Democrats' Rust Belt Struggles and the Promise of Independent Politics

The Center for Working-Class Politics
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The Center for Working-Class Politics is a research institution dedicated to studying the relationship between working-class voters and progressive politics. Its projects include regular surveys of working-class voters, statistical analyses of elections and polling data, and the construction of a comprehensive database of progressive candidate demographics, strategy, and messaging.

The Labor Institute develops and conducts education and policy programs for unions, environmental organizations, community groups, and immigrant worker centers on workplace health and safety, the environment, economics, and movement building.

The Labor Education Action Research Network (LEARN) at Rutgers University is the educational extension division of the Department of Labor Studies and Employment Relations in the Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations.

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Introduction

Over the last fifty years, inequality in the United States has skyrocketed. The shared prosperity of the post–World War II decades, which reduced the gap between the rich and the poor, appears to twenty-first-century Americans as a distant dream. In fact, inequality is now at its highest level since the Gilded Age. Today the top 1% of households control a greater share of national wealth than at any point since the 1940s and a share of national income not seen since the 1920s.[1]

Deindustrialization, mass layoffs, and the decline of unions have been coupled with globalization, tax breaks for the wealthy, and the deregulation of finance — effectively canceling the promise of the American dream for millions.

Worse, there is no effective political opposition to this state of affairs. Since at least the time of Ronald Reagan, Democrats have embraced the same fealty to big business — from Wall Street to Silicon Valley — that was once the preserve of country club Republicans. Not surprisingly, many working-class voters have abandoned the party they feel abandoned them first.

And nowhere is the Democratic Party's working-class problem more problematic — or more urgent — than in the Rust Belt. Once the backbone of the New Deal coalition, states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin have become epicenters of Democratic decline. With their high concentrations of blue-collar, working-class voters — the very constituents Democrats have been losing steadily over the past decades — these areas have absorbed the deepest shocks of deindustrialization and economic dislocation. Decades of factory closures, wage stagnation, and elite neglect have fueled widespread alienation and opened the door for right-wing populism and outsider candidates.

Despite populist rhetoric, the policies of right-wing politicians (tax breaks for the rich, social-spending cuts, deregulation, and anti-union legislation) only serve to further heighten inequality and immiserate the poor. But still, the Democratic Party seems rudderless, unable to mount an effective campaign against Trumpian populism — largely because party leaders are still unwilling to listen to working-class voters over and above the voices of lobbyists, donors, and political consultants.

If progressives want to rebuild a durable electoral majority, they will need to regain lost ground in the Rust Belt. The most promising path forward is through economic populism focused on reigning in out-of-control economic elites, reversing the effects of decades of mass layoffs, and standing up for ordinary people.

While many working-class voters no longer have faith in the Democratic Party, across the former industrial heartland and beyond, many still support what were once core Democratic economic ideas like taxing the wealthy, raising wages, and cracking down on corporate abuse. But they don't trust the party to deliver, and many don't even believe the Democratic Party still stands for those core ideas. That's a significant problem. It's not just that working-class voters are turning away from Democrats; it's that the Democratic brand itself is dragging down candidates who otherwise might be believing and saying all the right things.

That disconnect is part of a broader political moment. Support for America's two major parties has been on the decline for years. Today political independents outnumber both Democrats and Republicans, and as many as two-thirds of Americans now say they believe a third party is needed. But just because voters are fed up with the system doesn't mean they're ready to embrace something new. The Green Party, for example, has included many elements of economic populism in its platform for decades, yet has yielded very little electoral success. Structural realities help explain why: even if voters express support for a third party, American federalism, first-past-the-post election rules, and the sheer inertia of the duopoly make political action

1 Arloc Sherman, Danilo Trisi, and Josephine Cureton, *A Guide to Statistics on Historical Trends in Income Inequality* (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2024).

outside the major parties exceedingly difficult — a fact voters recognize in their reticence to cast ballots for third-party candidates.

That said, most congressional districts today are effectively one-party districts. In over 130 districts, the Republican candidate won by over 25 percentage points in 2024. There the issue may be the failure to develop a second party, not a third party. In these heavily Republican contexts where Democrats are unable or unwilling to mount an effective opposition, independent candidates may be the only viable path of opposition to Republicans.

Indeed, there are signs that independent candidates running on issues highlighting economic populism may be able to reach voters Democrats have lost in red and purple states, opening the door for a genuinely pro-worker, anti-elite politics to become a national reality.

Take Dan Osborn, a union mechanic who ran as an independent candidate for Senate in deep-red Nebraska. By dropping the Democratic Party brand and focusing on pocketbook issues — raising wages, protecting jobs, taking on corporate power — Osborn came within 7 points of defeating an incumbent Republican in a state Kamala Harris lost by 20. Analysis by Split Ticket found that Osborn dramatically outperformed every Democratic Senate candidate on the ballot in 2024 relative to baseline expectations, including longtime incumbents Jon Tester and Amy Klobuchar.

His campaign suggests that voters are more open to independent populist candidates than party-branded ones. But it also raises deeper questions: Did Osborn succeed because of his personal story and his outsider image — or because he was running as an independent rather than a Democrat?

We've seen this tension elsewhere too. Sherrod Brown in Ohio and Matt Cartwright in Pennsylvania have long embraced economic populism, yet both struggled under the weight of the Democratic label and were defeated in 2024. In other cases, Democratic populists have been able to hold on to their seats by distancing themselves publicly from their own party; Jared Golden of Maine and Marie Gluesenkamp Perez of Washington are clear examples of Democrats winning despite their party label. Previous research by the Center for Working-Class Politics (CWCP) in reports like *Trump's Kryptonite* has shown that candidates who distance themselves from partisan elites often perform better with working-class voters.[2]

But key questions remain: In states where the Democratic brand carries significant baggage, can populist progressives still succeed? Or does the party label pose an obstacle too formidable for even the most compelling messages to overcome, requiring progressive candidates in red states to run as independent economic populists? And if so, does the content of economic populism itself need to broaden — speaking more directly to the underlying economic grievances that have driven so many toward the Republican Party?

This report takes up these questions by examining Rust Belt voters' opinions of economic populism and party allegiance. It also attempts to deepen the content of economic populism by testing a new policy proposal that challenges the right of corporations to conduct layoffs (a major source of the Rust Belt's decline) while receiving public funds.

Drawing on original survey experiments and qualitative data from open-ended responses, we evaluate how economic populist strategies perform in one of the most politically consequential regions of the country.

For this study, the Center for Working-Class Politics, the Labor Institute, and the Labor Education Action Research Network (LEARN) at Rutgers, in partnership with YouGov, conducted an original survey of three thousand voters in four key states: Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. These states are not only pivotal in national elections but also home to large working-class populations that have experienced significant economic dislocation, especially from mass layoffs.

It is our belief that political strategies that successfully build worker power and counter corporate influence are desperately needed to reduce inequality and protect American democracy. Our goal was to test whether strong pro-worker messaging — especially from candidates operating inside or outside the Democratic Party — could resonate with voters who feel politically alienated.

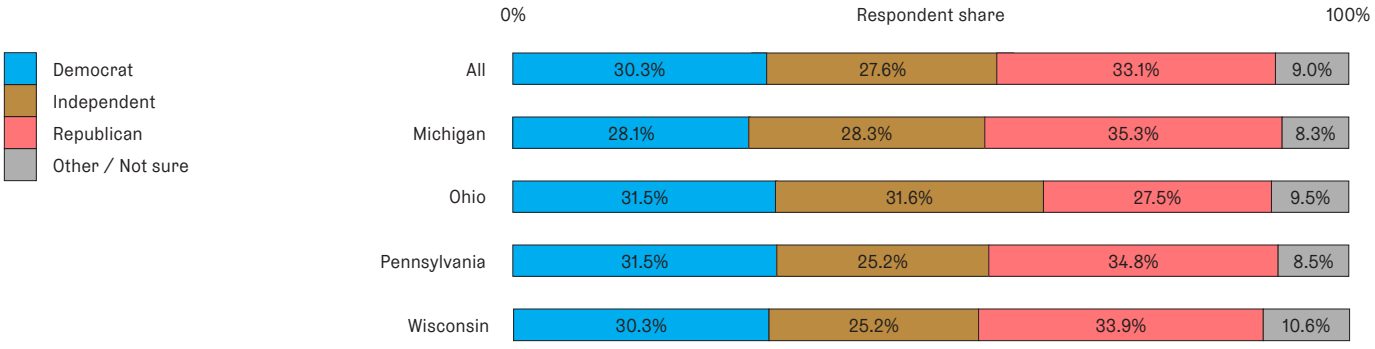
2 Jared Abbott et al., *Trump's Kryptonite* (Brooklyn, NY: CWCP, YouGov, Jacobin, 2023).

We surveyed 1,272 residents from Pennsylvania, 980 from Michigan, 1,145 from Ohio, and 1,056 from Wisconsin. These respondents were matched to a sampling frame based on gender, age, race, and education to produce a final dataset of three thousand respondents (750 per state). The sampling frame is politically representative of adults in these four states, based on public data sources including the American Community Survey (ACS), the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS), the National Election Pool (NEP) 2020 exit poll, and the Cooperative Election Study (CES). Final survey weights were generated through a combination of propensity score modeling and poststratification on key demographic and political variables, including past and expected presidential vote choice.

The following chart shows the breakdown of party identification within each state. Overall, 30% of respondents in these states are self-identified Democrats, 33% are Republicans, and 28% are independents.

Sample composition by party identification (weighted)

FIGURE 1



Key Findings

1. Strong economic populism is broadly and deeply popular. Economic populist messaging yielded net support of +45 points (defined as the percentage of respondents who support minus those who oppose). Messages that directly named corporate greed and economic elites as the problem outperformed the softer, "populist-lite" alternative by more than 11 points.

2. The Democratic Party's brand is a major liability in three of the four the Rust Belt states tested. In head-to-head tests, Democratic candidates underperformed their independent counterparts by over 8 points, even when delivering the exact same economic populist message. This "Democratic penalty" was largest among working-class, Latino, rural, and swing voters, and is more than enough to lose competitive elections across the region. The penalty was between 11 and 16 points in Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. By contrast, we did not observe such a penalty for Democratic candidates in Pennsylvania.

3. Voter disillusionment with Democrats is more about failure and less about ideological extremism. Many respondents — Democrats, Republicans, and independents alike — viewed the party as corrupt, out of touch, and unwilling to fight for working people. Most did not view the Democrats as an economic populist party of and for working people. Part of this (but only part) has to do with the perception of the party as "woke." Still, only a minority cited "woke" appeals as central to their frustrations with the party.

4. The most popular economic policies are bold, tangible, and grounded in fairness — and can unite voters across class and partisan lines. Across twenty-five ranked proposals, policies that reduced costs, curbed corporate abuse, and held elites

accountable (capping drug prices, taxing the wealthy, and even enacting a federal jobs guarantee) consistently performed best. Support for many of these policies cut across ideological and class divisions, highlighting the potential of economic populism to build the broad coalitions progressives need to win.

5. Even an unfamiliar, ambitious proposal to ban mass layoffs by federal contractors enjoys strong support. A new policy proposal to stop large companies that receive taxpayer money from conducting involuntary layoffs was one of the most popular policies tested, despite being unknown to voters. A separate ballot-initiative simulation showed the policy retained strong net support even when targeted by corporate opposition messaging — especially when paired with rebuttals from supporters of the initiative.

6. Independent populist politics may offer a credible path forward. Across the four Rust Belt states we surveyed, 57% of respondents supported the creation of a new Independent Workers Political Association (IWPA), with especially strong enthusiasm among noncollege voters, renters, voters of color, and the economically insecure. The idea of an IWPA drew significant support from Republicans and independents as well — suggesting a realignment opportunity grounded in economic populism.

The findings point to two clear but challenging paths forward:

1. Democrats might be able to win back Rust Belt working-class voters, but only by running bold economic populist campaigns that make reversing decades of economic stagnation the party's top priority — which will no doubt mean challenging corporate Democrats. The Democrats must develop a path to unequivocally establish themselves as the party of the working class, not their bosses and financiers.

2. There is significant political space for populist independent candidates, and perhaps even a new working-class political formation, to make significant electoral progress.

Detailed Summary of Key Takeaways

SECTION 1

Economic Populism Is Popular Across the Board

- Economic populist messaging is broadly popular. Pooling the four different populist messages we tested, 59% of respondents supported the candidate they read about, while just 15% opposed, yielding net support of +44 points. This broad-based appeal extended across race, class, age, and the rural-urban divide, suggesting that economic populism can help expand progressive electoral coalitions.

- Strong populism that directly challenges economic elites significantly outperforms softer, "populist-lite" rhetoric targeting only a few bad corporate actors. Net support for the strong populist message was 54.4 percentage points, compared to 43.1 points for the weaker version — a difference of 11.3 points. Relative to weak populism, strong populism drove both higher support (66.2% vs. 58.1%) and lower opposition (11.8% vs. 15.0%).

- Key Democratic constituencies respond especially well to strong populism. Respondents holding working-class occupations, voters with insecure jobs, those without four-year college degrees, and respondents in households earning under $50,000 all showed substantially larger net support for the strong populist message compared to the weaker version.

- Low-turnout and cross-pressured groups show strikingly higher rates of support for strong populism compared to weak populism. Young voters under thirty, Latinos, infrequent voters, and ideological moderates were especially responsive to strong populist messaging.

- These results underscore the strategic value of strong economic populism. By directly confronting corporate behavior rather than relying on softer frames of bad corporate actors, strong populist messaging appealed not only to voters in the Democratic base but also to the working-class, moderate, and independent voters essential to building durable majorities in the Rust Belt.

SECTION 2

The Democratic Label Undercuts Support for Economic Populists

- The Democratic label carries a clear electoral penalty. Independent candidates consistently performed better than Democrats delivering the same economic populist messages. This gap was evident across all message types, underscoring that the problem lies with the Democratic brand, not the platform itself. In competitive districts where outcomes hinge on narrow margins, this disadvantage, tied purely to party identification, could be decisive.

- The penalty is largest among key constituencies Democrats have struggled to reach. Latinos, working-class respondents, and those in rural and small-town communities were substantially more supportive of independents delivering the same economic populist messages.

- Partisanship and ideology shape reactions sharply. Conservatives penalized Democratic candidates heavily, moderates showed little difference in their reactions, and liberals preferred Democratic candidates over independents. Republicans drove much of the overall gap by favoring independents at much higher rates, whereas self-identified Democrats strongly preferred Democratic candidates.

SECTION 3

Understanding Rust Belt Voters' Perceptions of the Democratic Party

- Negative views of the Democratic Party are widespread. About 70% of respondents expressed unfavorable opinions on the party, mirroring recent polling. Disapproval spanned nearly every demographic and partisan group, including many who identify as Democrats or vote reliably for the party.

- Critiques differ across partisanship. Democrats and many independents were most likely to fault the party for poor performance or lack of political courage, expressing frustration that Democrats "don't deliver" on their promises or fail to stand up forcefully to Republicans. Republicans were far more likely to portray Democrats as untrustworthy and out of touch.

- Cultural critiques matter, but they aren't everything. A significant minority across groups mentioned "wokeness" or ideological extremism as a primary concern. Such sentiments often overlapped with broader complaints about Democrats being out of touch. Still, while cultural dissension was a factor, economic grievances and the perception of the party as corrupt were more often cited as cause for disillusionment.

- Similarly, concern around undocumented immigrants isn't necessarily a liability for Democrats. In fact, 63% of Rust Belt voters in our survey supported the legalization of undocumented workers who have been here for three years, have paid their taxes, and have not committed a felony

- The dominant narrative is structural: the party doesn't deliver. Across groups, the most frequent theme was that Democrats fail to get results, don't listen enough, and don't fight hard enough for the people who elect them.

SECTION 4

Which Economic Policies Can Move Rust Belt Voters?

- Top-performing policies tap into economic populism, fairness, and relief from rising costs. Proposals like capping prescription drug prices, stopping corporate price gouging, banning congressional stock trading, eliminating taxes on Social Security income, and raising taxes on the wealthy all scored extremely well. These measures likely resonated broadly because they addressed anger over corporate greed and political corruption while correcting inequities in ways that felt immediate and tangible for working families.

- Jobs-focused policies with clear local economic benefits also perform strongly. Protecting jobs tied to corporate subsidies, renegotiating trade deals to boost US manufacturing, offering small-business job-training tax credits, and upgrading infrastructure all ranked highly, likely because voters could easily connect them to job security and community vitality.

- Many policies are top priorities across class differences. A core set of fairness-driven, anti-corruption, and economic security–focused proposals consistently landed in the top tiers for both working-class and more affluent respondents, pointing to significant potential for broad-based coalition building around these issues.

- Partisan differences reveal genuine polarization on certain policies. Measures like raising the minimum wage to $20 per hour, implementing tariffs, and raising taxes on the wealthy generated sharp partisan divides, in contrast to the broadly popular economic security and anti-corruption proposals. These patterns highlight how media and campaign framing of issues influences voter reactions to ambitious reforms.

- Top-tier policies reflect enormous ideological diversity. The popularity of both a conservative-leaning balanced-budget amendment and a progressive federal jobs guarantee shows the broad range of economic policy proposals that voters viewed as high priorities.

- This ideological breadth signals an opportunity for progressives. Rust Belt voters appear open to a wide variety of economic populist proposals, offering progressives an opening to define their agenda around fairness, accountability, and benefits for working families.

- Costly or abstract structural reforms and traditional trickle-down policies perform poorly. Universal basic income, large-scale industrial policy, corporate tax cuts, and broad deregulation consistently ranked near the bottom, likely due to perceived high costs, indirect benefits, or strong partisan associations.

SECTION 5

The Populist Potential of Stopping Mass Layoffs

- Stopping mass layoffs is a broadly resonant policy focus with high potential for progressive campaigns. Despite being a novel and radical idea, a proposal to bar involuntary layoffs by companies receiving taxpayer funds ranked among the most popular policies tested — earning strong bipartisan support across class and geographic lines. It avoids the partisan baggage of many Democratic policies, aligns with core working-class economic concerns, and performs especially well when advanced by independent candidates.

- Messaging on mass layoffs outperforms standard Democratic economic appeals. In randomized control trial (RCT) testing, the message focused on the harms caused by mass layoffs performed 11 points better than a message offering mainstream Democratic "populism lite."

- A ballot initiative to stop mass layoffs can build support even under attack. A ballot initiative banning involuntary layoffs by large companies that receive tax dollars garnered strong baseline support (+30 points net favorability) and retained strong support in the face of corporate attacks when paired with rebuttals in support of the policy.

SECTION 6

Is Independent Politics the Solution?

- A majority of Rust Belt voters support the creation of an independent working-class political association, or IWPA. Up to 57% of respondents said they would support or

strongly support the organization, while just 19% expressed opposition, yielding net support of +39 points. This strong support was consistent across all four states tested.

- Support for the IWPA draws from a broad and diverse coalition. Support was especially strong among working-class voters, renters, young voters, voters of color, and nonvoters — groups Democrats have struggled to mobilize in recent cycles.

- Working-class voters are a central pillar of the IWPA's base. Around 60% of respondents without a four-year college degree backed the IWPA, compared to 52% of college graduates, demonstrating the organization's potential to appeal directly to the demographic most critical in the Rust Belt.

- The IWPA shows strong cross-partisan appeal. Up to 50% of Trump voters in some key subgroups expressed support for the IWPA, signaling real potential to realign portions of the Republican-leaning working class.

- Economically insecure and downwardly mobile voters are highly receptive. Support for the IWPA reached 74% among respondents who felt "very insecure" in their jobs and 66% among those who reported being "much worse off" than their parents.

- The IWPA could fill a political vacuum left by the Democratic Party's brand problems. By focusing on tangible working-class priorities and operating outside the two major parties, the IWPA could build a durable base in virtual one-party districts where Democrats have struggled.

SECTION 1

Economic Populism Is Popular Across the Board

This section examines the appeal of different types of economic populist messaging using a randomized controlled trial (RCT). Respondents were randomly assigned to read one of four campaign messages from either a Democratic or Independent candidate. Each message used economic populist language but varied in tone (strong vs. weak) and policy framework (progressive vs. mainstream). In this section we first report the overall appeal of economic populist rhetoric and then whether a sharper, more combative populist framing could outperform standard mainstream Democratic appeals.

Key Takeaways

- Economic populist messaging is broadly popular. Pooling the four different populist messages we tested, 59% of respondents supported the candidate they read about, while just 15% opposed, yielding net support of +44 points. This broad-based appeal extended across race, class, age, and the rural-urban divide, suggesting that economic populism can help expand progressive electoral coalitions.

- Strong populism that directly challenges economic elites significantly outperforms softer, "populist-lite" rhetoric targeting only a few bad corporate actors. Net support for the strong populist message was 54.4 percentage points, compared to 43.1 points for the weaker version — a difference of 11.3 points. Relative to weak populism, strong populism drove both higher support (66.2% vs. 58.1%) and lower opposition (11.8% vs. 15.0%).

- Key Democratic constituencies respond especially well to strong populism. Respondents holding working-class occupations, voters with insecure jobs, those without four-year college degrees, and respondents in households earning under $50,000 all showed substantially larger net support for the strong populist message compared to the weaker version.

- Low-turnout and cross-pressured groups show strikingly higher rates of support for strong populism compared to weak populism. Young voters under thirty, Latinos, infrequent voters, and ideological moderates were especially responsive to strong populist messaging.

- These results underscore the strategic value of strong economic populism. By directly confronting corporate behavior rather than relying on softer frames of bad corporate actors, strong populist messaging appealed not only to voters in the Democratic base but also to the working-class, moderate, and independent voters essential to building durable majorities in the Rust Belt.

Introduction

This section focuses on an RCT testing respondents' reactions to economic populist campaign messaging. In the experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to read a short campaign message from either a Democratic or independent congressional candidate. Each message conveyed a version of economic populist language, with four distinct variations based on strong vs. weak economic populist appeals and progressive vs. mainstream Democratic economic policies. This design allowed us to assess both the overall appeal of economic populist messaging and the extent to which candidate partisanship shaped voters' reactions to it.

All four messages tested in this experiment represent different versions of economic populist messaging, as each emphasizes the need to hold powerful economic actors accountable and to prioritize the well-being of working families. Three of the messages (A, B, and C) use what we refer to as strong populist messaging — a sharper, more explicit framing of corporate wrongdoing and its consequences for workers. We deliberately tested this strong populism in multiple ways: by itself (Message A), paired with progressive economic policy appeals (Message B), and paired with mainstream Democratic economic policy appeals (Message C). This approach allowed us to determine whether a sharper populist tone made any difference on its own and how its impact might be shaped by different economic policy frameworks.

In turn, we compared these strong populist messages to a mainstream economic populist baseline (Message D), which reflects a weaker populist tone and standard centrist Democratic economic policies. This type of messaging is similar to the "populist-lite" approach associated with Kamala Harris's 2024 presidential campaign: softening the corporate accountability framing and emphasizing bipartisan cooperation, broad-based growth, and tax cuts. This baseline allowed us to evaluate how strong populism stacked up against a more conventional Democratic appeal.

Later in the report, we will explain in greater detail why we chose to focus on mass layoffs as the central substance of our progressive economic populist appeals, as this framing is closely tied to concerns about job security and corporate accountability among voters in Rust Belt states who have suffered decades of mass layoffs and economic stagnation.

Message	Description	Exact wording	Candidate partisanship
A: Strong populist messaging only	Frames corporate tax breaks and layoffs as unjust but offers no specific policy commitment beyond general fairness	It's just plain wrong that hardworking families are struggling to keep up while big corporations get massive tax breaks and then turn around and lay off American workers. We shouldn't reward companies that cut American jobs just to boost profits. Instead, we should make sure everyone has a fair shot at the American Dream.	Delivered by either a Democrat or an independent
B: Strong populist messaging + progressive economic policy	Same strong populist framing as Message A, plus a clear pledge to stop companies receiving public funds from laying off workers	It's just plain wrong that hardworking families are struggling to keep up while big corporations get massive tax breaks and then turn around and lay off American workers. We shouldn't reward companies that cut American jobs just to boost profits; we should be making sure everyone has a fair shot at the American Dream. That's why I will work to stop big companies that receive tax dollars from laying off workers who pay taxes. It's simple: if you're taking our money, you should be putting Americans to work!	Delivered by either a Democrat or an independent
C: Strong populist messaging + mainstream economic policy	Strong populist framing paired with a centrist agenda of tax cuts, investment, and public-private collaboration	It's just plain wrong that hardworking families are struggling to keep up while big corporations get massive tax breaks and then turn around and lay off American workers. We shouldn't reward companies that cut American jobs just to boost profits. Instead, we should make sure everyone has a fair shot at the American Dream. That's why I will work with labor, small businesses, and major companies to invest in America, create opportunities for broad-based growth, and deliver tax cuts to over 100 million Americans.	Delivered by either a Democrat or an independent
D: Mainstream populist messaging + mainstream economic policy	Weaker populist framing that downplays corporate wrongdoing paired with the economic policies presented in Message C	Most businesses are creating jobs and playing by the rules, but some aren't, and that's just not right. We shouldn't be allowing companies to engage in price gouging or boosting prescription drug prices just to increase profits. Instead, we should make sure everyone has a fair shot at the American Dream. That's why I will work with labor, small businesses, and major companies to invest in America, create opportunities for broad-based growth, and deliver tax cuts to over 100 million Americans.	Delivered by either a Democrat or an independent

After reading the message, respondents were asked whether and to what extent they would support or oppose the candidate.

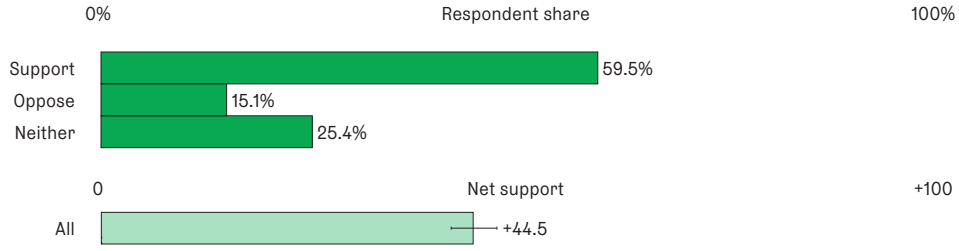
Support for Any Kind of Economic Populism

We first present results showing overall support for any kind of economic populist messaging, pooling support for candidates across all four economic populist messages and across candidate partisanship.

Our results show that economic populist messaging resonates strongly with voters in the Rust Belt. Averaging across all four treatments, we found that 59% of respondents supported the candidate they read about, while just 15.4% opposed the candidate, yielding net support of +44 percentage points. Economic populism, in short, is popular.

Support for economic populism

FIGURE 2



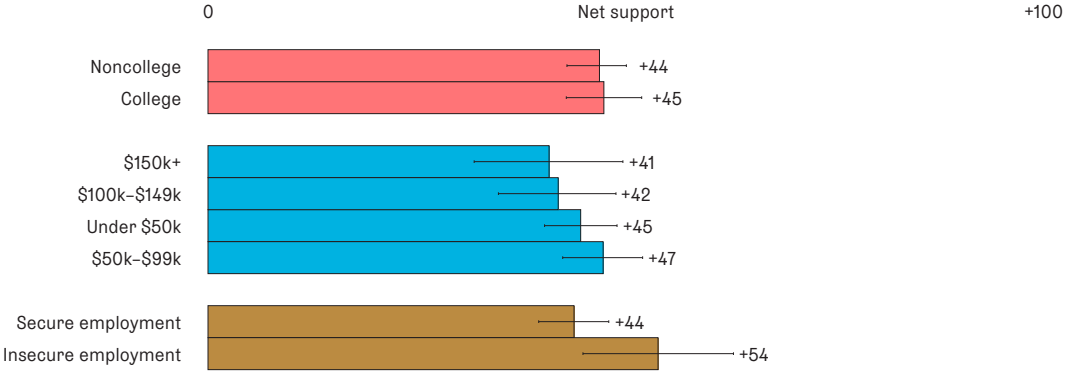
What's more, support for economic populist messaging cuts across a wide range of demographic groups. Indeed, Rust Belt respondents expressed strong net favorability toward economic populism across demographics, from class and race to age and geography in each of the four states we sampled, indicating the broad-based nature of support for economic populism and its potential to expand progressive electoral coalitions.

To be sure, in some cases favorability rates varied substantially. For example, black net favorability was 20 points higher than white favorability, women's favorability was 17 points higher than men's, and net favorability among respondents who were not in a union but would support one if it existed was over 30 points higher than support among respondents who had never been in a union.

That said, with the exception of Republicans and conservatives (among whom net support ranged from +8 to +14 points), net support for economic populist candidates was at least +30 points across all key demographics we analyzed, and as shown in the appendix, overall support was at least 50% across all groups analyzed (with the exception of Republicans, a substantial 42% of whom supported economic populist candidates, a figure that rises to 49% when the candidate is an independent). This suggests that populist messaging could help reengage constituencies who have become disaffected with the Democratic Party and are at risk of sitting out future elections.

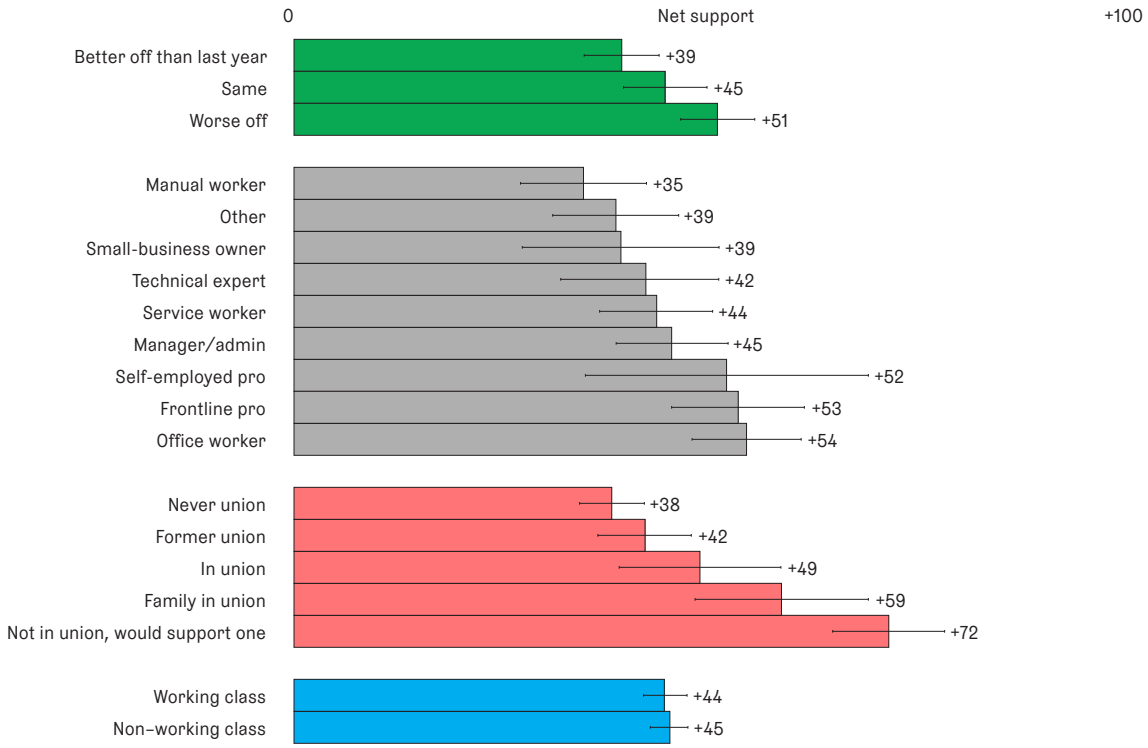
Net support for economic populism by class marker

FIGURE 3



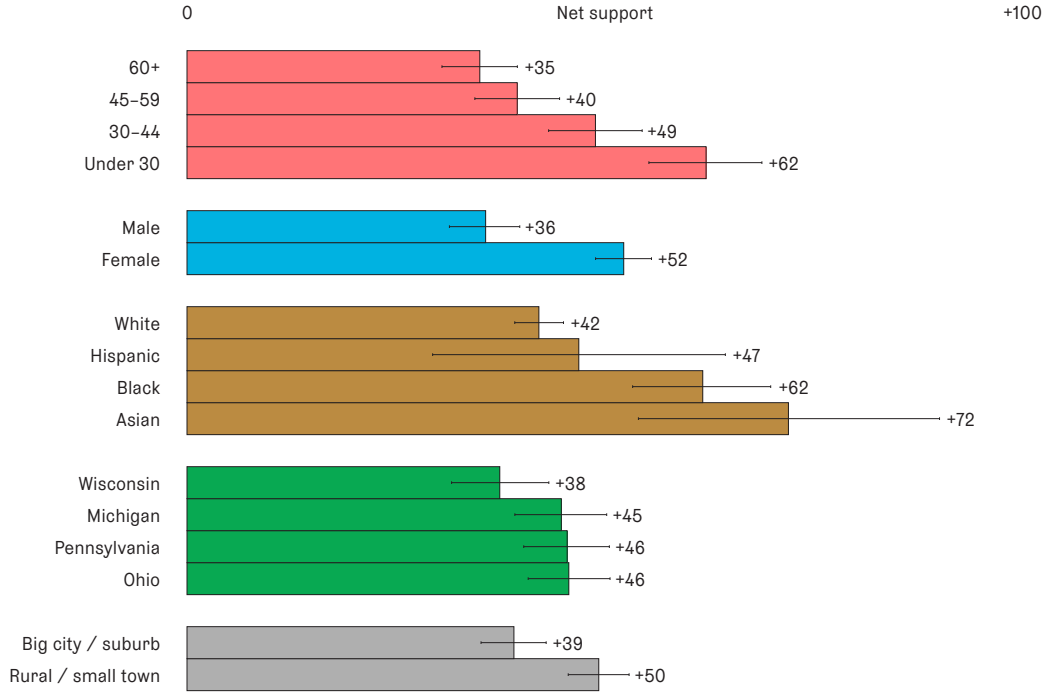
Net support for economic populism by class marker (cont'd)

FIGURE 3



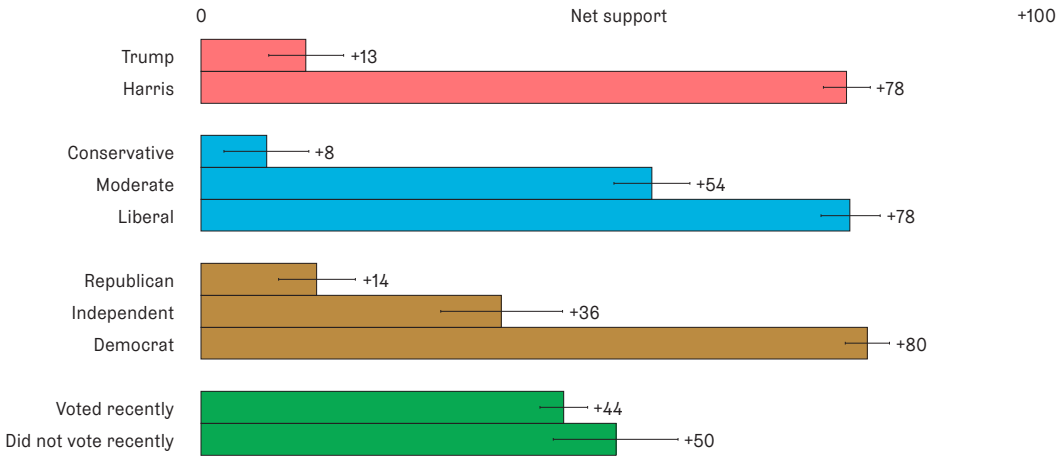
Net support for economic populism by demographic

FIGURE 4



Net support for economic populism by ideology

FIGURE 5



Support for Strong vs. Weak Populism

While we know that populist messaging is broadly popular, we also wanted to know what *kind* of populism performs best. Does the appeal of economic populist messaging depend on the strength of the message? Previous CWCP research examined messaging that unequivocally condemned economic elites and called for corporate accountability in strong language. We compared that support to weaker populist messaging that focused on reining in the excesses of the small number of companies that don't play by the rules. But the previous CWCP study was conducted in a single state (Pennsylvania) and was presented as messaging from the 2024 Harris campaign — hardly generalizable to progressive candidates as a whole. Most important, it was not an RCT, and therefore not a rigorous test of the impact of strong populism relative to weaker forms of populist messaging.[3]

To isolate the impact of the strength of populist messaging, we focus on Messages A and D presented above. The first reflects the moderate, soft-populist messaging often used by mainstream Democratic candidates and drawn directly from Kamala Harris's messaging in 2024. This version acknowledges that "most businesses are creating jobs and playing by the rules" but highlights a handful of bad actors — companies that engage in egregious behavior like price gouging and inflating prescription drug costs. This message appeals to fairness and consumer protection without meaningfully challenging corporate power. The second version delivers a more strident economically populist critique, taking aim at a systemic pattern of corporate behavior rather than isolated cases. It frames the issue in terms of injustice to working families, condemning the fact that large corporations can receive massive tax breaks while continuing to lay off American workers in the name of profit. This sharper rhetoric challenges not just bad practices but the profit-driven logic that prioritizes shareholders over workers. It questions the legitimacy of rewarding firms that slash good jobs or undermine labor standards despite receiving public financial support.

