

Vera ACTION

**Taking back the narrative on safety,
accountability, and justice in New York**

January 2024

How blood-and-guts headlines propelled Republicans in New York

In New York, voters consistently ranked crime among their top concerns in polls, while voters nationally did not.



By ERIN DURKIN
11/12/2022 07:00 AM EST
Updated: 11/12/2022 10:29 AM EST



New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, left, poses for photographs with New York City Mayor Eric Adams as they gesture to supporters, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021, in New York. [Frank Franklin II/AP Photo]

NEW YORK — Republicans nationwide leaned hard on crime in the midterms — and mostly fell flat.

But it did gangbusters in New York, where a tabloid drumbeat of chaos resonated with voters out in the city's suburbs, helping the GOP claim one open New York House seat and wrest three more from Democratic control.

Advertisement

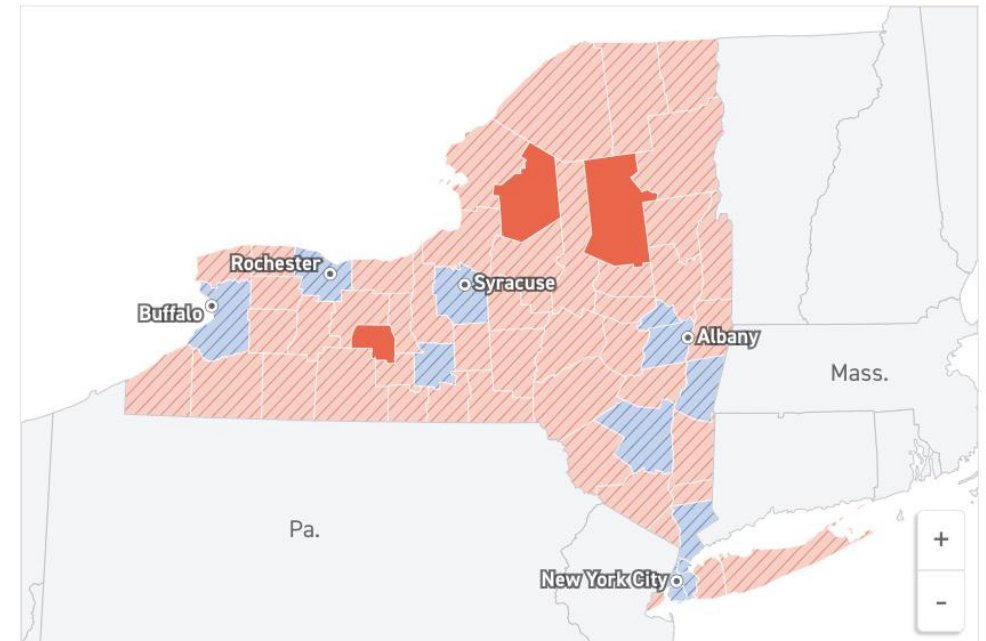
POLITICO

Election results: New York Governor

Last updated Jan. 12, 2023, 12:44 p.m. EST

Leading/Won

Dem's GOP



Candidate	Pct.
✓ Hochul* (D)	52.9%
◆ Zeldin (R)	47.1%

Hochul outspent Zeldin almost 4:1, but Zeldin spent \$15 million on ads about crime—while Hochul spent close to nothing on the issue.

New York-specific polling featured in this deck.

2023 statewide qualitative and quantitative research by Lake Research Partners:

- Quantitative survey of 800 likely 2024 voters across NYS (Nov. 2023, margin of error +/-3.1%)
- Quantitative Survey of 1,000 likely 2024 voters in NYS, with oversamples of Western NY, Long Island, the Hudson Valley, and five House districts (NY 1, 11, 17, 19, and 22) (Aug. 2023, margin of error +/-3.0%)
- Focus groups of likely voters in Long Island and Hudson Valley (July 2023)

