

How Social Proof Can Persuade the Middle

Key Findings from an online national survey of N=1004 adults, fielded May 15-27, 2025

About Voss Research and Strategy

Voss Research and Strategy is a leading messaging and narrative development firm that helps organizations design campaigns to mobilize supporters and move the middle.

We specialize in executing customized qualitative and quantitative research using an innovative analytical approach.

We believe that research is more than just measuring where we are. It is about charting the course to get where we need to go.

Methodology

Voss Research and Strategy designed and administered this survey which was fielded online among a nationally representative sample of N=1004 adults between May 15-27, 2025.

The data was weighted by age, gender, nine-way census region, educational attainment, and partisan identification to reflect the attributes of the overall population.

The survey error is +/- 3/1% for the total sample and is larger for subgroups.

Numbers may not add to 100, and nets may seem off by 1 point due to rounding.

Men	48
Women	51
Gen Z	16
Millennial	29
Gen X	27
Baby Boomer	26
Silent	3
White	71
Black	14
Hispanic	16
Asian-American/Pacific Islander	5
Indigenous	3
Democrat	31
Republican	34
Independent (with leaners)	25
Non-College Educated	66
College-Educated	33
Northeast	18
Midwest	21
South	38
West	24

"Research Inventory"



Movement vs. electoral incentives

Broad narrative vs. policy nuance

Social proof as a "means" instead of an "end."



What is Social Proof?

Social Proof & Conformity

In ambiguous situations, **people often rely on group consensus** to form their own judgments.

Muzafer Sherif's Autokinetic Effect Study (1936)

People often conform to a majority group's incorrect judgment even when the correct answer is obvious.

Solomon Asch's Conformity Experiments (1951)

Ambiguous Situation: Internet Ratings



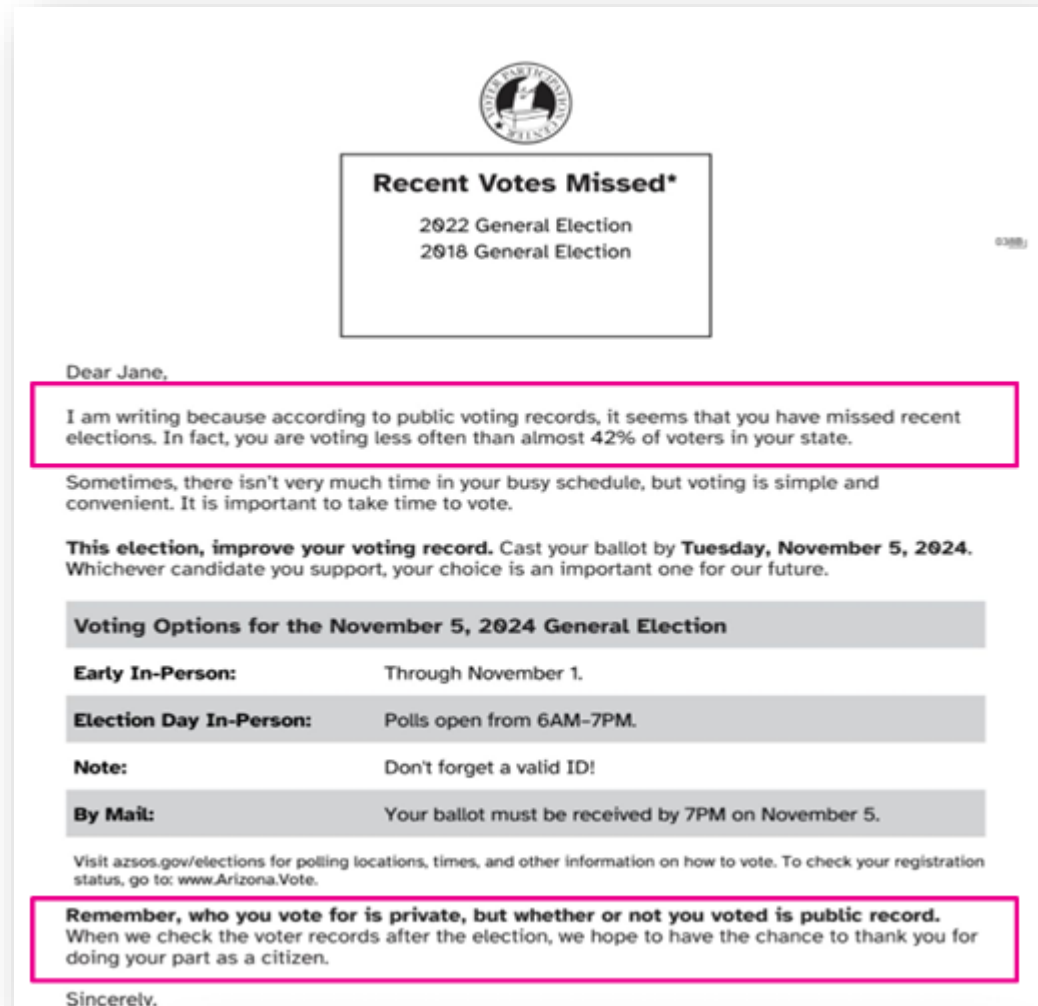
Example: Social Pressure

Campaigns already use this in registration and turnout tactics.

✓ Reminding people that whether or not they vote is public information.

✓ Telling people that their neighbors voted.

Both increase turnout.



The image shows an email from the Arizona Secretary of State. At the top is the state seal. Below it is a box titled "Recent Votes Missed*" containing "2022 General Election" and "2018 General Election". The email body starts with "Dear Jane,". A pink box highlights the text: "I am writing because according to public voting records, it seems that you have missed recent elections. In fact, you are voting less often than almost 42% of voters in your state." Below this is a paragraph: "Sometimes, there isn't very much time in your busy schedule, but voting is simple and convenient. It is important to take time to vote." Then, another paragraph: "This election, improve your voting record. Cast your ballot by Tuesday, November 5, 2024. Whichever candidate you support, your choice is an important one for our future." This is followed by a section titled "Voting Options for the November 5, 2024 General Election" with a table:

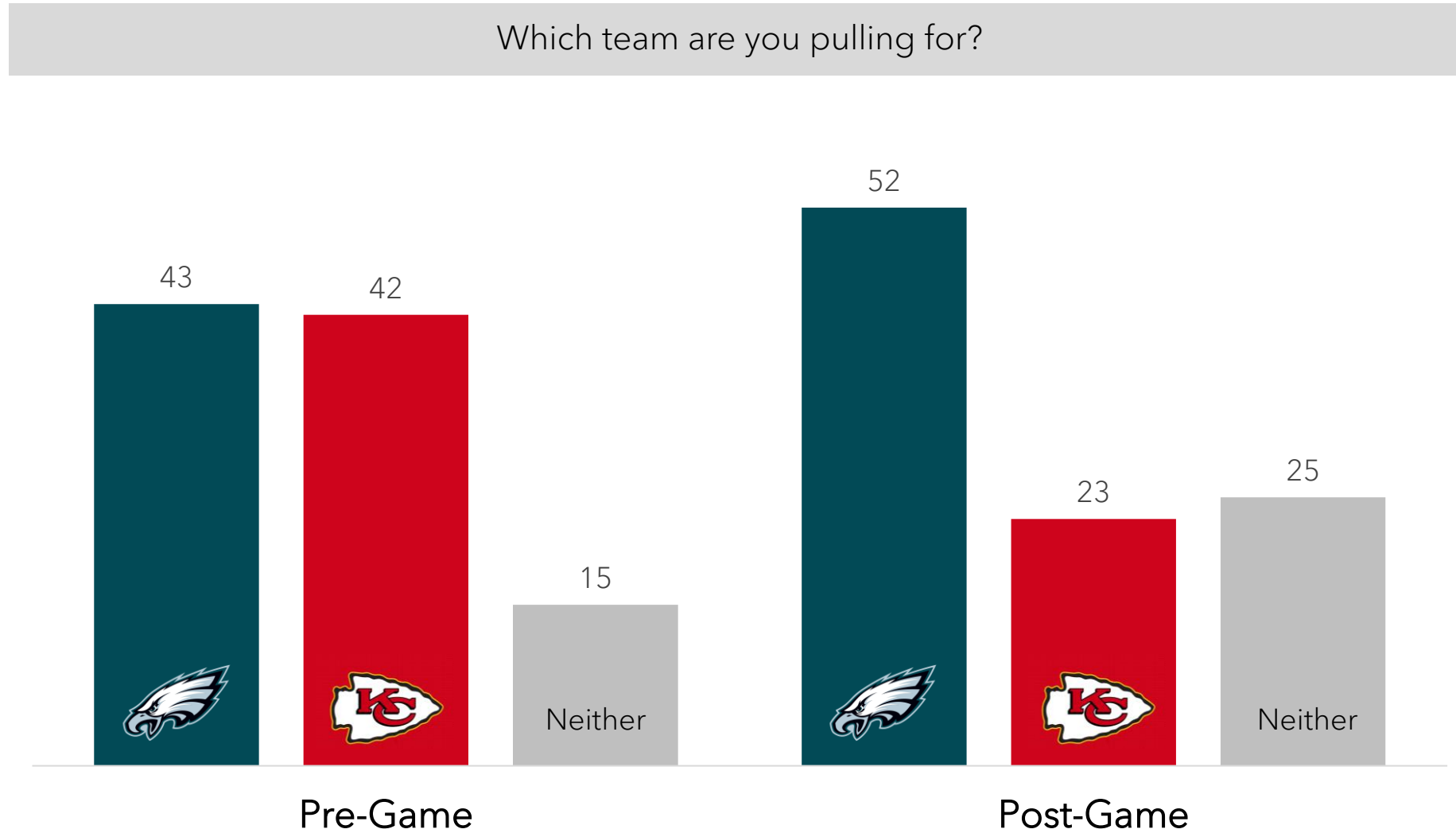
Early In-Person:	Through November 1.
Election Day In-Person:	Polls open from 6AM-7PM.
Note:	Don't forget a valid ID!
By Mail:	Your ballot must be received by 7PM on November 5.

Below the table is a note: "Visit [azsos.gov/elections](https://www.azsos.gov/elections) for polling locations, times, and other information on how to vote. To check your registration status, go to: www.Arizona.Vote." A final pink box highlights the text: "Remember, who you vote for is private, but whether or not you voted is public record. When we check the voter records after the election, we hope to have the chance to thank you for doing your part as a citizen." The email ends with "Sincerely,".

Example: The Winning Effect

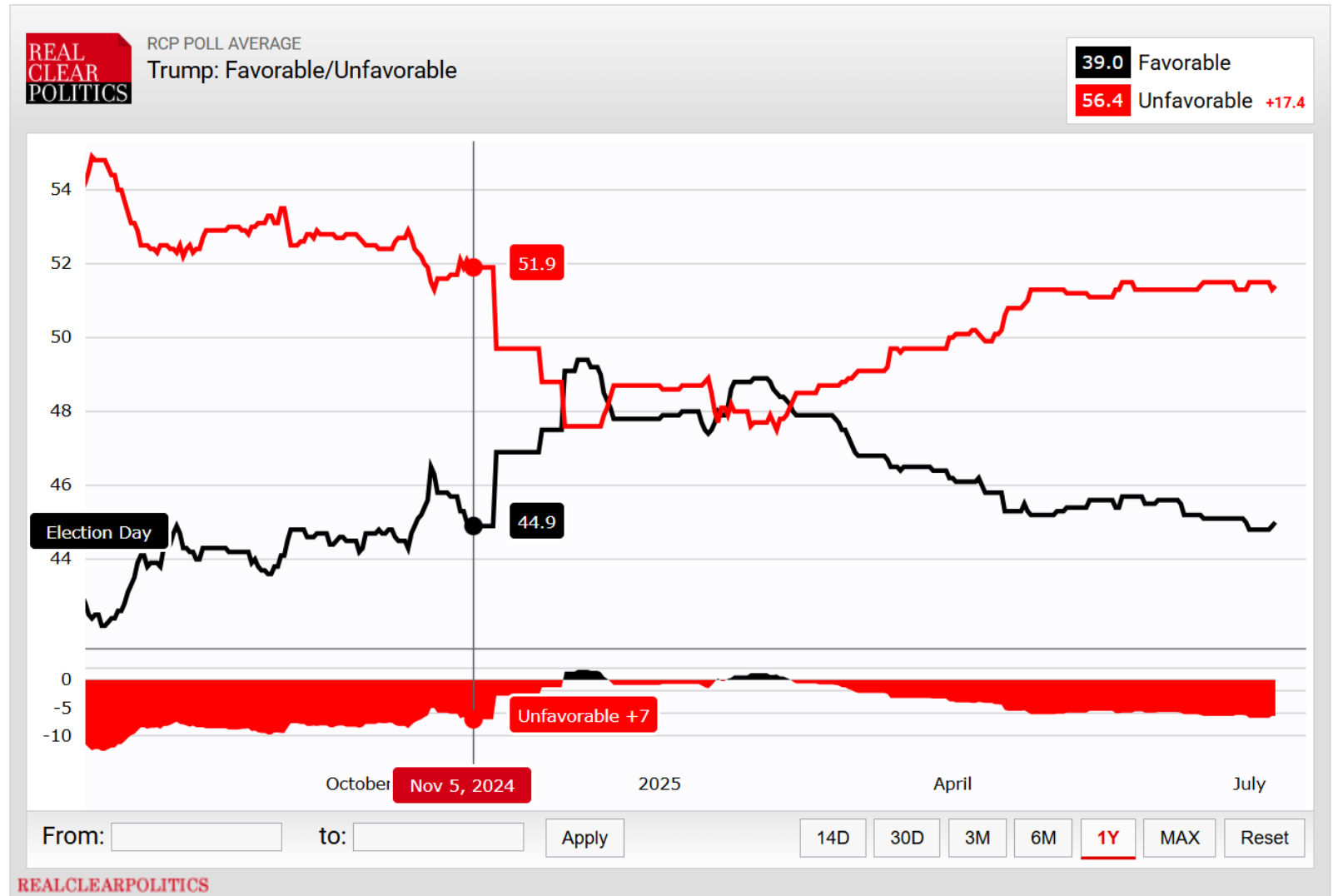
People like a winner.