As we discuss in greater detail in section 6, we chose mass layoffs as the focus of our strong economic populist messaging because they are both a potent symbol of economic unfairness and an important omission in Democratic Party discourse. Layoffs serve as a concrete and emotionally resonant example of an economy rigged against workers, particularly in deindustrialized regions where plant closures, outsourcing, and corporate downsizing have devastated local job markets and eroded community stability. Despite the profound harm mass layoffs have inflicted on working-class communities that have swung sharply toward Republicans, Democrats have largely failed to address the issue directly. Centering our message on this widely felt injustice allowed us to test whether a more combative, worker-first narrative could

3 Jared Abbott et al., *Populism Wins Pennsylvania* (Brooklyn, NY: CWCP, Jacobin, YouGov, 2024).

improve the appeal of Democratic candidates, particularly among voters disillusioned with both parties.

Both messages were paired with a version of standard centrist bread-and-butter economic policies drawn directly from former vice president Kamala Harris's 2024 economic platform and broadly representative of mainstream Democratic economic messaging. Using these widely adopted policy commitments allowed us to test whether the impact of strong economic populist messaging is broadly applicable, even among the many Democratic candidates who are not likely to pair economic populist messaging with strongly progressive economic policies. We examine how varying the content of candidates' economic policies changed respondents' reactions to economic populist messaging in section 5.

Our experimental findings show that the strong economic populist message significantly outperformed the mainstream "populism-lite" version of economic populism. Across the full sample, net support for the strong economic populist message was +54.4 percentage points, compared to +43.1 points for the weaker version — an difference of 11.3 points. This gap is driven by both higher support for strong economic populism and lower opposition: support increased from 58.1% to 66.2%, opposition declined from 15.0% to 11.8%, and neutral responses dropped from 26.9% to 22.0%.

The groups with which the strong economic populist message most substantially outperformed the weaker version were disproportionately made up of voters Democrats have historically struggled to mobilize or persuade, particularly working-class respondents. Among respondents who held working-class occupations, net support rose by 22 points relative to weak populism. Voters with insecure jobs and those with household incomes under $50,000 both showed an 18-point increase, and net support among respondents without four-year college degrees was 8 points higher for the strong populist message over the weak populist message.

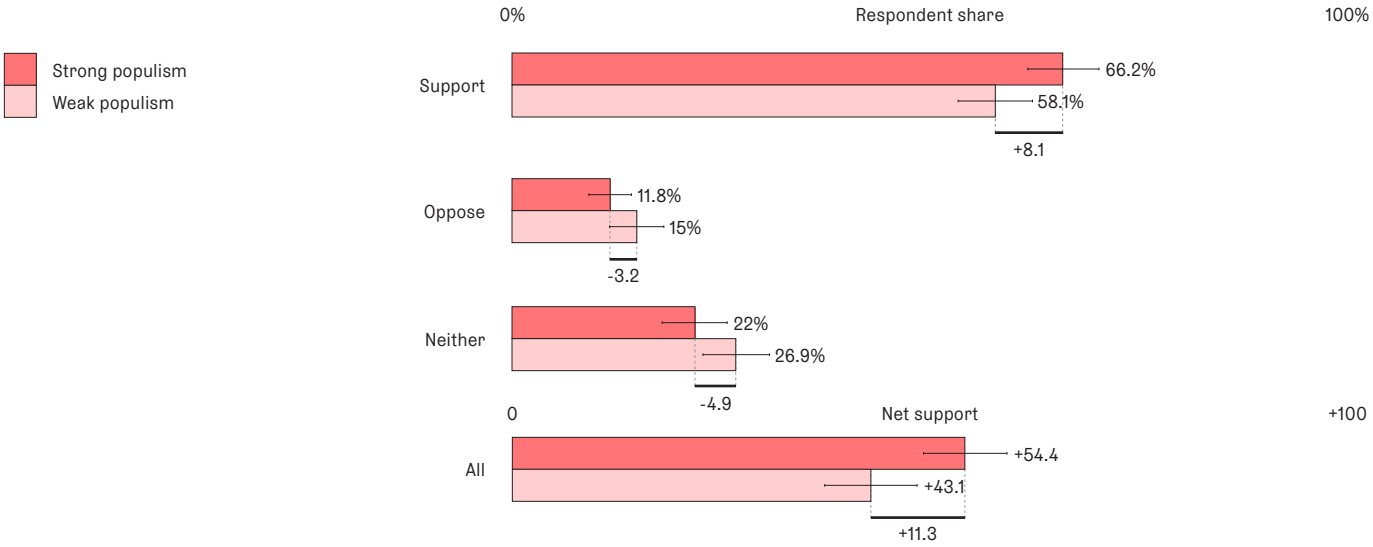
Demographic groups that tend to have low turnout rates or weak partisan attachments (and are thus prime targets for campaign mobilization and persuasion efforts) also responded strongly. Among respondents who had not voted recently, net support for the strong economic populist message was 23 points higher than for the weak economic populist message. Young people under thirty showed the largest generational shift, with a 28-point increase in net support. Latino respondents registered a 37-point differential — by far the largest observed across any racial or ethnic group — and moderates' net favorability for strong populism was 18 points higher than for weak populism. These results suggest that strong populist messaging resonates with many of the voters Democrats need to build durable majorities.

While gains among Republicans and conservatives were more modest, they were nonetheless notable given the polarized environment. Net support for strong populism among Republican and independent respondents was 7 points higher than for weak populism and 6 points higher among ideological conservatives. These results indicate that strong economic populist appeals can generate cross-partisan support, finding particularly strong support among key groups progressives need if they are to perform better in Rust Belt states and other difficult electoral contexts.

Together these findings highlight the broad appeal and strategic value of strong economic populist messaging. Strong economic populism boosts support relative to weak economic populism not only among voters in the Democratic base but also among working-class, low-income, young, insecure, Latino, moderate, and independent respondents. These are precisely the groups that mainstream Democratic messaging often fails to reach, yet they are essential to any successful effort to rebuild a working majority.

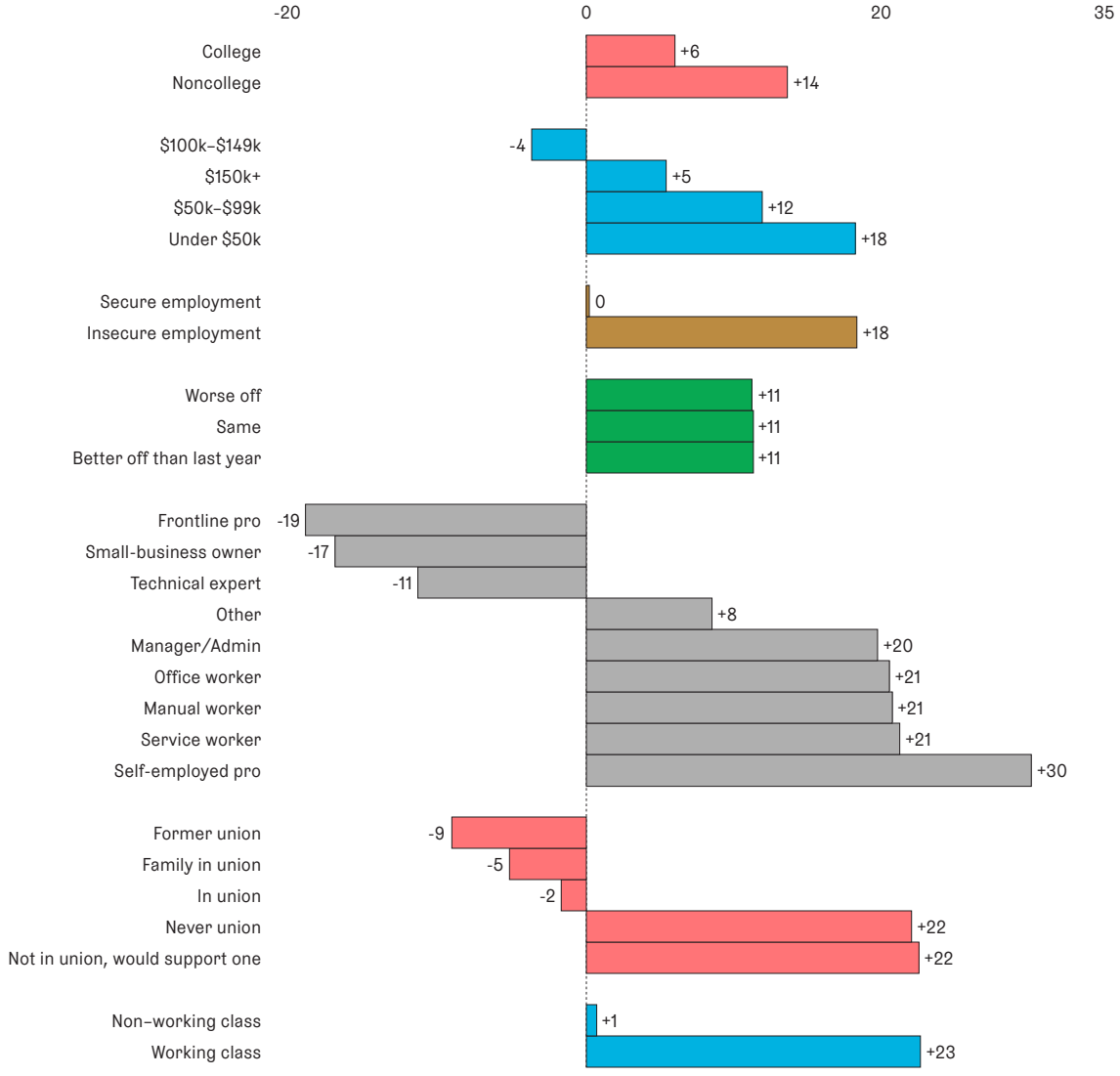
Support for strong vs. weak populism

FIGURE 6



Difference in net support for strong vs. weak populism by class marker

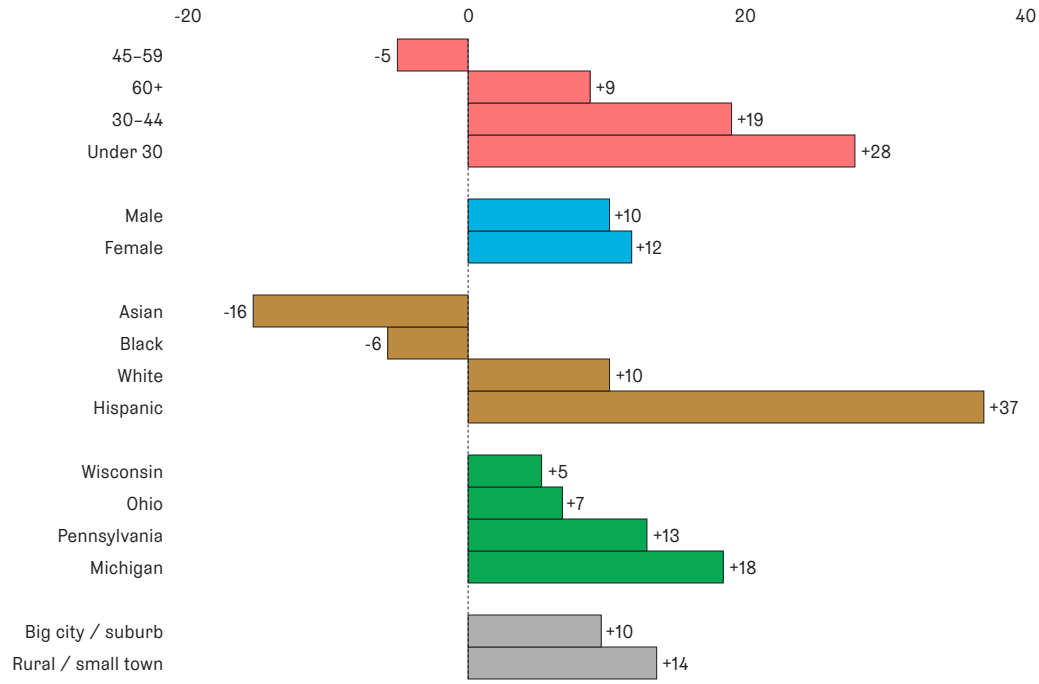
FIGURE 7



Higher values indicate greater support for strong populism.

Difference in net support for strong vs. weak populism by demographic

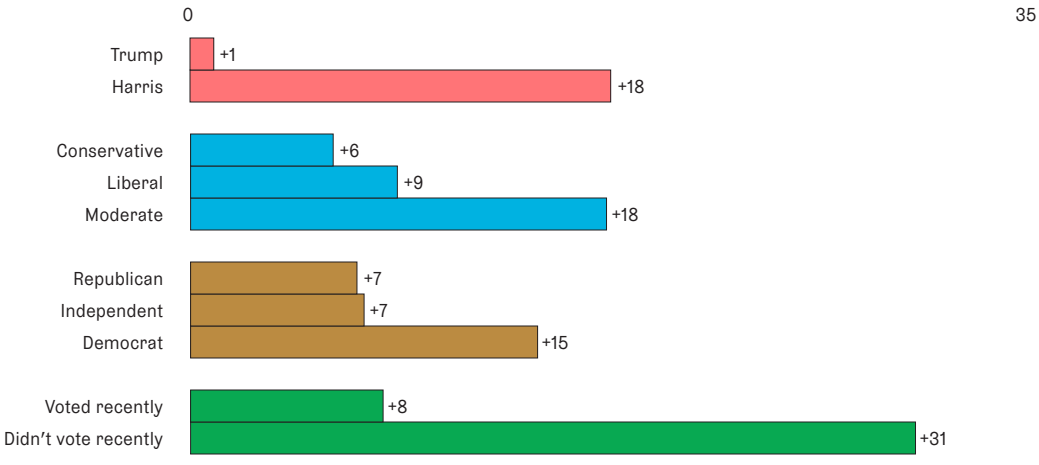
FIGURE 8



Higher values indicate greater support for strong populism.

Difference in net support for strong vs. weak populism by ideology

FIGURE 9



Higher values indicate greater support for strong populism.

SECTION 2

The Democratic Label Undercuts Support for Economic Populists

This section examines how candidate party affiliation affects support for economic populist messaging. We compared identical Democratic and independent candidates across the four populist messages to estimate the "Democratic penalty" — the degree to which negative perceptions of the party reduce the appeal of economic populism when delivered by Democrats.

Key Takeaways

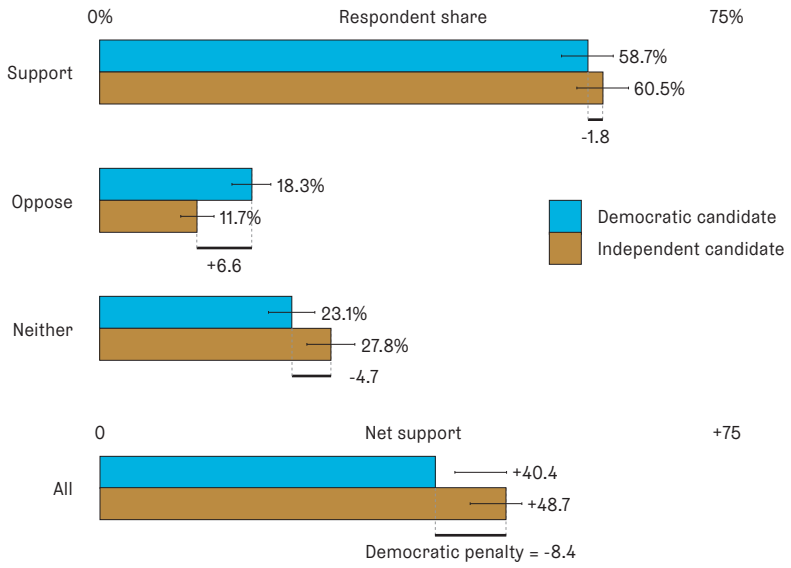
- The Democratic label carries a clear electoral penalty. Independent candidates consistently performed better than Democrats delivering the same economic populist messages. This gap was evident across all message types, underscoring that the problem lies with the Democratic brand, not the platform itself. In competitive districts where outcomes hinge on narrow margins, this disadvantage, tied purely to party identification, could be decisive.

- The penalty is largest among key constituencies Democrats have struggled to reach. Latinos, working-class respondents, and those in rural and small-town communities were substantially more supportive of independents delivering the same economic populist messages.

- Partisanship and ideology shape reactions sharply. Conservatives penalized Democratic candidates heavily, moderates showed little difference in their reactions, and liberals preferred Democratic candidates over independents. Republicans drove much of the overall gap by favoring independents at much higher rates, whereas self-identified Democrats strongly preferred Democratic candidates.

Support for economic populism by candidate party

FIGURE 10



What Is the "Democratic Penalty"?

Despite strong overall support for economic populist messaging, we expected that negative public attitudes toward the Democratic Party would dampen its favorability when delivered by Democratic candidates. To test the impact of partisanship on the appeal of economic populism, we compared the favorability of economic populism (pooled across the four economic populist messages) when delivered by Democratic versus independent candidates. In short, we compared the favorability of identical candidates who differed only in party affiliation.

Our results indicate that candidates labeled as independents received 8.4 percentage points more support than identical candidates labeled as Democrats. This penalty for the Democratic label held across all four message types, suggesting that it is the messenger, not the message, that is the problem. The gap was 12.6 points in Michigan,15.7 points in Ohio, and 10.9 points in Wisconsin, although Democratic candidates slightly outperformed independents in Pennsylvania (though the difference did not approach statistical significance). This is a troubling finding for Democrats. It indicates that even when the party embraces economic populism (a style of politics with demonstrably broad appeal) it may not reap the political benefits because the party's brand neutralizes its best arguments. The Democratic label appears to provoke skepticism that undercuts the effectiveness of policies that voters would otherwise support.

The implications are particularly stark in the context of tight races. In battleground districts where elections are decided by a few percentage points, a consistent 8-point disadvantage tied purely to party identification could be decisive. Some voters — especially those outside the Democratic base — are discounting otherwise appealing proposals simply because of the partisan label attached. This raises serious questions about how effective Democrats can be even with a popular platform, and whether their electoral coalition can be expanded without addressing the deep skepticism the party label now appears to provoke.

Which Voters Penalize Democratic Economic Populists the Most?

While the average penalty for Democratic economic populists is sizable, it is not evenly distributed across the electorate. Some groups are especially likely to discount economic populist messages when they come from a Democrat rather than an independent. These patterns highlight both the challenges facing Democratic candidates and the strategic opportunities available to independents who share a similar policy platform.

This partisan penalty was especially large among key constituencies that Democrats need to win — or win back. The most dramatic shift appeared among Hispanic respondents, with whom net support of the economic populist independent was +74, but was just +34 for the identical Democrat — a staggering 40-point drop. This gap, while imprecise due to sample size, suggests that some of the most important components of the Democratic base may be increasingly disenchanted with the party label.

Ideology and partisanship also deeply shaped reactions. Conservative respondents showed a 37-point gap, with net favorability dropping from +27 for the independent candidate to -10 for the Democratic candidate. By contrast, we see no meaningful difference in support among ideological moderates, while self-identified Democrats strongly prefer Democratic candidates over independents by a margin of 13 points.

The size and direction of this partisan penalty likewise varied across the electorate. In fact, the gap in support between Democratic and independent candidates is driven overwhelmingly by Republicans, whose net support for independent economic populists was 29 points higher than for identical Democratic candidates. By contrast, Democratic candidates actually performed better among both independents and Democrats (though the difference among independents was not statistically significant).

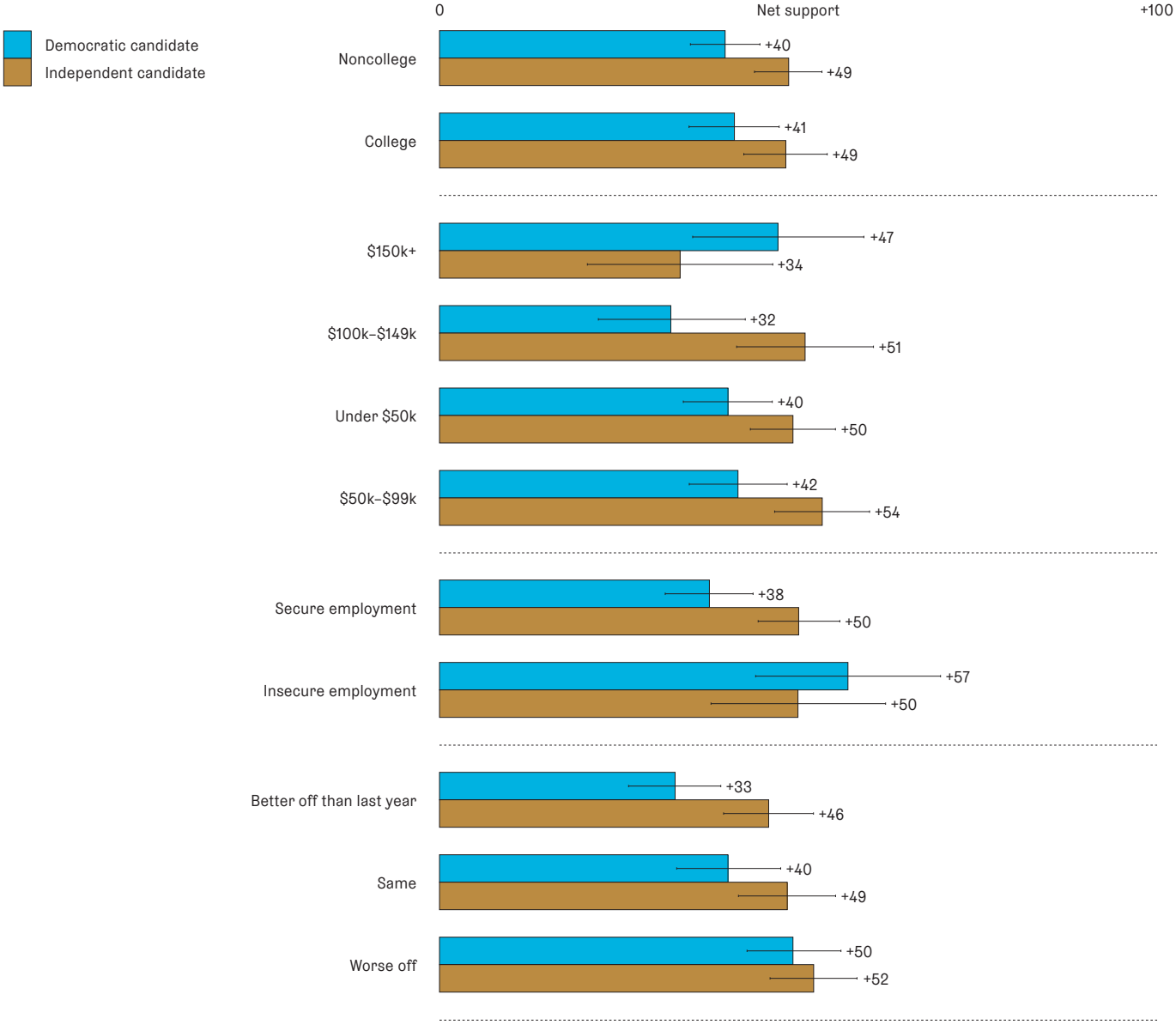
We also see a large Democratic penalty among older voters (over sixty), for whom the economic populist Democrat's net support stood at +26 points, compared to +45

points for the independent. Occupational and class divides reveal similarly stark contrasts. Net support of the populist independent was +51 points among respondents with working-class occupations but only +37 points for the Democrat.

A similar divide emerged based on geography. Rural and small-town net support for the independent was +47, compared to +33 for the Democrat. In battleground states like Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin, the independent outperformed the Democrat by 16, 13, and 10 points, respectively (though the latter two estimates are suggestive but not statistically significant), margins that could easily decide elections, while in Pennsylvania there was only a negligible difference between independent (+44 points) and Democratic (+47 points) candidates.

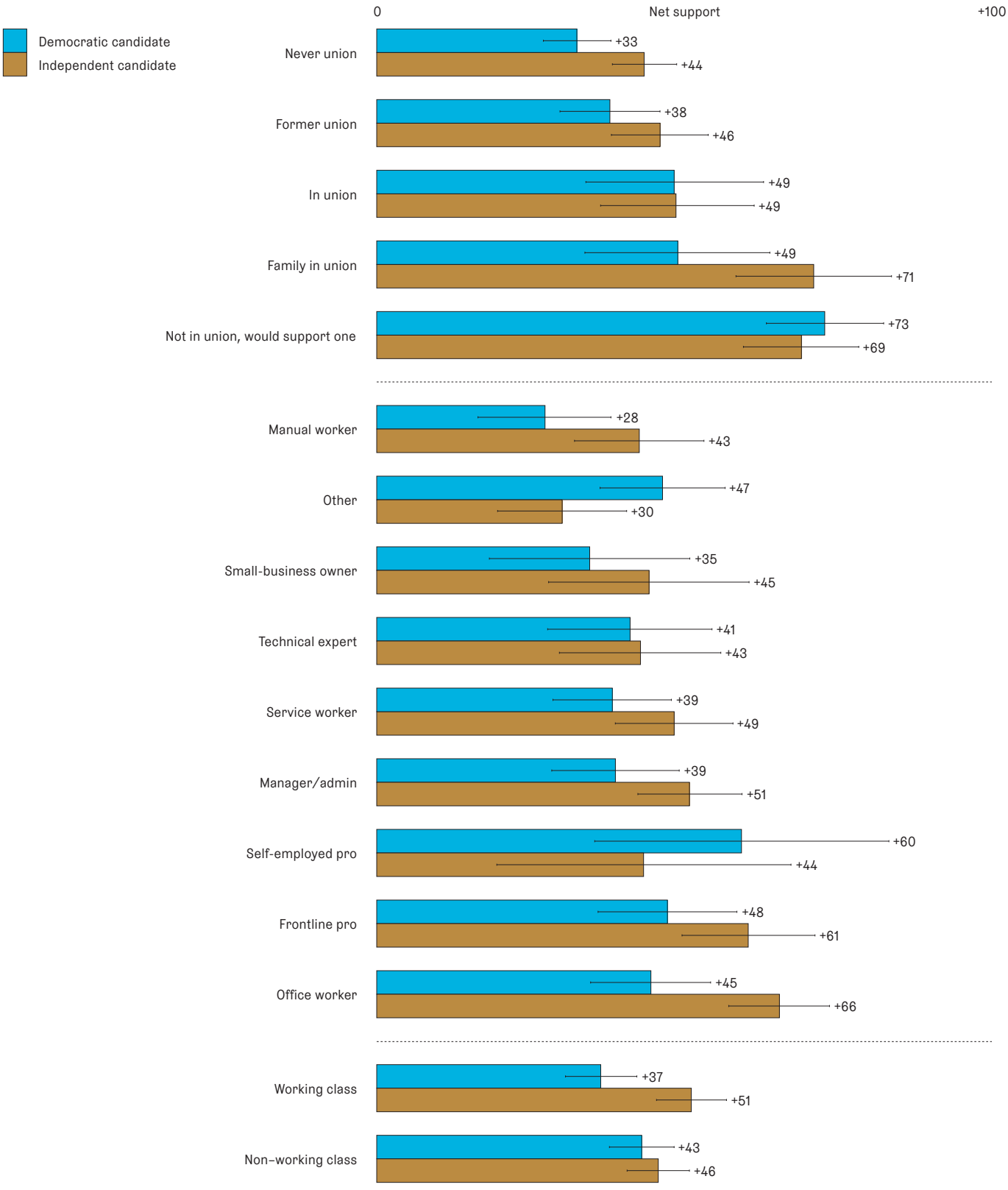
Net support for economic populism by class marker