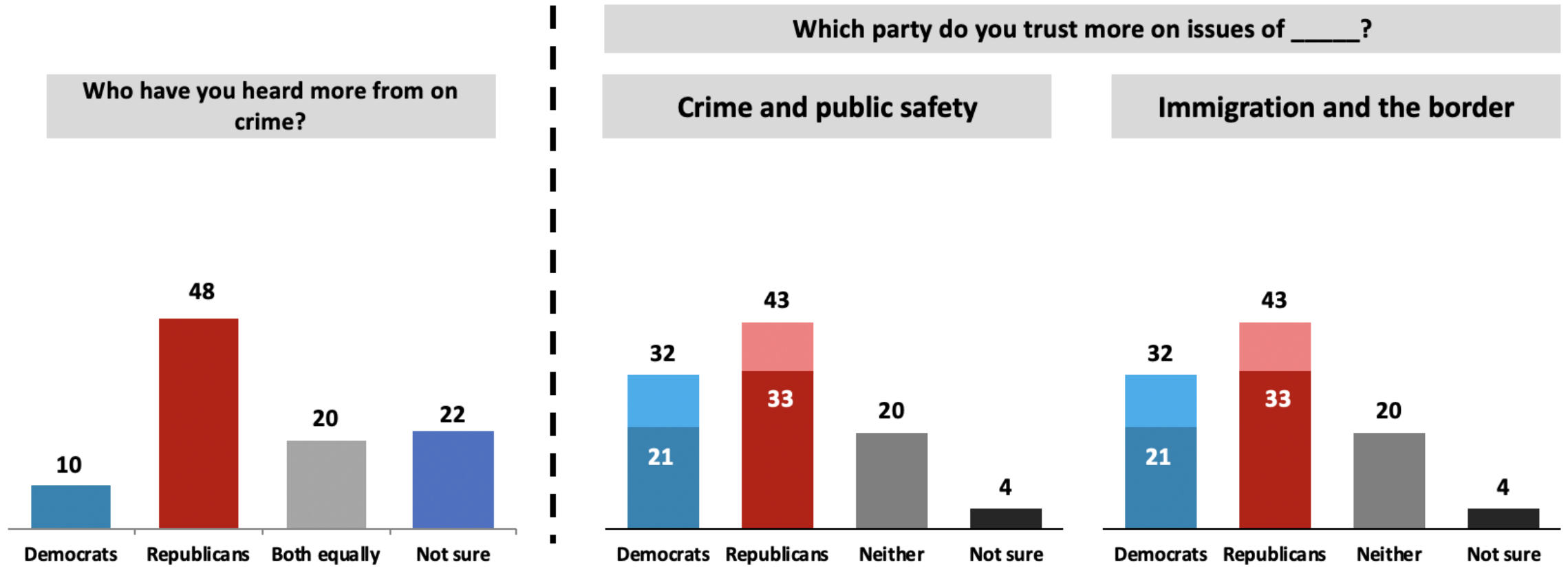
2022 statewide quantitative survey by David Binder Research:

- Quantitative survey of 600 registered voters in the New York City metro area, lower Hudson Valley, and Long Island (New York, Kings, Bronx, Richmond, Queens, Nassau, Suffolk, Westchester, Rockland, and Orange Counties) (April 2022, margin of error +/-4.4%)

Lesson 1.

The problem isn't that "tough on crime" wins. It's the silence in demonstrating elected leaders are "serious about safety."

