

When Candidates Lead with a “Serious About Safety” Message, it Outperforms Tough on Crime—Especially for Black Voters and Young Voters

TO: Vera Action

FROM: HIT Strategies – Roshni Nedungadi, Ashley Aylward, & Carla Hardy, Pollsters

Following an election cycle in Virginia where the issues of crime and abortion dominated the talking points of political candidates, polling among registered voters in Virginia elucidated the effect of this discussion on voting behavior. Democrats outspent Republicans on ads by \$7.6 million (\$35.2 million versus \$27.6 million, respectively).¹ While Democrats focused their ads on the topic of abortion, Republicans spent heavily in an attempt to make this election about crime and policing. This polling identifies future opportunities to motivate those who are not currently participating in elections to turn out to vote by addressing concerns around crime and public safety.

Key Findings

1. **Democratic ads with a “serious about safety” message have the potential to motivate the communities that have been sitting out of elections at higher rates than usual** – particularly Black voters and young voters.
2. **Virginia voters prefer a more comprehensive approach to crime and public safety**, one which involves fully funding social services, common sense gun laws, and mental health responders in some situations currently handled by the police.
3. **Virginia voters start with tepid trust for both Republicans and Democrats when it comes to making change on public safety and end with higher levels of trust in Democrats after viewing public safety ads from both sides of the aisle**, indicating an opportunity for Democrats to lead with a plan to address voters’ concerns and gain trust.
4. **A comprehensive, “serious about safety” message resonates with and motivates voters more than tough-on-crime Republican ads.** Voters particularly respond to a message about preventing crime before it occurs and providing mental health support for those in crisis.

Overall Findings

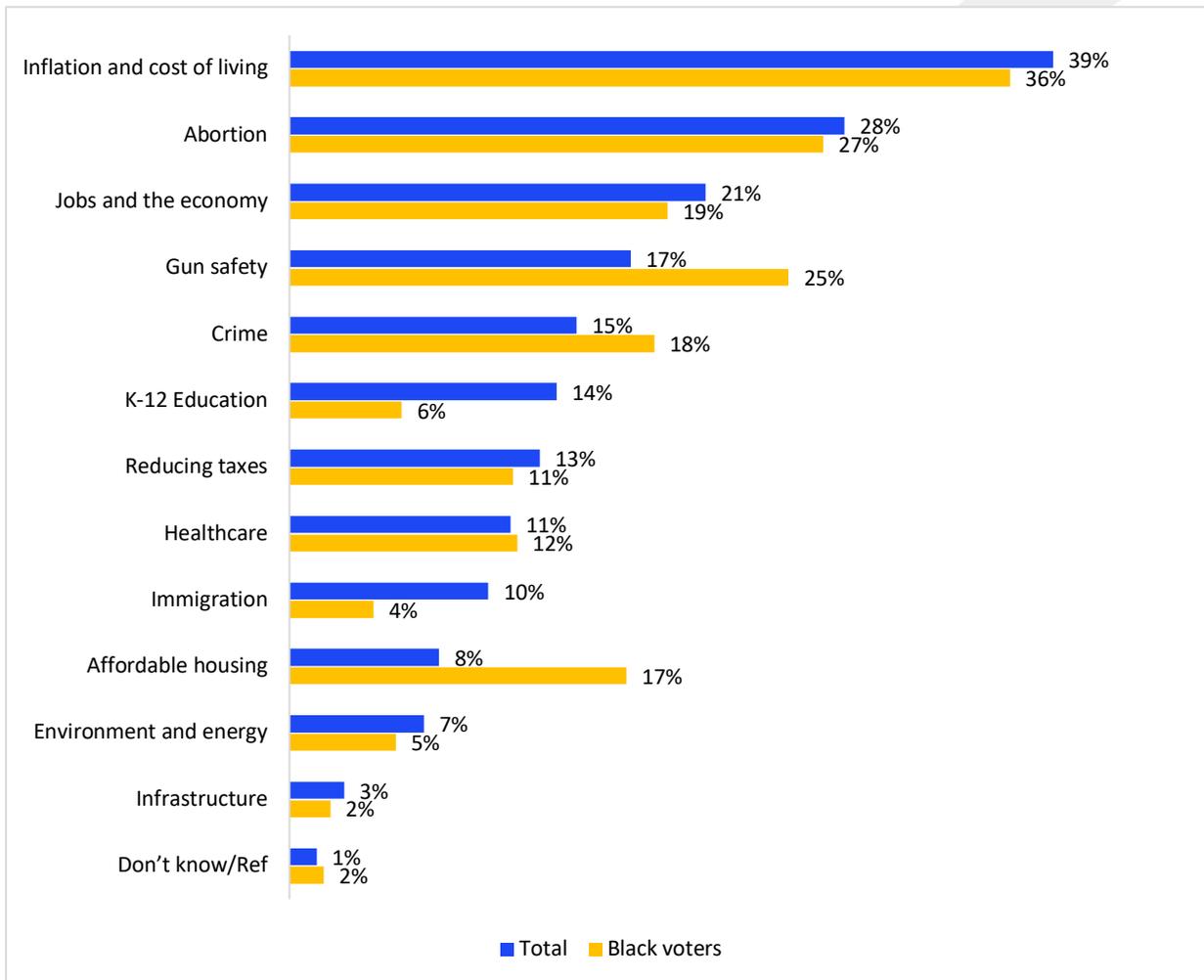
Crime was a second-tier issue for Virginia voters. Top on the list of issues for voters is the economy/jobs, with 27% saying this is their top issue. **9% of Virginia voters say crime is their top issue**, similar to issues like gun violence (10%) and affordable housing (11%). However, when we look at gun violence as a top issue

