

**TO:** Interested Parties

**FROM:** Sean McElwee  
*Co-Founder of Data for Progress*

# JOE BIDEN'S "ELECTABILITY"

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

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This memo outlines a series of informational statements posed to a representative sample of US voters designed to assess support for likely Presidential candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump. These statements, presented below, contained information about the past votes and political history. Immediately before and immediately after the statements, voters were asked if they would support Joe Biden, Donald Trump, someone else, or if they would stay home.

Prior to receiving the statements, 39.4 percent of voters reported they would support Joe Biden and 39.2 percent reported they would support Donald Trump (or 50.1-49.9 in the two-party vote). After receiving the statements, 34.2 percent of voters reported they would support Joe Biden and 39.4 percent reported they would support Donald Trump (or 46.5-53.5 in the two-party vote). One of Data for Progress' polling partners

fielded the survey from March 30, 2019 to April 7, 2019 using an online panel. The sample size of the survey was 1,309 and the margin of error of the survey is 3.1 percent. The survey was weighted to be nationally representative of the population of US voters by age, race, sex, and education.

- ▶ Among all women voters, 7 percent move from supporting Biden to supporting "someone else" after hearing the statements. This 7 percent movement among all women represents an 18 percent loss of Joe Biden's women voters, or a roughly 4 percent loss among the total electorate.
- ▶ Among black Millennial voters, the statements move 9 percent of all black Millennial voters from Biden to "someone else," which is roughly 17 percent of Biden's black Millennial supporters.
- ▶ Among all women Millennial voters, the statements move 8 percent of all Millennial women voters from Biden to "someone else" -- this is roughly one in six Millennial women Biden voters.

## BACKGROUND

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This early in a primary election cycle, voters do not yet have a full picture of the general election context. Typically, the share of voters reporting they will vote for a third party or write-in candidate at this point in an election cycle is overstated. But voters who report this are statistically more likely to either stay home or not vote (cite from chap 2, section 1). Here, consider voters who report they are likely to vote “for someone else” to be more likely to actually stay home on election day. Due to the general uncertainty in the nature of the general election this far from the nomination, we also focus on the two-party vote share among each candidate.

## THE STATEMENTS

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### *Taxes/the economy*

In 2005, Joe Biden voted to roll back bankruptcy protections, a move that disproportionately harmed women and single parents by forcing women who are owed child support to negotiate with credit card companies rather than with individuals. Studies later showed the same legislation prevented thousands of households from getting “clean-slate bankruptcies” during the Great Recession, deepening the crisis for many families.

In 2017 Trump and Congressional Republicans passed a series of tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations, with the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center showing that the bill actually slightly raised taxes on the lowest income brackets. Further data showed corporations mostly used the tax cuts for stock buybacks for investors, rather than to hire or increase wages.

For each candidate, how concerned or unconcerned are you with what you just read?

### *Iraq/foreign policy*

In 2002, Joe Biden voted for the authorization for the use of military force in Iraq, lending support to a war now widely believed to be a costly mistake. The war led to the rise of ISIS, but Biden has stood by his vote.

In 2017, the Trump Administration announced the United States would withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, leaving our European allies to manage enforcement and granting Iran significant leeway to alter its defense arrangements. Trump has removed the United States’ place at the table of one of the most important joint security negotiations of the 21st century.

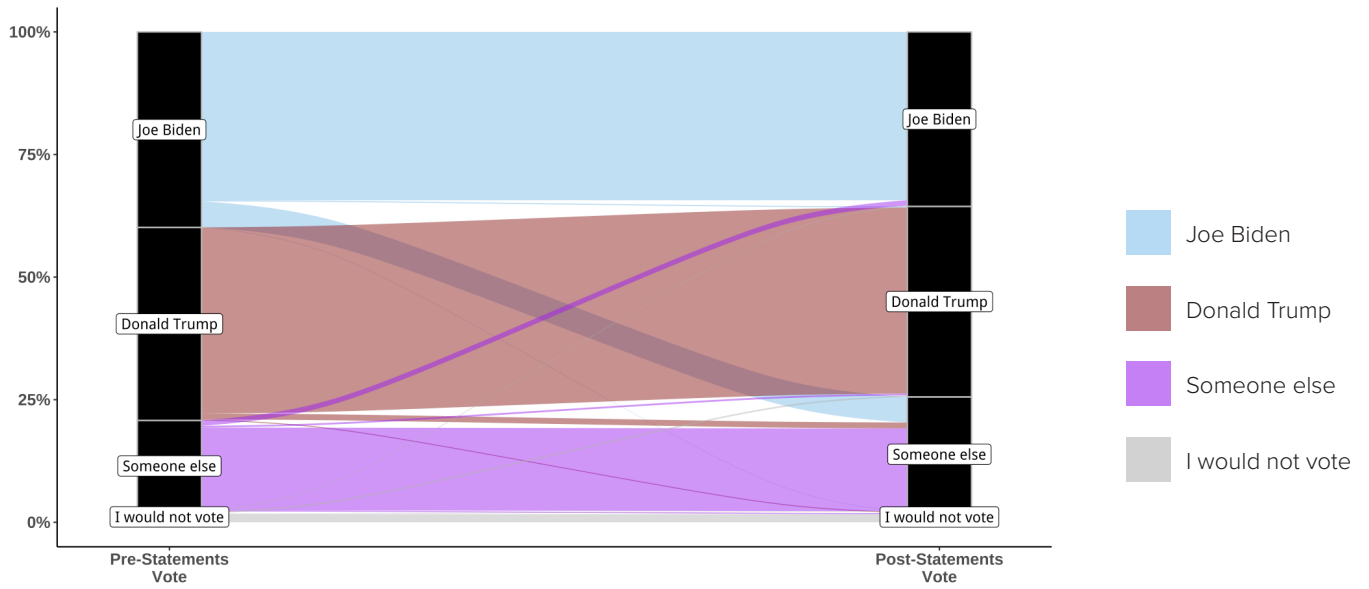
For each candidate, how concerned or unconcerned are you with what you just read?

