

VeraACTION

Making Meaning of the Midterms:

How Crime, Safety, and Justice
Influenced the 2022 Election and
What's Next for Justice Reform

Messaging Justice Initiative:

In early 2022, the Vera Institute and Vera Action launched an effort to use comprehensive, robust public opinion research and message testing to drive an effective narrative about safety, justice, and reform in the wake of backlash and fearmongering about crime. The Initiative includes:

- **Field coordination:**
15+ national organizations met biweekly since March 2022 to share messaging research and strategy.
- **Political outreach:**
30+ briefings of candidates, campaigns, committees, and caucuses during the 2022 election season.
- **Media outreach:**
Briefed 40+ outlets, reporters, and journalists in 2022.

Public opinion research and surveys referenced in this deck

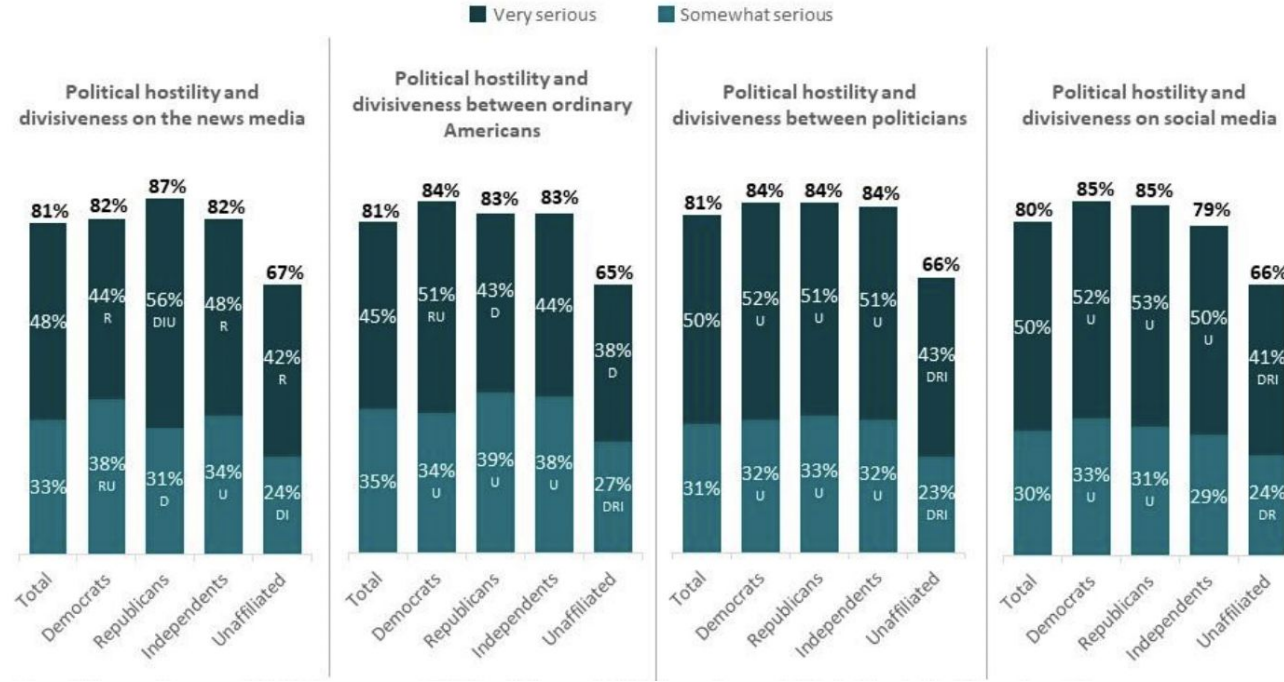
Vera and Vera Action conducted four rounds of research to understand what matters about crime, safety, and justice to different audiences:

- **Round 1:** qualitative research in late fall 2021 of 100 “moveable middle” likely voters and tested messages in Swayable in January 2022 with over 10,500 respondents nationally.
- **Round 2:** national quantitative poll in June 2022 of almost 4,000 likely voters, with oversampling in 11 battleground states.
- **Round 3:** qualitative survey of 69 Americans, with oversampling of Black and Latino/a respondents, on their perceptions of crime and safety.
- **Round 4:** a national online exit survey on election night of 1,800 actual voters and a second post-election quantitative survey of 2,100 actual midterm voters in 7 battleground states (AZ, FL, GA, MI, NC, PA, WI).

The research surveys captured respondents from across the political spectrum, including Democrats, Independents, and Republicans.

