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FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Wednesday, February 5, 2025

Independent and Soft Partisans on
the New Trump Administration

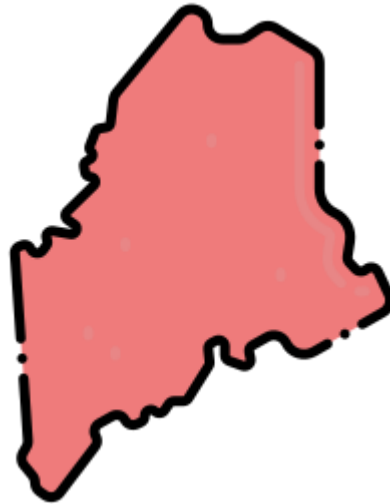


Methodology

On January 29, 2025, GBAO conducted three online focus groups independent and soft partisan voters across various demographics—including a mix across education, gender, race.



Higher information independents
and soft partisans in North
Carolina



Lower information independents
and soft partisans in Maine



Mixed information independents
and soft partisans in Michigan

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Key Takeaways

- While some intentionally choose optimism, even supporters are cautious about Trump's early actions.
- In particular, the funding freeze seems cruel and not well-planned.
- Tariffs seem likely to increase costs, although some wonder if there is a plus side.
- The details of Trump's tax plans are fuzzy to many, yet there is worry about the wealthy receiving most of the benefit.
- Many express concern about the influence of billionaires and corporations on the administration.

Post-Election Views Range From Fear to Optimism

Moderator: How are you feeling about things in the country today?

“Chaotic... The Democrats [are] kind of losing their marbles and acting like, ‘Oh my God, it's the worst thing ever.’ And the stuff that Trump is saying too, I don't know if he's joking or being serious half of the time because even the stuff you think he's joking about, he is serious.” – NC woman, weak Democrat

“Hopeful... Some of what his [Biden's] administration did was good, and some of it I totally disagree with. **But I'm kind of hopeful, especially about the economy, that things will get a little bit better.**” – NC woman, independent lean Republican

“Oh, gosh. [I'm] **anxious.**” – ME woman, independent lean Democrat

“I feel crappy... I think [Trump's] going to **upset quite a bit of people, upset the economy**, even though he says he's turning stuff around, but he's going to upset a lot of things.” – ME woman, weak Democrat



“I'd say we're very disappointed, but we're hopeful that maybe the few things [Trump will] do, that he could actually get a few things done well.” – MI woman, independent

“Chaos... It's all kinds of stuff you see in social media, seeing people fight and get unfriended on social media. So that's why I said chaos and all that.” – MI man, independent

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News About Many Initial Actions Is Breaking Through

Moderator: What have you heard about what President Trump has done since taking office?

"There's a lot of jobs and departments that have maybe lost some funding recently." – ME man, independent

"Tariffs and just he talks about shutting down the Department of Education." – ME woman, independent lean Democrat



"I feel like we're hearing more on social media, [about] what supposedly is getting done by Donald Trump versus Biden... **All these things, and renaming the Gulf of Mexico Gulf of America, and also wanting to buy Greenland.** But just hearing about it, whether or not it's true or not. So that's why just hearing, getting things done. But also, it could be true, it could not be true." – MI woman, independent lean Republican

"Immigration... For instance, I see on social media a lot that ICE is in town." – NC woman, weak Democrat

"Some of the things I've seen are him signing that there's only two genders. I've seen him implementing the **tariffs.**" – NC man, independent lean Republican



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Supporters Characterize Trump as “Chaotic,” “Moving Fast” in a Way That Might Not Be Perfect

Moderator: How do you feel about President Trump’s actions? Are you surprised?

