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FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Democrats And Independents
On The Economy



Methodology

On October 20, 2022, GBAO conducted three focus groups online with Democratic and Independent voters who varied across demographics—age, education, and race.



Strong Democratic voters in
Pennsylvania



Weak Democratic voters in North
Carolina



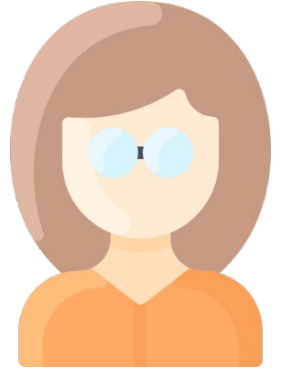
Independents and Independent-lean
Democratic voters in Arizona

Key Takeaways

- Democrats are acutely worried about abortion, extremist Republicans, and political division.
- Some see economic improvements, while others feel pessimistic.
- Discussing the “middle class” further reveals pessimism about economic inequality.
- Democrats see their own party as looking out for “regular people,” while Republicans look out for the wealthy.
- But knowledge of Democrats’ economic policies is extremely limited.

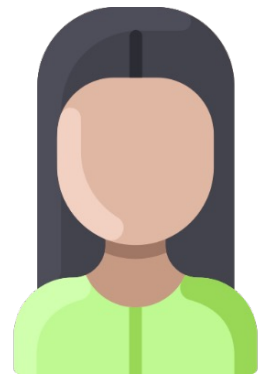
Democrats Generally Unhappy About The Direction Of The Country; Concerns About Division, Abortion Rights, And Extremist Republicans

"I said anxious and most of that comes from just, I feel like my version of reality is completely different from Doug Mastriano's version of reality, right? The guy running for Governor of Pennsylvania. He like is a January 6th-er and election denier. And just how is this person living in the same reality as me? How can we both exist in this place? How did it come to this?" – PA voter



"I watch Handmaid's Tale too, and that's why I'm scared. I feel like it's a slippery slope to getting all those laws [on] our bodies that when I think about what those freedoms are, talk about other countries that have it worse. That's where I feel like we're going with restrictions on abortion." – NC voter

"I said uneasy because there's a lot going on in the world, generally speaking, that could have a negative impact on everyone. I just feel like [on] some recent topics, we've just been sliding backwards. Abortion is a huge one. Election deniers. It's like, 'Let's just build a bridge and move forward, people. That was two years ago.' So I just feel like there's stuff that keeps coming back from the past that keeps haunting us and I just want to move forward and be more optimistic. And we've come out of the pandemic, let's get going, and I just hate looking back." – AZ voter



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There Is Some Limited Optimism About The Economy “Improving” Or A Sign Of “Biden Having Some Good Ideas”

“Well, I feel good because I feel, despite what a lot of people say, I think Biden has the right ideas. He's trying to do the right thing with **abortion, with poverty, with the border, with inflation, with gas.** It all looks really bad, but that's because that's how the system was set up. It's set up so that whatever you would like, if you're in power, you're not going to get it. So, in my opinion, in other words, he's not a king, so he can't do everything in one night.” – NC voter

“I said variable because everything's cyclical. I think **we had the crash in 2008, the housing crash.** How that affected everybody, there are a lot of people that lost their jobs, the economy was down at that point. And then slowly but surely, we kept building it back up, building it back up. That's how it always goes, every time... And something gets really high, really high, really high. The economy's going great and then for some reason it comes down for something.” – NC voter

“I think going through two years of the COVID pandemic, **just with all the uncertainty of are we going to get sick? Are we going to die? Getting through that. And now we're somewhat, pretty much back to normal.** We're able to travel and go different places. So kind of the usual political rhetoric that's going on right now is just going back to normal. And I kind of feel like we're going through just kind of a downtime right now. But I mean, as Americans, we always figure stuff out, and we always right the ship.” – AZ voter

“Most things are on the upswing. Yes, I know there's inflation. Temporary thing. We got jobs like crazy, wages are up, **inflation cuts into that. But again, that's a temporary thing** and I've been really active with a whole lot of different people over the last year or so. And I'm seriously optimistic about the young people in this country.” – AZ voter

