

To: Interested Parties

From: Global Strategy Group & Accountable.US

Date: November 10th, 2023

Re: NEW POLLING—Administration Has Positive Story To Tell On Consumer Protection, Lowering Costs

Americans across political, geographic, and demographic lines cite rising costs as the most pressing issue facing the country today. They are very receptive, however, to new information about the Biden Administration's efforts to lower costs by cracking down on corporate price gouging, including banning junk fees. Americans – including a large segment of disaffected Democrats and independents – believe policies being pursued by the Administration via the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau will lower costs “for people like me” and crucially, these policies can illustrate how Democrats are fighting on the side of consumers instead of corporations.

Key Findings

Costs remain Americans' top concern, and most believe the Administration's work to crack down on “price gouging” and eliminate “hidden junk fees” will lower costs for them. Two thirds (68%) say hidden junk fees are a growing problem, and 60% also believe “crack[ing] down on price gouging by banning hidden junk fees” would be effective at lowering costs.

The work to protect consumers and hold corporations accountable is a powerful proof point for Americans that the Administration and congressional Democrats are siding with consumers and against corporate greed. People already see President Biden as the leader more likely to stand for consumers over corporations, and corporate accountability is an area where Biden and Democrats in Congress have more credibility. By advocating for consumers when so much in the economy seems to be driven by corporate greed, the Administration and its allies can provide a bridge between their strengths and Americans' top priorities.

It is important to tie banning hidden junk fees to *cracking down on corporate price gouging*. Amid broadly rising prices, tackling junk fees alone is not the top priority – and in fact, in our focus groups we found “junk fees” to be an unfamiliar term, when used without a definition or the “hidden” prefix. But the message around the CFPB and junk fees is just as believable (if not more) as the message around CFPB's other efforts to help consumers, focused on unfair practices, fraud, and scams. Moreover, junk fees can – and should – be brought up alongside efforts to lower prices by *cracking down on corporate price gouging*. This gives advocates something to say on an issue where Americans are skeptical of the Administration and congressional Democrats (inflation), in terms where they have credibility (consumer protection, corporate accountability) and can provide proof points (cracking down on price gouging via junk fees).

A few themes rise above the rest as both most important and the best fit for the Administration and congressional Democrats: holding corporations accountable, protecting consumers, and lowering costs

Importance v. Net Trust in Biden/Democrats on Economic Issues



Advocates should define the debate as protecting consumers instead of corporations, something that President Biden and Democrats in Congress will do, and Republicans will not. The persuadable population on these issues – a mix of financially stressed Democrats, independents, and non-MAGA Republicans (detailed below) – gravitate towards an over-arching slogan of “protects consumers, not corporations” rather than alternatives about “real results”, “ban junk fees”, or “government” that’s on your side. When they hear about the efforts on junk fees and price gouging, they become more certain the CFPB will significantly lower the costs they personally face. Importantly, this is not just a debate about protecting consumers, it’s about fighting on their side instead of protecting the corporations. Americans also believe these corporate special interests have congressional Republicans in their pockets, and that because of this, congressional Republicans will oppose these efforts at every turn.

A critical segment of the public is stressed by rising prices but come to see pro-consumer efforts as likely to lower costs “for people like me.” Around 1 in 5 adults are not highly partisan, are highly sensitive to inflation, and expect the CFPB’s efforts will help them personally. This includes a disproportionate number of people of color and “disaffected” Democrats (the slice of Democrats who disapprove of Biden on the economy).

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Global Strategy Group conducted three focus groups among Black, Hispanic/Latino, and white adults – all with no four year college degree, followed by an online survey. For the survey, GSG conducted 1,202 interviews, including 1,001 registered voters nationwide and 225 interviews with registered voters in the 18 districts won by Joe Biden and a Congressional Republican (including an oversample of 201 with this group) between October 13th and October 19th, 2023. The survey has a margin of error of +/-3.1%. The margin of error on sub-samples is greater. Care has been taken to ensure the geographic, political, and demographic divisions of the population of registered voters are properly represented.



Protecting Consumers & Lowering Costs

Survey Analysis for
Accountable.US

Accountable.US

Research Methodology

Focus Groups

Global Strategy Group conducted **three focus groups on issues surrounding the economy** and the CFPB on September 27th and September 28th, 2023.

Participants in these groups were registered voters with less than a four-year college degree. The groups were segmented by race, with one group each with white, Black, and Hispanic/Latino voters.

Survey

Global Strategy Group conducted an online survey of 1,202 total interviews, including **1,001 registered voters nationwide and 225 interviews with registered voters in the 18 districts won by Joe Biden and a Congressional Republican** (including an oversample of 201 interviews with this group), between October 13th and October 19th, 2023.

The margin of error at the 95% confidence level is +/- 3.1%. The margin of error on sub-samples is greater.

Key Findings

- **Costs remain voters' top concern, and voters believe the administration's work to crack down on "price gouging" and eliminate "hidden junk fees" will lower costs for them.** Two thirds of the public say hidden junk fees are a growing problem, and most also believe banning them can help lower costs. The strongest language ties the highly salient problem of "price gouging" to the ban on junk fees.
- **The administration's work to protect consumers and hold corporations accountable is a powerful proof point for Americans that the administration is siding with consumers and against corporate greed.** People already see the administration and its allies in Congress as more likely to stand for consumers over corporations, and corporate accountability is an area where Biden has more credibility. By advocating for consumers when so much in the economy seems to be driven by corporate greed, the administration can provide a bridge between their strengths and salient problems Americans are facing – including rising costs.
- **There is a critical segment of the public who come to see the pro-consumer efforts as positive and likely to lower costs "for people like me."** This mix of independents and less ideological voters in both parties, who are experiencing major and moderate stress as it relates to rising prices – but respond positively after hearing about the work of the CFPB – make up 1 in 5 voters. They are disproportionately moderate, Black and Hispanic.



