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FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Wednesday, December 20, 2023

Democrats and Democratic-leaning
Independents on the Economy

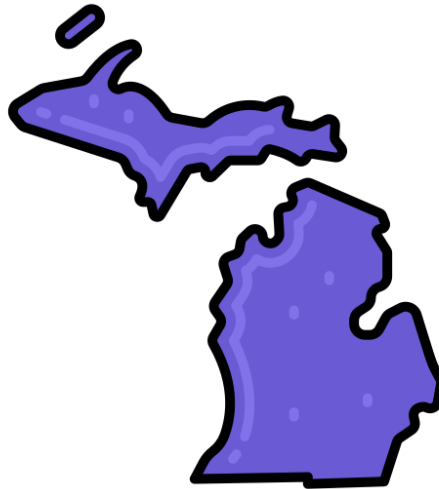


Methodology

On December 14, 2023, GBAO conducted three online focus groups with Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents to understand their perceptions of the economy and progressive policy priorities: one group in Pennsylvania who report being very favorable to President Biden as president, one group in Michigan who report being somewhat favorable to President Biden, and one group in Wisconsin who report being somewhat unfavorable to President Biden.



Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents in Pennsylvania who are very favorable of Joe Biden



Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents in Michigan who are somewhat favorable of Joe Biden



Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents in Wisconsin who are somewhat unfavorable of Joe Biden

Key Takeaways

- Democratic constituents are starting to identify some improvement on the economy.
- Inflation—specifically daily costs like gas and groceries—drives economic views more than anything else.
- Corporate greed is frequently cited as to blame for economic woes, while others think a wide range of factors is responsible for rising costs.
- Infrastructure, caps on the price of insulin, the CHIPS Act, and junk fees all sound like important efforts, even if impacts are not felt yet.
- Most economic facts feel believable, though not reflective of participants' personal economic experiences.

Some—but not all—Democrats are Feeling Optimistic About the Economy

“It's just everywhere we go, they're hiring and the wages have gone up. You see convenience stores paying \$18 to \$20 an hour, and some of the union contracts that they got big raises. So, I think the economy is doing well.” – PA man

“The stock market is doing real well. I lost a lot of money back in 2016 to 2020, and it's coming back to almost where it was. Yesterday, it was great. It was a record.” – PA man

“Well, I think I'm the minority here out of the group. I don't think the economy is doing well. I know what [was] said about the stock market, that's a fact. I don't necessarily believe that the stock market is a good indicator for how the economy's doing anymore.” – PA man

“I think the economy has picked up. I think people are still conservatively spending around this holiday season, but I'm seeing really good deals out there that I didn't see last year. Even in the toy and game area and even in clothing, I feel like, are not super expensive... I think that's a good sign. But I'm not seeing any movement really on interest rates. They're staying the same. They haven't gone up, which is good, but they need to come down a little bit more for me to say that the economy is going way up.” – MI woman

“So, they'll say like, ‘Hey, the economy's improving,’ but then I'll be like, is it? Because things are getting more expensive? They'll say, ‘Joblessness is down,’ but there's still a lot of help wanted signs for a lot of positions and there's a lot of things that you would've thought would've come back after COVID that haven't. So, they're saying things, but it doesn't necessarily feel like that. I'm not like, they're lying to us, but there is a disconnect.” – WI man

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Many Cite Gas Prices as an Improvement

"I know gas prices are starting to go down, don't know why. Haven't heard why." – WI man

"And the gas prices have dropped almost 30 cents in this last week in my area, I think that's a good sign." – WI woman



[Moderator: If we were doing this group six months ago, what would the price of gas been? The price of food would've been higher or lower than now?] "I think groceries were lower, but gas was higher." – PA man

"Personally, I paid \$2.49 today for some gas." – MI man



"Gas prices have dropped considerably. I went grocery shopping the other day, paid a lot... Not a lot less, but less than what I have in the past." – MI man

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But Many Still Feel Groceries as a Pain Point