“I mean, because just the amount of people that said last year or possibly even over the last two years who were on unemployment, how the numbers have changed. There are less people, at least around where I live at, the numbers have improved. **There are not as many people on unemployment as there was before.**” – PA voter

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Many Feel Younger People Have It Harder Now Than Their Own Or Their Parents' Generations

"I feel like there was a lot less stress back then. Things weren't as expensive. The world wasn't as dangerous. Streets a block from me weren't as dangerous. I just think life was a lot easier back then." – AZ voter

"I think the people younger than [me] have a lot harder road ahead of them as far as saving money, buying a house. I mean, it's obvious. I mean that we had a lot more options when we were younger than the generation after us... Well, I think rents were lower, the price of living was lower. Opportunities were greater. I think that **just getting ahead and being able to afford a lifestyle that everybody aspires to is much more difficult these days than it was when I was younger.**" – PA voter

"Thinking about debt, I work for a university and seeing all the students taking on debt and how they feel like they have to take on debt to get ahead and then graduate. **All of my students before the pandemic now graduate and get into jobs where they don't even make enough money to pay their student loan debt back. And that wasn't the case for me when I graduated. And I think it's only going to get worse.** It has gotten worse because of the pandemic, I think. But it was still the case before. We have seen inflation in this past year. But I mean, honestly, all of the problems that make inflation really bad were there before. It was people's wages not keeping up, rents going up, debt and banks and profiteering off of people. Inflation goes up now, and we don't have any of the tools to handle it." – PA voter

"... [My son] wants to get a place on his own. But I mean, **unless he has a roommate, there is no way he's going to be able to afford to live on his own right now with student loans and with rent and his car.** I mean, it's very unfortunate because I really do feel for this generation that's coming up right now." – PA voter

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Most Use Personal Indicators Rather Than Macro Ones To Determine How The Economy Is Doing



"... I'm just not sure, to be honest. I'm not an economist, so I don't know. A lot of times they'll say the economy's great. I don't think they base that on average people like us, I think they base it on the stocks and what the stocks are doing. And I'm sorry, I don't have stocks. I don't invest in stocks, so that doesn't mean anything to me. Again, it's a rich people's game, that's what it is." – PA voter

"I was thinking more of things that I can see, things that our family and friends can afford. So for instance, gas going down. Obviously seeing all the signs that people are hiring, and the good about that is being able to see minimum wage definitely does need to go up." – PA voter

"... Ever since that housing crisis, the state froze my teacher's salary. And if you adjust for inflation, now I'm making less than I did then. And I'm like a year 25 veteran teacher. And I would like to think that if the economy was going well, they might have extra money to put finally into teachers that have been working our asses off. And so I get real resentful about that and politics." – NC voter

"To me, it can come down to the basics as in eggs and milk, they're just ridiculously priced. I agree with people when they say things are going to level out, but I don't see [for] certain... And I hope I'm wrong, but I just don't see some things going down in price. I just think that they like getting that \$3.50, \$4.00 a gallon for milk." – NC voter



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Democrats See Their Party As Focused On Investing In Everyone, Particularly “Regular,” “Average” People

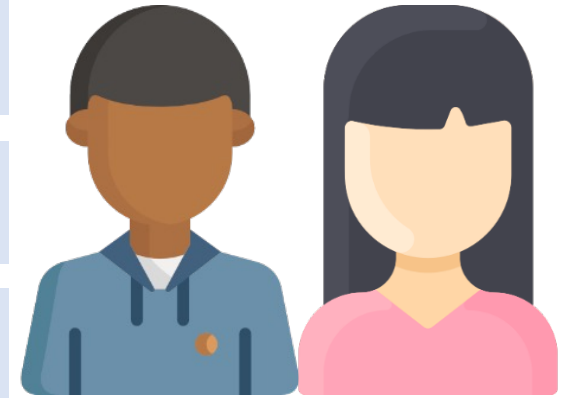
“I think it’s [the Democratic Party agenda] more empathetic to the average person, and they care more.” – NC voter

“Investing in green technologies. Seems like Democrats are more for having higher minimum wages for everyday people. I kind of feel like they're doing more to invest in the average person.” – NC voter