Issue Landscape

Overwhelmingly, Americans say scams and junk fees have become more common

Do you think scams or deceptive practices that take advantage of consumers have become...



Do you think hidden or unfair fees for goods and services, also known as “junk fees”, have become...

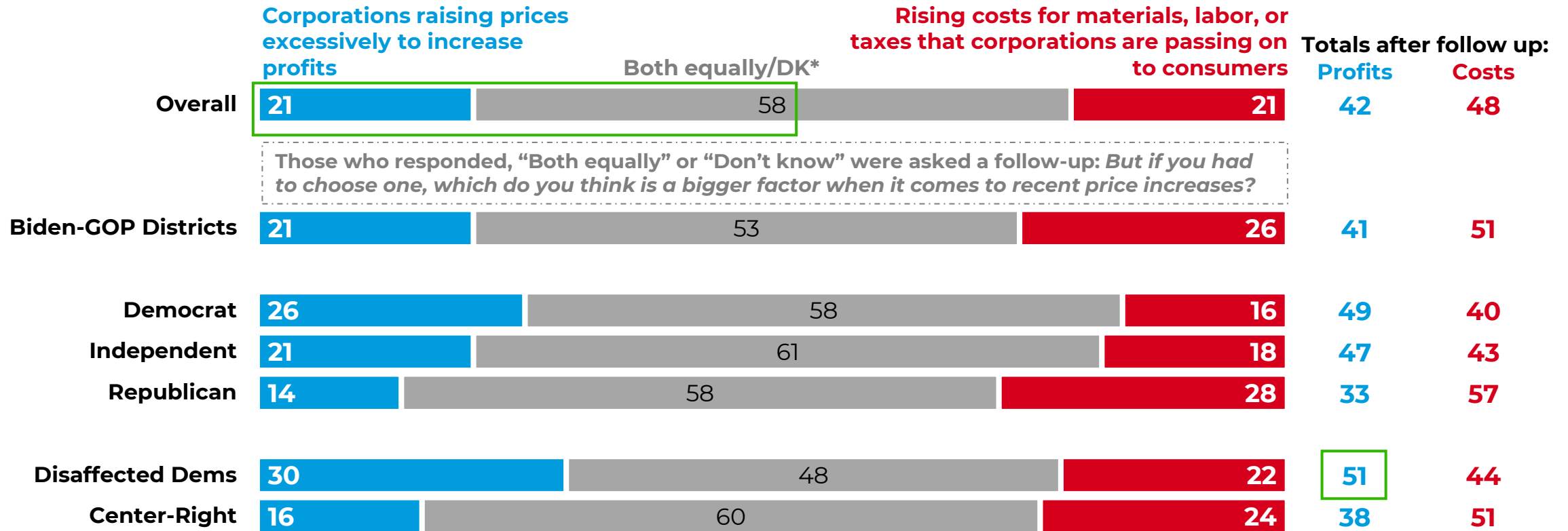


*Disaffected Democrats disapprove of Biden’s handling of the economy. Center-right are independents and not-very-conservative Republicans.



Americans have nuanced views on inflation, though most believe corporations raising prices “excessively” is a major driver

Thinking more about recent price increases, do you think this is usually caused by...

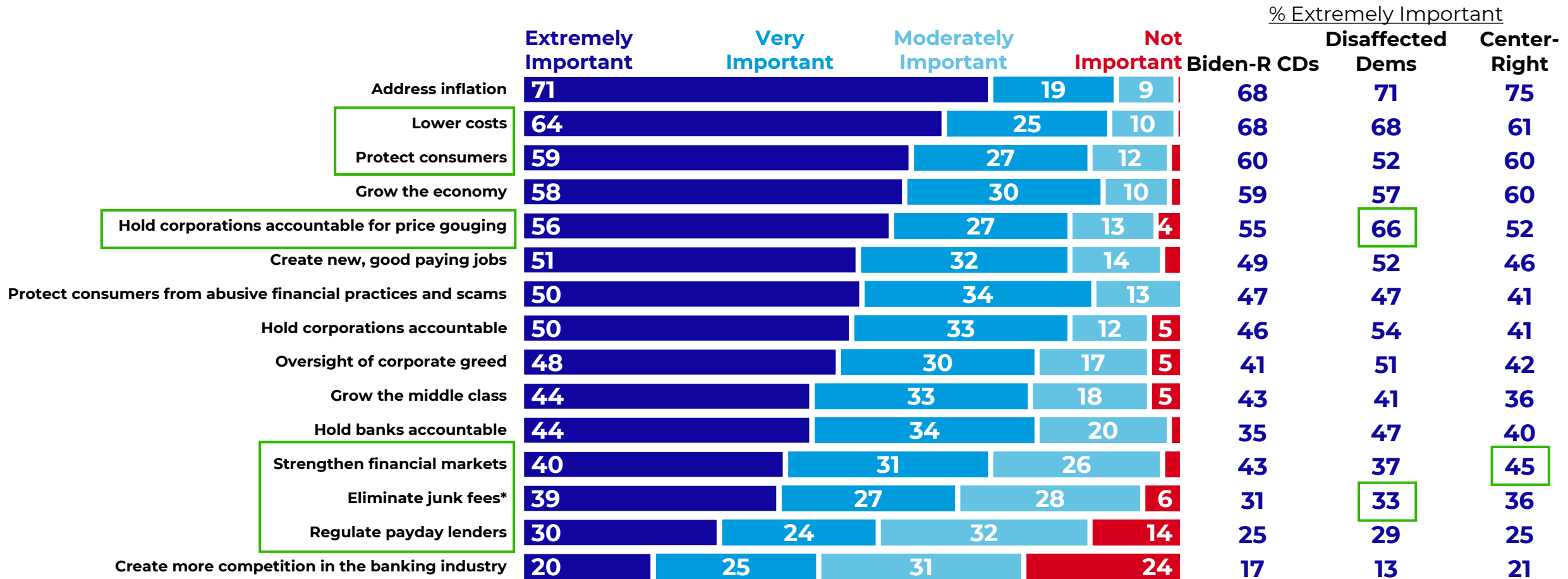


“It’s almost like each industry each is having their turn to get us. It seems like **each time a price of one thing goes down, the price goes up on something else – because it’s greed. I believe it’s greed 100%.**”