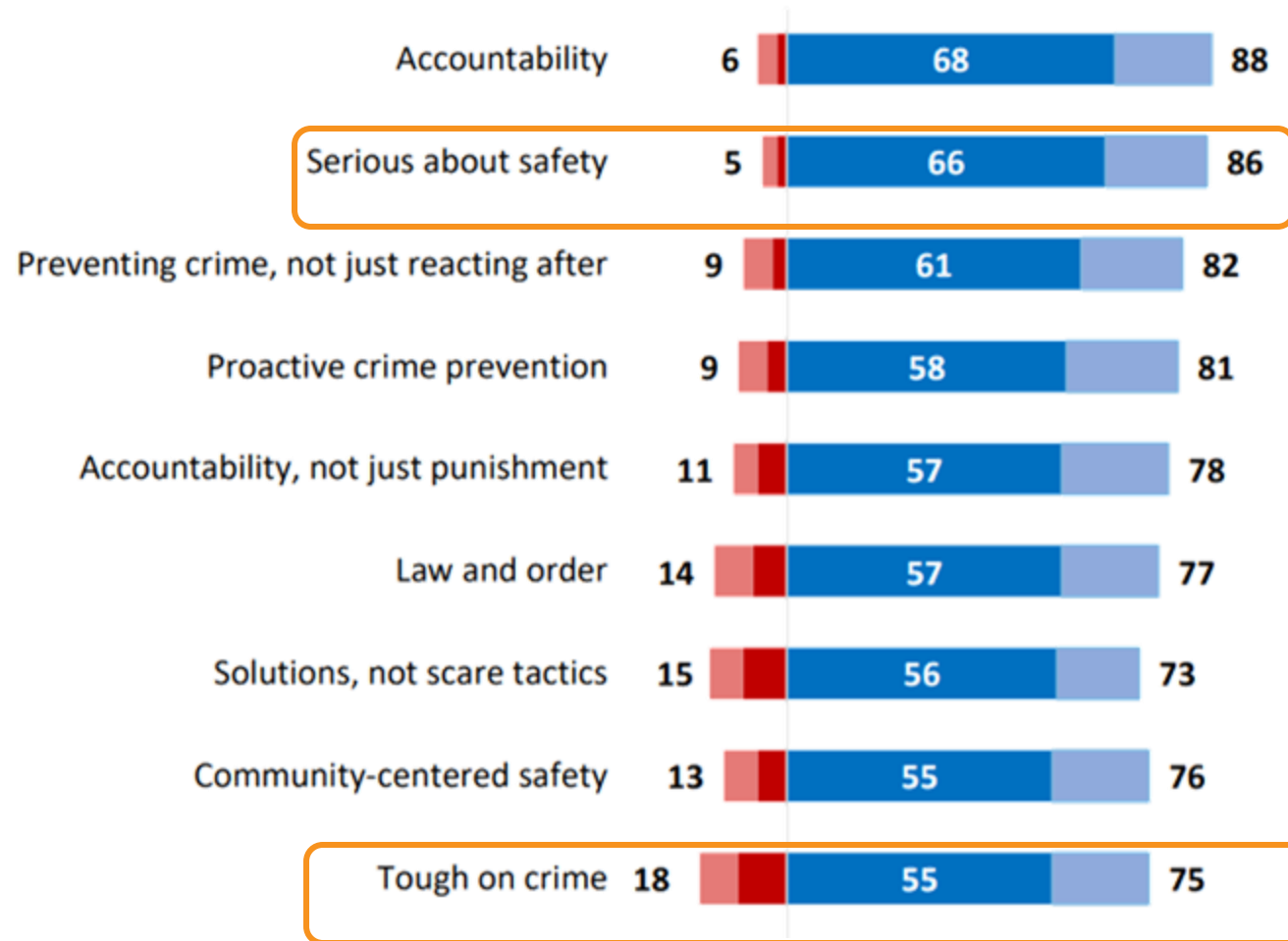
Voters trust Republicans more on issues of crime, safety, and prosperity simply because they hear more from them.



NYS voters favor an approach that is “serious about safety” over “law and order” or “tough on crime.”

“How would you feel if your community took one of these approaches to public safety?”

Favorability of Public Safety Approach



■ Very Favorable ■ Somewhat Favorable
■ Very Unfavorable ■ Somewhat Unfavorable

A concrete example of how owning the narrative makes a difference, even on contentious issues like bail reform.

“Bail reform in New York ended cash bail for low-level misdemeanors and nonviolent felonies. **Before bail reform, our court system criminalized poverty**, creating a system where the wealthy were free to go because they could afford to pay bail and gain release, but if you were poor you would go to jail. There is a lot of misinformation about how bail reform works in New York. Many judges, police officers, prosecutors, and public defenders continue to support the bail reform laws because they know that **judges can and do still set bail and detain people facing serious and violent charges, and those who commit crime are still held accountable.**”

	Support pre-explanation	Support post-explanation
Overall	25%	44% (+19)
White	26%	42% (+16)
Black	24%	50% (+26)
Latino	25%	47% (+22)
New York City	30%	52% (+22)
NYC suburbs	20%	42% (+22)
Western New York	28%	43% (+15)
Hudson Valley	21%	32% (+11)
Independents	13%	39% (+26)

Lesson 2.

