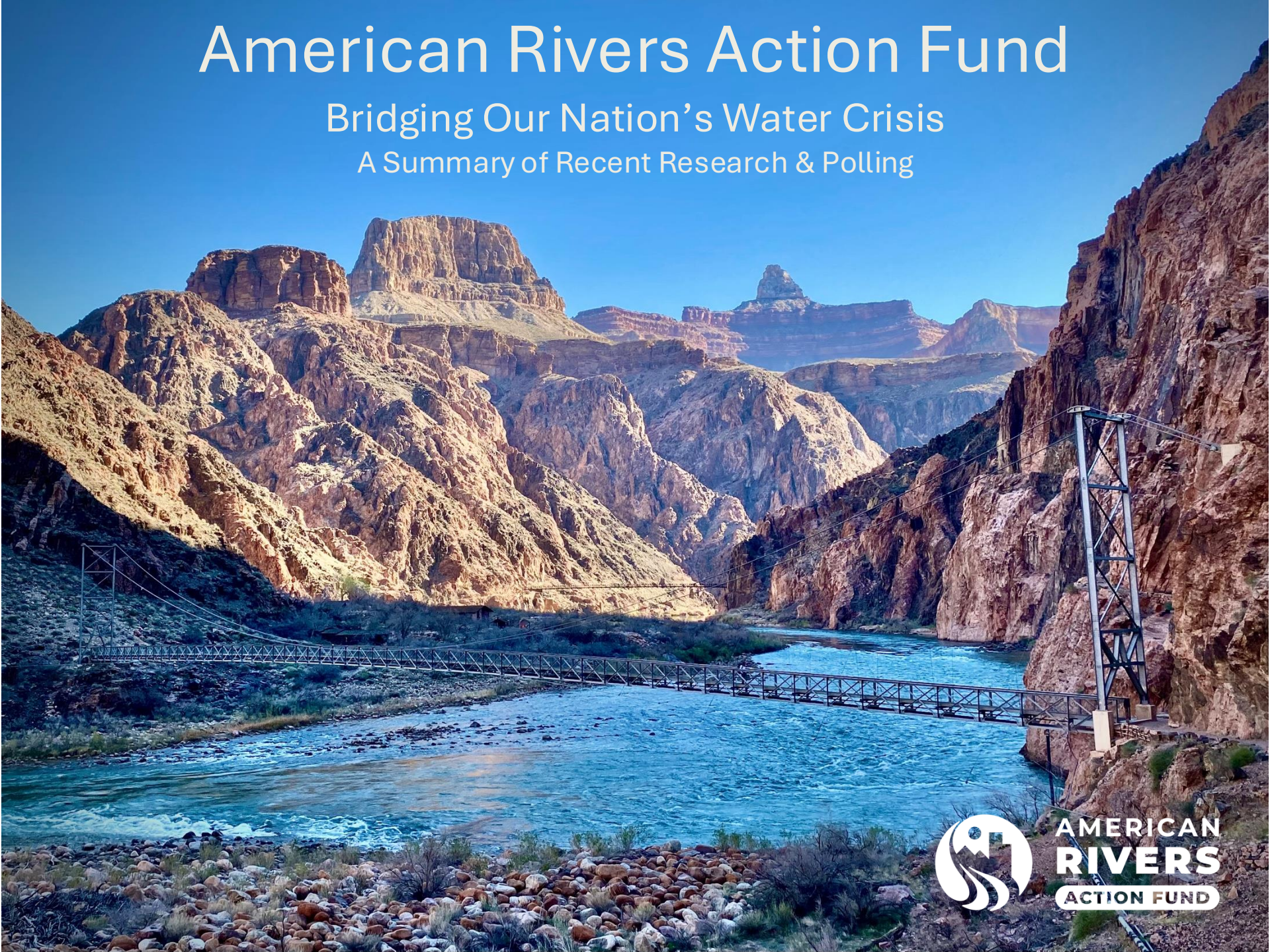


# American Rivers Action Fund

Bridging Our Nation's Water Crisis

A Summary of Recent Research & Polling



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# Confronting Our Nation's Water Crisis

## Why Rivers?

The nation is facing a water crisis - pollution, climate, severe storms, threats to clean water protections, threats to public lands

The only way to deliver solutions for rivers & clean water is to build a durable, comprehensive, credible river majority



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# We believe...



We can create positive change by bringing people together around the shared value of clean water, but...

We are testing and confirming these instincts and designing a strategy for reaching and mobilizing people around this vision in a bi-partisan, unifying, credible voice.





# WATER MESSAGES THAT MOBILIZE

DOs & DONT'S FOR ADVOCATES, COMMUNICATORS, & ELECTEDS



[www.AmericanRiversActionFund.org/water-message-guide](http://www.AmericanRiversActionFund.org/water-message-guide)



- Synthesis and insights from years of American Rivers research studies in Colorado and Arizona, expanded to a national audience.
- Also leverages other, non-AR polling and research from across the country.
- Proof of Concept-tested across 4 different ballot initiatives in Colorado over the past few years, all winning with bi-partisan majorities.



# The Opportunity: Water as a Unifying and Mobilizing Issue

No matter the strategy for advancing stronger water protections, one foundational truth can help make the case to decision-makers that they should be doing more: **voters care about clean water and the safety of their communities.**

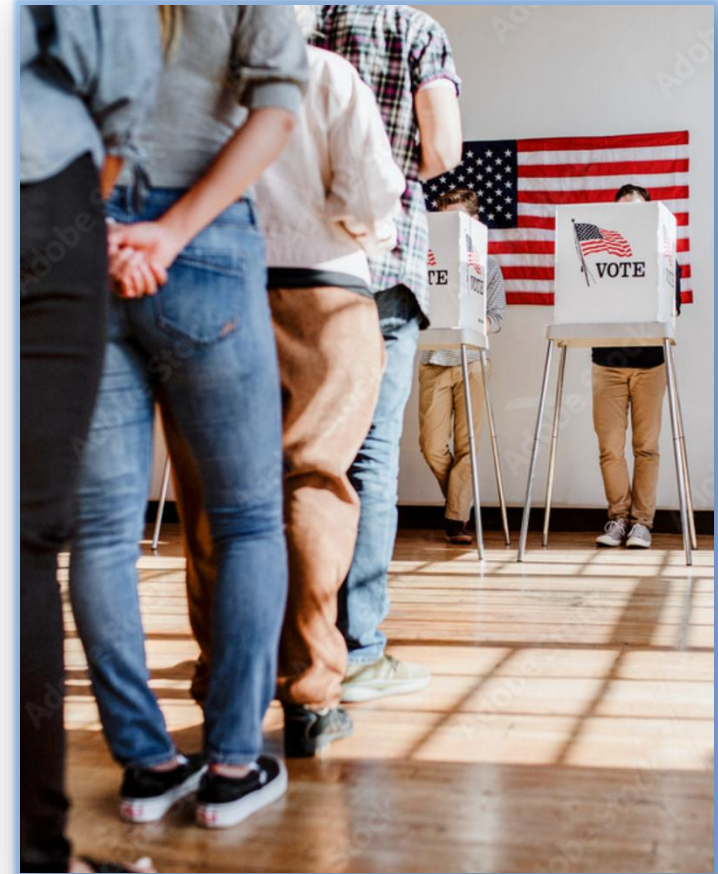
Consider the following:

- 78% of voters say they are at least somewhat likely to consider clean water when voting, with 46% being “very likely”
- A majority of voters say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who supports restoring clean water protections, with support strongest among moderates and independents.
- In Texas, **50% of voters said they would be more likely to back a candidate who prioritizes flood prevention**, including a significant number of Republicans and Independents.
- In conservative Indiana, **94% of voters support maintaining or strengthening wetland protections**, including **64% of Republicans**.



# Our questions...

- We identified the need to understand how voters feel about water, and if topics around water issues can mobilize. To that end, we set out to discover...
  - Who is a typical “water voter”
  - Does negative messaging around water suppress voter preference for candidates?
  - Which water messages are most persuasive, and to whom?
  - How effective are our most persuasive water messages when driving action on climate?
  - Do voters connect their water to rivers?