“Okay, so like last evening we did tacos, basic tacos. And for shells, ground meat, tomatoes, your basic fixings for tacos, it was \$25 for things. And you're talking about basic things... And yeah, you do have some extra things, but you could go down the street here to Taco Bell and get two meals for \$10. And you probably were just as full to be honest. Again, quality and things like that, but to show just the differences between the two.” – PA man

“Just because wages are high doesn't mean that the economy is doing well... It's crazy how much you are spending just for a box of food here at Aldi or even our local Giant Eagle...” – PA man

“If you buy, for example, a pound of meat that's \$7, \$8 a pound and you're earning only \$15 an hour, you're spending half of your wages on a pound of meat. That to me is not... That's not a balanced economy. That's the main problem that we have.” – WI woman

“The Thanksgiving dinner was like 200% above what it was a year ago, just to put it on the table. So, a lot of lower income families are struggling and it's not good to see.” – WI man

“Some things have dropped in groceries. Some things are still high, like the price of eggs are still high. But Thanksgiving dinner was cheaper. Buying it was cheaper than it was last year.” – MI woman

“Groceries, they're still more expensive than they were in the past, but they're not as high as they were a year or two ago with all the pandemic and supply chain problems and everything.” – MI woman

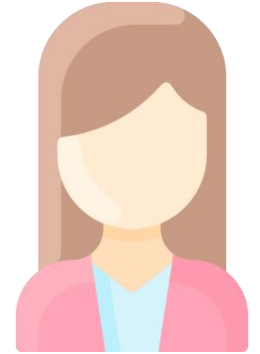


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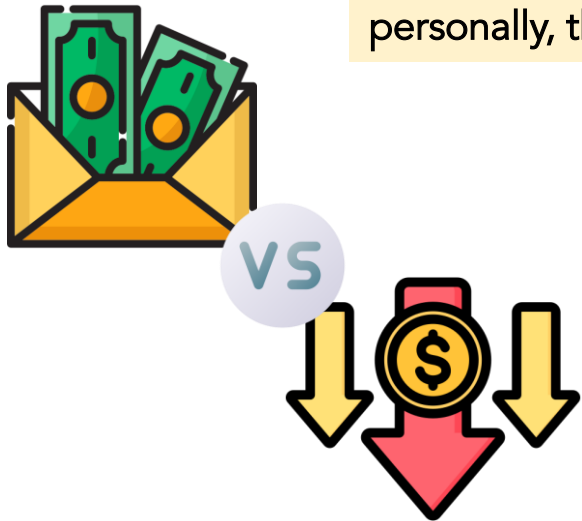
More Want Lower Costs Than Higher Wages

Moderator: Which would you prefer—your costs go down or your wages to up?

“[I am] earning more money [now] so my wages did go up, but I don't feel like I'm earning more money. If the cost of things keeps rising, I didn't essentially get a raise. I basically am breaking even as far as the cost of things going up and then my wage is going up. **If prices would stop increasing, people's increases in salaries would actually mean something.**” – WI woman



“Yeah, 'cause unfortunately the profession I'm in requires an unpaid internship. That's the way it is. **So, for me personally, the only thing that would help would be cost going down.**” – MI woman



“Because [wages are] a controlled factor, I can always make more money, I can always go work some more or do extra side jobs and things like that to fulfill those times and voids where if prices are up, then wages are down, prices can keep going up, up, up, up, up and my main job or something, I can't make more money.” – PA man

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Housing Costs Loom Large for Many

“Specifically, housing is really bad right now. No one can afford a house.” – MI woman

“I ended up having to move this summer because my rent went up by \$200, and it took me a long time to find something affordable. It took me about six months to find something affordable.” – MI woman

“I do have a friend who's selling her house right now, and it's selling for a lot more than it's worth. And then, they need to get a new house and they can't afford anything, even though they're getting a lot of money from the house that they're selling.” – MI woman

