

The background of the slide is a stylized, mosaic-like representation of the United States flag. It features wavy, diagonal stripes in shades of blue, red, white, and gold, creating a sense of movement and texture.

The Road to the Primaries

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC
October 2023

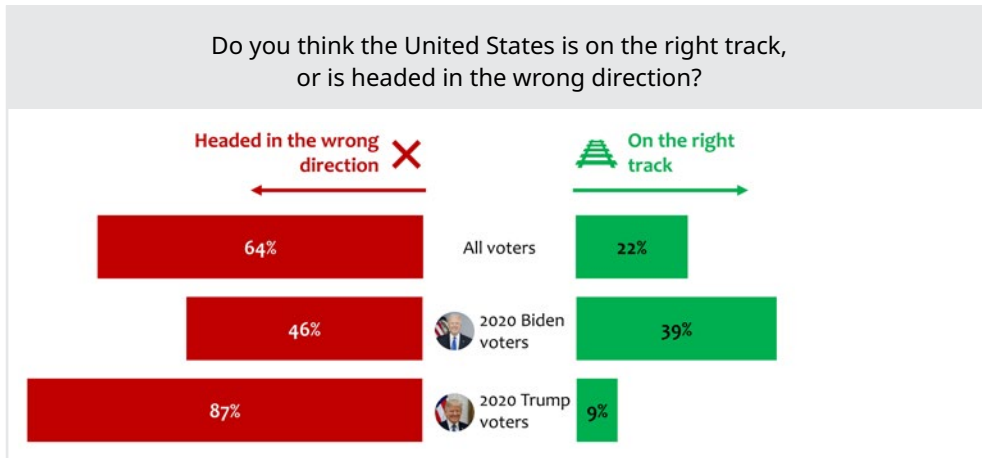
Lord Ashcroft Polls
X @LordAshcroft

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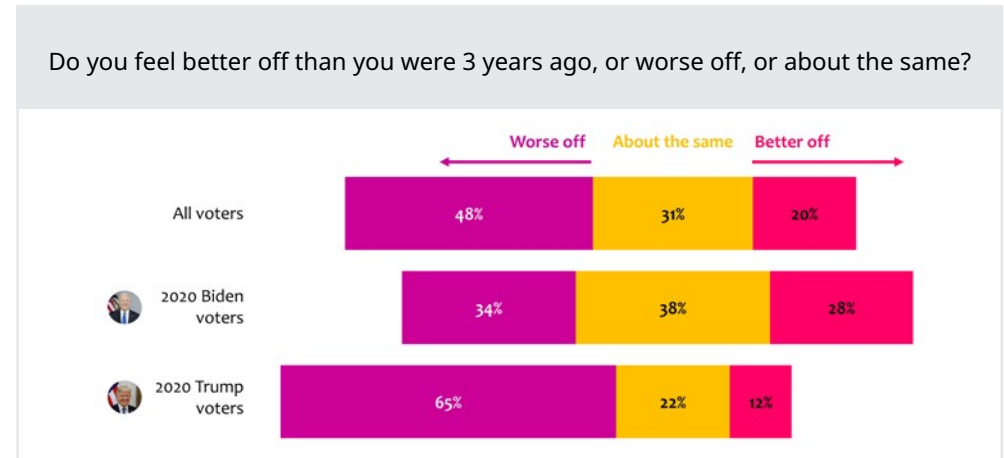


State of the nation

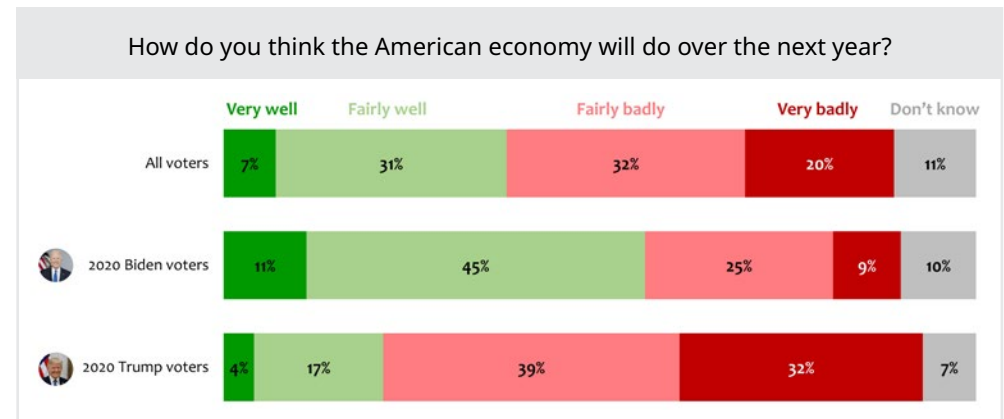


Nearly two in three Americans (64%) said the country was on the wrong track. Those who voted for Joe Biden in 2020 were more likely to say the country was heading in the wrong direction (46%) than that it was on the right track (39%). Examples mentioned in our focus groups included prices, the environment, culture wars, energy policy, failing infrastructure, division and polarisation, women’s rights, healthcare, obesity, housing, homelessness drug dependence, mental health, childcare, crime, the border, debt, schooling, welfare, and moral decline.

Just under half of all voters (48%) said they felt worse off than they did three years ago. This included just over one in three 2020 Biden voters (34%) – who were more likely to say they felt worse off than better off (28%). In our focus groups, people complained about rising prices across the board, and particularly on gas and groceries. Those involved in hiring staff often said it was hard to recruit even for reasonably paid jobs.



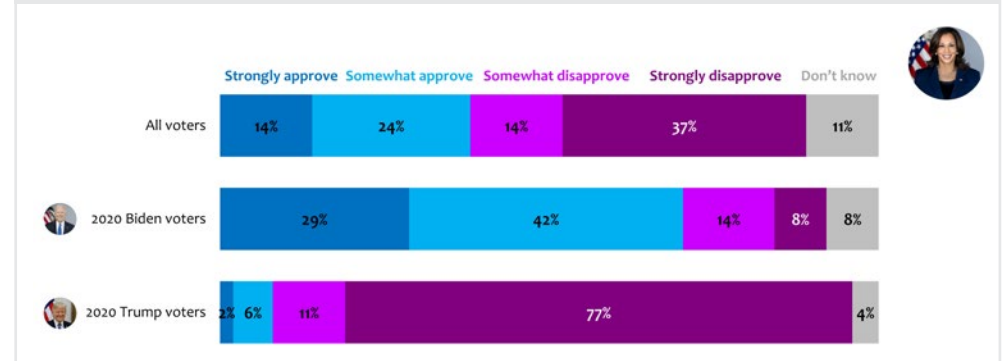
Just over half of Americans (52%) were pessimistic about prospects for the US economy over the next year, with one in five (20%) saying they expected the economy to do very badly. Biden voters from 2020 were more optimistic than most, but only a small majority (56%) expected the economy to do well.



Do you approve or disapprove of the way Joe Biden is handling his job as President?



Do you approve or disapprove of the way Kamala Harris is handling her job as Vice President?



More than one in five (21%) of President Biden's 2020 voters said they disapproved of his job performance. Overall, Americans disapproved by 55% to 41%, with 39% saying they strongly disapproved. Americans disapproved of Vice President Harris's performance by 51% to 38%, with 11% saying they didn't know.

In our focus groups, defenders of the Biden administration pointed to infrastructure spending, student loan forgiveness and work to renegotiate Medicare drug prices. Critics talked about stagnant or falling living standards, what they saw as counterproductive energy policies and an excessively liberal agenda; some who had voted for him complained of excessive moderation.