### *Crime/law enforcement*

In the 1990s, Joe Biden made a career out of helping build the prison-industrial complex in the United States through his work on the so-called Crime Bill. Biden’s efforts to increase minimum sentencing requirements, punish youth like adults, and expand the war on drugs put thousands of Americans behind bars for minor offenses. If he seeks the nomination in 2020, he will not be able to credibly commit to major reforms in our system of government.

In 1989, Donald Trump took out full-page advertisements in the New York Daily News calling for the death penalty for the so-called “Central Park Five,” five juveniles wrongly convicted for the rape and murder of a jogger in Central Park. He helped contribute to national uproar around the incarceration of juveniles later found to be innocent, and has stood by his support of the death penalty for them.

For each candidate, how concerned or unconcerned are you with what you just read?

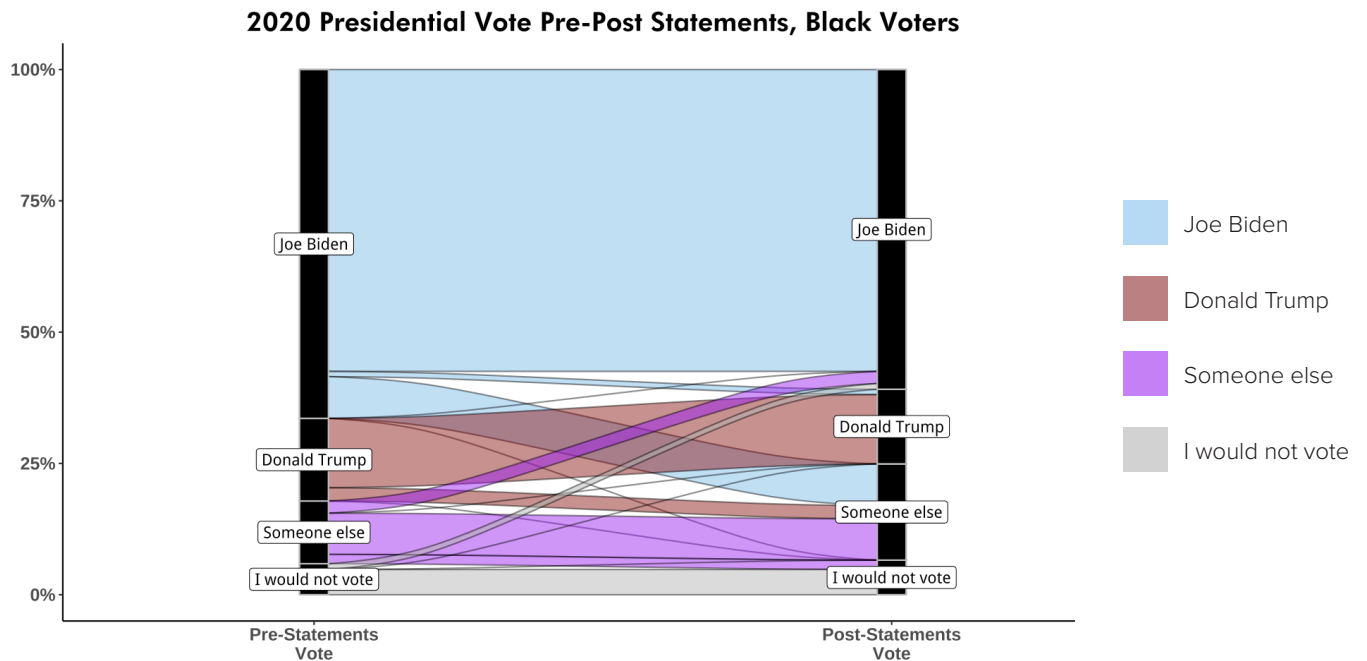


Overall, across the full sample, the net effect of the statements moved about six percent of all voters away from Biden to “someone else,” to Trump, or to staying home. That six percent of all voters represents about twelve percent of all of Biden’s initial supporters. In other words, roughly one in eight voters who initially support Biden move away from him after hearing these statements.

