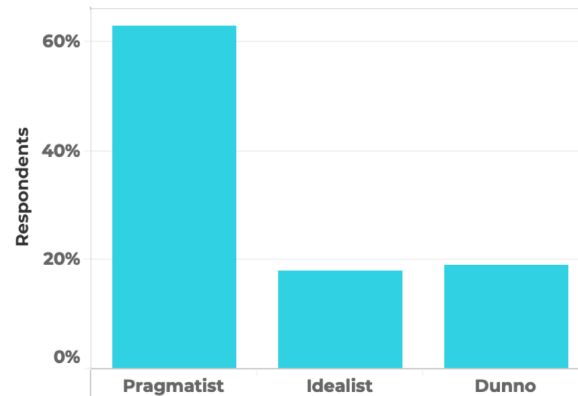


Source: Third Way / Avalanche Strategy national 2020 Democratic primary survey, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, conducted online May 2019.

This tension, and the deep anxiety it is creating, is causing many Democrats to say they'll support whichever candidate they think is the strongest general election matchup against Trump. In addition to open-ended questions around this topic, we also gave respondents a simple choice as to who they'd prefer as the Democratic nominee: a candidate they agree with on most issues but who would have a hard time beating Trump (the Idealist) or one they do NOT agree with on most issues but who would be stronger against Trump (the Pragmatist). Sixty-three percent of primary voters preferred the Pragmatist over the Idealist in that head to head.

Democrats Want a Candidate Who Can Win

“Which would you prefer: a candidate you agree with on most issues but would have a hard time beating Donald Trump, or a Democrat you do NOT agree with on most issues but would be a stronger candidate against Donald Trump?”



Source: Third Way / Avalanche Strategy national 2020 Democratic primary survey, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, conducted online May 2019.

The tension between Democrats’ urgency to beat Trump and their uncertainty that it will happen is *why* electability is driving the primary process. But *how* Democrats conceive of electability – specifically as it relates to the adoptable characteristics that they think make a candidate electable – is more complicated.

What Makes a Candidate “Electable”?

Nearly all of the seemingly countless Democratic presidential candidates and their campaigns are straining to present themselves as the most electable choice against Trump. Candidates are limited in what they can do to change perceptions rooted in their inherent characteristics, but it is possible for them to change their perceived electability by amplifying certain adoptable qualities or taking certain actions.

To understand how voters conceive of adoptable characteristics, and which ones they identify with electability, the primary voters in our research answered a series of open- and closed-ended questions about which characteristics were most important to beating Trump. The results show that

voters think of adoptable characteristics as falling into one of four categories: **qualities**, attributes like integrity or strength; **actions**, like uniting or fighting; **issues**, such as health care or climate; and **ideology**, such as moderate or progressive. And the degree to which candidates display some of these adoptable characteristics has a direct impact on how electable voters consider them.

But not all adoptable characteristics are created equal when it comes to perceived electability; the research shows a clear hierarchy. By far, voters believe that candidate qualities have the greatest impact on electability: 62% say they are most important to beating Trump. In second place, 30% indicate that candidates' actions are most important to beating Trump. There is a significant drop off in the share indicating that issues or ideology are crucial to winning. Just 19% pick issues, while only six percent believe that ideology is what sets up a candidate to beat Trump. (some people mentioned more than one in their open-ended responses, so the numbers don't add up to 100%.)



Candidate Qualities are Key to Perceived Electability

"What SPECIFICALLY do you think is the most important CHARACTERISTIC or ATTRIBUTE for a Democratic nominee to beat TRUMP?"



Source: Third Way / Avalanche Strategy national 2020 Democratic primary survey, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, conducted online May 2019.

Within these broad categories of adoptable characteristics, there are specific characteristics or attributes that project electability to voters. By exhibiting these characteristics—in

isolation or ideally in combination—candidates could potentially bolster their perceived electability in this moment when primary voters are frantically trying to ascertain their best bet to beat Trump.

Qualities are the Key

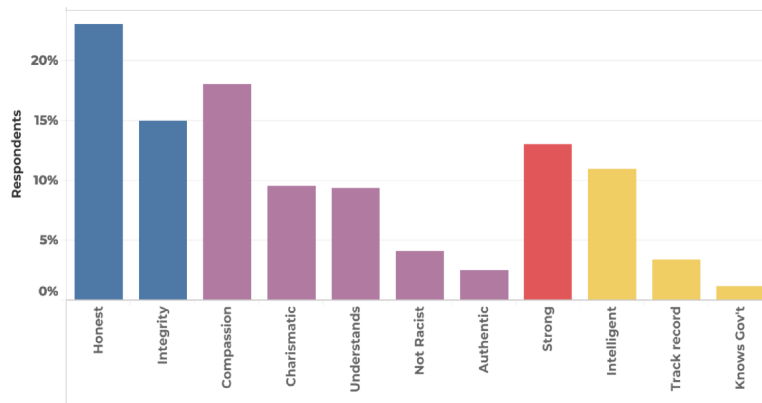
Six in 10 of Democratic primary voters say that candidate qualities are the most important factor when it comes to beating Trump. Voters believe a leader who reflects the best of this country sets up the most poignant contrast with Trump, a president who has degraded or abandoned many of our values.