Flip the script from crime to safety. Get off the opposition's "tough" or "soft" on crime playing field and onto your own by owning a message of "serious about safety."

Here is a typical "tough on crime" message that Republicans in NY, and some Democrats, lead with.

"I will make hard-working, law-abiding citizens the priority, and end the revolving door that releases violent criminals right back onto the very streets they committed their crimes on. I will make prosecutors do their jobs and enforce all the laws. I will fund the police and provide resources to rebuild the ranks of departments who have lost officers due to a lack of support and low morale. I will stand up to Democrats, who have allowed repeat criminals out of jail through bail reform and want to defund the police, and I will restore law and order in New York."

Responding with a "serious about safety" message performs just as well as a "tough on crime" response.

GOP ATTACK:

I will make hard-working, law-abiding citizens the priority, and end the revolving door that releases violent criminals right back onto the very streets they committed their crimes on. I will make prosecutors do their jobs and enforce all the laws. I will fund the police and provide resources to rebuild the ranks of departments who have lost officers due to a lack of support and low morale. I will stand up to Democrats, who have allowed repeat criminals out of jail through bail reform and want to defund the police, and I will restore law and order in New York.

42/43%

TOUGH ON CRIME RESPONSE:

I am committed to keeping communities safe and reducing crime. I support giving police more funding so there are more police on the ground and in communities. I want to give police and prosecutors the tools to solve and prosecute homicides and other violent crimes. I support speedy processing of rape kits to help solve rape cases, and enforcing laws to protect women from domestic abusers. I will make sure repeat violent offenders and people committing crimes with guns do not get early release from prison. I will support strict penalties for convicted drug dealers to stop the flow of drugs into our communities.

45%

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO SAFETY RESPONSE:

I stand for safety, accountability, and justice. I will make communities safer with real solutions that prevent crime before it happens by investing in good schools, affordable housing, treatment for mental health and drug addiction, and well-paying jobs. I will break the cycle of crime by holding people accountable when they violate the laws and build a just system that treats everyone fairly. I will support police who put their lives on the line everyday, while also holding them accountable if they abuse their power or break the law. I will get illegal guns off the street and focus police resources on solving the most serious cases.

47%

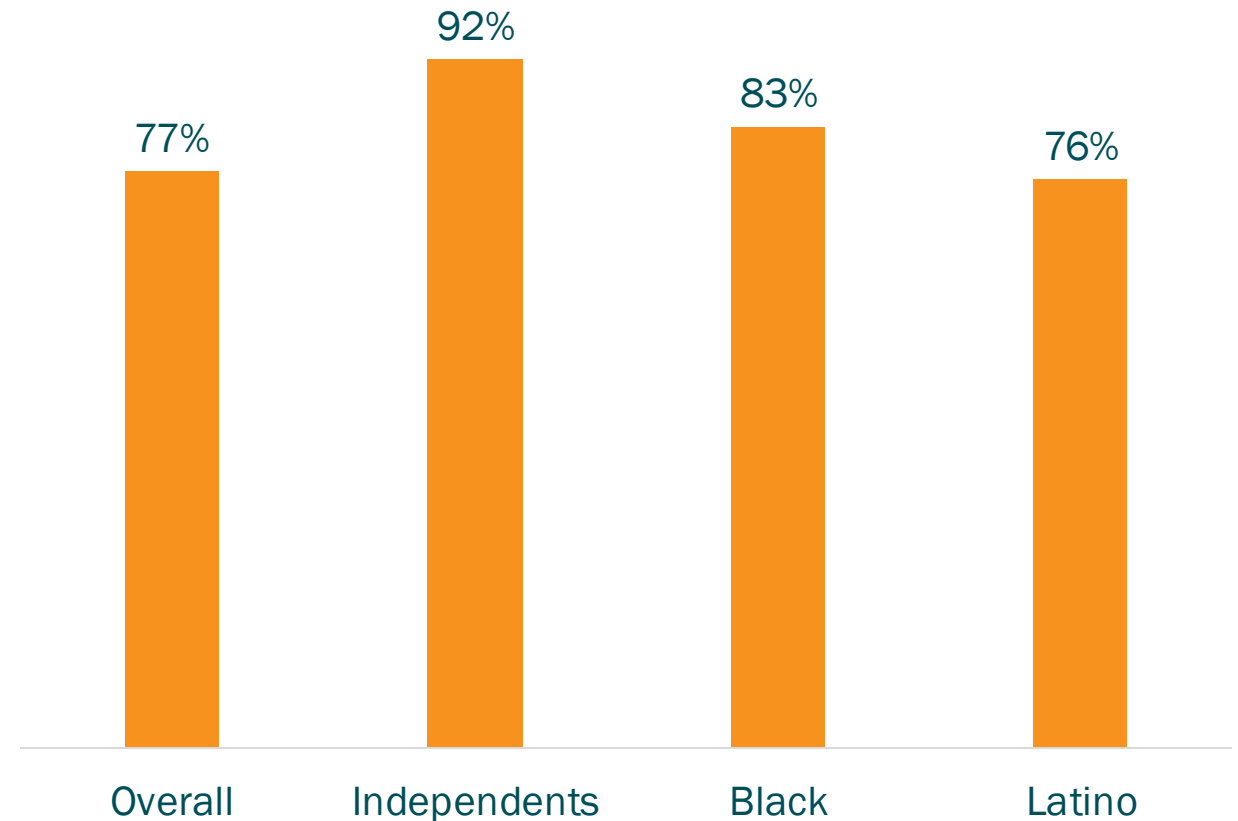
The comprehensive message of "serious about safety" performs better with voters of color and Independents.

