

Theories About the 2024 Election: What They Say, What Can We Learn?

January 2025

Overview

This brief presentation attempts to summarize a range of theories that have sought to explain the outcome of the 2024 election. It does not favor any theory or capture which view has gained the most acceptance, and it may miss some theories though we intend to continue to try and capture points of view going forward.

The material's purpose is to offer readers a way to see in one place a fuller range of theories, some admittedly with common themes but different labels and some we don't agree with, consider how the theories may relate and overlap, and suggest ways in which the nation may react going forward.

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I. Setting the Scene: Some relevant data from before and after the 2024 election

II. Theories: Ranging from economics to party brand to candidates to strategy, issues, and timing

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The background features three identical white, arched niches or alcoves set into a light blue wall. Each niche has a flat, white rectangular base. The arches are simple, rounded, and have a subtle shadow effect, giving them a three-dimensional appearance. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

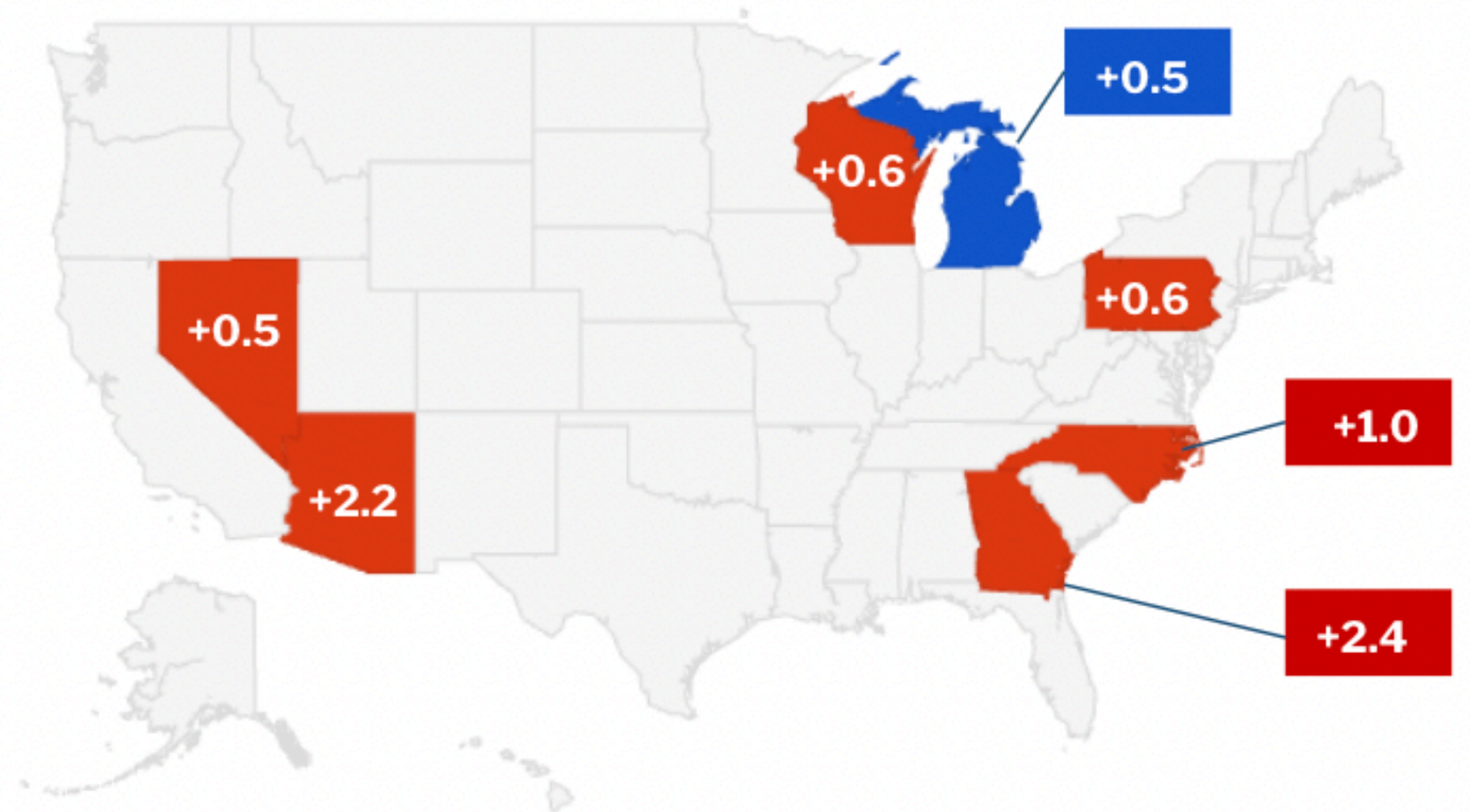
I. Setting the Scene

Polling Predicted a Tight Race, Hinging on Key Swing States

There were seven swing states in the 2024 presidential election:

- 1 Nevada
- 2 Arizona
- 3 North Carolina
- 4 Georgia
- 5 Pennsylvania
- 6 Wisconsin
- 7 Michigan

Aggregated Pre-Election Percentage Lead of Harris/Trump in Presidential Election Battleground States

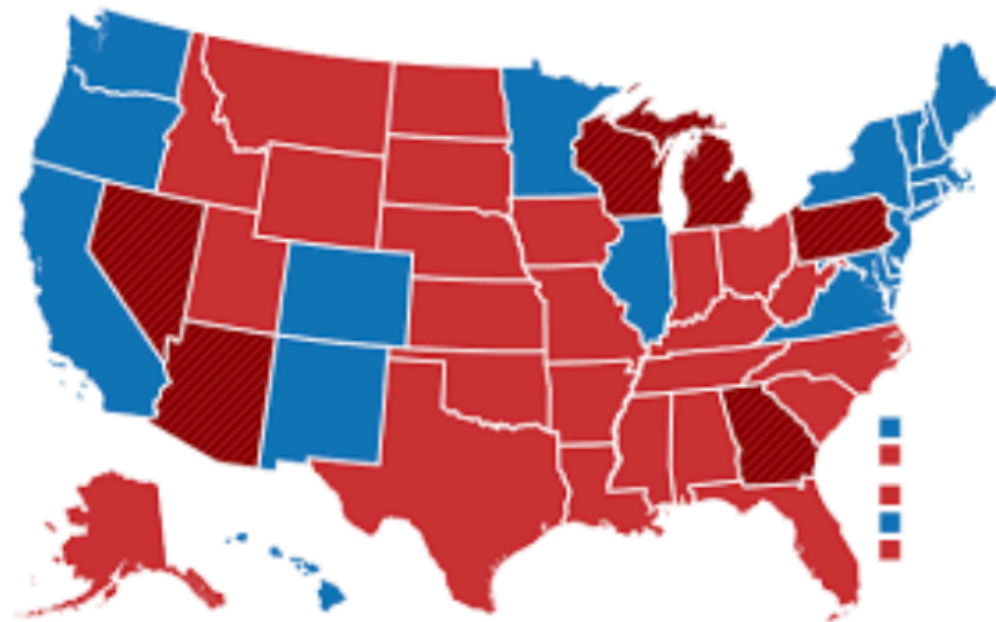


Source: [Real Clear Politics](#)

Outcome of 2024 Election: Republican Victories

Republicans won full control of Congress and the White House, securing a “trifecta” government. In the presidential race, Trump won all seven swing states.