– Focus Group Participant (White non-college man, Pennsylvania)

On its own, banning junk fees is not highly salient. It needs to be defined and, ideally, tied to the top priorities – lowering costs and protecting consumers vs. corporations

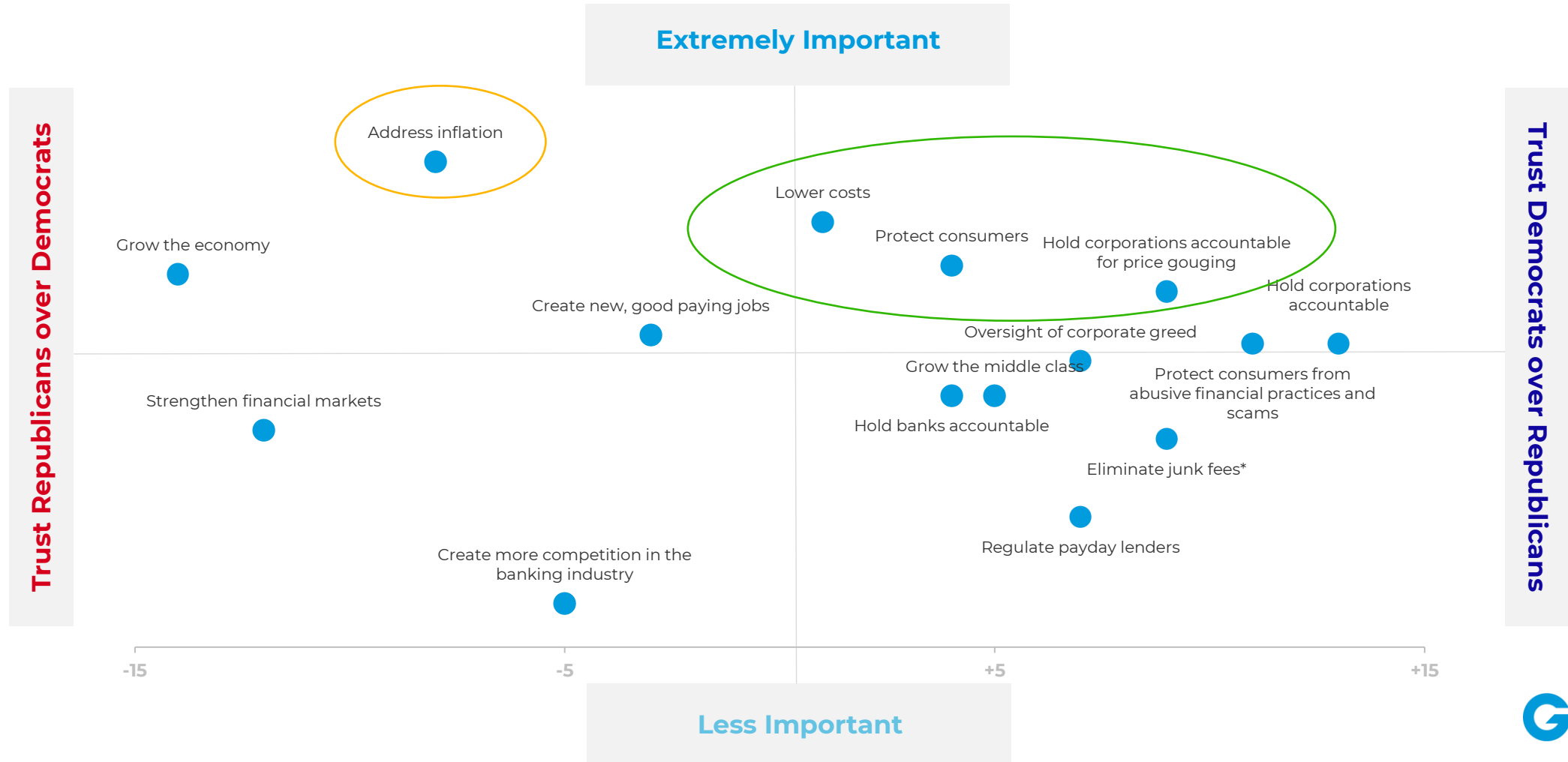
Please indicate how important each is for you as priorities for Congress and the President



*The sample was split, with half asked, “Eliminate **hidden junk fees**,” while the other half was also given a definition (“**hidden fees that aren’t listed on the upfront price**”). Including the definition raised the importance of taking on junk fees (71% Important with definition; 61% Important without).

A few themes rise above the rest as both most important, and the best fit for the administration: holding corporations accountable, protecting consumers, and lowering costs

Importance v. Net Trust in Biden/Democrats on Economic Issues



The junk fees push should be tied to a crackdown on “price gouging” where possible. This framing will resonate more

If the federal government **cracks down on price gouging by banning hidden junk fees**, how effective do you think it will be in lowering costs for people like you?