“I’m not going to say I’m surprised [about what he has done so far] and everything. That’s just how he is and all that. Like I say, the Gulf of America. So, it’s like, ‘Okay, well, he’s kind of... I don’t know, off the meds,’ but that’s just my opinion.” – MI man, independent

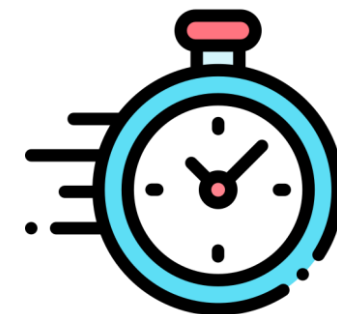
“Everything that he’s done so far is just out there. I don’t even know if he’s really going to do it. I can’t figure him out, to be honest with you.” – MI woman, weak Republican

“I still think he gets a little bit egotistical and talks a little bit too much... But overall, I’m good right now. I’m optimistic and think that we’re on a better path than we’ve been.” – NC man, independent lean Republican

“It just seems like it’s too much at once. Trump trying to make an impact and undo everything that Biden did is his goal. It seems like he’s trying to put his hand in too many different pots.” – NC man, independent

“A lot of things are changing.” – ME man, independent

“He’s going very fast.” – ME man, independent



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The Freeze Upsets Many Who Worry About the Personal Impact

Moderator: What comes to mind when you think about the recent federal freeze?

"I think it's stupid. There's no benefit of freezing that stuff. A lot of Americans rely on a lot of those things. I have Medicaid. I rely on federal grants. My grandma, she relies on Medicare. It's like what benefit was there to really do that? And what is this freeze going to lead to? Are they going to try to get rid of those things? If so, that's a good amount of people you're ripping benefits from, and it just don't make sense." – NC woman, weak Democrat

"I mean, [working] for a non-profit, and him being able to decide and wield his power as if he's like a king, right... We're going down some really trepidatious places here." – ME woman, independent

"I was appalled that he wanted to cut the basic social services to the people that need it the most, because he does want to go back to giving the big corporations more tax cuts, and the people that have his ear are the billionaires." – ME woman, weak Democrat

"It's just focusing on the wrong things and now you're holding up things that are actually important, like food stamps. I feel like it probably goes into half and reduced lunch for children as well. It's like we should be establishing more social safety nets for people so that if they do make a mistake, that they're able to get back off their feet and do something with it. But we're doing the opposite..." – MI man, independent lean Democrat

"Yeah, it's kind of confusing. I think he's talking about telling people to resign, going to give them \$8,000 [to] resign. It's some crazy stuff, man. There's [so] much stuff out there with that funding and all that. It's all over the place." – MI man, independent

"I'm actually a disabled individual from a dog bite accident that happened four years ago now at this point, and I truly 100% don't know [which] of my doctors are still my doctors at this moment and which ones take my insurance anymore." – MI woman, independent lean Democrat

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Others View the Freeze Through the Lens of Government Bloat

“There is too much government bloat going on in Washington and on the national level. They throw a hissy fit when you order them back to work from remote work, like, ‘What are we going to do for our childcare?’ It’s like, figure it out like everybody else. I don’t know what to tell you. So, in that case, all for it. **They need to figure out what is needed and what is not needed in Washington before they add more useless positions to the national debt.**” – NC man, independent



“I agree with the halting of the government hires... I think there's a lot of bloat and things that kind of need to be reevaluated and trying to find out what key positions are needed.” – NC man, independent lean Republican



“Well, the freeze thing was never supposed to, as far as I've researched, it was not supposed to affect welfare or SNAP and those kinds of things. It might affect Medicaid... So, if that's the truth, then it's not so bad if it's just trying to get rid of all the excess nonsense that's in the government.” – NC woman, independent lean Republican

There Is Universal Disdain for Politically-Motivated Firings



“He told [the government] like, ‘Hey, you got the right to fire anybody. Oh, you said something wrong? I’m going to fire you. Whatever.’ **That’s not okay. It is really some dictator-type stuff.**” – MI man, independent

“I was going to say, yeah. **It feels very dictator-ish.**” – MI man, independent lean Democrat

“I think people should have an open mind. I mean I have friends that don’t agree with me and I’m still friends with them... [As a business owner,] I look for the best person for the job. I **don’t care about what their home life is and who they’re dating.**” – ME man, independent

“Well, **that’s bull.** If they don’t agree with his agenda, why should he get fired? **Why should the person get fired for that?**” – ME woman, weak Democrat