WHAT THE AMERICAN PUBLIC FEELS ABOUT CRIME AND SAFETY IN 2022

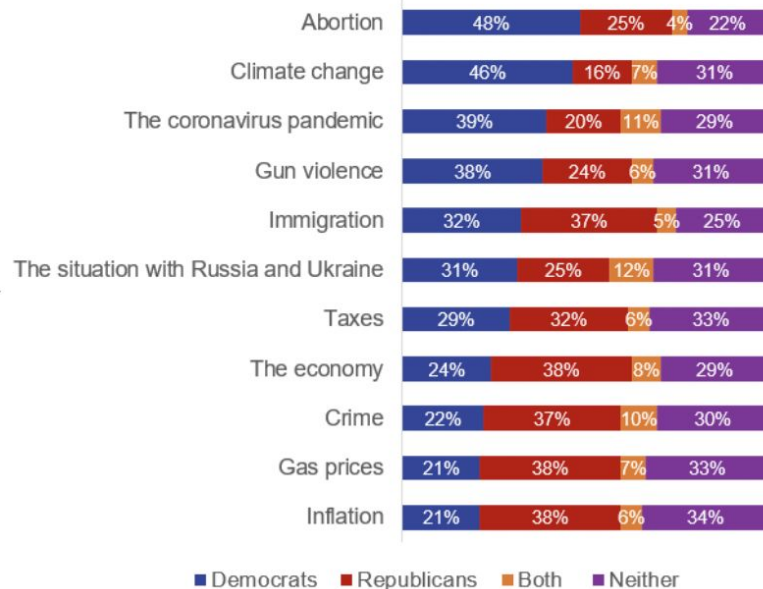
Americans are tired of the political hostility and want to see elected officials do their jobs and govern effectively.



Americans are not happy with the status quo on crime and safety and don't believe either party are strong on the issue.

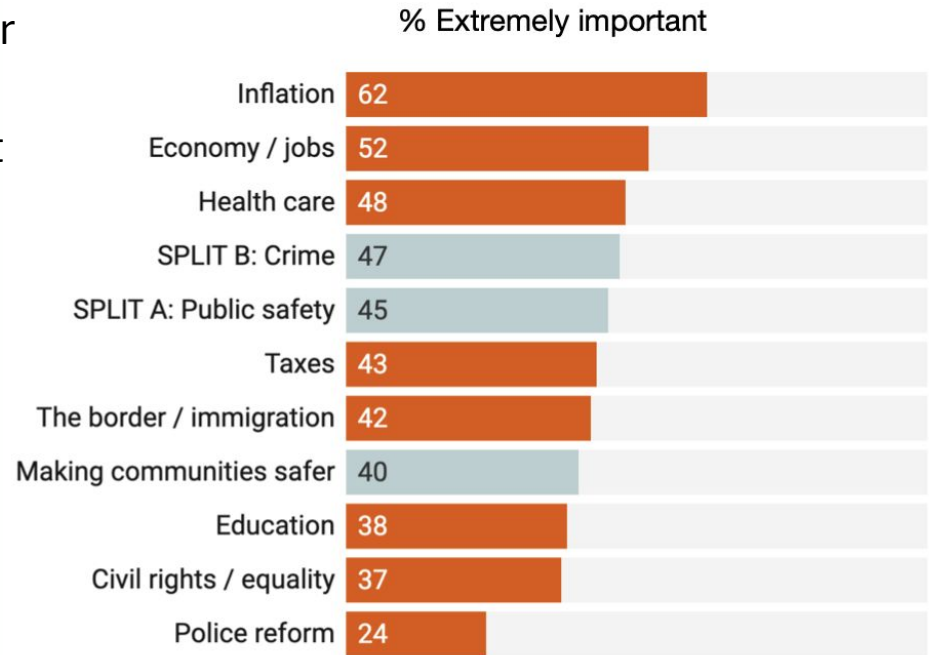
Which political party do you trust to do a better job handling:

Among registered voters



Crime and public safety trails inflation and the economy as a top-tier voting issue...

Think about how you decide to vote for a candidate. How important is each of these issues to **you personally** when it comes to voting this year?