If the federal government **bans hidden junk fees**, how effective do you think it will be in lowering costs for people like you?

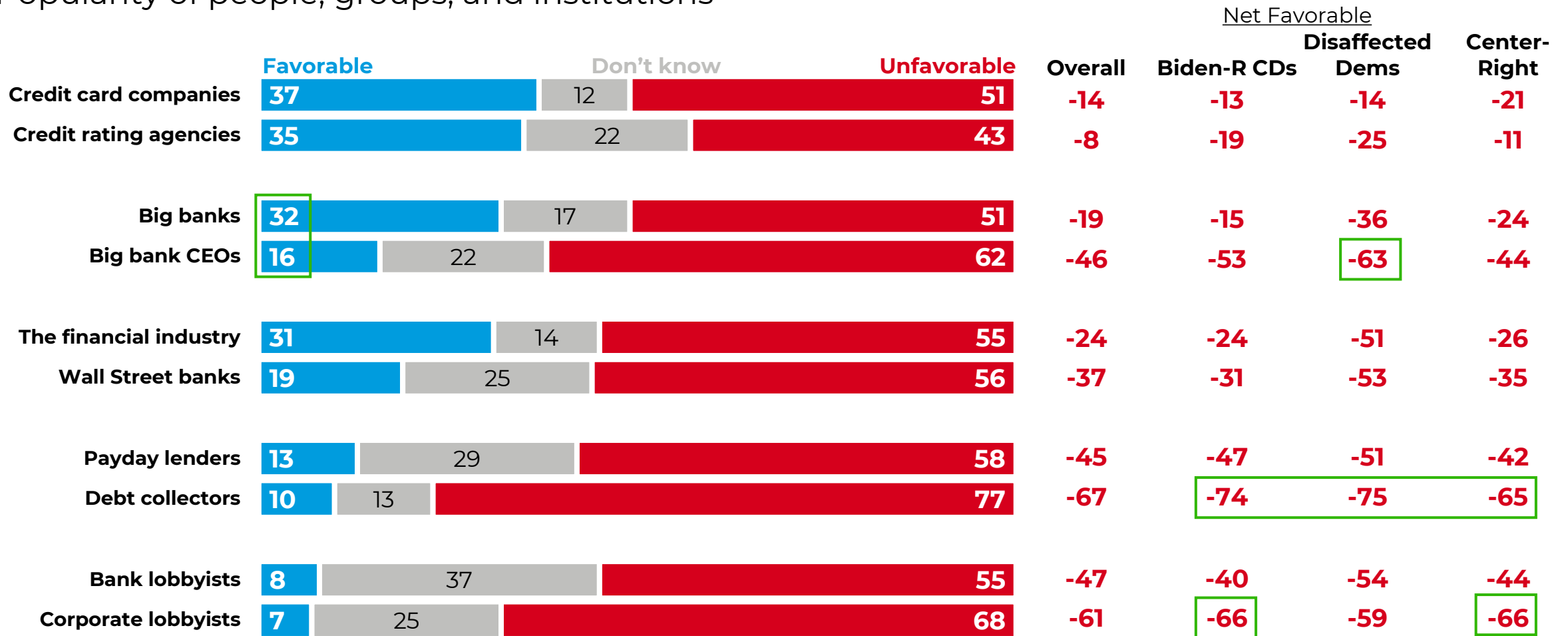


These may sound similar, but which is more important?



Banking/corporate “CEOs” and “lobbyists” find fewer friends than the industries they represent. Debt collectors are also especially unpopular

Popularity of people, groups, and institutions

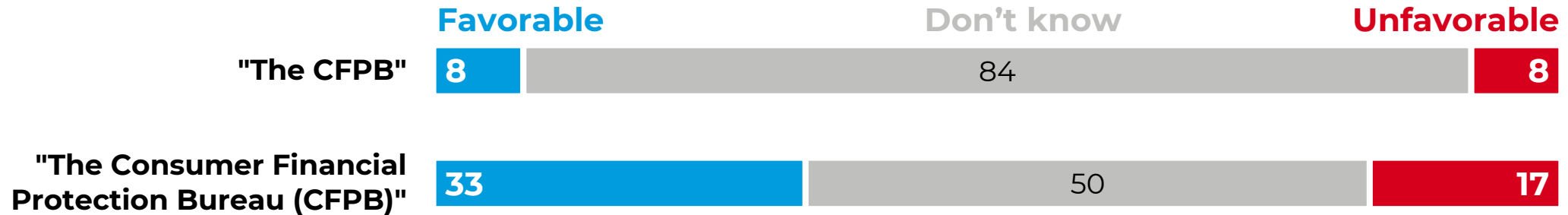




The Role of the CFPB

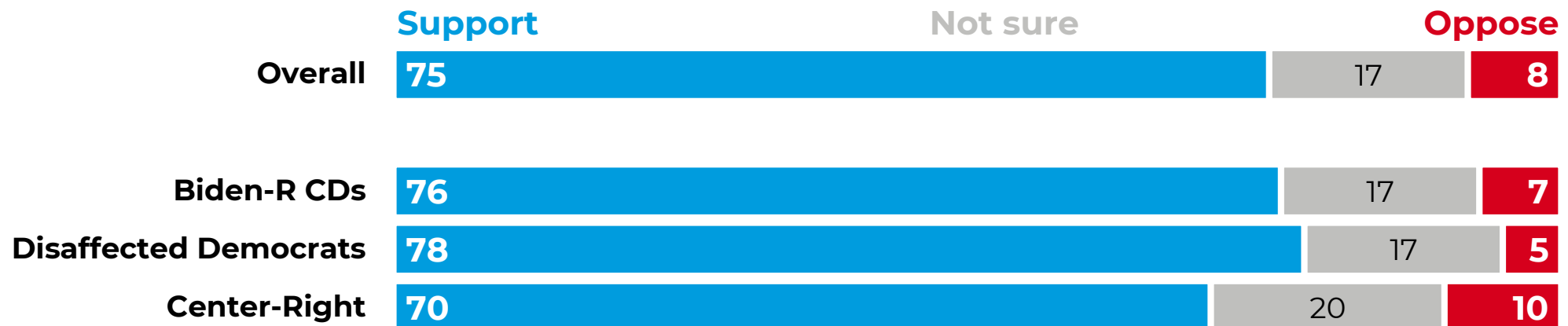
The public is unfamiliar with “the CFPB” but they tend to like the full name, and after learning what it does, they support it overwhelmingly