By tapping into the listening survey's open-ended questions, we're able to identify which qualities are associated with electability. A cluster analysis identified four qualities as truly important to a candidate's perceived ability to beat Trump. Democratic primary voters say a candidate should be **upstanding**, which is displayed through honesty and integrity. They should be **kind**, with voters most frequently citing compassion as the main driver. They should be **strong**, which is typically referenced in combination with other qualities (e.g., compassionate but strong). And they should be **competent**. Across these clusters, the specific words most frequently cited include honesty, compassion, strength, and intelligence.

Qualities Primary Voters Believe a Candidate Needs to Win

The 62% of responses describing a personal quality as the characteristic to beat Trump cluster into four themes:

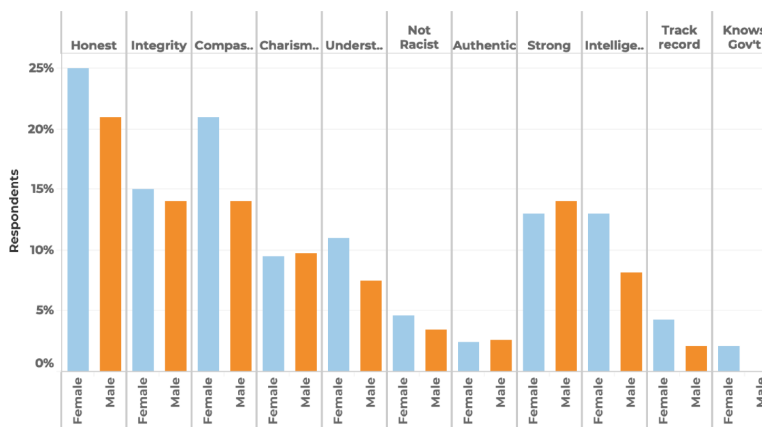
Upstanding Kind Strength Competent



Source: Third Way / Avalanche Strategy national 2020 Democratic primary survey, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, conducted online May 2019.

Men and women both associate candidate qualities with perceived electability, but women are even *more likely* to do so than men. And there are differences by gender on which qualities are most important to enable a candidate to beat Trump. Women are considerably more likely than men to emphasize honesty, compassion, and intelligence, while men are more likely to say strength and charisma than women.

Qualities that Drive Electability by Gender



Source: Third Way / Avalanche Strategy national 2020 Democratic primary survey, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, conducted online May 2019.

Actions Speak Loudly

Thirty percent of Democratic primary voters say that candidates' actions are the most important way they'll know if he or she can beat Trump. This importance placed on actions dovetails with another recent set of research we conducted that showed that Democratic primary voters prioritize action on urgent problems over efforts to move the debate or shift the "Overton Window."

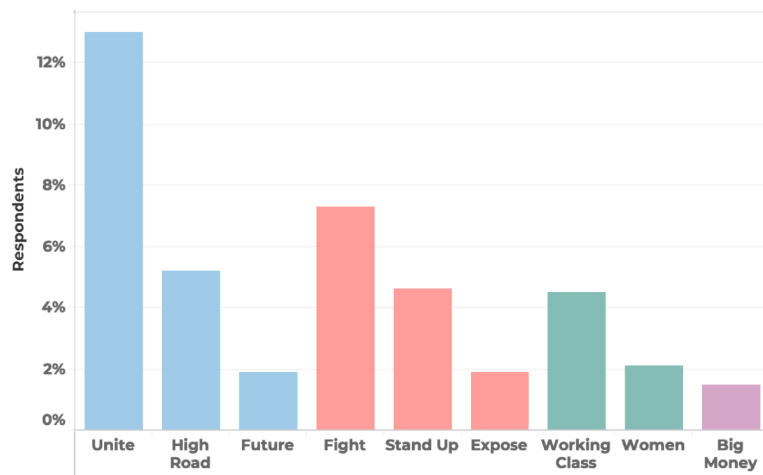
A cluster analysis of open-ended responses found that four sets of actions are essential to perceived electability. First, primary voters most frequently cite actions that signal **rising above**, such as uniting or taking the high road. Second, they prioritize **fighting** back or standing up to adversaries. These parallel priorities of wanting a candidate who can unite *and* fight back when necessary is a theme we found across this research. Next, they want someone who can **appeal to certain constituencies** like women and the working class. Finally, they want someone who will **refuse big money**. The most frequently cited specific actions are a somewhat contradictory mix including uniting, fighting, taking the high road, and standing up to Trump.