“I think number one, I think they try to promote the growth of unions. And number two, I think they try to get into infrastructure to try to create jobs to help bridges, roads and stuff like that.” – NC voter

“It seems to be investment in infrastructure, [and] the people benefit? A number of people. So I'm thinking about the infrastructure bill. I live near a bridge that collapsed recently and seeing that we have just failing infrastructure. It's not pinching pennies, it's not trying to cut and make things more efficient. It is investing in things that are important... Our buildings, our infrastructure, our ways to get around, our services, our health care, things like that. **Investing in things that benefit a lot of people instead of a very few.**” – PA voter

“I definitely feel that what they said earlier about it actually benefiting people, regular everyday people as opposed to just kind of lining their pockets. I like the fact that they're trying to push for increasing the minimum wage. The fact that Biden did pass the helping out with student loan debt. The fact that they did introduce the Affordable Healthcare Act. These are things that affect people, that can help people that need them. Lowering the cost of medications was something... This was something that didn't affect me years ago, but now it affects me and our families. And so to be able to say, ‘Yes, I can see it, it's affecting me.’ This is great. As opposed to we're going to take it away, we're not even going to think about it or discuss it.” – PA voter



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The Democratic Approach Is Like “A Dog” – Loyal, Caring; The Republican Approach Is Compared To A “Snake,” “Vulture,” Or “Pig”



Democratic Party Approach

“A Dog. Loyal, loving, caregiving, always at your side.” – PA voter

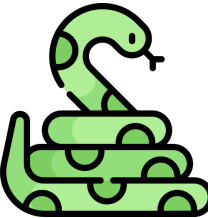
“I think a dog is a great one just because dogs are typically loyal and very caring. And I feel like more Democrats feel that way about the people, the American people, versus maybe the Republican Party.” – NC voter

“Dolphin. Because dolphins hang together. They take care of each other. When dolphins [are] in distress, the other ones gather around and try to take care of the problem. They've even been known to get divers who are out to cut nets that dolphins have been trapped in, and they work together as a group to get things done.” – AZ voter

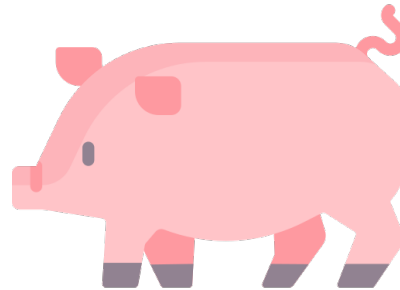
Republican Party Approach

“Shark.” – PA voter

“Vultures.” – PA voter



“[I] would actually say a snake, because they kind of move around the background and they'll bite.” – PA voter



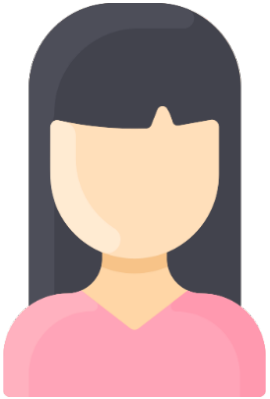
“A pig. They're greedy, they can only think about themselves.” – NC voter

“A leech. Just draining. Yeah, just draining what you have. But I think I would just more so describe the Republican Party as one that just tries to do whatever they want at any means necessary.” – NC voter

“I love animals. I think they [Republicans] are worse than any of these. **Because animals are like innocent, they don't have those intentions.**” – NC voter

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However, Few Democrats Can Describe Legislative Victories Like The Inflation Reduction Act, And Next To No One Can Name Its Components



"I'm sure there's a lot of stuff in it, and I haven't had time to do any research to figure out all the different things. Plus everybody kind of covered some of those pieces, but yeah, there's a lot. I don't hold my breath until the opera lady sings. I'm like, 'Let's wait till everything's signed in and then I will celebrate.'" – AZ voter

"[Heard of] one called the infrastructure bill, but it has another name, but I don't remember it." – PA voter

"Kind of, sort of." – NC voter

"With the media and the news and this and that, you get a lot of crosstalk of everything but that. And that's why people never heard of it, because it's not sexy, and it doesn't sell ads. So they're not going to lead with it, and they're not going to constantly talk about what you just read. I think it's all great. It sounds wonderful, and it sounds [like] something that's great. **But when was the last time anyone heard anyone talk about it?**" – NC voter