Both sides agreed that President Biden had not been able to deliver on hopes that he would reduce division and rancor in political life. Republicans pointed to what they saw as an aggressively liberal agenda, and said they often kept their opinions to themselves in professional or social life for fear of being lectured or ostracised. They also felt that by reversing Trump initiatives such as the Keystone Pipeline on day one in office and calling some Trump supporters a threat to democracy, Biden had hardly proved himself to be a uniter. Democrats tended to point to social media and misinformation.

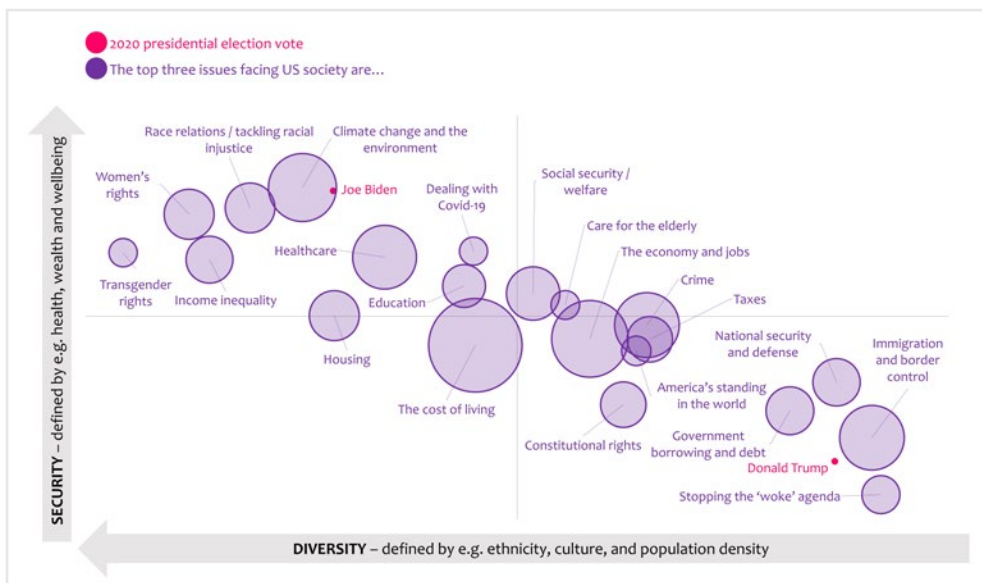
However, voters on all sides agreed about the condition of President Biden himself, which many believed to be serious and worse than was being publicly admitted. His occasional stumbles and confused public performances left many on both sides wondering whether he was up to the job now, let alone how he would handle a second term. This in turn led people to wonder who in the White House was really making the decisions.

- “If he continues to decline people will vote for someone that's halfway with it, even if it's Trump. Looking at Biden talk scares me to death.” Iowa
- “He needs to open the field because there are a lot of valid concerns. The situation is not going to get any better and we need someone stronger.” New Hampshire
- “It's almost like he's a puppet and whoever is behind him is running the show. But we don't know who that is.” New Hampshire

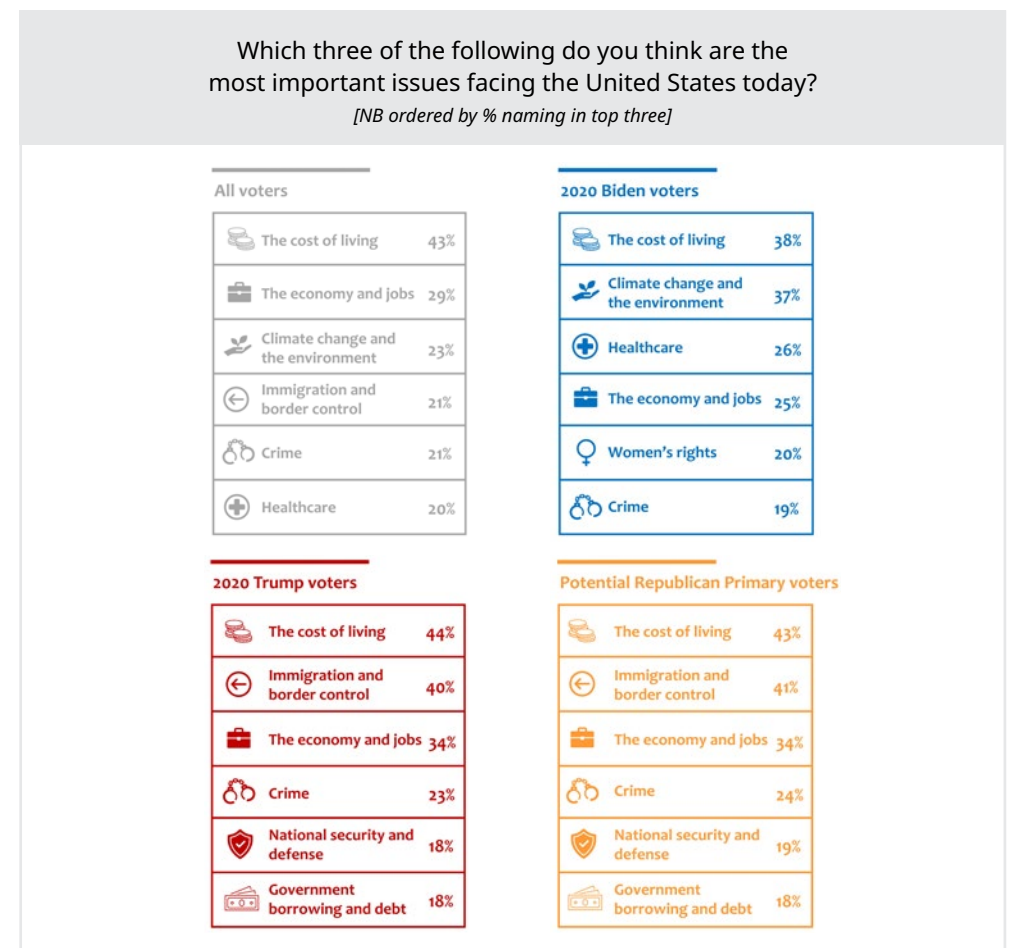
Issues at stake

We asked people what they considered to be the three most important issues facing the United States. Here the answers are plotted according to people's security on the one hand – measures including income, house value, education and health – and the diversity of their communities on the other – things like ethnicity and population density.

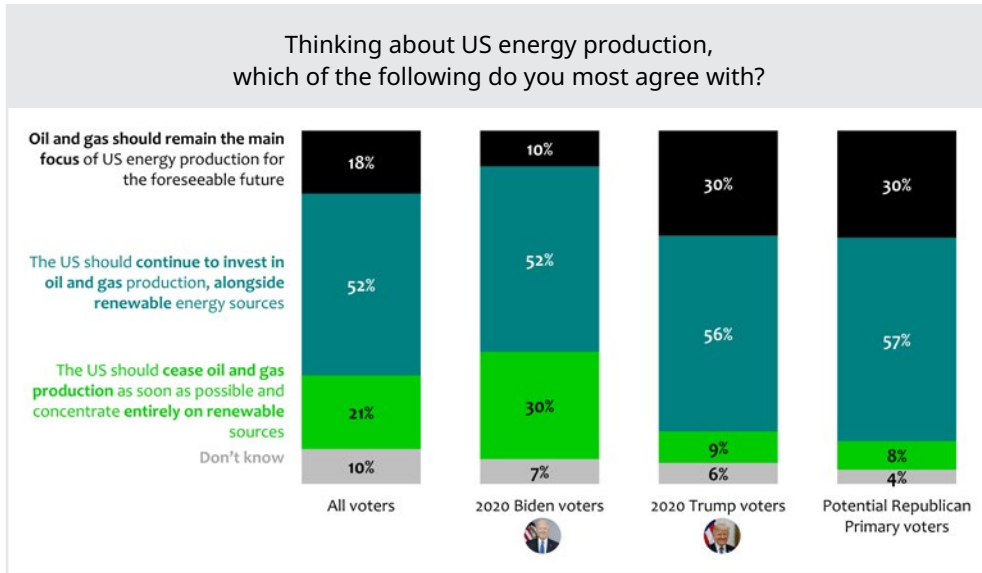
The lower-diversity, lower-security bottom right quadrant – largely rural and small-town America that has become the Republican heartland – is where we are most likely to find concerns about immigration and the border, national security and the so-called 'woke' agenda. Those who prioritise transgender rights, climate change and tackling racial injustice are more likely to be found in the more prosperous, diverse and politically liberal top left. The fact that the single biggest concern, the cost of living, is at the very centre of the map shows it to be a universal issue not confined to any one part of the community.