“For me, because I rent, my rent has gone up for the past three years now. Like \$15, \$20 each year. I live in a crappy old house... but why [have] the property values been going up when nothing has changed around here? Streets still suck. The property itself still sucks. So, yeah, that kind of thing.” – WI man



Most View the Economy Through the Lens of Their Daily Experiences

"I've made the most amount of money I've ever made in my life this year, and I am living paycheck to paycheck. And I wasn't three or four years ago. So, I am not seeing [the economy improve] in my own personal experience." – PA man

"Before you could buy a regular-sized box of Frosted Flakes for \$3.99. And the other day when I went to get it it's \$6.69. So even though a lot of people are making more money, I don't know how much of it that you see if the prices in the store and everything went up. So, I don't know. I'm kind of in the middle. I just sometimes find even other ways to make extra money to do other things, like activities or entertainment, is still something's wrong, because even though you make more, it's still like most people said, you're basically living, or for some people, living paycheck to paycheck." – PA woman

"Last year I had two daughters in gymnastics, we don't do that anymore. Our salaries have gone up, we've never been making this much and we have more debt than we've ever had. So, we feel it a lot at home and we've trimmed back everywhere, everywhere." – WI woman

"I don't think we're doing any better than before. We're actually just... My husband is going to be retiring soon, and we're not in a position that... He probably has to work a year or two longer to manage it. **He might've thought about retiring a couple of years sooner, but that's not going to be possible.** It's just the same thing. Everything is costing more, a little bit here, a little bit there, and it all adds up." – WI woman

"I was in that situation [where my rent increased] last year. **They upped it and we had no out, so we were stuck paying more money.** And on top of that, I was off work because of an injury I received at work, so our finances were cut way more than in half." – MI man

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Some See Corporate Greed as to Blame for the Country's Economic Struggles, While Others See it as More Complex

Moderator: Who or what is to blame for the current economic situation?

"100% corporate greed, 100%.... My CEO makes \$12 million a year, he doesn't need to make \$12 million a year. They could pay their people more money and not raise prices. We're making more profit year over year over year, they could take a little bit of that money and just pay their employees and not have to raise the cost of their product." – PA man

"From the research I've done, it's artificially created. Those companies like Purdue, they made billions because they took advantage of COVID and said it was because of COVID, the shortage. I know that the egg industry was investigated and now they're going through the courts because they fixed prices..." – PA man

"The corporations and the ultra-rich. They've had their power for a long time and they've had a lot of money for a long time and they've taken more and more of it and spent it not even necessarily on themselves, but on the people in charge of them. So, that way they just do whatever they want with it and they're not getting taxed and they have all the rules made to benefit themselves." – WI man

"I don't really think there's a person or an entity or an organization to blame. I just think it's so many different things. It's so complicated." – WI woman

"A lot of it is what's already in place when he [Biden] took office and everything. So it's trying to fix what he can, but also some of the solutions for one thing might contribute to the problems of another thing." – MI woman

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There is Little Awareness of the Biden Administration's Record on the Economy

	Infrastructure	CHIPS Act	Inflation Reduction Act	Hidden/Junk Fees
# of people who heard of the bill/issue	10/20	3/20	12/20	3/20



"In theory, [the Infrastructure bill] sounds good. But I mean, I haven't heard of it, so I don't know too much about it." – MI woman

"I can think of Biden's student loan forgiveness plan." – MI woman

Well, I think if [the Infrastructure bill] promises everything it says, that sounds like a pretty good thing that we can all benefit from... [But] I haven't heard of that." – WI man

"[I've heard about] the lower prescription costs, especially for insulin." – WI man

"I'm not too familiar with [the Inflation Reduction Act]. Also, how it's being enacted throughout our lives, and the insulin capping for elderly people, why isn't that applied to everybody? I don't really know where I've seen those specific criteria fall into place in life." – WI woman

"I don't [recall anything about the Inflation Reduction Act]." – PA man

[Moderator: How many people here say they have heard of the CHIPS Act?]
 "Is that the kids' health insurance?" – PA woman

There is Widespread Misunderstanding or Low Information About the Biden Administration's Economic Policies

Moderator: What is Bidenomics?