FIGURE 11



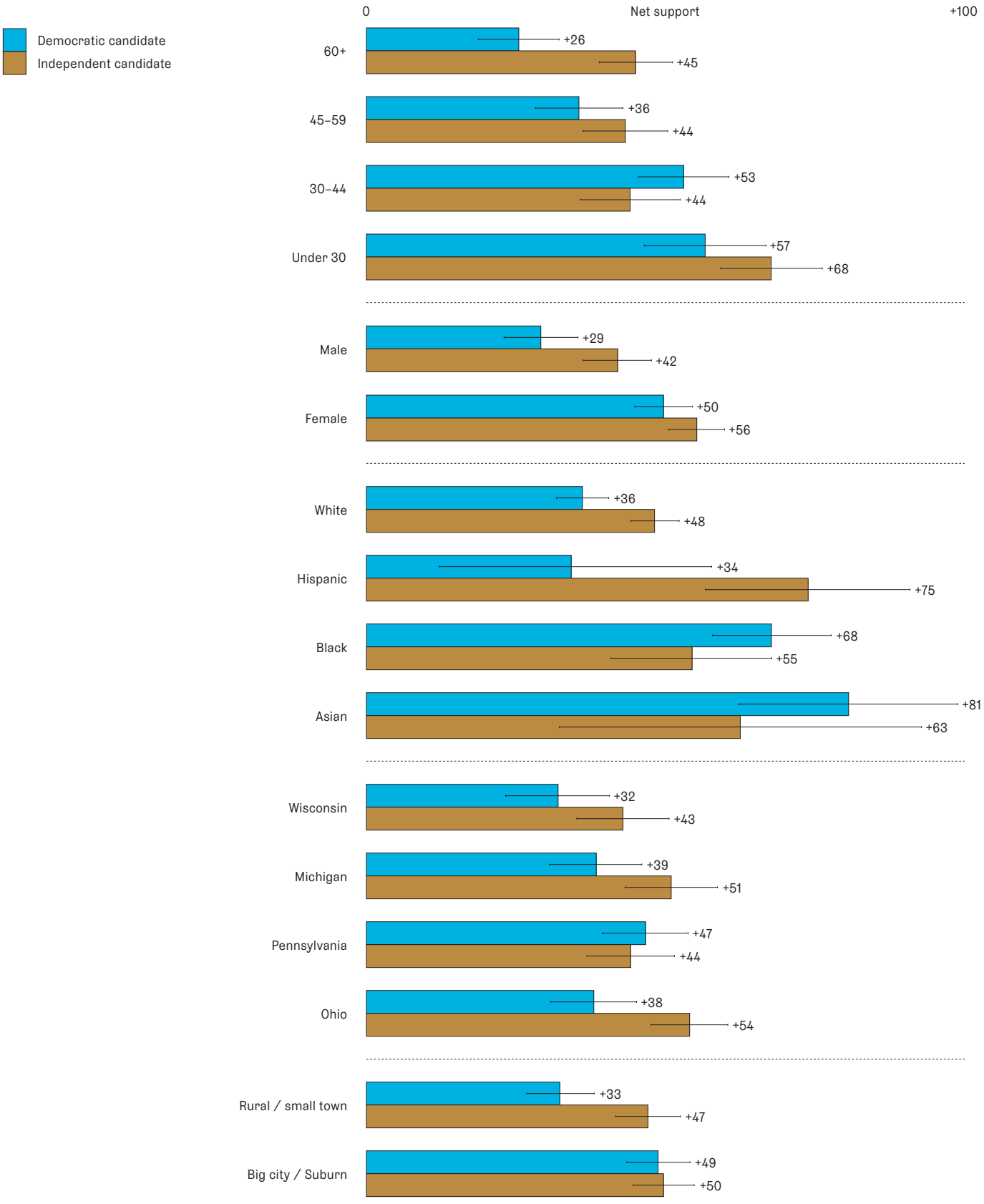
Net support for economic populism by class marker (cont'd)

FIGURE 11



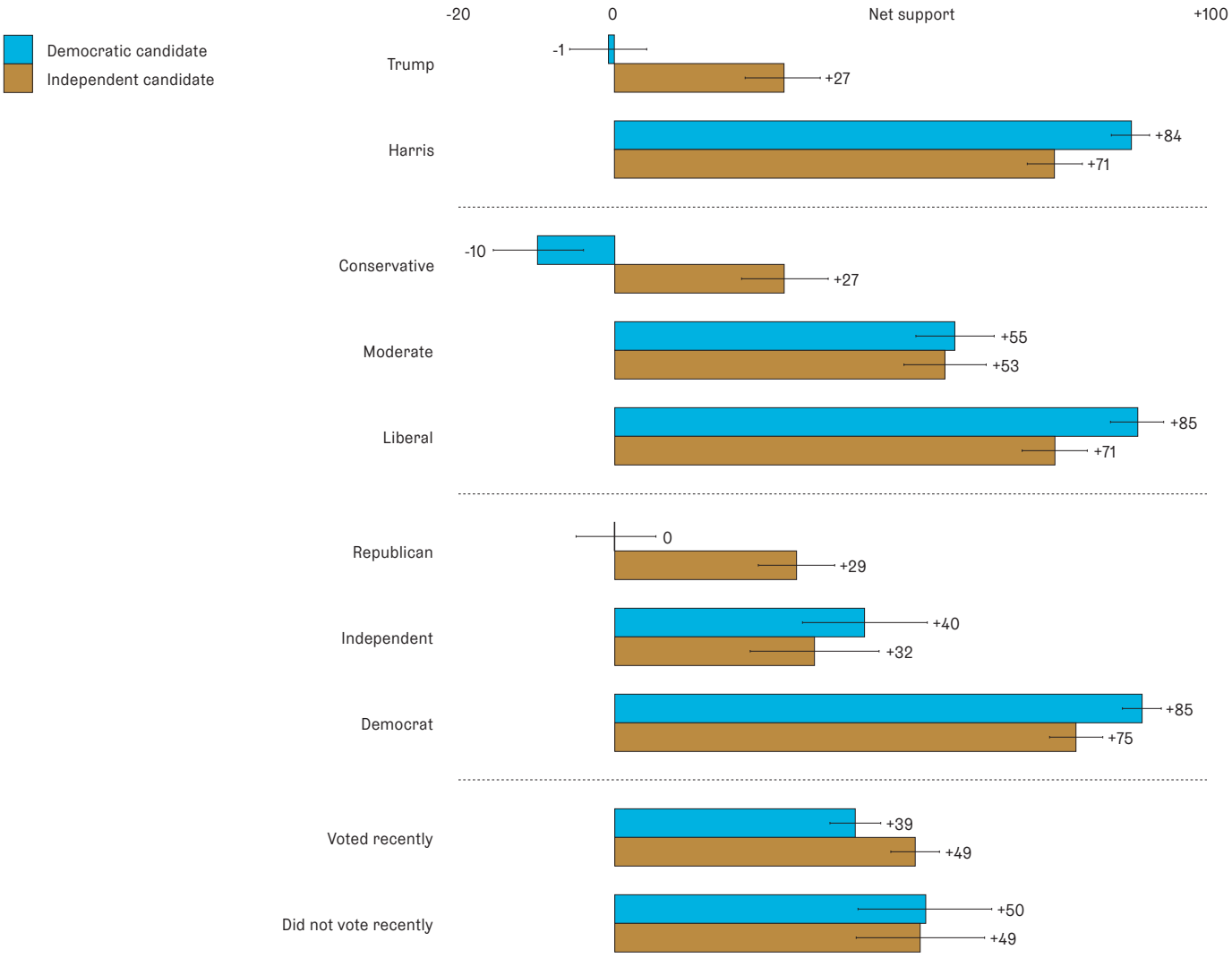
Net support for economic populism by demographic

FIGURE 12



Net support for economic populism by ideology

FIGURE 13



Together these results illustrate a troubling dynamic for Democrats. Economic populism is broadly popular, but when it comes from a Democrat many voters discount or reject it. If Democrats want to build durable winning coalitions in purple and red states, they need to confront the fact that their brand is holding them back. Overall, results highlight both opportunities and constraints. On the one hand, running as an independent may help economic populist candidates avoid the reflexive backlash toward Democrats that many voters across key demographic groups exhibit. On the other hand, these same candidates are unlikely to gain an edge and could face risks in districts where Democratic partisanship is central to turnout and mobilization. The impact of distancing from the Democratic label will thus depend heavily on district context, partisan composition, and the trade-offs a candidate is willing to accept. For instance, if there are more Democrats than Republicans in a district, and Democrats prefer Democratic to independent candidates, an independent candidate could hurt Democratic turnout in those districts, while in a heavily Republican district the opposite would be true. In short, running independent candidates is likely to be very helpful for economic populists in red districts, particularly those where no Democratic challenger runs and splits the non-Republican vote, but not helpful in blue districts.

Given the favorability penalty faced by Democratic candidates, we next wanted to understand why voters were often skeptical of the Democrats.

SECTION 3

Understanding Rust Belt Voters' Perceptions of the Democratic Party

To get a clearer picture of how Rust Belt voters view the Democratic Party, we asked respondents to share their first impressions in their own words. Instead of giving them a list of possible answers, we used an open-ended prompt to capture top-of-mind reactions and then analyzed the responses for common themes and attitudes.

Key Takeaways

- Negative views of the Democratic Party are widespread. About 70% of respondents expressed unfavorable opinions on the party, mirroring recent polling. Disapproval spanned nearly every demographic and partisan group, including many who identify as Democrats or vote reliably for the party.

- Critiques differ across partisanship. Democrats and many independents were most likely to fault the party for poor performance or lack of political courage, expressing frustration that Democrats "don't deliver" on their promises or fail to stand up forcefully to Republicans. Republicans were far more likely to portray Democrats as untrustworthy and out of touch.

- Cultural critiques matter, but they aren't everything. A significant minority across groups mentioned "wokeness" or ideological extremism as a primary concern. Such sentiments often overlapped with broader complaints about Democrats being out of touch. Still, while cultural dissension was a factor, economic grievances and the perception of the party as corrupt were more often cited as cause for disillusionment.

- Similarly, concern around undocumented immigrants isn't necessarily a liability for Democrats. In fact, 63% of Rust Belt voters in our survey supported the legalization of undocumented workers who have been here for three years, have paid their taxes, and have not committed a felony

- The dominant narrative is structural: the party doesn't deliver. Across groups, the most frequent theme was that Democrats fail to get results, don't listen enough, and don't fight hard enough for the people who elect them.

General Attitudes Toward the Democratic Party

To understand how Rust Belt voters felt about the Democratic Party, we included an open-ended question meant to minimize response bias induced by leading questions, question framing, or offering only a discrete set of responses to which they had to conform. We posed a question about respondents' views of the party: "In one sentence, write what first comes to mind when you think of the Democratic Party." We then used text analysis to identify recurring themes and sentiments across responses.

This approach offered several advantages over traditional survey questions. By prompting respondents to generate their own language and prioritize their own associations, the question captured unfiltered, top-of-mind impressions of the Democratic

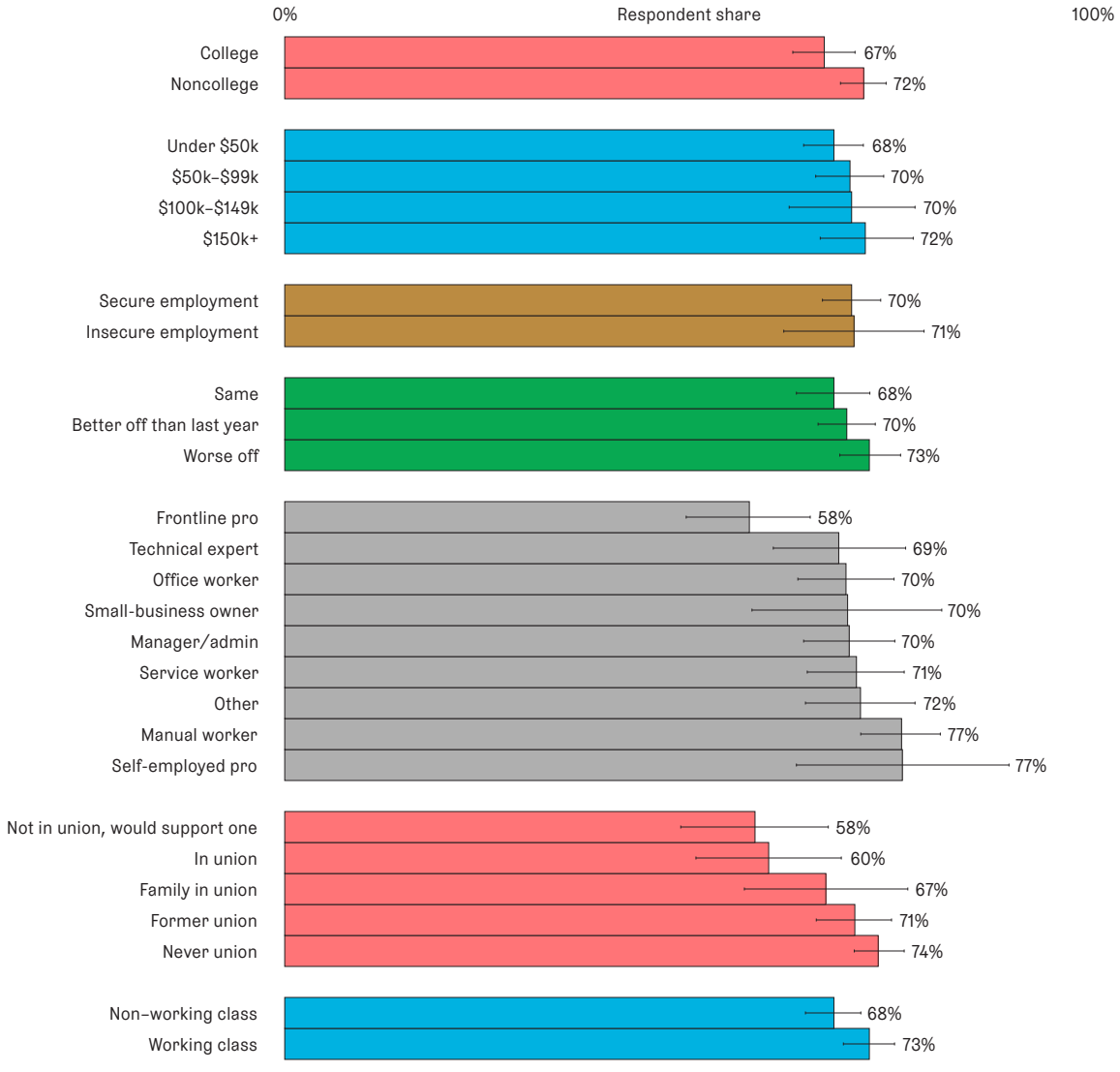
Party — impressions that might have been obscured by researcher-imposed framing or limited response options. Unlike multiple-choice formats, which constrain expression and often reflect the priorities of the survey designer, this open-ended prompt allowed voters to foreground what *they* saw as most salient, whether it was the party's perceived failures, values, tone, or leadership. As a result, the question yielded a more authentic and textured portrait of the party's public image, revealing both dominant narratives and underlying frustrations that might otherwise go undetected.

Overall, we found that 70% of respondents had a negative opinion of the Democratic Party.

We see substantial differences across age, race and ethnicity, occupation, and partisanship. For example, only 46% of black respondents expressed a negative view of the Democratic Party, compared to 73% of white respondents. Similarly, 58% of frontline professionals (teachers, lawyers, doctors, etc.) reflected unfavorably toward Democrats, compared to an overwhelming 77% of manual workers. That said, negative views of the Democratic Party cut across virtually all groups, including self-identified liberals (41% negative), 2024 Harris supporters (39% negative), and even self-identified Democrats (35% negative). And large majorities across geography, gender, and class also expressed disapproval of the party.

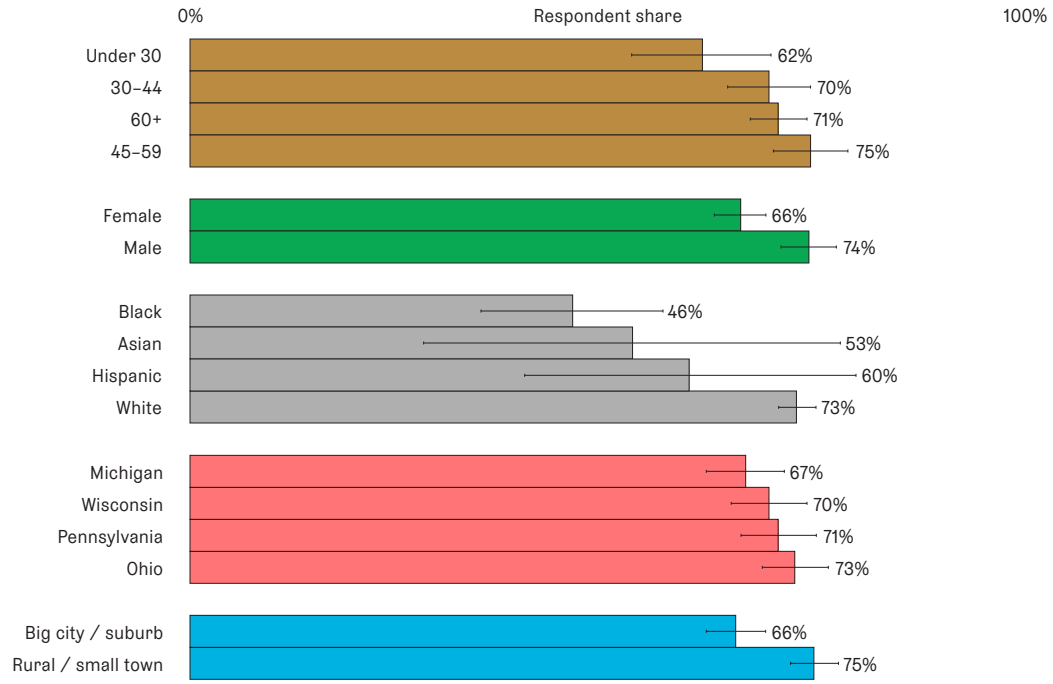
Negative view of the Democratic Party by class marker

FIGURE 14



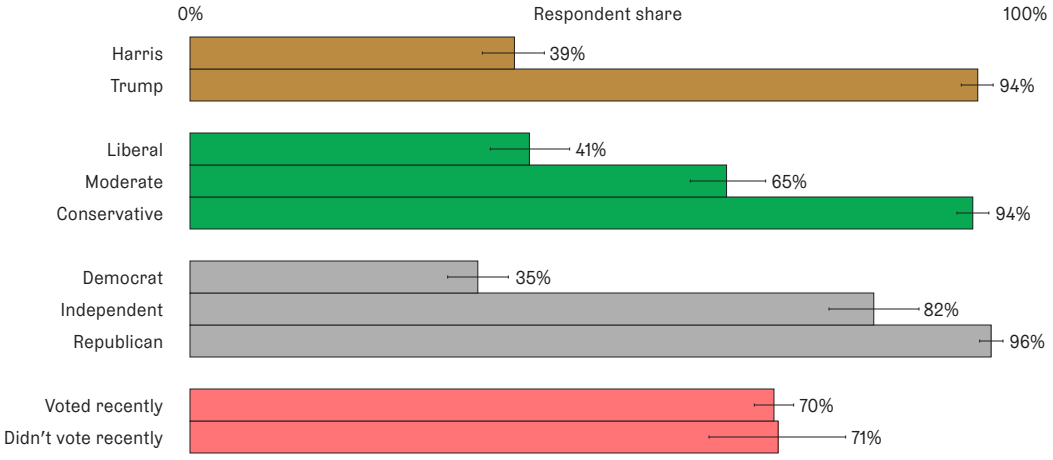
Negative view of the Democratic Party by demographic

FIGURE 15



Negative view of the Democratic Party by ideology

FIGURE 16



What Drives Negative Views of the Democratic Party?

We wanted to know *why* respondents held negative views of the Democratic Party, so we grouped their open-ended responses by theme. The figures below summarize the reasons respondents gave for holding negative attitudes toward the Democratic Party, broken down by their partisanship.

Self-identified Democrats' overwhelming gripe with their party was poor performance. As the disaggregated graph illustrates, Democratic voters who expressed dissatisfaction tended to emphasize the party's ineffectiveness in carrying out its policies, rather than ideological disagreement or betrayal. Their frustration was less about what the party stood for than about what it failed to do.

For instance, Democratic respondents reported that the party was "well intended, [but] poor [in] execution," with others calling it "impotent and ineffective" and charging that "the Democratic Party talks a lot but has accomplished little in recent years." Another respondent put it succinctly: "Some good ideas, but very ineffective at enacting them."

In addition to concerns about implementation, many Democratic respondents expressed frustration at what they saw as the party's lack of political courage — its "spinelessness" in standing up to Republican extremism. For instance, one voter criticized "the establishment faction within it that holds all of the decision-making power but has none of the will to fight for the groups of people who actually turn out to vote for Democrats." Another echoed that view, writing: "Failed to stop the GOP from destroying the country and used women's health care as a scare tactic pawn for too many years."

Among independents, poor performance was also the most common critique of the Democratic Party, but to a much lesser extent than among Democrats — just 35% of independents mentioned performance, compared to 73% of Democrats. Instead, both independents and Republicans were more likely to emphasize what they saw as the party's dishonesty and corruption. As one Republican respondent put it, the Democrats are "thieves and liars — crooked and not like me at all." Another wrote that the Democratic Party "has become extremely corrupt while pointing the blame at others. More interested in helping themselves than helping their constituents."

Similarly, independents and especially Republicans were far more likely to say the party felt out of touch or alienating. One independent respondent complained that Democrats were "falling behind on what's important to people," while another said, "I am so disappointed with the Democratic Party and feel they haven't represented their constituents in a long time." A third put it more bluntly: "They are out of touch and have forgotten who they are." Still others were even more scathing, calling Democrats "completely out-of-touch assholes."

Interestingly — and importantly, given recent debates about the Democrats' image as the "party of the woke" — only a minority of voters across all groups cited ideological extremism or "wokeness" as a central reason for disliking the party. Just 3% of Democrats, 11% of independents, and 19% of Republicans cited this theme. Among these critiques, Democrats were called "communists and traitors," "a bunch of woke clowns," and "harmful to children, families, and the country."

Still, this is a significant minority, making up roughly a third of voters altogether. Further, the fact that respondents didn't use overt language about wokeness doesn't mean they weren't motivated by similar sentiments. In some cases, concerns about ideological extremism overlapped with more general critiques of Democrats being out of touch. For example, respondents described the party as "focused on the wrong priorities" or referred to Democrats as "horrible, disgusting people with no morals." That said, despite high-profile postelection polling from groups like Blueprint suggesting that majorities of 2024 swing voters believe that Democrats "want to promote critical race theory," "have extreme ideas about race and gender," "want to promote transgender ideology," and are generally "too focused on identity politics," our open-ended responses suggest these are not the dominant concerns of voters.

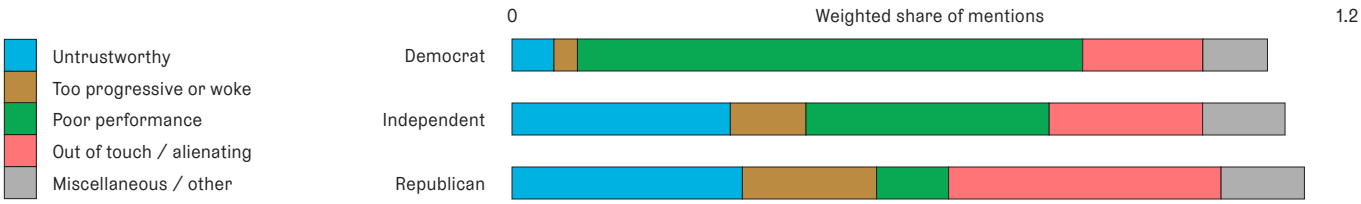
As such, even on issues like immigration, populists don't need to ape Trump to win Rust Belt voters. For instance, from 2010 to 2020, the Cooperative Election Survey at Harvard University asked the following question: Are you in favor or opposed to "granting legal status to illegal immigrants who have held jobs and paid taxes for at least three years, and not been convicted of any felony crimes." In 2010, 32% of white working-class respondents supported this statement. By 2020, white working-class support jumped to 62%.

We decided to ask exactly the same question again in these four Rust Belt states. Our assumption was that years of controversy over undocumented workers led by Trump might have undermined support for legalization. But the results have not changed. Today 63% of Rust Belt voters support the legalization of undocumented immigrant workers who have played by the rules.

This doesn't mean Democrats don't have cultural liabilities with working-class Rust Belt voters, nor that they should ignore the way their messaging on divisive social issues can reinforce perceptions of elitism or condescension. But it does suggest that the cultural critique of the party is ancillary to many voters' core criticism: that the party is beholden to elites, doesn't deliver, doesn't listen, and doesn't fight.

Reason for disliking the Democratic Party

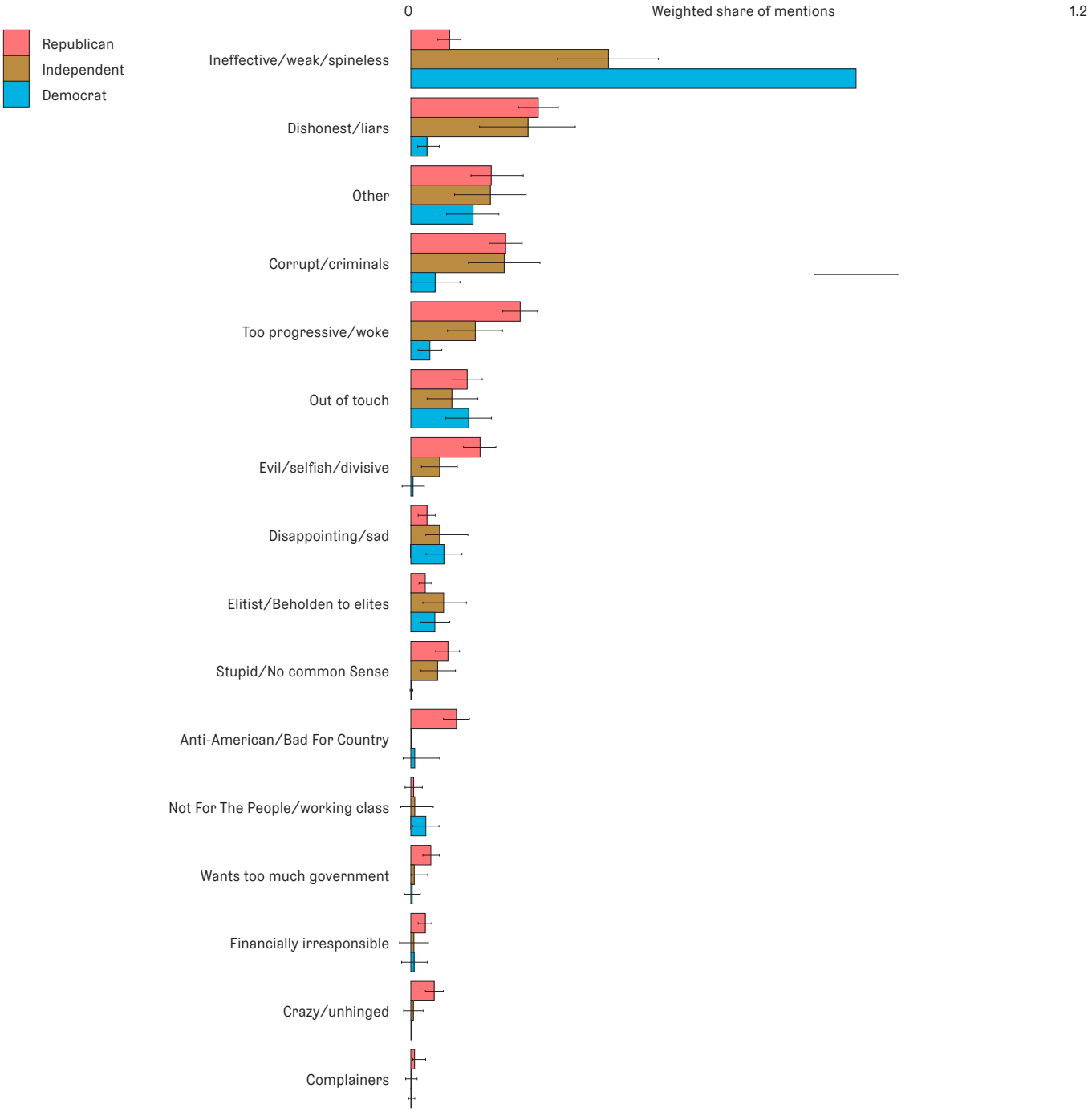
FIGURE 17



Total sums greater than 1 due to multiple responses from individual respondents.

Detailed reason for not liking the Democratic Party

FIGURE 18



Total sums greater than 1 due to multiple responses from individual respondents.

SECTION 4

Which Economic Policies Can Move Rust Belt Voters?

This section examines which economic policies Rust Belt voters prioritize most — and which are most likely to influence how they evaluate candidates. We forced respondents to make trade-offs among 25 economic policy proposals to identify the ones they care about most, rather than simply those they say they support in principle.

Key Takeaways

- Top-performing policies tap into economic populism, fairness, and relief from rising costs. Proposals like capping prescription drug prices, stopping corporate price gouging, banning congressional stock trading, eliminating taxes on Social Security income, and raising taxes on the wealthy all scored extremely well. These measures likely resonated broadly because they addressed anger over corporate greed and political corruption while correcting inequities in ways that felt immediate and tangible for working families.

- Jobs-focused policies with clear local economic benefits also perform strongly. Protecting jobs tied to corporate subsidies, renegotiating trade deals to boost US manufacturing, offering small-business job-training tax credits, and upgrading infrastructure all ranked highly, likely because voters could easily connect them to job security and community vitality.

- Many policies are top priorities across class differences. A core set of fairness-driven, anti-corruption, and economic security–focused proposals consistently landed in the top tiers for both working-class and more affluent respondents, pointing to significant potential for broad-based coalition building around these issues.

- Partisan differences reveal genuine polarization on certain policies. Measures like raising the minimum wage to $20 per hour, implementing tariffs, and raising taxes on the wealthy generated sharp partisan divides, in contrast to the broadly popular economic security and anti-corruption proposals. These patterns highlight how media and campaign framing of issues influences voter reactions to ambitious reforms.

- Top-tier policies reflect enormous ideological diversity. The popularity of both a conservative-leaning balanced-budget amendment and a progressive federal jobs guarantee shows the broad range of economic policy proposals that voters viewed as high priorities.

- This ideological breadth signals an opportunity for progressives. Rust Belt voters appear open to a wide variety of economic populist proposals, offering progressives an opening to define their agenda around fairness, accountability, and benefits for working families.

- Costly or abstract structural reforms and traditional trickle-down policies perform poorly. Universal basic income, large-scale industrial policy, corporate tax cuts, and broad deregulation consistently ranked near the bottom, likely due to perceived high costs, indirect benefits, or strong partisan associations.

Introduction

Next we take a deeper dive into the economic policies Rust Belt voters care most about and ask which policy in particular might move them to support progressive economic populism. Since we already know that a wide range of economic populist policies — from raising taxes on the rich and lowering prescription drug prices to increasing the minimum wage and instituting a federal jobs guarantee — enjoy strong public support, we opted to go beyond simply polling respondents on their levels of support for various policies. Instead we investigated how they prioritized the many, varied economic policies they may be exposed to — and thus which policies are most likely to affect the way they evaluate candidates who present them.To this end, we turned to a maximum difference scaling, or MaxDiff, design. MaxDiff is a survey methodology designed to measure the relative importance or preference for a set of items — in this case, economic policy proposals. Respondents were repeatedly shown small subsets of policies and asked to choose the one they supported the most and the one they supported the least. This setup allows the model to infer the maximum difference in preference across all possible pairs of policies. Importantly, the survey is designed so that each policy appears the same number of times.

In our case, the exact wording given to respondents was:

> We are going to show you various economic policies that have been proposed by political candidates. On each screen, you will see a set of policies. Please read through the policies carefully and indicate which policy you support the most and which you would support the least.
>
> You will evaluate multiple sets of policies. Some policies may appear in more than one set, but we want your honest opinion on each unique set. Your selections will help us understand which policies resonate most with you.
>
> For example, in one set you might see policies such as:
>
> - "Stop big companies that receive tax dollars from laying off workers who pay taxes."
> - "Enact a balanced-budget amendment to stop the federal government from spending more than it receives."
> - "Expand tax credits for research and development in biotech, AI, and other innovative technologies."
> - "Raise the minimum wage to $15/hr."
>
> On each screen, please mark the policy you support the most and the one you support the least.

This forced-choice approach provides richer and more discriminating data than traditional rating scales because it requires respondents to express preferences among competing options, even if they like (or dislike) them all. In contrast, more typical survey approaches, such as yes-no questions or 5-point Likert scales, tend to produce results in which most policies cluster at the top as respondents, to appear agreeable, say they support everything and disapprove of very little. This makes it difficult to determine which policies are actually the highest priorities. By requiring respondents to make trade-offs, MaxDiff provides clearer distinctions among items.

Another advantage is that MaxDiff allows us to rank a large set of items in a way that is manageable for respondents. Asking respondents to directly rank twenty-five policies would be overwhelming and would likely result in unreliable data. MaxDiff breaks the exercise into smaller, easier tasks while still producing a clear ordering of overall priorities. These advantages make MaxDiff especially useful for understanding which policies stand out to people, even among a list of options they broadly support.

We were able to test twenty-five economic policies in total. In designing this battery of policy items, our goal was to probe the contours of contemporary economic

populism: how Americans think the government should intervene in the economy, for whom, and through what mechanisms.

We assembled a diverse set of proposals that address widely shared concerns about job quality, cost of living, corporate power, and economic insecurity, but that do so through sharply divergent ideological frameworks and policy instruments. Some proposals reflect a progressive or left-populist vision centered on raising wages, empowering workers, and taxing the wealthy. Others embody conservative or market-oriented approaches such as tax cuts, deregulation, and fiscal restraint. Still others appeal to broad-based populist logic, targeting elite privilege, foreign competition, or perceived unfairness in economic outcomes.