	"Comprehensive approach"		"Tough on crime"	
	Support for Democrat	Support for Republican	Support for Democrat	Support for Republican
Overall	47%	43%	45%	42%
White	44%	49%	43%	46%
Black	72%	9%	49%	22%
Latino	62%	17%	50%	39%
New York City	54%	32%	53%	28%
NYC suburbs	41%	52%	42%	49%
Western New York	42%	47%	53%	45%
Hudson Valley	50%	41%	30%	55%
Independents	31%	53%	22%	46%

A comprehensive "serious about safety" message also wins with voters who rank crime as a top priority.

"The issue of crime is important to my vote"

	Comprehensive response	"Tough on crime" response
Overall	47%	45%
Independents	31%	22%
Black	72%	49%
Latino	62%	50%



Lesson 3.

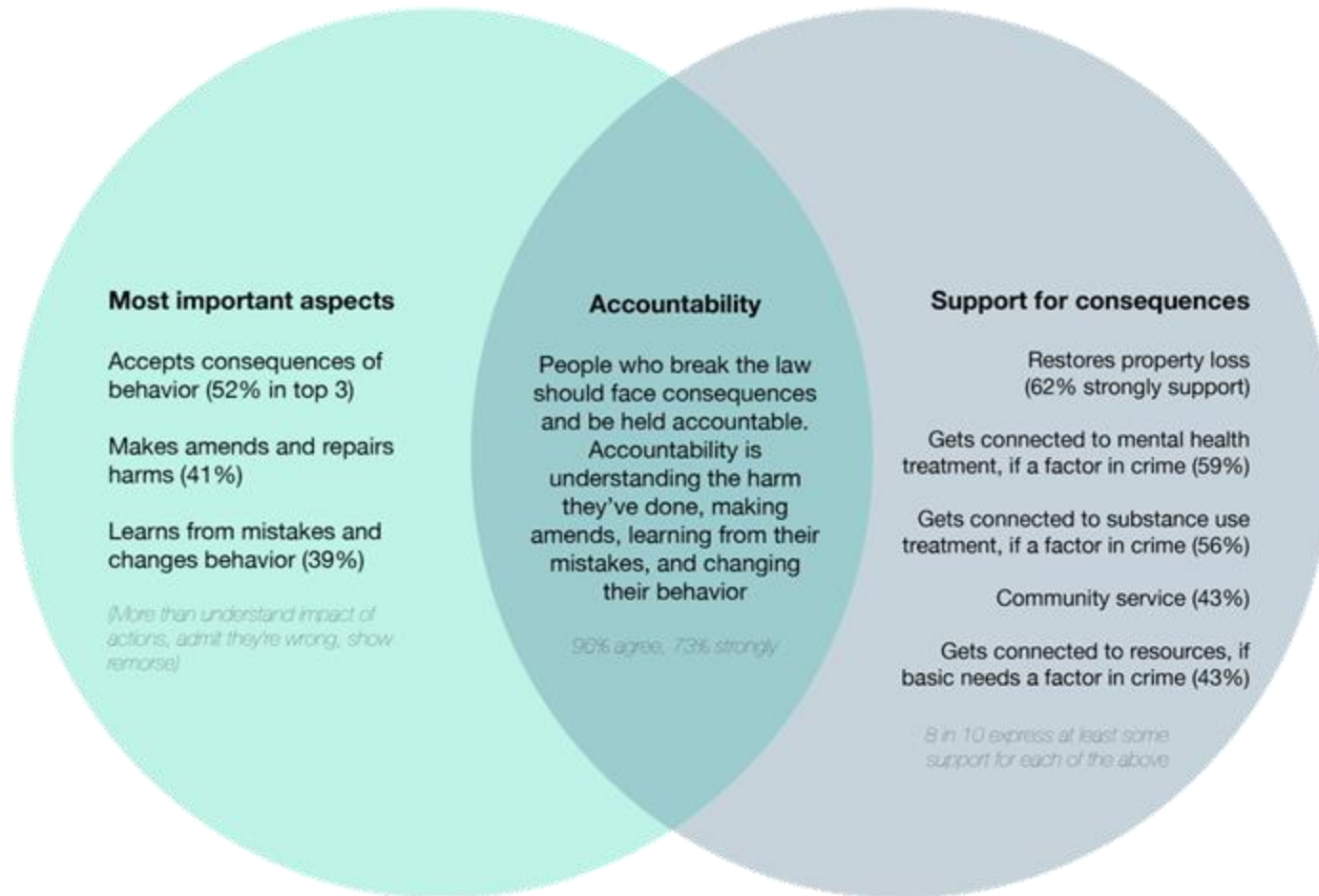
Own a "serious about safety" message by addressing the urgency of responding to crime and stopping violence, as well as the necessity of investing in prevention.

What it means in practice to be “serious about safety.”