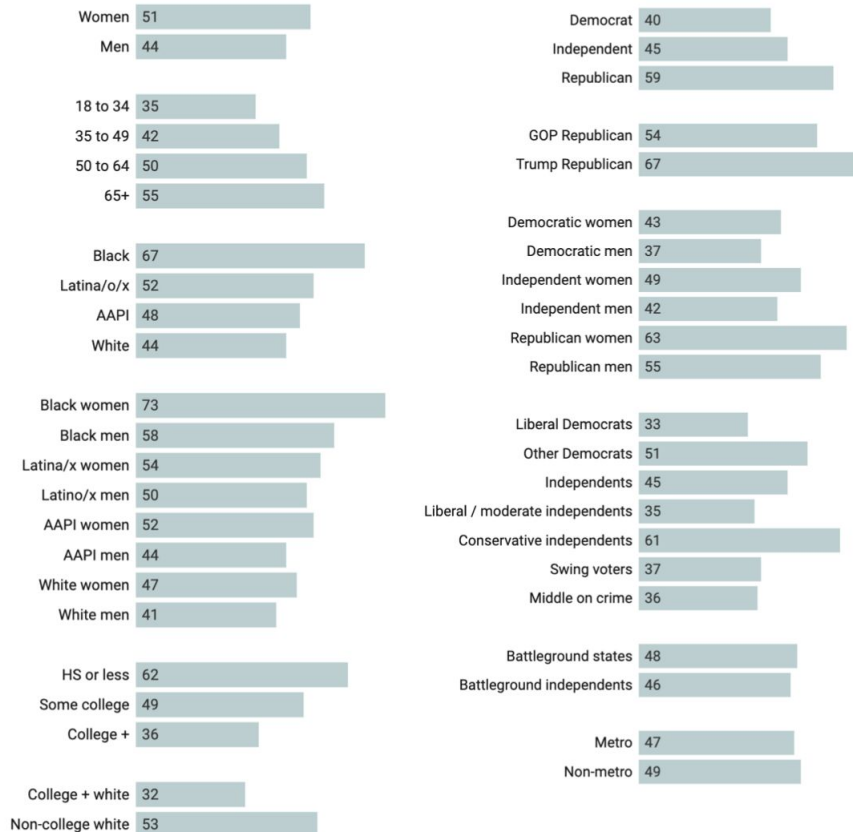


... but is a priority voting issue with Black voters, Republicans, and voters without college degrees.

Crime is most important to their vote:

- Black women **73%**
- Trump republicans **67%**
- Republican women **63%**
- Voters with a high school degree or less **62%**
- Conservative independents **61%**
- Black men **58%**

% Crime is “extremely important” in vote



THE \$157 MILLION DOLLAR BET ON A “RED CRIME WAVE”

Midterm voters key in on crime

Crime and public safety are proving to be a potent mix of issues in the midterm election.



House Democrats pass police funding bills despite divisions

By FARNOUSH AMIRI September 23, 2022



Democrats Worry as G.O.P. Attack Ads Take a Toll in Wisconsin

THE POINT
WITH CHRIS CILLIZZA

Crime is the dark horse issue of this election

Analysis by Chris Cillizza, CNN Editor-at-large

Fetterman's clemency crusade draws soft-on-crime attacks from Oz in Pennsylvania Senate race

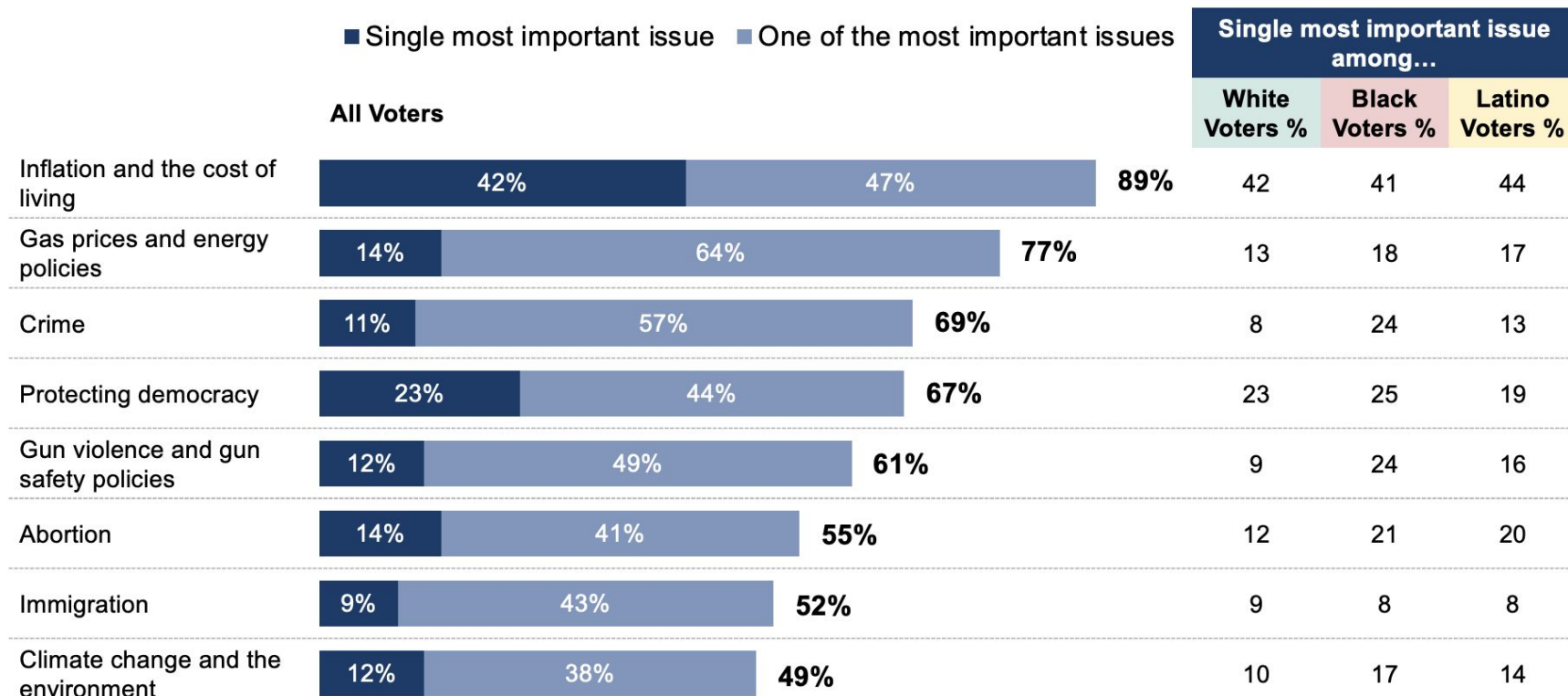
Mehmet Oz and his GOP allies have run with a series of ads and messaging that strips context from the cases Lt. Gov. John Fetterman has championed as head of the state pardons board.