Policies Tested

Policy	Type	Ideological valence
Eliminate taxes on Social Security income.	Redistribution	Broad (Republicans and centrist Democrats in swing states)
Raise taxes on the superwealthy and large corporations.	Redistribution	Progressive (Democrats, Biden, Warren–Sanders wing)
Provide $1,000 monthly cash payments to every American.	Redistribution	Progressive (Andrew Yang, UBI advocates)
Eliminate taxes on tips.	Redistribution	Conservative (Trump, GOP proposals)
Cap prescription drug prices.	Predistribution	Broad (Biden, Trump, bipartisan congressional proposals)
Stop large companies from price gouging.	Predistribution	Progressive (Biden, Democrats)
Set limits on wages and prices to control inflation.	Predistribution	Progressive (historically left-wing macroeconomic controls)
Raise the minimum wage to $15/hr.	Predistribution	Progressive (Democrats, labor unions)
Raise the minimum wage to $20/hr, indexed to cost of living.	Predistribution	Progressive (left-wing Democrats, labor advocates)
Ensure workers who want to can join a union without employer interference.	Predistribution	Progressive (Democrats, labor unions)
Limit executive pay at major corporations.	Predistribution	Progressive (Democrats, Warren–Sanders wing)
Put worker representatives on the board of directors at major companies.	Predistribution	Progressive (Democrats, Warren)
Renegotiate trade deals to boost American manufacturing.	Predistribution	Broad (Trump, Democrats like Sherrod Brown)
Enact "Buy American" policies to spur manufacturing jobs.	Predistribution	Broad (Trump, Biden)
Stop big companies receiving tax dollars from laying off workers.	Predistribution	Broad
Upgrade rail systems, build a unified electrical grid, and repair aging ports.	Predistribution	Broad (Biden, Trump, bipartisan infrastructure plans)
Offer tax credits for small / medium-sized businesses to train low-skilled workers.	Predistribution	Broad
Implement tariffs on foreign imports to protect American jobs.	Predistribution	Conservative populist (Trump, Buchanan, some labor Dems)
Enact a $1 trillion industrial policy for clean energy and domestic manufacturing.	Predistribution	Progressive (Biden, left-of-center think tanks)
Enact a federal jobs program guaranteeing all Americans the option of a stable job at a decent wage.	Predistribution	Progressive (Democrats, Sanders–AOC)
Reduce corporate tax rates to boost business investment.	Neither (predistributive implications)	Conservative (Republicans)
Cut government regulation to create more jobs.	Neither (predistributive implications)	Conservative (Republicans)
Create a US sovereign wealth fund to invest national assets.	Neither (predistributive implications)	Broad (progressive economists [for public wealth-building] and some conservatives [as a way to harness national assets for future fiscal security])
Ban all members of Congress and families from owning stock, with criminal penalties.	Neither (anti-corruption)	Broad
Enact a balanced-budget amendment to cap federal spending.	Neither (fiscal rule)	Conservative (Republicans, fiscal hawks, some centrist Democrats)

To provide conceptual clarity, we categorized the proposals using a framework that distinguishes between predistribution and redistribution.

- Predistributive policies aim to change the rules of the market before taxes and transfers, shaping how income and power are distributed at the point of

production. This includes initiatives like raising the minimum wage, strengthening union rights, restricting layoffs by subsidized companies, promoting domestic manufacturing, and putting workers on corporate boards.

- Redistributive policies, by contrast, shift income after it is earned, typically through taxes or direct transfers. In our set, these include proposals for a universal basic income, tax increases on the wealthy, and the elimination of taxes on Social Security income and tips.

Our selection focuses primarily on predistributive policies. Existing research indicates that working-class voters — who make up a pivotal share of the electorate, especially in Rust Belt states where progressives habitually struggle — are more likely than middle- and upper-class voters to prefer predistributive policies over redistributive ones. Scholars Ilyana Kuziemko, Nicolas Longuet-Marx, and Suresh Naidu have found that working-class Americans are more supportive of measures that raise pretax incomes and rebalance power in the workplace, because these policies are tied directly to work, reciprocity, and fairness.[4] By contrast, redistributive programs that tax and transfer money downward — such as income-based welfare programs or entitlement expansions — are often met with skepticism by working-class voters, who may distrust government-administered systems they perceive as inefficient, overly bureaucratic, or disproportionately benefiting others.

At the same time, we included a targeted set of redistribution policies because they capture other important dimensions of economic attitudes and allow for meaningful comparative benchmarks. In particular, the proposals to eliminate taxes on Social Security income and to eliminate taxes on tips reflect an anti-burden, cost-of-living-oriented form of economic populism often invoked by conservatives but embraced by some Democrats as well. Unlike broader expansions of programs like Social Security, Medicare, or childcare — which are already well-established priorities for voters — these tax-focused policies allow us to test the appeal of lesser-known or alternative redistribution proposals that have emerged in recent political debates, including those with potential cross-partisan resonance in the working-class Rust Belt.

By contrast, we also wanted to examine solidly progressive redistributive proposals that center on economic populism and the provision of direct relief to working families. The proposal to raise taxes on the superwealthy and large corporations is a core progressive and pro-labor priority generally opposed by Republicans, and it allowed us to assess public support for the widely debated approach to funding social investments through increased taxation on the wealthy. Finally, the proposal to provide $1,000 monthly cash payments to every American represents an even more ambitious redistributive reform, championed by progressive Democrats, that tests public receptivity to universal income support, which, unlike predistributive strategies, does not directly restructure the market.

Finally, we included a small number of policies that fall into neither category, such as a balanced-budget amendment and banning stock ownership by members of Congress. These measures capture other important dimensions of working-class concerns about economic policies and political life: government accountability, elite corruption, and fiscal discipline. They do not directly address income distribution per se, but they resonate with the widely held perceptions that the economy and the political system are rigged in favor of the powerful.

By assembling this ideologically diverse and conceptually grounded set of policies, we aim to capture the multidimensional nature of contemporary economic proposals. The resulting framework allows us to assess not only which policies are most popular but also how distinct approaches to economic governance resonate across ideological and class lines. In particular, it highlights differences between predistribution strategies that restructure markets and shift power before taxes and transfers, redistributive strategies that provide direct relief or fund social investments after the fact, and fiscal restraint and anti-corruption measures that seek to limit government spending or hold elites accountable.

4 Ilyana Kuziemko et al., "'Compensate the Losers?' Economic Policy and Partisan Realignment in the US," National Bureau of Economic Research working paper series, no. 31794, Cambridge, MA, October 2023.

Main Results

Economic policy priority utility scores

FIGURE 19

The policies that performed best across the sample share several common features: they are easy to understand, they are framed around fairness or accountability, and they promise tangible economic or quality-of-life benefits.

The predistribution policies that performed best were characterized by a clear focus on holding corporate actors accountable and directly improving jobs, wages, or economic security for working families. Capping prescription drug prices and stopping corporate price gouging performed exceptionally well, reflecting the policies' salience for voters struggling with high costs and anger over corporate greed. Similarly, conditioning corporate subsidies on job protections (a policy we examine in greater detail in section 5), offering small-business job-training tax credits, and renegotiating trade deals to boost American manufacturing all ranked among the highest-performing policies. These proposals are straightforward and easy for voters to envision in terms of concrete benefits. Infrastructure investments such as upgrading rail systems, building a unified electrical grid, and repairing aging ports also ranked highly. Such projects are broadly associated with visible improvements to daily life, such as expanded job opportunities and enhanced long-term competitiveness.

Interestingly, two of the four redistribution-oriented policies we tested ended up among the top four overall, suggesting that at least some redistribution policies — particularly those framed in terms of economic populism and providing relief to working families without directly increasing government spending — can achieve broad appeal among working-class-heavy Rust Belt electorates. Eliminating taxes on Social Security income and raising taxes on the superwealthy and large corporations both resonated strongly and ranked among the top four policies. These proposals can be readily understood as addressing inequities in the tax system rather than creating entirely new entitlements, and they align with widely shared beliefs that the wealthy are not paying their fair share and that ordinary Americans are unfairly burdened. This fairness and populist-based framing likely helped these proposals perform as well as they did across class and partisan lines. Similarly, banning members of Congress from owning stock (an ethics and accountability reform) also scored highly across the sample, tapping into economic populist anger over perceived government corruption and lack of responsiveness to voters' needs.

At the same time, some of the other highest-ranking policies demonstrate the huge ideological diversity of the economic policy proposals that voters see as most important, such as a balanced-budget amendment (a long-standing conservative priority) and a federal jobs guarantee (a signature progressive proposal). Both ranked in the top two tiers of policies. While partisanship drives much of this variation (a point we explore further below), it also reveals the broad openness of Rust Belt voters to a range of economic populist proposals, including very progressive versions.

For progressives, this represents a significant opportunity. Many of the top-performing policies cut across traditional left-right boundaries by combining economic fairness, accountability for elites, and visible benefits for working families. This suggests that a progressive economic populism centered on these themes has the potential to resonate widely — particularly in the working-class Rust Belt states that remain pivotal to winning national elections.

By contrast, expensive or abstract policies tended to rank poorly. This includes proposals like $1,000 monthly cash payments to all Americans, a $1 trillion industrial policy for clean energy and manufacturing, wage and price controls, and creating a US sovereign wealth fund. While each of these ideas received at least modest support from either Democratic or Republican respondents, they failed to resonate with the electorate as a whole, likely because they were viewed as either too costly or too difficult to connect to tangible benefits in respondents' lives.

Similarly, traditional conservative economic policies, such as cutting corporate tax rates to spur business investment and broad deregulation, ranked poorly overall, reflecting public skepticism about whether they directly help working families or instead primarily benefit corporations and the wealthy.

Middle-tier policies tended to be those that were polarizing across partisanship, such as union protections, minimum-wage increases, and limiting executive pay. These proposals performed well with either Democrats or Republicans, but they faced significant opposition from other respondents.

Partisan Breakdown

To simplify cross-group comparisons of the MaxDiff results, we broke the original utility scores into five tiers from top to bottom. This tier-based approach smooths out small differences in scores and makes it easier to identify clear patterns of agreement and disagreement across partisan groups. Importantly, ties in the original utility scores were preserved, ensuring that policies with identical scores for a given group are placed in the same tier. These tiers should still be interpreted as directional rather than precise, but they highlight the policies that resonate broadly across groups.

Several policies enjoyed broad support, consistently landing in the top two tiers of favored policies among Democratic, Republican, and independent respondents. Examples include capping prescription drug prices, stopping corporate price gouging, and eliminating taxes on Social Security — all of which either provide direct relief to working people or stress holding economic elites accountable. Similarly, job-training tax credits for small businesses and a ban on Congress members owning stock also fell into the top two tiers among all three groups. Taken together, these examples prove that policies framed around lowering costs, rooting out corruption, and empowering workers — often couched in populist, anti-elite language — can transcend partisan divides and potentially help to unite a broad swath of voters.

Other policies are ranked highly among one group but moderately lower among other groups. For instance, enacting a balanced-budget amendment is a top-tier priority for Republicans, but it drops to the upper-middle tier for independents and the middle tier for Democrats. Likewise, renegotiating trade deals to boost US manufacturing and cutting government regulation were strong priorities for Republicans, but they received lukewarm to negative assessments from Democrats. Conversely, Democrats favored raising the minimum wage to $15 per hour, while independents were on the fence and Republicans moderately opposed. Likewise, the $1 trillion industrial policy for clean energy and providing $1,000 monthly cash payments fell in the middle of Democrats' rankings but at the bottom of the Republican distribution. These policies reflect significant differences in emphasis but not outright polarization, indicating potential for building strong cross-partisan support, yet not to the same extent as the policies ranked among the top two tiers across all partisan groups.

A smaller set of policies exhibited high partisan divergence, and they tend to share a common thread: they are either ambitious measures or reforms that fall to the left of mainstream Democratic economic policy proposals, making them more likely to be perceived as riskier interventions in the market, or are closely associated with partisan identities. For example, raising taxes on the superwealthy and large corporations was a top-tier priority for Democrats and independents, but it dropped into the lower-middle tier for Republicans. Similarly, raising the minimum wage to $20 per hour ranked at the very top for Democrats but plummeted to the middle or bottom tier for independents and Republicans, respectively. The same pattern held for implementing tariffs on foreign imports: Republicans placed the policy in the top tier, but Democrats and independents pushed it into the lower-middle or bottom tiers. These policies often involve more visible redistribution, carry strong elite partisan cues, or may be perceived as riskier interventions in the market, all of which heighten polarization. These divisive policies highlight where building cross-party consensus would be the most challenging.

Policy priorities by partisanship

FIGURE 20

Cross-Class Preferences in Policy Priorities

On the whole, we found relatively little class- or education-based polarization around the most popular economic proposals.

Roughly a third of the policies tested garnered consistently strong support across all class and education groups, underscoring the potential for a broad coalition around a set of clear, high-visibility reforms. Three policies — raising taxes on the superwealthy and large corporations, eliminating taxes on Social Security income, and capping prescription drug prices — ranked among the most popular policies (top four to six) in every group. In addition, a second set of policies consistently landed in the top two tiers (top nine to thirteen) across groups: providing tax credits to small- and medium-size businesses for job training, enacting a balanced-budget amendment, upgrading infrastructure, banning members of Congress from owning stock, and stopping corporate price gouging. Though these measures vary in their mechanisms, ranging from predistribution and redistribution to anti-corruption reforms, they share common characteristics: they offer tangible, easily understood benefits or address widely perceived unfairness, either by directly reducing household costs, strengthening the economy, or curbing elite abuses. These qualities likely explain why they bridge class and educational divides so effectively.

Another set of policies generally landed in the top two tiers across groups, with one notable exception: college-educated respondents were less supportive. These included stopping big companies from laying off workers, renegotiating trade deals to boost manufacturing, and creating a federal jobs guarantee. This pattern reflects a broader trend of educational divides that were modest but relatively common — and more frequent than class-based differences. Holders of four-year college degrees were also less favorable than other groups toward policies such as banning members of Congress from owning stock, stopping large companies from price gouging, cutting government regulations to create more jobs, and reducing corporate taxes to boost investment. At the same time, they were moderately more favorable than all other groups toward policies that strengthen union protections and invest in infrastructure. These differences suggest that education-based divisions shape how certain economic and anti-corruption reforms are perceived, even when overall levels of support remain high.

Yet education-based differences, while noticeable, should not be overstated, since in all cases college-educated respondents' views were only modestly distinct from those of other education- and class-based groups. In fact, there was only one policy for which respondents reported a class or education-based difference in attitudes: implementing tariffs on foreign goods to protect American jobs. Tariffs ranked toward the bottom among most class- and education-based groups, but manual workers rated the policy among their top six. This is likely due to a combination of manual workers being disproportionately Republican and the fact that they are among the primary potential beneficiaries of higher tariffs on foreign imports.

Among respondents as a whole, we see consistently weak support for costly, complex, or partisan policies as well as those with indirect or unclear impacts on voters' lives. Policies such as price and wage controls, universal basic income, massive industrial policy for clean energy, and raising the minimum wage to $20 per hour all fell into the lower tiers across most groups. Similarly, there was broadly weak support for traditional conservative laissez-faire economic policies, including cutting government regulation and reducing corporate tax rates, which were consistently ranked near the bottom. Together these patterns suggest that policies requiring significant upfront costs or that carry ideological baggage struggle to gain traction across education- and class-based constituencies.

Policy priorities by class and education

FIGURE 21

Overall, the MaxDiff results highlight a broad appetite among Rust Belt voters for policies that clearly address fairness, accountability, and economic security. These priorities cut across class and partisan lines in ways that could form the foundation for durable worker-centered coalitions. At the same time, the ideological diversity of top-ranked proposals points to opportunities (and challenges) for progressives seeking to set the terms of debate on economic populism.

With this context in mind, we next take a closer look at one policy that we believe warrants deeper exploration: proposals to stop mass layoffs by companies receiving public subsidies. We focus on this issue because of its potential to resonate with working-class voters in deindustrialized regions like the Rust Belt, where the economic and social consequences of layoffs have been especially severe.

SECTION 5

The Populist Potential of Stopping Mass Layoffs

This section examines the political potential of focusing on mass layoffs as a cornerstone of economic populist messaging and policy. Drawing on both public opinion data and two RCTs, we assess how Rust Belt voters respond to proposals that would prohibit large companies receiving taxpayer dollars from conducting involuntary layoffs. We first evaluate the relative popularity of this novel policy among twenty-five economic proposals, then test how mass-layoff messaging affects support for candidates, and finally examine how a ballot initiative restricting mass layoffs performs in the face of corporate opposition.

Key Takeaways

- Stopping mass layoffs is a broadly resonant policy focus with high potential for progressive campaigns. Despite being a novel and radical idea, a proposal to bar involuntary layoffs by companies receiving taxpayer funds ranked among the most popular policies tested — earning strong bipartisan support across class and geographic lines. It avoids the partisan baggage of many Democratic policies, aligns with core working-class economic concerns, and performs especially well when advanced by independent candidates.

- Messaging on mass layoffs outperforms standard Democratic economic appeals. In randomized control trial (RCT) testing, the message focused on the harms caused by mass layoffs performed 11 points better than a message offering mainstream Democratic "populism lite."

- A ballot initiative to stop mass layoffs can build support even under attack. A ballot initiative banning involuntary layoffs by large companies that receive tax dollars garnered strong baseline support (+30 points net favorability) and retained strong support in the face of corporate attacks when paired with rebuttals in support of the policy.

Introduction

Among the top-two-tier policies we tested above was a bold plan to rein in corporate excesses by preventing involuntary mass layoffs by companies that receive tax dollars. Despite being virtually unknown as a policy tool and entailing restrictions on corporate behavior that go far beyond measures proposed by Democratic politicians, the policy still ranked equal or higher than key progressive economic proposals. For a range of reasons that we describe below, these findings should not be surprising. Stopping mass layoffs speaks to and addresses core economic anxieties felt by working-class communities in the Rust Belt while avoiding many of the pitfalls that can depress support for progressive economic policies among working-class voters.

The policy is well suited to reach Rust Belt voters because of the sheer devastation that mass layoffs have wrought in Rust Belt states. From 1996 to 2012, the Bureau of Labor Statistics operated a mass-layoffs database that collected information on the number of workers who lost their jobs during layoffs of fifty or more workers. During

those years, 21.2% of Pennsylvania's workforce experienced a mass layoff, 22.5% of Michigan's did, and 22.4% of Wisconsin's did. Lives were upended and communities were severely damaged. Many of the hard-hit areas have never recovered. Layoffs serve as a concrete and emotionally resonant example of an economy rigged against workers — particularly in deindustrialized regions where plant closures, outsourcing, and corporate downsizing have devastated local job markets and eroded community stability.

What, if anything, can be done to stop layoffs that seem to be driven by vast changes in technology and trade? The 2020 layoffs conducted by Siemens, the giant German corporation, provide an example. At the time, the corporation decided to lay off 1,700 workers in the United States and 3,000 in Germany as it shifted away from the production of compressors used in fracking. In the United States, all the workers lost their jobs with only a few severance payments based on their years of service. In Germany, however, the union IG Metall holds half the seats on the Siemens board of directors, and it used its power to win a very different agreement for German workers: there would be no compulsory layoffs. Instead, the company would offer buyouts, and no one would be forced to leave.

That stark difference in approach gave us the idea that large US corporations could also live with policy against compulsory layoffs, provided they had a strong incentive to do so. In the United States, the incentive could be federal contracts. Nearly twenty thousand large corporations receive taxpayer funds in the form of federal contracts, according to GovSpend. What if those contracts contained a clause that would prohibit compulsory layoffs? Wouldn't it be reasonable to demand that those large corporations that receive taxpayer funds *not* conduct compulsory layoffs of taxpayers? We know from the Siemens example that large corporations have the capacity to use buyouts rather than compulsory layoffs to achieve their desired employment levels.

This focus on mass layoffs is also strategically appealing, because it fits squarely within the predistributive framework that research shows is especially attractive to working-class voters. Predistributive policies — such as raising the minimum wage, strengthening union protections, or protecting workers from international competition — directly shape the rules of the economy before taxes and transfers. Stopping involuntary mass layoffs by companies that receive taxpayer dollars speaks directly to the key strengths of predistributive policies that, according to researchers, make them particularly appealing to working-class voters. Stopping involuntary mass layoffs could dramatically improve workers' sense of social standing without increasing government spending, and the policy does not play into the negative stereotypes of inefficiency and corruption that many working-class Americans associate with redistributive systems. To the contrary, it specifically attacks a form of corporate corruption that has devastated working-class communities in the Rust Belt.

What's more, given that neither party has championed the policy, it is not coded as either Democratic or Republican (unlike, say, "buy American" or expanding Medicaid). Finally, this policy is fundamentally different from the popular economic policies analyzed in section 4, which provide direct relief to working families but do little to address the underlying power relations that have led to decades of increasing economic inequality. Reining in mass layoffs has potentially transformative implications to put workers on a strong footing relative to large corporations.

For these reasons, we decided to take a deeper dive into the potential of mass-layoff messaging and policy proposals to reach Rust Belt voters. The analysis in this section tests the potential to reach Rust Belt voters from a range of perspectives.

- First, we provide a more focused analysis of the relative popularity of the mass-layoffs policy than our analysis of economic policy proposals above.
- Next, we return to the RCT introduced in section 1 to assess how congressional candidates would fare if they centered mass layoffs in their campaign materials.
- Finally, we present the results of a second RCT testing the efficacy of a ballot initiative around mass layoffs.

In political contexts where Democrats do not control the state legislature or where Democratic politicians are not interested in running on or promoting mass-layoff

messaging or policies, a ballot initiative campaign could be an effective means of raising the profile of mass layoffs as a policy option and heightening public demands for corporate accountability. Would Rust Belt voters support a ballot initiative that enacted such a policy? Would voter support hold up against corporate counterarguments? And could those counterarguments be successfully countered? These diverse tests of the political potential of layoff-centered messaging produce strong evidence that mass layoffs provide a promising policy focus for progressive economic populists going forward.

Stop big companies receiving tax dollars from laying off workers.

TIED FOR 4TH
AMONG DEMOCRATS

TIED FOR 5TH
AMONG NONCOLLEGE GRADS

TIED FOR 5TH
AMONG UNDER $50K FAMILY INCOME

TIED FOR 6TH
AMONG MANUAL WORKERS

TIED FOR 6TH
AMONG INDEPENDENTS

TIED FOR 6TH
AMONG THOSE WITH DECLINING LIVING STANDARDS

TIED FOR 6TH
AMONG RURAL AND SMALL-TOWN RESIDENTS

How Important Is Addressing Mass Layoffs to Rust Belt Voters Relative to Other Economic Policy Priorities?

We first present a more detailed summary of how the layoff policy ("Stop big companies receiving tax dollars from laying off workers") fared relative to the twenty-four other policies we examined in the previous section.

Despite its comparatively novel and radical nature — since directly interfering in corporations' internal business decisions, like conducting layoffs, falls outside the realm of what is typically considered acceptable policy by either major party — the mass-layoff policy was more popular than many of the well-known economic policies we tested. Overall, it tied for fifth out of twenty-five policies among Rust Belt voters. And support for addressing mass layoffs cut across partisanship: it was tied for the sixth-most-favorable policy among Democrats, for fifth among independents, and for fourth among Republicans.

Likewise, respondents from key demographic groups that Democrats have struggled to reach in recent electoral cycles showed robust support for the policy, which was tied in fifth among respondents without a four-year college degree and those whose family income was less than $50,000 per year, and tied in sixth among respondents who reported a declining standard of living and those who live in rural areas and small towns.

Across the board, respondents expressed stronger support for combating mass layoffs than they did for other popular economic policies, including raising the minimum wage to $15 per hour and ensuring that workers who want to join unions are able to. In short, stopping mass layoffs seems to hit a chord with Rust Belt voters.

How Much Support Would Candidates Receive If They Campaigned on Addressing Mass Layoffs?

Next, we wanted to see if running on messaging around mass layoffs would be productive for political candidates. To assess this, we return to the RCT described in section 1, in which we randomly assigned respondents to receive one of four distinct economic populist messages and asked them to report their level of support or opposition.

In this section, rather than assessing the average support garnered by economic populism among Rust Belt voters or its relative appeal, we wanted to determine whether candidates who centered language and policy appeals around mass layoffs would perform as well as more traditional populist-inspired economic appeals from Democrats. To this end, we broke down the layoff-centered language into two components: a) Messaging that identifies greed-driven mass layoffs of hardworking Americans as a central political problem in the United States today, and b) a specific policy proposal to combat mass layoffs — in this case, stopping large firms that receive tax dollars from carrying out compulsory layoffs. The first message we tested focuses on mass layoffs alone as a problem, while the second message adds the proposed policy solution to the description.

As comparative benchmarks, we also tested messages drawn directly from Kamala Harris's 2024 campaign speeches that employed 1) mainstream populist-inspired rhetoric paired with the mass-layoff policy proposal, and 2) mainstream populist-inspired rhetoric paired with a basket of bread-and-butter economic proposals commonly offered by mainstream Democrats, such as investing in America to create broad-based opportunities for economic growth and cutting taxes on working families.

As we reported in section 1, the message pairing a focus on mass layoffs as a central problem in US politics (labeled "strong populism") with mainstream Democratic economic proposals performed substantially better than the message pairing mainstream "weak populism" with the same economic proposals. This suggests that incorporating a discussion of the pain caused by corporate mass layoffs can be highly beneficial for candidates.

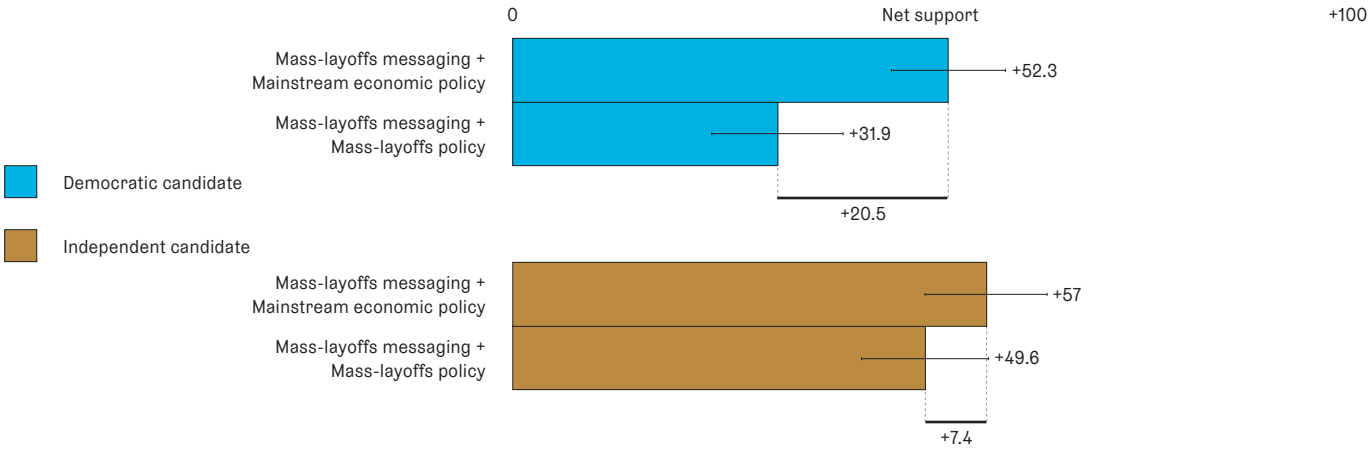
In turn, when we tested Democrats delivering the mass-layoff language with the policy proposal to stop mass layoffs, we found that the message received 21 points *less* net support compared to when Democrats proposed mainstream economic policies as the solution. While we cannot speak to why Rust Belt respondents viewed Democrats so unfavorably when they proposed the policy to stop mass layoffs, it may be connected to the deep skepticism they feel about Democrats' capacity to deliver meaningful benefits to working- and middle-class Americans (documented in section 2).

By contrast, among independent candidates, there is only a 7-point difference between the two messages, and the difference is not statistically significant. In short, at least when running as independents, economic populist candidates have little to fear from centering mass layoffs as a key problem in their messaging (which substantially increases their favorability among Rust Belt voters) or even from proposing a solution to the problem that tackles corporate power head-on.

That said, we cannot conclude from our results that running on a policy to stop mass layoffs will benefit candidates more than mainstream economic policy alternatives. This, however, was to be expected, given how little attention has been paid to the comparatively novel and radical proposal to take federal contracts away from firms that lay off workers. Candidates could potentially raise the popularity of policies focused on mass layoffs by prioritizing the issue on the campaign trail and promoting it through draft legislation. And the political benefits could be substantial: stopping mass layoffs could resonate strongly with working-class voters who have seen precious little action taken by politicians of either party to address perhaps the most central economic crisis facing their communities in recent memory and, most important, could do so without playing into Republican talking points about irresponsible deficit spending or bloated government bureaucracy.

Democratic candidates drive mainstream economic policy's advantage over mass-layoff policy

FIGURE 22



Stopping Mass Layoffs Through a Ballot Initiative

Direct democracy campaigns like single-issue ballot initiatives at the state level can mobilize working-class voters around broadly popular economic proposals without triggering the same partisan backlash that often accompanies Democratic candidates. In state that allow them, such ballot initiatives may be particularly promising in places where Democratic politicians struggle and independents face a spoiler problem. In our sample, Michigan and Ohio are the primary examples, though ballot initiatives are also permitted in swing states such as Arizona and Nevada.

Ballot initiatives have been surprisingly successful in red and purple states on issues like raising the minimum wage and protecting abortion rights, gaining substantially higher support than Democratic politicians running on the same policies. They may also offer a viable path for building support to stop mass layoffs. And beyond their capacity to change public policy, ballot initiatives are also valuable for raising the public profile of issues to help generate mass awareness and support.

To test the potential appeal of a ballot initiative to stop mass layoffs among Rust Belt voters, we conducted another RCT. We randomly assigned one group of respondents basic information about the ballot initiative, and we divided the rest of the sample into four groups that received this same information as well as additional materials that voters might receive in a real-world campaign. Two groups received negative information about the ballot initiative, either that the initiative represented a path to socialism or that it would have negative economic consequences. The remaining two groups received both one of the opposition messages and a corresponding counter to that message from supporters of the initiative.

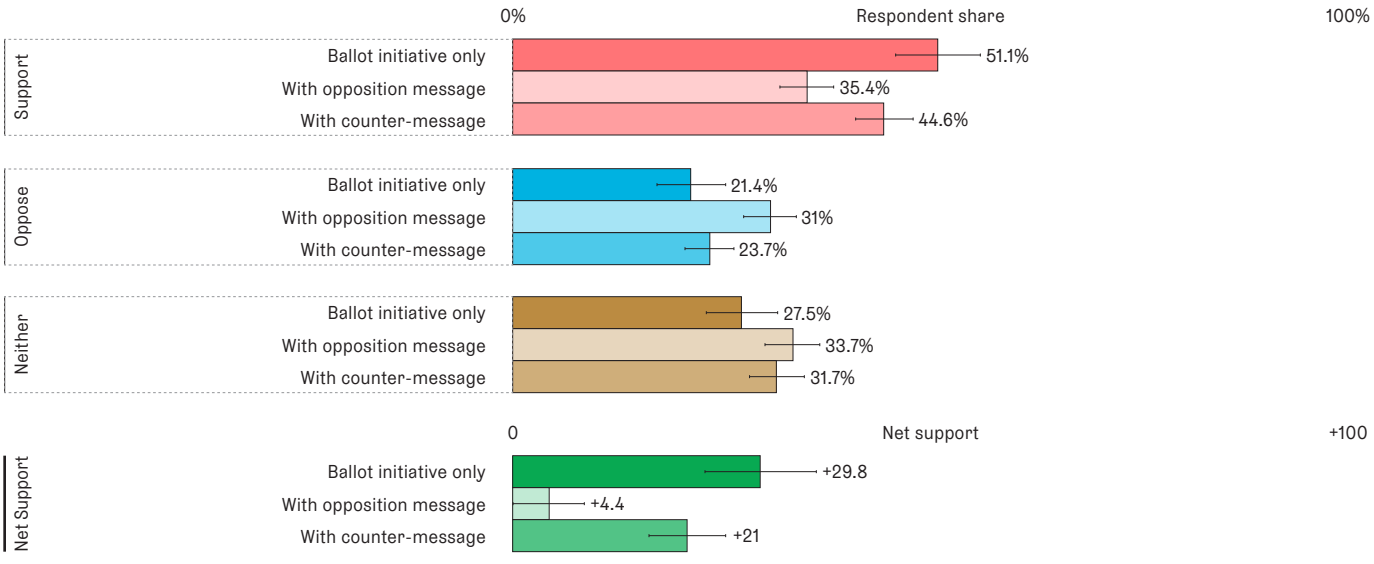
This sequence of messages allowed us to gauge not only the abstract level of support the ballot initiative would receive but also how well such an initiative — which in practice would face fierce corporate opposition — would hold up against both corporate counterattacks as well as counter-messaging to challenge those attacks.