Initial Favorability



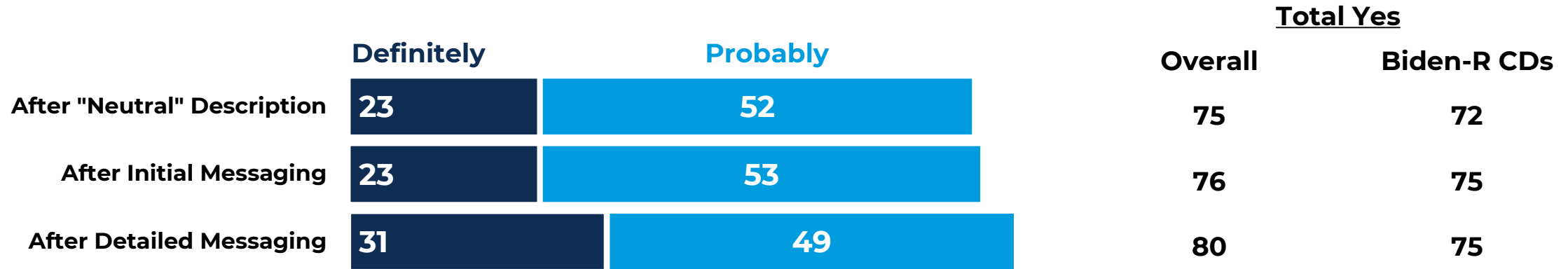
Support for the CFPB with “Neutral” Description

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, or CFPB, is a federal agency. The CFPB writes and enforces rules for financial institutions like banks and lenders to protect consumers from unfair and deceptive practices in mortgages, credit cards, bank accounts, and other financial products and services.

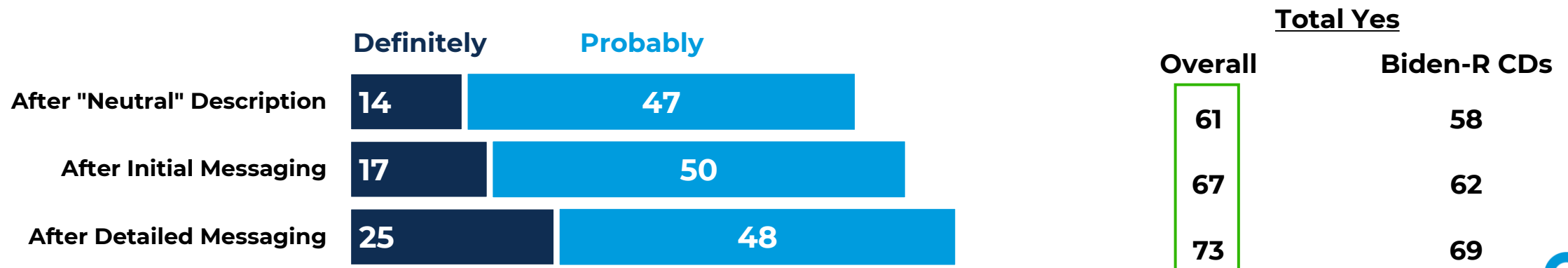


Most see the CFPB as personally beneficial from the start, and support grows as people learn more, especially on costs