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Inflation Reduction Act Components

- a) Capping insulin costs for seniors to \$35 a month and capping annual out-of-pocket costs for prescription drugs at \$2,000 a year
- b) Giving Medicare the power to negotiate for lower prescription drugs prices
- c) Requiring large profitable corporations that pay little to no federal taxes to pay a minimum of 15%
- d) Lowering health insurance premiums by an average of \$2,400 a year for people who buy their insurance on their own
- e) Reducing the deficit by over \$300 billion
- f) Providing tax incentives to create more manufacturing jobs in the U.S.
- g) Increasing enforcement of current tax laws to crack down on tax evasion by individuals and corporations
- h) Providing tax credits to expand clean energy production like solar and wind power

People Are Surprised And Like The Inflation Reduction Act; Even If Some Don't See Themselves Reflected In The Programs, They Assume The Economy Will Benefit

"It gives me hope, not just for me, but for other people that are in dire need of it. I do recall some news articles, reading them, that there was somebody that couldn't afford their medication every month, so they were having to skip it. That's something that I had to do, and so to see this, it's just, thank God for something to say it's finally here, but what took so long? Then you look at who was voted in and them striking it." – PA voter

"I do think it will be helpful. I've heard people saying that, for example, the insulin thing— I'm a diabetic and despite the grays not yet a senior. I'm no longer on insulin but when I was first diagnosed and I had to buy insulin, I was like okay, so I buy this and maybe I just have to pay my rent late. You have to make those choices. I think it is a good thing. I still think there could be more done. But it's a step in the right direction at least." – NC voter

"I feel like everything on that list is very, I think it's beneficial, but I don't think it'll be tremendously beneficial to me where I am right here." – NC voter

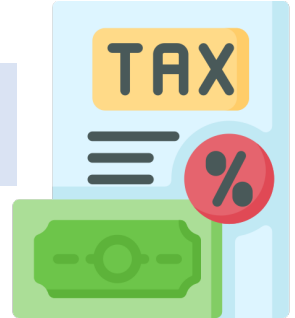
"I think it's promising, but I don't really see any benefits to me necessarily unless I was out of a job or something, then I would probably get the health insurance. But otherwise, I don't fit into the Medicare. I don't use insulin. And then the other things are more like for businesses and things like that." – AZ voter

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Democrats Also See The Republican Approach As Looking Out For The Wealthy

"[Moderator: What is the Republican Party's plan to improve the economy?] Probably to lower taxes on the companies and the people that have a lot of money." – AZ voter

"Yeah, probably a lot of deregulation for policies, for just big corporations and stuff. Letting them be less restricted on certain things." – AZ voter



"Exploitation. Take from Peter to give to Paul. Take away, pinch pennies, reduce services, cut things that help people so that [they] can be provided by private companies that maybe they own or have stock in or will increase their bank account. It's all me, me, me... and [they] get rich off of the backs of people they see as lesser than them." – PA voter



"I feel like they are more focused on a trickle-down type thing where it's like, okay, let the companies and big corporations make all the money and then somehow that will go down to affect everyone on a lower level." – NC voter

"I honestly think that they're so concerned with taking away our rights that the economy is low on their list. I think that they would rather tax us, take the money from us instead of the big corporations, when it comes to the economy. But I think they're far more concerned with taking away our rights." – NC voter

"But I hear about giving raises to CEOs, and I haven't seen a raise of any substance for years and years. And I know tax cuts to the rich, all that." – NC voter

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The Middle Class Is Not An Income Definition, But A Sign One Can Afford The Basics Plus Some Extras

"I feel as if I grew up in a middle-class family. My mom and dad weren't making a ton of money, but it was enough money that we had a nice house and a couple of cars, and we would go on vacation, and we had money in the savings." – PA voter

"What comes to mind for middle class is, you don't make a ton of money, but you're able to pay your bills, live in a decent house, have a couple cars if you want. It's pretty much my status. So, that's what middle class is, in my opinion." – PA voter