Post-game surveys always shows a shift in people saying they were pulling for the winning team.



Example: The Winning Effect

The first polls after Election Day 2024 showed a large bump in favorable ratings toward Trump.





Research Goal

Research Goal

Building on our past research that compared what people think, with what people assume OTHER people think:

We wanted to explore this dynamic with two types of issues.

1) Positive Perception Gap, Social Proof Advantage:

Economic Populism

→ Our assumption, based on a decade of polling, is that more Americans agree with a progressive worldview on this and that people THINK Americans have a progressive view (social proof advantage).

2) Perception Deficit, Social Proof Disadvantage:

Transgender Freedom and Immigration

→ Our assumption is that Democratic disunity, right-wing mass spending, and right-wing media bubbles made social proof work against our side.

In other words, the dominant narrative made average Americans believe that most people are against immigrant and trans rights, thereby priming them to also disfavor these groups.

Research Consequences

Where we have a Positive Perception Gap

→ We need to leverage it.



Where we have Perception Deficit

→ We need to know if more people agree with us.

→ **And if they do**, then we need to do a better job of conveying that our position is the popular one.



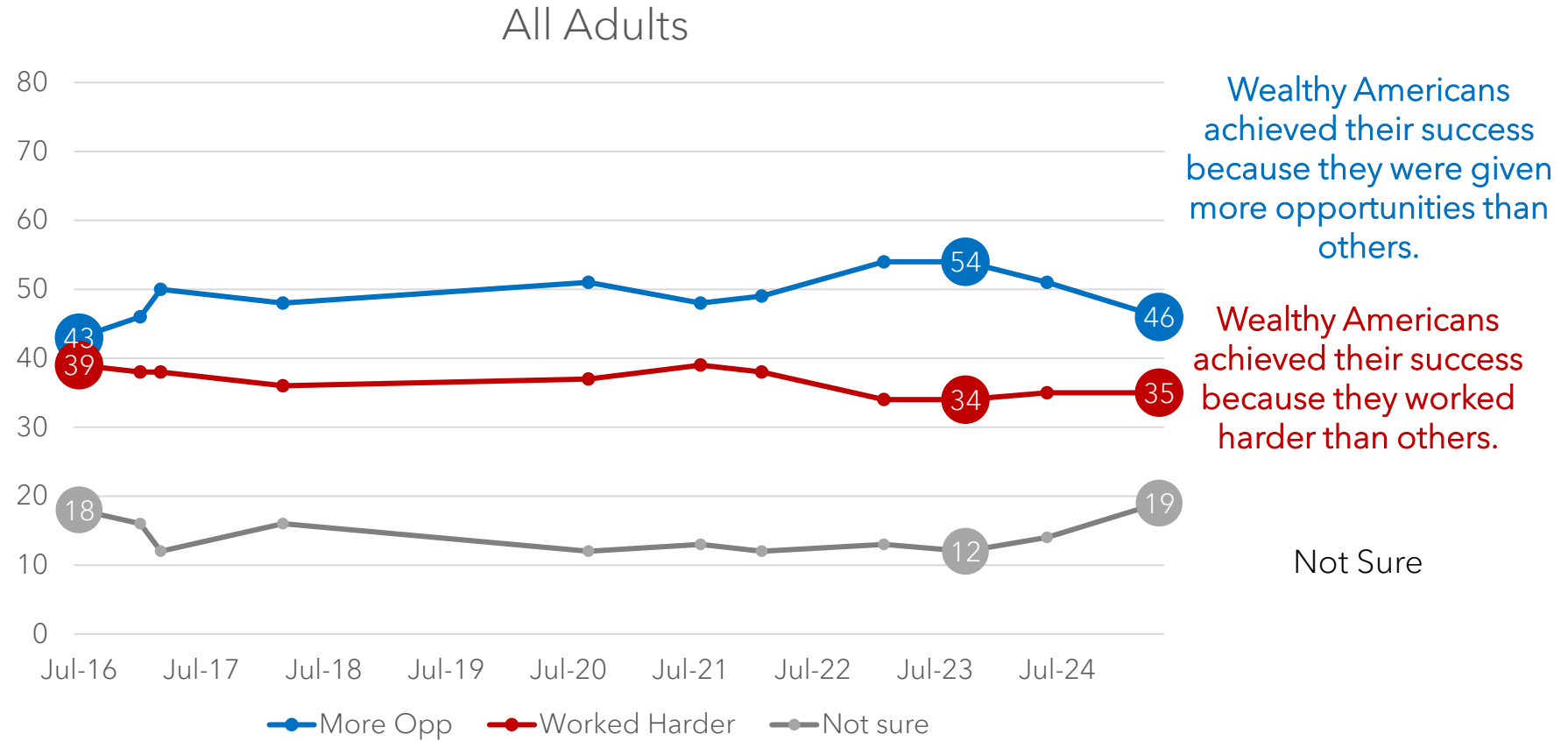
Economic Populism

Assumption: Positive Perception Gap

Views over Time

More Americans have consistently told pollsters that wealthy Americans achieved their success because they were given more opportunities than others.

In your opinion which of the following is the primary reason wealthy Americans have achieved financial success?



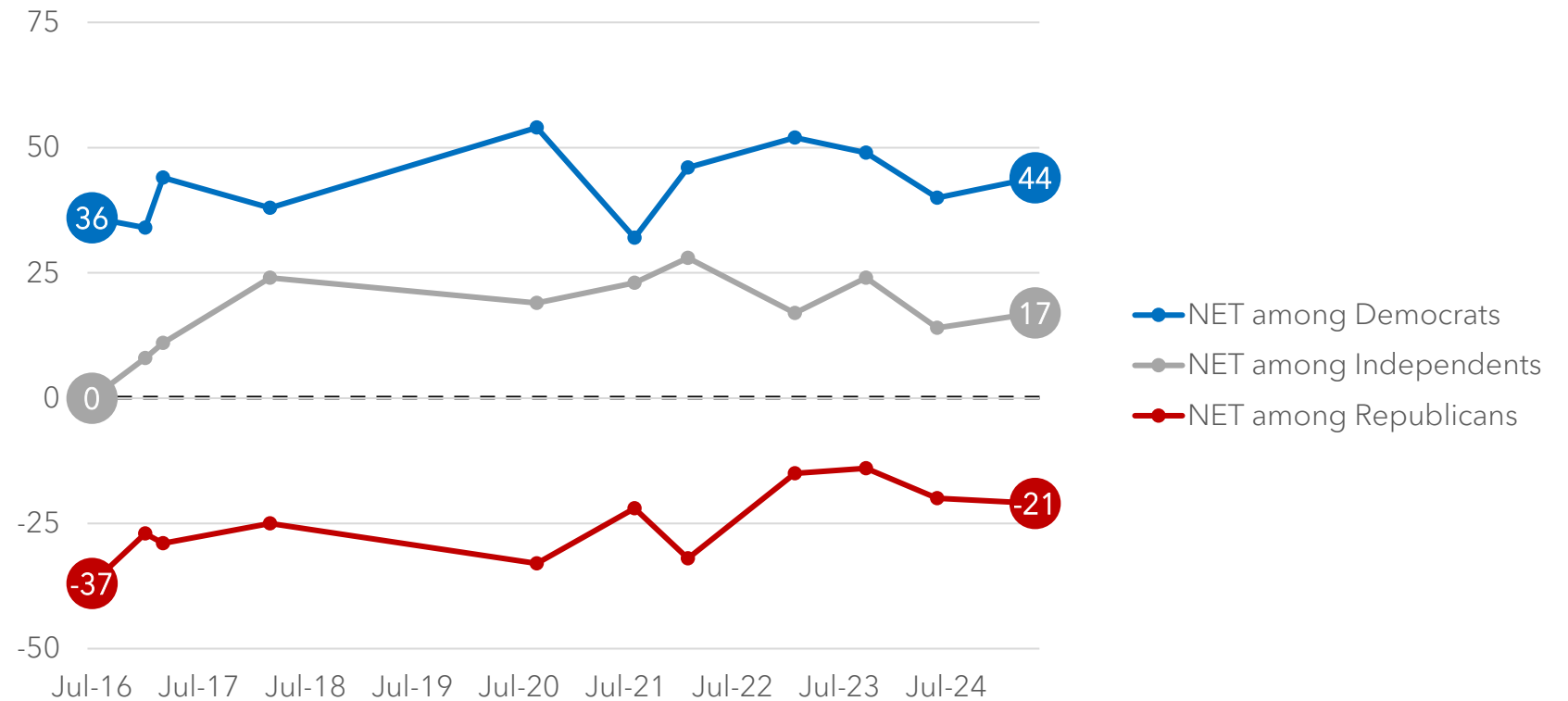
Shifts Toward Progressive Worldview

Americans across party lines are trending more populist on this compared to where they were in July 2016.

(Note: "Net agree" with the progressive viewpoint does not account for people who answer "not sure")

In your opinion, which of the following is the primary reason wealthy Americans have achieved financial success?

NET Agreement
(Difference in agreement with progressive worldview and conservative worldview)
Wealthy Americans achieved their success because they were given more opportunities than others.



Class: Self View and Social Proof

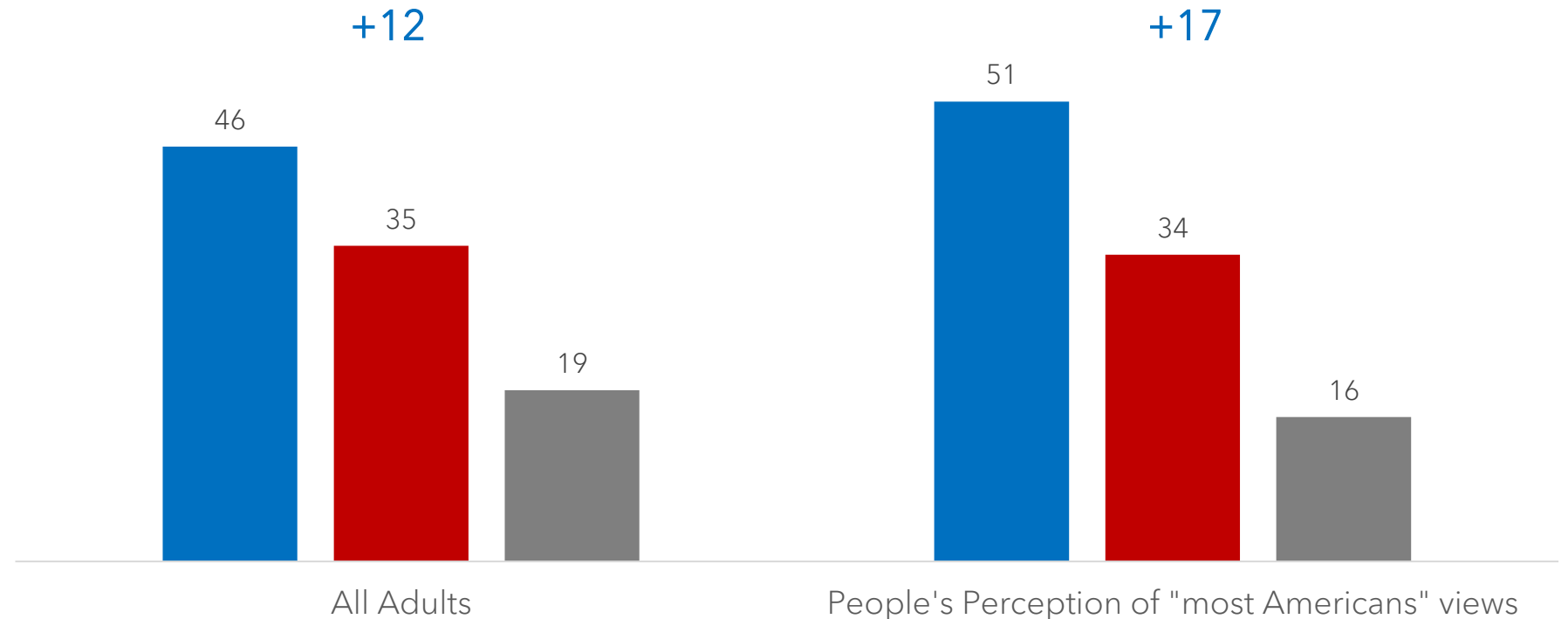
Sure enough, we found a 46 percent plurality of Americans believe the progressive worldview on why wealthy Americans achieved financial success.

And, when people consider what more people in America think, even more assume Americans hold a progressive worldview.

Left: In your opinion, which of the following is the primary reason wealthy Americans have achieved financial success?
Right: And which do you think more people in America say is primary reason wealthy Americans have financial success?