# Who is a typical “Water Voter?”

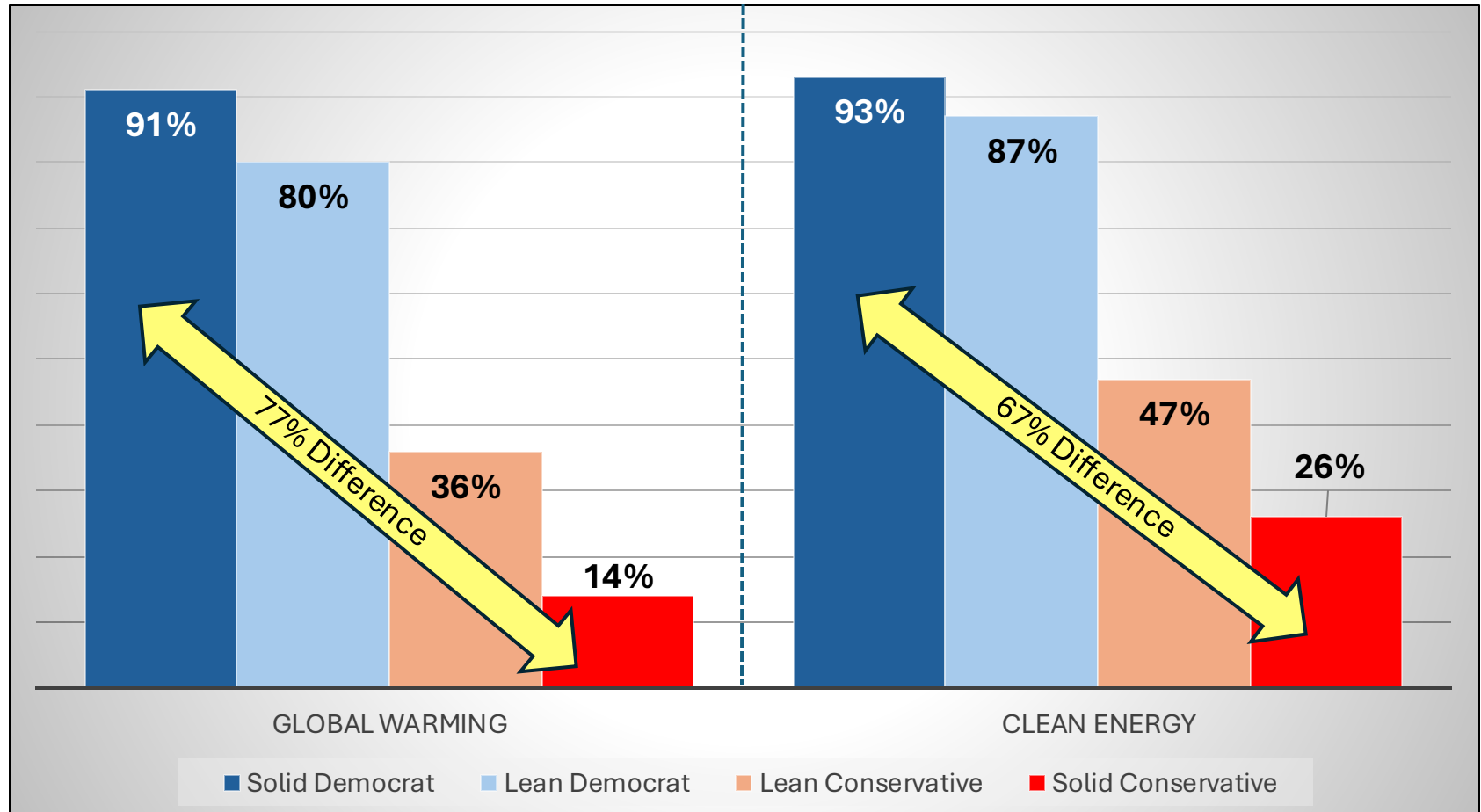
Purpose: Evaluate voter perspectives, opinions, and hopes about water & society to identify message themes for testing.

What we learned: Nearly 8-in-10 people expressed motivation to consider protecting clean water when voting this year.

- Typically middle-age and older, Moderate or Conservative leaning, responsive to messages about protecting clean, safe, reliable drinking water and connection to rivers.
- Messages with themes around *Populism*, *Community Safety*, *Pollution*, and concern for *Future Generations* most frequently rise to the top.
- 26% of people who said **they were likely or very likely** to consider clean water when voting did not vote in 2020 - an opportunity to get them to the ballot box.

# The Partisan Divide on some environmental issues is often extreme...

*Issues voters feel should be Very High/High Priority for Congress and/or President*

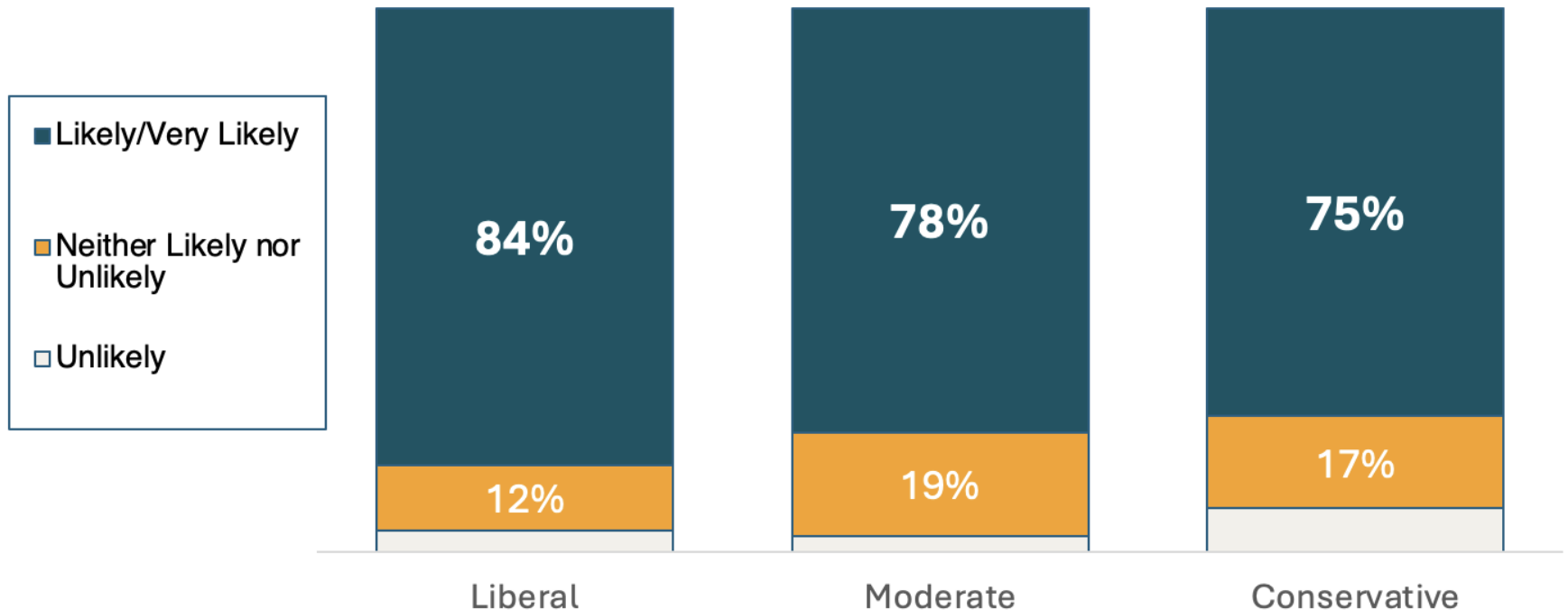


Source: Yale Program on Climate Change Communications, George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, 2024



But clean water is a much more unifying topic across ideologies...

How likely are you to consider protecting clean water when voting this year?



Source: American Rivers Action Fund/Grow Progress Audience Understanding Survey, September 2024, n=586

## ***Water Messages:***

**Community Safety:** Our homes and livelihoods are getting wiped out from threats to our water, whether it is destructive weather, crumbling infrastructure, or polluters who put our drinking water at risk. We need leaders who will protect our water and safety by investing in our communities so our families and businesses can stay protected in the face of disasters.

**Populism:** Clean water isn't a luxury, it's a right that belongs to all of us, not just the wealthy or the powerful. We pay our taxes, and we deserve clean, safe water in return. But right now, big corporations and special interests are putting their profits ahead of our health and safety. We need leaders who will stand up for the people, not bow to the elite. By electing candidates who fight for clean, affordable water, we're taking back control of what's rightfully ours.

**Race-Class Narrative:** We all want clean, safe water for our families, no matter what we look like or where we come from. But today, wealthy corporations and powerful interests are trying to divide us by race and class, distracting us while they pollute our water and drive up our bills. Whether we live in the city, the suburbs, or rural communities, we're all affected when our water is contaminated. It's time to come together, across our differences, and demand our elected leaders put our health and safety first, not the profits of big polluters.

**Future Generations:** The fight for clean water isn't something we can afford to put off. It's an urgent issue that affects us and the generations to come. Our choices today will determine whether our children and grandchildren will have access to safe, reliable water. If we don't act now, rising costs, crumbling infrastructure, and contamination we see today will only worsen, leaving future generations in crisis. It's our responsibility to elect leaders who will act now to secure clean, affordable water for the generations that follow.

**Childhood Summer:** Think back to the summers of our childhood splashing in streams, running through sprinklers, and drinking straight from the garden hose without a care in the world. Clean water was something we could always count on. But now, that simple joy is slipping away for too many families. Electing leaders who prioritize clean, safe water is about ensuring that today's kids can make those same memories and grow into healthy adults.

**Clean Water Protections:** The water protections we've relied on for decades are being stripped away, leaving our communities vulnerable. Every creek and stream connects to larger rivers, and being careless with these seemingly minor resources adds up to major problems. Pollution and contamination in small streams don't stay contained; they flow into our rivers, lakes, and, ultimately, our drinking water. We need to elect leaders who will restore these critical protections.