"Not only that, but being able to afford vacations. Being able to afford the time to take off from work to go somewhere with your whole family and enjoy time off. Which is not something I've been able to do, my parents worked every single day with the jobs they had, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. That's what I have been doing." – PA voter

"... When I hear that phrase, I just picture a person or a family who gets by comfortably. They're not living paycheck to paycheck, but they're also not living it up either. They're comfortable, they have some savings, they can plan for their future and the next generation's future as well." – NC voter

"Well, to me, the middle class... it's just the common folk out there, the middle-of-the-road people. The people [who work] eight to five, not necessarily white collar, more blue collar than white collar folk across the country. To me, that's middle class. They go to work every day. They'd put their 40 hours a week in. They work for 20 years, hopefully. And they live on a pension or fixed income. There's nothing high end about them at all. They're very basic people." – AZ voter

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Now, People See Middle Class As No Longer Able To Afford These Things, Spurring A Discussion About The Phrase Itself

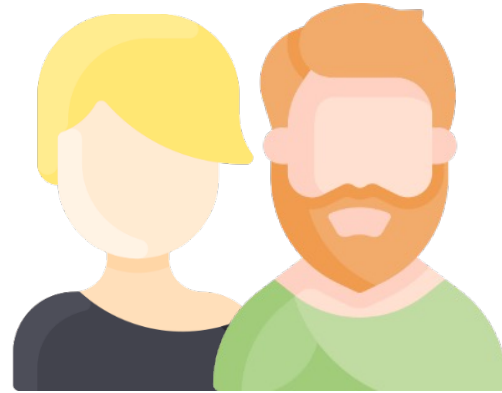
"Today, I feel as if middle class, I mean, I'm just going to be honest, [is] middle class. Today, I don't know how people are living when they're considered middle class today. It's disgusting to me. It really truly is because middle class is not what it used to be." – PA voter

"I can't think of anything like that right now, but to describe America's class or something. Something that is not so meh, middle class. Middle class feelings. I think it's too generalized. I don't like the term 'middle class' anymore." – PA voter

"I'm with you on that. I think my current issue is that it's being defined in what it's not. It's not poor and it's not rich, it's not this, it's not that, but what is it?" – PA voter

"Middle class to me sounds like a good thing. In the 50s, 60s, 70s, middle class meant quite good. You were happy, you had a family, you had a decent job, you were socking away money. You were a Democrat for most part. And there weren't many rich people, and there weren't that many poor people. The middle class sort of grew the country. And then lovely, wonderful Ronald Reagan came in, and that was the beginning of the end of your middle class." – NC voter

"Absolutely, it's being chipped away. I was born in '50, so I was a product of the 50s and 60s, when unions were strong and wages were strong. And then along came Reagan and put kibosh on all that. And we've gone downhill with the middle class ever since, in terms of numbers of people who can achieve that." – AZ voter

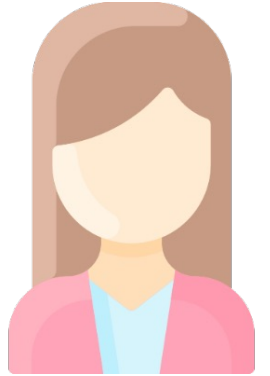


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Three focus groups with Democrats were conducted October 20, 2022—strong Democrats in Pennsylvania, less strong Democrats in North Carolina, and independent/lean Democrats in Arizona. For more info, visit navigatorresearch.org

“Working Class” Sounds Like A Job Category, Like Blue Collar Or Service Jobs, But For Others, It’s Interchangeable With “Middle Class”

“I think about those words referring to the kind of work or the kind of job that you have almost. This might be because I’m in a union, but I **tend to think of working class as referring to labor, manual labor jobs, manufacturing jobs, getting paid hourly.** And I think of middle class as white collar where you have a salary or you’re management or you’re a knowledge worker or something like that, but increasingly those two are getting collapsed because the salaries and the benefits aren’t necessarily all that different.” – PA voter



“I don’t think working class and middle class are the same thing. I think working class can define lower income people as well as maybe some of them are of the middle class, but **working class I see as people who live paycheck to paycheck.**” – PA voter