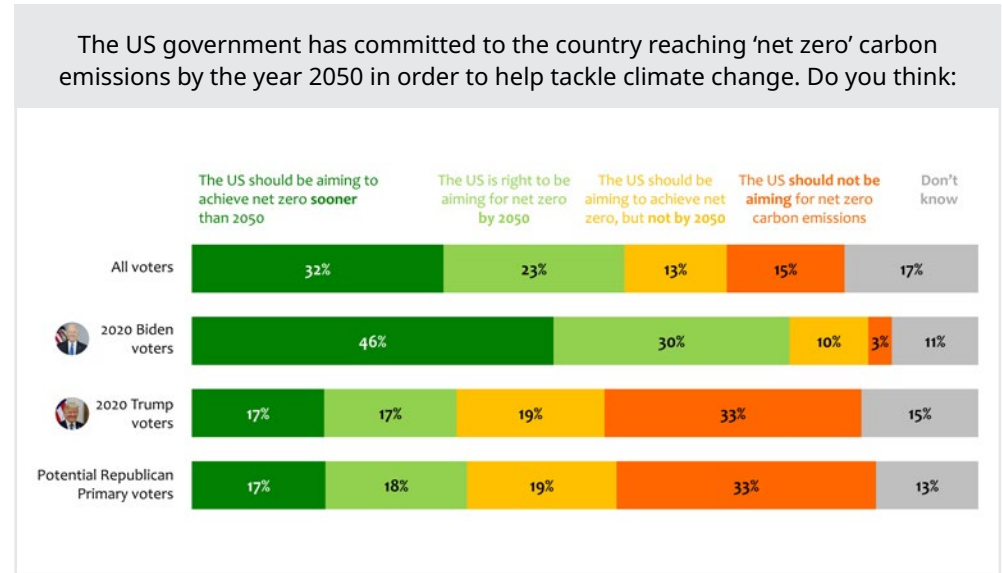
This is confirmed when we look at the issues of most concern to different kinds of voters. While the cost of living tops all lists, for 2020 Biden voters this was followed by climate change and healthcare. For 2020 Trump voters – and for likely 2024 Republican primary voters – it was followed by immigration, the economy and crime. Many in our groups said they had observed rising crime at first hand, including violent crime in previously peaceful places and a huge increase in shoplifting.



Energy and net zero



Asking specifically about energy and climate policies, we found a small majority of Americans (52%) saying the US should continue to invest in both oil and gas and renewable energy sources; similar proportions said the same among 2020 Biden (52%) and Trump voters (56%). However, Biden voters were more likely to say the US should cease oil and gas production as soon as possible and concentrate entirely on renewables (30%), while an identical proportion of Trump voters thought oil and gas should remain the focus for US energy production for the foreseeable future.



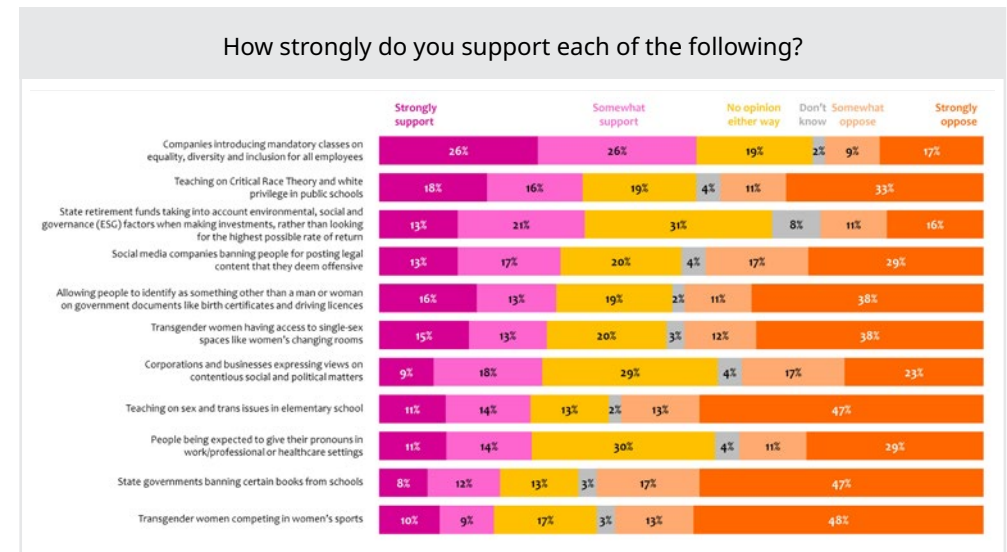
Three quarters of Biden voters said they thought either that the current target for achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050 was right (30%) or that the US should be aiming to achieve the target sooner (46%). Most Trump voters thought either that the target date should be later than 2050 (19%) or that the US should not be aiming for net zero at all (33%).

What is woke?

We asked in our poll what if anything people understood by the term 'woke'. For about half of voters, including a quarter of 2020 Trump voters, being 'woke' was a positive thing, to do with trying to make society more understanding and respectful towards different kinds of people. For most Republicans, it was about defining people according to their membership of groups like race, gender or sexuality, and saying this is the most important thing about them. One in five said they didn't know what it meant.



Asking specifically about various ideas that have been described as 'woke', we find a range of opinion from broad acceptance or indifference – companies introducing mandatory diversity training, ESG investing, social media companies banning people for legal but offensive content, corporations expressing views on controversial issues – to much more contentious ideas like transgender women competing in women's sports, access to single-sex spaces, and allowing people to identify as something other than male or female on official documents like a birth certificate or driving licence.



How strongly do you support each of the following?

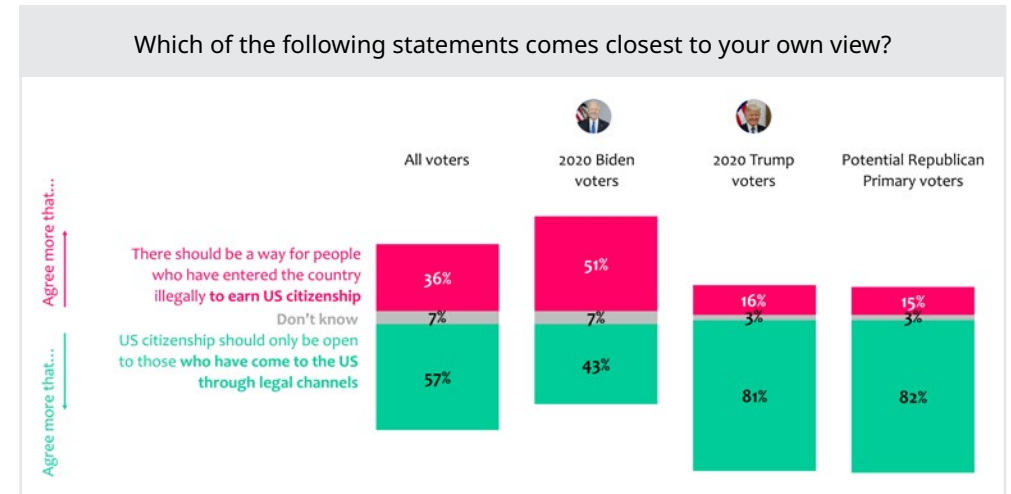
[NB showing top 5 and ordered by % opposing]