TAKEAWAY 1:

Voters saw through the fearmongering and dog whistles. By and large, the crime attacks didn't stick. Across the country, votes were cast for justice reform, drug policy, and reform DAs.

Issues other than crime were a higher priority for voters.



Nine Midterm Stories You Should Not Miss on Criminal Justice and Voting Rights

Criminal justice reformers made inroads, election denial

their own

Slavery, involuntary servitude rejected by 4 states' voters

By AARON MORRISON November 9, 2022

2022 ELECTIONS

Progressive Prosecutors Won In Midterm Elections Across The US In Spite Of Tough-On-Crime Rhetoric From Republicans

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

MARIJUANA

Here's how five states voted on the legalization of recreational marijuana

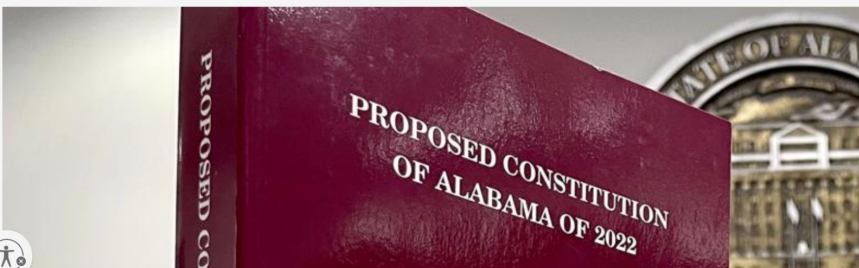
PUBLISHED WED, NOV 9 2022 10:30 AM EST | UPDATED WED, NOV 9 2022 4:31 PM EST

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KEY POINTS

- Five states had proposals to legalize recreational marijuana on the ballot in the midterm elections.
- Voters in Maryland and Missouri approved the legalization, while similar proposals were rejected in Arkansas, North Dakota and South Dakota.



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TV

**Closing Bell:
Overtime**

UP NEXT | **Fast Money** 05:00 pm

TAKEAWAY 2:

Where the crime attacks did stick is in blue jurisdictions where backlash to a high-profile justice reform existed *before* election season. Many Democrats under-performed compared to their counterparts in red and purple jurisdictions.

Crime attacks were most impactful in some reliably Democratic strongholds that passed high-profile reforms.

- **Minnesota:**

After prosecuting the police officer who murdered George Floyd and lending his support to an ultimately unsuccessful ballot measure to replace the Minneapolis Police Department with a Department of Public Safety, Attorney General Keith Ellison won by less than 1 percent over his GOP challenger after being relentlessly attacked as endorsing “defund the police.”

- **Oregon:**

In 2020, Oregon voters passed Measure 110 for drug decriminalization and increased funding for treatment services. Backlash to the reform loomed large in the 3-way gubernatorial race, where Democrat Tina Kotek—the only candidate on the campaign trail committed to protecting Measure 110 if elected—barely won over her two challengers who had said they would repeal the law if they won office.

- **New York:**

Going into the elections, New Yorkers ranked crime as a top voting issue after backlash to bail reform began as soon as the law was passed in 2019. GOP gubernatorial candidate Lee Zeldin made crime the centerpiece of his campaign and spent millions attacking incumbent Governor Kathy Hochul for supporting bail reform. Democrats across the board underperformed—from a tighter-than-expected governor’s race to losing 4 Congressional House seats.