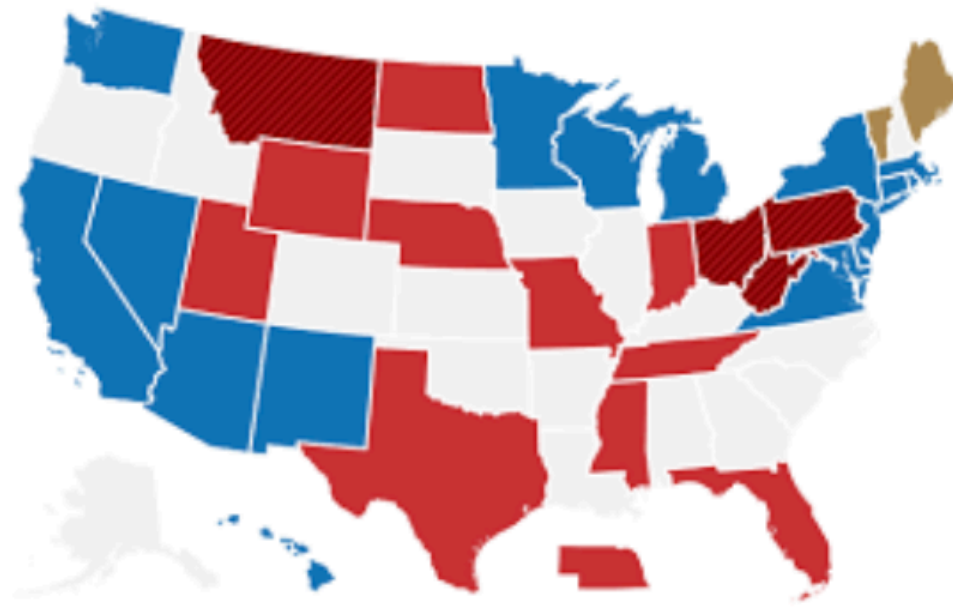
White House



Harris: 226

Trump: 312

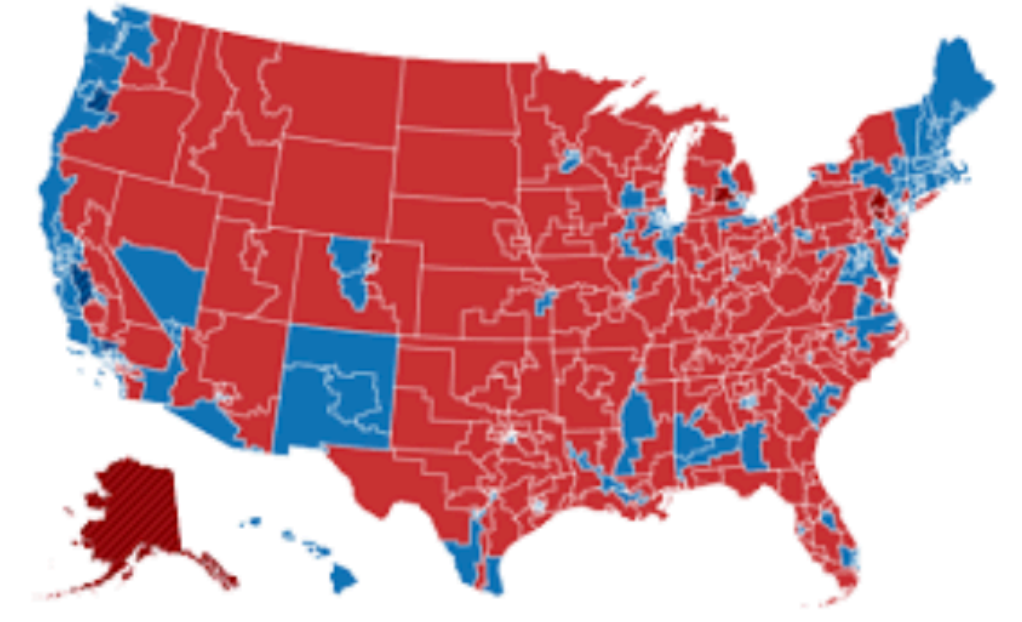
Senate



Democrat: 47

Republican: 53

House



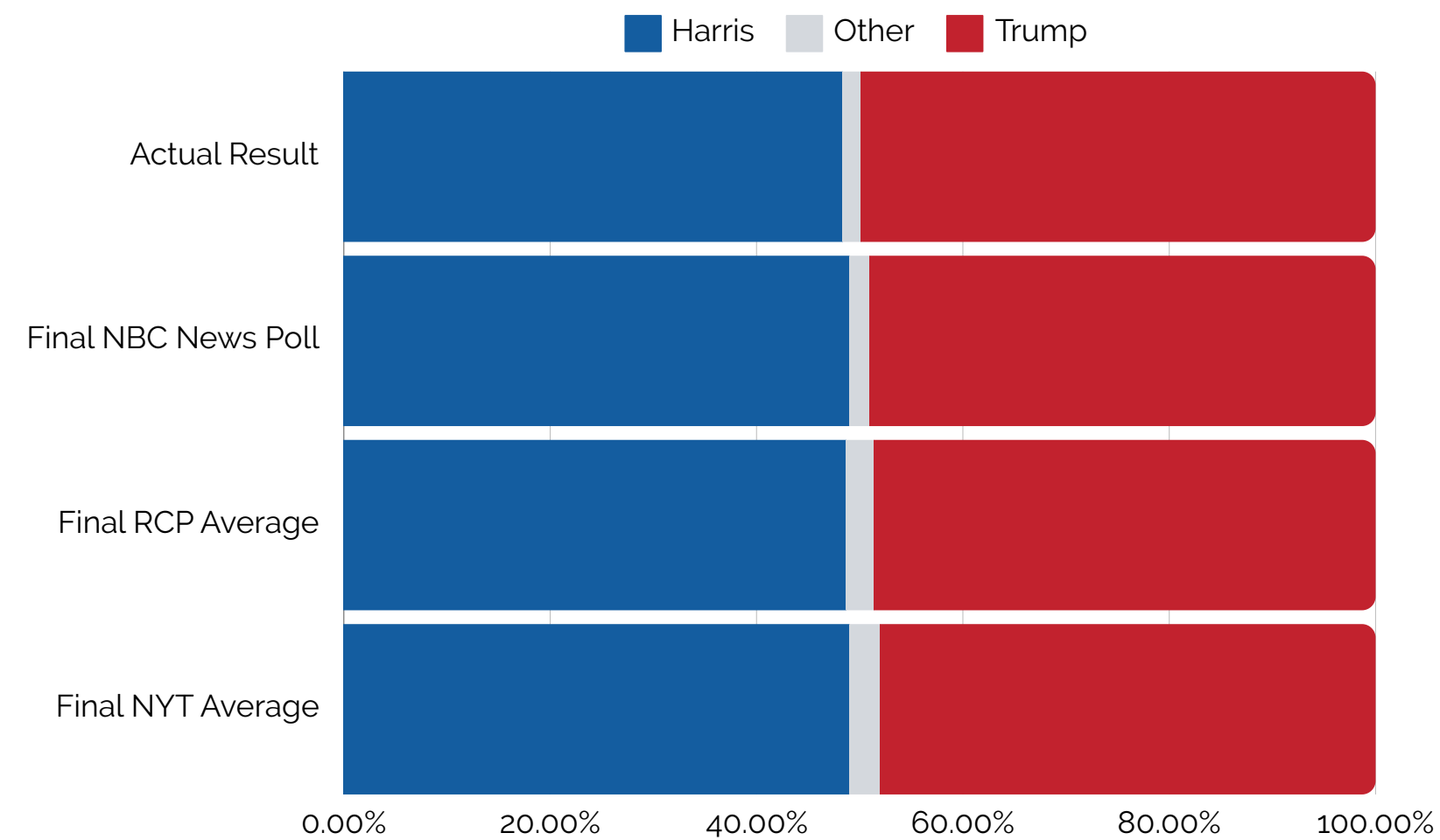
Democrat: 215

Republican: 220

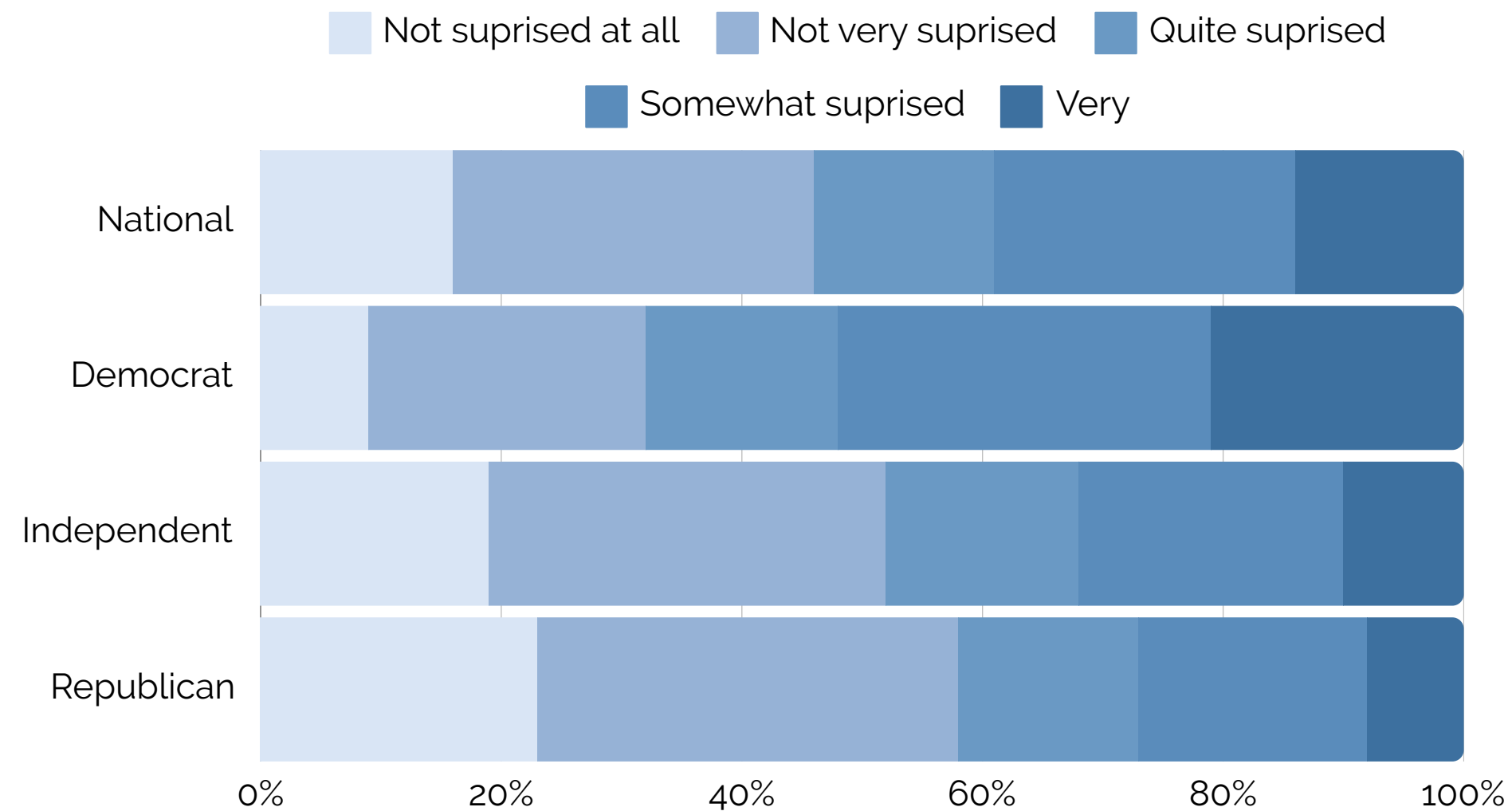
Accurate Polling but a Surprised Electorate

Polling during the 2024 presidential election reflected one of the best performances in presidential polling over the past decade. Despite that, people were surprised by the election's outcome.