# EFFECT AMONG BLACK VOTERS

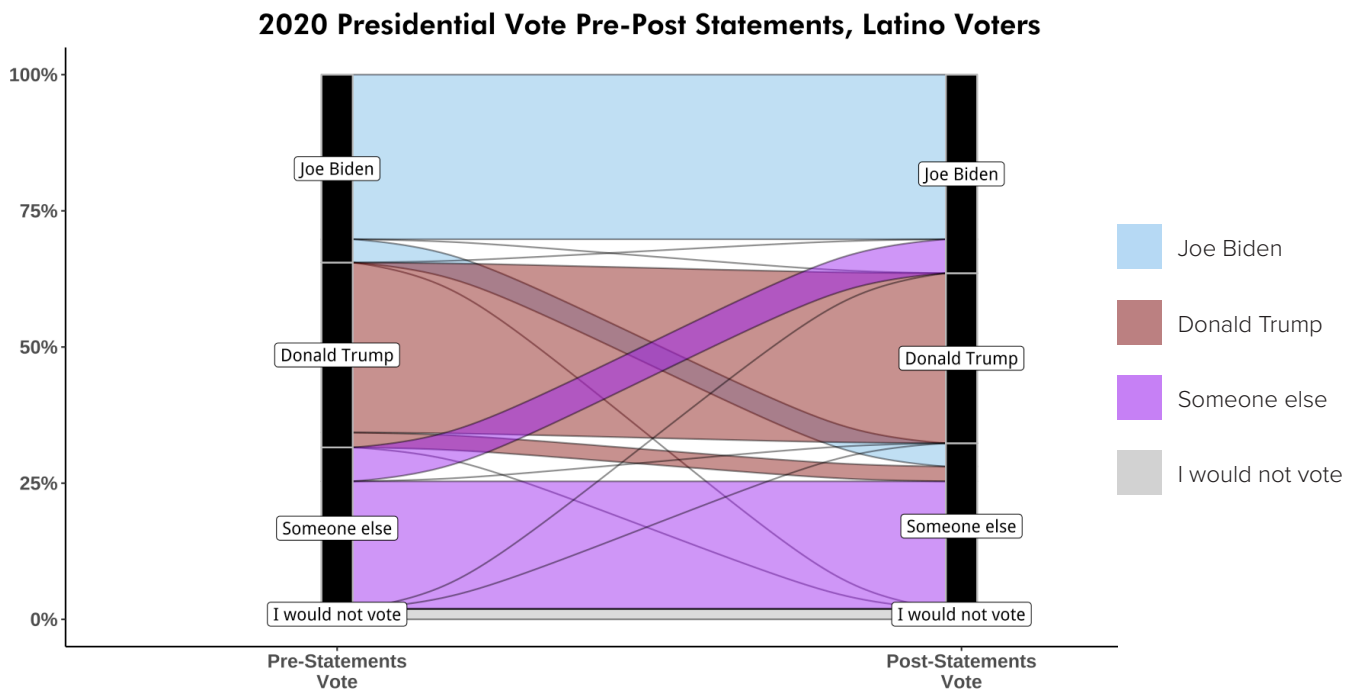
Prior to receiving the statements about Biden and Trump, 61 percent of black voters reported they would support Biden, 15 percent said they would support Donald Trump, 17 percent said they would hold out for someone else, and 7 percent said they would not vote.

After receiving the statements about Biden and Trump, 56 percent of black voters reported they would support Biden, 14 percent said they would support Trump, 22 percent said they would hold out for someone else, and 8 percent said they would not vote. These statements cause about five percent of black voters to move away from Biden, representing an 8 percent loss among black voters overall.