Actions Primary Voters Believe a Candidate Needs to Take to Win

The 30% of responses describing an action as the most important CHARACTERISTIC or ATTRIBUTE to beat Trump, cluster four ways:

Rise Above Flight Appeals to constituencies Refusing big money

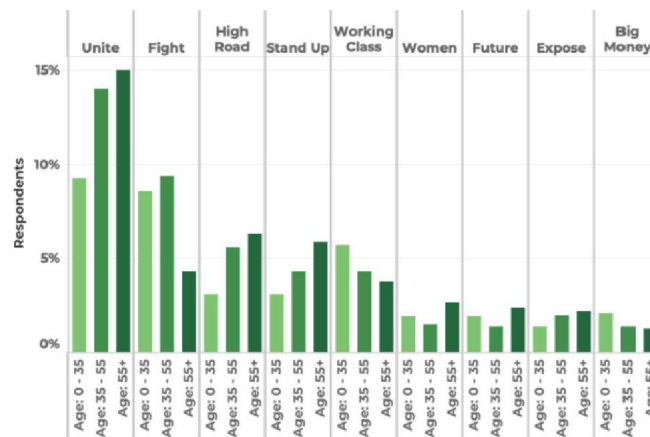


Source: Third Way / Avalanche Strategy national 2020 Democratic primary survey, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, conducted online May 2019.

Some differences in perception of these actions do emerge when responses are broken down by age. Older voters, especially those over 55, are more likely to identify uniting, high road, and standing up to Trump as key to winning. By contrast, younger voters are more likely to cite fighting, appealing to the working class, and refusing big money. It is noteworthy that older voters gravitate toward standing up to Trump while younger voters prefer a fighter. This tension suggests that Democrats are continuing to grapple with just how aggressive a posture they want the nominee to take in order to beat Trump in the general election.



Actions that Drive Electability by Age



Source: Third Way / Avalanche Strategy national 2020 Democratic primary survey, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, conducted online May 2019.

Issues are Secondary

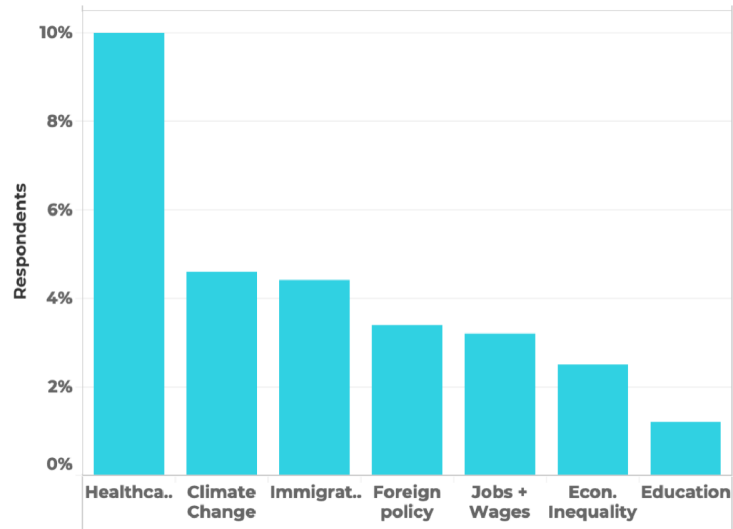
Just 19% of Democratic primary voters say candidates' issue positions or priorities are the most important factor when it comes to whether they can beat Trump. Put another way, more than three times as many voters pick candidate qualities over issues as key to electability.

Those primary voters who do believe issues are key to winning in 2020 mention **health care** at about twice the rate of any other issue. After health care, **climate change** and **immigration** make up the second tier of issues, followed by **foreign policy** and **jobs/wages**, with **economic inequality** and **education** trailing behind. There was a long list of issues that came up infrequently that is not featured in the chart below,

which shows just how diffuse voters' priorities are outside the top few issues—particularly health care.