How the 2024 National Vote Stacked up Against the Polling Averages



Over half of the nation, and nearly half of Republicans, were surprised by the outcome of the election



Source: [Independent](#), [NBC](#)



II. 12 Theories on Why Republicans Won/ Democrats Lost

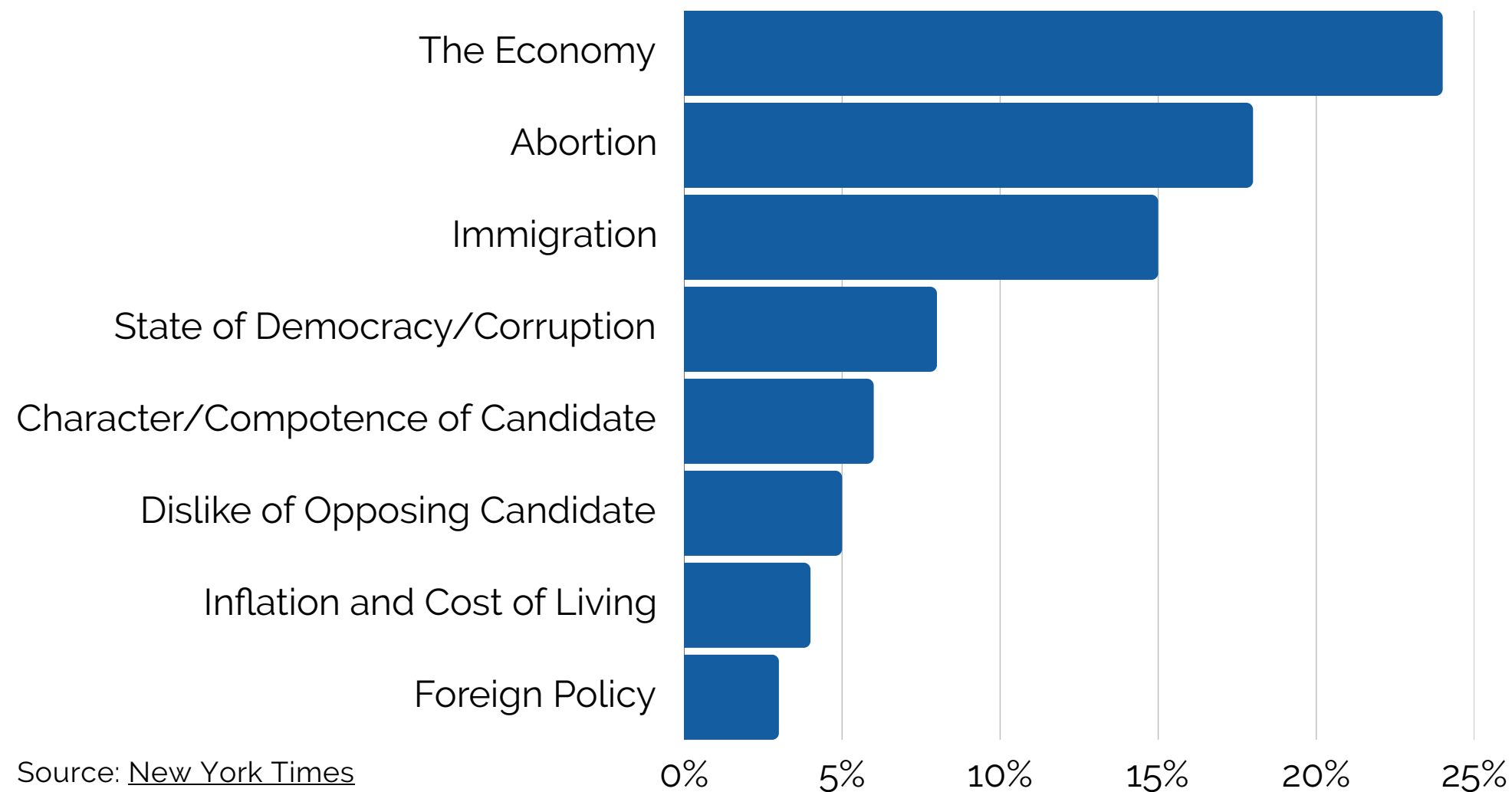
One can see from the sampling of theories that follow that there is a great deal of overlap. Among the theories: lack of confidence in the economy; distrust of current institutions; loss of working class voters; different strategies to reach voters; concerns about party; and others.

Readers may note that many of these are not only potentially interrelated but overlapping as well, that they may incorporate other distinct theories we haven't specifically identified, and we invite readers to make their own connections to form hypotheses about the election and the views of the electorate.

Theory #1: Voters Trusted Republicans to Handle the Economy

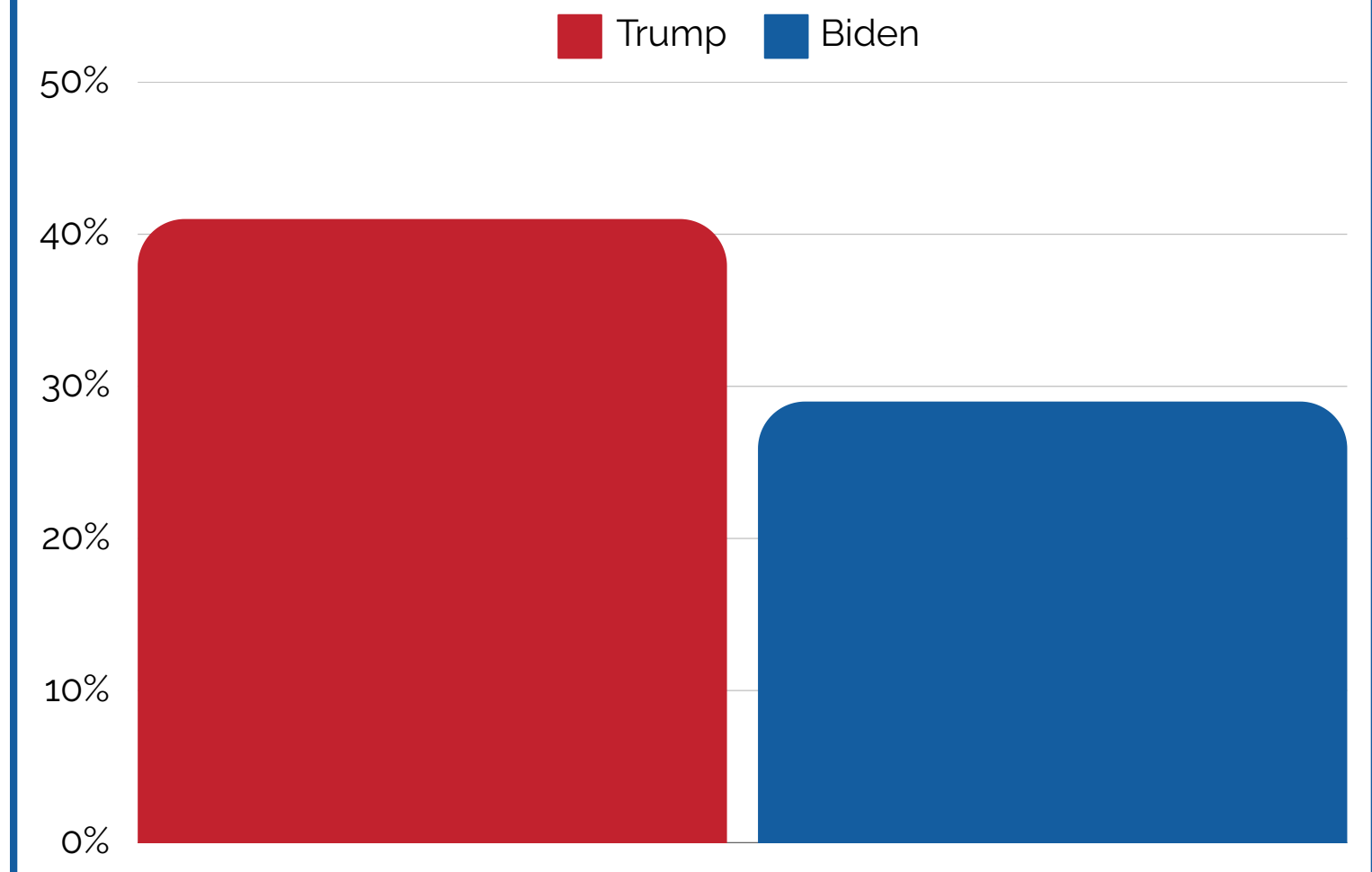
The economy was the number one issue for voters, especially in key states, and they trusted Trump to handle it.