Intelligencer



EARLY AND OFTEN | OCT. 31, 2022

The Democratic Fight That's Hurting Hochul Bail reform looked toxic to suburban lawmakers long before Lee Zeldin seized on it.

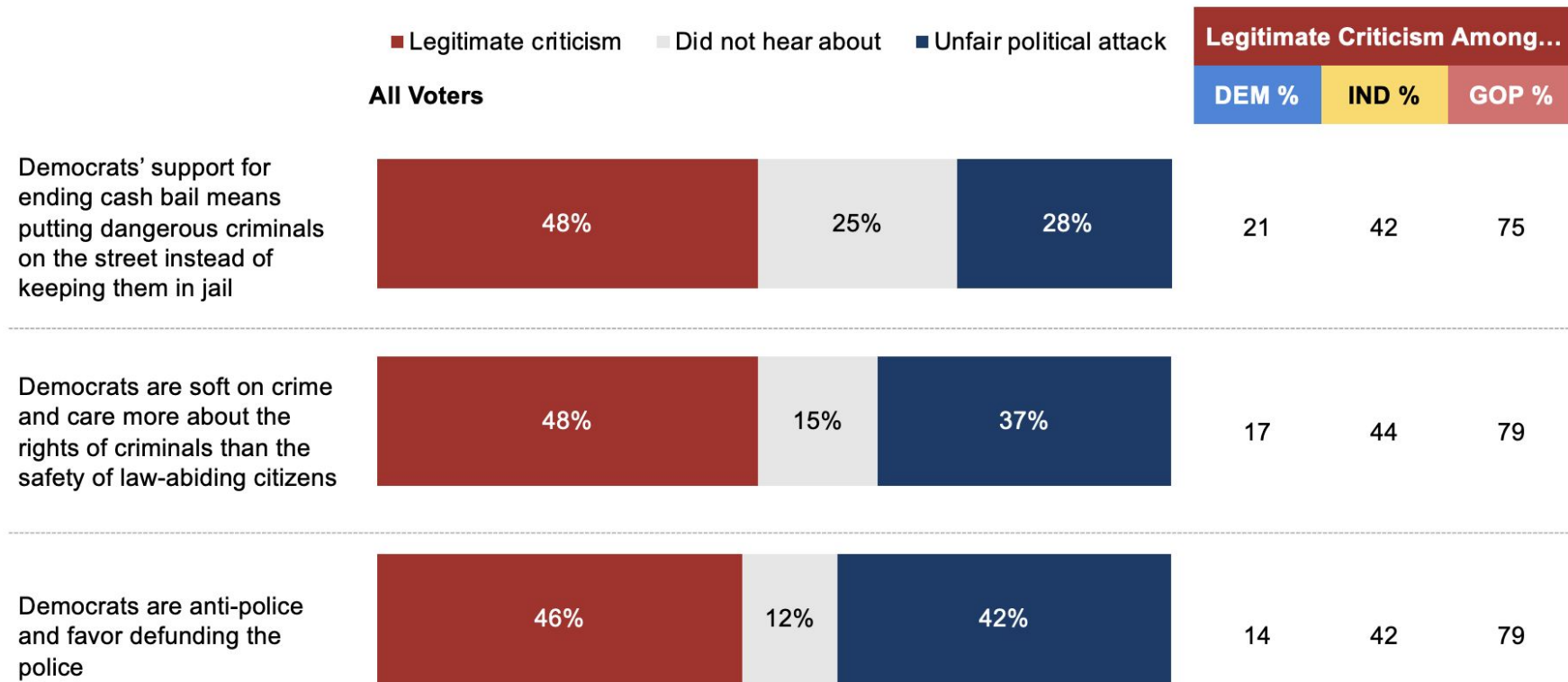
By David Freedlander

Sean Patrick Maloney on His Loss, the Media and A.O.C.

Mr. Maloney said that he and other New York Democrats were unable to overcome suburban fears of crime. He also had some harsh words for Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

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Even among DEM voters, exit survey results reveal they believe criticism of some policies, like bail reform, are legitimate.