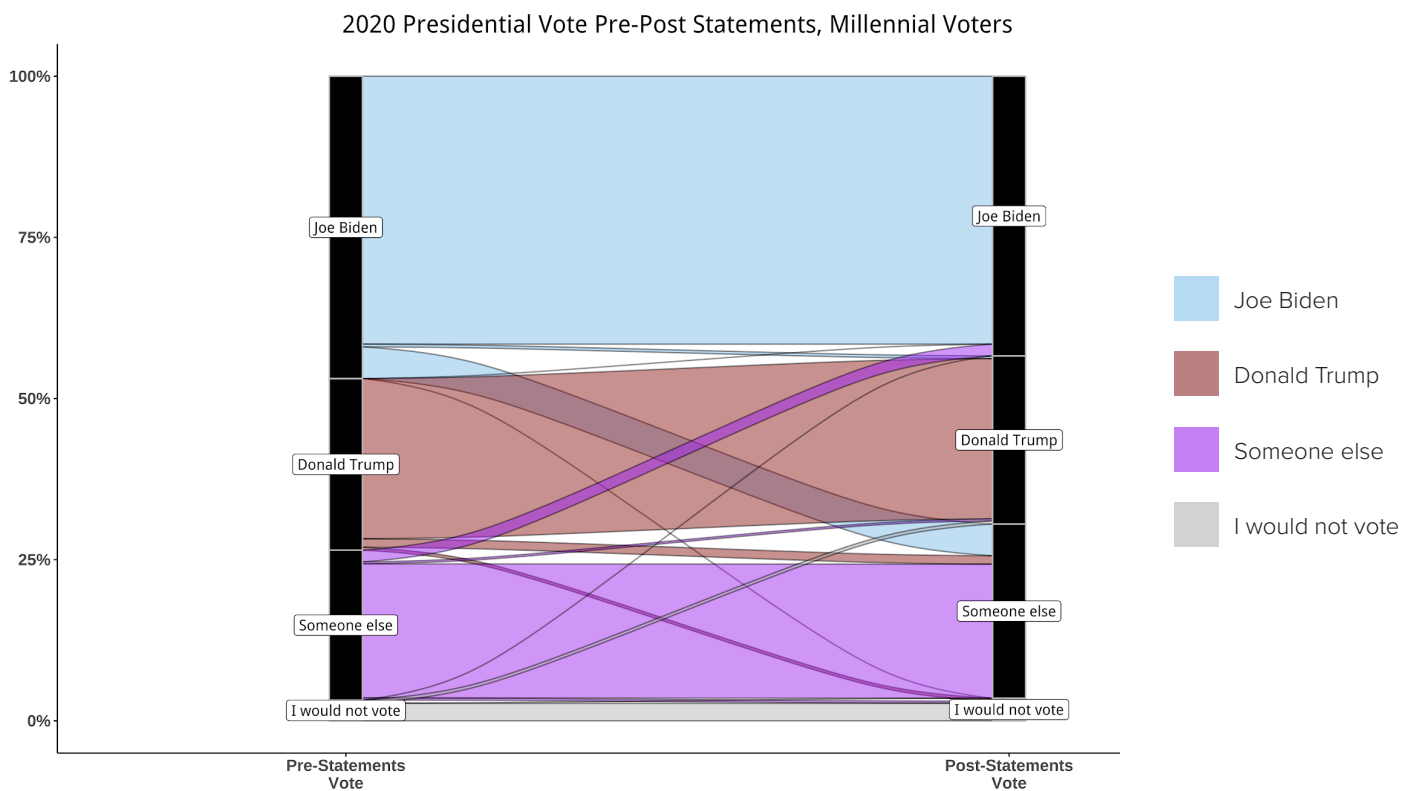
# EFFECT AMONG LATINO VOTERS

The statements do not cause much movement among Latino voters. Prior to receiving the statements and after receiving the statements, about 33-35 percent of Latino voters report supporting either Biden or Trump. Both before and after receiving the statements, about 26 percent of Latino voters report they will wait for someone else. The following plot shows that movement among Biden supporters is compensated for by movement among those who initially said they would prefer to vote for someone else. Though the statements clearly move some Latino voters away from Biden, some Latino voters move toward him as well.



# EFFECT AMONG MILLENNIALS

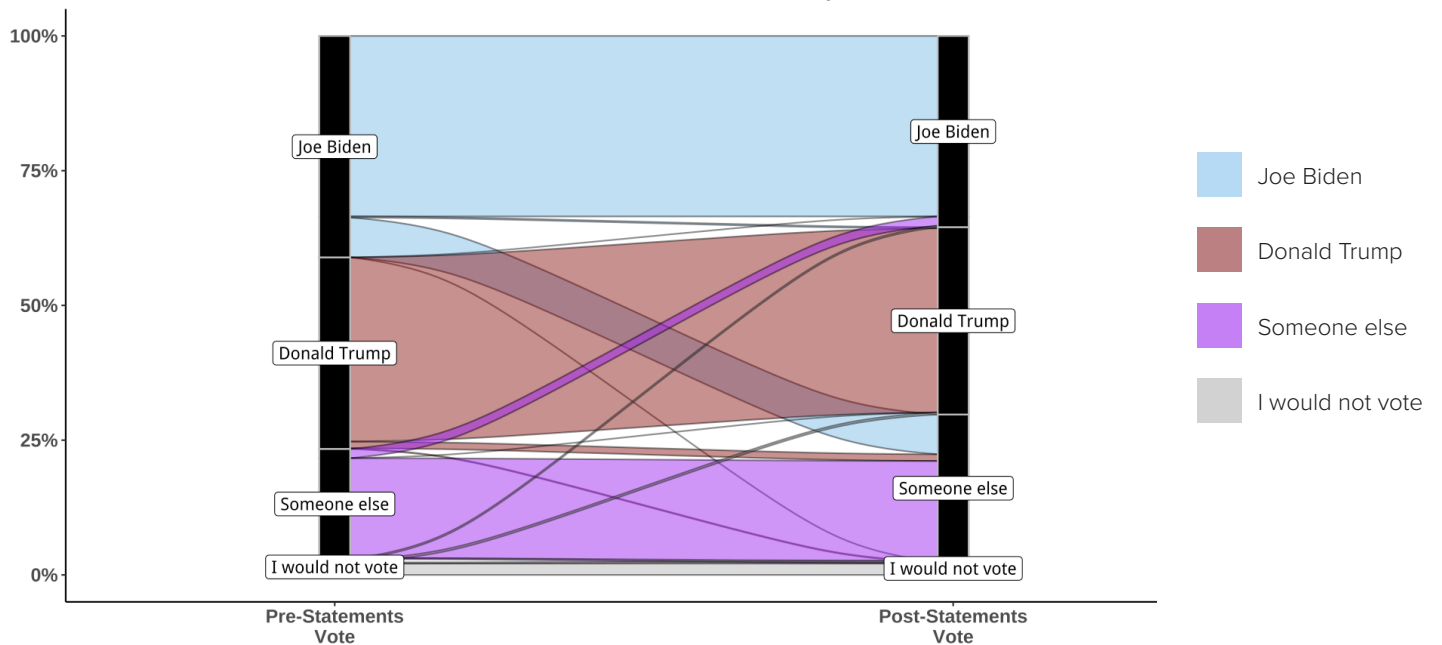
Prior to receiving the statements, Biden is the clear preferred candidate among Millennials, with 46 percent reporting they would support him, just 27 percent reporting they would support Trump, and 23 percent reporting they would hold out for someone else. After receiving the statements, 43 percent of Millennial voters overall report they would support Biden, indicating Biden loses 3 percent of all Millennials or 7 percent of his Millennial supporters. The following plot suggests the movement away from Biden is partially compensated for by those who initially reported they would hold out for someone else moving toward Biden.