Voters in battle ground states listed the economy as the most important issue in determining their vote



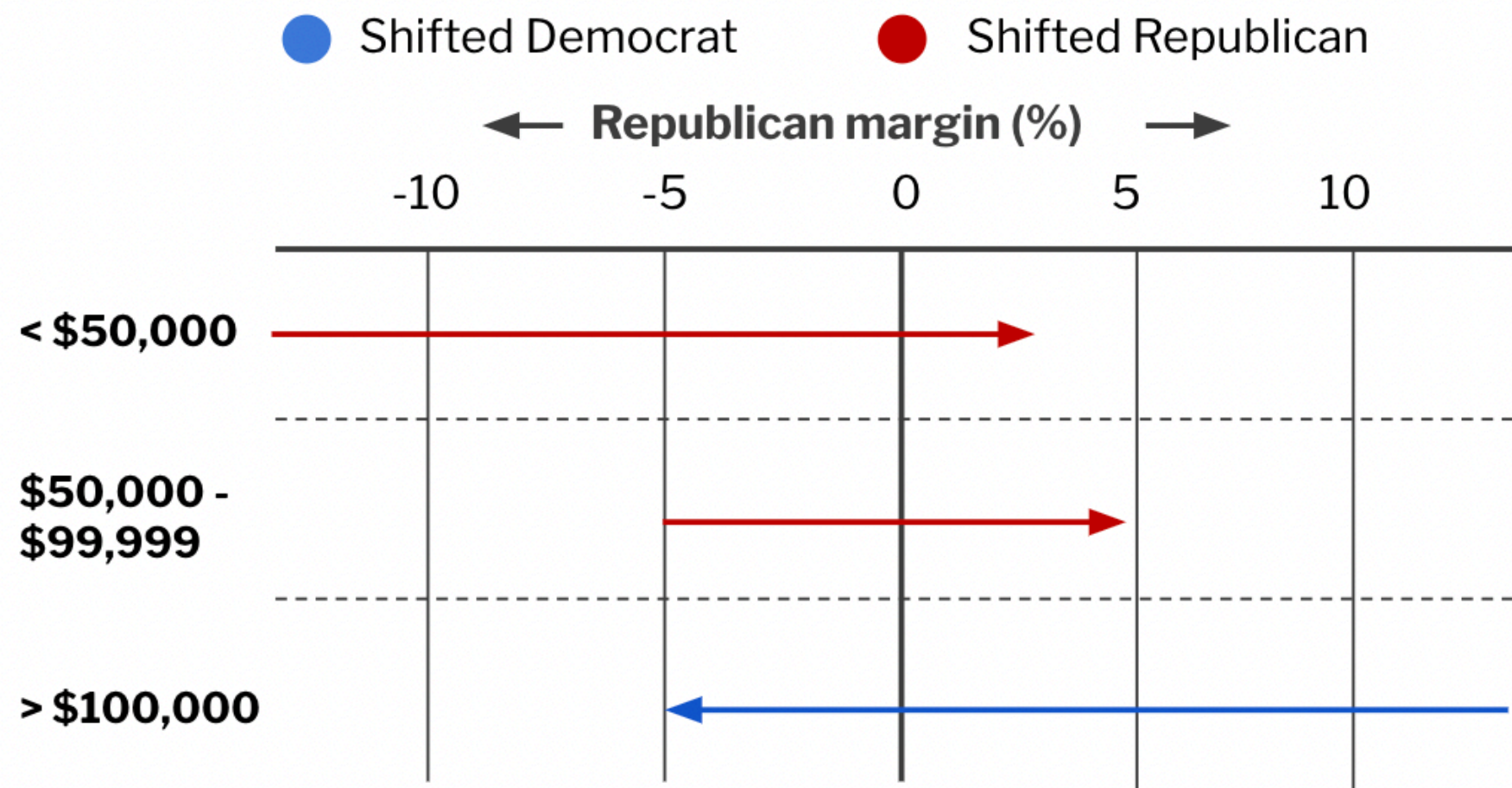
Source: [New York Times](#)

**Who Would Perform Better on the Economy?
May 2024**



Theory #2: Democrats Lost Support Among the Working Class

Trump increased his support among lower-income groups while Harris secured a majority of high-income votes.



Republican Margin Over Democrats, Change Since 2020,
by Demographic Group

"A major problem is that many Democratic candidates formulate political appeals to working people based on the way that they themselves think about political issues rather than the way many culturally traditional working people do."

-[Andrew Levison](#)

"No one, including me, has all the answers right now, but what we know for certain is that Democrats must reclaim our identity as the party of the working class."

-[Sen. Chris Murphy](#).

Theory #3: Democrats' Policy Priorities Have Been Captured By Interest Groups

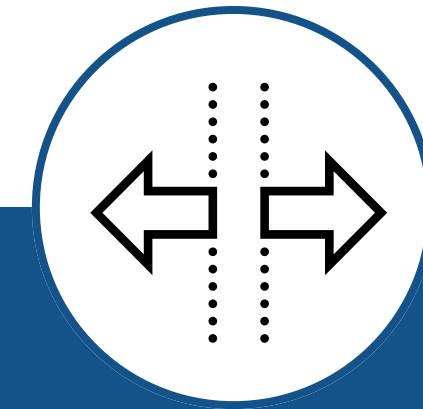
Some political commentators claim progressive interest and activist groups have become too influential in Democratic politics.



“A party that is serious about winning would be wise to start ignoring these organizations and concentrate on what is really important: connecting to the values and concerns of the broad majority of the American electorate.”
– Ruy Teixeira



“And we as a society need to find better ways to uplift divergent voices. Otherwise, we will be victims of groupthink.”
– Abby Phillip



“Achieving a supermajority means declaring independence from liberal and progressive interest groups that prevent Democrats from thinking clearly about how to win.”
– Adam Jentleson

Theory #4: Democrats Became Defenders of the Status Quo

Voters' faith in the system of government is eroding while Democratic messaging continues to center on protecting institutions.



“Democrats can no longer be the party talking about ‘protecting’ the system of government or its institutions. We need no longer be the ones defending the status quo in an economic system that Americans feel is broken.”

– Jesse Ferguson



“I think it’s shaking free of an institutional structure, or maybe even an institutional straitjacket, that’s no longer working, maybe hasn’t been for some time.”

– Ezra Klein



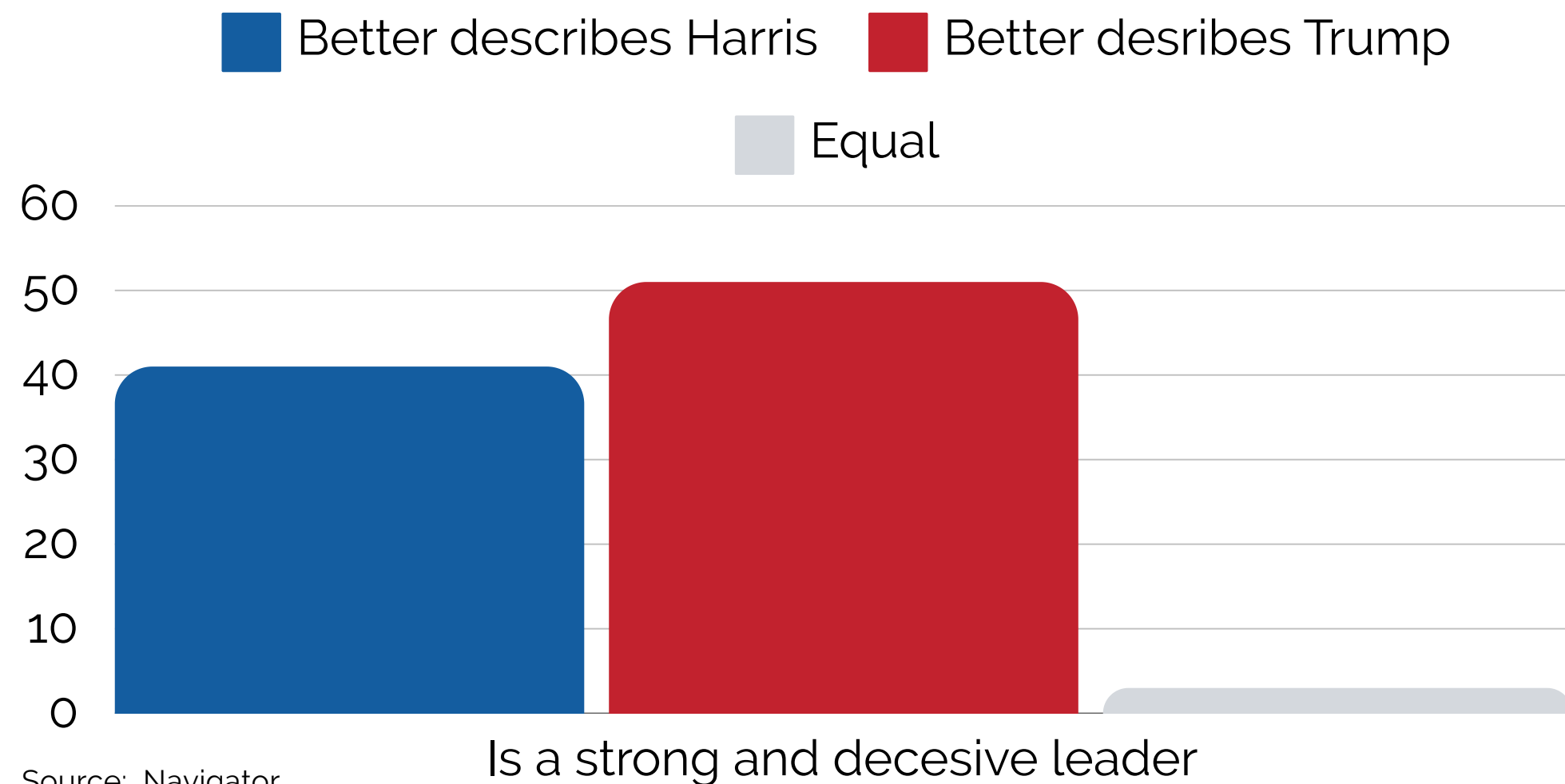
“In contrast, the Democratic Party has been blind to the rising sea of disillusionment. In today’s America, aspiration and ambition have been supplanted by anger and animosity. Talk about missing the moment.”