**Priority:** There are so many important issues to consider when we vote: healthcare, education, jobs, but if we can't trust our elected officials to protect something as basic as our right to clean water, how can we trust them with anything else? Clean, safe water is the foundation of our lives. If our leaders don't stand up to corporate interests to defend this essential right, they're failing us in every other area. We need to elect candidates who understand that without clean water, nothing else matters. If they can't get this right, they don't deserve our trust on any other issue.

## ***Placebo Message:***

**Morton Salt:** Morton Salt has over 20 production facilities across the U.S., Canada and the Bahamas, each devoted to bringing you the high-quality products you expect.





# The Questions We Tested these Messages Against:

*(Each of these questions were asked after the respondent had seen the message stimulus)*

*(All on a 5-pt scale...)*

1) How likely are you to take into consideration a **candidate's positions on protecting water resources and clean water** when you decide who to vote for this year?

2) Thinking about the 2024 elections, how motivated are you to vote?

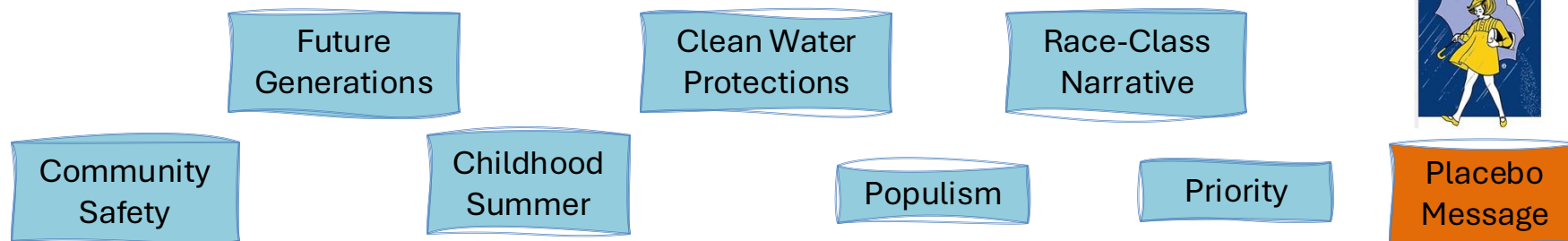
3) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

*Elected officials should **prioritize protecting water resources and clean drinking water** as much as the economy, health care, and education.*

# Best Performing Messages Overall

Rapid Message Test #2 - October 2024

We tested 7 unique water messages against a placebo message - covering topics around...



Two key messages rose to the top across multiple metrics...

## Populism

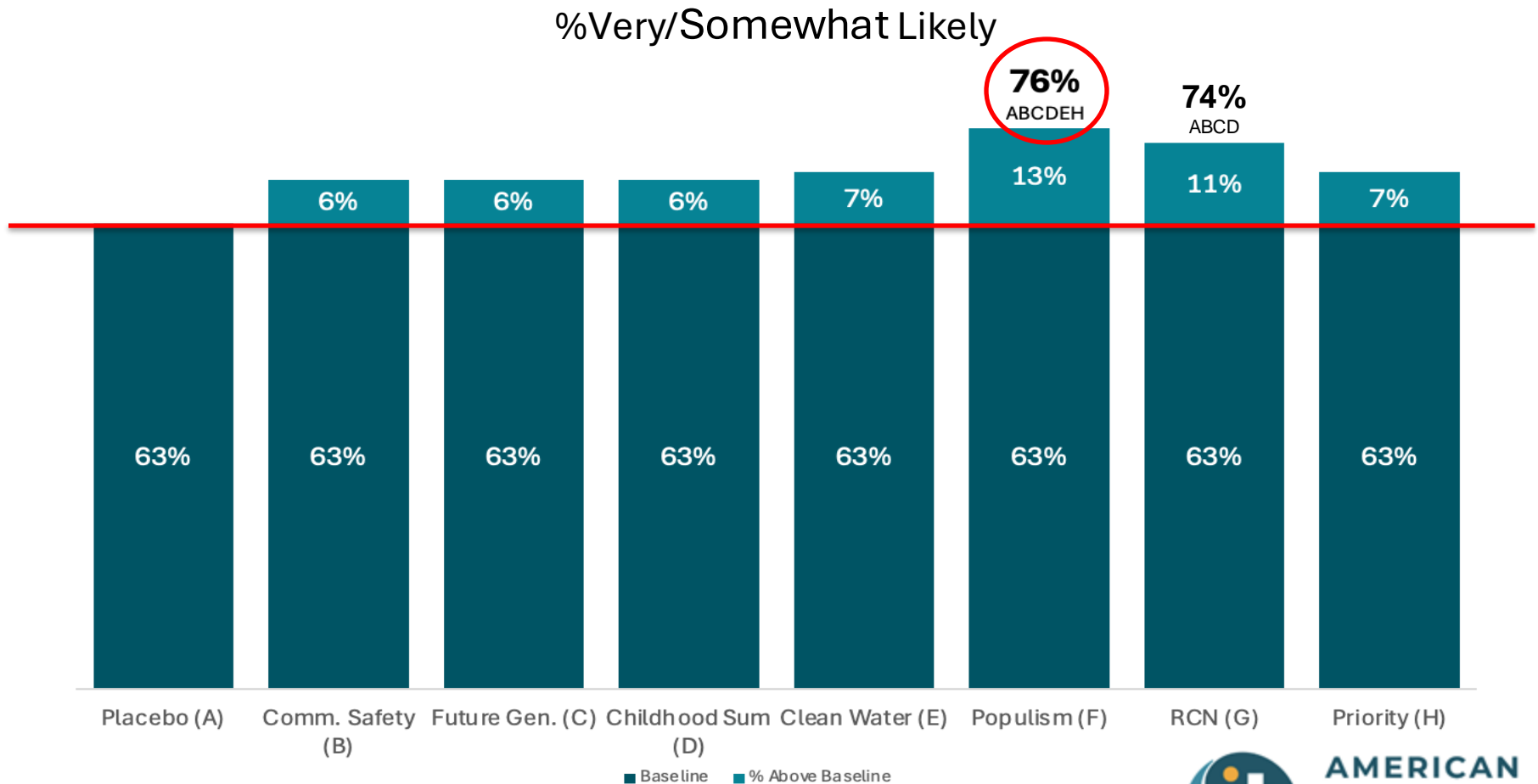
Clean water isn't a luxury - *it's a right that belongs to all of us, not just the wealthy or the powerful*. We pay our taxes, and we deserve clean, safe water in return. But right now, *big corporations and special interests* are putting their profits ahead of our health and safety. We need leaders who will stand up for the people, *not bow to the elite*. By electing candidates who fight for clean, affordable water, were taking back control of what is rightfully ours.

## Race Class Narrative

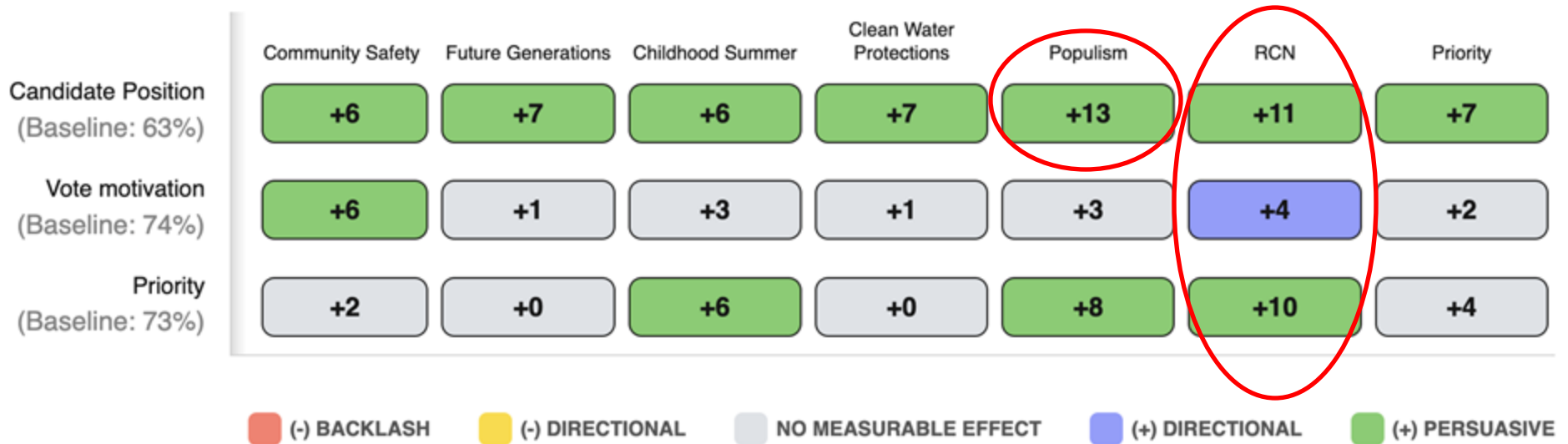
We all want clean, safe water for our families, *no matter what we look like or where we come from*. But today, wealthy corporations and powerful interests are *trying to divide us* by race and class, distracting us while they pollute our water and drive up our bills. Whether we live in the city, the suburbs, or rural communities, *we're all affected* when our water is contaminated. It's time to *come together, across our differences*, and elect leaders who will put our health and safety first, not the profits of big polluters.