# EFFECT AMONG WOMEN

Prior to the statements, Biden is the narrowly preferred candidate among women, who prefer Biden to Trump 40-37. After the statements, Biden is narrowly opposed among women, who prefer Trump to Biden 37-36. Across the statements, Biden loses nearly 8 percent of women, who are partially compensated for by about 3 percent of undecided women moving toward Biden over the course of the statements.

### 2020 Presidential Vote Pre-Post Statements, Women Voters



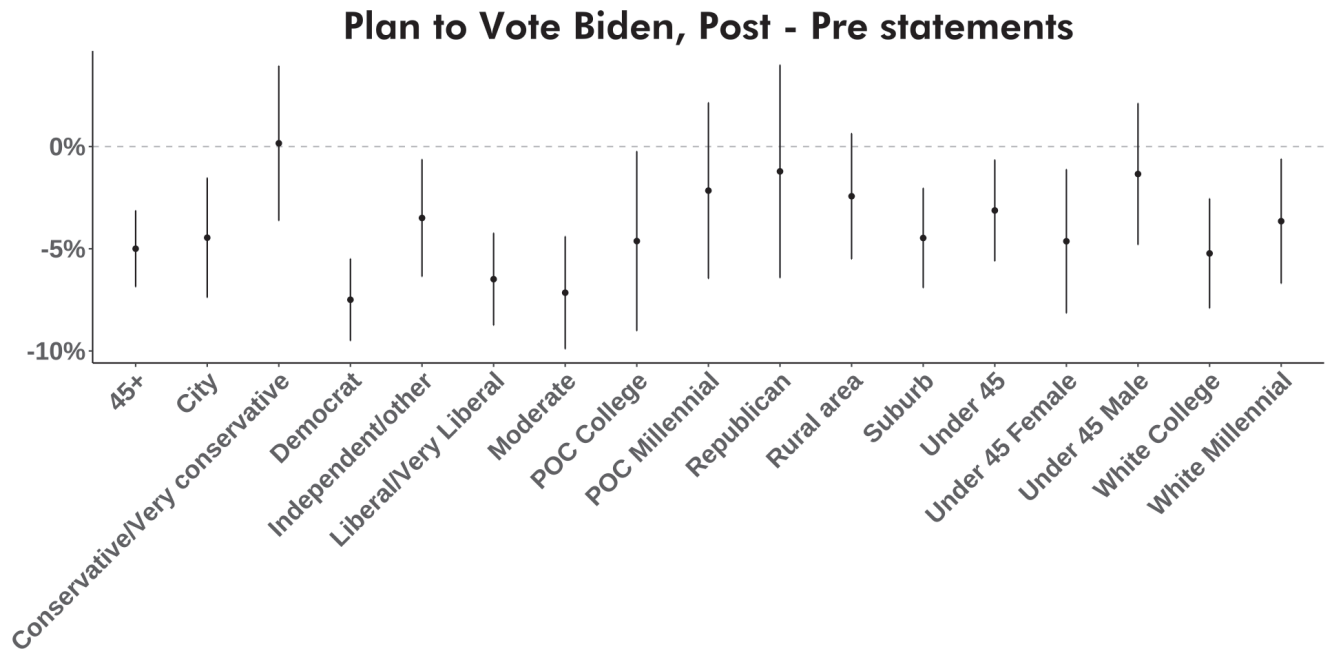
### Pre-Post Differences Among Groups

While the sample size constrains us from analyzing the data at very low levels of granularity, we can compare how some subgroups of voters moved after hearing the Biden statements. In many cases, either the sample size is too low or the variation from respondent to respondent is too high to draw statistical conclusions. For example, accounting for the sample size and variation, we can only say that the movement against Biden from pre-statements to post-statements among Millennial people of color is somewhere between 6 percent away from Biden and 2 percent toward him - in other words, not a statistically distinguishable movement in either direction.

For other subgroups, the movement away from Biden is clear. Voters over 45 move away from Biden by about 5 percentage points, as do voters who report living in an urban area. About 4 percent of Independent voters

move away from Biden, as do nearly 8 percent of self-identified political moderates. About 7 percent of self-identified liberal or very liberal voters move away from Biden after the statements. People of color with college degrees and whites with college degrees both move away from Biden, though the total amount of movement is just barely statistically detectable due to lower sample size.

Perhaps surprisingly, we see that Biden clearly loses favor among groups that are necessary to winning both a Democratic Presidential primary and a general Presidential election. Older voters, urban-area voters, Independents, moderates, and liberals all move away from Biden to a statistically detectable degree. The overall net movement is just 4 points, plus or minus 5 points. That quantity is driven upward slightly by Republicans and conservatives, who are generally not concerned by the Biden statements and do not report much intention to vote for him anyway.