	All voters		GOP Primary voters	
Somewhat /strongly oppose...	State governments banning certain books from schools	64%	Teaching on sex and trans issues in elementary school	85%
	Transgender women competing in women's sports	61%	Transgender women competing in women's sports	83%
	Teaching on sex and trans issues in elementary school	60%	Transgender women having access to single-sex spaces	77%
	Transgender women having access to single-sex spaces	49%	Allowing people to identify as something other than a man or woman on government documents	76%
	Allowing people to identify as something other than a man or woman on government documents	49%	Teaching on Critical Race Theory and white privilege in public schools	70%

When we look at levels of support for each idea, we see that the same ideas tend to be unpopular, but opposition is around 20 points higher among likely Republican primary voters than among Americans as a whole. The one exception – banning certain books in schools – tops the list of unpopular measures for the country as a whole but does not appear among the Republican primary voters' top five most opposed.

Immigration and citizenship

A small majority of 2020 Biden voters (51%) agreed that there should be a way for those who have entered the country illegally to earn US citizenship. However, most Americans (57%), including 81% of 2020 Trump voters, said citizenship should only be open to those who have come to the US through legal channels.



In our focus groups, many on all sides felt the situation on the border had if anything got worse over the last three years. There was a widespread view that crossing into the US illegally (and trafficking drugs in the process) was too easy, and that there was little disincentive to try. Several noted that responsibility for the border had been given to Kamala Harris but that she had struggled to make progress on the issue.

Allies and adversaries

There was no significant party divide when we asked whether people saw various countries more as allies or adversaries of the US. Canada (79%), Australia (78%) and the UK (77%) were the most likely to be seen as friends of the US, with slightly fewer saying the same of Germany (66%), Japan (64%), Mexico (61%), Israel (60%) and India (60%).

Notably, the proportion seeing China as an adversary or threat (77%) exceeded those saying the same of Saudi Arabia (62%) or Pakistan (65%), and was on a par with the number saying the same of Iran.

In our focus groups, voters of different political persuasions spoke of China as an aggressive competitor which was using its economic influence and technological capability to gain power around the globe. They often lamented that the US had long been dependent on Chinese imports and worried about China investing in US land and property – “buying American soil”, as they often put it.

Though many favoured a tougher approach to China, they wondered what this could mean in practice, given the amount of American debt in Chinese hands. The only answer most could see was greater economic independence for the US, especially when it came to manufacturing.

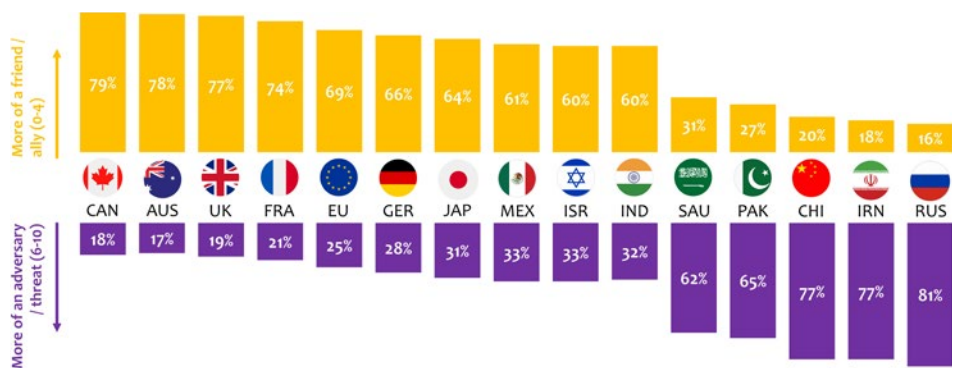
“We’re so reliant on them. We’ve got too many eggs in one basket. It makes us so vulnerable.” South Carolina

“We need to take a stronger stand and build independence. During the Trump presidency there was an effort to build things and make us more independent, like the pipeline and energy and bringing back manufacturing and getting ourselves back on top.” New Hampshire

“We’re letting them buy American soil. That should never happen.” Iowa

“Can we be tougher on them? We owe them a bunch of money. I don’t think we have that kind of leverage.” Iowa

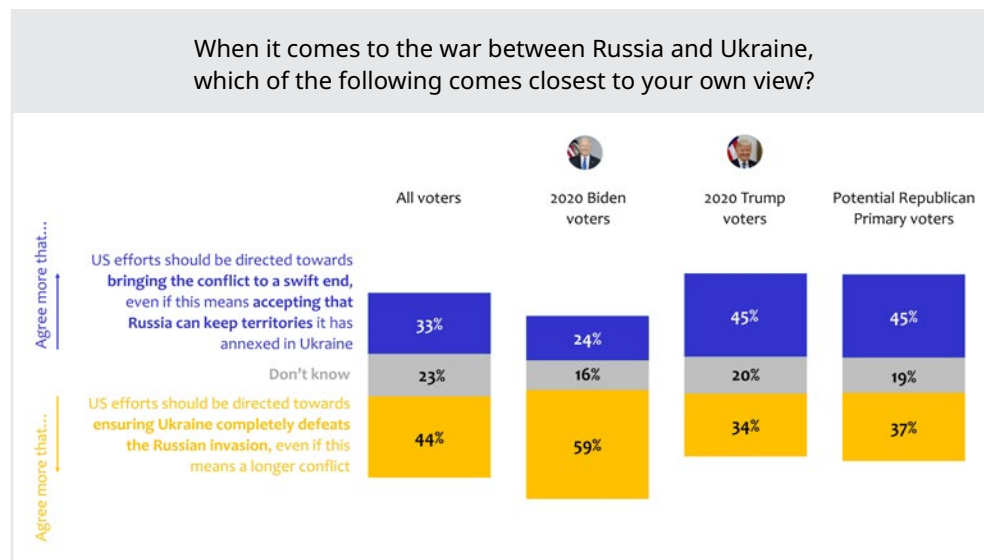
Please say whether you see each of the following as a friend and ally of the UK/US, or as an adversary or threat to the UK/US – where 0 means a close friend or ally and 10 means very much an adversary or threat, and 5 means neither.



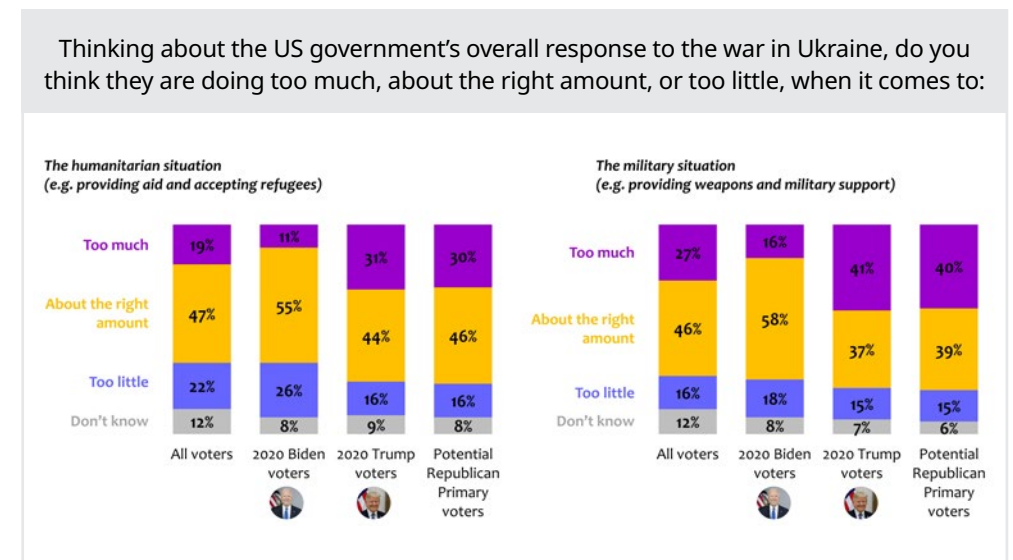
Russia and Ukraine

There was more of a divide over the war in Ukraine. While a plurality thought the US had got its humanitarian response about right, many Republicans in particular think that in terms of military support, America was already doing too much.