How likely are you to take into consideration a **candidate's position on protecting water resources and clean water** when you decide who to vote for this year?

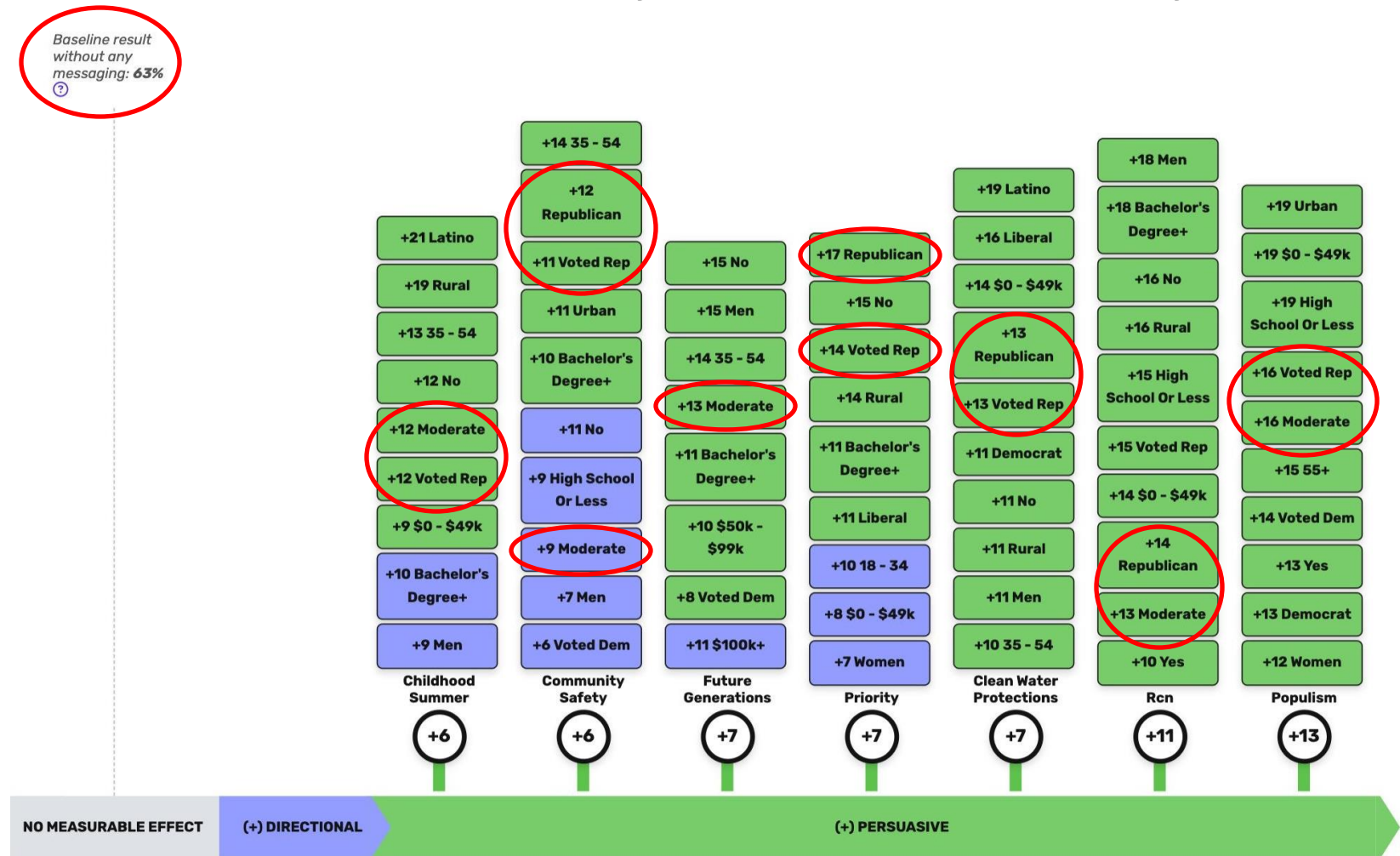


## Message Performance above Baseline

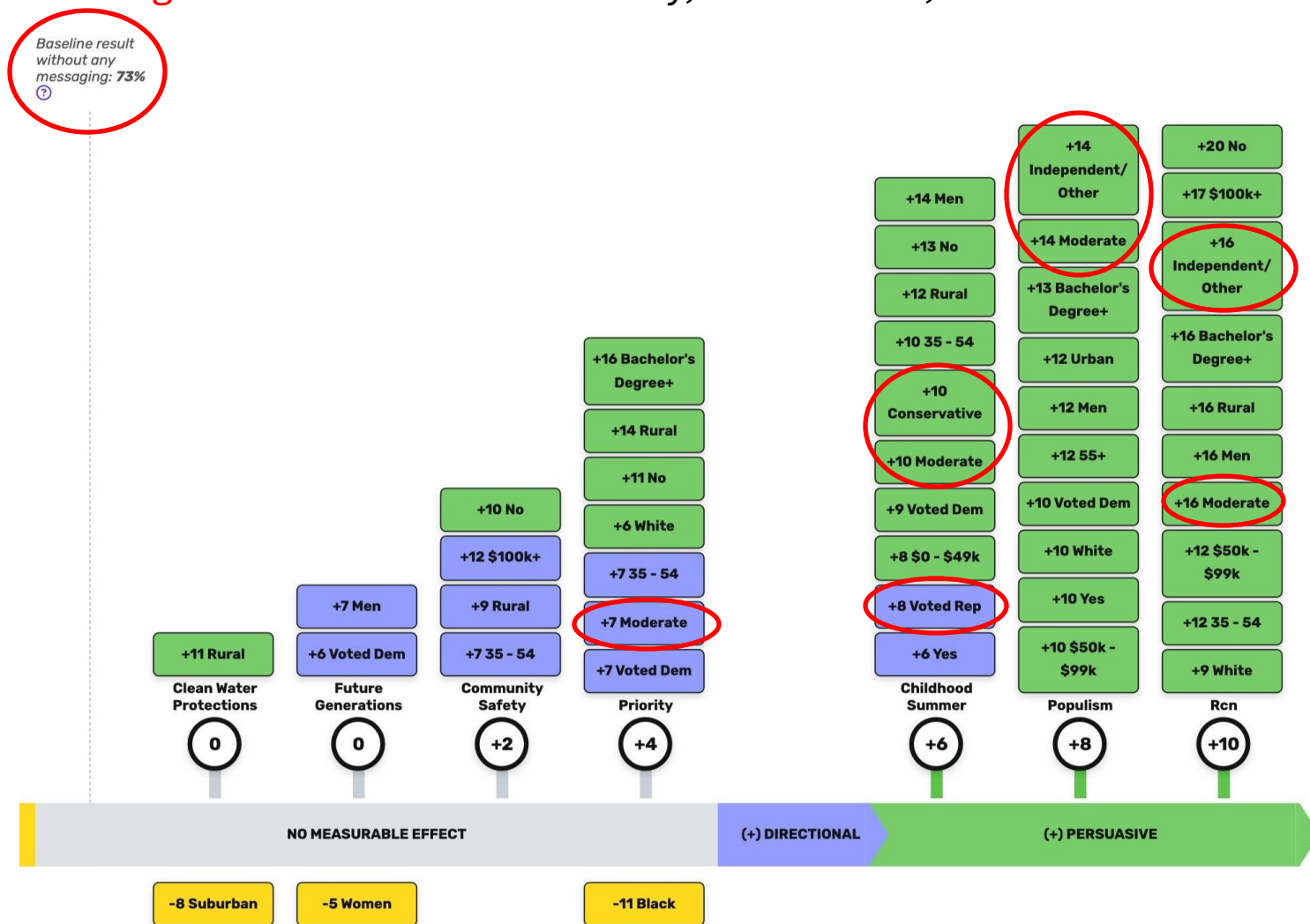




How likely are you to take into consideration a **candidate's position** on protecting water resources and clean water when you decide who to vote for this year?



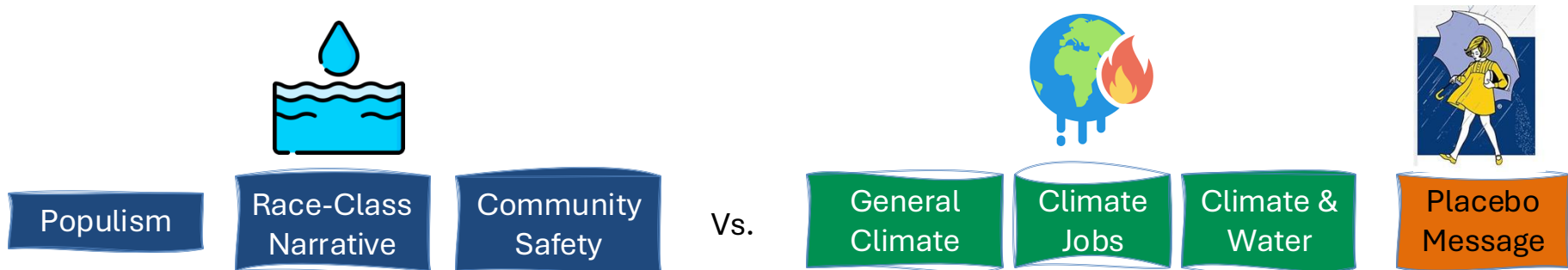
# Agree that Elected Officials Should *Prioritize Protecting Water Resources and Clean Drinking Water* as Much as Economy, Health Care, Education



# Question: How Effective are our Most Persuasive Water Messages When Driving Action on Climate?

Methodology: Compare our 3 best performing **water** messages to 3 well-crafted **climate** messages. Study conducted on November 25, 2024 among 2,822 voters nationwide.