"I think it pertains to his policy engagement regarding what he's doing to keep inflation down or keep our supply chain moving. And **any things that he... like talks he's having with other countries, regarding any issues.** We couldn't get the chips for a while for all these cars, but maybe he had a conversation with from, say, Korea, the leader of Korea, to come up with a plan to get them here faster." – MI woman

"I don't know. I've never heard of Bidenomics." – MI woman

"I feel like some of it has **not been publicized** because all you hear about is the infighting in Congress. That's about it." – WI woman

"I know it's been thrown around in the news, but again, I **haven't seen exactly what it is or how it's affecting us at this point.**" – WI man

"I think it refers back to the economy. I think it refers back to how he handled COVID, how he handles joblessness, how he handles inflation, **just pretty much how he handles everything for our day-to-day lives.**" – WI man

"I try to keep up on the political realm, **both sides of it, but I can't even tell you what Bidenomics was.** I think it was a marketing ploy, I think that's all it was." – PA woman

"**Oh man, I don't know.** It's a lot of lip service. I think he was maybe even trying to even the wage gaps through taxation. I don't know how that's going. I honestly don't understand Bidenomics." – PA man

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The Inflation Reduction Act, CHIPS, Infrastructure, and Curbing Junk Fees all Sound Like Important Efforts

Infrastructure

"Yeah, it was roads, bridges, and utilities and basically we hadn't taken care of them in a very long time, **so they needed to be repaired.**" – WI man

"What I know about it is that they were going to try to build a whole infrastructure up from the middle out. **In fact, like infrastructure here, we had some really bad things happen. So, they're really dumping money in to try to just build everything up.**" – PA woman

CHIPS Act

"I think [the CHIPS Act is] a good thing. **Anything that lowers the cost for us.** I think we've become too reliant on overseas production for a large majority of our goods that we use every day." – MI woman

"I know with buying a new car a while ago, it was hard to get them. We waited almost a year because they didn't have the chips put in them, and **you hate to see us held hostage by other countries in the supply chain. So, that part's a good thing,** that we're building plans there for that." – PA man

Inflation Reduction Act

"I was hearing just bits and pieces of it, that we're trying to get the price, of course, of wages to match what the prices of basic everyday things are. I don't know specifics about it... **I just have heard of it. I just remember thinking to myself, 'That's what we need right now.'**" – WI woman

"Again, the jobs, trying to get jobs. You don't have to go to college to make a good wage. They're trying to make people believe that, go be a plumber, a welder, construction and those sorts of things." – PA man

Hidden and Junk Fees

"I think it's great, because there are several class-action lawsuits, from everything from life insurance to ticket fees. **This needs to be controlled, because it's price gouging.**" – PA woman

"I think it's great. **And as a concert goer or a ticket purchaser myself, I've had instances where my fees got personally reduced or refunded when this came into play...** So, I think that's a great thing, and it could go even further too, but I think it's a great start." – MI woman

The Impact of These Policies are not Quite Felt yet

“One thing that I can think of is that Flint doesn't have clean drinking water still. And the infrastructure policy, it's clearly not working yet.” – MI woman

“I mean, all of this sounds like good things. I don't know how long it is going to take for us to actually see all of the results. So, it's proposing it to happen now, but are most of the results going to be after he's out of office, so it's not attributed to him?” – MI woman



“I think where it gets tricky is that some of these things maybe prevented the economy from getting even worse, and you can't measure that. So infrastructure, maybe it did help our costs from not getting even crazier, because COVID they were getting bad because there weren't enough drivers and stuff. So maybe some of these systems in place slowed it, but we don't really know and you can't really measure that. How would we have been had these things not been enacted?” – WI woman

“All these things, it's not enough for fixing the economy. These are little bits and pieces, but altogether it's not enough.” – WI woman