There was also no clear consensus as to America's ultimate objective. While most Biden voters said the US should aim to help ensure Ukraine completely defeats the invasion, Republicans inclined to the view that American efforts should be directed towards bringing the conflict to a swift end, even if that meant a compromise over territory.



In our focus groups, Biden voters tended to think the administration was striking a reasonable balance of helping Ukraine as much as was practical without provoking Russian retaliation or escalation. Republicans tended worry that the US was helping enough to prolong the conflict and produce an indefinite stalemate rather than outright Ukrainian victory, and that precious resources were being spent on a conflict involving no direct American interest that they could see. Several drew the contrast between the billions spent in Ukraine and the \$700 offered to households affected by the wildfires in Hawaii.



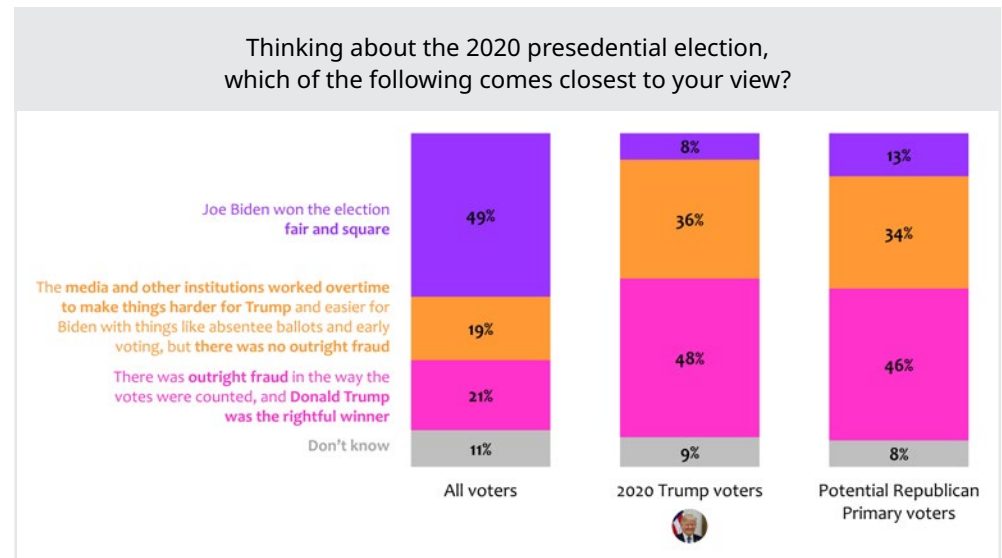
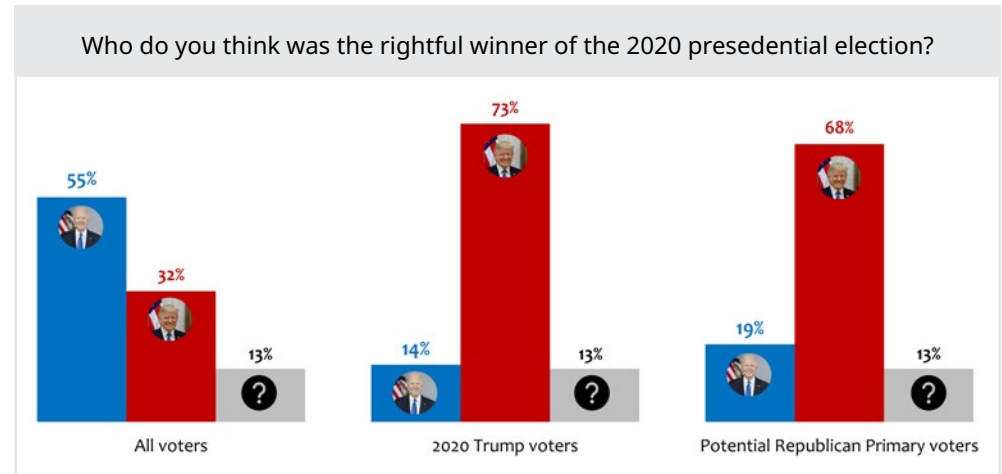
The 2020 election and the Trump indictments

While most Americans said they believed Joe Biden was the rightful winner of the 2020 election, more than 7 in 10 Trump voters said Trump was the true victor, as did 68% of Republican primary voters (though there was a considerable divide on this question between those backing Trump in the primaries and those supporting other candidates).

“I’m as conservative as anyone I know but claiming you won when obviously you’re not in the White House is not going to win in 2024. Move toward the future.” Iowa

“He should move past it. That being said, there’s no chance Biden had 10 million more votes than Obama. 82 million votes, my ass.” Arizona

However, those who believed the election had been unfair did not always think there had been outright fraud. While just under half of Trump voters thought this had indeed been the case, 36% thought covid-related measures on things like absentee ballots and early voting had worked against Trump and in favour of Biden. In our groups, even many of those who sympathised with Trump’s position thought he should move on and focus on the next election.