What we learned: Like RMT #2, the baseline response to all messages was quite high. While “General Climate” outperformed all other messages, the difference was slight, and a trio of water-related messages persuaded voters nearly as well, and much better than the other climate messages.



# The Questions We Tested these Messages Against:

*(Each of these questions were asked after the respondent had seen the message stimulus)*

Issue Motivation Question: How likely are you to take action to protect basic necessities like clean air and water?

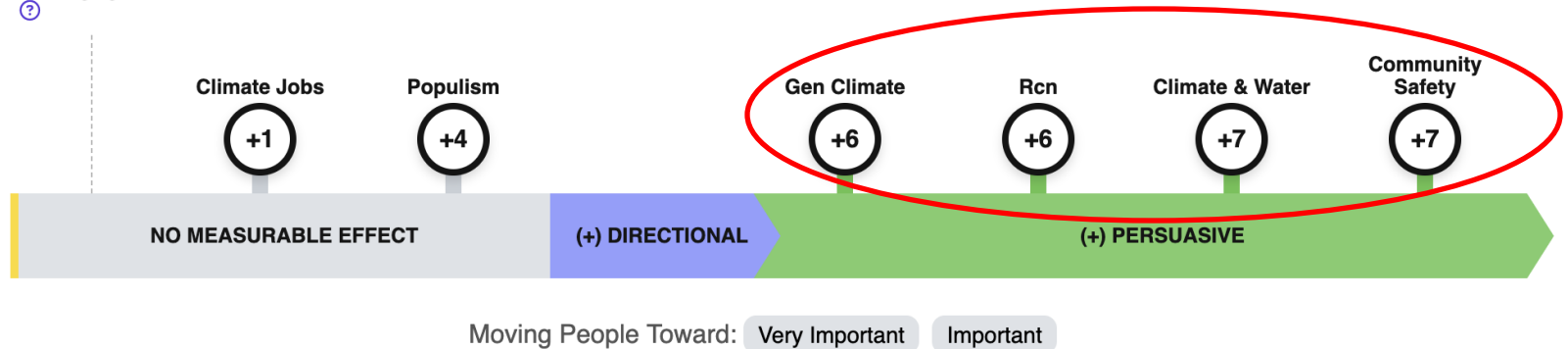
Climate Importance Question : How important is it to you that newly elected politicians **prioritize addressing climate change** while in office?

Water Importance Question : How important is it to you that newly elected politicians **prioritize protecting water** while in office?



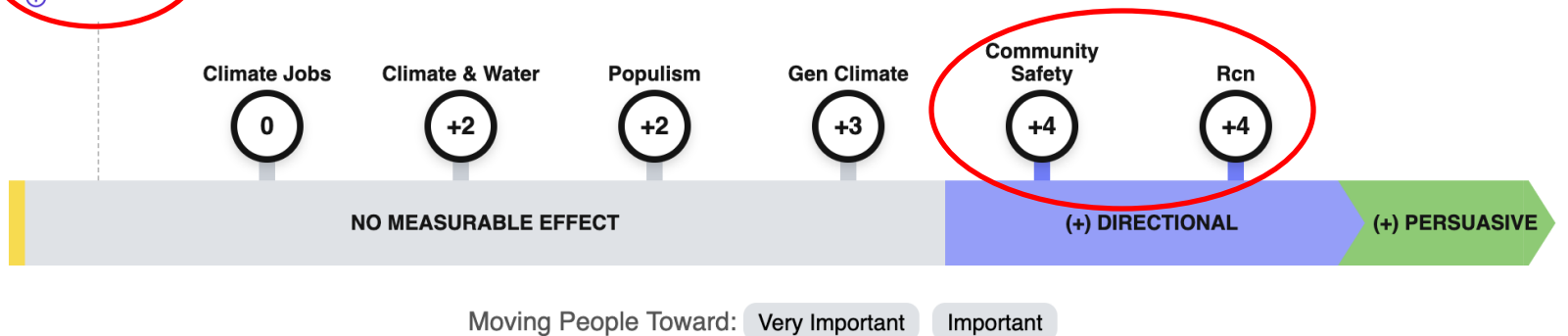
Baseline result  
without any  
messaging: 67%  
?

## Importance that Politicians *Address Climate Issues*



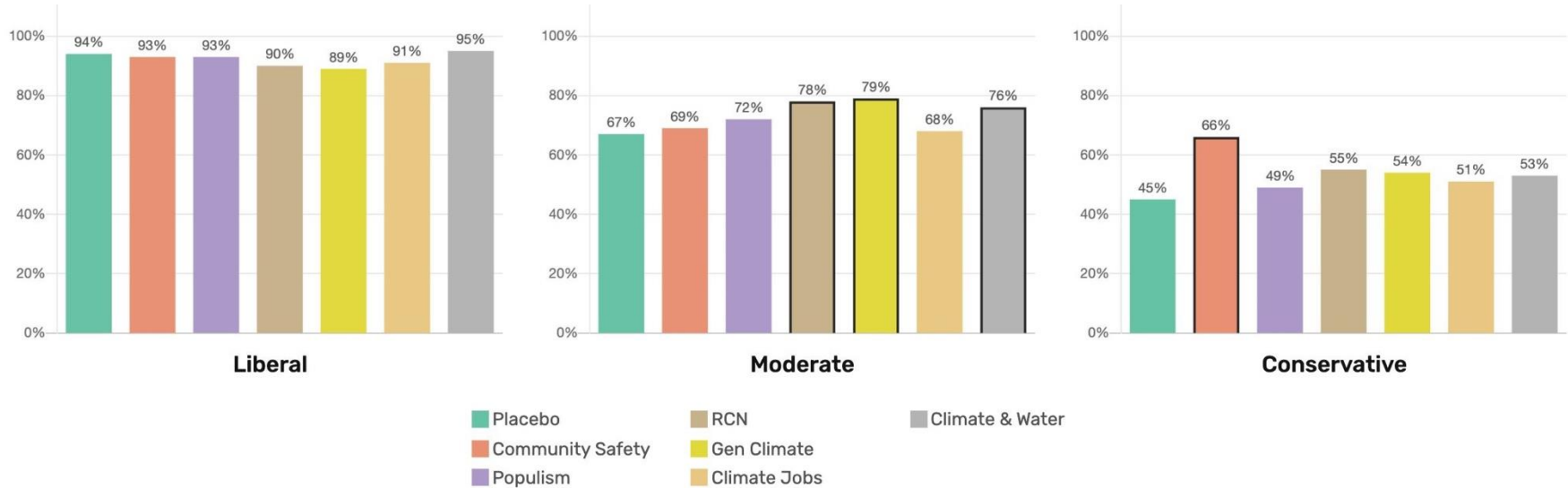
Baseline result  
without any  
messaging: 81%  
?

## Importance that Politicians *Address Water Issues*

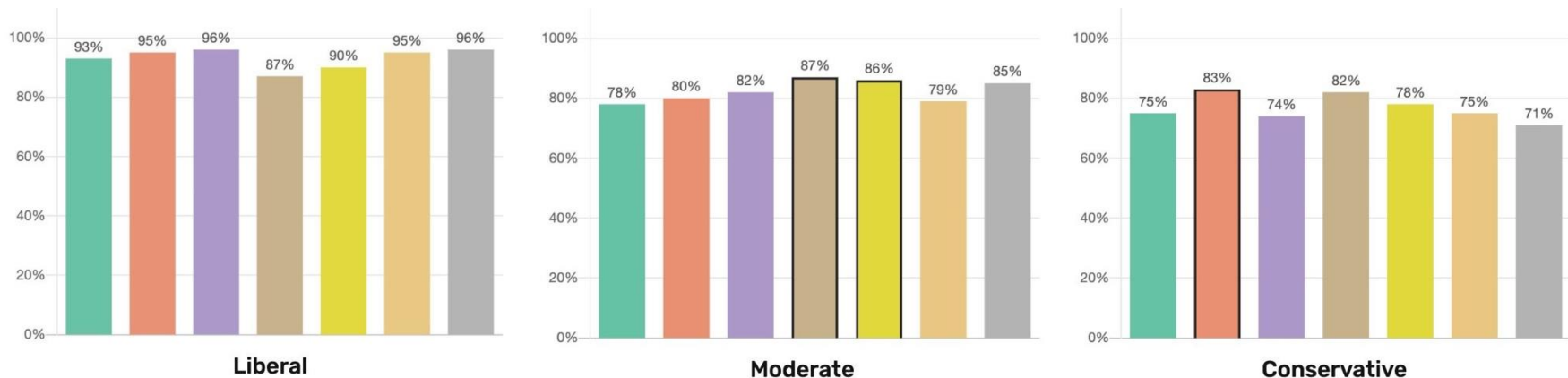


# By Ideology - Climate Question vs. Water Question:

How important is it to you that newly elected politicians prioritize addressing climate change while in office?