Summary of Mass-Layoff Ballot Initiative Message Tests

Treatment arm	Opposition message	Opposition framing	Rebuttal from supporters	Exact wording
Message A: Ballot initiative only	No	No	Yes	We will now give you information about a specific policy proposal we would like you to evaluate. After reading the information you will be prompted to tell us your opinion of the proposal: "Corporations with more than 500 employees that receive taxpayer-funded federal contracts are prohibited from conducting involuntary layoffs of American workers. All layoffs during the life of a taxpayer-funded contract must be voluntary, based on employer financial incentives. No one shall be forced to leave."
Message B: Ballot initiative + opposition messaging 1	Yes	Freedom, anti-socialism	None	Message A + Here you can also read a common critique of this proposal: "The key to a free society is free enterprise. Both include the right of business owners, large and small, to manage their own enterprises as they see fit. When the government intervenes to control hiring and firing, it clearly is a step toward socialism, which history has shown is both a failure economically and a path toward totalitarianism. It will harm jobs, our economy and democracy."
Message C: Ballot initiative + opposition messaging 2	Yes	Economic harm, business relocation	No	Message A + Here you can also read a common critique of this proposal: "If this proposal passes, it will push companies to leave the country or relocate to other areas where there is less government interference. This will lead to more job loss and the proposal is sure to prevent job growth. If businesses are unable to reduce their payrolls when needed, they will err on the side of not hiring new workers as well and accelerating automation."
Message D: Ballot initiative + opposition messaging 1 + supporter rebuttal	Yes	Freedom, anti-socialism	Yes	Message B + Now please read the following response from supporters of the measure: "Under this ballot initiative ALL corporations are totally free to lay off workers provided they do not take taxpayer money. But if they do receive taxpayer money and have more than 500 employees, then involuntary layoffs would be prevented in order to protect the well-being of American workers and our communities. Layoffs would have to be voluntary based on financial packages like those often offered to executives."
Message E: Ballot initiative + opposition messaging 2 + supporter rebuttal	Yes	Economic harm, business relocation	Yes	Message C + Now please read the following response from supporters of the measure: "Under this ballot initiative ALL corporations are totally free to lay off workers provided they do not take taxpayer money. But if they do receive taxpayer money and have more than 500 employees, then involuntary layoffs would be prevented in order to protect the well-being of American workers and our communities. Layoffs would have to be voluntary based on financial packages like those often offered to executives."

Support for layoffs ballot initiative

FIGURE 23



We found strong overall support for the ballot initiative, which, absent opposition messaging, received a net favorability rating of +30, with 51% of respondents supporting it and just 21% opposing it (and 28% being neutral or undecided).

Not surprisingly, when we paired the ballot initiative with opposition framing, net support dropped to just +4 points (indistinguishable from zero), with the percentage of supporters falling to 35% and the opponents rising to 31% (and neutral or undecideds to 34%). Yet when the opposition messaging was challenged by pro-initiative counter-counter-messaging, net support jumped to +21 points, with the percentage of supporters increasing to 45% and the level of opposition dropping to 24% (the share of neutral or undecided respondents also dropped slightly to 32%).

In short, provided it was sufficiently well defended against opposition attacks, support for the ballot initiative dramatically outpaced opposition, and the percentage of neutral or undecided respondents only rose marginally in the face of anti-initiative messaging (when it was countered by pro-initiative messaging). This despite the fact that the initiative entails imposing unprecedented restrictions on the managerial prerogative of large firms and that it was entirely new to respondents.

Finally, it is important to note that nearly a third of respondents expressed neither favorable nor unfavorable views toward the initiative. This suggests the ceiling on support could be quite high, especially with the right outreach and framing. Notably, many of the respondents who selected the neutral option were self-identified liberals and Democrats — groups that, on the whole, were strongly supportive of the initiative. This suggests that even among generally supportive constituencies, some respondents may have had uncertainty about this specific proposal. Their neutrality may reflect limited awareness about the policy rather than opposition to it, meaning they may be especially responsive to targeted persuasion.

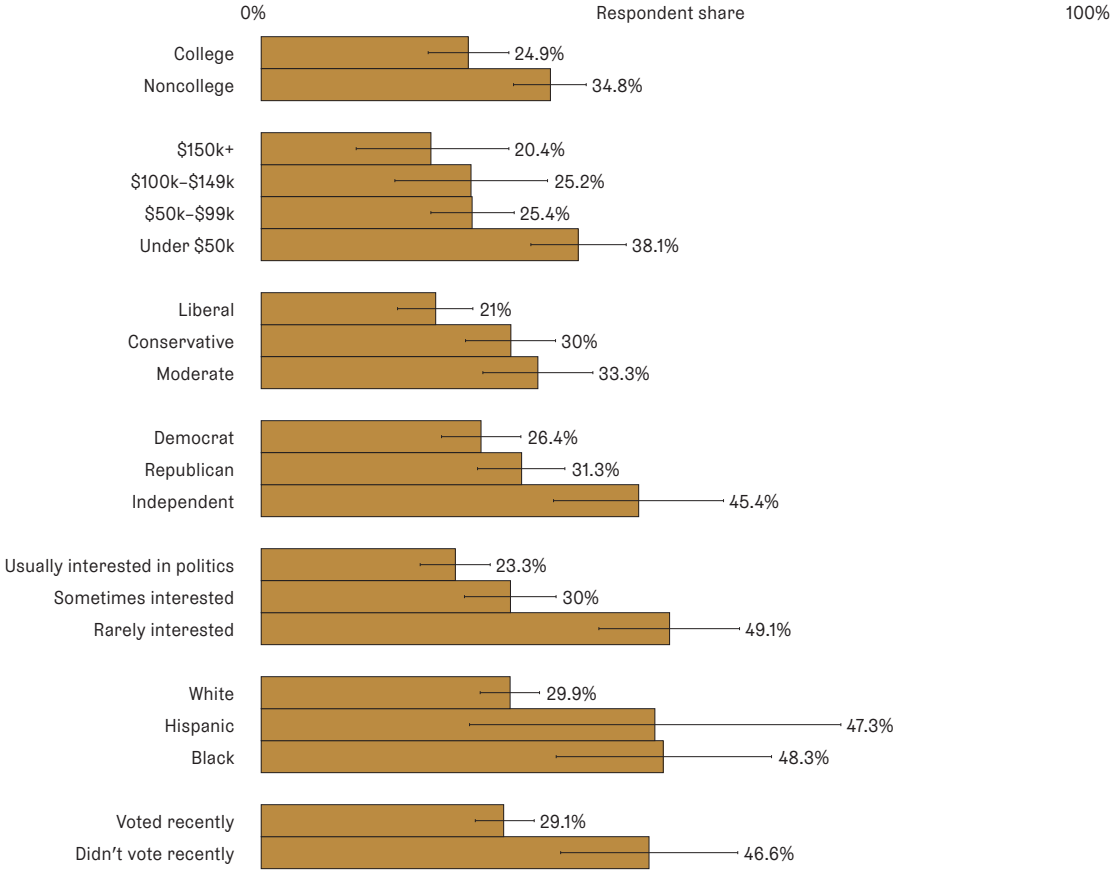
In addition, a disproportionate share of neutral respondents reported following politics only occasionally or not at all. These less-engaged voters may be more open to progressive messaging, particularly in the absence of strong counterarguments from conservative media.

Finally, neutral responses were more common among key demographic groups — such as noncollege voters and lower-income respondents — that have grown increasingly disaffected with the Democratic Party in recent election cycles.

This matters because these constituencies are central to any progressive strategy for rebuilding a durable electoral majority. Rather than indicating firm opposition, their neutrality may simply reflect their disengagement from politics. With the right messaging and outreach, these voters could be reengaged around a populist economic agenda that speaks directly to their material concerns.

Respondents who neither support nor oppose the ballot measure by group

FIGURE 24



The results in this section point to a powerful but underleveraged opportunity for economic populists: messaging centered on mass layoffs not only outperforms standard Democratic economic appeals but also carries broad approval across partisan and class divides. The issue resonates because it directly names a concrete source of economic harm (corporate layoffs of working people) and ties it to a clear accountability mechanism (withholding taxpayer support from companies that harm taxpayers). While still unfamiliar to voters, support for the policy is strong and resilient, especially when defended against corporate attacks. And because it is not yet coded as partisan, the issue offers a unique opening to engage disaffected voters, particularly through outsider campaigns and ballot initiatives that bypass the credibility constraints facing establishment Democrats.

SECTION 6

Is Independent Politics the Solution?

This section examines voter support for the creation of the Independent Workers Political Association (IWPA), a new political formation that we invented for this research project committed to advancing working-class priorities outside the two major parties.

Respondents in four key Rust Belt states were asked whether they would support the IWPA, which would run independent candidates on a bold economic populist platform. This platform included four planks: stopping large companies that receive tax dollars from laying off workers, guaranteeing decent-paying jobs for all who want to work, raising the minimum wage, and stopping pharmaceutical and food industry price gouging.

In this section we first report overall levels of support for the IWPA and then examine whether it has the potential to build a durable base among the constituencies progressives must win over to compete in red and purple states.

Key Takeaways

- A majority of Rust Belt voters support the creation of an independent working-class political association, or IWPA. Up to 57% of respondents said they would support or strongly support the organization, while just 19% expressed opposition, yielding net support of +39 points. This strong support was consistent across all four states tested.

- Support for the IWPA draws from a broad and diverse coalition. Support was especially strong among working-class voters, renters, young voters, voters of color, and nonvoters — groups Democrats have struggled to mobilize in recent cycles.

- Working-class voters are a central pillar of the IWPA's base. Around 60% of respondents without a four-year college degree backed the IWPA, compared to 52% of college graduates, demonstrating the organization's potential to appeal directly to the demographic most critical in the Rust Belt.

- The IWPA shows strong cross-partisan appeal. Up to 50% of Trump voters in some key subgroups expressed support for the IWPA, signaling real potential to realign portions of the Republican-leaning working class.

- Economically insecure and downwardly mobile voters are highly receptive. Support for the IWPA reached 74% among respondents who felt "very insecure" in their jobs and 66% among those who reported being "much worse off" than their parents.

- The IWPA could fill a political vacuum left by the Democratic Party's brand problems. By focusing on tangible working-class priorities and operating outside the two major parties, the IWPA could build a durable base in virtual one-party districts where Democrats have struggled.

Broad Support for an Independent Workers Political Association

To better understand the potential of an independent, pro-worker political formation, we asked Rust Belt voters about their support for a new organization: IWPA. This question asked respondents to give their opinion of a new working-class political organization that championed a radical set of economic issues, including a mix of popular policies that are already in the Democrats' platform as well as jobs-focused policies that go further toward addressing decades of working-class decline:

> Would you support a new organization, the Independent Workers Political Association, that would support working-class issues independent of both the Democratic and Republican parties? It would run and support independent political candidates committed to a platform that included:

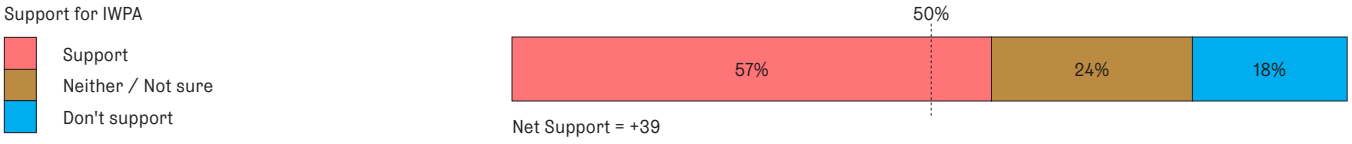
- Stop big companies that receive tax dollars from laying off workers who pay taxes
- Guarantee everyone who wants to work has a decent-paying job, and if the private sector can't provide it, the government will
- Raise the minimum wage so every family can lead a decent life
- Stop drug-company price gouging and put price controls on food cartels

These planks were selected to communicate an unequivocally pro-worker agenda while also emphasizing fairness, accountability, and tangible economic benefits. The IWPA platform was purposely centered on the issues that working-class voters care about the most and going well beyond the edge of what most Democratic-leaning politicians and pundits believe most voters would accept.

Despite its radicalness, the IWPA drew substantial support from voters across Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. A majority (57%) of Rust Belt respondents said they would support or strongly support the creation of such an organization, while just 19% expressed opposition. Another 24% neither supported nor opposed or were unsure about the IWPA. Net support for the IWPA was +39 points. This level of support suggests that voters are not only open to a new political formation but are receptive to an agenda that directly challenges corporate interests and promises to materially improve their lives.

Support for Independent Workers Political Association

FIGURE 25



Equally significant, the prospect of independent candidates running on a pro-worker agenda resonated most strongly with the very voters Democrats have had the hardest time engaging and turning out in recent elections. Support for a working-class political association was consistently higher among working-class respondents. Net support for the IWPA among those without a four-year college degree was +45 points, compared to just +27 points among college graduates. The same trend emerged across income brackets. Net favorability was positive among respondents making $150,000 a year or more, but the margin, at +12 points, was not decisive. Support climbed steadily as income decreased: +27 net favorability among those earning $100,000 to $149,000; +41 among those making $50,000 to $99,000; and +50 among those making less than $50,000. Likewise, net favorability among respondents in working-class occupations was +43, compared to +35 among respondents in non-working-class jobs.

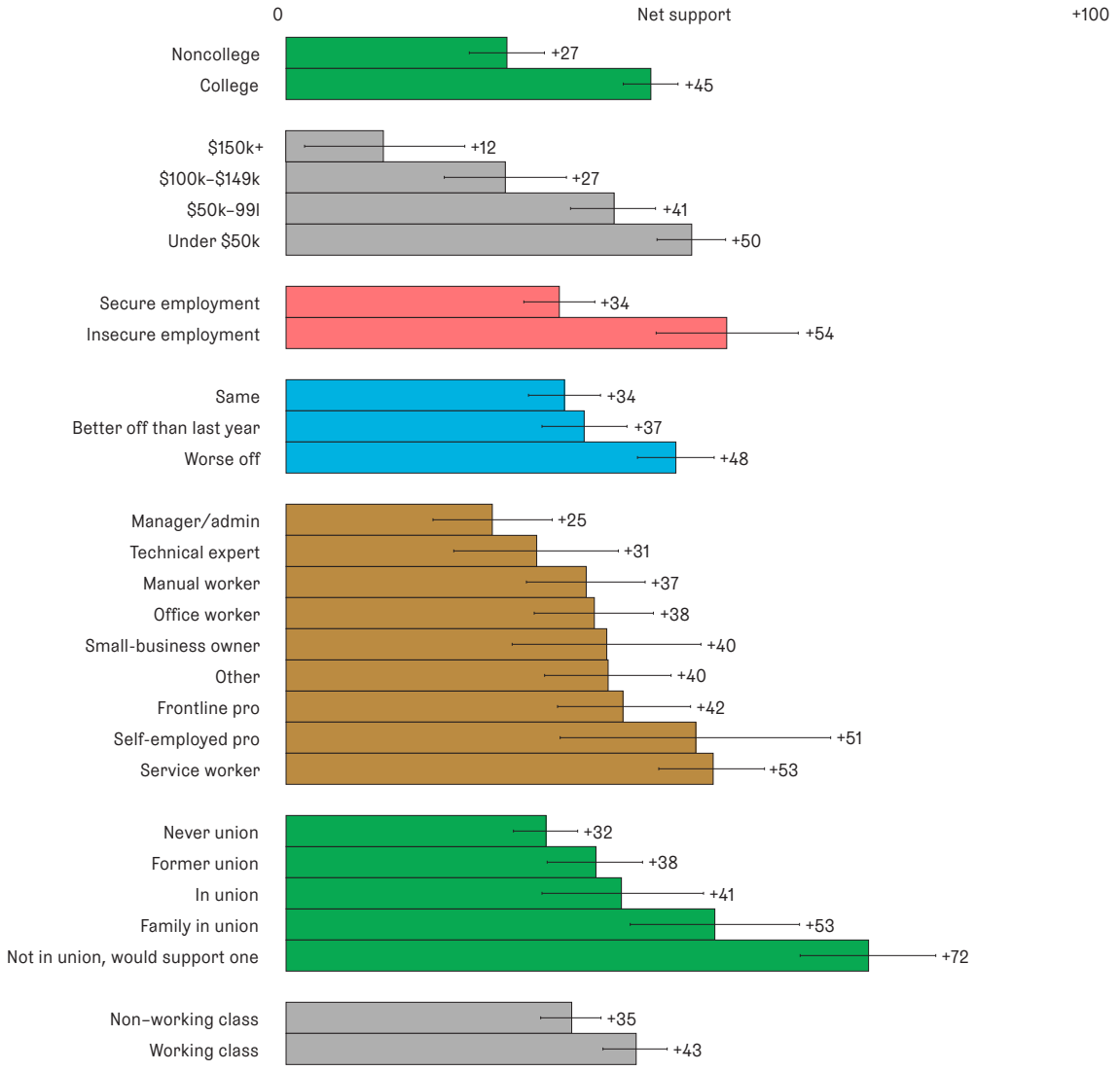
Voters experiencing job insecurity, a group central to Donald Trump's 2024 win, were also especially receptive. Among those who said they felt "very insecure" in their jobs, net support for the IWPA was +54 points, versus +33 among respondents who felt "very secure." And voters who described themselves as worse off than their parents were substantially more likely to back the IWPA(+48 net favorability) than those who believed they were better off (+34).

The association also enjoyed stronger support among racial and ethnic minority groups that shifted toward Trump in 2024. While net support among white respondents was +38, that figure climbed to +62 among Latino and black respondents. Turnout history and age further underscored the IWPA's political potential: net support stood at +37 among recent voters but rose to +59 among nonvoters, and net support was +60 among respondents under thirty, compared to just +27 among those over 60.

Taken together, these patterns reveal that the IWPA is most appealing to the constituencies Democrats have had the most difficulty winning or retaining: working-class voters, people of color, and those who feel that the promise of the American dream is slipping away. The association's strong support from these groups illustrates not only its potential but also the extent of the political void left by a Democratic Party that has too often failed to speak convincingly to voters' economic insecurity and alienation from the political system.

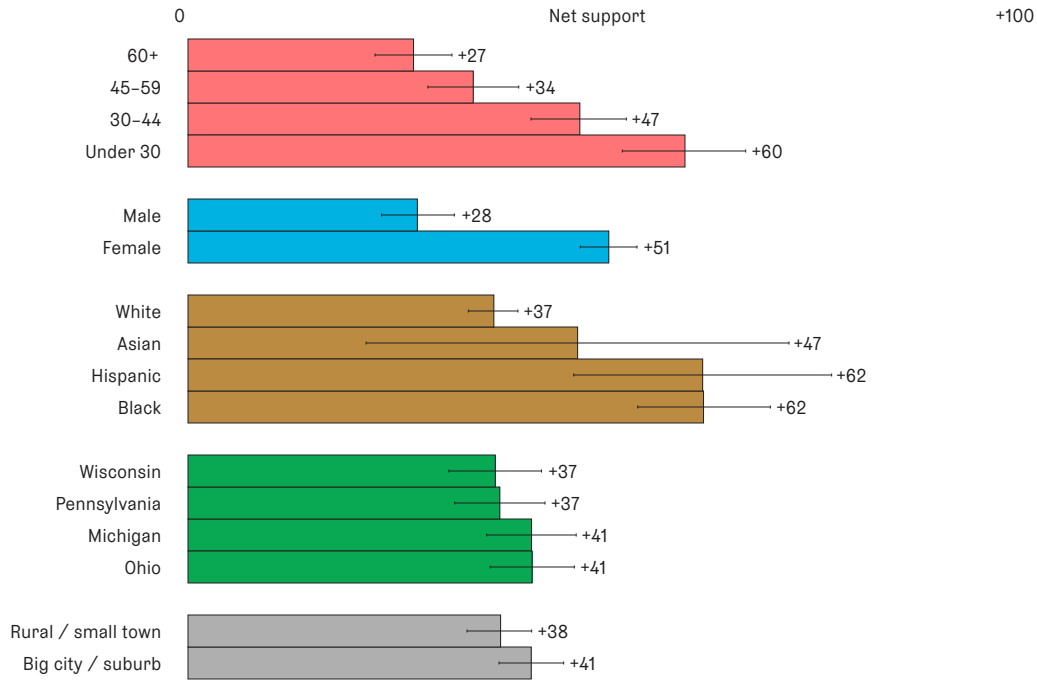
Net support for IWPA by class marker

FIGURE 26



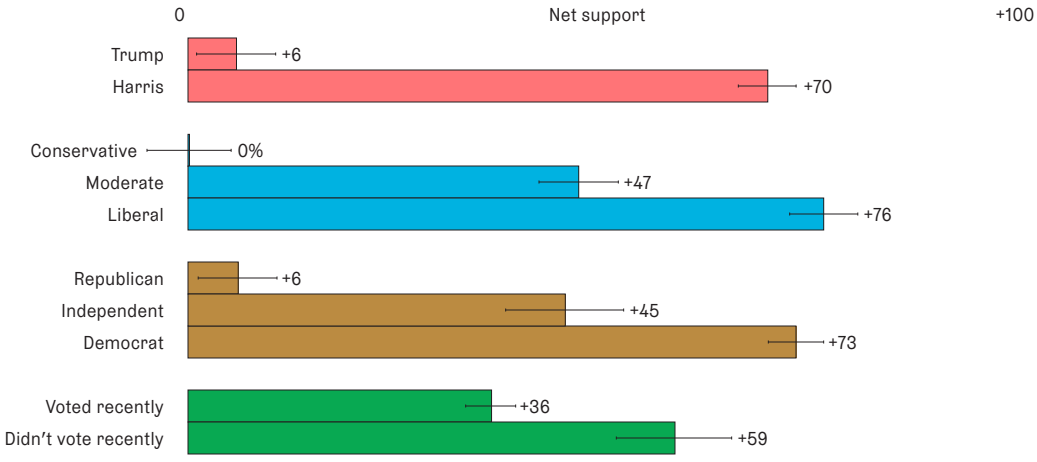
Net support for IWPA by demographic

FIGURE 27



Net support for IWPA by ideology

FIGURE 28



Building a Winning Coalition: IWPA's Appeal to Trump Voters and Infrequent Voters

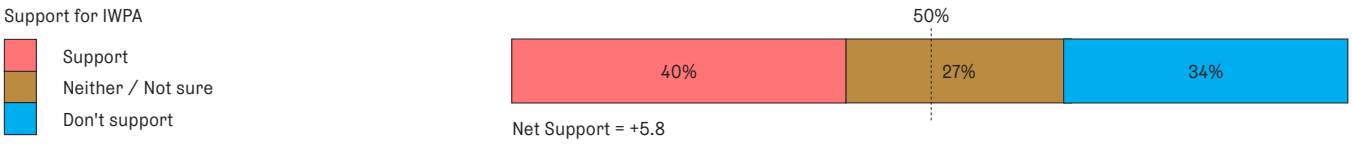
Beyond showing the IWPA's broad popular appeal, our results also demonstrate that the program garners meaningful support from groups that have been pivotal in recent Republican victories and Democratic losses. Winning in red and purple states requires both persuading a share of Trump voters and mobilizing nonvoters who are disproportionately working class and disengaged from politics, and we find that the IWPA has significant potential among both groups.

While Trump supporters were not as enthusiastic about the IWPA as many other groups, the results are still striking. A full 40% of Trump 2024 voters reported supporting

the IWPA, meaning that four in ten Trump voters expressed support for a platform centered around strong progressive economic policies such as stopping involuntary mass layoffs by corporations receiving taxpayer dollars and implementing a federal jobs guarantee. Just as important, nearly 30% of Trump voters were neutral or undecided, suggesting significant room for persuasion around these issues. Many Trump voters do not have strongly held prior beliefs about the economic policies advanced by the IWPA, leaving open the possibility of moving them with clear, compelling messaging.

IWPA support among Trump 2024 voters

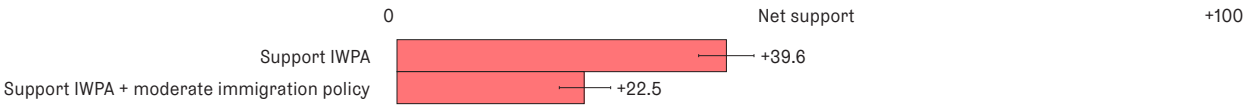
FIGURE 29



Notably, 23% of 2024 Trump voters both supported the IWPA and backed a moderate immigration policy that would grant legal status to immigrants who "play by the rules" (as we discussed in section 3). This demonstrates that a substantial portion of Trump voters who are receptive to the IWPA's economic agenda may also be open to supporting the association even if it stakes out more liberal positions on key social issues on which the Republican Party has assumed hard-line conservative positions. This overlap underscores the opportunity to build a broader coalition around the IWPA platform, even among voters who have previously supported the GOP.

IWPA and immigration policy support among Trump 2024 voters

FIGURE 30

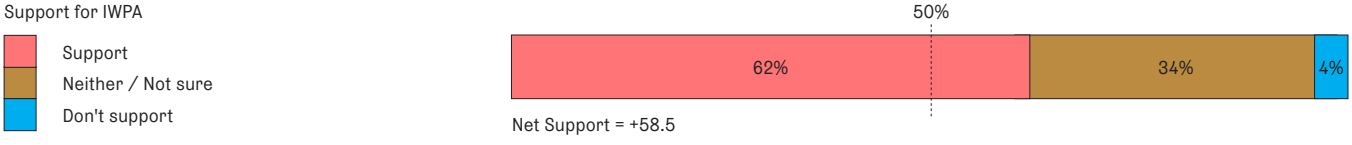


In addition to this promising support among Republicans, support was very strong among nonvoters, a group Democrats must mobilize in order to win in Rust Belt states and nationally. Over 62% of nonvoters said they would support the IWPA, while another 34% were neutral or undecided, leaving only 4% in outright opposition. This is a remarkable level of support among a group that has historically been difficult to reach and activate.

Taken together, these results show that the IWPA platform resonates strongly with both key persuasion targets (Trump voters) and crucial mobilization targets (nonvoters). The combination of substantial existing support among persuadable Republican-leaning voters and overwhelming support among disengaged potential Democratic voters is highly encouraging. It suggests that bold, worker-centered economic populism has the potential not only to shore up the Democratic base but also to broaden its coalition by engaging voters who feel alienated from the current political system.

IWPA support among nonvoters (having voted recently)

FIGURE 31



Conclusion

In sum, the IWPA shows serious potential to connect with the types of voters Democrats need to win in red and purple states. Its platform resonates with many working-class voters, communities of color, nonvoters, and even a substantial share of Trump supporters. The fact that 40% of Trump 2024 voters expressed support for the IWPA alongside the 62% of nonvoters who said they would back it highlights the organization's ability to appeal across key constituencies. These findings suggest that a clear pro-worker agenda can not only motivate disengaged voters but also reach beyond the Democratic base, helping to lay the groundwork for broader electoral coalitions.

Today inequality is at its highest level since the Gilded Age, and that doesn't bode well for democracy. Increased inequality, coupled with a government seemingly unwilling to address the concerns of ordinary Americans, has led many to lose faith in democratic institutions. The problem has opened the door for right-wing populism, which blames powerless immigrants and workers of color for the economic woes of the middle class rather than directing blame at the corporate elites who actually wield power and dictate policy.

Unfortunately, the policies of right-wing populists — such as tax breaks for the rich and corporations, the elimination of federal workers' union rights, the defunding of key government regulatory agencies, and the reduction of social welfare programs — only increase inequality further. Without a pro-worker political counterbalance, these issues are likely to fester.

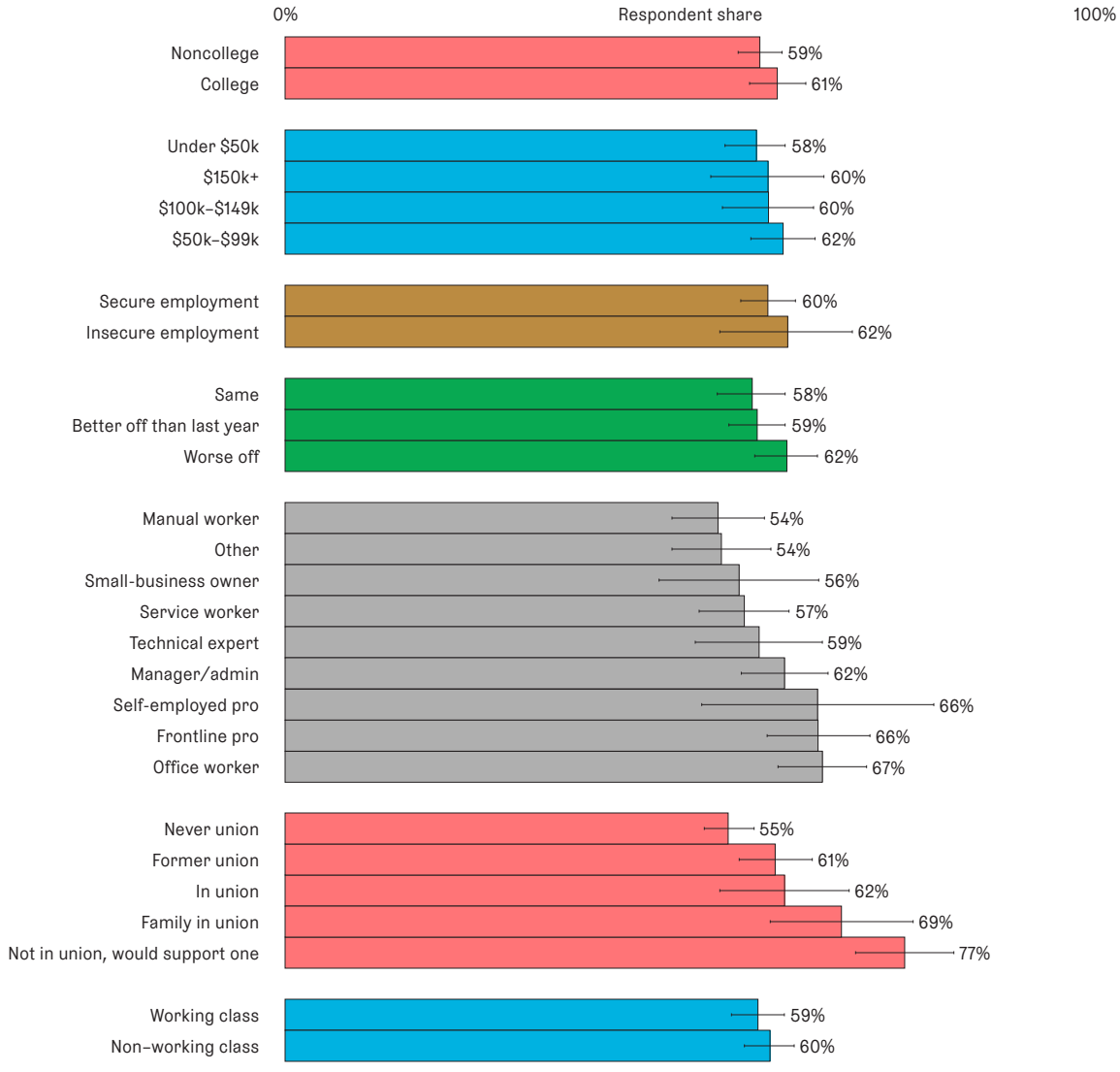
Our findings are crystal clear: There is broad-based support for economic populism. And strong populism outperforms weak populism. This shines a bright light on the best path forward to reduce inequality and strengthen and restore faith in democracy.

The question is whether that path can be blazed by candidates bearing the Democratic Party label. Our findings of a significant penalty for running as a Democrat, paired with majority support for the creation of the IWPA, suggest that populists should run as independents in deep-red districts that Democrats have largely abandoned.