TAKEAWAY 3:

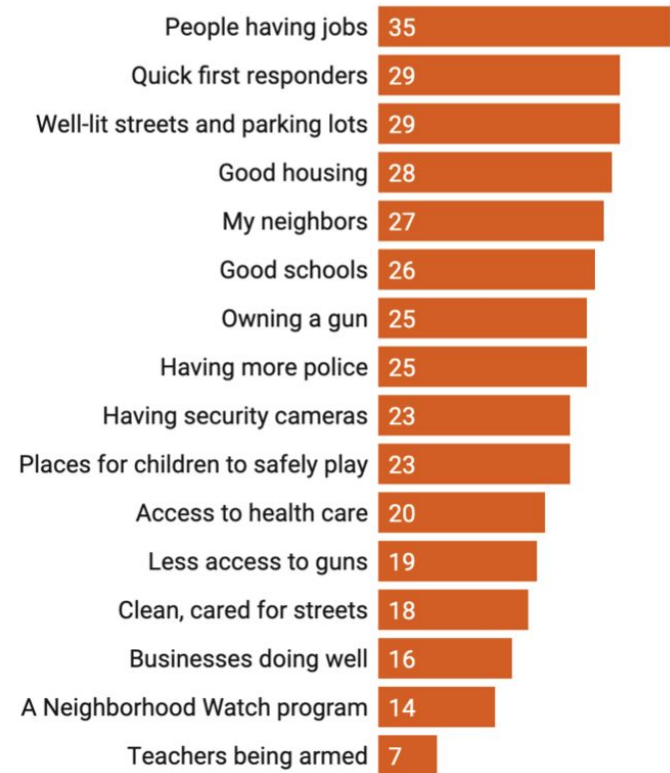
Candidates who prevailed—despite relentless crime attacks—didn't avoid the issue or revert to “tough on crime” language. They leaned into a strong, affirmative vision with solutions for safety.

Likely voters identified a range of factors that contribute to stability and neighborhood safety.

Think about being safe in your own neighborhood and community. What makes you feel safe? Choose the top 3 or 4 for you:

Jobs, housing, and schools are the top structural issues. Other top factors are:

- Quick first responders
- Well-lit streets and parking lots
- Owning a gun
- More police



DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE

Crime is rising and many of us are feeling less safe. While some politicians will try to divide us, my focus is fixing the problems. Let's look at solutions that reduce crime, increase safety, and serve the community.

Here's what we can do. In the short-term, new breakthroughs in gun violence and crime prevention programs are showing major success now. We need to fund and replicate these programs. Police have dangerous and hard jobs. Let's support police officers who put their lives on the line for us every day. Let's make sure our first responders get better training, like how to de-escalate situations. We also have to stop the flood of illegal handguns and ghost guns that are coming into our communities.

In addition to fighting crime, we need to work on preventing it in the first place. We already have some answers on that. The safest places in America don't have more police, more jails, more prisons, and harsher sentences. They have access to jobs and opportunities. They have good schools. There's housing and health care. There's good infrastructure. There's hope for the future. We need to fully fund things that are proven to create safe neighborhoods. Everyone deserves to work, play, and raise their children in safety. Instead of trying to stir up people's emotions just to get elected, I'll do my job to fix problems and keep people safe.

REPUBLICAN NARRATIVE

Crime has been on the rise for three years and we're reaching historic spikes in homicides, gang activity, motor vehicle thefts, and assaults. From the White House to liberal state and local governments, there has been a systemic failure to contain crime in America. It stems from the dangerous belief that enforcing the law is somehow morally wrong or even racist. It has paralyzed law enforcement agencies at all levels and created prosecutors who would rather let a dangerous criminal walk out of jail than enforce the law.