¹ [Ad Impact/Politico](#)

among demographics, 21% of Black Virginia voters say gun violence is their top issue. This trend also applies to people of color more broadly, with 15% of voters of color saying gun violence is their top issue.

Of those who voted in the 2023 election, when we asked what the top issues influencing their vote were, 15% of voters said crime and 17% of voters said gun safety. **This is higher among Black voters, 18% of whom said crime was the top issue and 25% who said gun safety was the top issue that impacted their decision to vote.** The salience of crime and safety, especially from gun violence, as an issue when specifically thinking about voting behavior underscores just how important having a strong narrative on public safety is for any candidate.

Thinking about your vote decisions, which ONE or TWO of these issues do you feel had the biggest impact on how you decided to vote in the November 7, 2023, election?

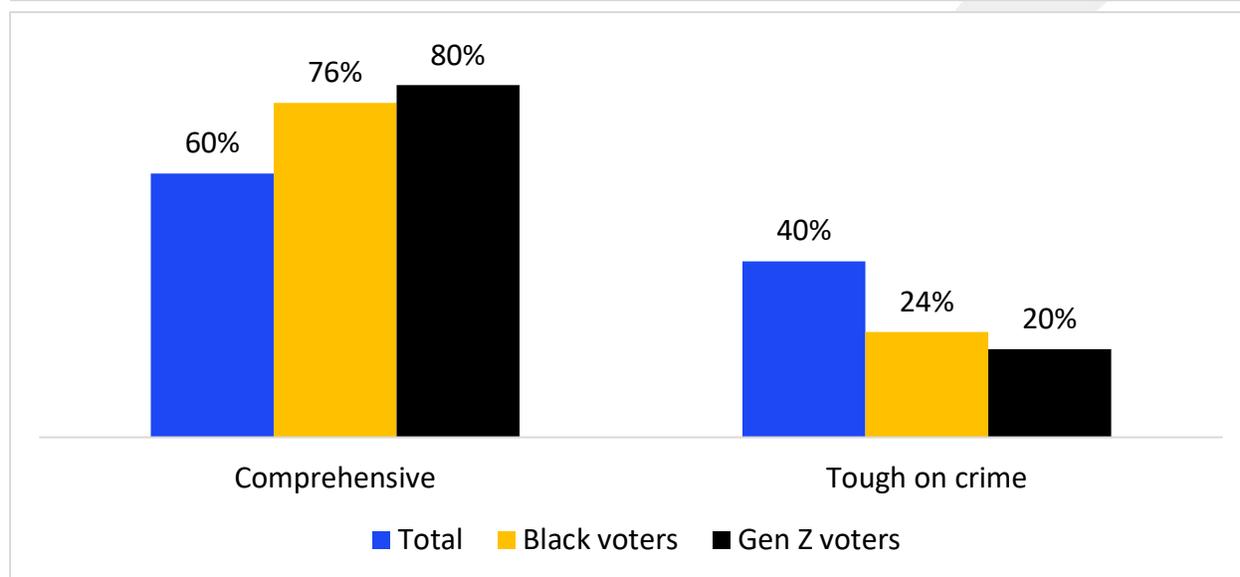


In a head-to-head test, **60% of Virginia voters indicated they preferred a comprehensive approach** to crime and public safety, which involves fully funding things to create safe communities, such as funding for schools, housing, and mental health resources. Only 40% of Virginia voters preferred the “tough on crime” approach in this test. Support for a comprehensive approach to safety is higher among Black voters (76%), young voters aged 18-24 (76%), and voters of color (70%), suggesting that this is the type of response they are looking for on crime from candidates.

Which one of these statements comes closest to your view?

[COMPREHENSIVE] Fully fund things to create safe communities and improve people's quality of life, like good schools, a living wage, and affordable housing, and do more to prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and getting illegal guns off the street.

[TOUGH ON CRIME] Doing more to get tough on crime, like having tougher sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep potentially dangerous people in jail, and providing police more support and resources.