– Rahm Emanuel

Theory #5: Need for Stronger Leaders

Voters view strength as an essential feature of a good President and felt Harris was a weaker leader than Trump.

Swing voters viewed being a “strong and decisive leader” as an important quality in a President and viewed Trump as the stronger leader.

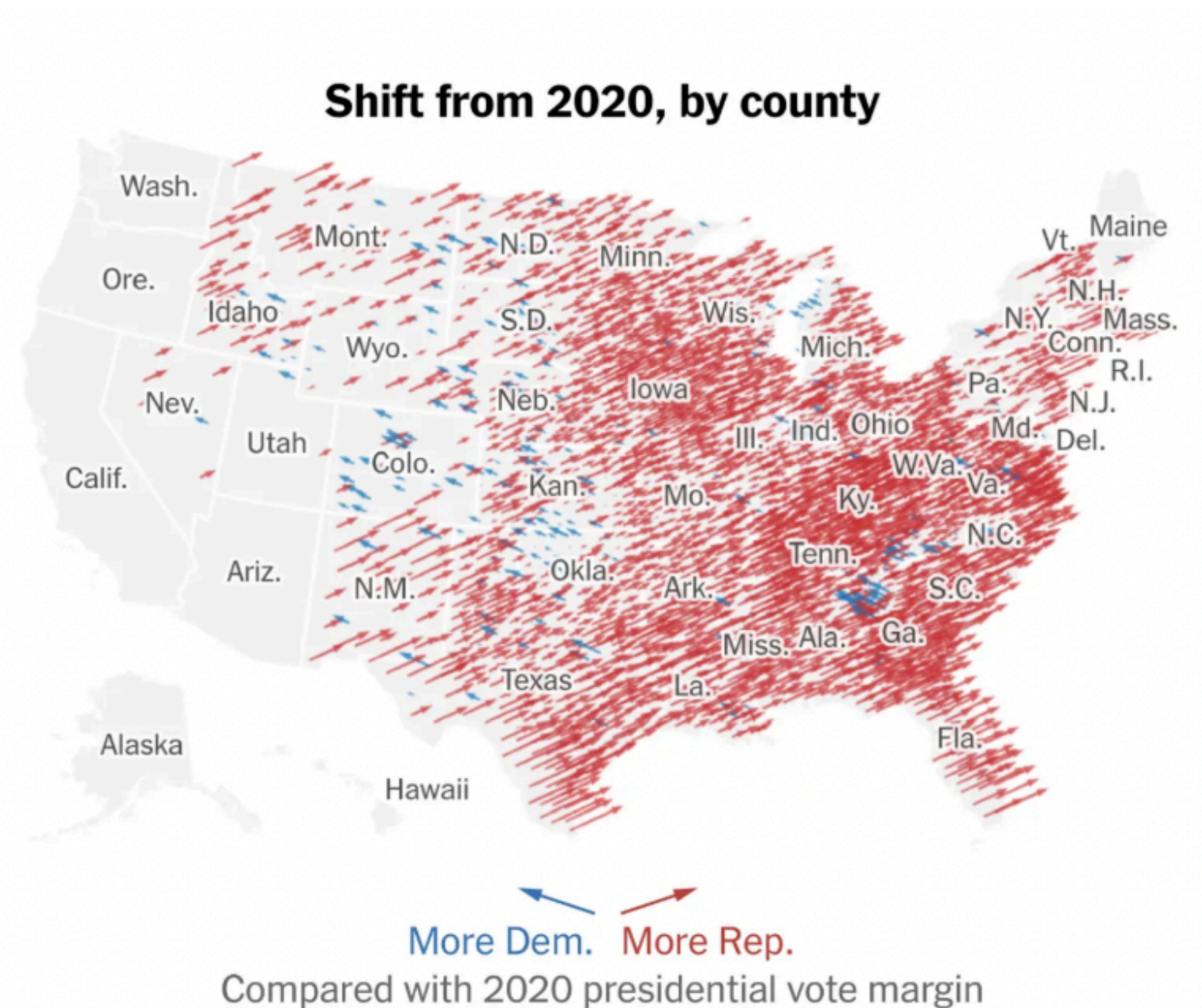


“Dems listen too much to ‘the groups’ is being coded as an anti-leftwing view, but it's about a broader culture of coalitional cowardice that often doesn't have a strong ideological view one way or the other. It just doesn't want anyone inside the tent to be too upset.”

– [Ezra Klein](#)

Theory #6: Overall, Voters Leaned Right while Democrats Were Left

Republicans won a bigger share of votes in every state in 2024 compared to 2020, a phenomenon that is perhaps a result of voters viewing Democrats as being too far left.



How did voters see themselves, Trump and Harris ideologically?



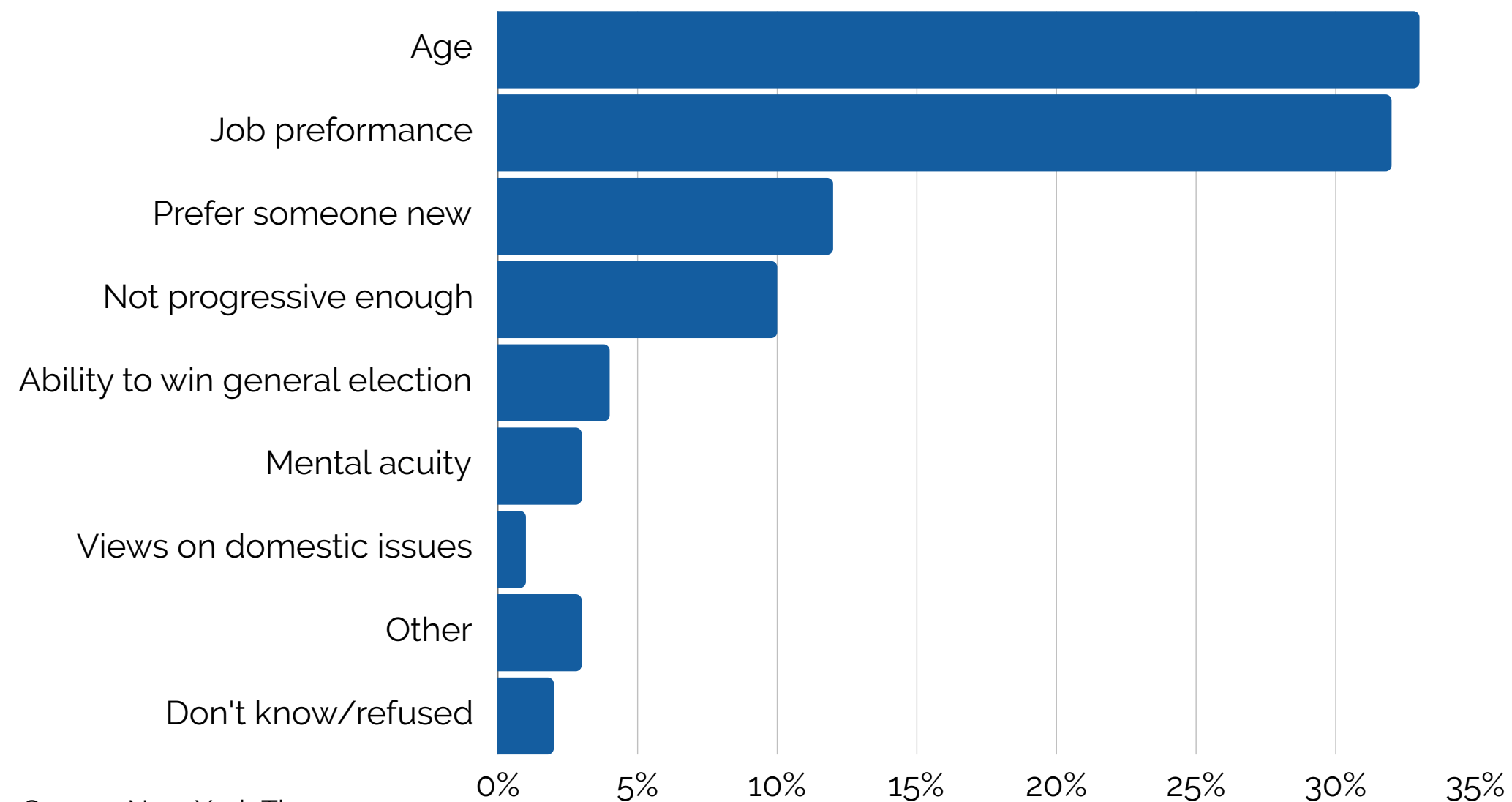
"A big-tent Democratic coalition needs leftists. But left-wing candidates are rarely winning tough elections, and too often, they're not improving governance of the solidly blue places where they're elected."