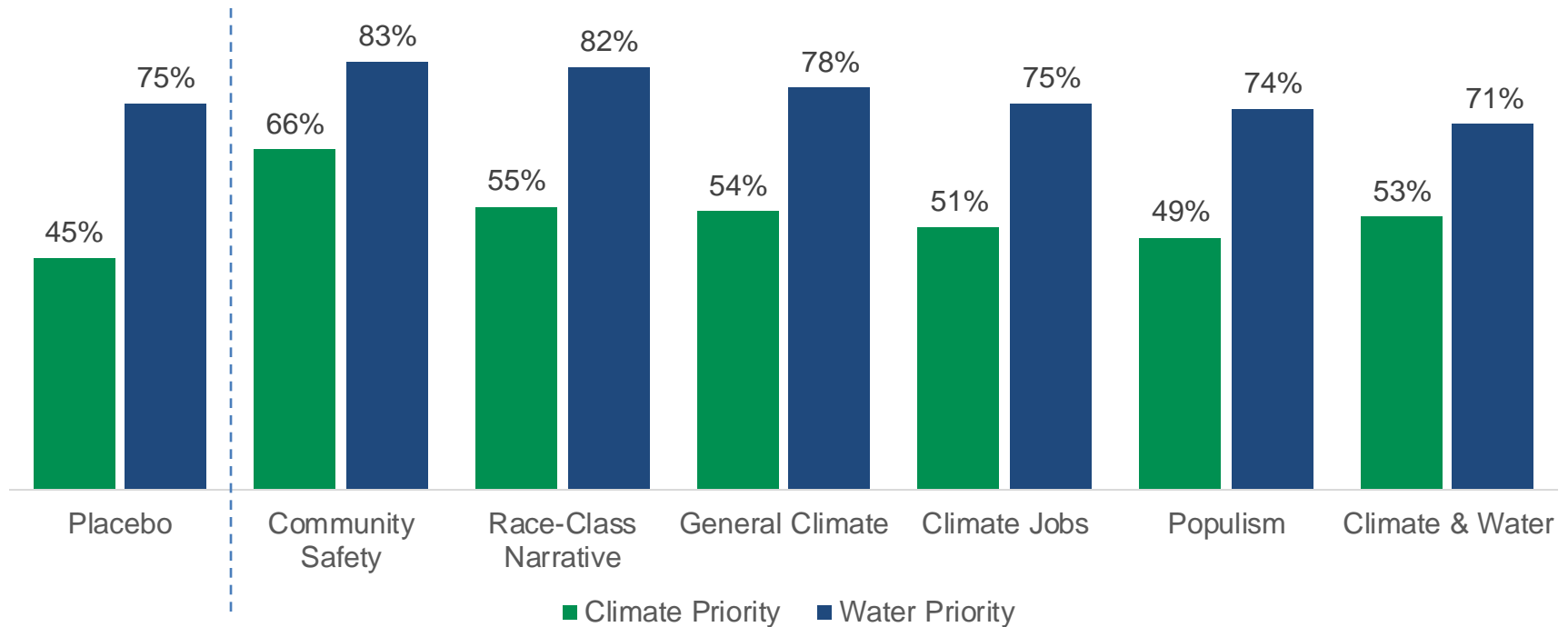


How important is it to you that newly elected politicians prioritize protecting water while in office?



# Conservatives - Politicians Prioritize Climate vs. Water

## Persuasive Messages with Conservatives

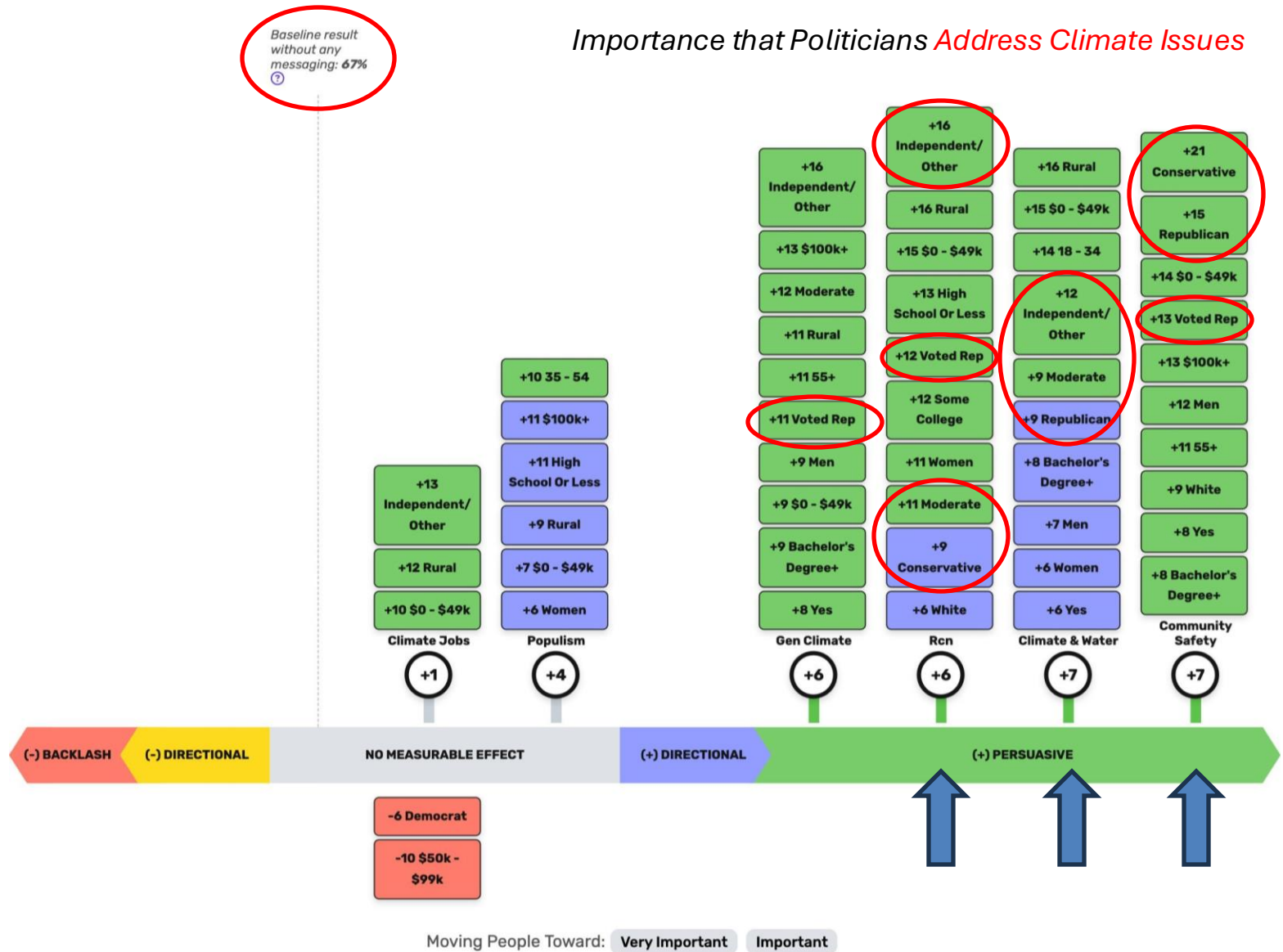


Climate Priority Question: How important is it to you that newly elected politicians prioritize addressing climate change while in office?

Water Priority Question: How important is it to you that newly elected politicians prioritize protecting water while in office?