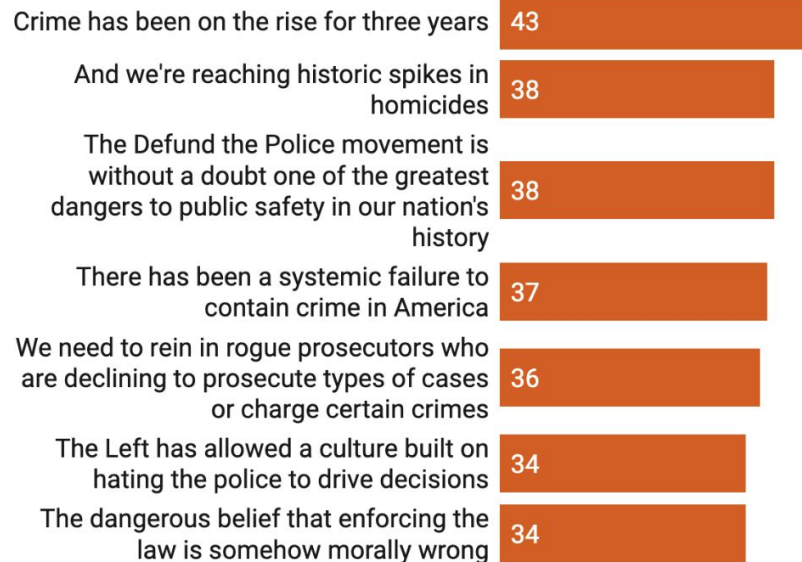
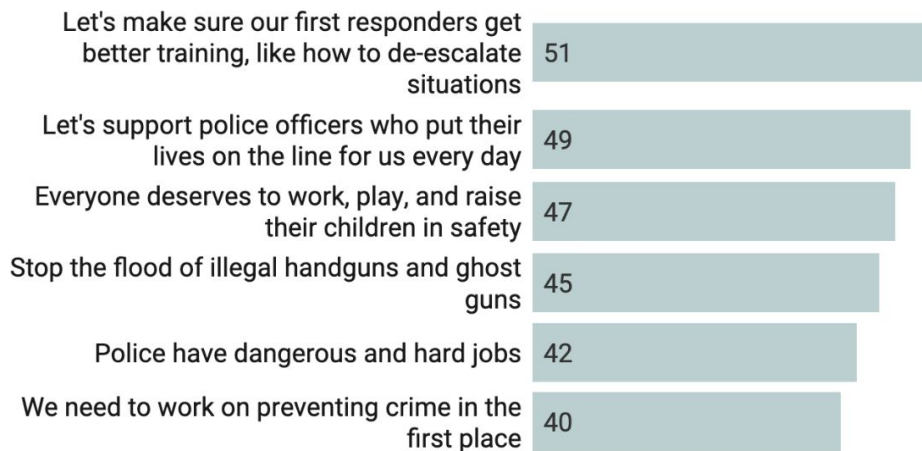
The Left has allowed a culture built on hating the police to drive decisions surrounding law enforcement. The Defund the Police movement is without a doubt one of the greatest dangers to public safety in our nation's history, and Democrats are responsible for it. We need to stop subsidizing the Left's pro-criminal agenda. We need to rein in rogue prosecutors who are declining to prosecute types of cases or charge certain crimes. We need to stop federal funds to states that have "no cash bail" laws on the books.

Once again, Democrats have broken a part of our civil society, and once again it will be conservatives who will step up to piece it together.

A positive, solutions-oriented message outperforms the opposition's "scare tactics" when compared head-to-head.

% Agreed with most

(Text highlight exercise)



"We were forgotten men...
John Fetterman reached
out and pulled us up."

Illinois Democrats, attacked on the campaign trail for bail reform, also doubled down—and won re-election decisively.

AXIOS Chicago

Nov 9, 2022 - Politics

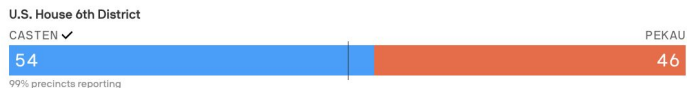
Democrats sweep the Illinois midterms

Justin Kaufmann, Monica Eng



Key election results in Illinois

As of Nov. 9 2022, 5:30am; 95% precincts reporting; Checkmarks indicate winners called by AP



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Illinois Democrats held their ground in last night's midterms by winning almost every contested seat and maintaining a 5-2 majority in the state Supreme Court.

Attorney General

Incumbent Kwame Raoul fended off Republican challenger Thomas DeVore.



[A message from Ericsson](#)

The lack of a strong patent licensing system can slow or stagnate the cycle of innovation.

[Learn why →](#)

- Raoul helped craft criminal justice reform in Springfield.
- DeVore, an attorney, ran an aggressive campaign criticizing the SAFE-T act and suing the AG's office over mandates.

TAKEAWAY 4:

A winning strategy is neither “progressive” nor “conservative” – a strong, affirmative vision with solutions for preventing crime and delivering safety is what wins voters.

Despite fearmongering, strong support persists for a crime prevention approach (53%) over “tough on crime” (47%).

Tough on crime: Doing more to get tough on crime, like having stricter sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep potentially dangerous people in jail, and giving police more support and resources.

Crime Prevention: Fully fund things that are proven 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 cracking down on illegal gun sales.

	% Total Do More to Prevent Crime	
	Tough on crime %	Crime prevention %
White Voters	51	49
Black Voters	36	64
Latino Voters	40	60
Democrat	24	76
Independent	48	52
Republican	69	31
Urban	45	55
Suburban	46	54
Rural	52	48

Though DEM and GOP voters differ in overall approach to crime, they both support mental health and drug treatment services.