– Matthew Yglesias

Theory #7: Biden Should Have Dropped Out Sooner

Biden resisted calls to step away from the election for months, placing Democrats in a bad position going into 2024.

By the end of 2022, 76% of Democratic voters thought Joe Biden should NOT run for President, citing various reasons:



Source: [New York Times](#)

“Had President Biden gotten out, say May of 2023, I don’t have any doubt that Democrats would have won, and it wouldn’t have been close.”

– [James Carville](#)

Theory #8: Trump Campaign Redefined Harris

Harris was successfully defined by the Trump campaign especially among swing voters.

Over 80% of swing voters who chose Trump believed Harris held positions she didn't campaign on in 2024

Policy Position	Swing Voters, Chose Trump Believe
Using taxpayer dollars to pay for transgender surgeries for undocumented immigrants in prison	83%
Requiring all cars manufactured in US to be electric vehicles by 2035	82%
Decriminalizing border crossings	77%
Allowing abortion until the day of birth	76%

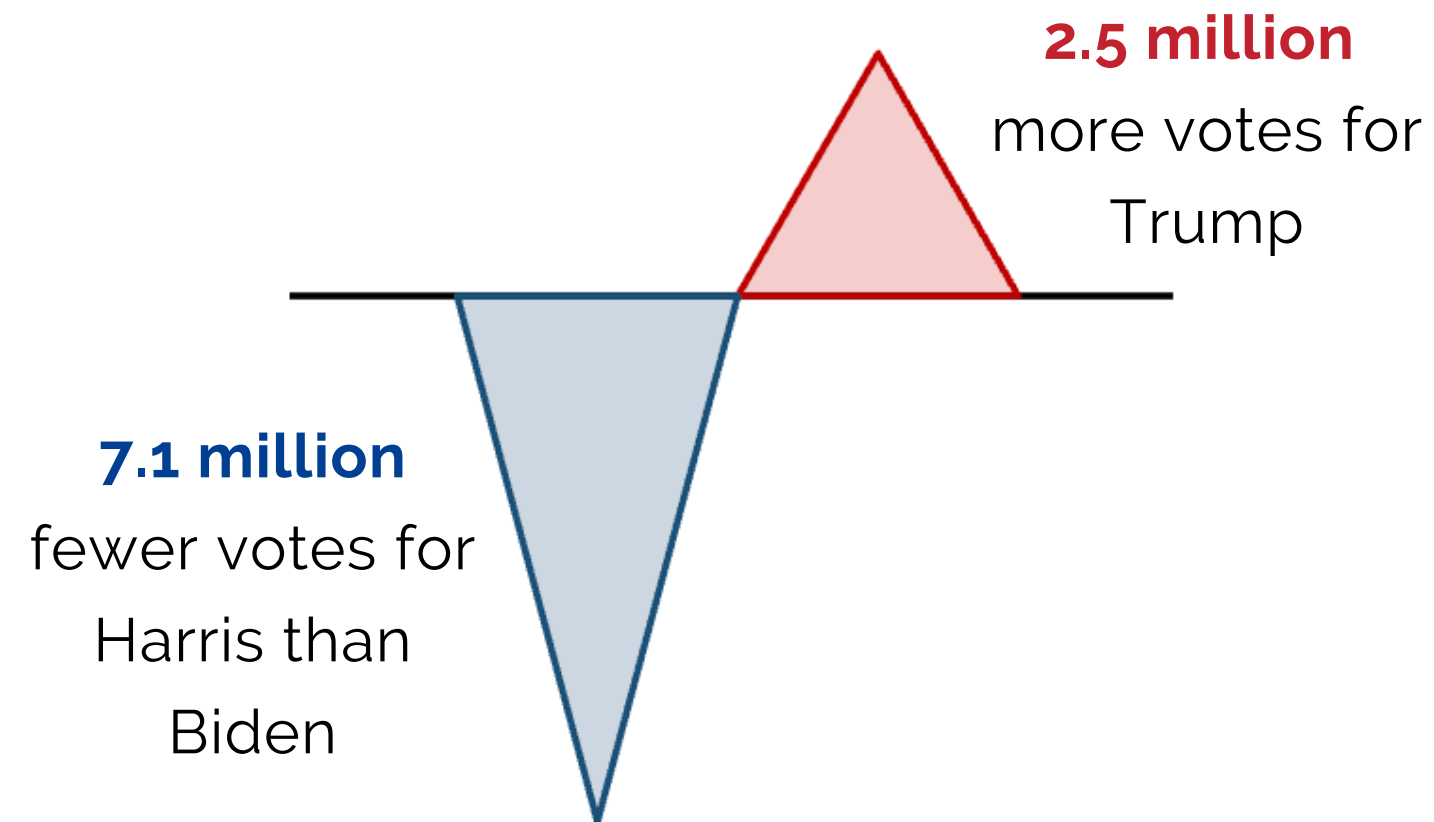
"In the weeks leading up to the election, candidate Harris struggled to define herself as polls repeatedly showed little daylight between her and Trump. Often, Trump's flaws seemed to be Harris' main selling point: She was not Trump. But who was she? Even Harris herself seemed scared to say."

– Elizabeth Brown

Theory #9: Harris Campaign Was Not Effective

Trump's gains in the election came from Harris' losses, a result which caused pundits to criticize the campaign on various grounds.

Changes in Votes Compared to 2020



“Kamala Harris lost this election when she pivoted to focus almost exclusively on attacking Donald Trump. Voters already know everything there is about Trump – but they still wanted to know more about Harris’ plans for the first hour, first day, first month and first year of her administration.”

– Frank Luntz

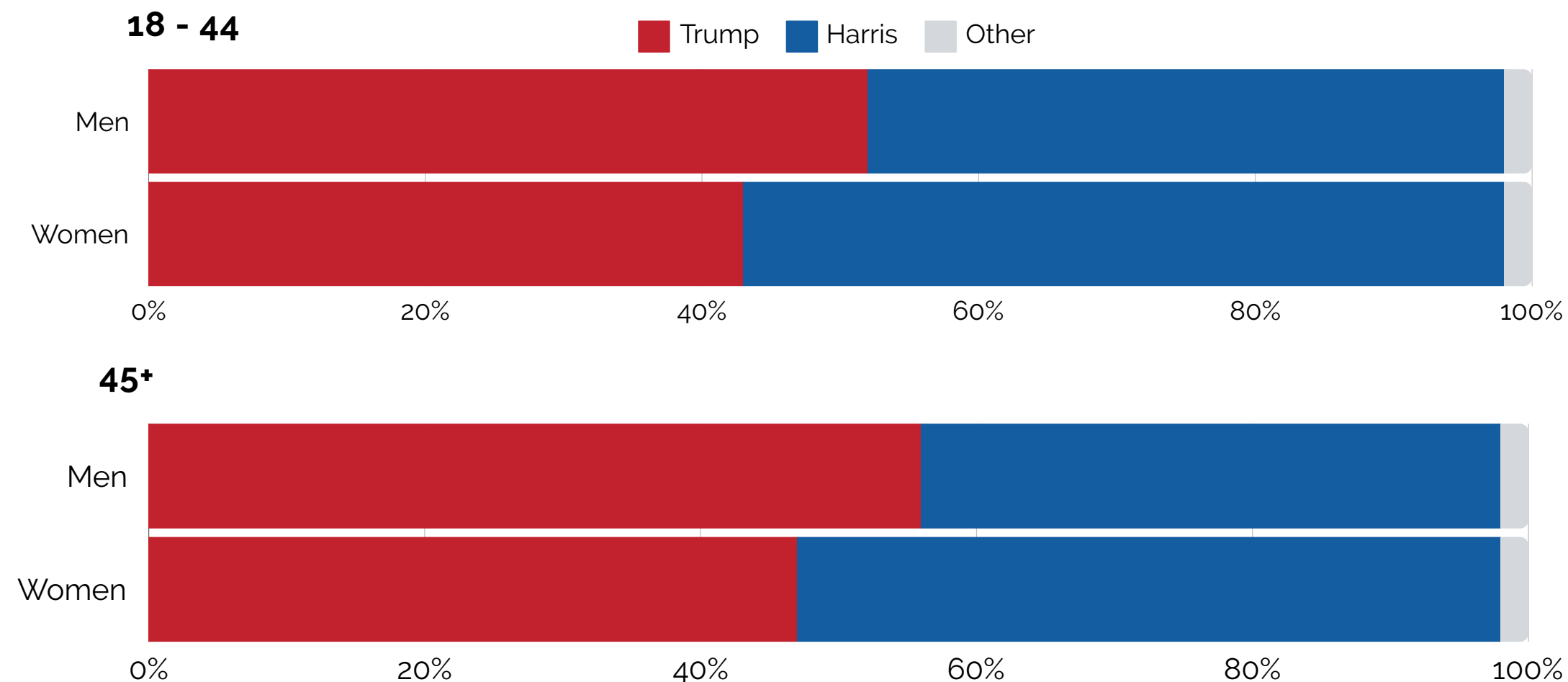
“The popular vote result was almost entirely a collapse in support for Harris and Democrats, not an increase in support for Trump and MAGA. Trump was no more popular this year than four years ago, while Harris significantly underperformed Biden 2020.”