- Lead with safety
- Talk about preventing and breaking cycles of crime
- Include immediate and long-term solutions
- Center accountability

“I stand for safety, accountability, and justice. I will make communities safer with real solutions that prevent crime before it happens by investing in good schools, affordable housing, treatment for mental health and drug addiction, and well-paying jobs. I will break the cycle of crime by holding people accountable when they violate the laws and build a just system that treats everyone fairly. I will support police who put their lives on the line everyday, while also holding them accountable if they abuse their power or break the law. I will get illegal guns off the street and focus police resources on solving the most serious cases.”

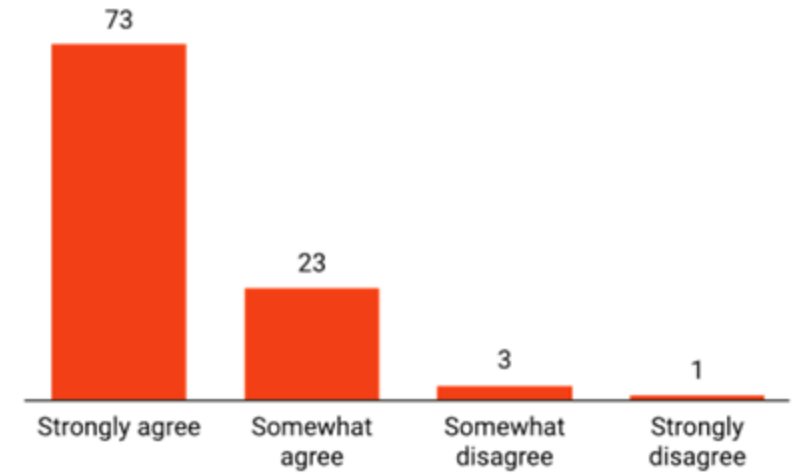
Centering accountability means focusing on repair and change rather than punishment.