Appendix

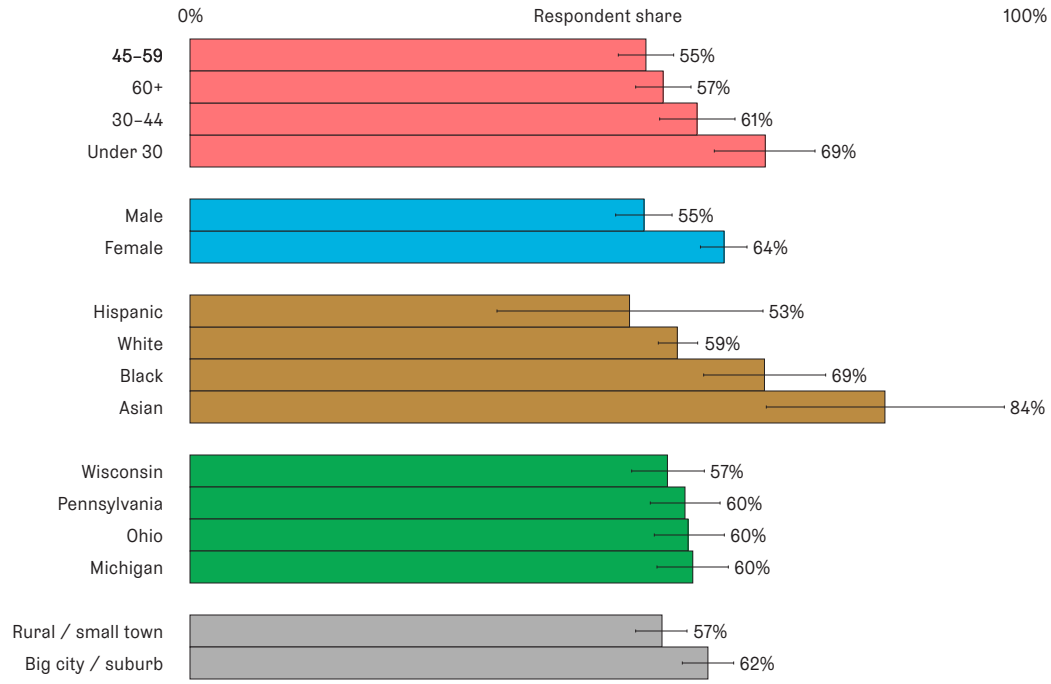
Support for economic populism by class marker

FIGURE A1



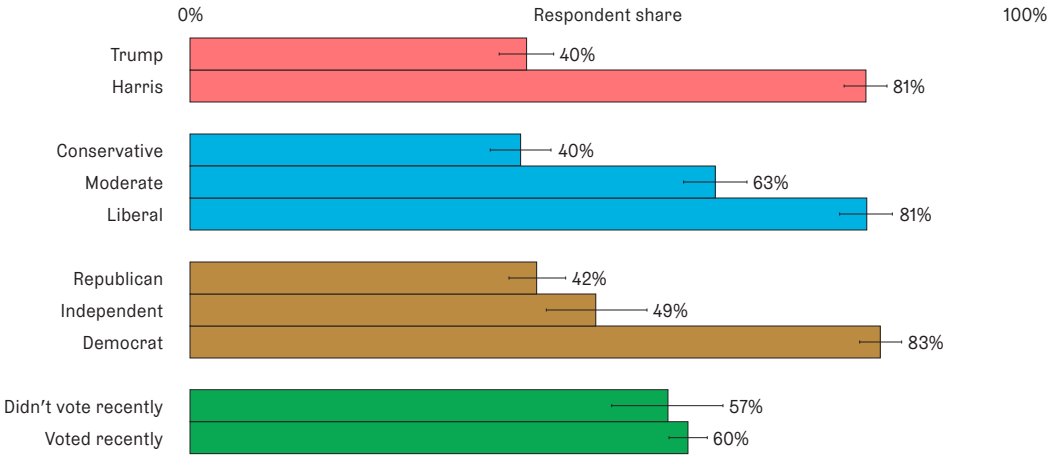
Support for economic populism by demographic

FIGURE A2



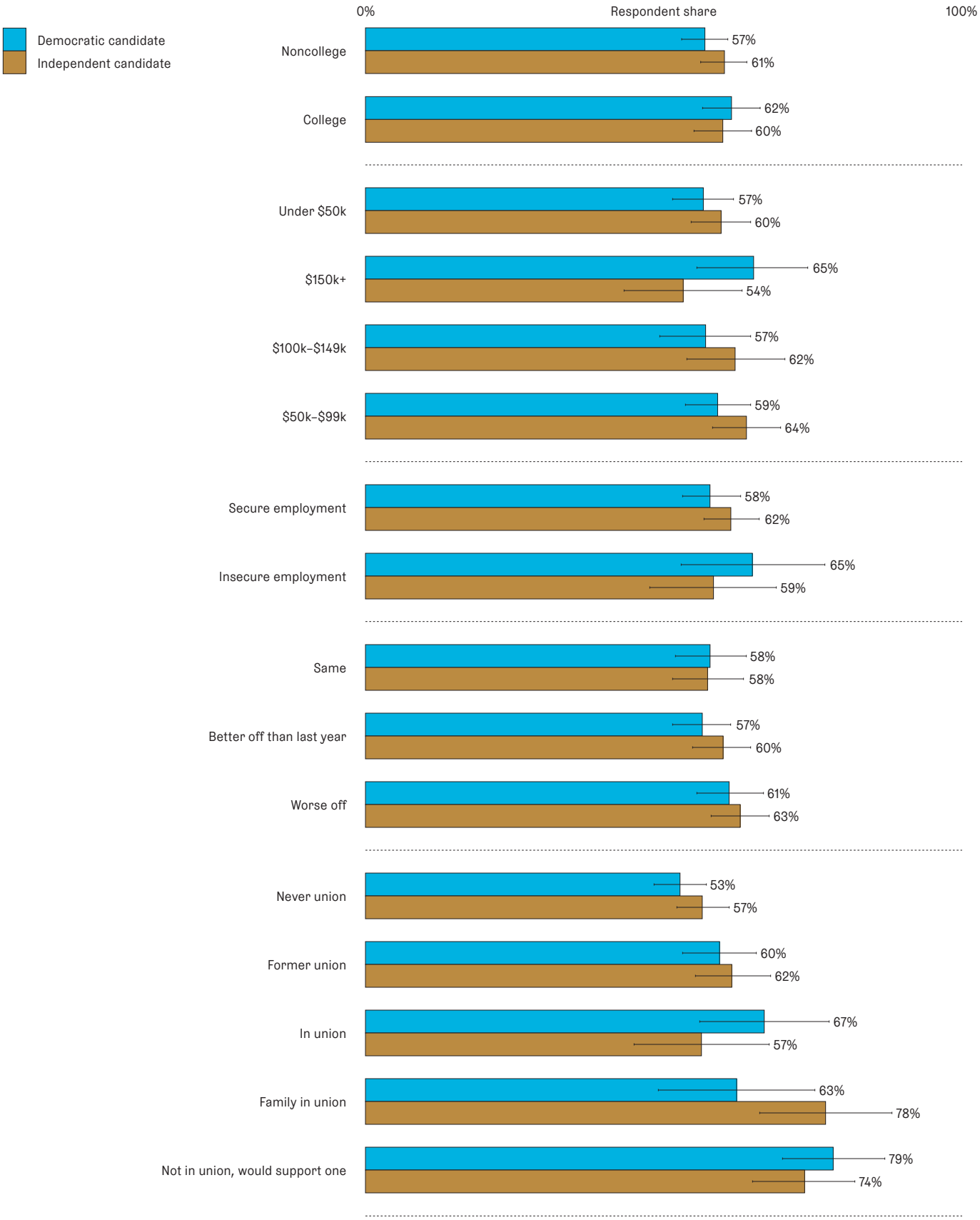
Support for economic populism by ideology

FIGURE A3



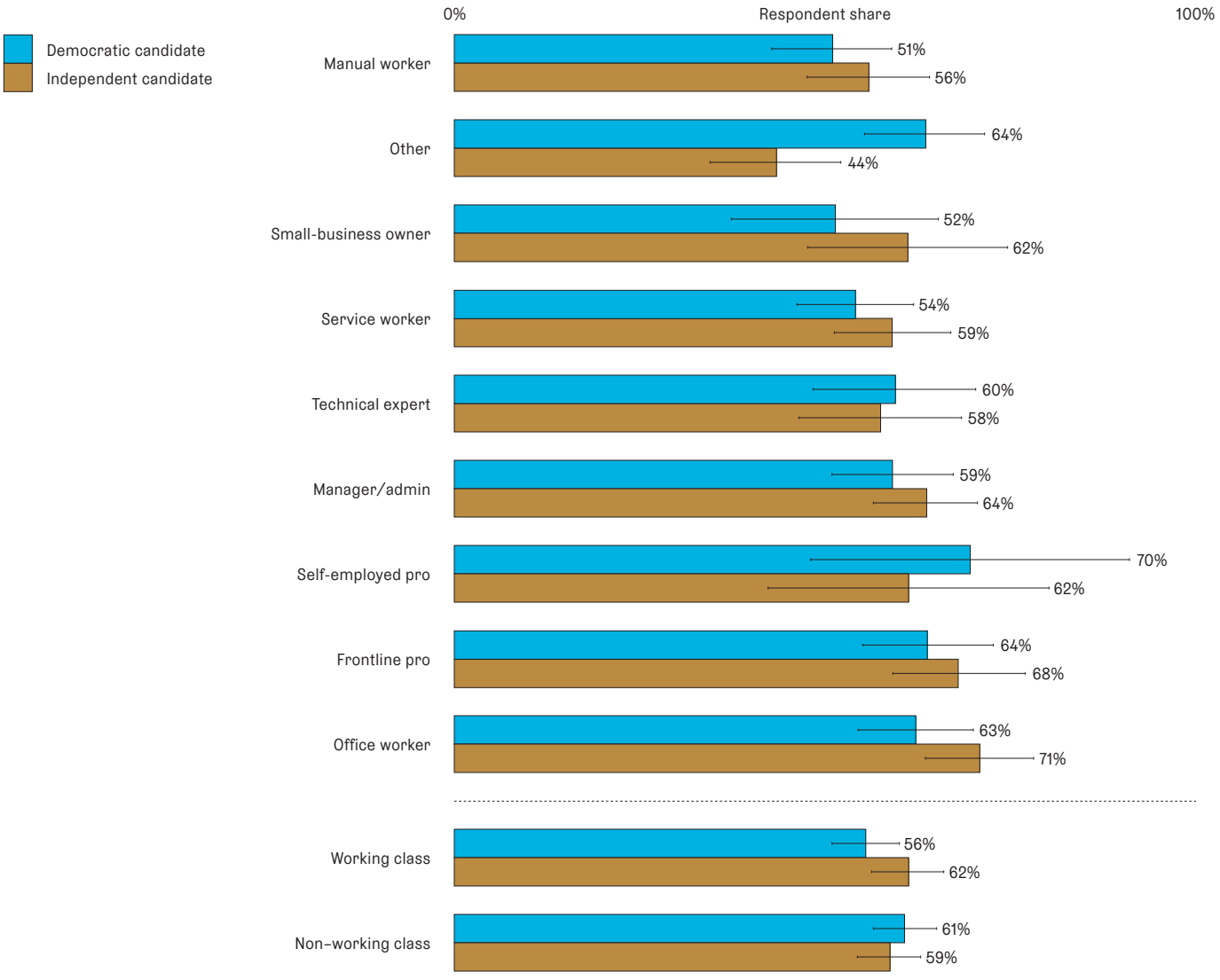
Support for economic populism by class marker

FIGURE A4



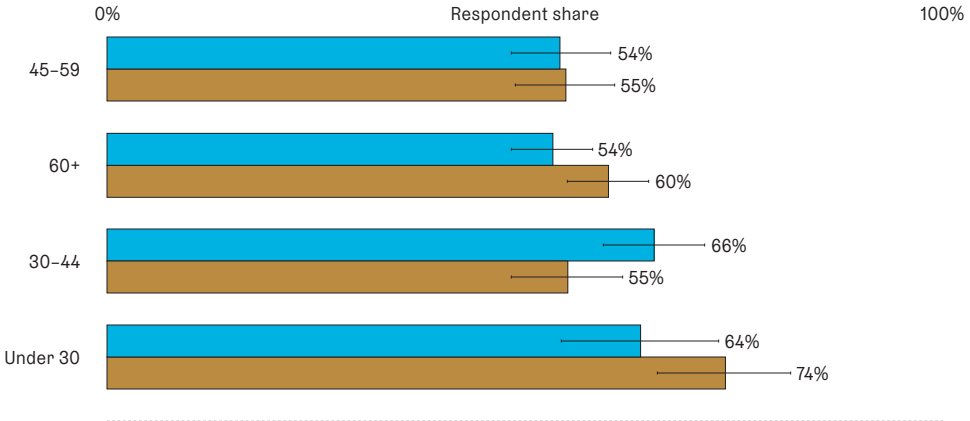
Support for economic populism by class marker (cont'd)

FIGURE A4



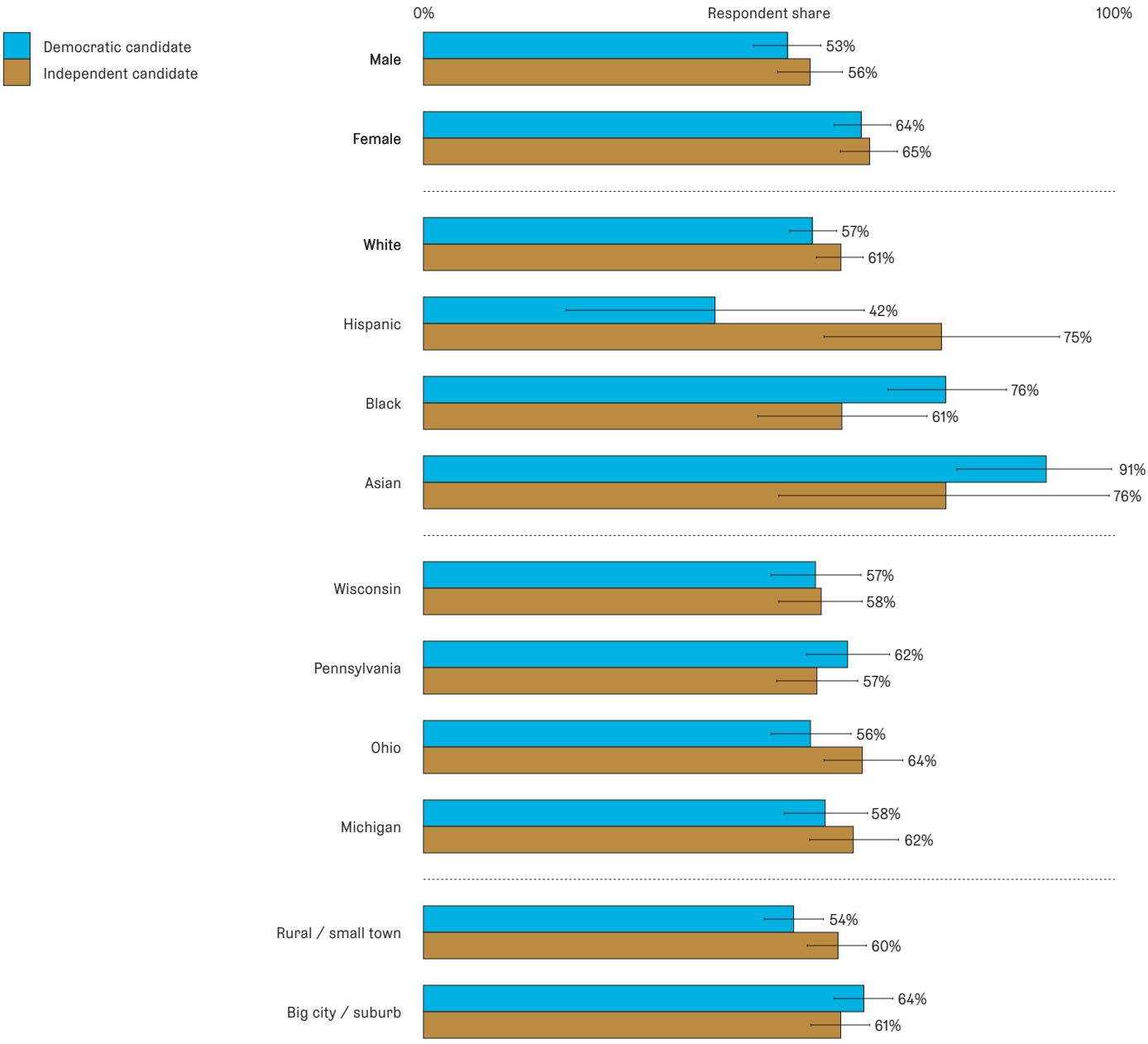
Support for economic populism by demographic

FIGURE A5



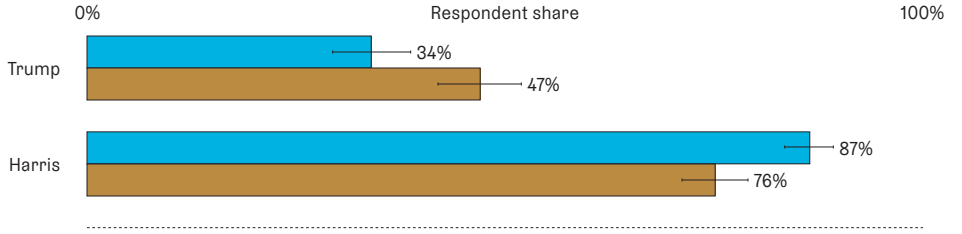
Support for economic populism by demographic (cont'd)

FIGURE A5



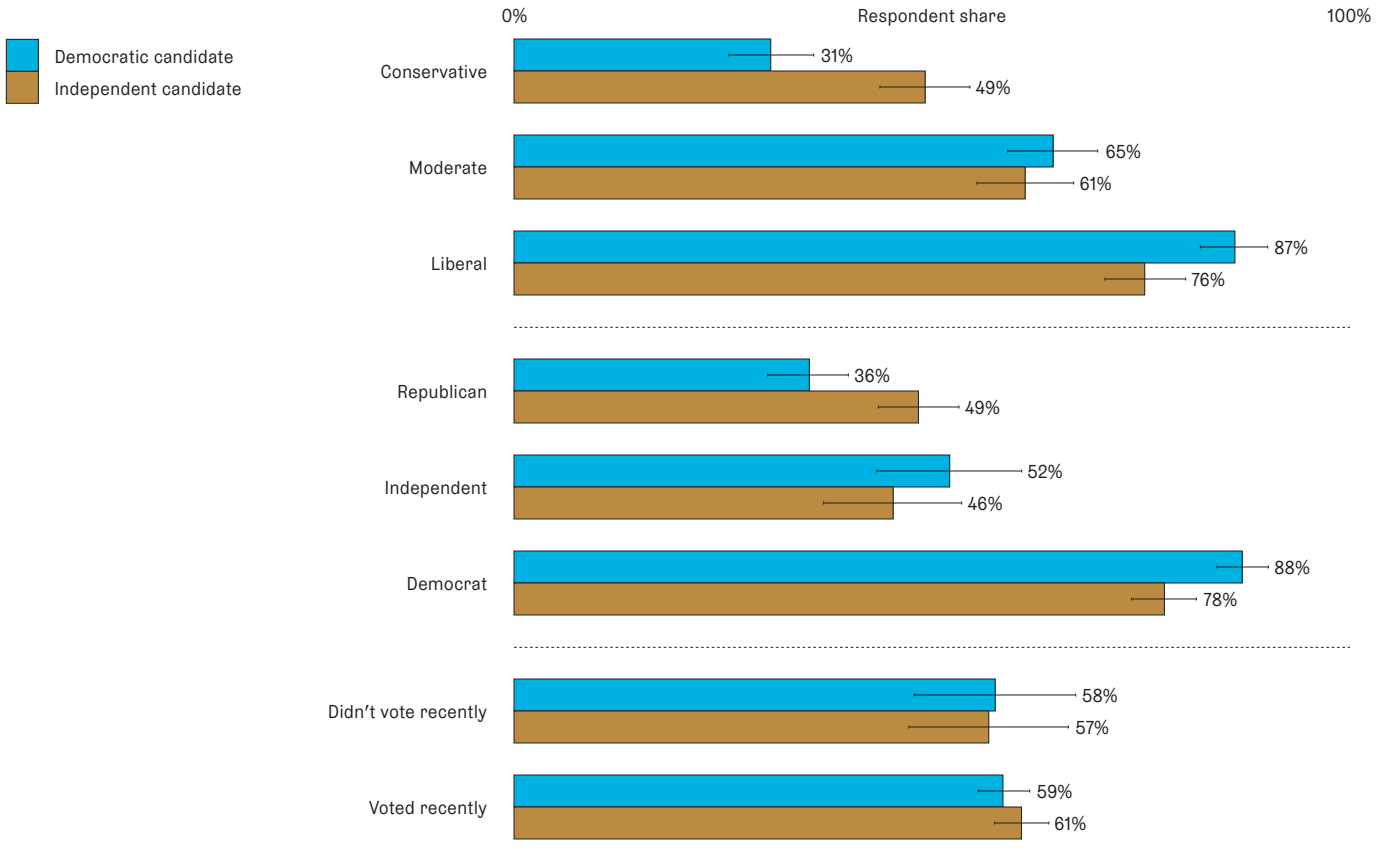
Support for economic populism by ideology

FIGURE A6



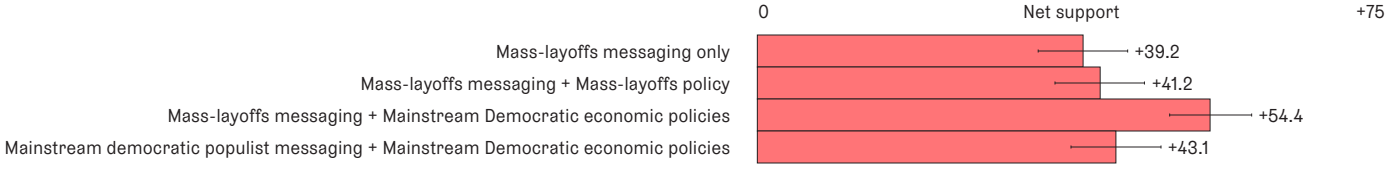
Support for economic populism by ideology (cont'd)

FIGURE A6



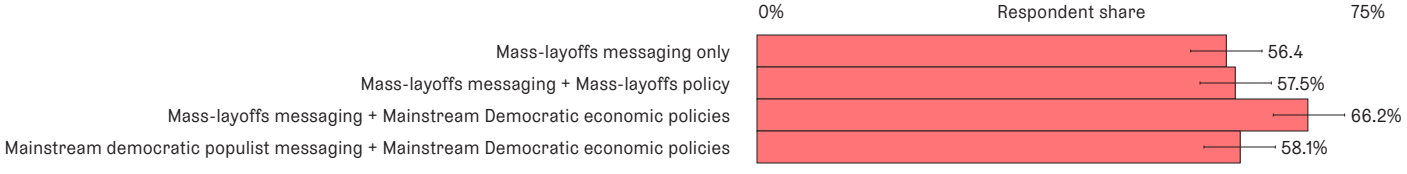
Net support for economic populism (pooled across candidate party)

FIGURE A7



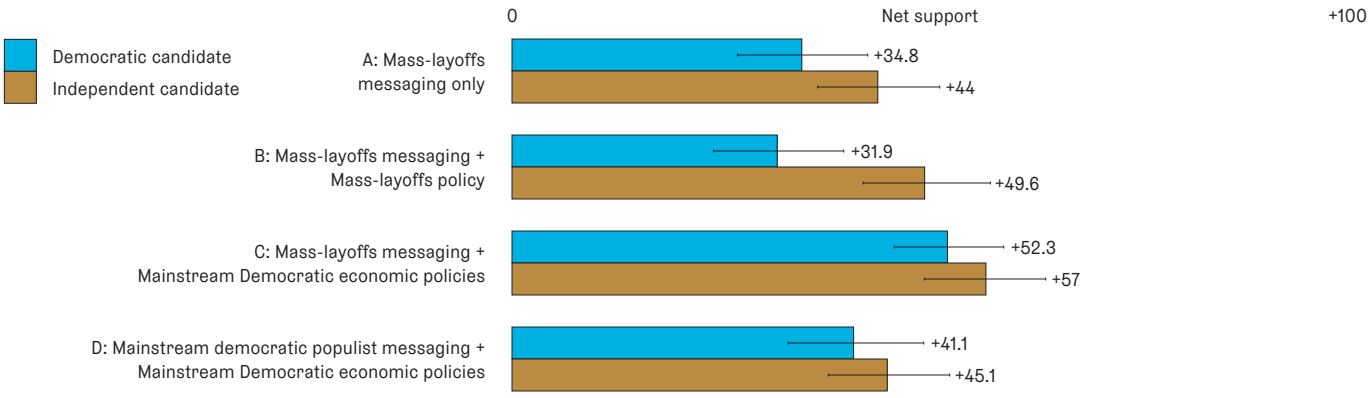
Support for economic populism (pooled across candidate party)

FIGURE A8



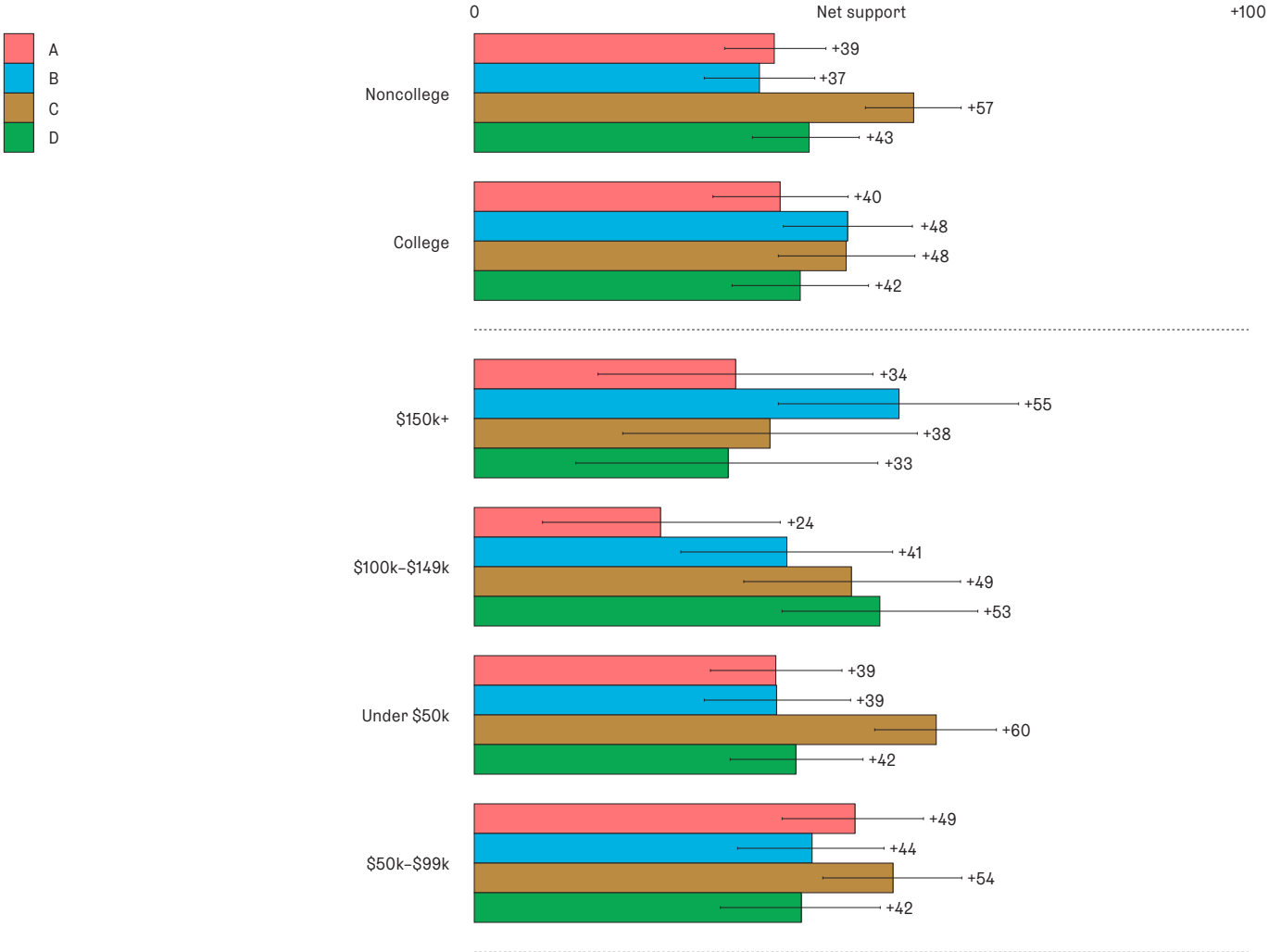
Net support for economic populism by message

FIGURE A9



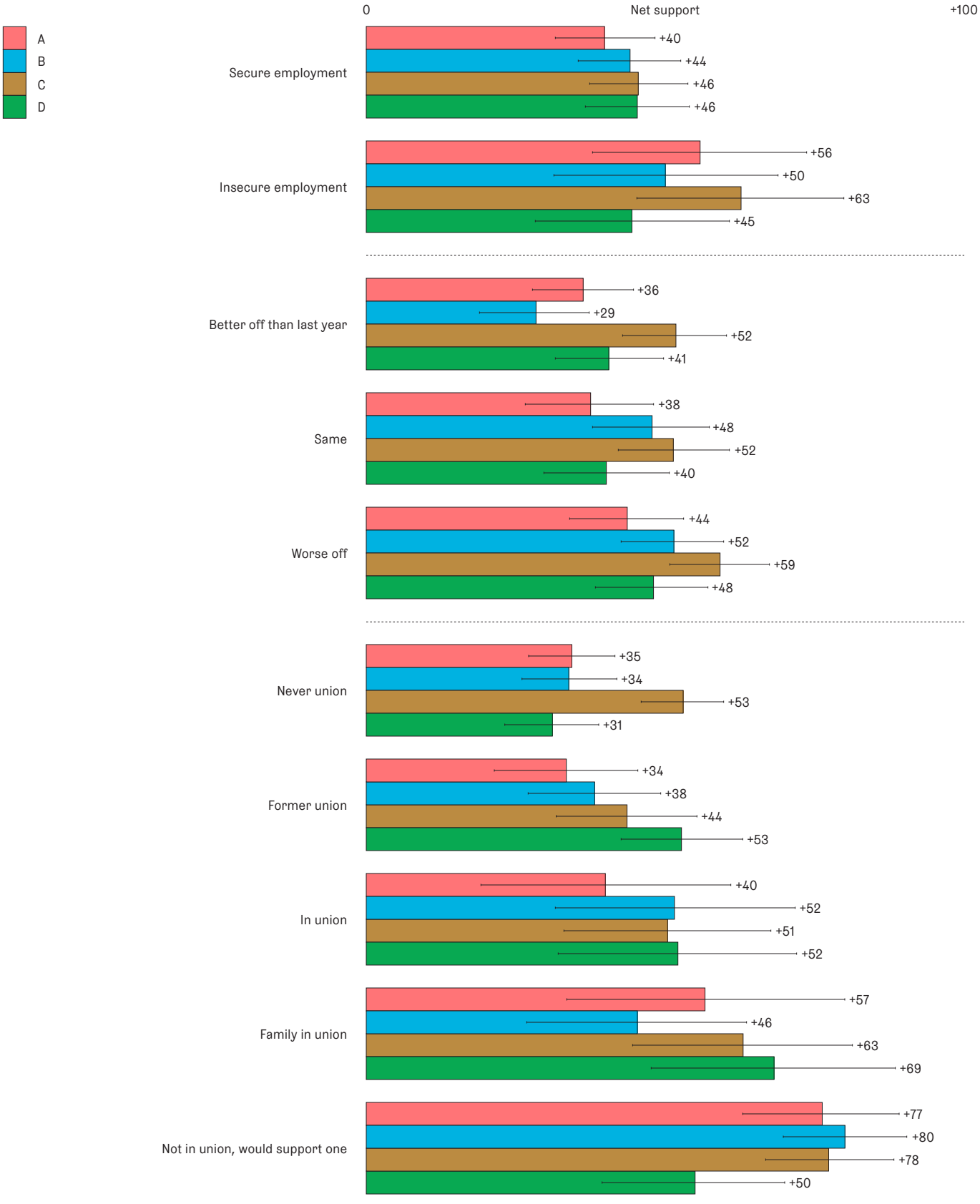
Net support for economic populism by message and class marker

FIGURE A10



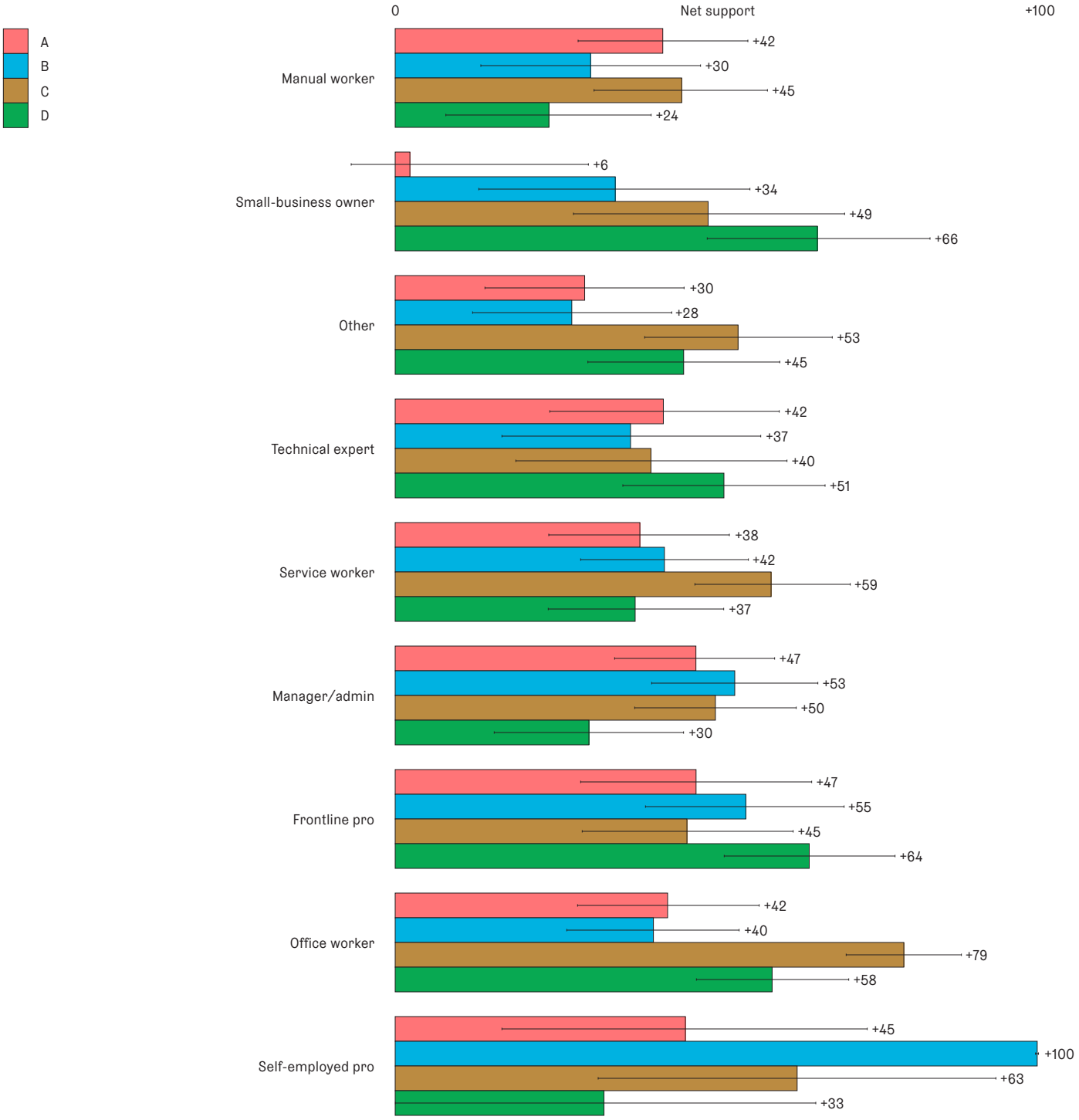
Net support for economic populism by message and class marker (cont'd)