Issues Primary Voters Believe a Candidate Needs to Focus on to Win



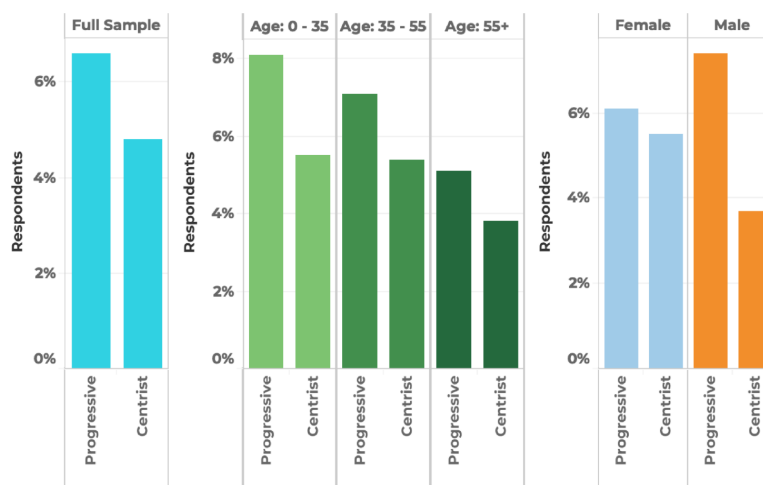
Source: Third Way / Avalanche Strategy national 2020 Democratic primary survey, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, conducted online May 2019.

Ideology isn't Primary

Perhaps the most surprising finding in the research is that while much of the conversation inside the beltway is focused on it, just six percent of primary voters believe that electability is about ideology.

The small sliver of voters who do believe ideology is the key to beating Trump are slightly more likely to support a progressive electoral path over a centrist one (although all of these numbers are small—just over six percent of the sample say the former, while just under five percent say the latter). Young voters and men are more likely than women and older voters to believe a progressive ideology improves electability.

Ideology & Electability by Age and Gender



Source: Third Way / Avalanche Strategy national 2020 Democratic primary survey, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, conducted online May 2019.

Compared to the numbers on qualities and actions, these are all tiny slices of the primary electorate. The bottom line is that Democratic primary voters generally don't believe that ideology will be the key to beating Trump in 2020.

The Right Combination to Up Perceived Electability

The analysis above shows that candidates for president have an opportunity. They can take concrete steps to improve their perceived electability by amplifying adoptable characteristics like qualities or actions. But efforts by candidates to amplify just one particular characteristic may not work in isolation. Primary voters want to see a combination of these characteristics in concert.

To explain, take the matrix chart below. If a candidate worked tirelessly to amplify qualities like integrity but did little to emphasize action, such as standing up to adversaries, they could come off as a **Wimpy Puritan**. Voters may be skeptical that such a person would have the backbone to stand up to Trump when it comes time in the general election. A candidate who has an ideological vision but lacks substance on the issues needed to offer an actual plan might be perceived as an unelectable **Dreamer**. Such a candidate would

be vulnerable to attacks that they are living in the clouds and have no plan to get things done. And the **Professor** could be just the opposite, offering all the ideas in the world but no broader vision. And primary voters could worry that a professorial candidate would struggle to respond at scale against Trump's horrifying but expansive vision for the country. Finally, a **Brawler** candidate could be one who knows how to get in the mud and fight but lacks the personal qualities Americans look for in their leader. A brawler may come off as a Democratic version of Trump, a caricature that is unlikely to inspire voters.



The Electability Matrix

	Qualities	Ideology	Issues	Actions
The Wimpy Puritan: A righteous candidate that can't throw a punch	✓			✗
The Dreamer: A candidate with lofty vision but no clear plan		✓	✗	
The Professor: A candidate with lots of policy but unable to connect and inspire		✗	✓	
The Brawler: A candidate that can fight in the mud but lacks personal integrity	✗			✓
The Nominee: The nominee will check all four boxes to some degree	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: Third Way / Avalanche Strategy national 2020 Democratic primary survey, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, conducted online May 2019.

The candidate who is best able to amplify the right combination of these adoptable characteristics and generate the perception that they are best situated to beat Trump is likely to be the Democratic nominee in 2020. The nominee doesn't have to be the highest ranked across all four of the categories, but they do have to weave together a perception that to some extent checks all four boxes.

Conclusion

The tension between Democratic primary voters' deep desire to beat Trump and the uncertainty they have that it will happen has made electability a key input in voters' decision-making for 2020. While candidates cannot change how inherent characteristics like age, race, or gender affect their

perceived electability, there are other adoptable characteristics that contribute to perceptions of electability. Ultimately, the candidate who can persuade most primary voters they are the best situated to defeat Trump in the general election is likely to be the nominee – and that will require amplifying all four adoptable characteristics in a way that is authentic to who they are as a candidate seeking the highest office in the land.

Third Way / Avalanche Strategy national 2020 Democratic primary survey, 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters, conducted online May 2019.