“[I] disagree on that. I **don’t think you should be fired for a political belief.** That’s where you get into that **dictatorship mentality** where it’s like, ‘Hey, it’s my way or the highway. If you don’t agree with me, you’re out.’” – NC man, independent lean Republican

Details of Trump's Immigration Actions Confuse, Feeling Unbelievable or Inhumane

"I think that there's a lot of scare tactics going on surrounding the immigration things that are being done." – NC woman, weak Democrat

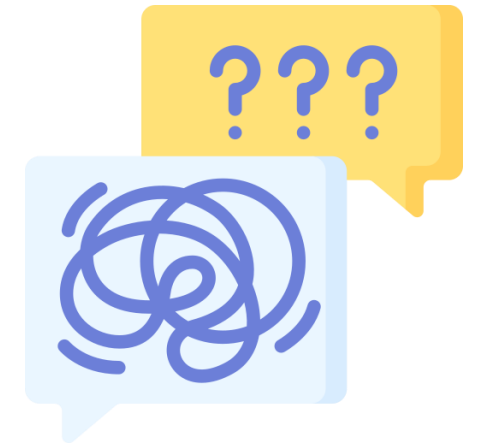
"I just saw something about he's deporting or plans to deport a bunch of immigrants to Guantanamo Bay. It's just very scary." – NC man, independent

"I don't think he's going to have mass deportations. I think it's just too difficult... I just think you got 11 million people, supposedly, how do you physically find them and deport them?" – ME man, independent

"It sounds so ignorant to say nobody wants [the deported immigrants]. But other countries are refusing to take these humans back. **So where are these human beings who have a heartbeat and a soul going to go? Because they're still people.** Whether or not they crossed or came here illegally, they're still human beings." – ME woman, independent

"They're going to churches. They're going to schools. They're setting up interstate-wide and all that. I heard all kinds of crazy stuff... You can go in and get these kids from schools. It's just too much." – MI man, independent

"I think that is wrong, but in his rhetoric, he says that if they're a criminal. So, are these people that are in the churches, in the hospitals, in the schools, are they criminals? **If they're not criminals, then he should leave them alone.** His thing is criminals. **He throws that in there a lot, but I don't understand the school and church thing.** That's just out there." – MI woman, weak Republican



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Most View Tariffs as Likely to Raise Their Own Costs

Moderator: What do you believe the impact of tariffs will be?

"God, I hate to even think about it, but anyway, everything's going to go up. The prices are going to go up and we're going to be stuck paying for it." – MI woman, weak Republican

"This is all inflationary and it's 100% going to see prices rise everywhere. I know it's a negotiating tactic, but I don't think you do that against people like Canada and Mexico, our biggest trading partners." – NC man, independent



"He just wants to put tariffs on most things from other countries, especially China, and I just feel that China's not paying the tariffs. It's going to be the people who buy the products, that eventually everything's going to trickle down to the cost of the goods." – ME woman, independent lean Democrat

"[The cost of tariffs are] going to all come to our pocket. We're going to end up paying a little bit more." – ME woman, weak Democrat

"Raised prices on imported/exported stuff would force us to consider manufacturing closer to home, which would probably still be more expensive, so I think the user will feel this no matter what." – ME man, independent



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Participants Diverge on Whether Increased Costs From Tariffs Will Have Other Positive Benefits, Such as Negotiating Leverage or Better Paying Jobs

"I think that the idea of bringing manufacturing back to America is a great idea, but there's a reason that all our malls have closed, right? There's a reason that we love Amazon, because we pay less. We don't want to pay American workers, because American workers want high wages. I mean, the math isn't mathing." – ME woman, independent

"Usually the customer [pays the cost of tariffs]. But that's literally not what [is] going to happen, because so far we've had two countries cave to the tariff without a single price increase. He's literally just trying to get better import export deals out of these countries." – NC man, independent

"I think a lot of what's going on is definitely negotiation-type things where other countries are being threatened, and I don't think it'll be quite as severe as what the threats are." – NC woman, independent lean Republican

"When tariffs were introduced [last Trump presidency], the steel industry flourished." – NC woman, weak Democrat