Combined top two most important issues for a candidate to address when it comes to crime, violence, and public safety

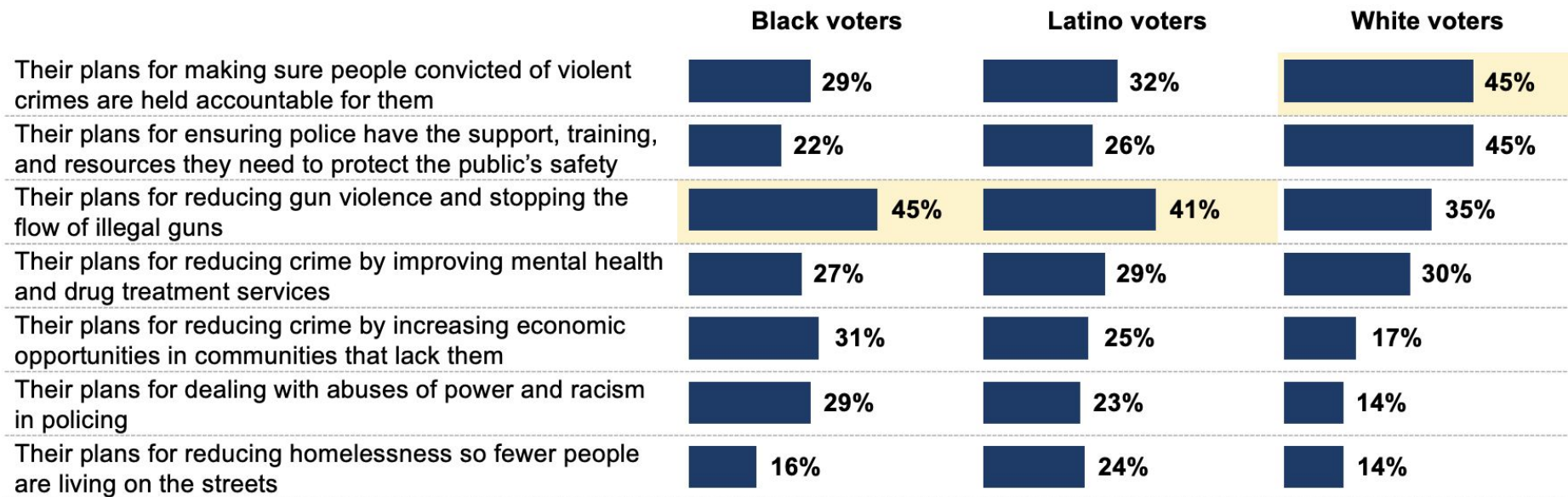
	All Voters	DEM %	IND %	GOP %
Their plans for making sure people convicted of violent crimes are held accountable for them	41%	24	40	58
Their plans for ensuring police have the support, training, and resources they need to protect the public's safety	40%	23	41	55
Their plans for reducing gun violence and stopping the flow of illegal guns	37%	56	37	20
Their plans for reducing crime by improving mental health and drug treatment services	29%	32	25	28
Their plans for reducing crime by increasing economic opportunities in communities that lack them	20%	26	24	13
Their plans for dealing with abuses of power and racism in policing	16%	24	19	9
Their plans for reducing homelessness so fewer people are living on the streets	16%	16	15	16

TAKEAWAY 5:

Even though crime and safety is a kitchen table issue for many voters, they strongly favor solutions for safety that are community-driven over the status quo that drives mass incarceration.

When asked what policies most effectively prevent and address crime, Black voters especially favor a solutions approach.

Most important topics for candidates to address when it comes to dealing with crime, violence, and public safety



THE MAIN TAKEAWAY:

Post-elections, with the relentless fearmongering at bay, we have an opportunity to turn the issues of preventing crime and delivering safety into an asset, not a liability, moving forward.

RESEARCH/STUDY

Fox's coverage of violent crime dropped after the midterms

Weekday violent crime segments decreased by 50% in the week of the election compared to the weekly average since Labor Day

WRITTEN BY TYLER MONROE & ROB SAVILLO

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM MEDIA INTEL STAFF

PUBLISHED 11/17/22 2:49 PM EST

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COMMENT



A new approach to messaging on crime, safety, and justice

1. **Acknowledge the importance of safety** and say you're engaging in an honest conversation.
2. **Lead with a vision for preventing crime and delivering safety** and use phrases such as, "We need to prevent crime in the first place, not just react after," and "I am about solutions, not scare tactics."
3. Most likely voters view the police favorably but also support wise deployment of public resources and accountability. An effective frame is to say, "**We need to use our resources wisely and deploy the right tools for each situation. Send civilian first responders to address mental health crises. Support the police to solve serious crime. And hold officers accountable if they abuse their power.**" Support for police can equal better training, skills, and oversight, not simply more funding.
4. The public strongly supports more investment in community-based solutions for safety. **Highlight those solutions as part of a comprehensive approach to crime-fighting and making communities safe.** Use examples of programs like community violence intervention, mental health first responders, affordable housing for justice-involved people, and mental health and drug treatment.
5. Support for justice reform policies remains high, so **remind audiences that we can have both safety and justice** if attacked as "soft on crime" for championing reform.

For questions, please contact:

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