Do you agree or disagree:

People who break the law should face consequences and be held accountable. Accountability is understanding the harm they've done, making amends, learning from their mistakes, and changing their behavior.

N = 1,396



Lesson 4.

A "serious about safety" message draws even or outperforms a "tough on crime" one even when it comes to contentious issues like bail reform, transit safety, Raise the Age, immigration, and policing.

Countering bail attacks with accountability draws even overall and wins over NYC, Black, and Independent voters.

TOUGH ON CRIME BAIL ROLLBACKS:

Because of bail reform in New York, criminals are no longer being held accountable for their actions. Even if they do get arrested, repeat offenders often wind up right back on the street within the same day, and face little to no consequences for their actions, because judges aren't allowed to keep them in jail. We need to end bail reform and go back to the way things were – when our communities were safer, and criminals faced consequences for their actions.

ACCOUNTABILITY:

We need both personal accountability and accountability in the criminal justice system. Before bail reform, New York had a two-tiered system: the rich evaded accountability by buying their freedom, while the poor languished in jail. Bail reform means people aren't punished for poverty and, in serious cases, judges can and do still set bail and hold people in jail. With bail reform, people still face consequences that require making amends and changing their behavior. That is the kind of accountability we need—not rolling back bail reform.

	Tough on crime	Accountability
Overall	43%	43%
White	47%	40%
Black	35%	54%
Latino	43%	40%
New York City	32%	54%
NYC suburbs	48%	35%
Western New York	51%	39%
Hudson Valley	46%	43%
Independents	30%	43%

NYC residents favor adding trained mental health providers over increased police presence on the MTA.

MORE POLICE:

We've all seen the distressing clips of innocent New Yorkers and tourists getting violently attacked unprovoked on the subway. People just want to commute without the constant fear for their lives, whether they are trying to get to work on time for navigating the city. We need to increase the number of police patrolling the transit system, and impose stricter penalties for lawbreakers to ensure our subways become safe, reliable, and available for all.

TRAINED SPECIALISTS:

Every New Yorker deserves a safe commute, and hearing about random attacks on the subway is scary. But despite headlines, the NYPD reports that transit crime is actually below pre-pandemic levels. The mayor's office has repeatedly increased the number of police on the subway, but the headlines don't stop. Instead of paying cops overtime to mostly catch fare evasion, we should be paying the right first responders to handle crises, like using trained specialists who can defuse a situation and connect people to treatment.

	Trained specialists	More police
Overall	43%	46%
White	42%	49%
Black	49%	29%
Latino	53%	36%
New York City	52%	38%
NYC suburbs	35%	54%
Western New York	43%	47%
Hudson Valley	40%	47%
Independents	24%	53%

While the influx of new immigrants is challenging, a message of inclusion draws even with an exclusion one.

GOP ATTACK:

The sanctuary city of New York, which invites immigrants to come regardless of their status, has hit a breaking point with new migrants. They are spilling onto the sidewalks, and even into public schools and the suburbs. Democrats have slashed paychecks for cops and firefighters to pay for their stay. We can't handle this influx of arrivals who bring dangerous drugs and crime. It's time to end sanctuary status and send out the message – we don't have room for a flood of illegal immigrants, and we aren't an unlimited haven with unlimited benefits paid for by taxpayers.

45/46%

DEFICIT FOCUS:

Although our compassion is limitless, our resources are not. New York values the contributions of immigrants, but the sudden influx of 110,000 asylum seekers poses an overwhelming challenge. A clear resolution remains elusive, and every community in the state will feel the effects before we manage to devise a solution. The arrival of these migrants has imposed a significant financial burden that the state cannot bear, and New Yorkers deserve better. It is time for the federal government to take action by temporarily closing the southern border and providing financial aid and resources to New York until the situation is under control.

43%

ASSET FOCUS:

Immigration has always been essential to our economy, our culture, and our community. We can address the influx of immigrant newcomers, but we must be unified. We need the federal government, state, and local partners to come together to help immigrant newcomers gain work authorization, stable housing, and be able to contribute to our society. There are currently more job openings in New York State than there are workers to fill them – these new arrivals can help fill those jobs. Investing in safety and stability for all New Yorkers, including new immigrants, results in stronger families, lower crime, more tax revenue, and a better economy for everyone.