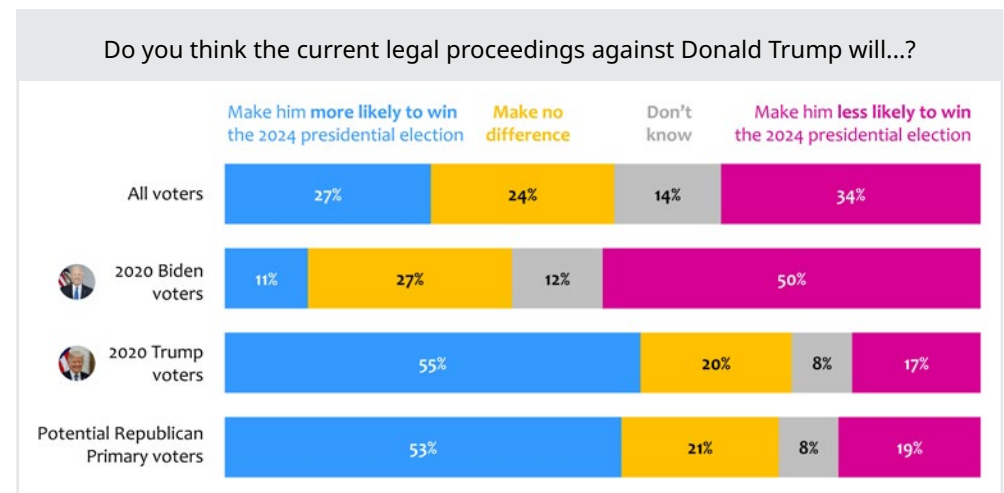
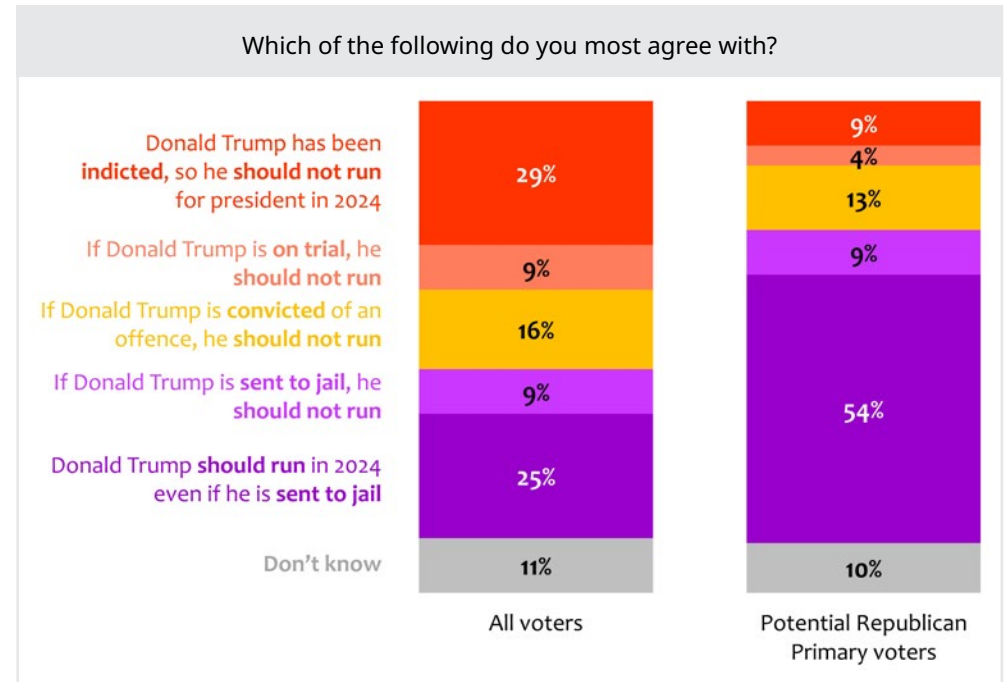
The vast majority of Republicans and nearly 1 in 5 Biden voters said they thought the lawsuits against Donald Trump were politically motivated. In our focus groups, Democrats would admit that some of the charges would never have been brought against a different individual, while Republicans sometimes felt that just because politics lay behind the prosecutions did not necessarily mean there was no case to answer.

“Everybody’s got a Stormy. They all have documents. Some of this is just to pad the number of indictments.” South Carolina

“I’m not saying I don’t think Trump should be prosecuted. But in history, we’ve turned the other cheek with other politicians of his stature. The Democrats are pushing on this because they feel threatened by his position and his ability to get elected again.” New Hampshire

“You did a little something with the woman, that’s your business. That ain’t got to do with the country. But telling somebody ‘I need you help me not to lose’? Come on, now.” South Carolina

A majority of likely Republican primary voters said the indictments made them more likely to support Trump in the election; only 8% said the charges made them less inclined to do so.



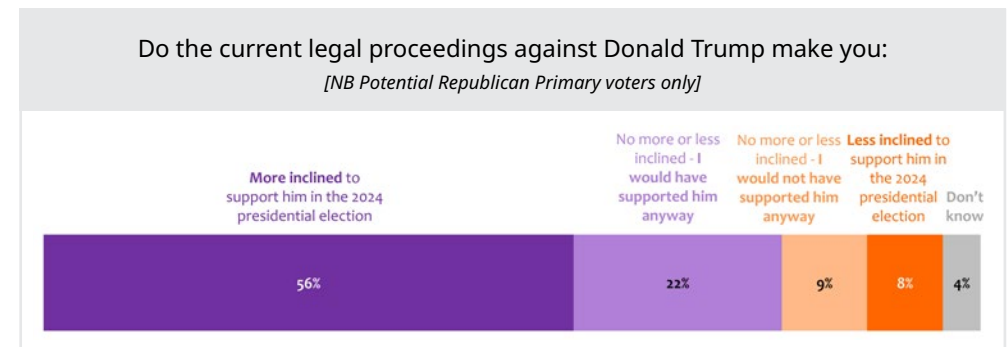
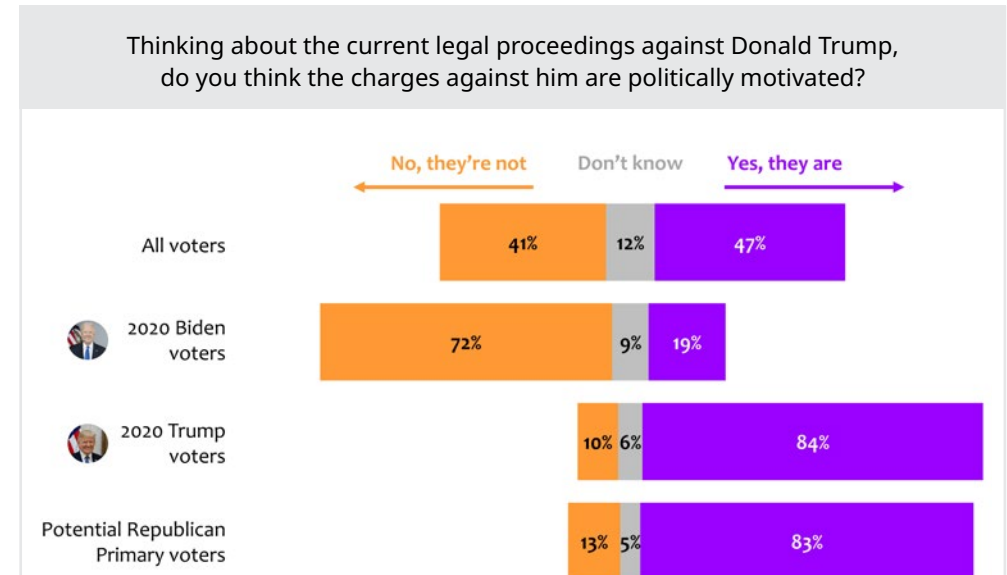
Fewer than 1 in 10 likely primary voters said the indictments themselves were reason enough for Trump not to run. A further 26% said he should withdraw if he is on trial, convicted or imprisoned during the campaign. A majority (54%) said he should continue to run even if he is sent to jail.

In our focus groups, however, it was clear that many Trump supporters would reflect carefully before deciding whether or not to vote for him if he were convicted.

“I think he was a great president. But I also feel there are a lot of people in jail and it’s very hard for them to get a second chance. If you go to jail for drugs, you can’t vote for so many years. So when you allow this, what example are we setting?” South Carolina

“I would still vote for him, but only because of being upset at how they did it, how they tried to get him out.” Arizona

“It would depend how he handled that conviction. He would say ‘I’m going to fight this, but I’ve been convicted by fellow Americans,’ that would be huge for me. But if he just automatically said ‘oh they’re lying, these people lied, the Democrats paid them off’, that would taint my view of him.” Arizona

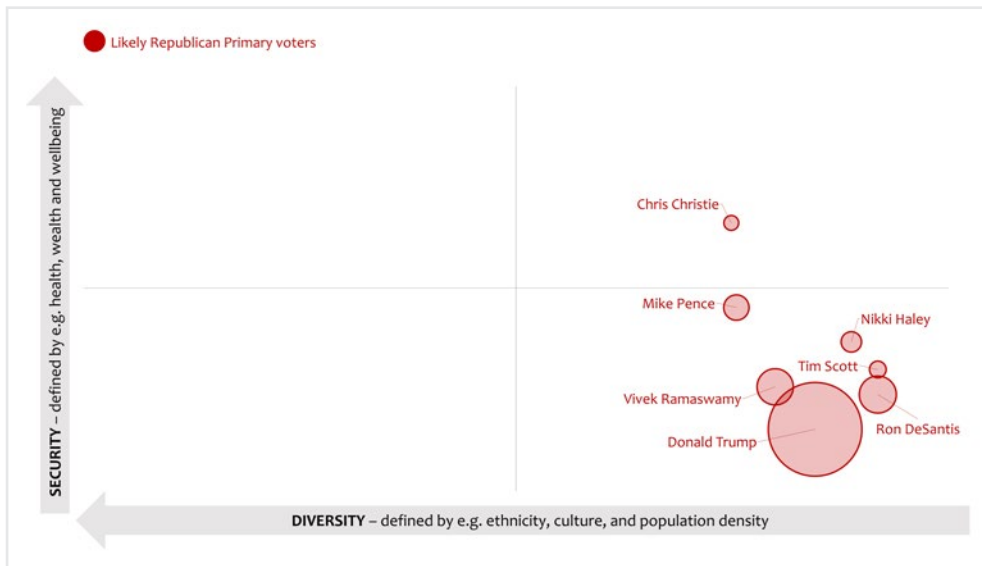


Most 2020 Trump voters (55%) and a majority of likely Republican primary voters (53%) said they thought the legal proceedings against Trump made it more likely that he would win the 2024 presidential election. Voters as a whole were more likely to think the proceedings would hurt his chances (34%) than help them (27%).