## STATEMENTS

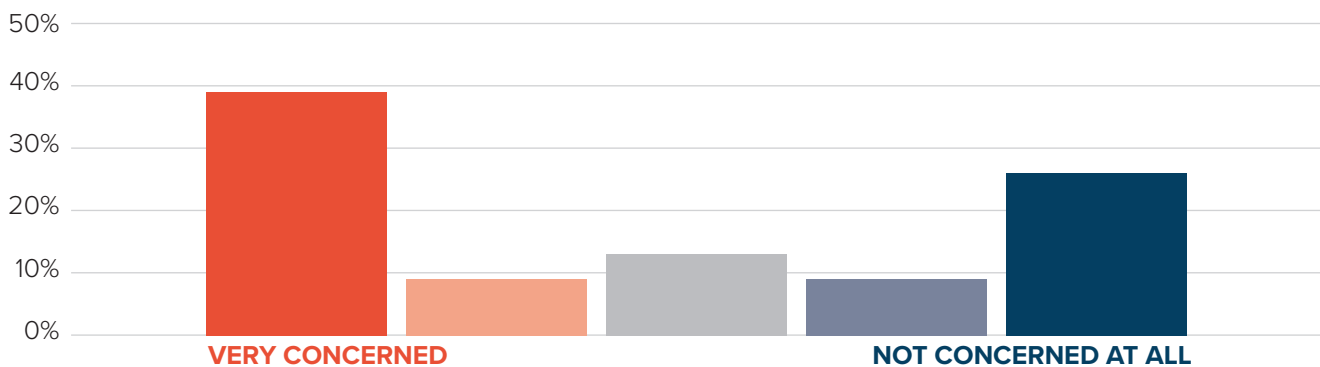
Perhaps surprisingly, across all the statements voters reported being significantly more concerned about the Trump statements than the Biden statements. That said, voters exhibited clear concerns about Joe Biden's record. On a 1-5 scale, with 1 representing very concerned and a 5 representing being unconcerned, voters averaged about a 3 for Biden on each item, and about a 3.5 for Trump on each item.

On the Iraq statements, about 39 percent of voters reported being "very concerned," and about 23 percent of voters reported being "very concerned" about Joe Biden's Iraq War vote. In contrast, 26 percent reported being not at all concerned about Trump's Iran deal withdrawal, and 22 percent reported being not at all concerned about Biden's Iraq War vote.

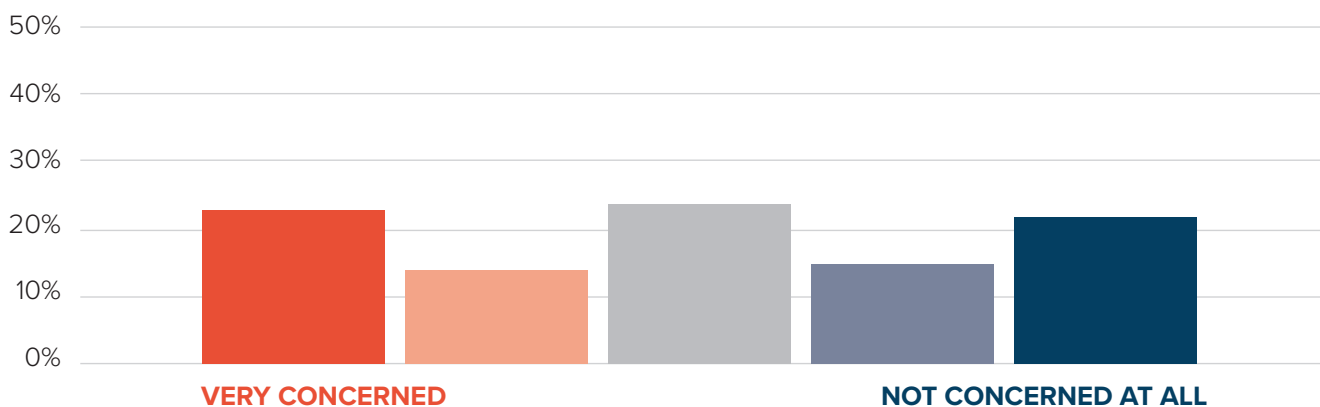
Perhaps surprisingly, although it has been a subject of conversation for decades, voters still reported being overwhelmingly concerned about Trump's past support for executing the wrongfully-convicted "Central Park Five." Fully 46 percent of voters reported being very concerned about that statement. At the same time, fully 25 percent of voters were very concerned by Joe Biden's past crime bill votes.

Voters also expressed strong concerns about Biden's record on big banks and lenders. Indeed, voters were nearly as concerned about Biden's past financial votes record as they were about the Trump tax cuts, those tax cuts being widely viewed as the albatross that dragged Republicans down below majority status in the 2018 midterm elections in the House.