Voters heard from Republicans more on the issue of crime leading up to the election. 41% of voters indicated hearing more from Republicans than Democrats (21%) on this issue. When we asked about the political ads Virginia voters saw leading up to the election, most saw negative ads from Democrats about Republicans and abortion (73%), while 55% saw negative ads from Republicans about Democrats on crime and safety. Black voters saw these ads more, with 65% saying they saw these often, suggesting that they may have been a targeted subgroup for crime ads by the Republicans. Voters in the DC area suburbs also saw these ads more, with 62% saying they saw these often.

When it comes to crime and public safety, voters in Virginia do not have high levels of trust for Democrats or Republicans on this issue. 40% of voters say they trust Democrats on crime and public safety, with 54% saying they do not trust Democrats on this issue. Of the issues we tested, this is the second-lowest issue for Democrats when it comes to trust. While crime and public safety is the issue voters in Virginia trust Republicans the most on, only 47% of voters trust Republicans here, which is only 7 points higher than the level of trust for Democrats. **Black voters have much higher levels of trust for Democrats on this issue,** with 59% trusting Democrats on crime and public safety. Young voters aged 18-24 and Black voters have significantly lower levels of trust for Republicans, with only 29% of young voters and 21% of Black voters trusting Republicans on this issue. In the absence of either party leading on this issue, voters default to their local police departments, who enjoy the highest favorability of any person or group in this polling (67% favorable among all voters).

Response to Candidate Messages

Respondents were shown three ads on the topic of crime and public safety: [one ad for \(1\) Republican Juan Pablo Segura](#); [one ad for \(2\) Democrat Nadarius Clark](#) and a [mock ad by \(3\) Vera Action](#) that simulates a Democratic response to crime that embraces a comprehensive “serious about safety” message.

After each ad, we asked voters if they support the approach shown in the ad and how well it addresses their concerns around crime. The Clark ad (72%) and Vera Action mock ad (73%) addressed voter concerns slightly better than the Segura ad (65%). **Additionally, these two ads did more to move non-voters, with 46% of those who did not vote saying the Clark ad would have made them more likely to vote and 41% saying the same in response to the Vera Action mock ad, while only 29% said that seeing the Segura ad would have made them more likely to vote.**