The primaries

Our national polling conducted between 17 August and 1 September found Donald Trump with 60% of the vote among likely Republican primary voters, with Vivek Ramaswamy and Ron DeSantis tied for second place on 10%. Our over-sample polling in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, which continued until 12 September, found Trump with 53% of the combined votes, with Ramaswamy, DeSantis, Tim Scott and Nikki Haley all within a two-point margin in second to fifth place (8% to 10%).

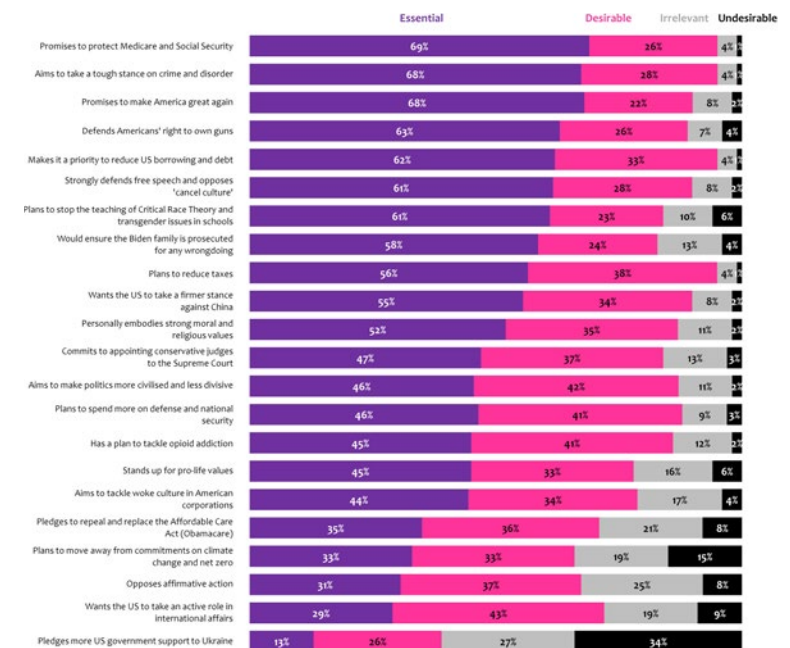
Our demographic map enables us to visualise where the higher-scoring candidates are drawing their support. Those supporting Ramaswamy and DeSantis are most likely to be found close to Trump territory. Those supporting Chris Christie are furthest from what is now the centre of gravity of Republican support.



We asked likely primary voters how important it was that the Republican nominee had (or did not have) certain attributes. Promising to protect Medicare and Social Security, a tough stance on crime and promising to make America great again were the most likely to be considered essential, followed by protecting gun rights and reducing borrowing and debt. Fewer than half said it was essential to stand up for pro-life values or tackle woke culture in American corporations, and only one in three thought it essential to repeal Obamacare. Just over one third (34%) said it would be undesirable for the nominee to pledge more US support for Ukraine.

When it comes to choosing the Republican nominee for president in 2024, would you say each of the following were essential, desirable, irrelevant or undesirable?

[NB Potential Republican Primary voters only]



On most political and policy issues, there is little to separate those supporting Trump in the primaries from those backing other candidates. However, there are some points of difference. The most significant is that only 41% of non-Trump voters say Trump was the rightful winner in 2020, compared to 86% of those backing the former president. Trump voters were also nearly three times as likely as their non-Trump counterparts to say that the official result was down to outright fraud, rather than the Democrats benefiting from covid-related election rules.

In our focus groups, Republican primary voters currently intending to back Donald Trump often spoke of his flaws but believed he would act on the things they cared about and defend their values, even if he did not personally embody them. They saw him as the most effective advocate for their interests and the most likely to achieve results – whether a stronger economy, a healthy 401k, a realistic energy policy, a counter to what they saw as the prevailing liberal agenda or the chance to “make America great again.” They also saw him as the Republican most likely to beat the Democrats in November 2024.



Vivek Ramaswamy had caught the attention of many of our participants, many of whom said they wanted to hear more about his ideas. They saw him as an educated, successful and articulate outsider, as well as well-presented and polished – though some felt he seemed rather over-rehearsed. Several saw similarities with Trump, particularly in the early stages of his 2016 campaign, and often assumed the parallels were deliberate, leading them to wonder how far he believed what he said. Participants sometimes concluded that he was setting himself up for future campaigns, or aiming to win Trump’s favour as a potential running mate.



Ron DeSantis had a number of supporters in our groups, but many felt his campaign had taken a wrong turn. Some felt there was a difference between his persona as governor of Florida – standing up to Disney, guiding the state through covid or competently managing the response to Hurricane Idalia – and that of presidential candidate, in which he seemed to be going out of his way to create controversy. They felt he was therefore struggling to project a clear or authentic message.



Nikki Haley impressed participants with her performance in the first candidates’ debate, in which several felt she had come across as tough and smart. They noted that she had served in the Trump administration without baggage, and saw her as a conservative realist. They liked her foreign policy experience, and sometimes suggested her level-headedness and diplomatic skills would make her a good vice president to Trump. However, some doubted that she would manage to garner the support needed to go further.



Many of those who respected **Mike Pence** for certifying the election in the face of pressure from the president dislike the fact that he was at Trump’s side for so long, while strong Trump supporters condemn him for taking the stance he did. However, many recognise his moral compass, but doubt that his very conservative views would win over the national electorate. Some argue that he is seeking to seal his own legacy independent from that of Trump.