44%

A message of inclusion outperforms exclusion with key voting blocs, including Latino and suburban voters.

	Asset focus		Deficit focus	
	Support for Democrat	Support for Republican	Support for Democrat	Support for Republican
Overall	44%	46%	43%	45%
White	43%	51%	42%	48%
Black	50%	24%	56%	25%
Latino	54%	27%	42%	38%
New York City	52%	35%	51%	33%
NYC suburbs	43%	48%	39%	57%
Western New York	45%	50%	36%	50%
Hudson Valley	31%	59%	39%	44%
Independents	10%	65%	24%	53%

On Raise the Age, a message of "invest in making the law work" draws even or wins with most voters.

REPUBLICAN "ROLL BACK RTA":

It is time to change the flawed "Raise the Age" laws that allow 16 and 17 year olds to commit violent crimes and walk free, often leading them to commit even more violent crimes. Law enforcement experts have repeatedly explained that these laws have directly led to an increase in youth violent crime and made it more difficult for the police to protect the public because they can't hold violent youth offenders accountable. While we can all agree that young people who make mistakes should be given second chances, teenagers who commit violent crimes or carry guns must face adult consequences.

DEMOCRAT "INVEST IN WHAT WORKS":

The "Raise the Age" law lets the courts treat kids like kids when they make a mistake or break the law, because we understand that kids are still growing and their brains don't weigh risks the way adults do. Gun violence among teenagers is a problem in our community, but blaming the wrong cause means we miss the right solutions. Instead of rolling back a commonsense law, we need more gun violence prevention, programs that strengthen school support, jobs, and mental health and drug treatment services. We need to invest in solutions that are proven to work instead of locking up our kids and throwing away the key.

	Invest in what works	Roll back the law
Overall	48%	42%
White	47%	45%
Black	65%	19%
Latino	44%	40%
New York City	53%	36%
NYC suburbs	45%	46%
Western New York	44%	51%
Hudson Valley	46%	40%
Independents	31%	46%

On policing, a support and accountability message wins, particularly when supported by nonpartisan messengers.

CANDIDATE A ATTACK:

My opponent supports the radical left and defunding the police. Crime is at an all-time high, but the other candidate constantly criticizes the police, voices support for policies that stop the police from doing their jobs, and wants to allow repeat criminals out of jail through so-called “bail reform.” The other candidate is opposed by police unions because they want to take away resources from our brave officers and leave them defenseless in the line of duty. Our cities, like New York, are under siege by criminals because of anti-police candidates.

CANDIDATE B “SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY”:

We deserve real solutions to keep our communities safe. We are pouring billions of dollars into a public safety system that isn’t working. We need to get serious about safety with a new approach. We can support the police to do the difficult jobs we ask them to do, and also hold them accountable when they break the law. We can reduce crime by investing in community violence prevention, youth employment, mental health and drug treatment, and affordable housing, and by focusing police resources on the most serious cases.

	A	B
Overall with partisan labels	45%	44%
Overall without partisan labels	27%	52%
White	29%	49%
Black	27%	62%
Latino	24%	50%
New York City	23%	56%
NYC suburbs	35%	42%
Western New York	16%	57%
Hudson Valley	32%	54%
Independents	21%	47%

Lesson 5.

In addition to elected officials leading with a strong "serious about safety" message, trusted messengers are an invaluable resource to echo that frame.

Voters trust and want to hear from crime survivors and their families, first responders, and experts.

Convincing messengers on issues of crime and public safety	
Survivors of violent crimes	45%
First responders	40%
Families of crime victims	37%
Community violence prevention specialists	36%
Nurses	32%
Criminal justice and public safety experts	27%
Teachers	27%
Religious leaders	10%

Together with trusted messengers, step into the silence gap with a comprehensive "serious about safety" frame.

Lead with safety

Talk about preventing and breaking cycles of crime

Include immediate and long-term solutions

Center accountability

For questions, please contact:

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