– Michael Podhorzer

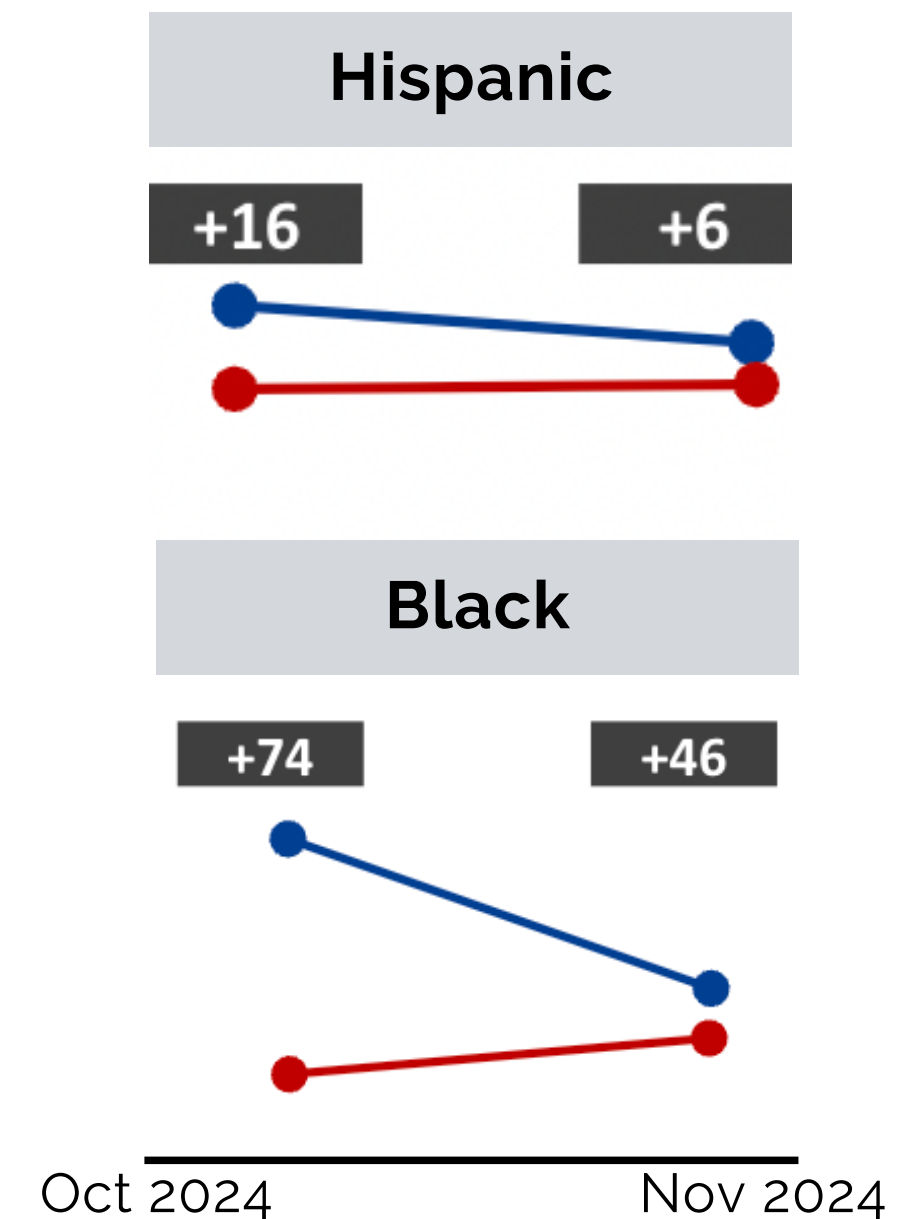
Theory #10: Trump Focused on Specific Voters

Trump mobilized male, Black, and Hispanic voters – demographic groups that were key to securing his win.

Men turned out for Trump in historic numbers, while women continued to support Democrats



Trump Made Big Gains with Black and Hispanic Voters



Source: [US News](#), [Democracy Corps](#)

Theory #11: Social Media Strategy Was Pivotal

Voters are increasingly consuming news via social media, a reality the Trump campaign successfully capitalized on.

Trump made an appearance on the Joe Rogan Experience Podcast, the most watched podcast in the world. Harris declined to make an appearance.

26 million

The number of views Joe Rogan's podcast with Donald Trump got on Youtube within the first 24 hours of being posted

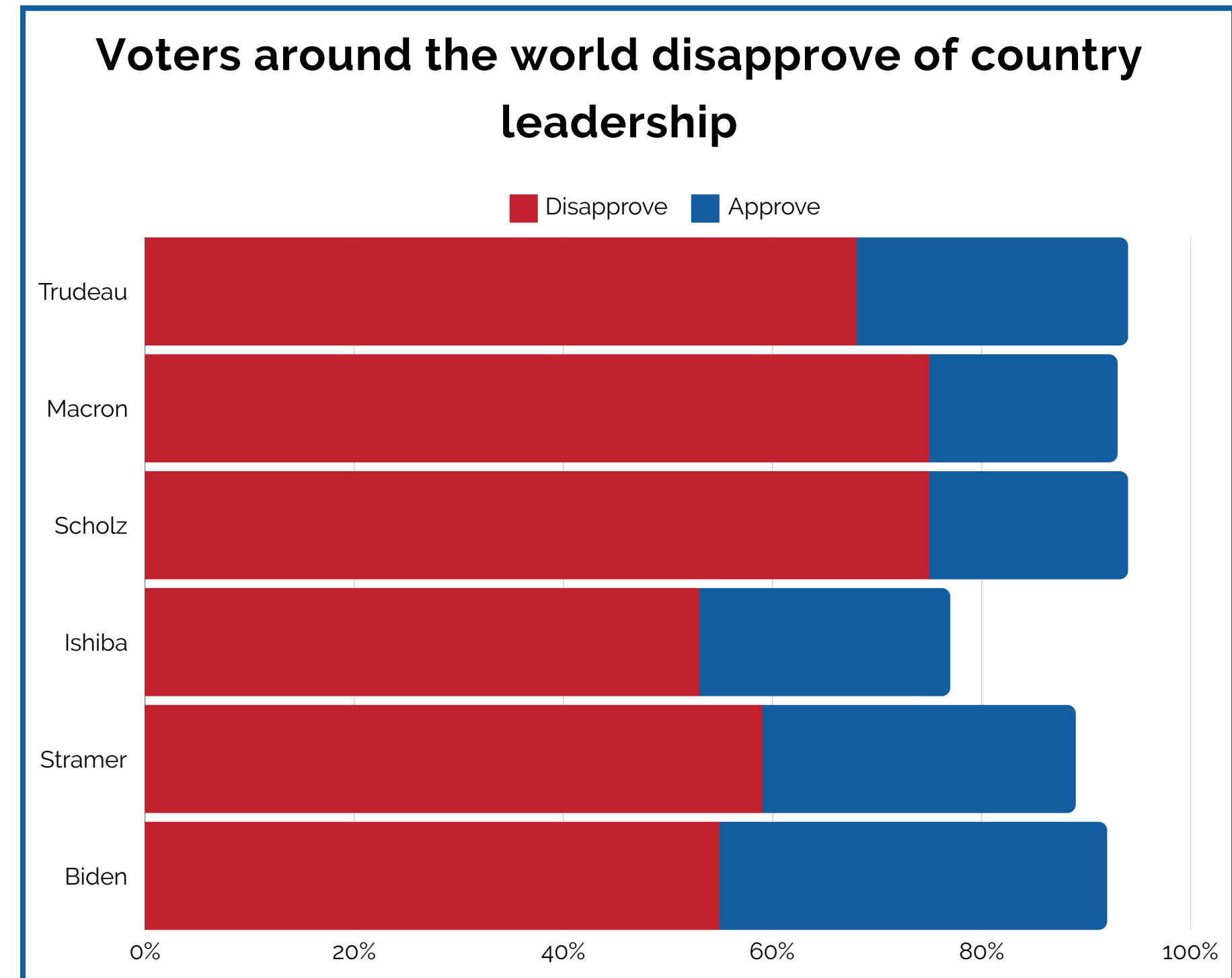
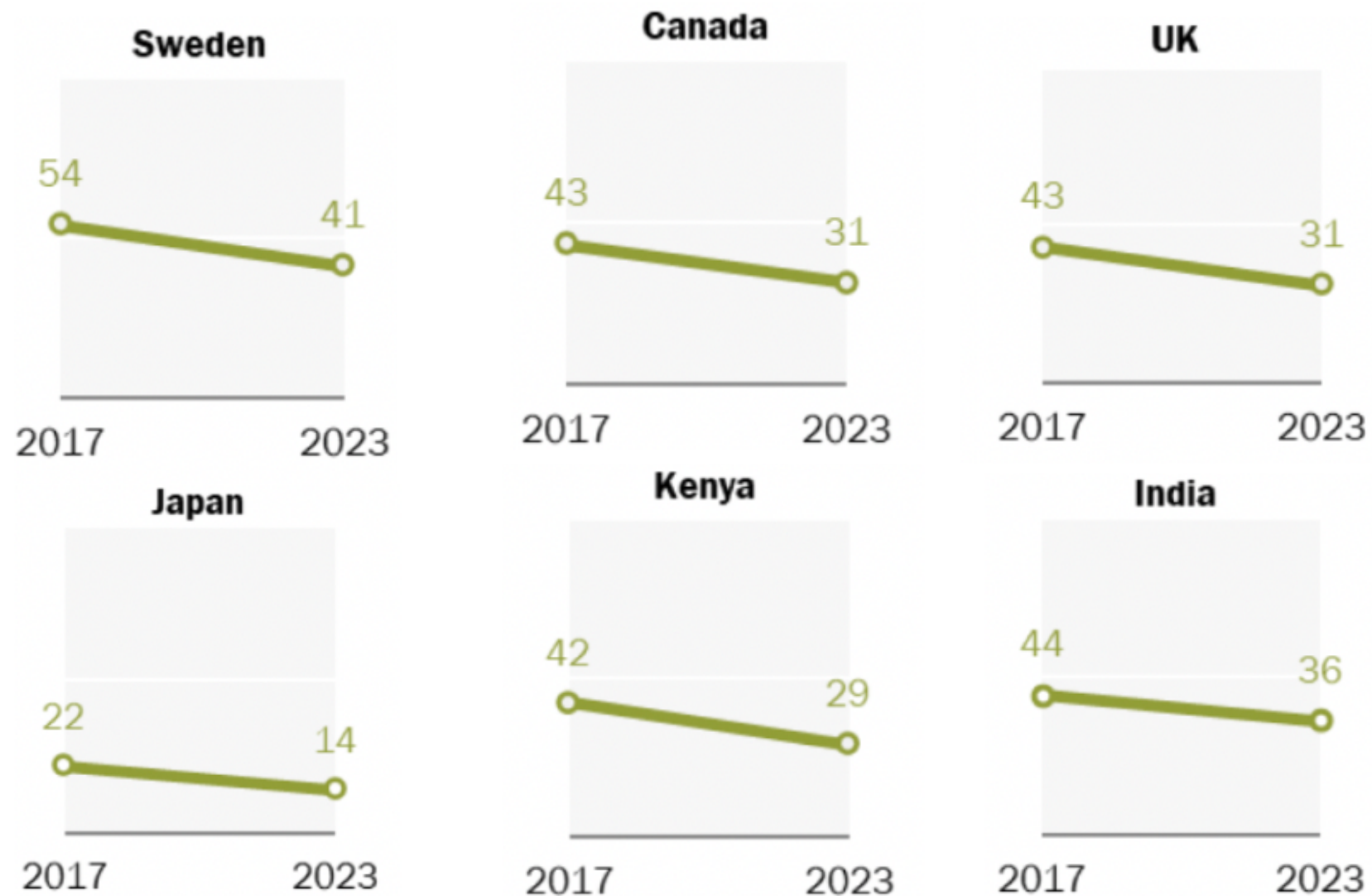
“Throughout her short campaign, Harris was subject to criticism about her lack of media appearances. Toward the end of the election cycle, Harris participated in a media blitz appearing on television shows like The View, radio shows like The Breakfast Club as well as popular podcasts like Call Her Daddy. But by avoiding popular podcasts and shows, especially those having to do with YouTubers and streamers, Harris missed out on appealing to young men – otherwise known as the ‘bro vote.’”