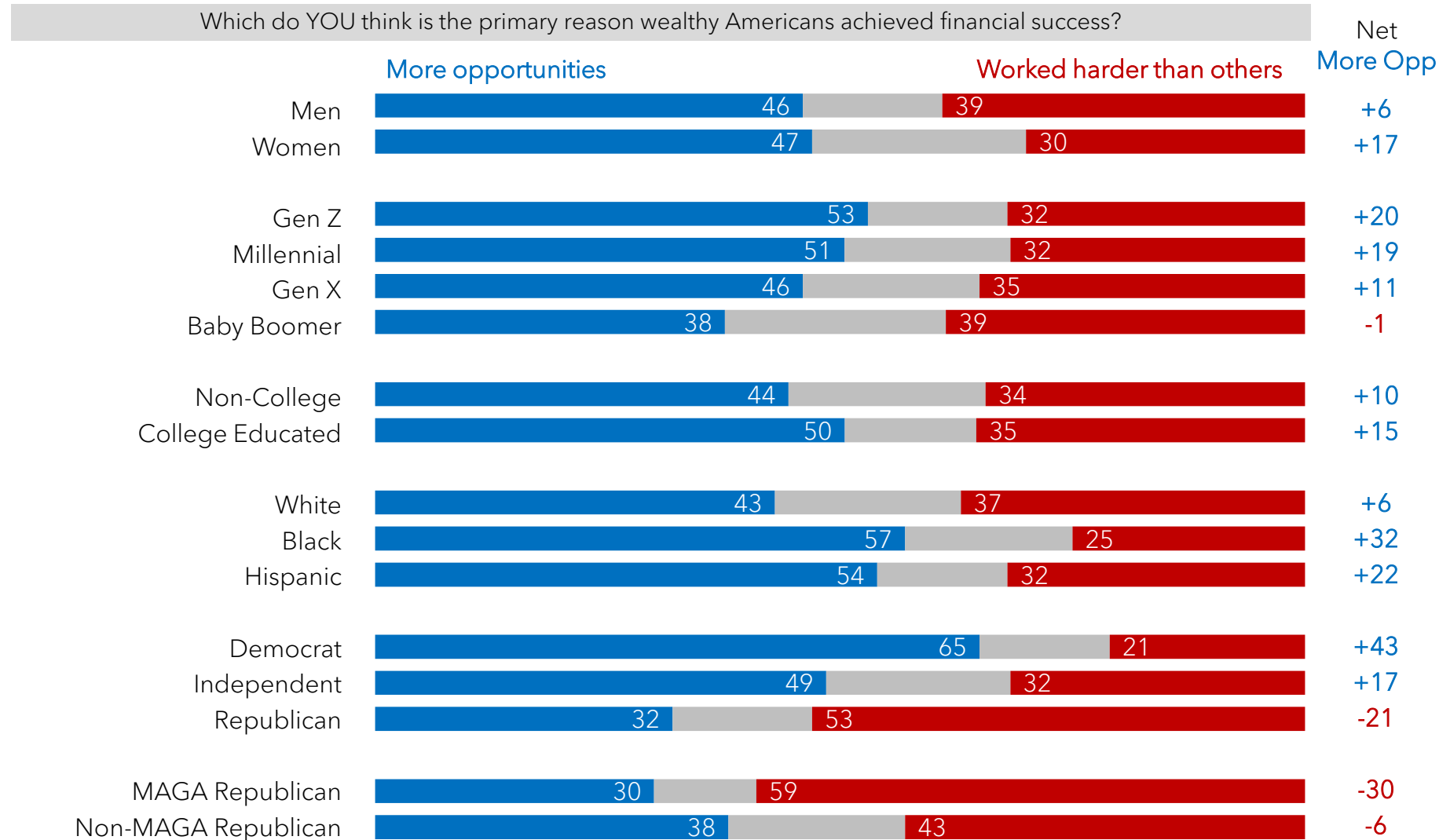
Wealthy Americans achieved their success because they were given more opportunities than others.

Wealthy Americans achieved their success because they worked harder than others.



Most Groups Hold Progressive Worldview

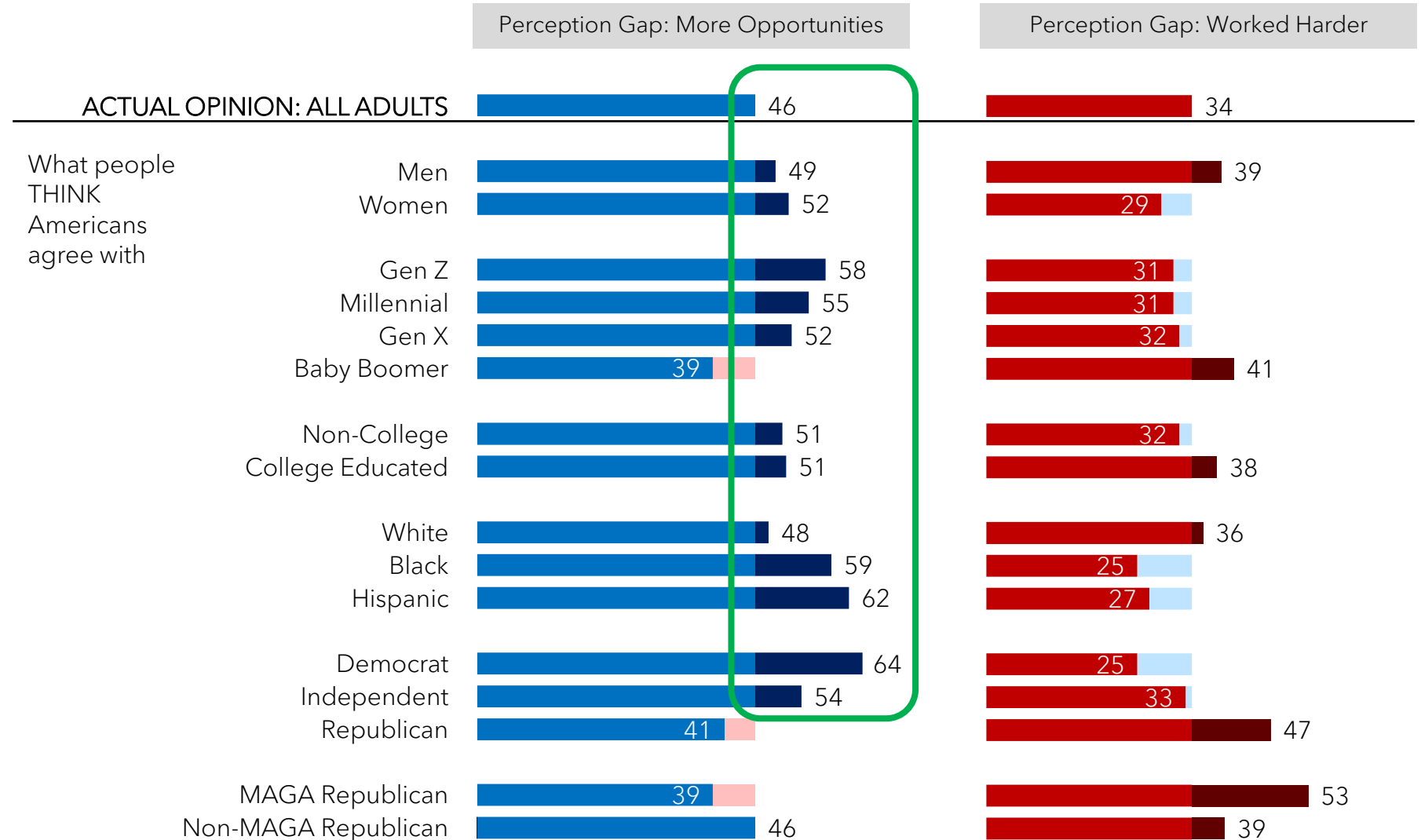
Women, younger Americans, Black and Hispanic adults, and Democrats are more likely to hold a progressive view on class and economic populism.



Perception Gap: Positive

Those most likely to hold a progressive view on class tend to be most likely to assume that more Americans think the same.

They end up overestimating agreement, suggesting this is an issue where the progressive viewpoint has a positive perception gap.



■ ■ Positive Perception Gap
■ ■ Perception Deficit

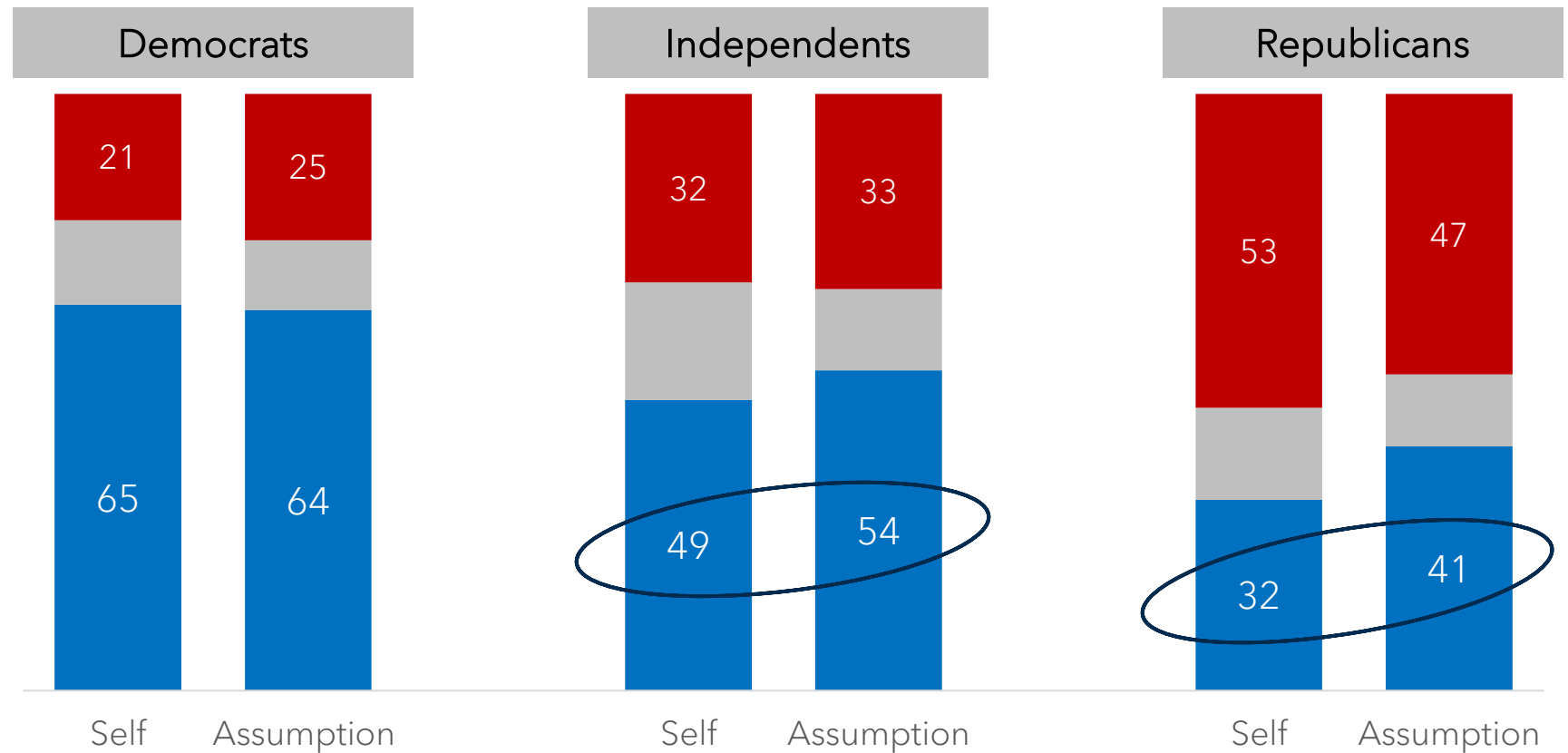
Democratic Confidence

With a positive perception gap, Democrats are more likely to assume that Americans think the same way that Democrats think.

Republicans and independents assume Americans are more progressive on this dimension, relative to their own views.

Difference in agreement and assumption by party ID

■ More opportunities ■ Not Sure ■ Worked harder





Transgender Freedom

Assumption: Perception Deficit

Transgender Freedom: Self View and Social Proof

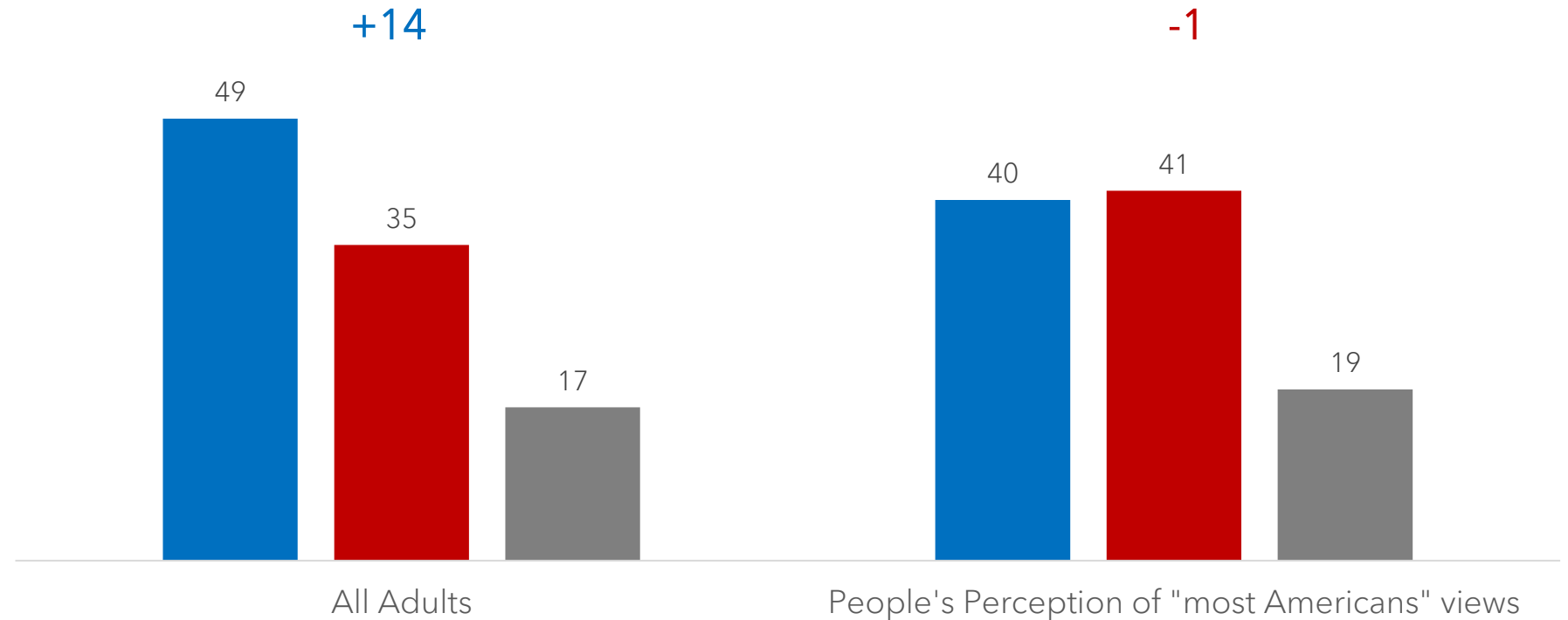
Nearly half of Americans hold a progressive view on transgender freedom.

But Americans divide evenly on what they assume most people think.

Left: Which of the following statements do you agree with most?
Right: And which statement do you think more people in America agree with?