“I feel like middle class is working class.” – PA voter

“I think the difference is **working class are more people who are living paycheck to paycheck.** Where if tomorrow’s Friday, they already have that money spent, and every dollar has a name to it. And there’s not a lot of fat in their paychecks to do anything fun.” – AZ voter

“I’ve always seen the working class and the middle class as the same.” – NC voter

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Unprompted, Many Cite Corporate Greed As Driving Economic Challenges And Inequality



"I think it's volatile because I think that it's being truly dictated by legislation and our big corporations. I do see the world turning into more of a capitalist, opportunistic type economy. And I think that these corporations are preying on the working class." – AZ voter

"Corporations are getting record profits, and it's insane. But yet, the average person's wages have been the same forever. Meanwhile, you go to the grocery store and a box of cereal is \$6." – NC voter

"I keep seeing where businesses have record profits, record payouts to CEOs and shareholders, but then they want to blame everything like everything's going bad and all the people down lower have to suffer because of it. But the same thing where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer kind of thing." – NC voter

"And really our economy right now is the rich get richer and the poor stay poorer, and wages don't keep up with inflation and that's all so that the people who own the companies, own the stocks, **Elon Musk blinks and makes 20 grand and people freak out about forgiving 20 grand in student loans.**" – PA voter

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“Middle-Rigged” Message Mostly Positive And Democratic; However, Some Wonder If It Unfairly Excludes Some Groups

When the middle class does well, we all do well. But for years the wealthy and corporations have been getting richer while working people struggle under the weight of rising costs and stagnant wages.



“I think it's accurate.” – NC voter

“Yeah, I think it's true.” – NC voter

“I do think that actually having a real middle class gives a place for people to go up to in terms of wages and wealth but yeah, I think when the middle class does well does not mean that working class people will also do well.” – PA voter



“To me, that's just such a turn off for me because you can't paintbrush everyone in the same category.” – AZ voter

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There Is Clear Support For Student Loan Forgiveness, Even Among Those Who Paid Off Their Loans And Wish They Had The Benefit

"At first, I was like, 'Oh,' because if it had come two years earlier and wiped out my debt, and I was like, 'Oh man, why couldn't this have happened before so that I could benefit?' It is possible to feel that and feel happy that it helps people, other people. I didn't get to benefit. That sucks. But it's also great that people like my step kids might get the benefit or other people who really need it. Both of those things are true at the same time for me." – PA voter

"That is a great opportunity to help people reset, especially young families and young kids kind of getting out in the world. Some people can't get a six-figure job coming out of college. There's just not that many laying around. So just to make ends meet, I think there's a lot of young people out there that this could really benefit." – AZ voter

"I think it's definitely a step in the right direction and it's great. Again, personally it won't help me because I took out private loans and it's not for private loans. But I still think it's amazing and even for those who want to maybe further their education, it wouldn't be so much anxiety about doing that. Because I've been thinking about oh well, maybe I should go back and get my master's. But I don't want to have to take out thousands of dollars in loans again and be even further in debt than I already am. But I definitely love that it's happening." – NC voter

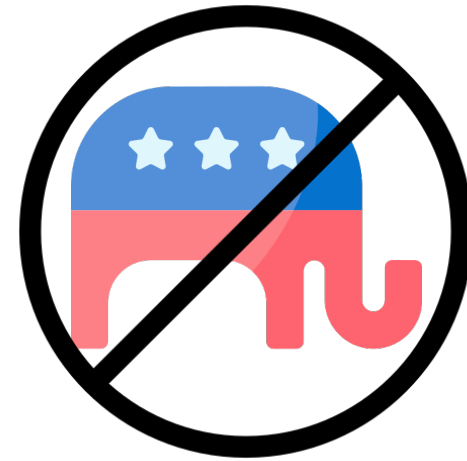
"I think it's a bigger problem that we've been in debt for so many years because of the high cost of education in our country. That's a problem. But I'm happy this will be giving relief to some people. I'm thinking about my own kids going forward when they get to college. I don't know where the future of that goes, but that gives me hope. But selfishly though... this is one of those things I wish someone had fought for years ago. Because I just paid mine off at age 50." – NC voter

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Despite These Results, More Were Motivated To Stop Republicans Than Because Of Excitement About Democrats' Agenda