– Ariana Baio

Theory #12: A Global Shift Against Incumbents

2024 sets a record for the number of votes cast in democratic elections in a single year. The results of these elections around the world reflect a strong, global, anti-incumbent sentiment.

As people report increasing economic distress and dissatisfaction with the ruling party, fewer people now say representative democracy is a very good way to govern in many countries.



III. Final Thoughts



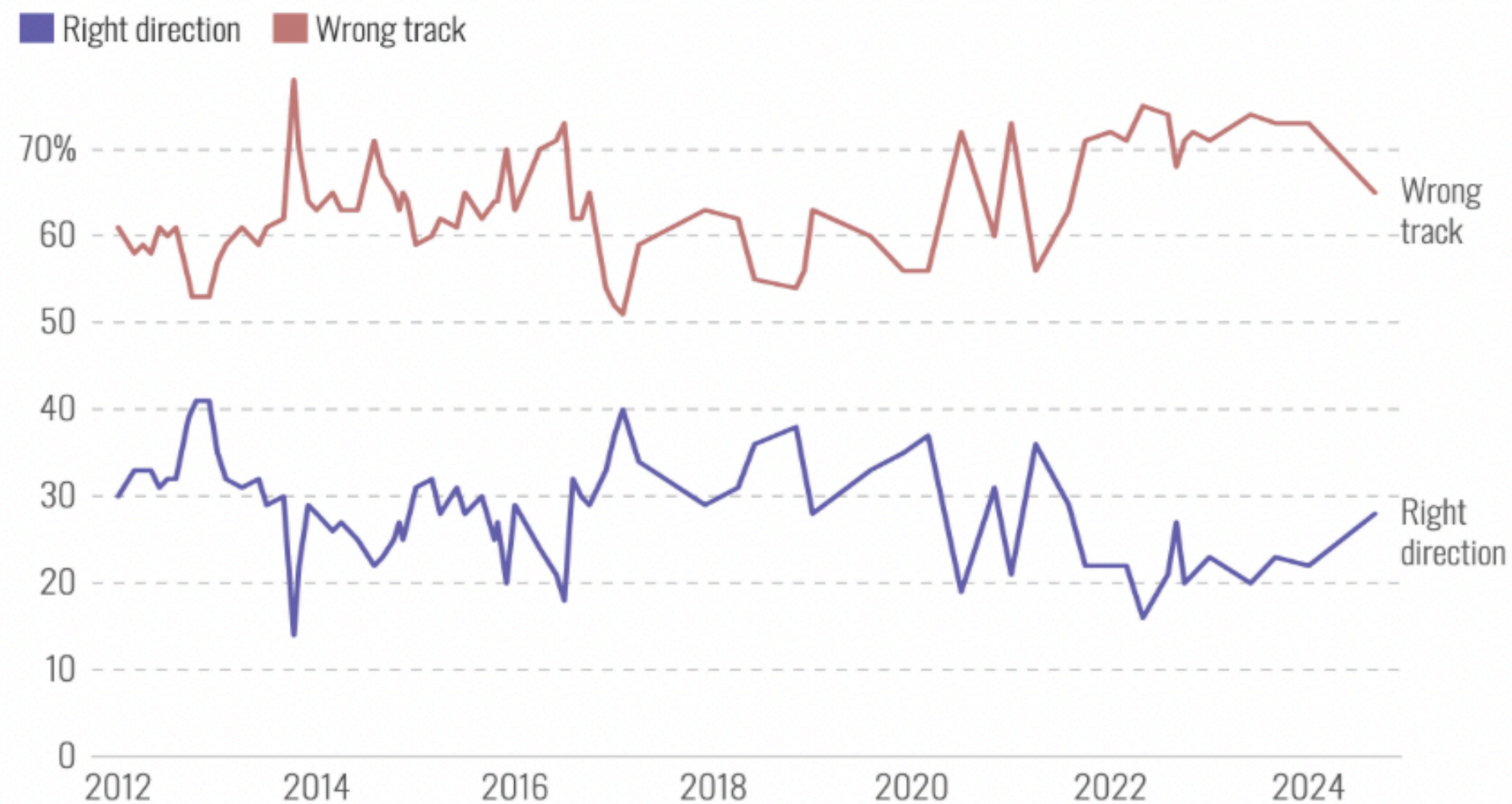
One Possible Theme:

People are looking for change. They worry about our country's direction, and likely will continue to worry.

Voters Feel the US is Moving in Wrong Direction

The day of the 2024 election, 65% of registered voters said the country is on the wrong track. Surveys have found steadily high rates of dissatisfaction with the direction of the country for years.

Two-thirds of voters say the US is on the wrong track



Source: [NBC](#)

“While the wrong track data is now under 70% for the first time since September 2022, it is still a terrible 65% for the party in power...the cost of living remains the dominant issue, and the share of voters who say their family’s income is falling behind is the highest we have recorded.”

– Jeff Horwitt

Ultimately, a question for this electorate going forward is: **Who Will Represent Change?**

“As Mr. Trump broke norms, disregarded public health officials and threatened a postwar foreign policy consensus, the two parties even found their usual roles reversed. Democrats became the party of institutions, the national security apparatus, norms and, ultimately, the status quo — not change.”

– [Nate Cohn](#)

Possible Takeaways

- 1 Despite the ongoing desire for change, it was a relatively close presidential election (a margin of 1.48%).
- 2 Voters seem likely to continue to look for reform and change, and be skeptical of elite institutions that they feel have not led the country in the right direction.
- 3 It may be advisable for those in parties, and outside of them, to continue to push for more dramatic reform and ideas to address the electorate's desire to restore the country to a more satisfying direction.

Thank You