Transgender people should have the freedom to be themselves and live their lives.

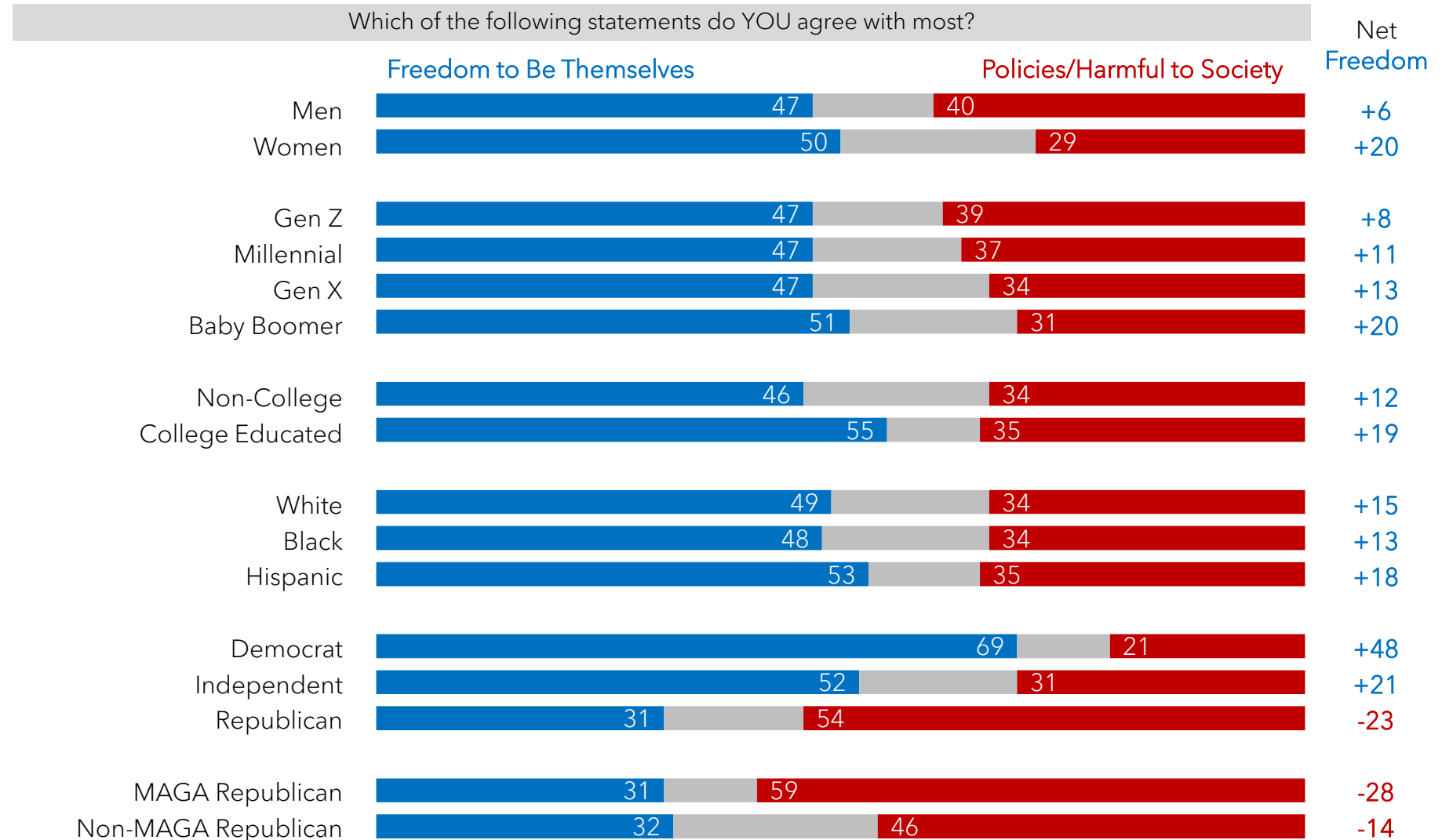
There should be policies in place to ensure transgender views and lifestyles do not harm society.



Most People Prefer Transgender Freedom

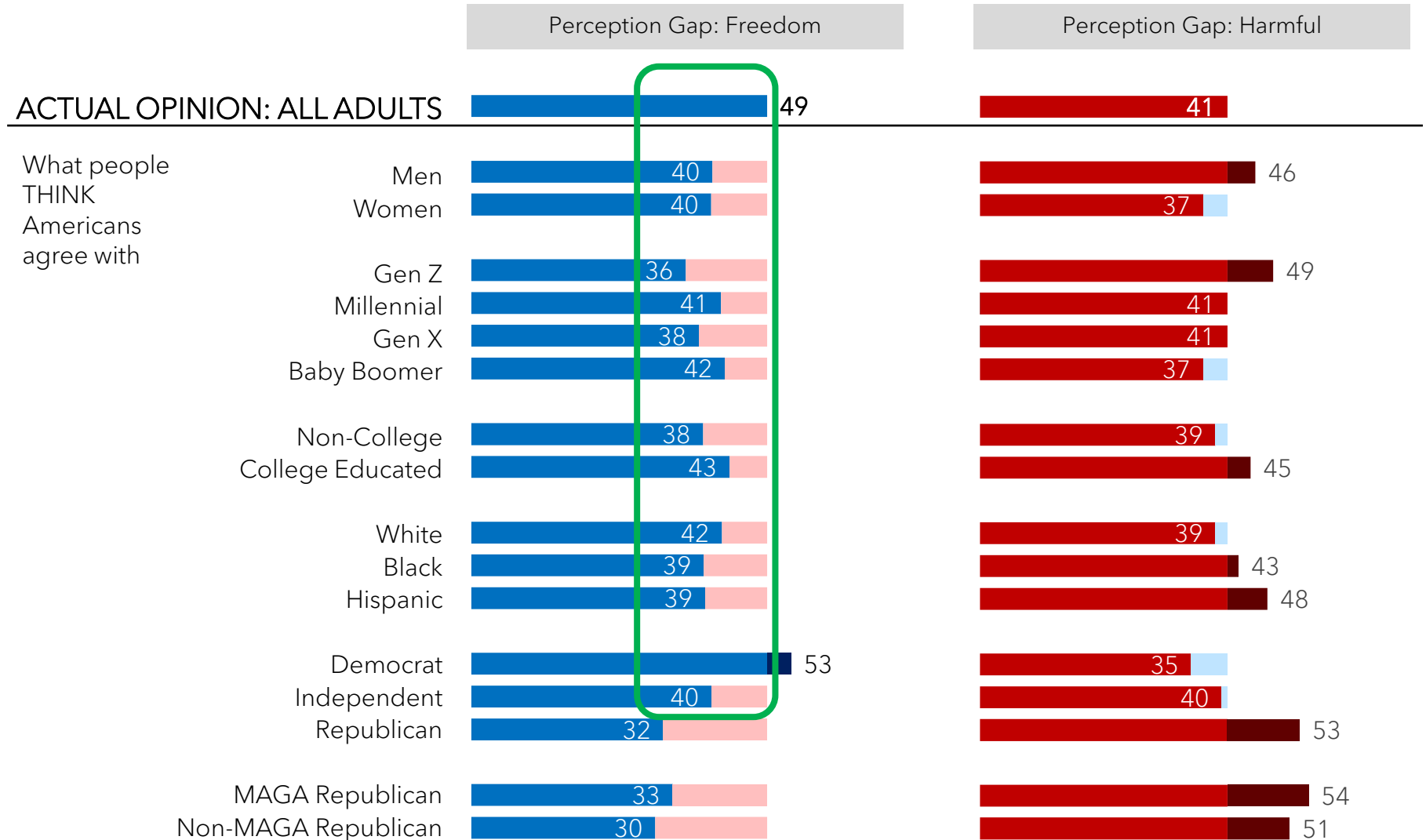
Americans across demographics hold a progressive worldview toward transgender freedom.

Women, college educated adults, Hispanic adults and Democrats are most likely to agree that transgender people should have the freedom to be themselves.



Perception Gap: Deficit

Across demographics, people underestimate the support for transgender freedom.



■ ■ Positive Perception Gap
■ ■ Perception Deficit

Change Since Last Year

Views have dramatically shifted on this since last summer, after \$200+ million in anti-trans advertising.

That investment changed people's assumptions, and some opinions.

But Americans still hold a progressive worldview.

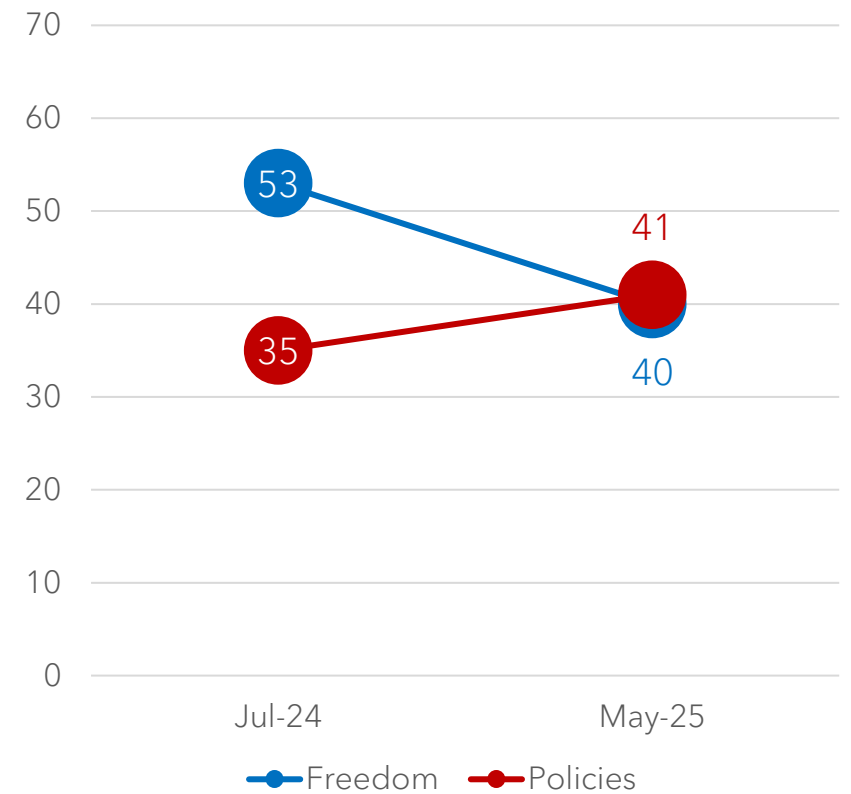
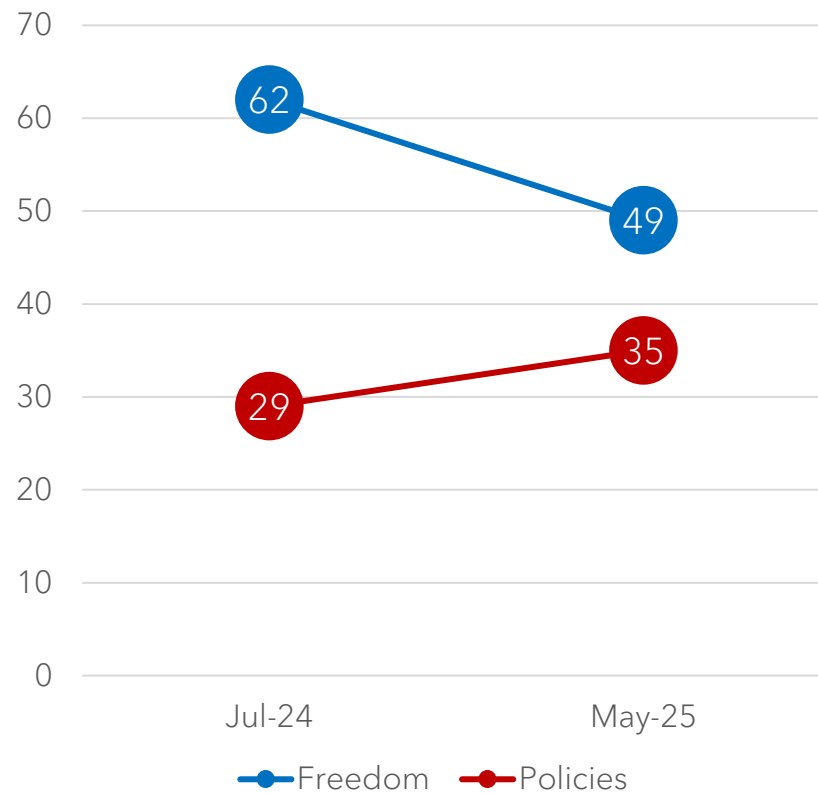


Which do you agree with most?

2024: Which do more people in your state agree with?
2025: Which do more people in America agree with?

Transgender people should have the freedom to be themselves and live their lives.