"I'm just basically trying to keep Trump and all of his crazy people that are running out of politics. That's what I'm thinking." – NC voter

"I think that it is more about stopping Republicans because as we saw, as you stated earlier with the Inflation Reduction Act, none of the Republicans voted for that. And I think in order to get more of the things that we want to occur, or to happen, we have to have more Democrats actually in office. Just for us to be able to get those things." – NC voter



"Most of the time it's to stop Republicans, but every now and then I get really excited about something." – PA voter

"As terrible as it sounds, I think it's more Republicans, just keeping them out of office." – PA voter

"I would really prefer somebody who has some experience and that's not a television personality and not have a repeat of the last Presidential-Elect happen here in Pennsylvania. I've been talking to my significant other and my mind is being blown at this moment. It's like, 'Oh, it's happening again.' And so he says, 'Well, you have to vote. You have to go out and do something about it. You cannot just sit back and allow it to happen.'" – PA voter

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Abortion Continues To Be A Huge Driver For Democrats

"Definitely reproductive rights are at the top of my list because I do have a daughter who is at the age where she'll need it if she needs it." – NC voter

"I would say reproductive rights. I have a daughter as well and I don't want anyone touching her rights. That should all be for her." – NC voter

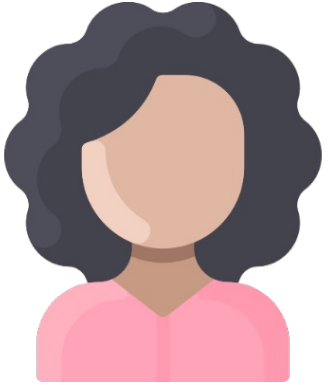


"What concerns me more this time around is the reproductive rights and all of the just general freedom that it seems like Republicans are really adamant about taking away from people." – NC voter

"The new abortion law, because I have an 18-year-old in nursing school, and so that will all affect her also as she's getting older. So yes, very concerned." – PA voter

"Well, because what they're doing is they're taking rights away right now. **And so what's the next right that's going to be taken away? And abortion, I mean, to me, I think would affect everybody.** But even if you think it doesn't affect you now, what's the next thing that comes down that they take away that might affect you?" – PA voter

Most Worry About Republicans Being “Batshit Crazy” On Democracy And Rights



“Economy's interesting. Inflation's temporary, all that. But the threat to our democracy is my number one concern. Anybody that has an R after their name will never get a vote from me, until that R stops being batshit crazy.” – AZ voter

“Because it's already going to be coming that this election is a fraud... We already know that's coming, because it's already there and we haven't even voted yet. Then just so many different issues right now about abortion and just things that have just totally blown me off the fence.” – AZ voter

“I think there would be a lot of how it was when Trump was in office. I think there'd be discrimination. I feel like there'd be laws put in place that would hurt other people, that would be disguised one way to help but then also to hurt other people.” – NC voter

“Republicans are saying that they have no sense of morality or backbone. They'll say and do whatever. And they think that people are going to go along with [it], you know.” – NC voter

“The sensible gun laws are on the top of my list seeing that we just had a mass shooting in Raleigh. And just I could never bring myself to vote for a Republican, so no there's not going to be anything that changes my mind at this point.” – NC voter



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About Navigator

In a world where the news cycle is the length of a tweet, our leaders often lack the real-time public-sentiment analysis to shape the best approaches to talking about the issues that matter the most. Navigator is designed to act as a consistent, flexible, responsive tool to inform policy debates by conducting research and reliable guidance to inform allies, elected leaders, and the press. Navigator is a project led by pollsters from Global Strategy Group and GBAO along with an advisory committee, including: Arkadi Gerney, The Hub Project; Joel Payne, The Hub Project; Christina Reynolds, EMILY's List; Mike Podhorzer, AFL-CIO; Jesse Ferguson, progressive strategist; Navin Nayak, Center for American Progress Action Fund; Stephanie Valencia, EquisLabs; and Melanie Newman, Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

About the Study

GBAO conducted three online focus groups on October 20, 2022 with Democrats and Independents in three states: Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Arizona. Some quotes have been lightly edited for brevity. Qualitative results are not statistically projectable.

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