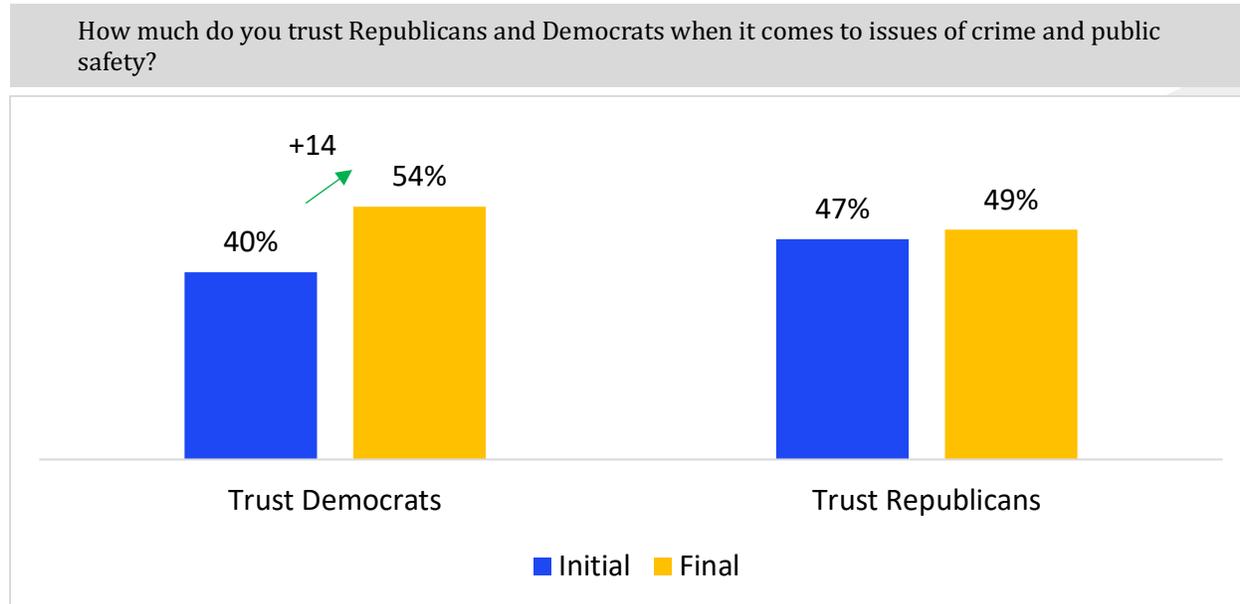


We asked Virginia voters what specific concerns each ad addressed regarding crime and recorded their open-ended responses. For the Segura ad, voters’ responses mostly related to the candidate’s promise to fund police departments or work with them (21%), whereas in the Clark ad, voters overwhelmingly called out increased gun safety (52%). For the Vera Action mock ad, voters felt the message addressed providing support for mental health (20%), having a plan for public safety (19%), and preventing crime before it happens (14%). Since voters named multiple concerns addressed by this ad, this suggests that the Vera Action mock ad depicts a more thorough and nuanced approach to addressing public safety.

After viewing all three ads, voters selected the ad which most aligned with their views. 23% of voters in Virginia selected the Republican Segura ad, 26% selected the Democratic Clark ad, and 34% selected the Democratic Vera Action mock ad. 16% selected none of the above, which is not insignificant. **47% of Black voters selected the Vera Action mock ad, much higher than the total. 48% of voters 18-24 also selected this ad as the one that came closest to representing their views.**

In the final ask of trust for Republicans and Democrats when it comes to crime and public safety, 54% of Virginia voters indicate they trusted Democrats, which is a 14-point increase from the initial ask on this question. Only 49% indicated they trusted Republicans to make change on crime and public safety after watching each ad. Trust is higher for Democrats among women (60%) and Black voters (80%).

36% of Virginia voters shifted to more trust in Democrats to make change on the issue of crime, while 24% of voters shifted to less trust in Republicans to make change on the issue of crime. Of the group that shifted to higher trust in Democrats, they are more likely to be young (52% 18–24-year-olds shifted), young Black voters (46% of Black voters 18-49 shifted), and voters of color making less than 100k (40% shifted).



Based on the shift upward in trust towards Democrats to make change on the issue of crime and public safety, Democrats have an opportunity to lead on public safety and make up a lot of ground with voters. By clearly stating a comprehensive plan that demonstrates they are “serious about safety” by funding community investments to prevent crime, supporting gun safety, and using civilian first responders, Democrats can show they hear voters’ concerns about crime and that they have a comprehensive plan to keep communities safe.

RESEARCH CONTENT CONTACT

If you have any questions, please contact:

Ashley Aylward
ashley@hitstrat.com

Survey Methodology:

These findings are from a proprietary survey conducted by HIT Strategies on behalf of Vera Action. This survey consisted of N= 1000 Virginia registered primary voters and oversamples of N=75 Black registered voters and N=75 Independent voters. The survey was conducted via live phone dialing utilizing both (35%) landline and (35%) cellphone numbers and (35%) text-to-web. The survey fielded from November 16 – November 20, 2023. The margin of error is +/- 3.1%.