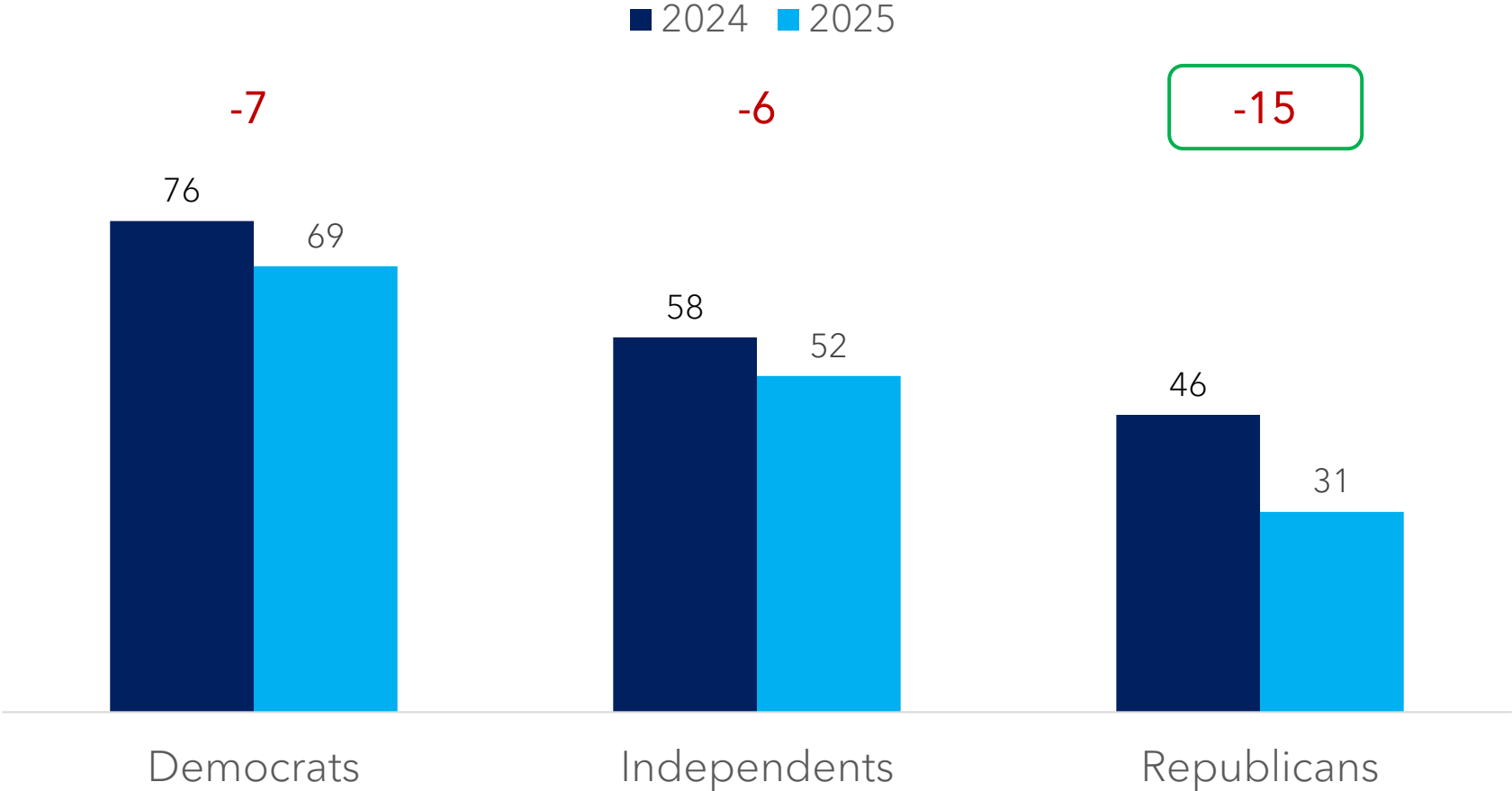
There should be policies in place to ensure transgender views and lifestyles do not harm society.



Change Since Last Year by Party

Views shifted across party lines, but most notably among Republicans.

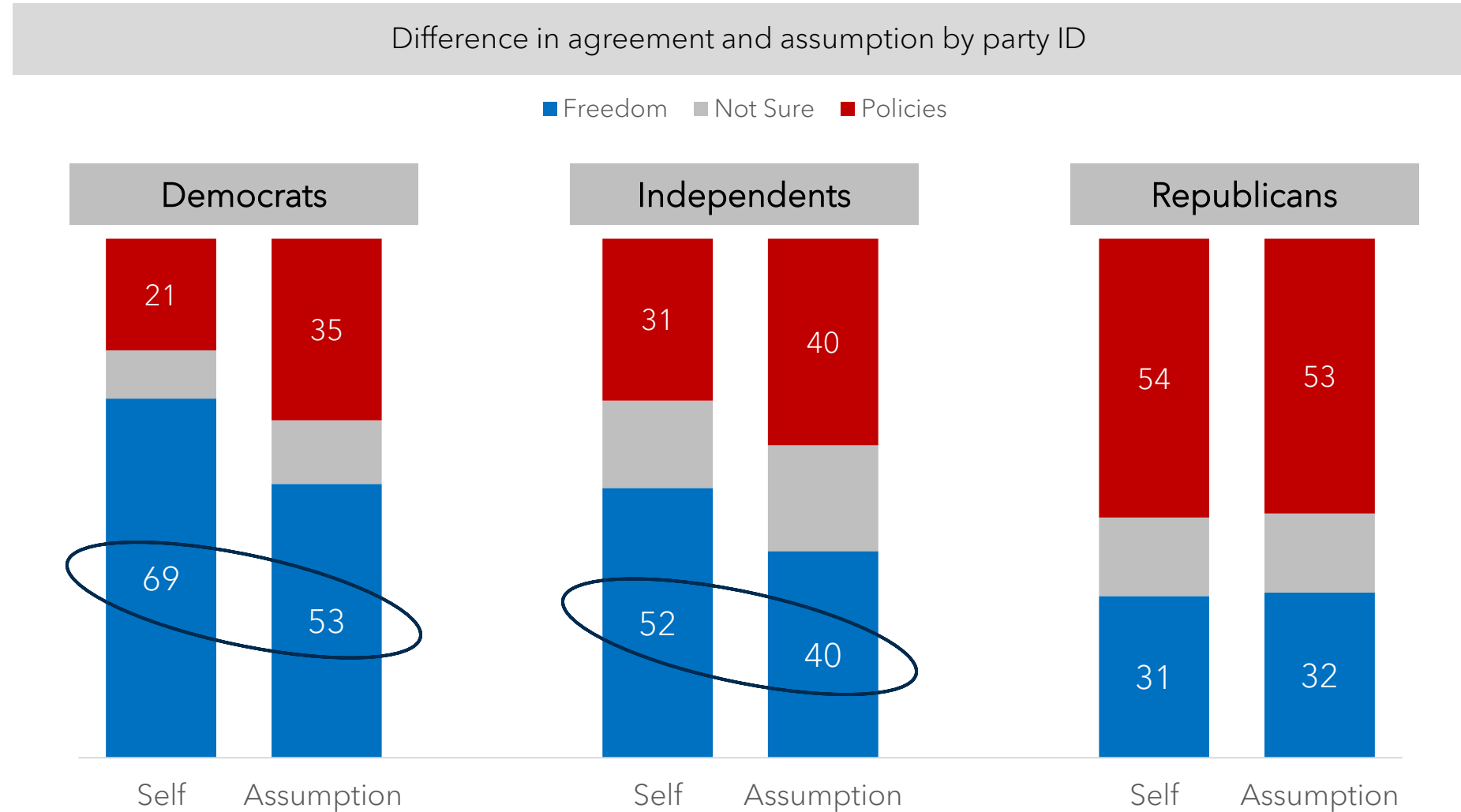
% Agree by Party with "Transgender people should have the freedom to be themselves and live their lives."



Republican Confidence

In this perception gap, Democrats and independents assume fewer Americans agree with them.

Republicans assume Americans hold the same view as them.



2024 Presidential Vote by State

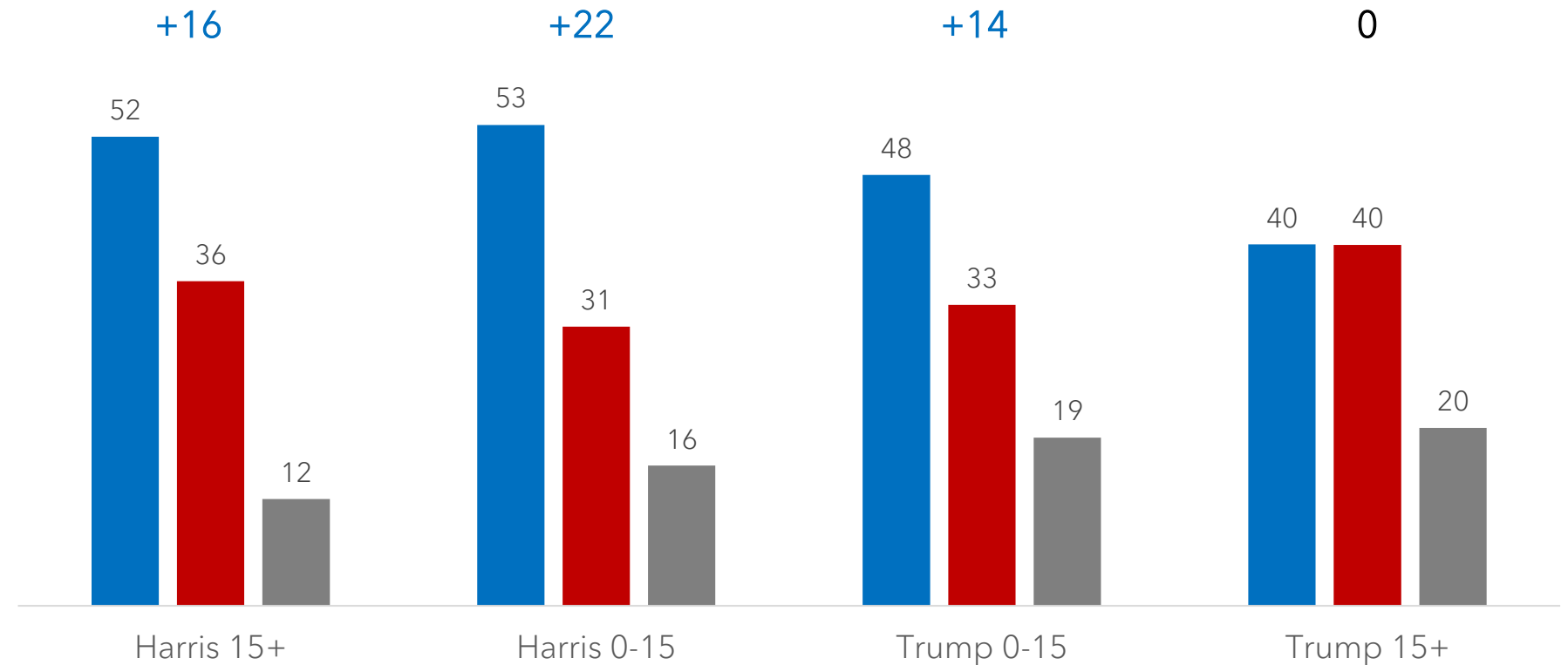
People divide evenly in states that Trump won by 15 points or more in 2024.

Across all other states, more people agree with transgender freedom.

Which of the following statements do you agree with most?

Transgender people should have the freedom to be themselves and live their lives.

There should be policies in place to ensure transgender views and lifestyles do not harm society.