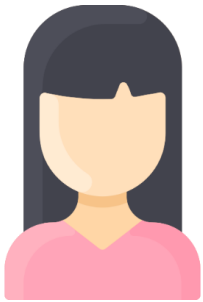
"If prices go up, it'll be hard. But I also don't feel like we can let every other country in the world run over us and think that they can do whatever they want and we will always just sit back and take it." – NC woman, independent lean Republican

"I think it can help some things for us to make things here within our country, but I'm interested to see how the market is going to react when he starts these tariffs." – MI man, weak Democrat

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Few Can Recall What the “Trump Tax Cuts” Were or Could Be Going Forward

Moderator: When I say the “Trump tax cuts,” what comes to mind?



“I don't even remember. I really don't.” – MI woman, weak Republican

“I would say just like what I heard from the election, **but it was very confusing, between him and Biden, who was cutting taxes** or you would hear taxes would go up for either upper class or middle class. It wasn't very clear to me.” – MI woman, independent lean Republican

“Unfortunately, I have not heard anything about it either. I'm assuming they're corporate tax cuts though, but I don't know for sure.” – ME woman, independent lean Democrat

“Is that the small business tax cuts? If so, I was on board with that.” – NC man, independent

“I don't have much opinion on it, so that's my thing... [Moderator: What impact do you think this will have on you personally?] I would say as far as me right now, not much. It's hard because I'm in a situation where I'm a part-time student, part-time worker, and I live with my parents. As far as me in the future, only time can tell, but it doesn't impact me much now.” – NC woman, weak Democrat



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Yet Many Are Quick to Assume Trump's Cuts Are Solely Looking Out for the Rich and Corporations

"I'm just thinking that the tax rates for many American taxpayers are much higher than 15%, and it doesn't seem equitable to me [for the corporate rate] to go that low." – NC woman, independent lean Republican

"There were big tax cuts last time for corporations, and I remember it wound up just going to bonuses to the top earners and to keep shareholders happy." – NC man, independent

"I'm not on board with it honestly because every time in the past when corporations have gotten the tax break, they haven't hired a lot more people in comparison to what they were saving. **More often than not, they would just use the additional money for either CEO salaries or stock buybacks or convertible bonds.**" – NC man, independent

"Uninformed, what comes to mind is probably tax cuts for corporations and higher capital individuals, but that's uneducated, so I'm going to not say more." – ME man, independent



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Some Skepticism as to Whether “Trickle Down” Will Work For Them

“I have a real hard time with more cuts for corporations, and I'm not sure I agree with the trickle-down philosophy. I haven't seen it work, but I may have missed some pieces, so I'm still open to maybe it does work.” – ME woman, weak Democrat

“I can see why they gave tax breaks to corporations in a way to encourage them to do business in America, but I don't know if that really benefited the normal everyday American.” – ME woman, independent lean Democrat

“Hopefully that the trickle-down effect really is a trickle-down effect, and it's not just something where they do end up saving money and just putting it back in their pockets because a lot of times you save some money and instead of putting it back into the people, they'll just put it in their pockets.” – NC woman, independent

“Last time it didn't actually trickle down. So, the businesses used their money in a different way, and they outsourced jobs to cheaper places, and so that wasn't really effective.” – NC woman, independent lean Republican

“What happened to me, I'm just speaking for myself, in 2017... the company I worked for... we had 60 employees. Trump tax cuts took place. Four months later, we had a meeting, everyone across the board got a \$5 raise, a \$5 hourly raise. That's huge.” – NC man, independent lean Republican

“I don't know too much aside from that, but I remember it felt like it was for the upper class and that it was going to kind of negatively affect lower and middle class economy and families. So, it felt kind of like it was a tax cut for him and his friends.” – MI man, independent lean Democrat



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The Influence of Musk and Tech CEOs Emerges Unaided as a Red Flag