FIGURE A10



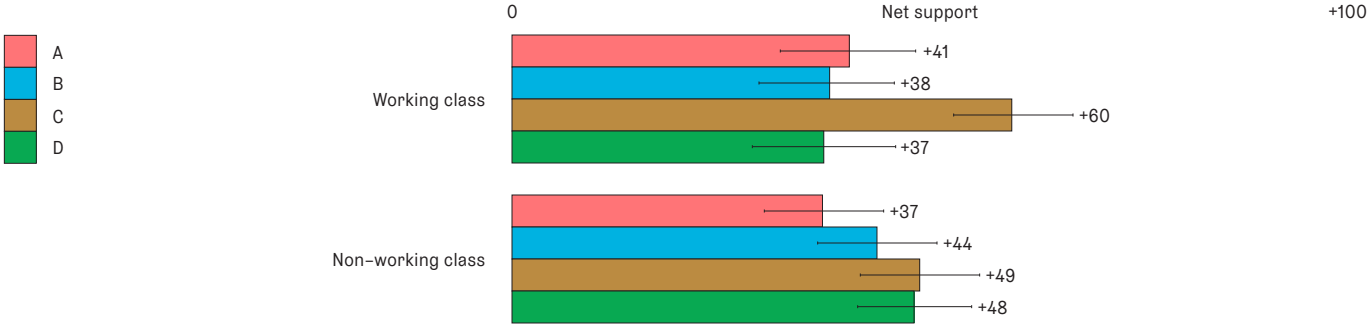
Net support for economic populism by message and class marker (cont'd)

FIGURE A10



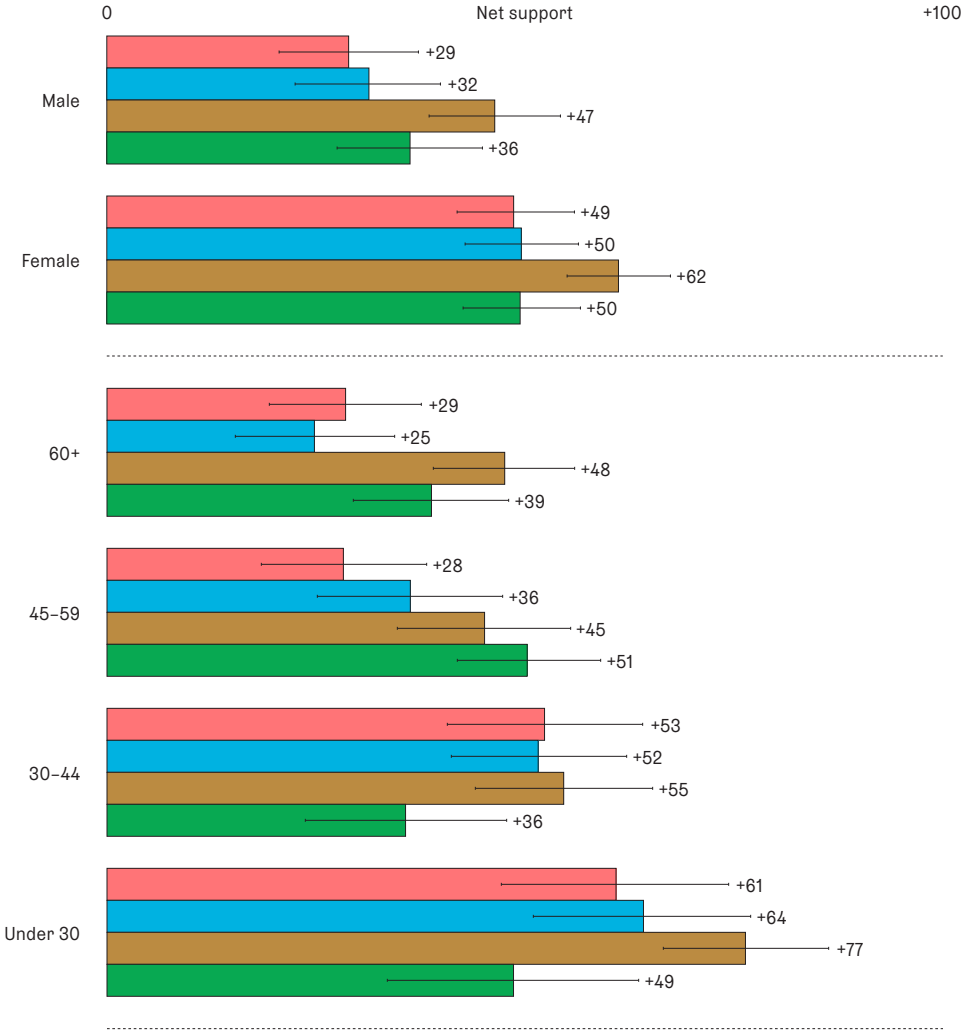
Net support for economic populism by message and class marker (cont'd)

FIGURE A10



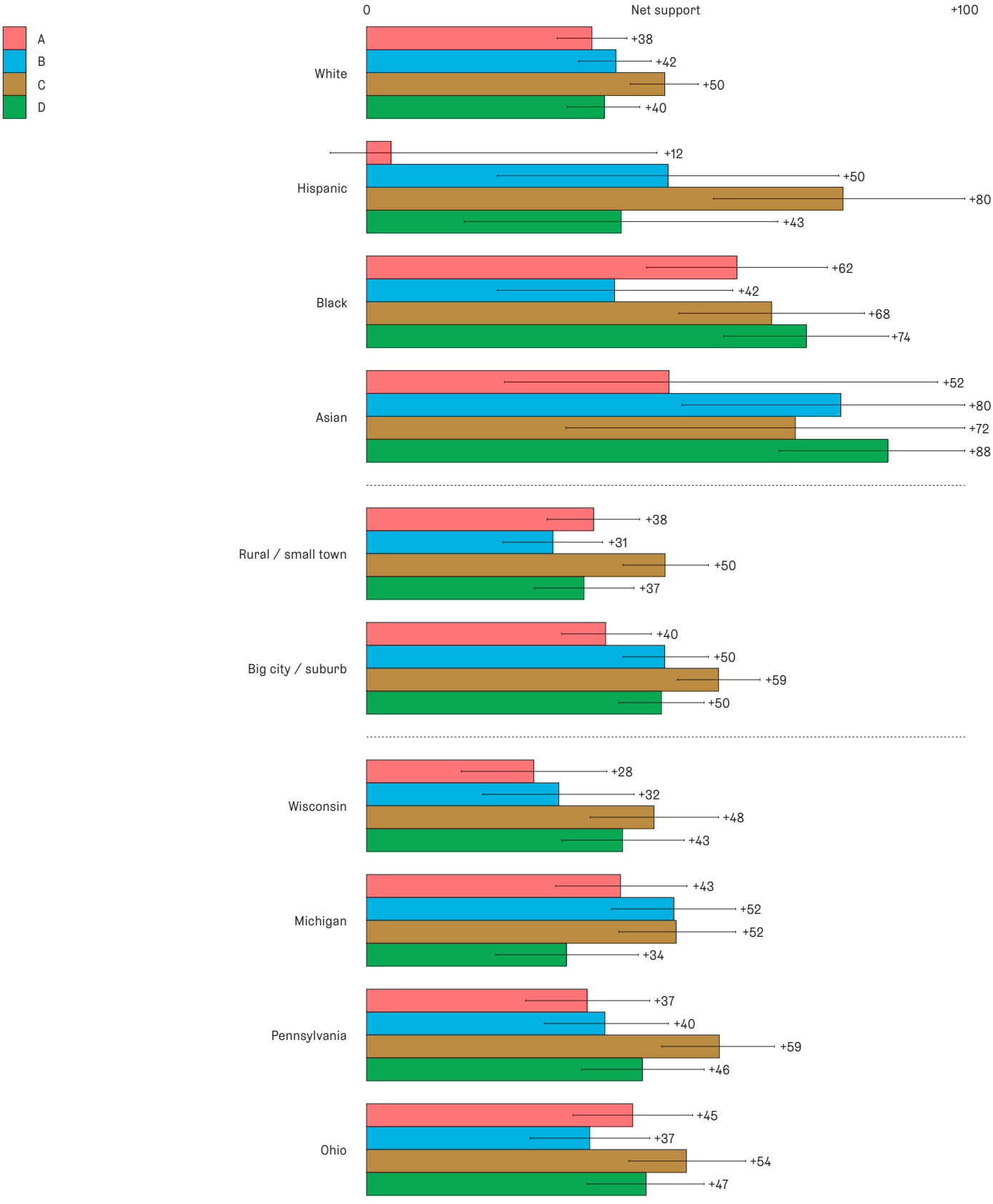
Net support for economic populism by message and demographic

FIGURE A11



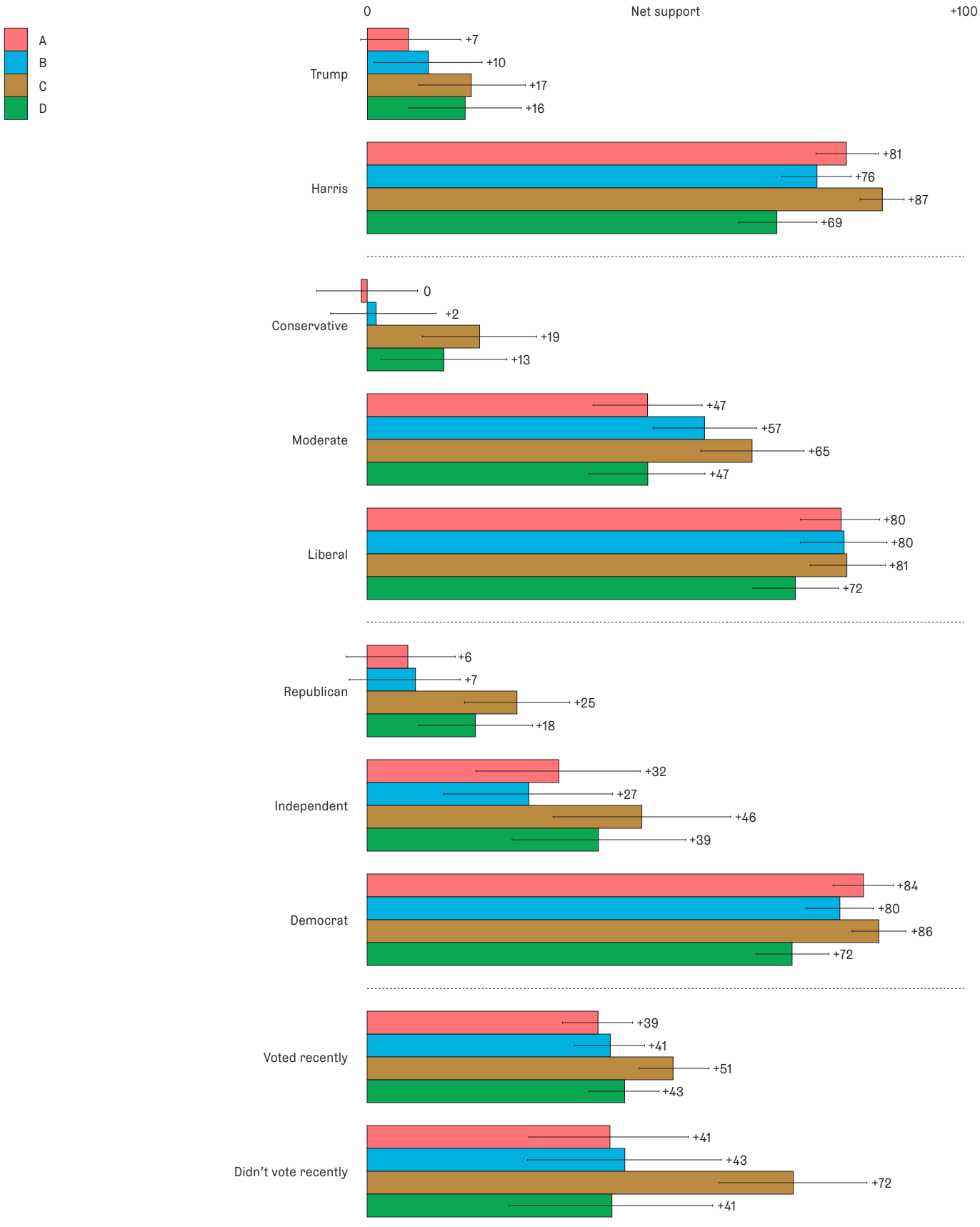
Net support for economic populism by message and demographic (cont'd)

FIGURE A11



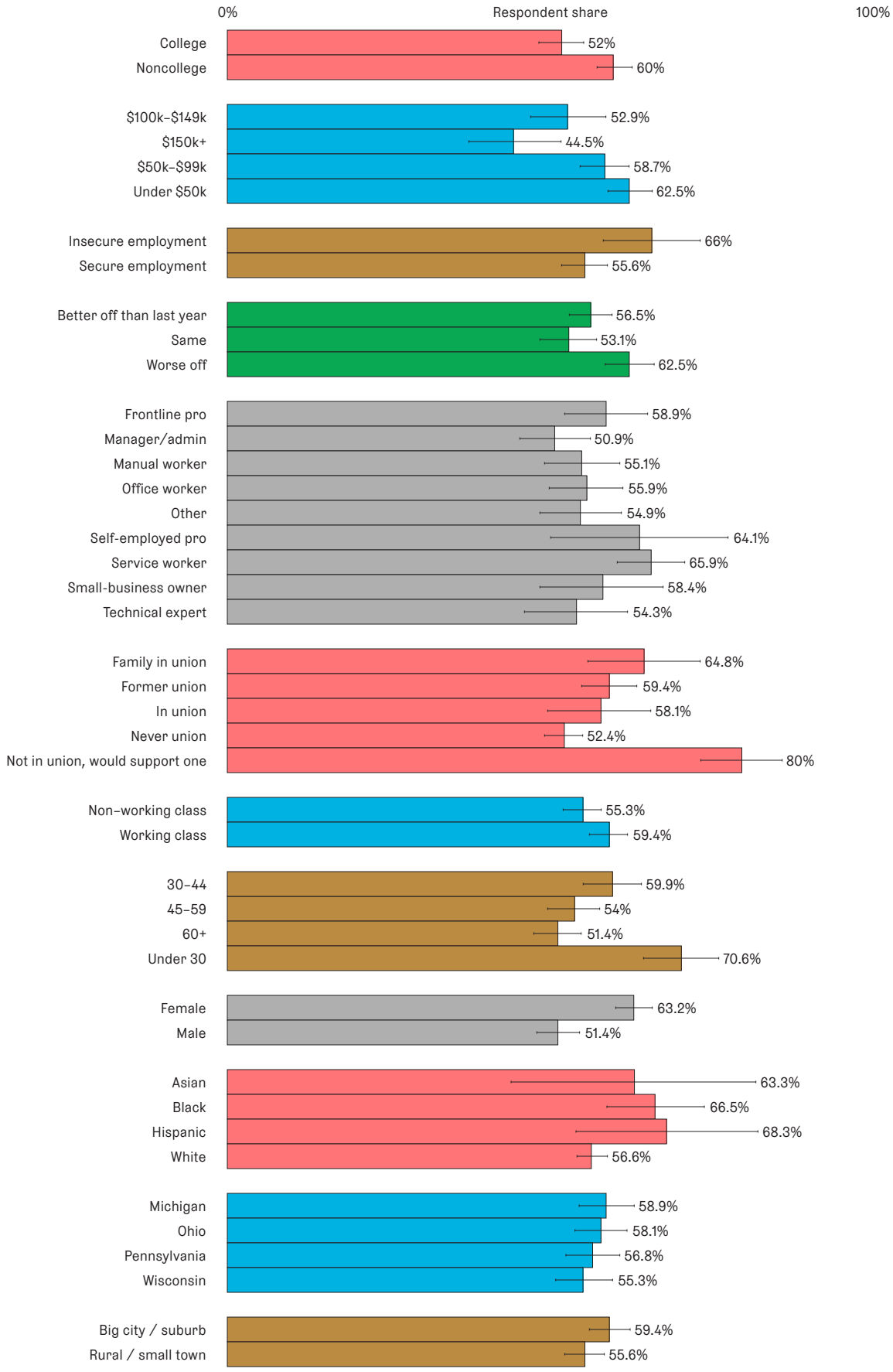
Net support for economic populism by message and ideology

FIGURE A12



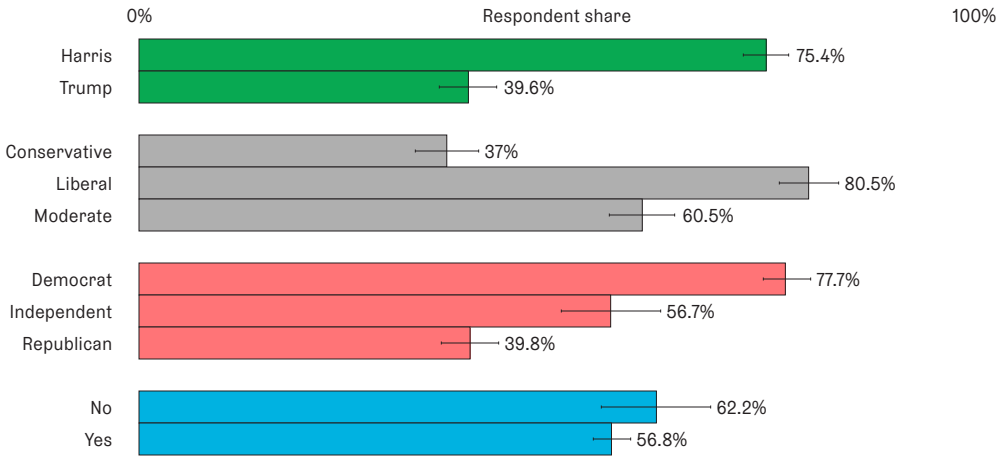
IWPA support by group

FIGURE A13



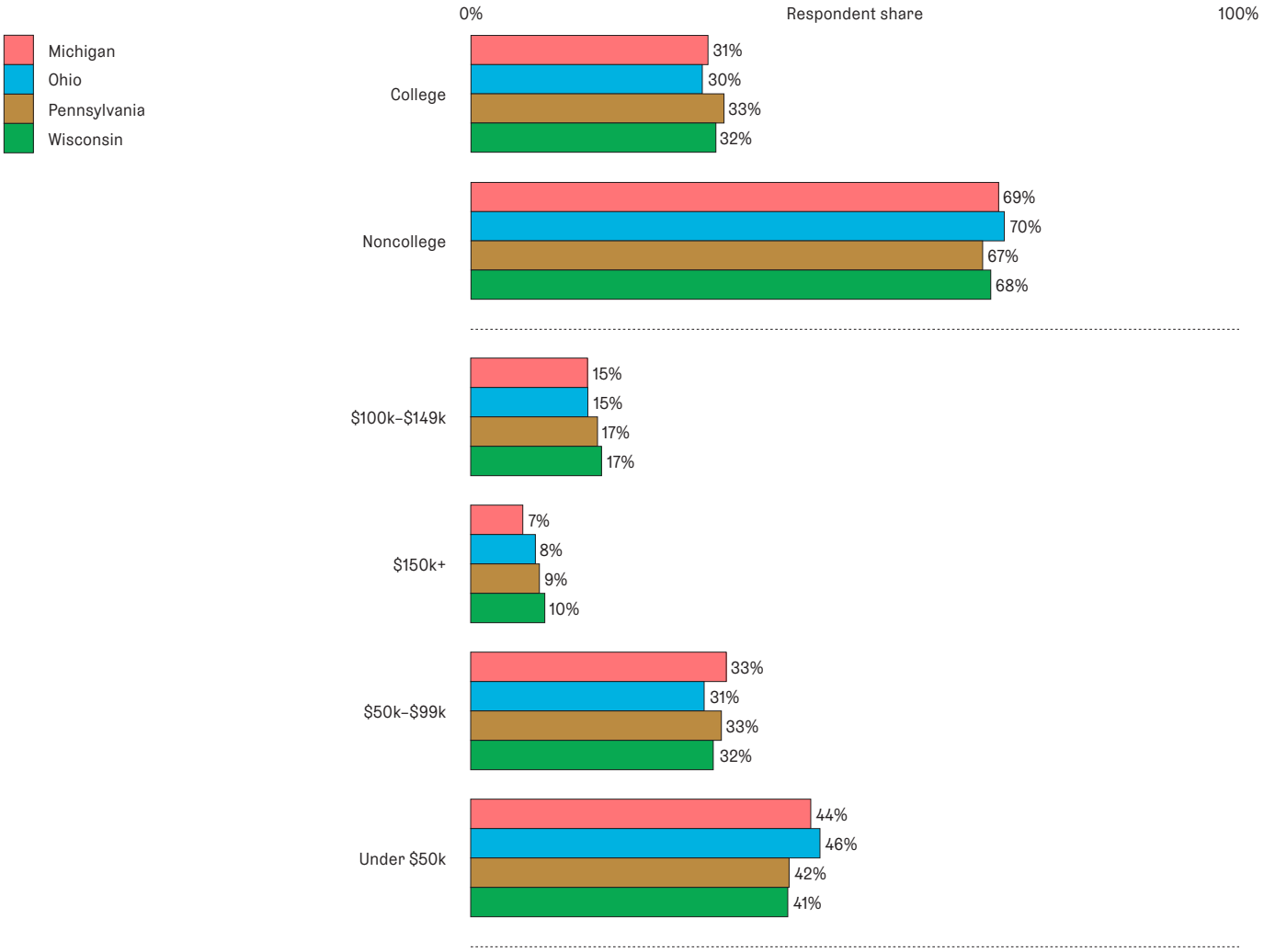
IWPA support by group (cont'd)

FIGURE A13



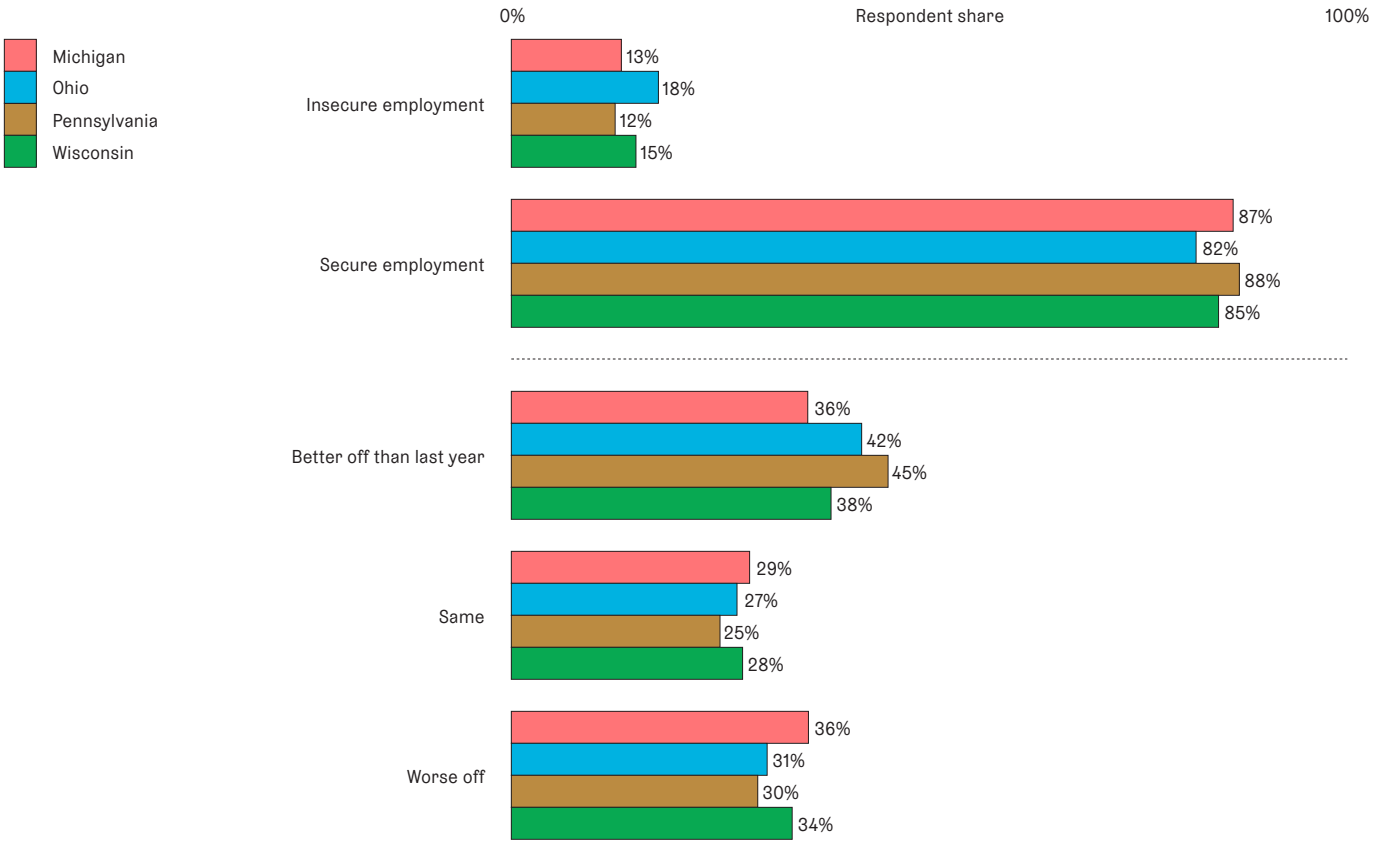
Sample demographics by state and class marker

FIGURE A14



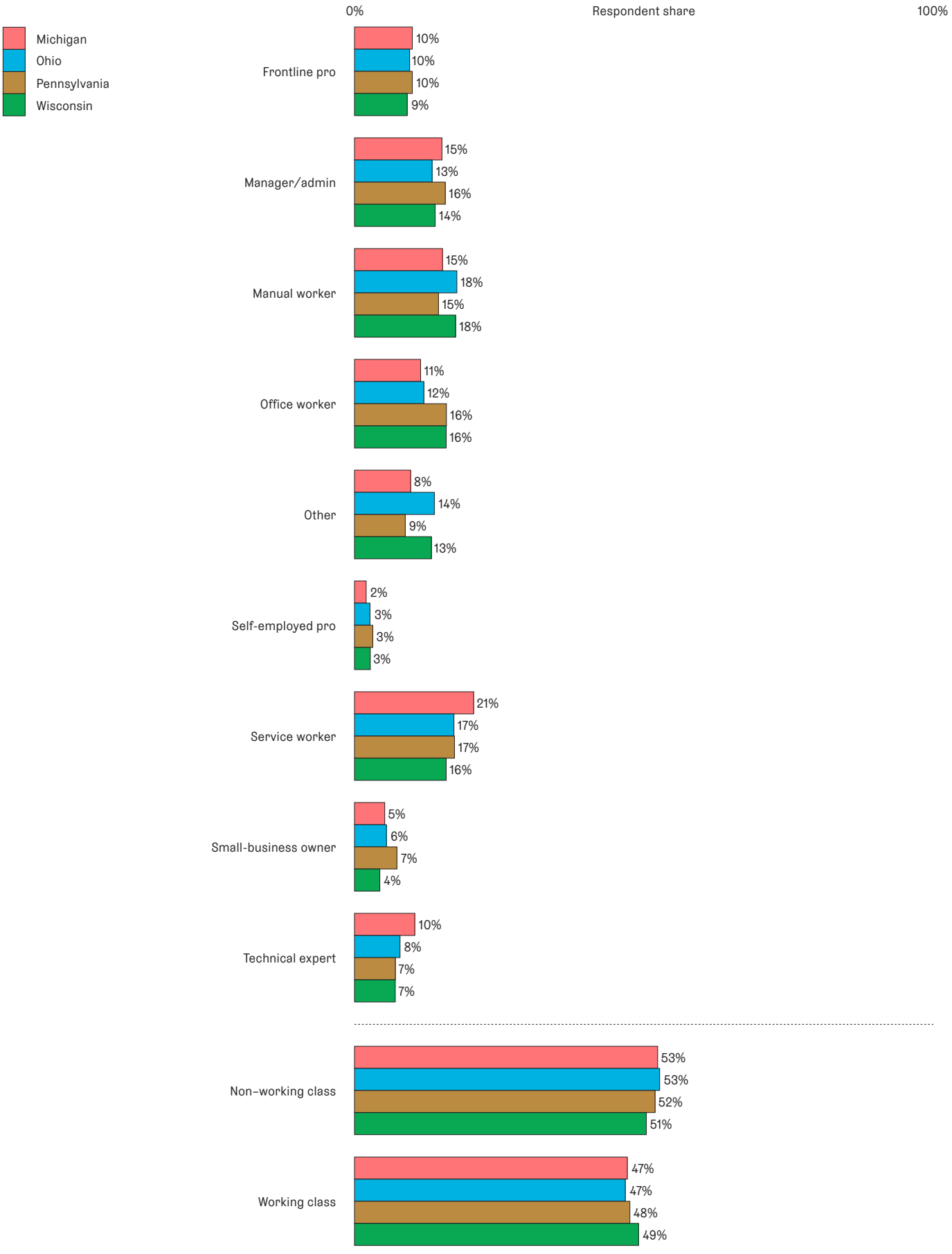
Sample demographics by state and class marker (cont'd)

FIGURE A14



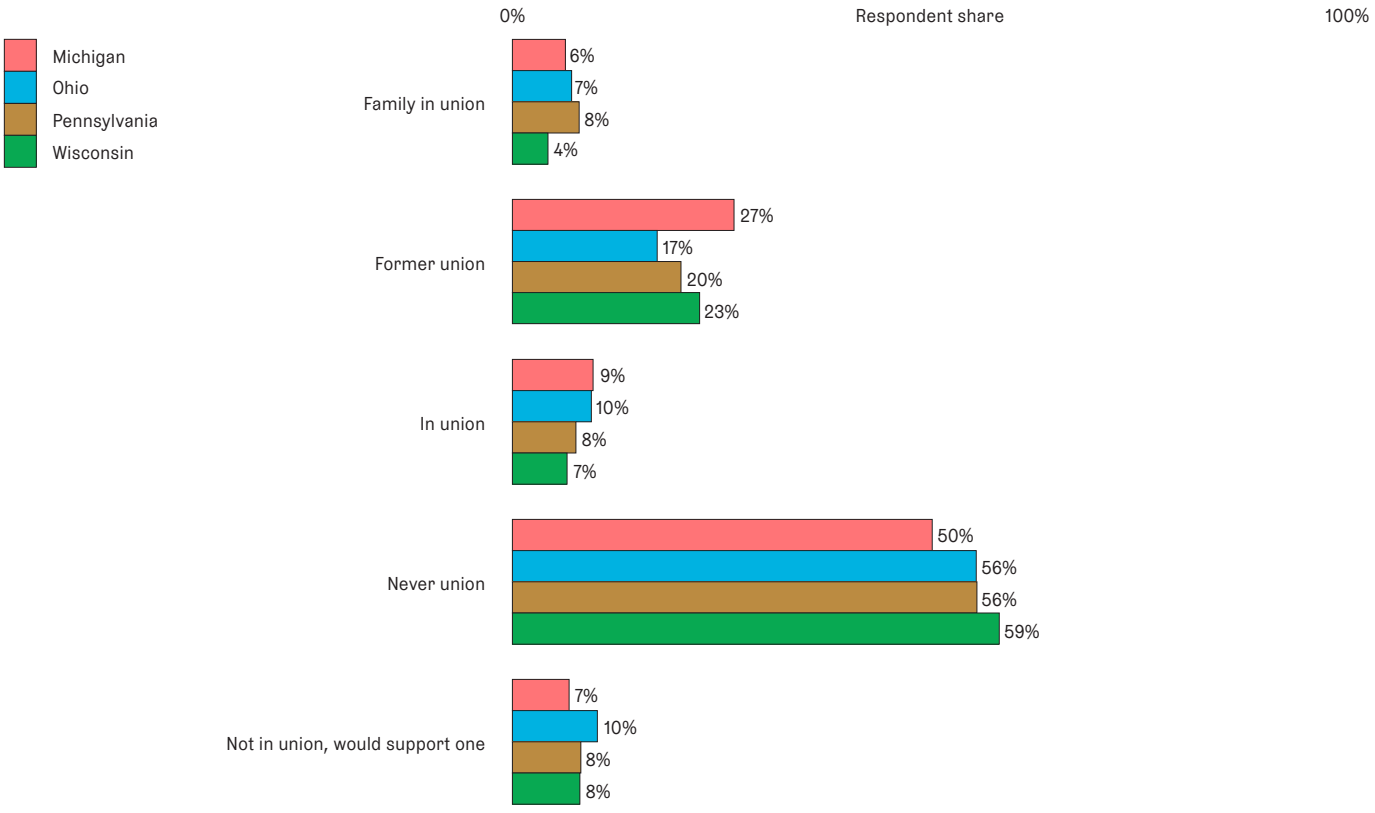
Sample demographics by state and class marker (cont'd)