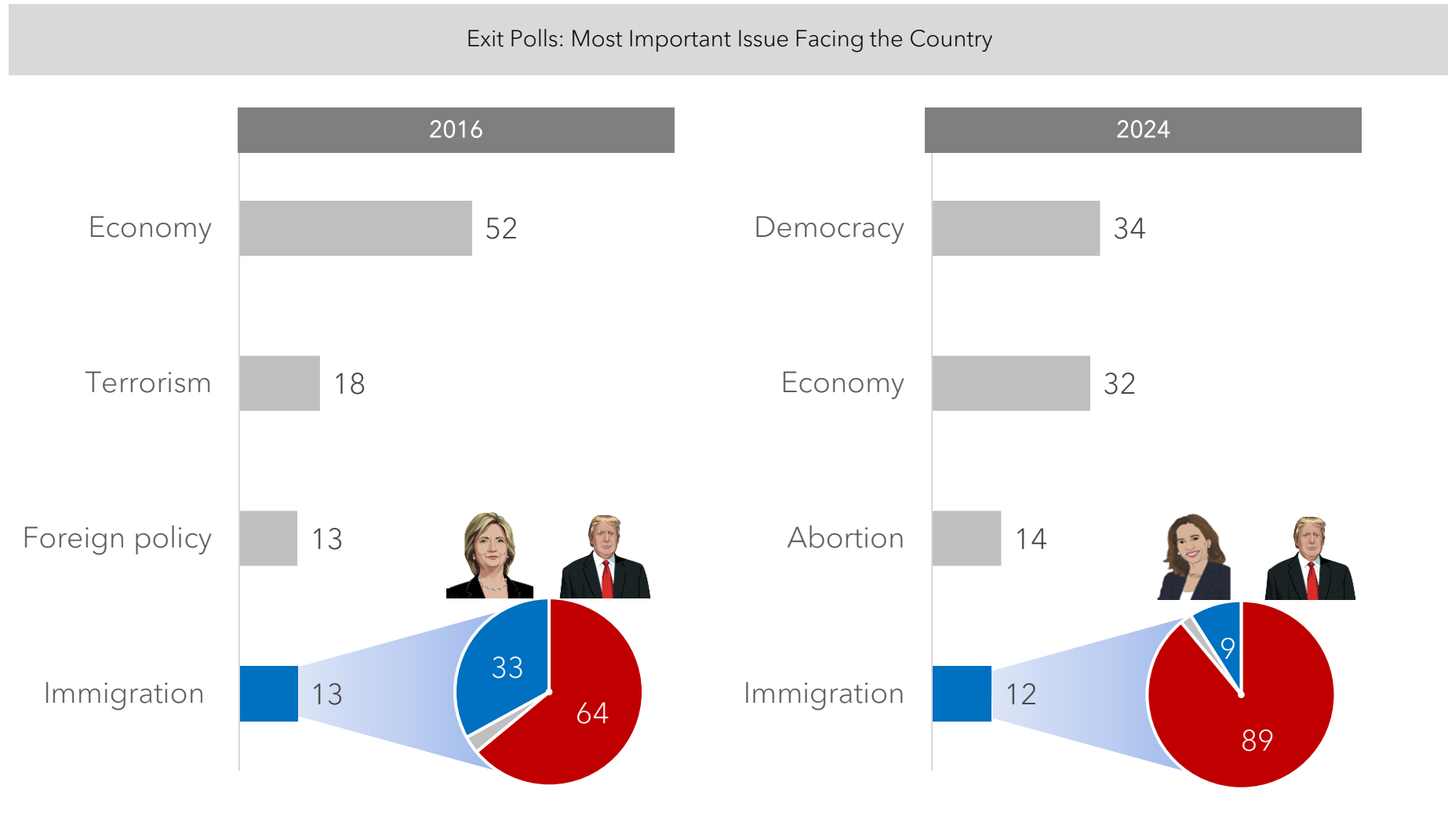


Immigration

Assumption: Perception Deficit

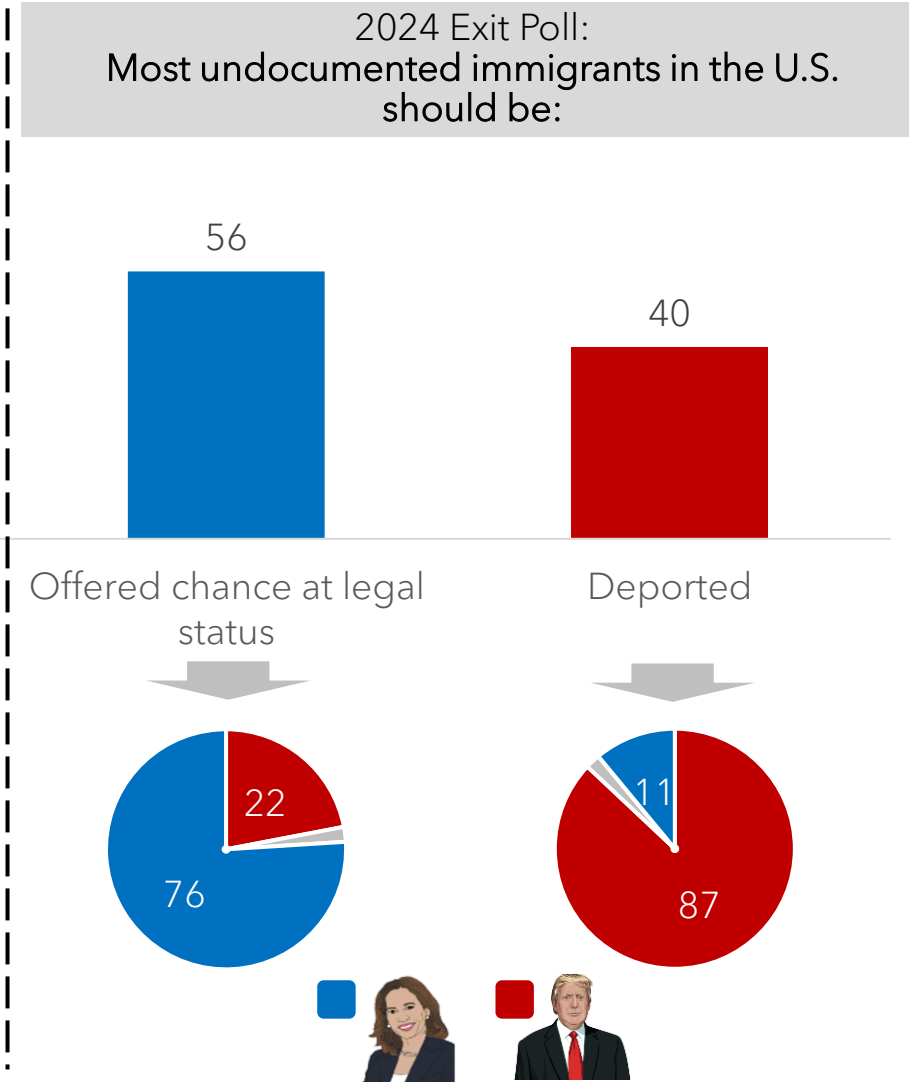
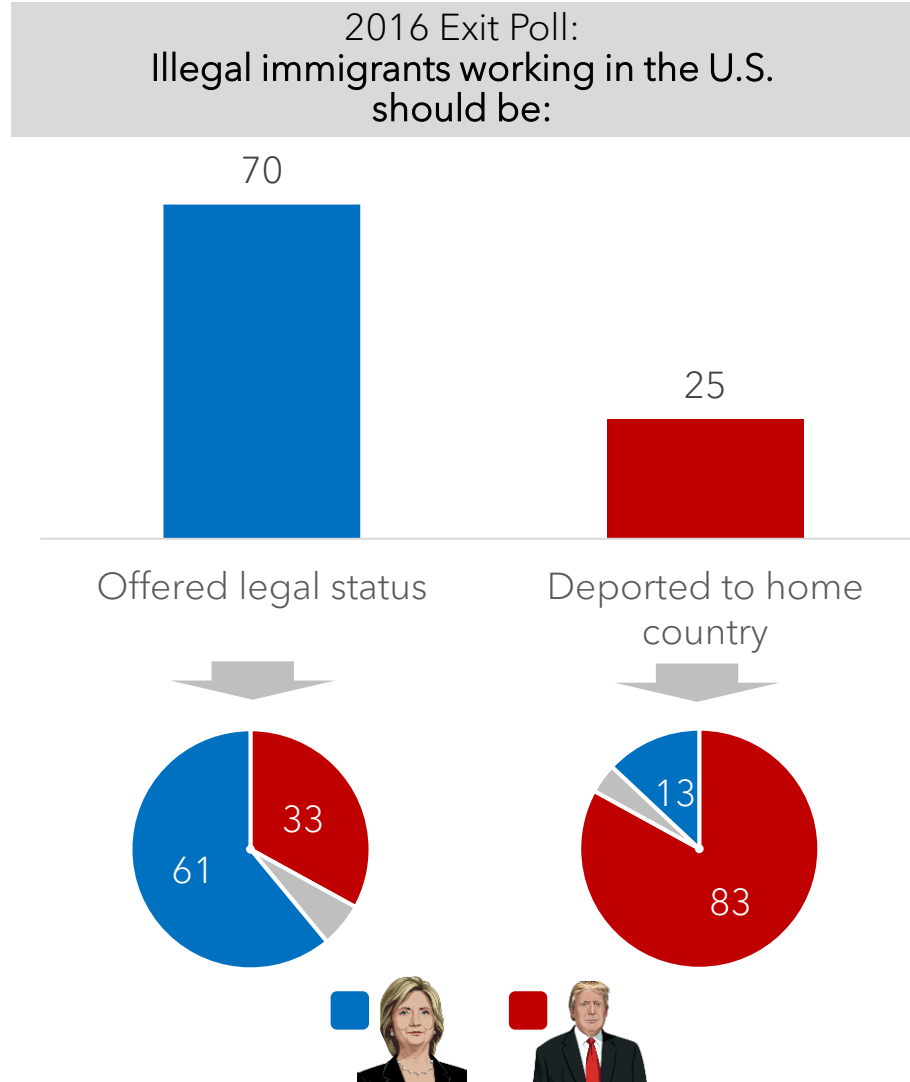
Context

As an issue, immigration broadly speaking has consistently ranked lower in importance. However, it has always been a top issue for Trump's base of support.



Context

Views have changed.
But chasing the polls has an opportunity cost with social proof.
“Deport” has always been Trump’s base core position.
When we appeal to “deport” in our messaging, even when sandwiched with other currently popular positions – we are appealing to Trump’s base.



Immigration Messaging Comparison

Do you agree or disagree with that position on this issue?

Republican	"Soft Dem" (1/2 Sample)	"Third Way" (1/2 Sample)
<p>Republicans in Congress say that crossing the border illegally is a crime, so every illegal immigrant is a criminal and they should all be deported. They say we need to build mass detention centers in Guantanamo Bay and along the border to house illegals waiting to get deported. We need to conduct immigration raids across the country to find illegals wherever they are. We cannot have a country if we do not have strong borders.</p>	<p>Democrats in Congress say people fleeing violence and poverty have a legal right to seek asylum in the United States. They are just searching for a better life, and we should welcome them with compassion and dignity. We need to reform our immigration system to be more humane and welcoming and make it easier for people to immigrate to the United States and provide a pathway to citizenship for those who are already here embedded in our communities.</p>	<p>Democrats in Congress say that illegal immigration is a problem. They say we are a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. We need to restore order at the border and urge immigration judges to process cases so we can decide who can come into our country and send home those who are not eligible under US law. We also need to deport illegal immigrants who have been convicted of violent crimes and create pathways to legal status for people who have been contributing to our communities for years and have a US citizen spouse and children.</p>
56% Agree, 44% Disagree	55% Agree, 45% Disagree	79% Agree, 21% Disagree

Generic Congressional Ballot	Heard Soft Dem	Heard Third Way
Total Democratic Candidate	50	50
Total Republican Candidate	50	50

Immigration: Self View and Social Proof

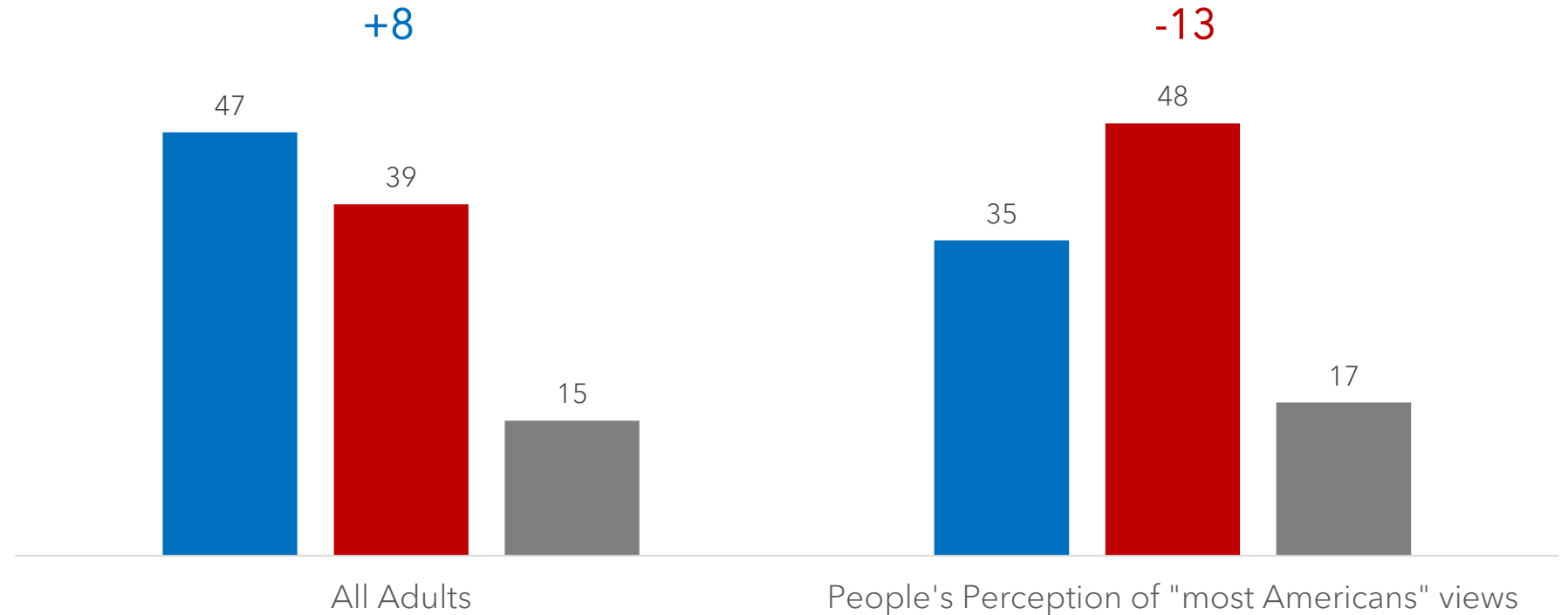
Nearly half of Americans agree that people fleeing violence and who seek asylum in the U.S. are searching for a better life and that we should welcome them with compassion and dignity.

However, the numbers flip when people consider what more people in America think.

Left: Which of the following statements do you agree with most?
Right: And which statement do you think more people in America agree with?

People fleeing violence and poverty who seek asylum in the United States are searching for a better life. We should welcome them with compassion and dignity.

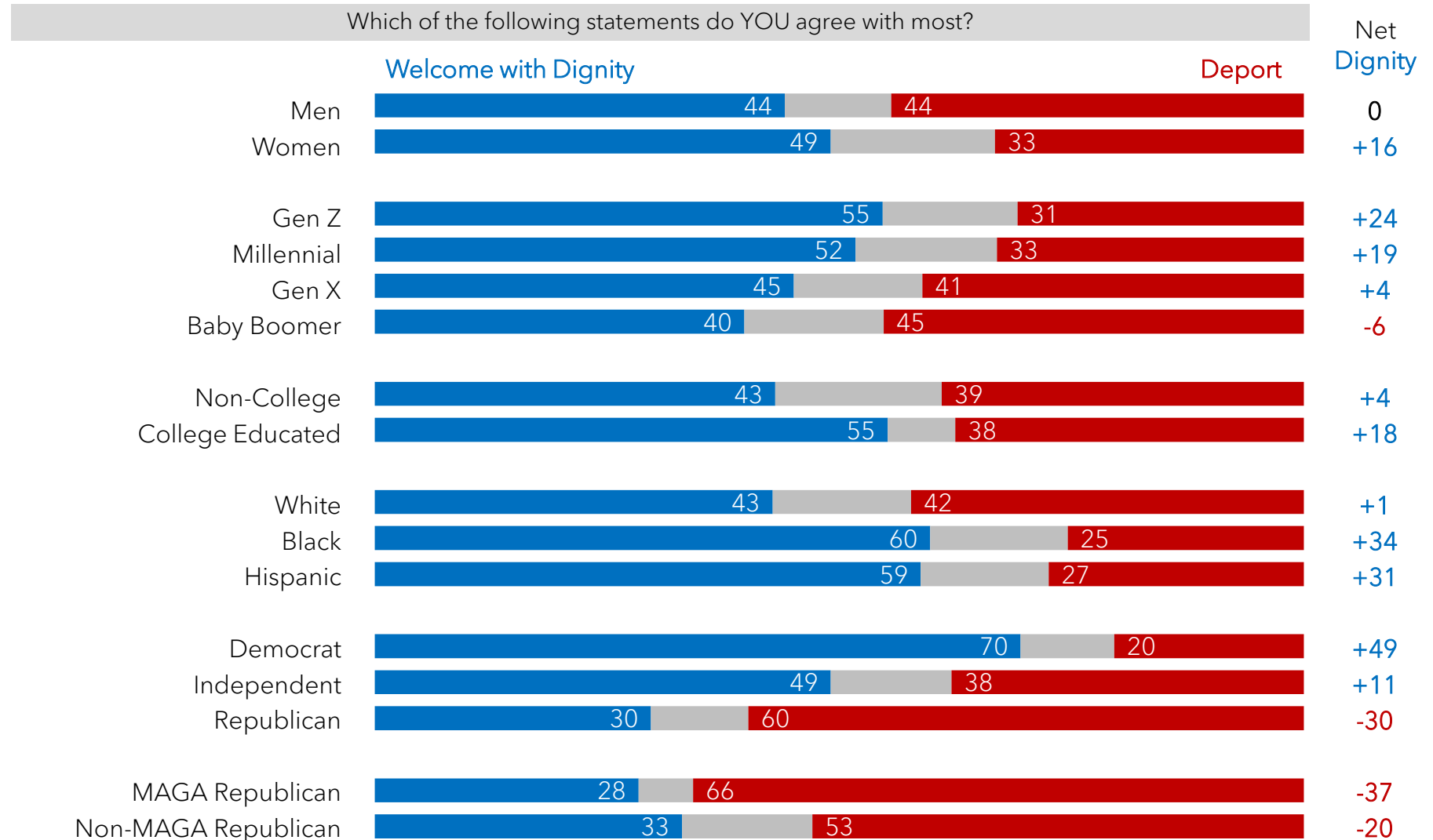
Every immigrant who crosses the border illegally is a criminal and should be deported. We cannot have a country if we do not have strong borders.