Do you think the CFPB's work will **have a positive impact on people like you?**

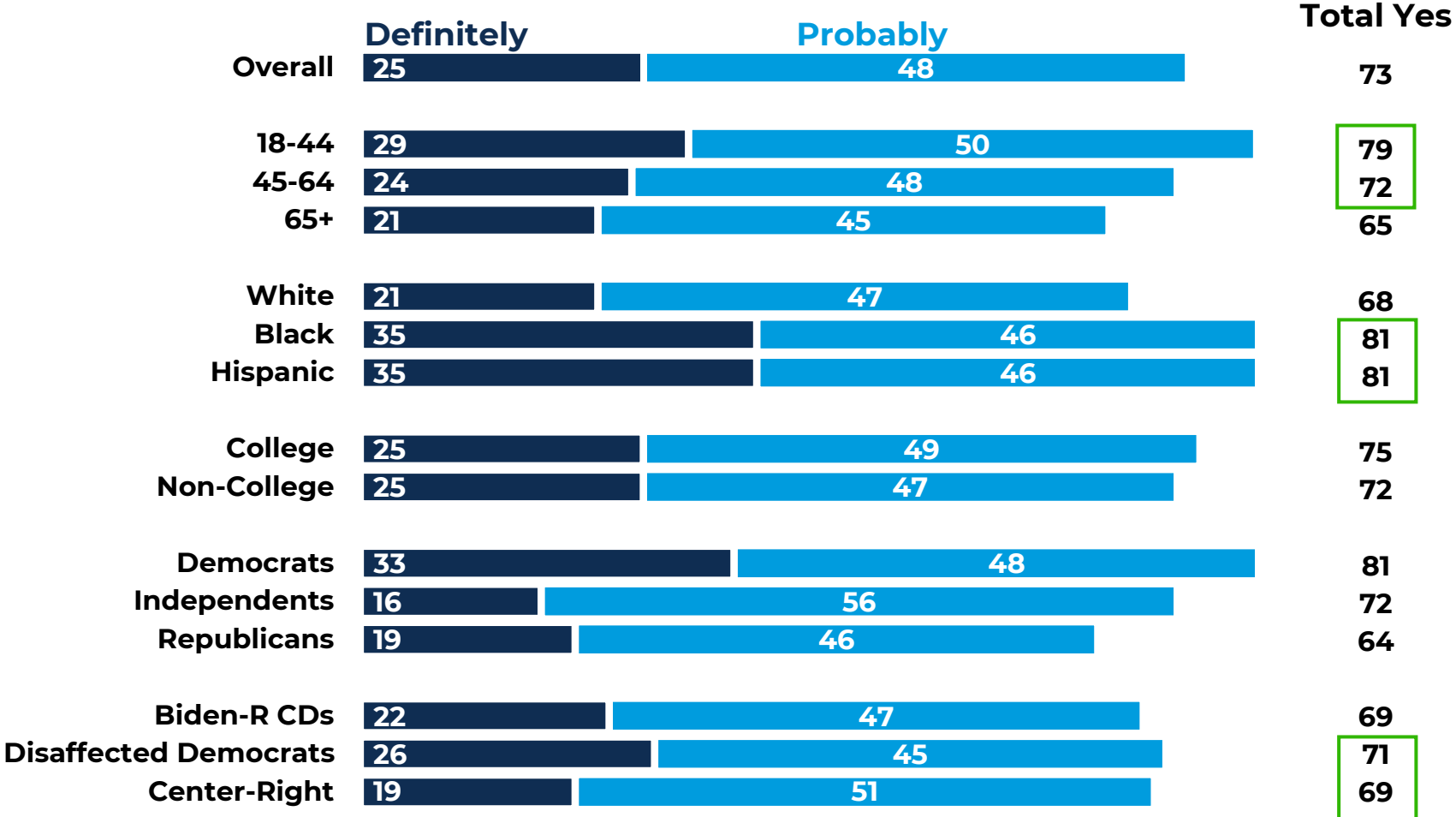


Do you think the CFPB's work will **significantly lower costs for people like you?**



Even disaffected Democrats and Americans on the center-right are highly positive about the administration’s ability to “lower costs” via CFPB

Do you think the CFPB’s work will **significantly lower costs for people like you?** (POST-Messaging)



There is a critical segment of the public – not in a partisan corner but especially stressed by rising prices – who come to expect consumer protection efforts will be positive or lower costs “for people like me”

Economy Targets



Solid

Strong liberal Democrat, or not even moderately stressed about rising prices*

Persuadable & Price Sensitive

Stressed by prices and but not strongly partisan/ideological, and comes to believe CFPB's work will be personally beneficial

Reach

Conservative MAGA Republican or unpersuaded on CFPB

PROFILE:

Moderates/Less Ideological Voters:

- Non-liberal Democrats (38%)
- Independents (34%)
- Disaffected Democrats (33%)
- 2020 non-voters and 3rd Party voters (31%)
- Non-MAGA Republicans (29%)

Black (31%)

Hispanic (28%)

Non-white non-college (28%)

Income <\$50k (26%)

*Overall, 75% of voters cite “rising prices” as a major (46%) or moderate (29%) source of personal financial stress.

Cracking down on price gouging and junk fees is, if anything, slightly more believable than the work on other scams/unfair practices

Junk Fees

The CFPB is working to lower costs for consumers by cracking down on price gouging and eliminating harmful, high-cost hidden junk fees. Junk fees can show up in the form of “service charges” that inflate ticket prices, “resort fees” that increase the cost of hotels, and mystery fees on phone and cable bills. Many Americans encounter junk fees from banks and credit card companies, including fees for late penalties, overdrafts, returns, using an out-of-network ATM, money transfers, inactivity, and more. The CFPB also forces financial companies to be transparent and provide clear information about what consumers will owe and when.

Unfair Practices

The CFPB protects consumers from unfair, deceptive, or abusive practices and takes action against companies that break the law. This includes everything from an initiative to cap excessive credit card fees to a report uncovering illegal collection tactics by payday lenders. Since its founding, the CFPB fields millions of consumer complaints directly and gets corporations to respond when customers have problems, and the agency has secured billions of dollars in relief for millions of U.S. consumers who were ripped off by scams or treated unfairly by banks and other greedy financial firms seeking to turn a profit by taking advantage of people.

	Believable	Very Believable	Believable	Very Believable
<i>Believability</i>	87	33	83	29
	Definitely/Probably	Definitely	Definitely/Probably	Definitely
<i>Positive impact on people like me...</i>	75	22	76	24
	Definitely/Probably	Definitely	Definitely/Probably	Definitely
<i>Will lower costs for me...</i>	68	17	67	17

Persuadables are most convinced to support the administration's consumer protection work when the focus is junk fees or corporate "opponents"