FIGURE A14



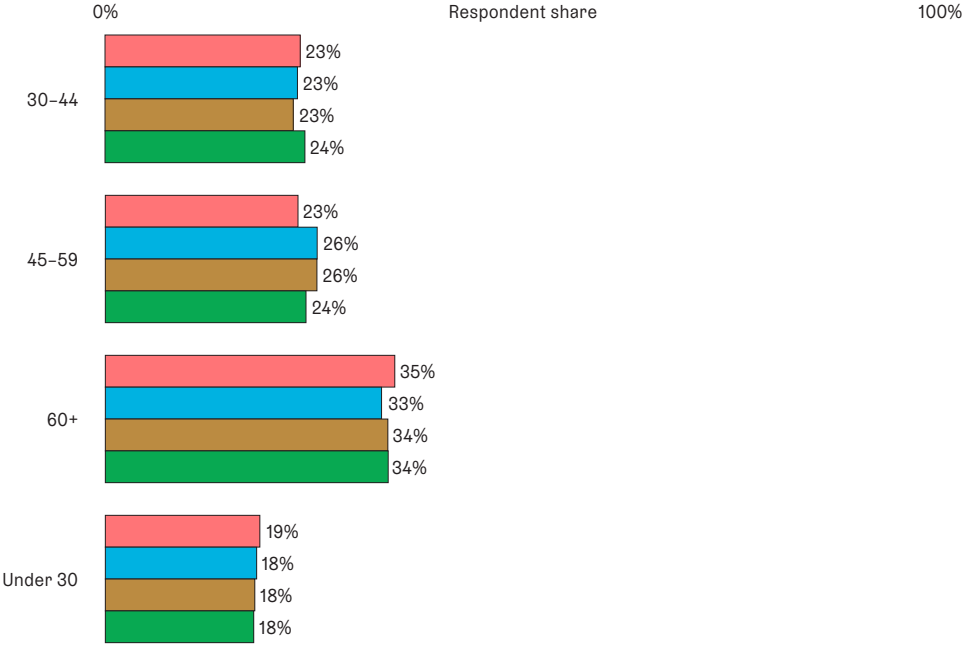
Sample demographics by state and class marker (cont'd)

FIGURE A14



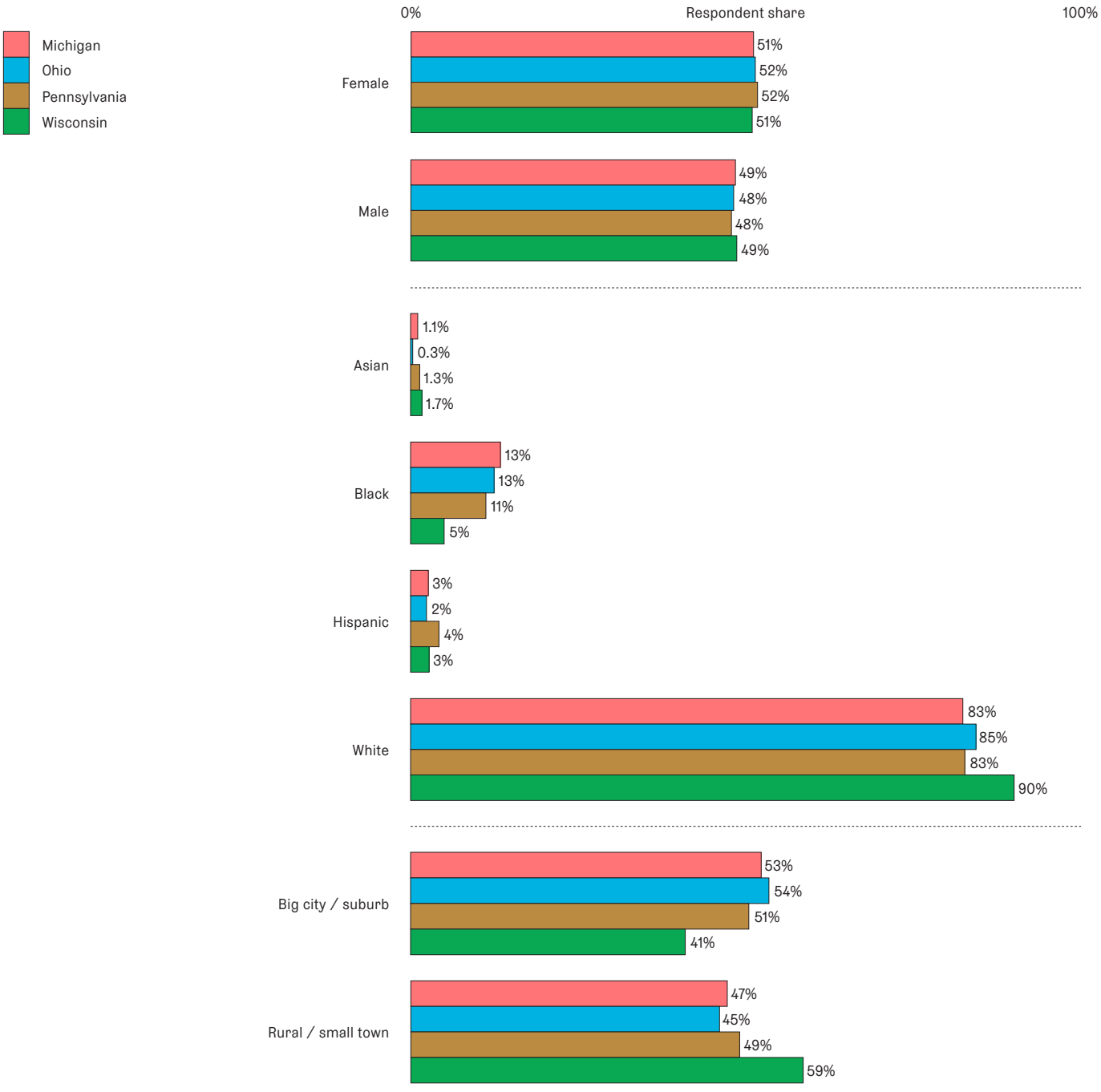
Sample demographics by state and demographic

FIGURE A15



Sample demographics by state and demographic (cont'd)

FIGURE A15

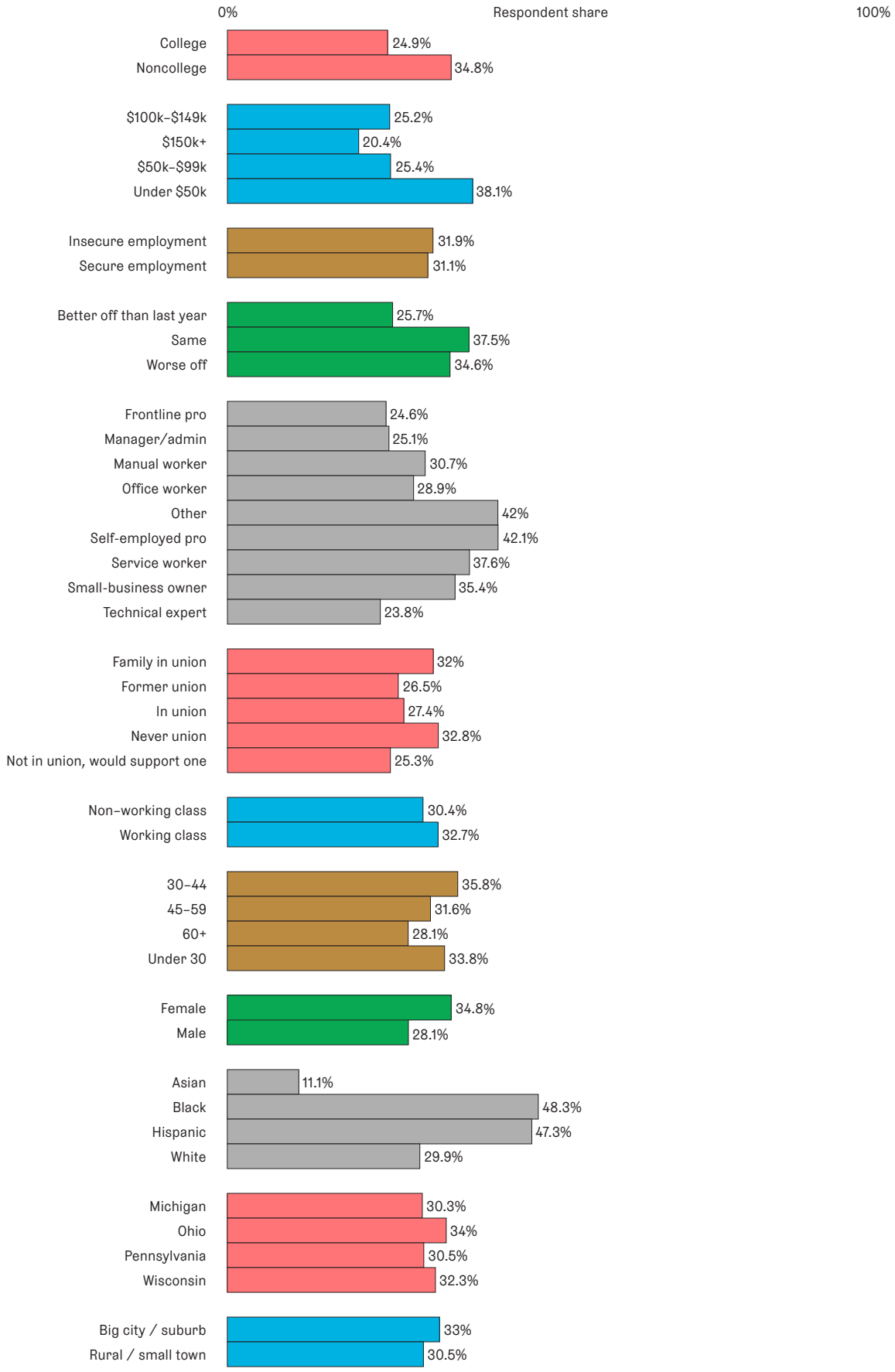


Sample demographics by state and ideology

FIGURE A16

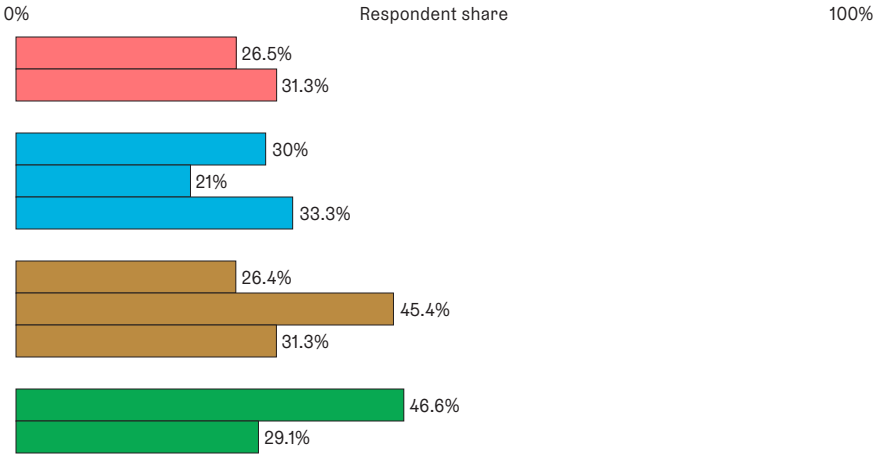
Respondents who neither support nor oppose the ballot measure by group

FIGURE A17



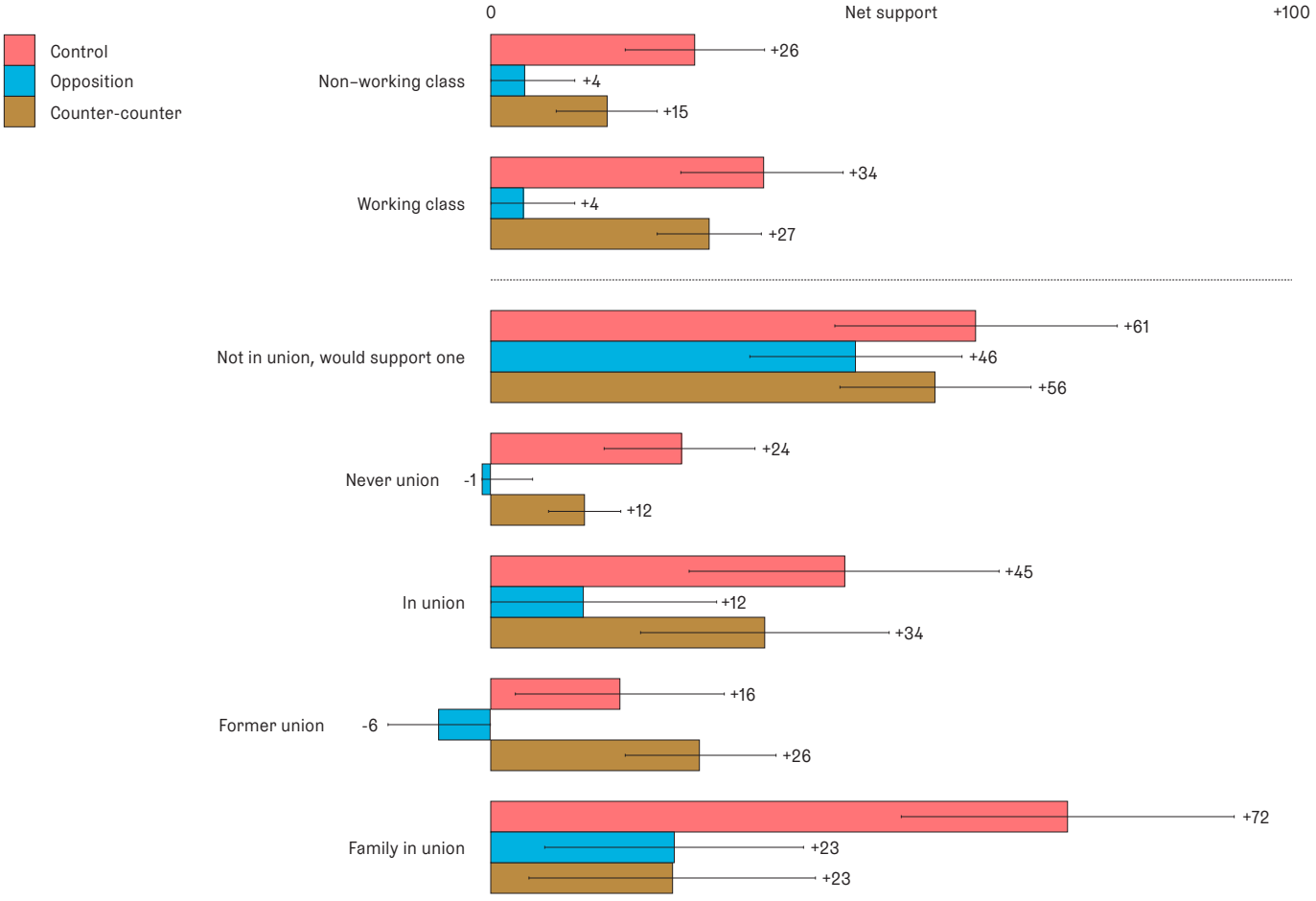
Respondents who neither support nor oppose the ballot measure by group (cont'd)

FIGURE A17



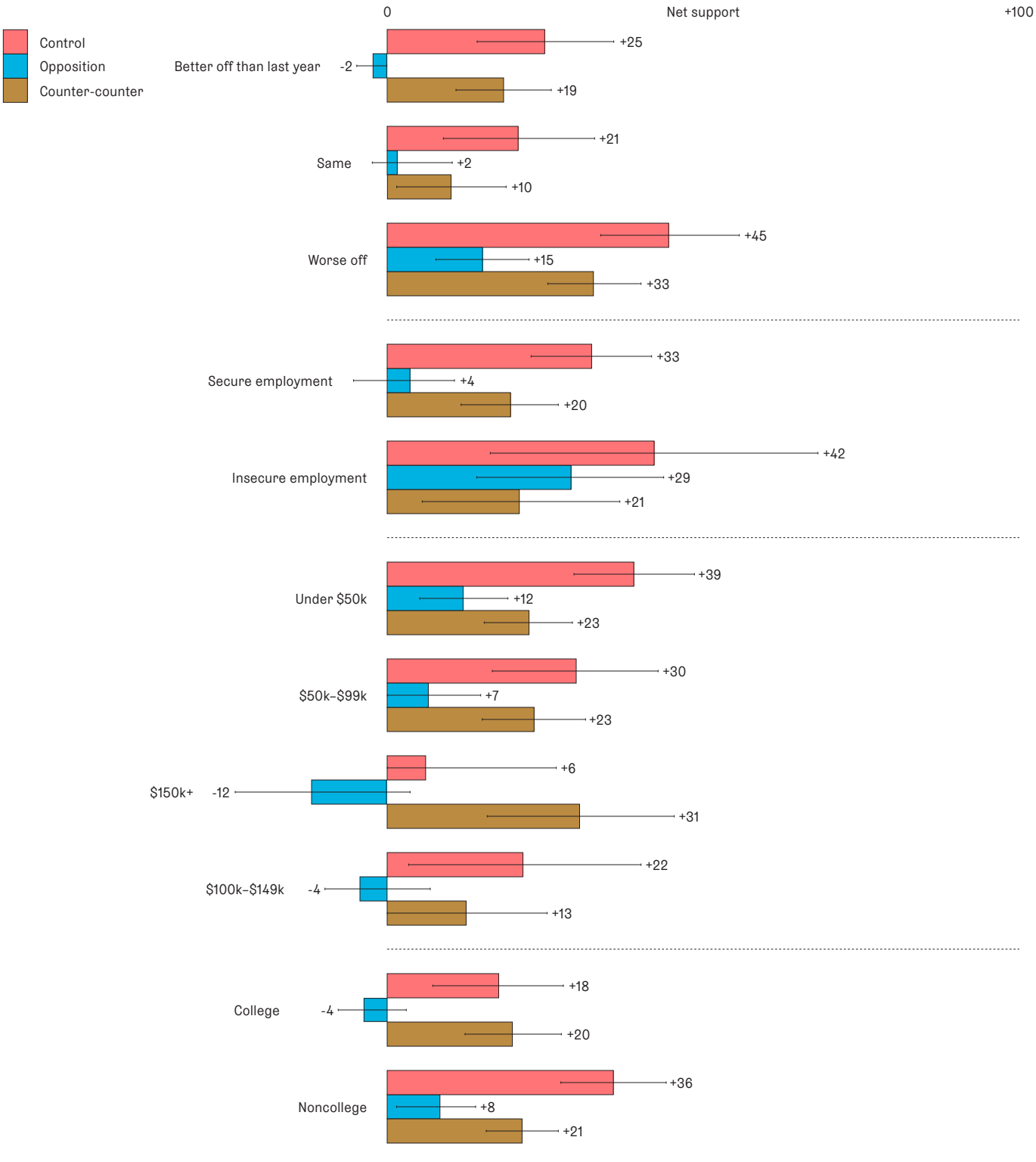
Net support for ballot measure by class marker

FIGURE A18



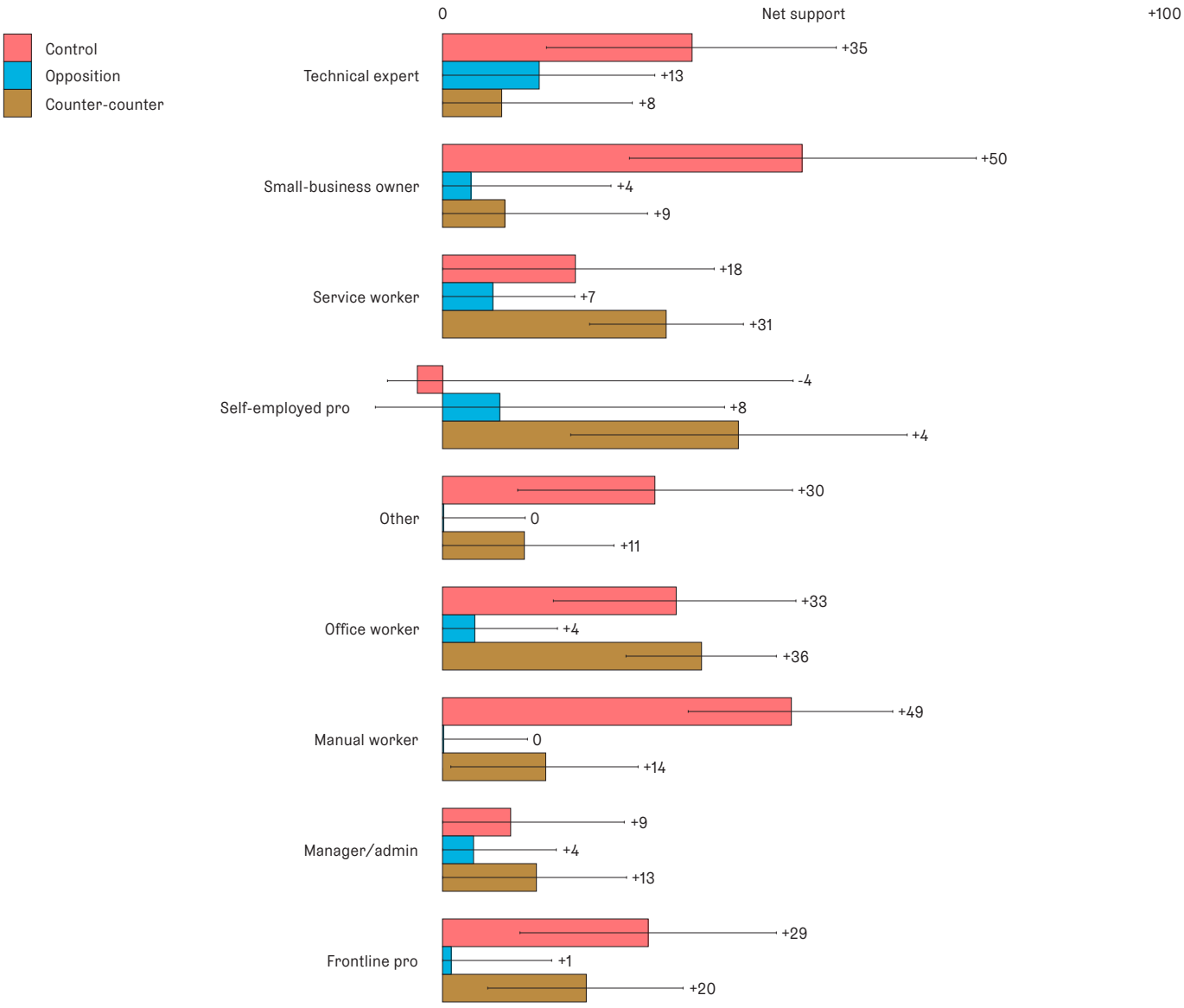
Net support for ballot measure by class marker (cont'd)

FIGURE A18



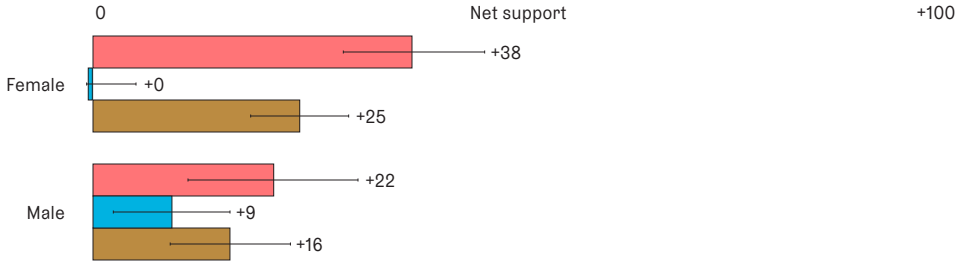
Net support for ballot measure by class marker (cont'd)

FIGURE A18



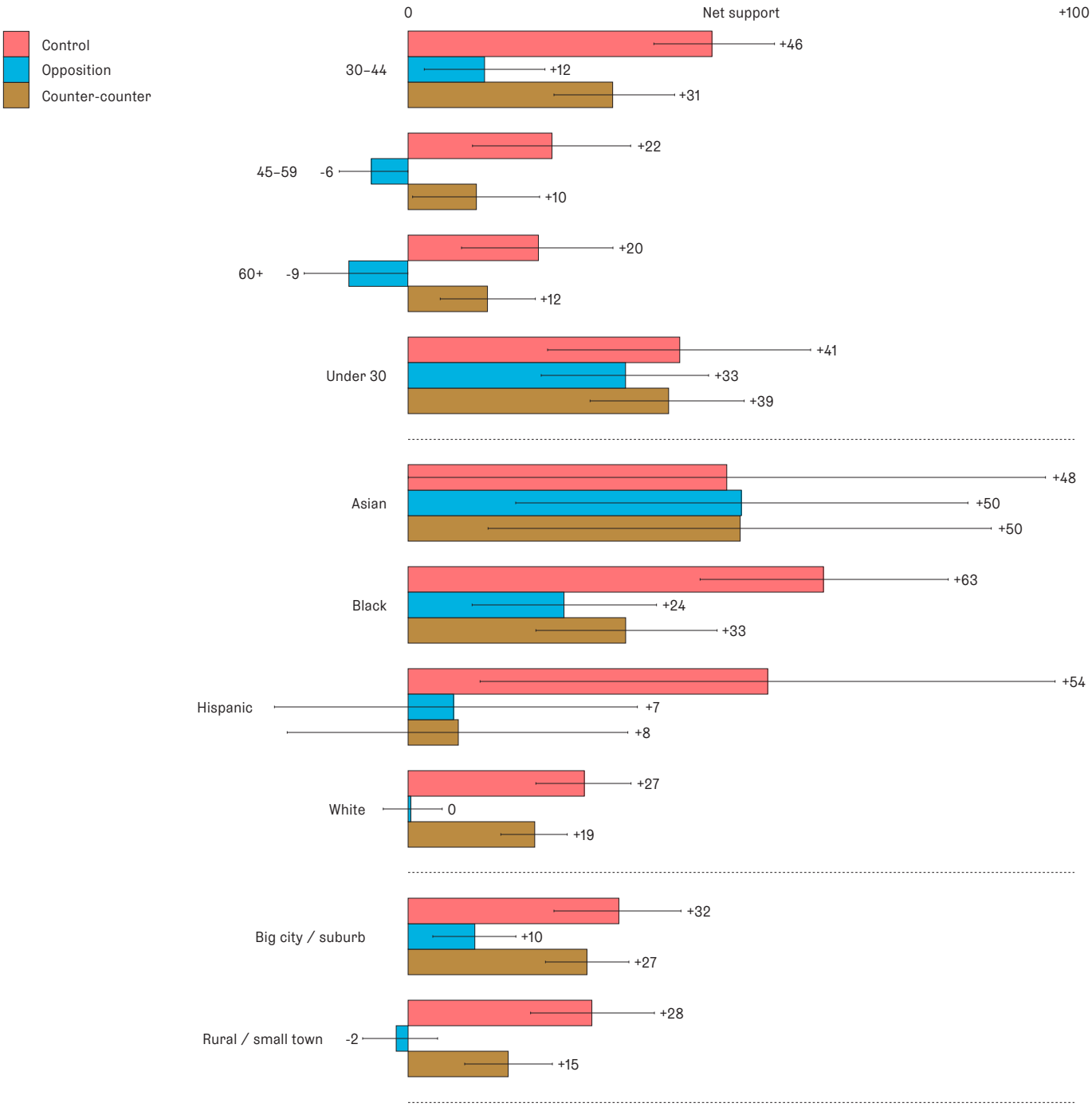
Net support for ballot measure by demographic

FIGURE A19



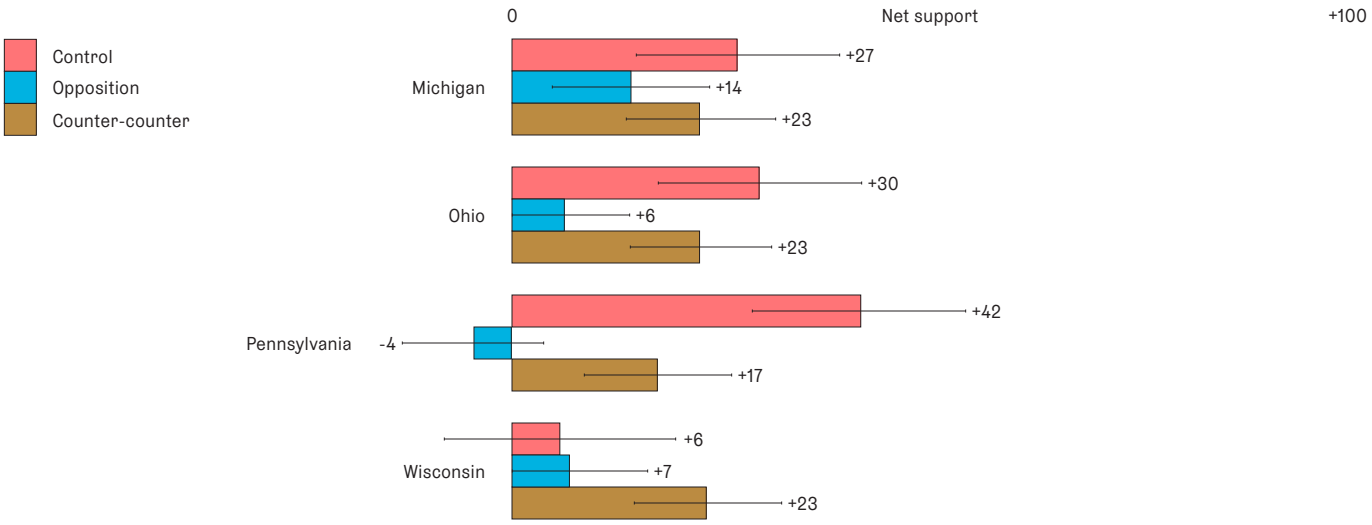
Net support for ballot measure by demographic (cont'd)

FIGURE A19



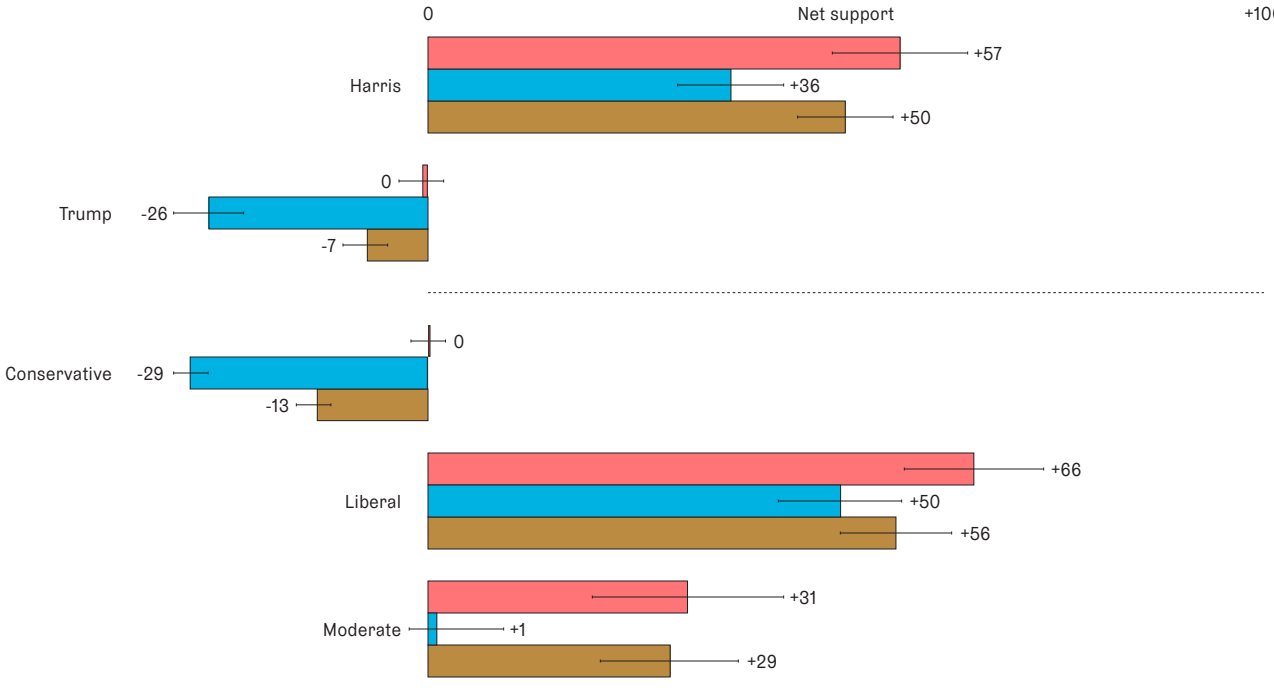
Net support for ballot measure by demographic (cont'd)

FIGURE A19



Net support for ballot measure by ideology

FIGURE A21



Net support for ballot measure by ideology

FIGURE A20