Most People Prefer Dignity and Compassion

Women, younger Americans, college-educated adults, Black, Hispanic, Democrats and independents are more likely to agree we should welcome people with compassion and dignity.

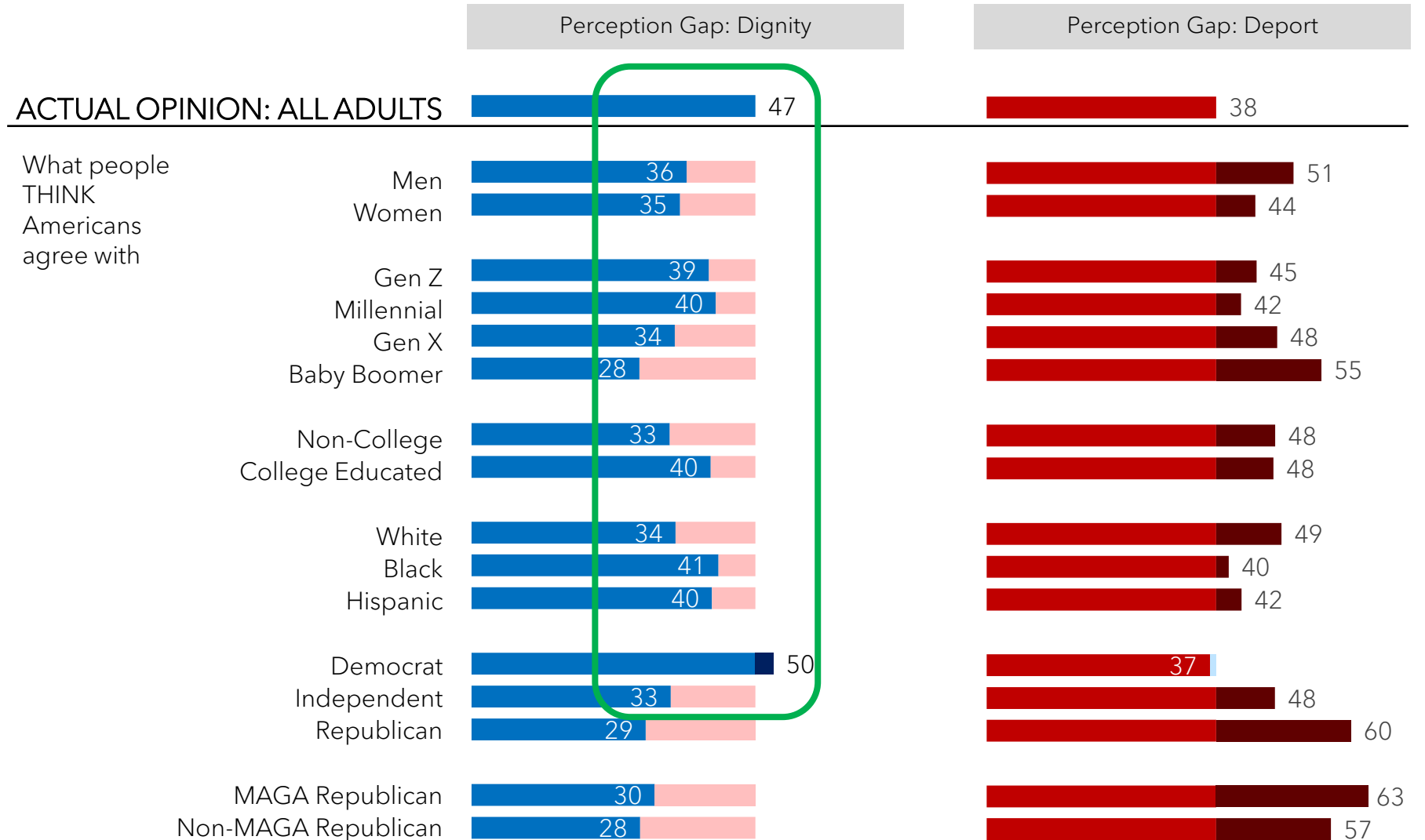
Only Baby Boomers and Republicans agree more that every person here illegally should be deported.



Perception Gap: Deficit

People across demographics dramatically underestimate how many Americans agree with a progressive worldview on immigration.

This issue is currently in a perception deficit.

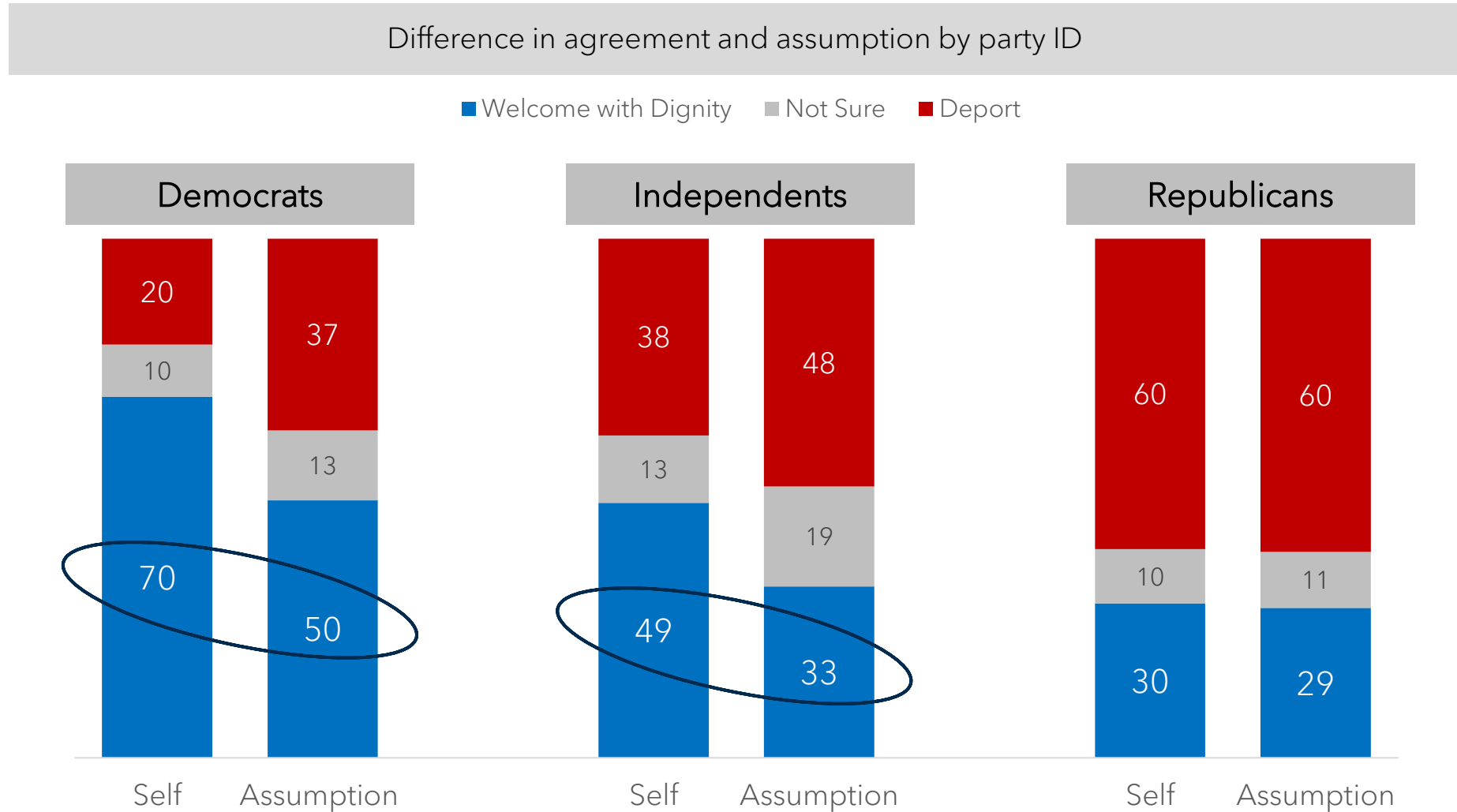


■ Positive Perception Gap
■ Perception Deficit

Republican Confidence

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Republicans assume Americans hold the same view as them.



2024 Presidential Vote by State

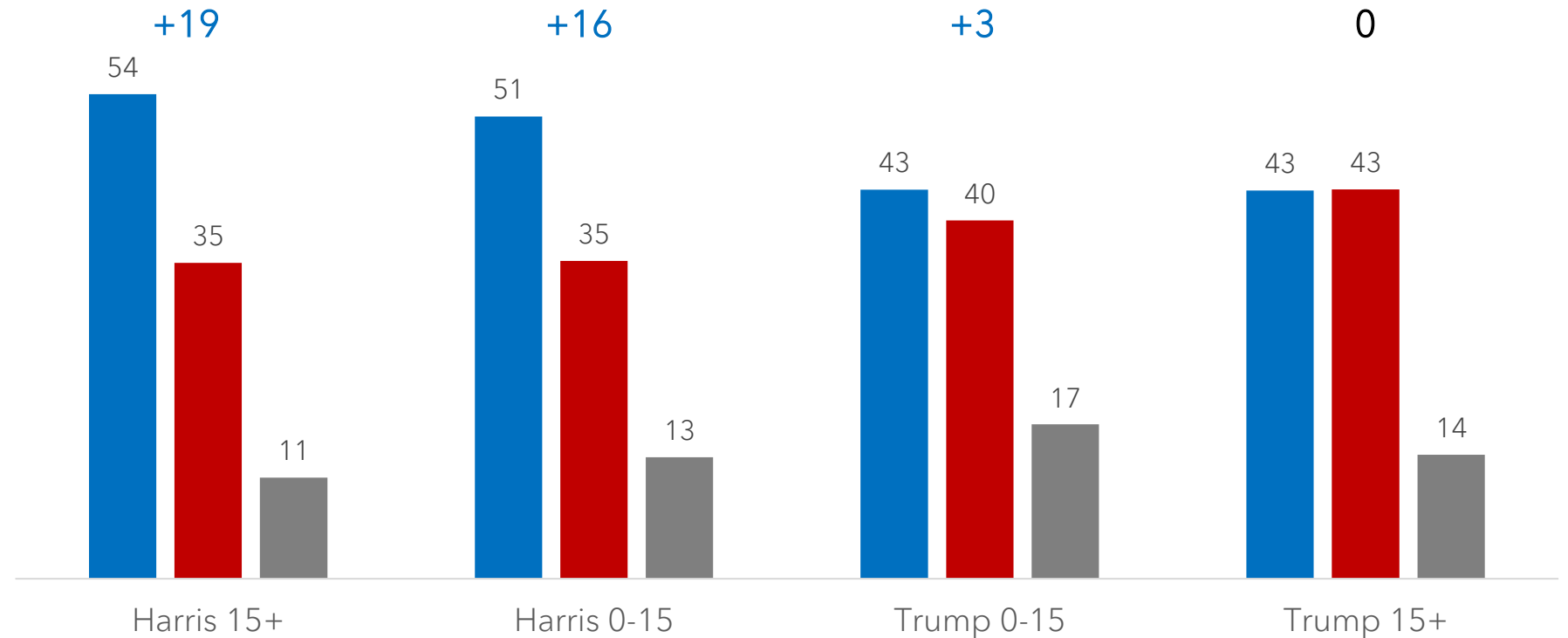
People divide evenly in states that Trump won by 15 points or more in 2024.

Across all other states, people agree more that we should welcome people with compassion and dignity.

Which of the following statements do you agree with most?

People fleeing violence and poverty who seek asylum in the United States are searching for a better life. We should welcome them with compassion and dignity.

Every immigrant who crosses the border illegally is a criminal and should be deported. We cannot have a country if we do not have strong borders.



Actions



Deportations become abductions

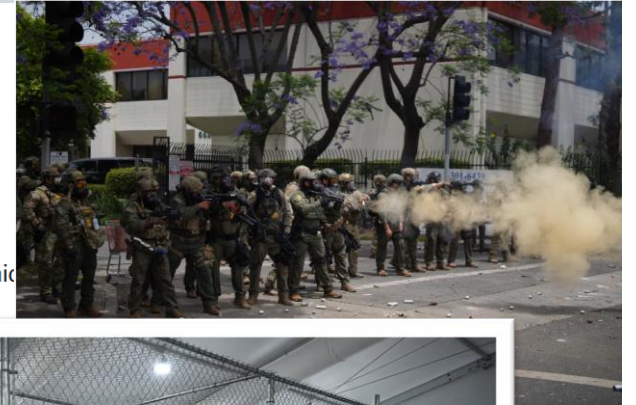


Immigration

National Guard to mobilize amid L.A. protests, Trump's border czar says

California leaders and Trump officials have openly traded barbs amid immigration raids that have sparked clashes between police and demonstrators in Los Angeles.