Messages in support of the CFPB

Overall	Biden-R CDs	Disaffected Dems	Center- Right	Persuadable	
32	30	33	26	48	[ACCOUNTABILITY] The CFPB has issued \$4 billion in penalties against companies that broke the law and have put \$17.5 billion back in American's pockets. Without accountability, corporations will never stop trying to bend or break the rules to turn a profit, and U.S. consumers will pay the price, and that's where the CFPB means accountability.
		% Very Convincing			
32	26	37	20	49	[JUNK FEES-LOWER COSTS] The CFPB is working to lower costs for everyday Americans by banning junk fees, such as surprise banking overdraft fees, excessive credit card late fees, or charges for basic services like checking your account balance. By stopping junk fees, the CFPB is putting money back in the pockets of everyday Americans.
29	29	38	22	47	[OPPONENTS] To judge how CFPB puts consumers first, just look who is opposed to the CFPB. Corporate special interests like payday lenders, the big banks, and other corporations who want to boost their profits by cheating everyday people are doing everything they can to eliminate the CFPB, which is how we know it's doing the right thing.
29	36	29	21	47	[JUNK FEES] The CFPB is banning the unfair hidden fees known as "junk fees," such as surprise banking overdraft fees, excessive credit card late fees, or charges for basic services like checking your account balance. By stopping junk fees, the CFPB will put money back in the pockets of everyday Americans.
28	27	29	19	42	[RESULTS] Since the pandemic, the CFPB has been fighting lower costs for Americans. Bounced check fees are down more than 86%, saving consumers nearly \$2 billion. Overall, banking fees are down more than \$5 billion annually compared to pre-pandemic. This is only the beginning, but the CFPB is getting results.

Pushing off of corporate bad actors [OPPONENTS]: 29% very convincing; 41% with movers) is more fruitful than doing so against MAGA [OPPONENTS-MAGA]: 26% very convincing; 33% with movers).

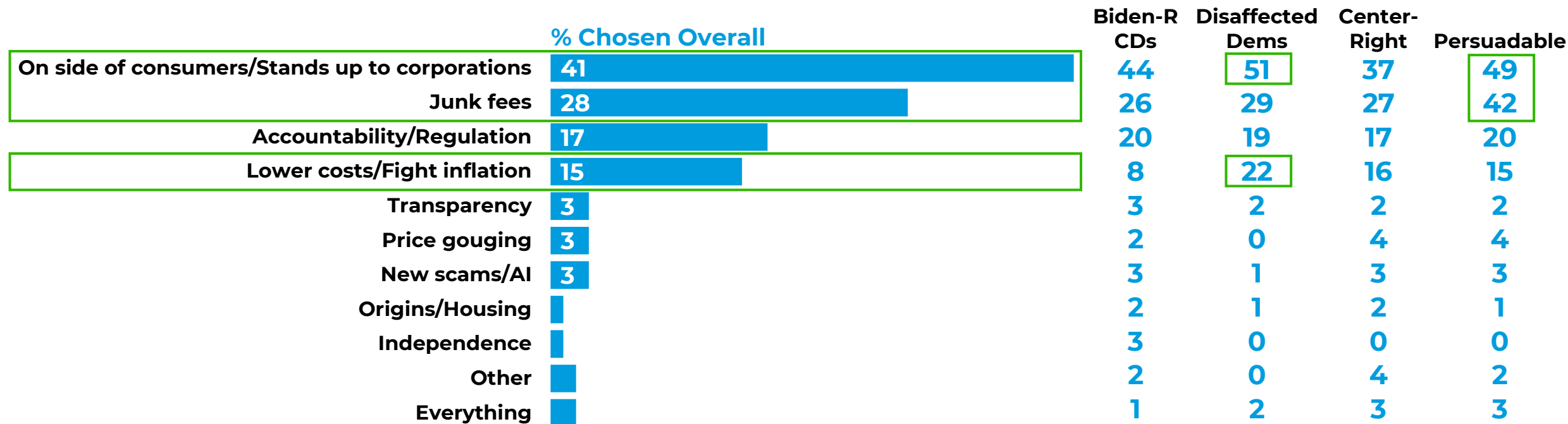
Messages describing the CFPB’s origins and describing a government agency “dedicated” to helping consumers don’t resonate so much

Messages in support of the CFPB

Overall	Biden-R CDs	Disaffected Dems	Center- Right	Persuadable	
28	25	27	21	44	[TRANSPARENCY] The CFPB works to bring transparency to an increasingly complex world of financial products. Banks, lenders, and credit card companies too often disguise what consumers will owe and when, or how to use benefits. By requiring firms to provide clear information, the CFPB enables Americans to make financial decisions with peace of mind.
		<i>% Very Convincing</i>			
28	31	26	23	41	[NEW SCAMS] Changes in technology like A.I. and new financial apps are making it easier for scammers to trick their victims or impersonate them, making a growing number of American families vulnerable. With the CFPB, Americans have an agency whose job it is to create tools and regulations that tackle new forms of scams and fraud from proliferating.
27	27	28	20	42	[ORIGINS] The CFPB was created in 2010 after a housing crash and financial crisis showed us the risk of letting big banks and predatory mortgage lending go unchecked. It led to a housing crisis where 10 million Americans lost their homes and communities across the country were devastated. The CFPB was created to prevent that from ever happening again.
27	25	26	19	44	[DEDICATED AGENCY] The CFPB means someone is on your side, instead of protecting the bottom line of powerful corporations and special interests at the expense of consumers. With the CFPB, American families have an agency dedicated to answering consumer complaints, rooting out bad behavior, and helping Americans navigate financial decisions.
26	25	30	15	43	[OPPONENTS-MAGA] To judge how CFPB puts consumers first, just look who is opposed to the CFPB. Corporate special interests like payday lenders and the big banks have joined with MAGA Republicans to eliminate the CFPB. It's all part of an extreme MAGA agenda that serves big corporations at the expense of middle class and working people.