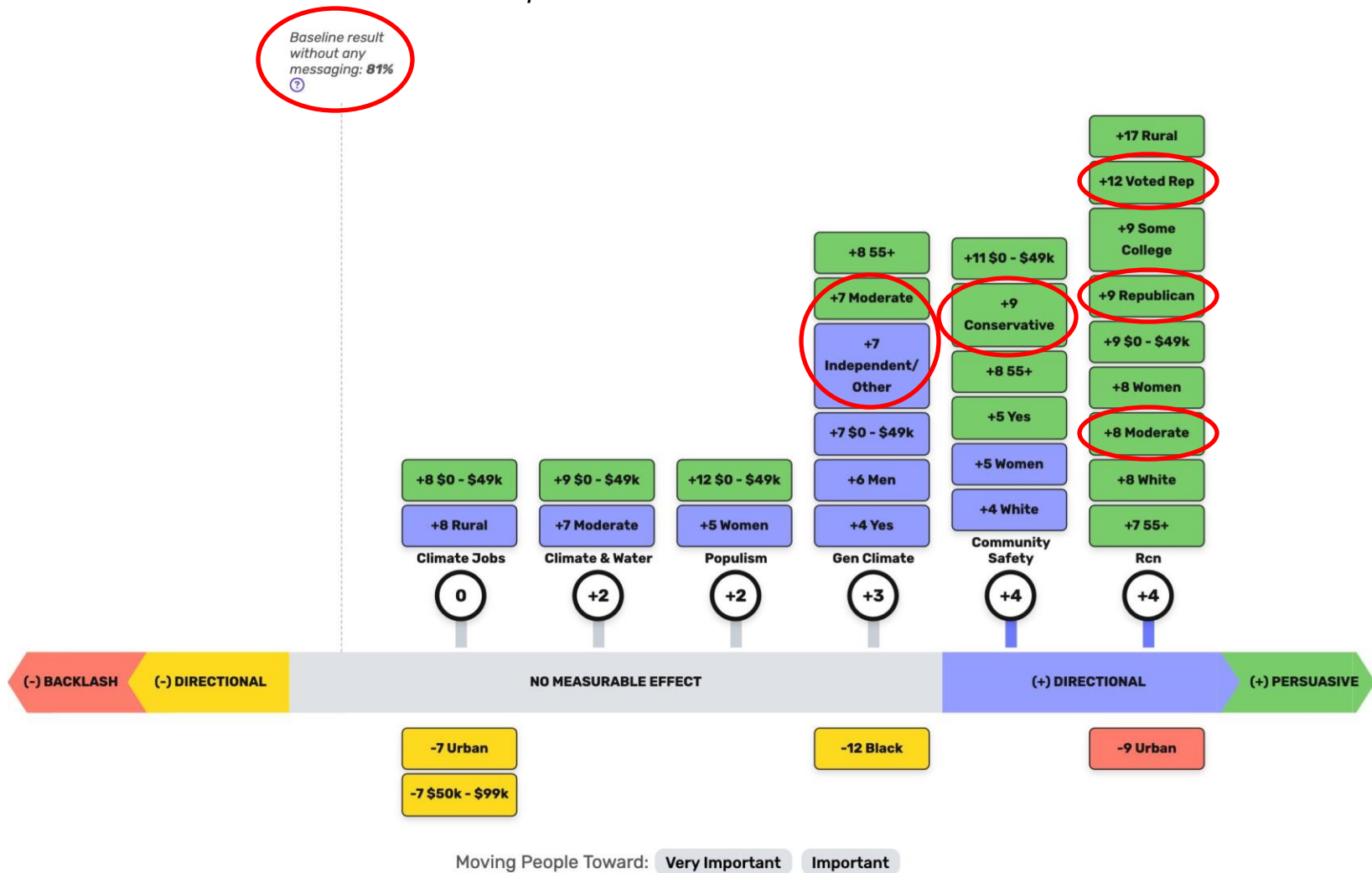


# Importance that Politicians Address Climate Issues





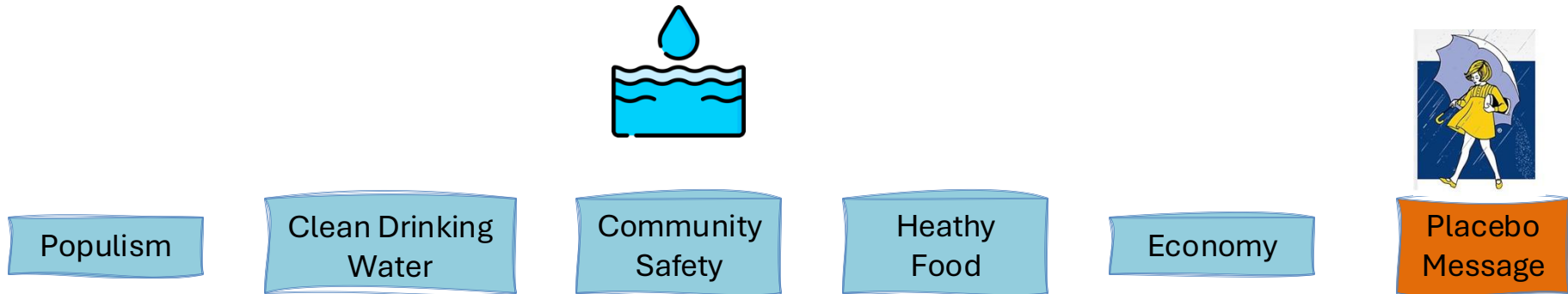
## Importance that Politicians Address Water Issues



# Do Voters Connect Their Water to Rivers?

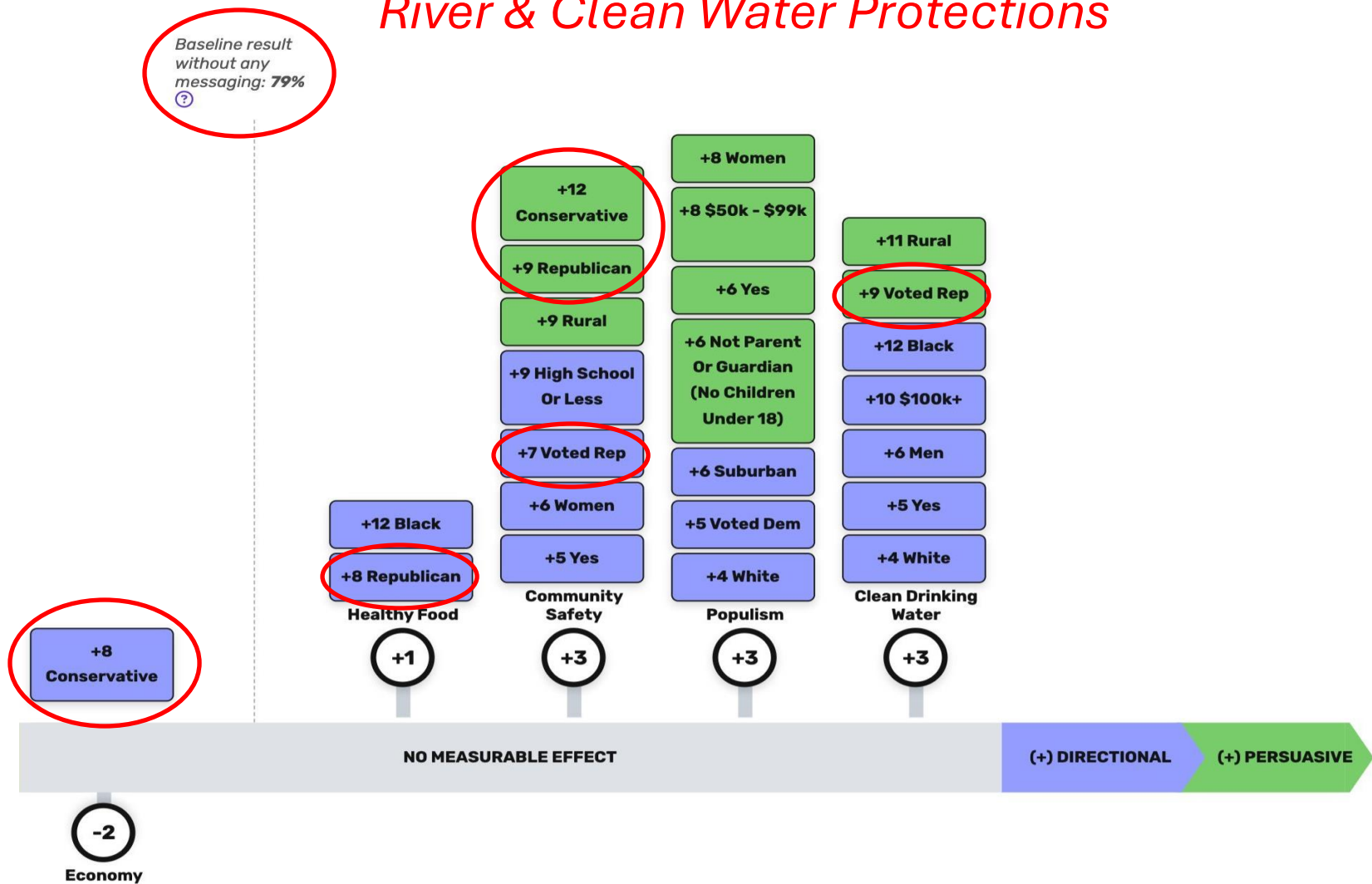
Methodology: Compare 5 messages, asking respondents about protecting rivers as sources of clean water and priority to other household issues.

What we learned: Voters are less enthusiastic about the connection between rivers and clean water, but some key insights exist. Overall, rivers and clean water are less prominent as voting issues, but again, some key insights show signs that motivation can improve.