Updated June 7, 2025



Detention centers become concentration camps



Actions and Reactions

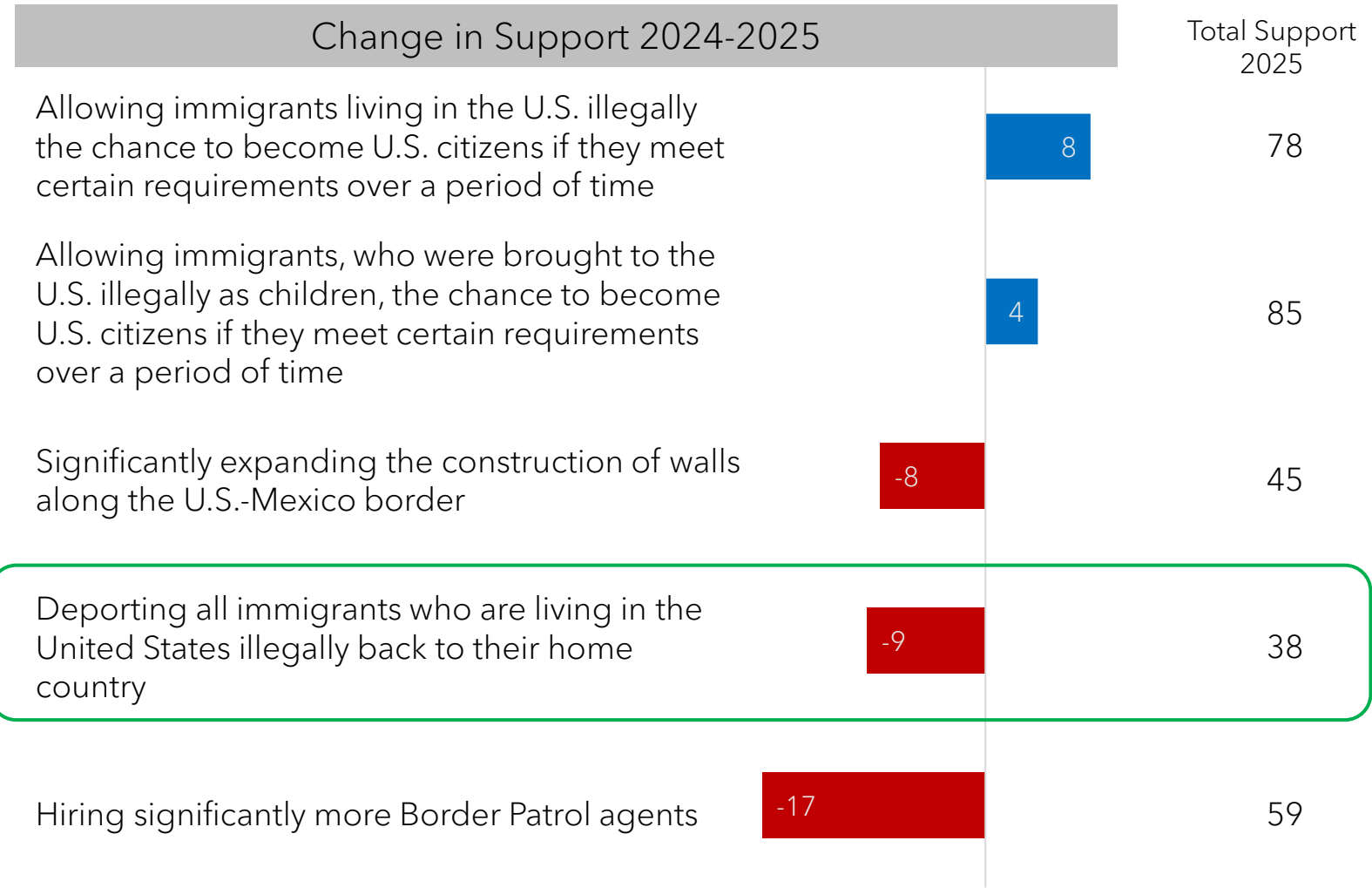


Nash

Philadelphia, PA

Atlanta, GA

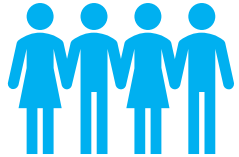
Actions Change Opinions





Considerations and Implications

Potential Causes of Perception Gaps



Stability of Majority Opinion

Stability may create ingrained assumptions.

Instability may lead people to seek other indicators.



Position of Party in Power

Winning effect may cause people to assume most people share the party in power's preferences.



Media Consumption

Media bubbles may provide false sense of consensus.

Those who are Unsure Lean Toward Group Consensus

People who are unsure on each question lean toward thinking more Americans agree with the perceived majority opinion.

If we do not assert that we are the winning team, we won't attract these folks to our side.

In ambiguous situations, people often rely on group consensus to form their own judgments.

Muzafer Sherif's Autokinetic Effect Study (1936)

Perceptions of what Americans think on each issue, among people who say they are "not sure" on each issue, respectively.

Wealthy Americans achieved their success because they were given more opportunities than others.

Transgender people should have the freedom to be themselves and live their lives

People fleeing violence & poverty who seek asylum in the United States are searching for a better life. We should welcome them with compassion & dignity.

Wealthy Americans achieved their success because they worked harder than others.

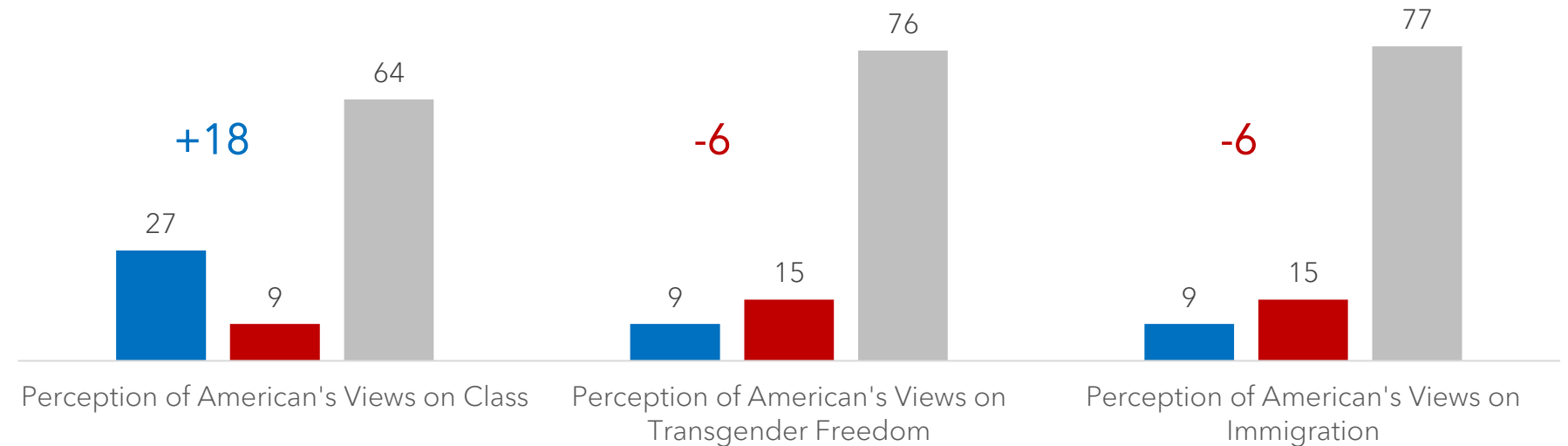
There should be policies in place to ensure transgender views and lifestyles do not harm society

Every immigrant who crosses the border illegally is a criminal and should be deported. We cannot have a country if we do not have strong borders.

Among the 19% who are not sure themselves on this question:

Among the 17% who are not sure themselves on this question:

Among the 15% who are not sure themselves on this question:



Amplifying Success Stories

Michigan **Advance** →

HEALTH CARE ENVIRONMENT BUSINESS + LABOR CIVIL RIGHTS CRIMINAL JUSTICE POLITICS + GOV

EDUCATION LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

Plymouth-Canton community defends school district diversity policies amid outside attacks

BY: LEAH CRAIG - JUNE 11, 2025 3:23 PM



Members of the public fill the Plymouth-Canton Community Schools Board of Education meeting, June 10, 2025 | Photo by Leah Craig

Community members gathered at the Plymouth-Canton Community Schools Board of Education meeting Tuesday to **voice their vehement support for the district's inclusive policies and leadership.** Attendance extended beyond the boardroom into the hallway.

The outpouring of public support comes on the heels of a contentious May 27 meeting, when six individuals used far-right and religious rhetoric to lambaste the school board. Further examination of social media accounts showed that **these agitators were flown in from out of state** specifically for the Plymouth-Canton Board meeting.

The individuals in question were **paid operatives of Turning Point USA...**

Challenge: Some Cede the Narrative

Democrats Are Wary of Playing Into Trump's Hands by Supporting 'No Kings,' L.A. Protests

Some leaders are feeling the long shadow of 2020 demonstrations that sparked GOP backlash

Wall Street Journal 6/14/25

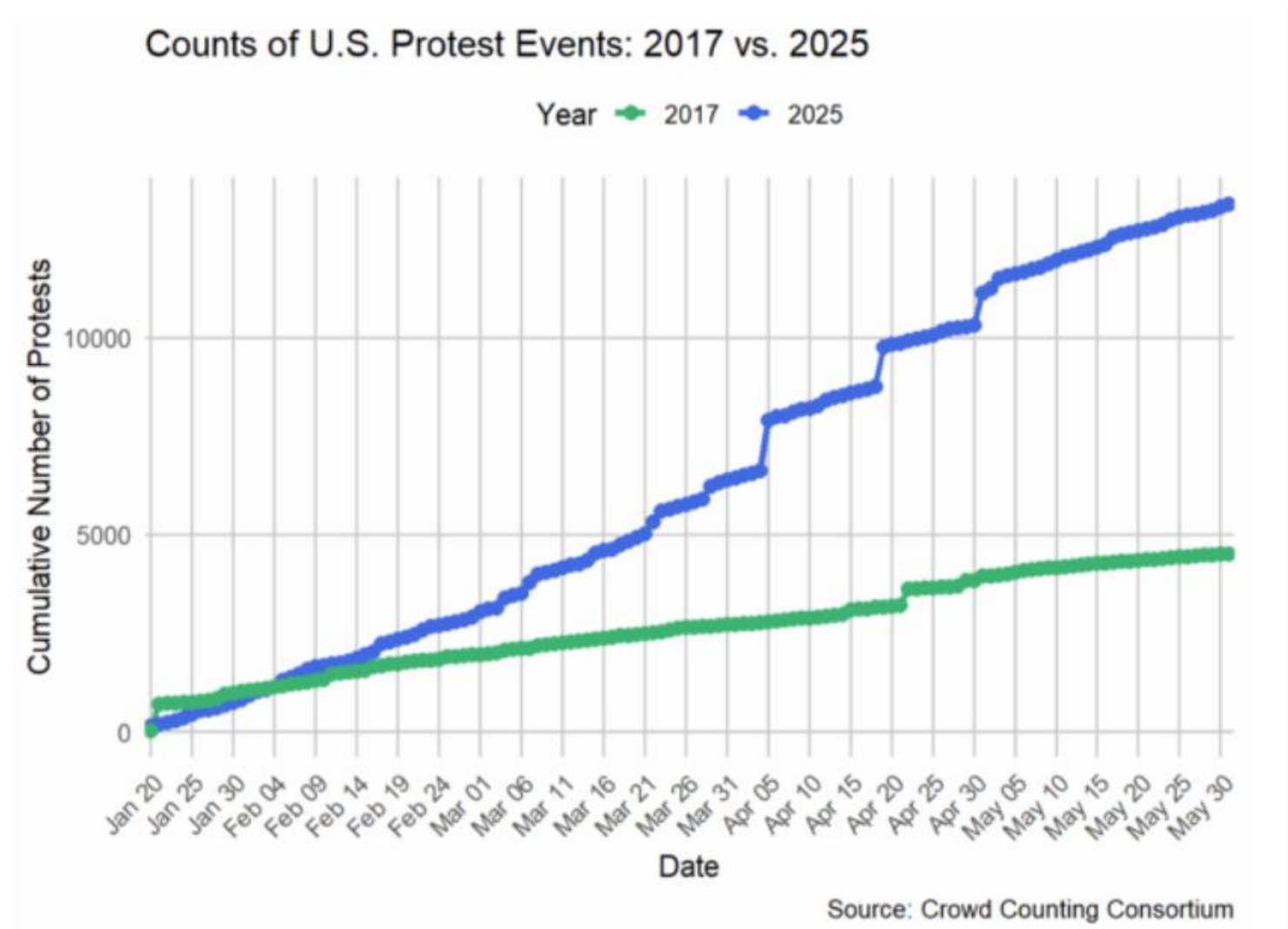
"There are many Democrats who don't want to touch the immigration question with a 10-foot pole, but when you let your opposition define the narrative, then perception becomes reality," said Tory Gavito, president of Way to Win, a left-leaning political strategy group.

"The dangers outweigh the potential upsides for Democrats and for Trump, which is not a contradiction," said Matt Bennett, co-founder of the center-left think tank Third Way. "Trump could go too far; he always does. And the protests could also—and already kind of have—go sideways for us."

People are Mobilizing

If we support this,
we build social
proof and our
winning team.

If we sideline it, we
cede it.



Research and Tactics

Other issues that may have a Positive Perception Gap.

Potentially Social Security, medical debt, climate change, public education, gun violence.

Other issues that may have a Perception Deficit, or evolving attitudes.

Potentially foreign policy and artificial intelligence.

Simulating social proof. Measuring its impact.

Polling can measure a perception gap and simulate social proof in messaging. Real world RCT's needed to test impact of intentionally using social proof as a strategy.

- In messaging: evoking people joining together
- Testing self and assumed agreement

- Expanding and leveraging participatory media.
- Centering our own story-telling.

For more information

Email me: Jonathan@VossStrategy.com

Dig into the toplines and crosstabs yourself:

<https://tinyurl.com/2kuw7ppt>



Details on September's Community Poll:

<https://tinyurl.com/yeyf9k2m>