In their own words, voters emphasize importance of standing on the side of consumers vs. corporations and “junk fees” once link with costs is established

What one or two things do you find most appealing about the CFPB's work? [OPEN END]



Selected Responses:

“I like that the CFPB is on **consumer’s side**. They are trying to reduce scams, fraud and junk fees.” – Black non-college woman

“The CFPB is working to actively oppose and regulate big corporations from **protecting their bottom line at the cost of consumers** and the constitution. Big companies are all about greed and I’m glad that there’s some sort of checks/balances happening to mitigate that.” – White non-college woman

“They actively hunt corporations and try to **force them to lower prices and delete hidden fees** which in turn lowers the price of cost of living everywhere.” – White non-college man

The push on junk fees is most believable AND strong evidence of standing up to corporations

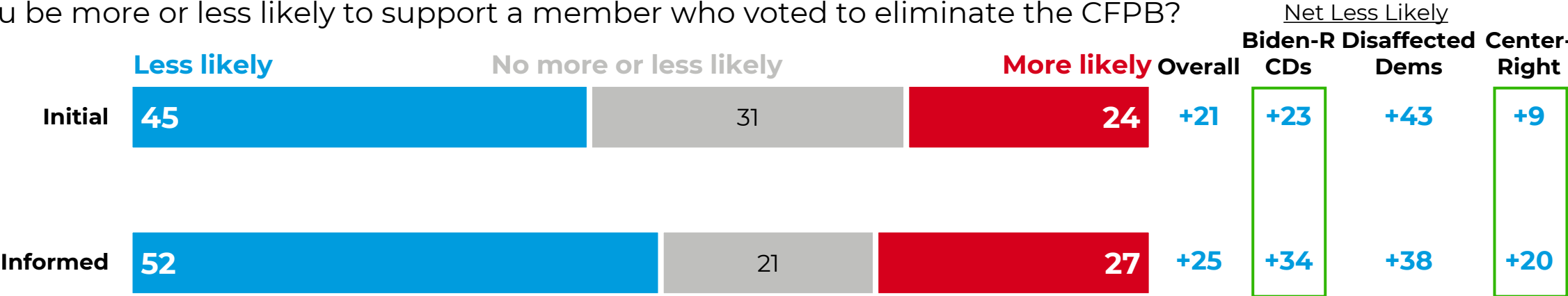
CFPB Proof Points – Evidence of Standing up to Corporations* and Believability

	<u>Overall</u>		<u>Persuadable</u>	
	Good Evidence *	Believable	Good Evidence	Believable
Banning junk fees	58	47	68	47
Regulating outrageous interest rates and deceptive tactics by the payday lending industry	43	39	43	38
Going after consumer banks that charge surprise overdraft or depositor fees	37	34	39	36
Fining big banks billions of dollars for breaking the law	37	33	48	40
Forcing credit card companies to provide clear information about fees and benefits	35	40	31	34
Going after mortgage lenders and servicers who charge hidden fees	27	31	34	36
Fielding millions of customer complaints from consumers and getting companies to respond	18	28	16	33
Rooting out discrimination by credit rating agencies and suing them for deceptive sales tactics	15	19	11	24

* Full question text: Which THREE of the following provide the strongest evidence that the CFPB is willing to stand up to corporations who are hurting consumers?

Members could pay a political price for opposing the CFPB, and public already perceives GOP position to be putting corporate interests first

Would you be more or less likely to support a member who voted to eliminate the CFPB?



Which do you think is the bigger reasons Republicans in Congress oppose the CFPB?



This was asked in a split sample test against a version pushing off of “Wall Street campaign donors” specifically, though the results were nearly identical (53% what corporations want them to do / 24% ineffective and waste of money).



Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusions & Recommendations

It's about Consumer Protection – and lowering costs – not CFPB. The agency's mission is widely popular. Unsurprisingly, its acronym is not. In addition, focusing only on “financial scams and abuse” undersells the scope of the agency's work and by extension, the Biden Administration's work. Ultimately, scams play only a bit part in the financial challenges families, which are dominated by the problem of rising costs. A focus on standing up to corporations and corporate price gouging speaks to these deeper concerns.

Communicate about banning hidden junk fees AND cracking down on corporate price gouging. Amid broadly rising prices, junk fees alone don't have the same salience with the public – and in fact, in our focus groups the term is largely unfamiliar without a definition or the “hidden” prefix – though they have much more potential than “scams.” Moreover, the message around junk fees is just as believable (if not more) as the message around CFPB's other efforts to help consumers, focused on “unfair practices” and scams. Junk fees should be brought up alongside efforts to lower prices by cracking down on corporate price gouging. This gives the administration and their allies something to say on an issue where they may lack credibility (inflation), in terms where they have credibility (consumer protection, corporate accountability) and can provide proof points (cracking down on price gouging via junk fees).

Define the debate as protecting consumers instead of corporations. The persuadable population on these issues – a mix of financially stressed Democrats, independents, and Republicans – gravitate towards a “consumers not corporations” slogan. When they hear about the efforts on junk fees and price gouging, they become more certain the CFPB will impact them positively and significantly lower the costs they personally face. Importantly, this is not just a debate about protecting consumers, its about fighting on their side instead of protecting the corporations (who have elected Republicans in their pockets).

Messaging Framework

What is happening: Too many corporations are motivated by greed and are price gouging consumers with hidden junk fees. By cracking down on price gouging and banning junk fees, the Biden Administration is taking the side of consumers instead of corporations, and the same corporate special interests that profit from rising prices are doing everything they can to stop it.

Who is doing it: The Biden Administration is behind the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which is siding with consumers and holding Big Bank CEOs and corporate lobbyists accountable. Influential Republican members of Congress are in the pocket of the CEOs and lobbyists, so they are trying to weaken the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

Why: Without accountability, corporations will never stop trying to bend or break the rules to turn a profit, and American consumers will pay the price. By stopping junk fees and price gouging, the Biden Administration is holding corporations accountable and putting money back in the pockets of everyday people.

Thank You

New York

Washington, DC

Hartford

Chicago

Denver

Seattle