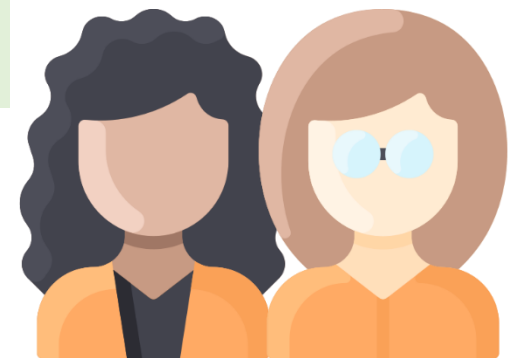
"[Trump] takes care of his friends. He doesn't care about the regular, average person in America, so that's just what it is." – MI man, independent



"I was all for Trump after the four years of the Biden administration, but then Elon entered the mix, and so now I'm like, I wonder if Elon has our best interest in hand... So, I'm still kind of on the fence. I don't really trust Elon." – NC man, independent lean Republican

"I'm a little concerned about all the billionaires and the white men that he's been surrounding himself with." – ME woman, weak Democrat

"Well, [Trump's tax plan] kind of makes sense since Bezos, Zuckerberg and Musk were all at his inauguration." – ME woman, independent



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Most Feel January 6th Pardons Should Have Been “Case By Case”

“I think that some of [the insurrectionists], like the ones that didn't really do anything violent, yeah, that's fine if they're pardoned, but the ones that were actively violent and they weren't defending themselves or anything, they were just being violent for the love of the game, I'm like, nah, they got to learn.” – NC woman, weak Democrat

“He did that completely just to slap the other administration. I'm sure from all their back and forth and him feeling like he was always under attack from them, that was his way of retaliating against them.” – NC man, independent

“It should have been case by case.” – ME man, independent

“I do think that if they were violent, they should not have been pardoned. I know there were some people during the January 6th insurrection that didn't do a lot of violent things and maybe they were okay to be pardoned, but I think that they needed to really look at it and not do a blanket everybody's pardoned.” – ME woman, independent lean Democrat

“I remember at the time, his response was to distance himself from all the people that he mobilized to go do that. So then to [go] four years later, go double back and just say, ‘Hey, it wasn't wrong what you did,’ and then kind of empower them even more just seems very dangerous, I guess, or just a weird thing to teach to people, to your constituency.” – MI man, independent lean Democrat

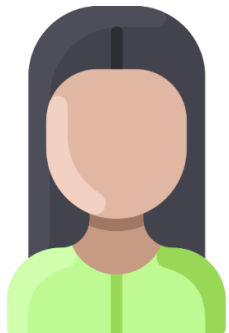
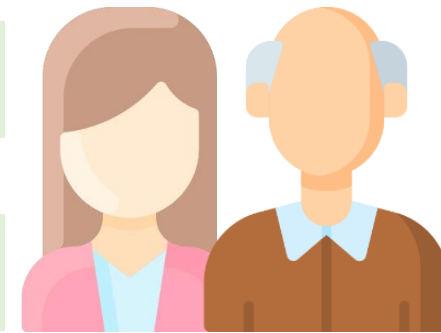
“I was disappointed. I mean, I just thought they were going to do this case by case. And a lot of these were violent acts that they committed. And then you got the leader of the Proud Boys and he was pardoned. I mean, these are activists and it's very scary, and they did the wrong thing by doing a blanket pardon.” – MI man, weak Democrat

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Some Reflect on Corruption and Discontent With the Outgoing Administration

"Well, it can't get worse than it was with Biden. I mean, that's kind of what I keep looking at in my mind. **It can't get worse than it was with the Biden administration.**" – ME woman, weak Democrat

"**It's following his predecessor, I guess.** I think Biden... I read that he said the most pardons of any president. But just the fact what he did at the end, I mean that's just corrupt." – ME man, independent



"**At the end of the day, I believe when it came to this election, you literally had to choose the lesser of the two evils.** I wasn't a hundred percent with Kamala. I'm not a hundred percent with Trump, but we got to choose someone." – NC woman, independent

"We're talking about everything going up, but it's already up. **How did we get here? It wasn't because of a tariff...**" – MI woman, weak Republican

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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 January 29, 2025, with independent and soft partisan voters in NC, ME, and MI. Some quotes have been lightly edited for brevity. Qualitative results are not statistically projectable.

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To learn more about Navigator:

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