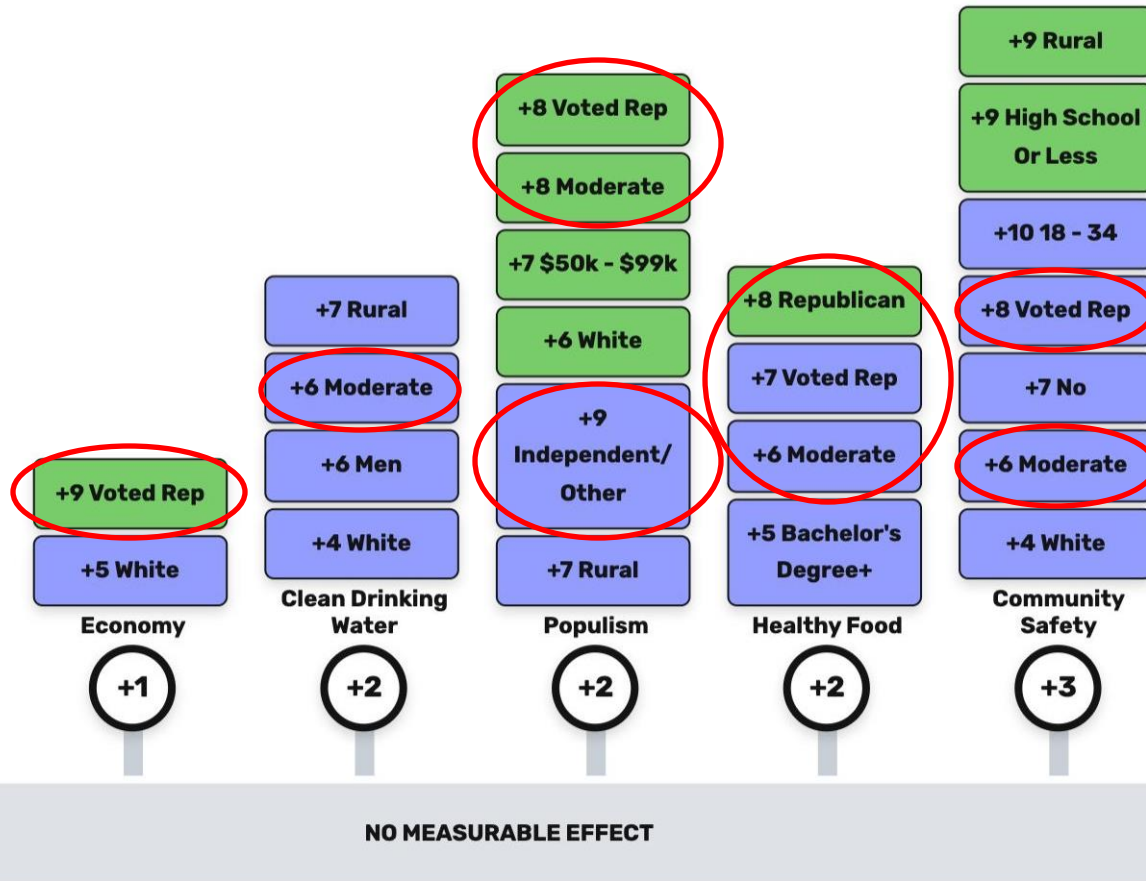
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# Likelihood to Vote for Politicians who *Strengthen River & Clean Water Protections*



# Agree that *Politicians Should Do More to Protect Rivers* as Sources of Clean Water and Natural Resources

Baseline result  
without any  
messaging: 82%  
?





# In Summary...

- Through 5 different, coordinated tests, water is shown to be a unifying, bi-partisan topic in various ways across age, gender, urbanicity, and political ideology
  - *But has a ways to go to be at the level of top-of-mind issues among voters*
- The typical “water voter” is generally middle-age and older, Moderate or Conservative leaning, responsive to messages about protecting clean, safe, reliable drinking water and cites a connection to rivers.
- From a message performance standpoint, Populism and Race Class Narrative messages are overall most persuasive, but all six of the messages tested were more persuasive than the “baseline” message (placebo about Morton’s Salt)
- Water-related messages are effective at persuading voters to consider action on both climate AND water issues, more so than climate messages on their own.
- The connection between water resources and rivers is less prominent among these voters, but signals that there is room to grow and elevate that connection moving forward.

*Thank you for your  
time and attention...*



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# Water Messaging & Insights Pathway

*It's not about the tests we are running, its about the questions we are answering...*

Question:	Insights:	Especially Among:
Does negative messaging around water suppress voter preference for candidates?	<i>Yes! Tests demonstrate that candidate choice is significantly suppressed when presented with negative water messaging</i>	Women, lower income households, people who lean Democratic or Independent
What does a "typical" water voter look like and what messages might they be most responsive to?	<i>They typically are older, Moderate or Conservative leaning, responsive to messages about protecting clean, safe, reliable drinking water and connection to rivers. Water is a unifying message!</i>	Skews older, middle or lower income, Moderate or Conservative ideology, aware of weather concerns (surrogate for climate)
Among many ways to think about water, what resonates the most, and what is most persuasive?	<i>Themes around <u>Populism</u>, <u>Community Safety</u>, and <u>Race-Class Narrative</u> are the most persuasive</i>	Moderate and Conservative voters, persuasive across many demographics
Is there carryover to other topics? How effective are our most persuasive water messages when talking about climate, for instance?	<i>Yes! Water messages move voters to act on climate nearly as effectively as climate messages. And of course, water messages persuade voters to act on water issues.</i>	Various themes touched various demographics, but water-related messages supported climate messages nearly across the board.
In voters minds, how does "water" connect to rivers? How does persuasive water messaging translate to river protection/clean water threats?	<i>Yes! All our river and clean water messages receive strong support around politicians who advocate for rivers and clean water protections and voters say leaders should do more. There is room to grow importance of water as a top-tier issue, however.</i>	

# Messages Tested: *(Respondents were exposed to only one message)*

## **Water Messages:**

Community Safety: Our homes and livelihoods are getting wiped out from threats to our water, whether it is destructive weather, crumbling infrastructure, or polluters who put our drinking water at risk. We need leaders who will protect our water and safety by investing in our communities so our families and businesses can stay protected in the face of disasters.

Populism: Clean water isn't a luxury, it's a right that belongs to all of us, not just the wealthy or the powerful. We pay our taxes, and we deserve clean, safe water in return. But right now, big corporations and special interests are putting their profits ahead of our health and safety. We need leaders who will stand up for the people, not bow to the elite. By electing candidates who fight for clean, affordable water, we're taking back control of what's rightfully ours.

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## **Climate Messages:**

General Climate: Climate change is the defining challenge of our time. Record-breaking heat, devastating wildfires, wildlife extinction, and extreme storms threaten our safety, health, and future. But we have solutions. Bold action now can prevent the worst impacts of climate change and secure a healthier, more sustainable future. We must demand our elected leaders act on climate and protect the planet for all of us, including the generations to come.

Climate Jobs: The climate crisis isn't just an environmental challenge, it's an economic opportunity. Clean energy is already creating millions of good-paying, stable jobs across the country. By investing in this growing industry, we can build a stronger, more resilient economy for everyone. We need elected officials who will champion clean energy jobs and create a prosperous future for our families and communities.

Climate & Water: Extreme weather is fueling a water crisis. From worsening floods and hurricanes that destroy homes, to droughts that deplete water supplies for farms and families, livelihoods are at risk across the country. Every community deserves clean, reliable water and every community deserves leaders who will fight for solutions. Our elected leaders must commit to action to ensure clean water and public safety for all.

## **Placebo Message:**

Morton Salt: Morton Salt has over 20 production facilities across the U.S., Canada and the Bahamas, each devoted to bringing you the high-quality products you expect.










## Message Performance above Baseline



# Research Completed To Date...

What	When	Why	Who
Rapid Message Test (RMT #1)	July 2024	Evaluate water messaging's potential to reduce voter support for harmful policies or candidates.	NJ-2 and MI-10 registered voters 
Audience Understanding Survey (AUS)  Online/Quant. Focus Group	September 2024	Evaluate voter perspectives, opinions, and hopes about water & society to identify message themes for testing. Random choice and open-ended formats	Registered voters nationwide (n=600) 
Rapid Message Test (RMT #2)	October 2024	Test themes from AUS to determine strongest <i>water persuasion</i> messages	Registered voter nationwide (n=3,220) 
Rapid Message Test (RMT #3)	November 2024	Compare 3 best performing <i>water</i> messages to 3 well-designed <i>climate</i> messages	Registered voter nationwide (n=2,819) 
Rapid Message Test (RMT #4)	January 2025	Evaluate people's connection between <i>clean water</i> and <i>rivers</i>	Registered voter nationwide (n=2,421) 
Custom quantitative research project - National	TBD, by need...	National look at people's connection to water and rivers, potential threats to loss of protection or water quality.	Registered voters nationwide (N=1,000)

# July RMT #1

*Purpose:* *Evaluate water messaging's potential to reduce voter support for harmful policies or candidates*

*What we learned:* Negative water messaging can depress candidate support.

- Drinking water-focused accountability messages are quite persuasive when attempting to lower favorability for a particular candidate.
- In Michigan, our ads lowered favorability for John James by 13%, and in New Jersey, favorability for Vandrew decreased by 29%
- Additionally, the ads decreased stated likelihood of voting for each by 7 points.

# October RMT #2

Purpose: *Test themes from AUS to determine strongest water mobilization messages*

What we learned: *Populism and Race Class Narrative messages are overall very persuasive, but all six of our messages were more persuasive than the “baseline” message (placebo about Morton’s Salt)*

- Support for clean water messages is high before message exposure.
- Race Class Narrative is most persuasive for 18–34-year-olds, but Populism is best for 55+
- Populism was popular across all genders, incomes, and political ideologies.