### TRUMP IRAN STATEMENT



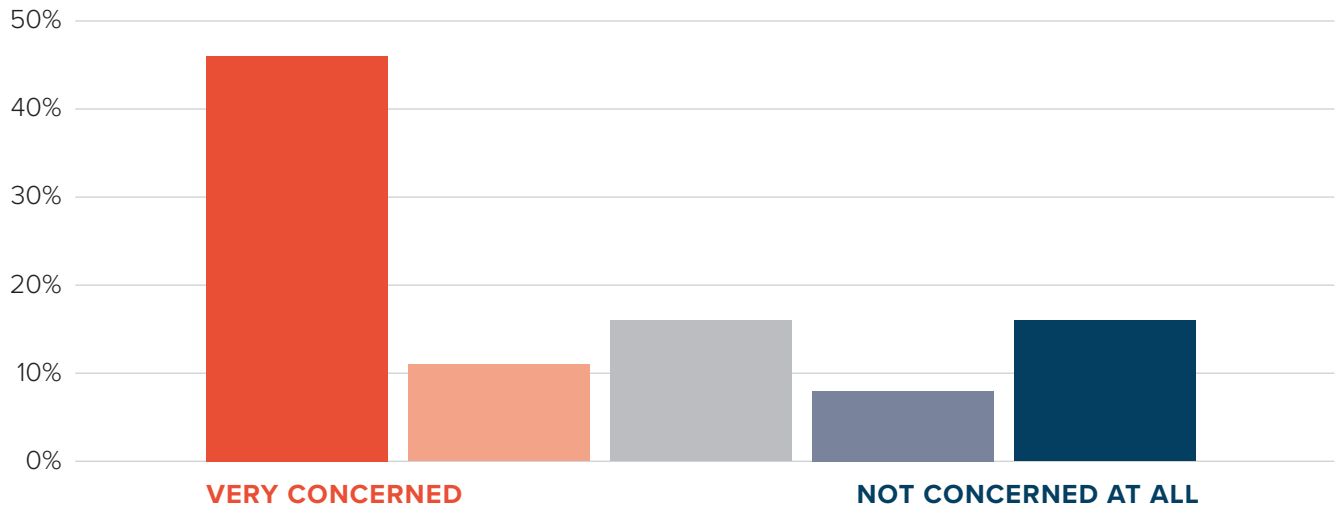
### BIDEN IRAQ STATEMENT



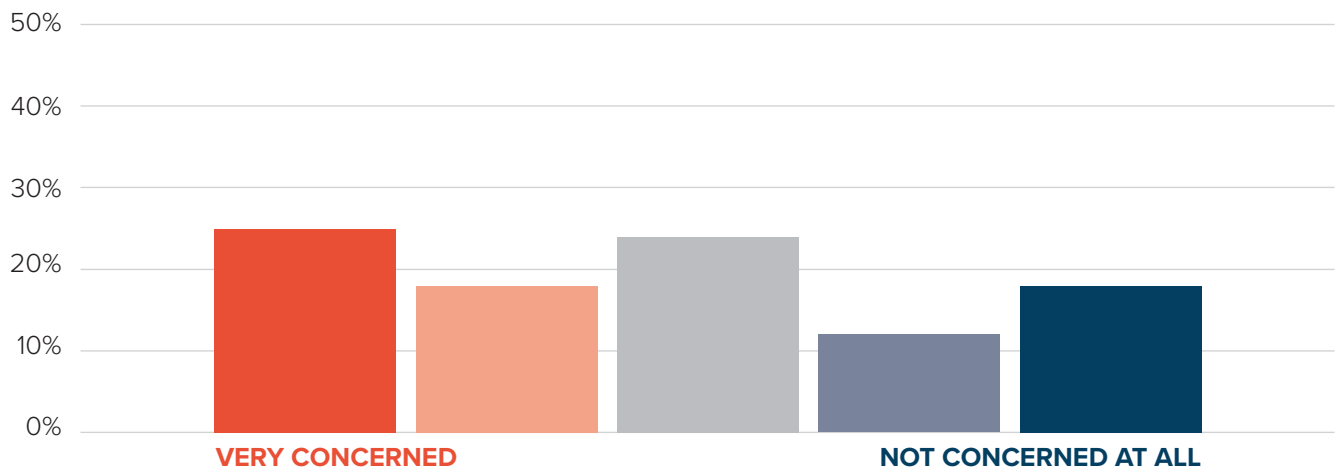
Intriguingly, respondents who we could classify as likely voters were significantly more concerned about each statement than were less frequent voters. Respondents who reported having voted in both 2016 and 2018 reported about 5-10 percent higher levels of concern

than did respondents who hadn't voted in both cycles. Biden's voting record is even more concerning to those who are most likely to be participating in the upcoming primary and general elections.