“Well, just around here too, they've been fixing all the major highways around here. I'm not sure about specifics in terms of it, but I've seen it happening here, whether it's state or federal money that's coming in through that, 43 is getting all fixed up now, and that has been needed for years now...” – WI woman



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Even Though Their Personal Situations are not Improving, Participants Admit the Economy is Getting Better

“The one thing I'll say I'm surprised about ... All this stuff is true because you see it on TV. And if you believe the station you're watching, then how come half the country doesn't believe it; that the economy's so bad, that Biden's a bum, that all this stuff goes on; when you have this many jobs and lower interest rates and all that?” – PA man

“Yeah, I feel like, again, I feel like it is ... It's going in the right direction...” – PA man

“Just with all of our ideas and the things that you've read, kind of just put the picture of things that I wouldn't have gathered altogether. But now that this has all been presented and kind of the numbers don't lie kind of thing, that's where my perspective changed because of the numbers and the percentages and things that, with the certain bills that have passed, just kind of putting that all into perspective, tells the story, it backs the story, I guess.” – MI woman

“I think things are getting better, but it's still hard. Everyone I know, we all feel like we're still penny pinching. Things are still tough, even though the stats say that they're getting better.” – MI woman

“You know things are getting better and you can see it other places and with other people, but why does it not feel things are getting better for me or my family or this or that?” – MI man

“I don't know if my views have necessarily changed, but I feel more informed about what's happening now, and it seems like things are heading in the right direction. But just still based on how it feels in everyday life it doesn't feel much different, I guess.” – WI man

“But, at the end of the day, we're all influenced so much by our own personal experiences. So, whether these things were enacted in the past few years or not, I feel like I'm in a worse place than I was three years ago.” – WI woman

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Respondents Were Shown a Series of Economic Indicators

- a) GDP, or the country's Gross Domestic Product, is increasing at a rate of 5.2%, which is the fastest rate of growth in almost two years.
- b) The inflation rate is 3.24%, a drop from last month and much lower than 7% to 9% last year. This means lower prices on things like groceries.
- c) There have been job gains every month for nearly three straight years.
- d) The unemployment rate is currently 3.7%, and has been below 4% for almost two years straight. There hasn't been a streak like this since the 1960s.
- e) Gas prices have been dropping—they're about \$2 a gallon lower than last year, and are close to pre-pandemic prices.

Those Unhappy With Their Economic Situation View Indicators With Skepticism

"I thought it [unemployment] would also be higher. It makes me wonder how many people are doing more side hustle jobs versus just working a normal 9:00 to 5:00. Maybe they're working multiple part-time jobs or independent contracting, stuff like that." – WI man

"[Inflation being down] surprises me. I know the price of eggs has come down. There was the avian flu, and I know that the price of eggs has come down. But I don't see prices coming down as much of a percentage as that. I don't know. I don't know where those numbers are coming from because I still feel like I'm paying the same amount last year as I did this year. So, I don't know." – WI woman

"It doesn't sound believable to me. I don't know where those numbers come from. But I can say from the price of goods that I buy for my business and for personal products that we buy at the grocery store, I don't see that significant of a drop." – WI man

"I've heard that there's been a decrease in unemployment, that more jobs have come out. But once again, it's what do those jobs pay? Who's working those jobs?" – WI man

"I don't know. The way that it feels is negative, but then the numbers are positive... But yeah, it's just this overall feeling. Everyone I talk to feels like things are not going well." – MI woman

"When I go to the grocery store, it doesn't reflect that. I told you guys when we started, I feed seven people. I get the same stuff every week. I don't buy junk. We cook... I buy practically the same things over and over, and my bill has increased. My kids love berries. The price of fruit is through the roof." – PA man

"I don't see the drop [in inflation]. I see it being pretty much the same." – PA woman

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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: Jessica Floyd, 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 December 14, 2023 with Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents in three states: PA, MI, and WI. Some quotes have been lightly edited for brevity. Qualitative results are not statistically projectable.

For Press inquiries contact:

press@navigatorresearch.org

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