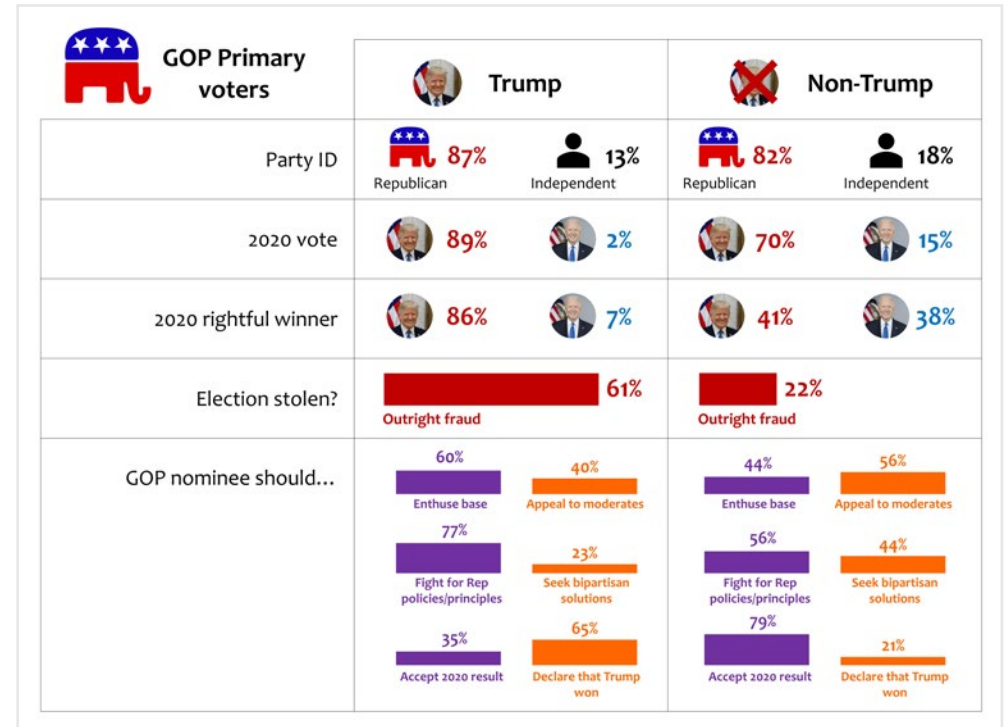
Tim Scott was described as honest, likeable and a straight shooter, and people respected his story and background. However, some feared he was almost too decent, commenting that he seemed quiet in the first debate, and most doubted that he would ultimately be the contender.



Many recalled **Chris Christie’s** time as New Jersey governor for both positive and negative reasons. His vocal opposition to Trump played better with Democrats than with potential Republican primary voters, though people had also noticed his changes of heart on this question. Many thought his campaign seemed to be driven mostly by anger at Trump rather than being a serious attempt to win office.



Doug Bergum was referred to as “the farmer guy” and some knew him to be the governor of a rural state, possibly one of the Dakotas. **Asa Hutchinson** was mentioned as an outspoken critic of Trump. **Larry Elder** was mentioned as an entertaining talk-show host. Some knew that **Perry Johnson** was a quality expert and had sent out books in the post. A few referred to **Will Hurd** as a moderate from Texas.



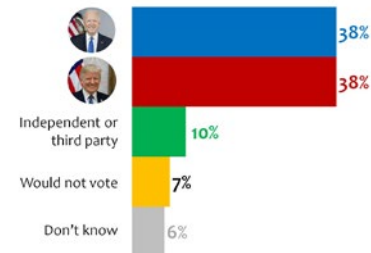


Finally, we asked how people would vote if Joe Biden were up against the leading Republican contenders. These figures should be taken with a degree of caution, since at this stage in the campaign the results still largely reflect name recognition.

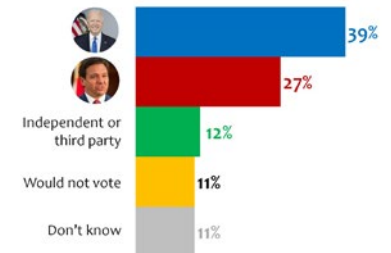
However, it is notable that in none of the scenarios does President Biden reach 40% of the vote. Except for the Trump-Biden contest in which they are tied, our detailed data shows 2020 Trump voters to be much more likely than 2020 Biden voters to say they don't know how they will vote, or to say they will back an independent or third-party candidate. This suggests there is more room for Republicans to swing behind their party's eventual nominee than there is for Biden to expand his support.

If the next presidential election were held today, who would you vote for if the candidates were:

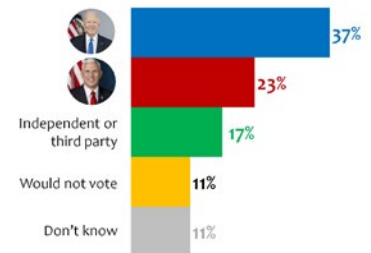
Joe Biden vs Donald Trump



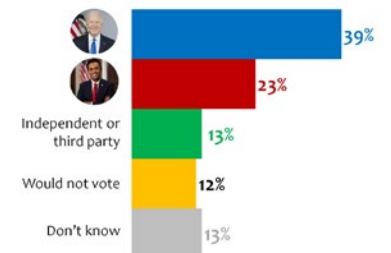
Joe Biden vs Ron DeSantis



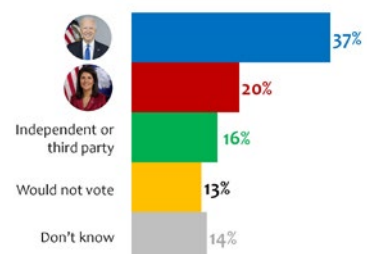
Joe Biden vs Mike Pence



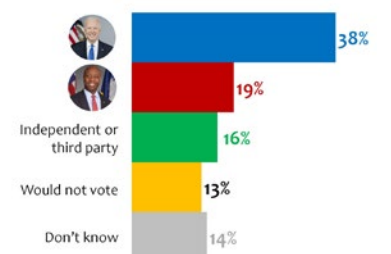
Joe Biden vs Vivek Ramaswamy



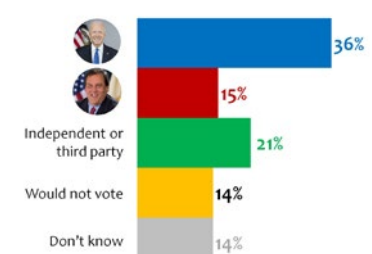
Joe Biden vs Nikki Haley



Joe Biden vs Tim Scott



Joe Biden vs Chris Christie





Methodological note

20,942 adults in the United States were interviewed online between 17 August and 12 September 2023. Results have been weighted to be representative of all adults in the US. Full data tables are available at LordAshcroftPolls.com.

16 focus groups were held between 7 and 19 September 2023 in the following locations:

- Manchester, New Hampshire
- Charleston, South Carolina
- Cedar Rapids, Iowa
- Phoenix, Arizona

The groups were divided between likely voters in the Republican and Democrat primaries. Participants were drawn from a wide range of backgrounds and the groups included equal numbers of men and women.

About Lord Ashcroft

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. He is a former treasurer and deputy chairman of the UK Conservative Party. He is also honorary chairman and a former treasurer of the International Democrat Union. He is founder and chairman of the board of trustees of Crimestoppers, vice-patron of the Intelligence Corps Museum, chairman of the trustees of Ashcroft Technology Academy, a senior fellow of the International Strategic Studies Association, former chancellor of Anglia Ruskin University and a former trustee of Imperial War Museums.

His political books include:

- Smell the Coffee: A Wake-Up Call for the Conservative Party
- Call Me Dave: The Unauthorised Biography of David Cameron
- Hopes and Fears: Trump, Clinton, the Voters and the Future
- Well, You Did Ask: Why the UK Voted to Leave the EU
- The Lost Majority: The 2017 Election, the Conservative Party, the Voters and the Future
- Jacob's Ladder: The Unauthorised Biography of Jacob Rees-Mogg
- Diagnosis of Defeat: Labour's Turn to Smell the Coffee
- Going for Broke: The Rise of Rishi Sunak
- Reunited Nation? American Politics Beyond the 2020 Election
- Red Knight: The Unauthorised Biography of Sir Keir Starmer
- First Lady: Intrigue at the Court of Carrie and Boris Johnson
- All To Play For: The Advance Of Rishi Sunak

His other books include:

- Victoria Cross Heroes, Volumes I and II
- Special Forces Heroes
- George Cross Heroes
- Special Ops Heroes
- Heroes of the Skies
- White Flag? An Examination of the UK's Defence Capability
- Unfair Game: An Exposé of South Africa's Captive-Bred Lion Industry
- Life Support: The State of the NHS in an Age of Pandemics
- In the Shadows: The Extraordinary Men and Women of the Intelligence Corps