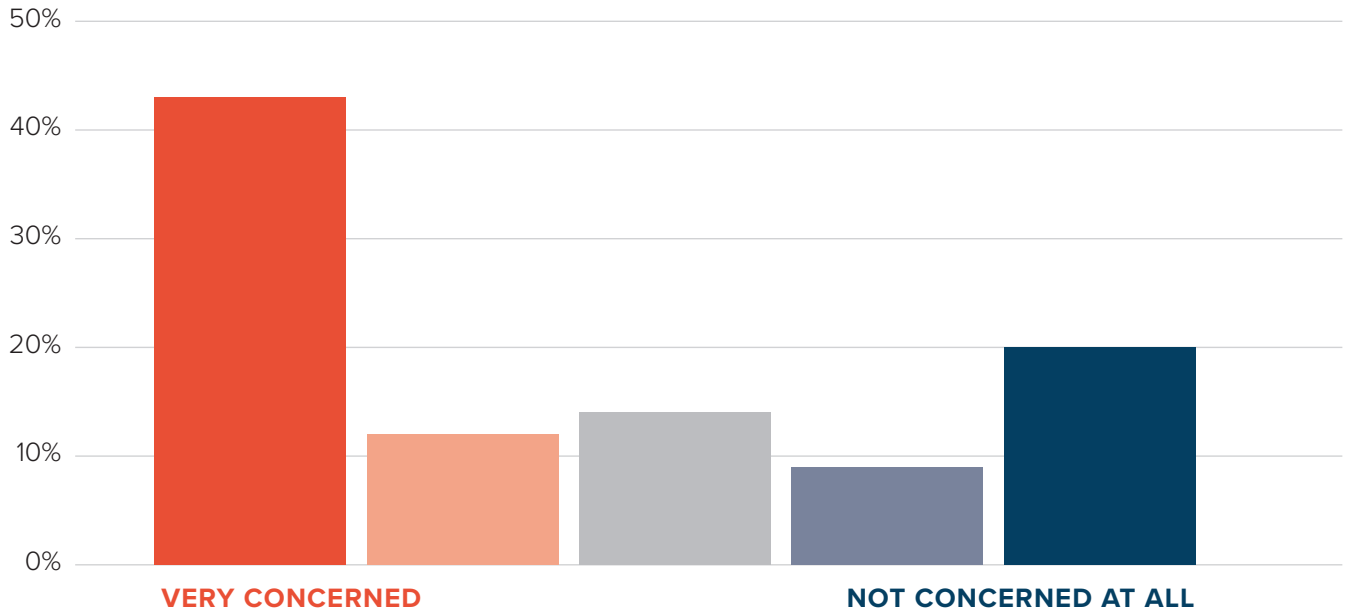
### TRUMP CENTRAL PARK FIVE STATEMENT



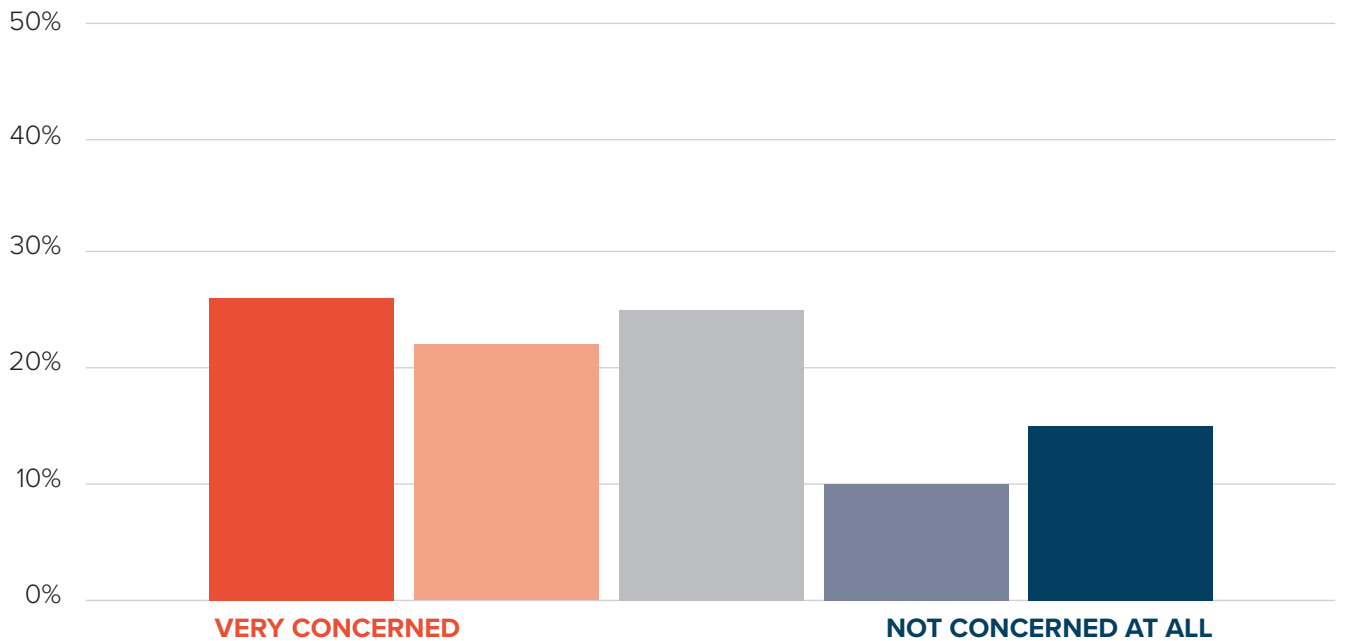
### BIDEN CRIME STATEMENT



## TRUMP TAX CUT STATEMENT



## BIDEN BANKRUPTCY STATEMENT



## CONCLUSION

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Voters are clearly concerned when exposed to negative information about Joe Biden, a candidate who has not yet been exposed to the kind of relentless criticism a candidate in a general Presidential election will face. Troublingly, information about his past has the clearest and strongest effects among clear Democratic partisans and moderate and Independent voters, populations with whom the eventual nominee will need to perform strongly to be competitive in 2020. In our sample, that movement was enough to flip Biden from Biden narrowly defeating Trump to Trump safely beating Biden.

We also caution that these statements were presented in a format maximally beneficial to Joe Biden. The statements were paired with similar statements about Donald Trump, and thus were contextualized by

reporting Biden's past on roughly equal footing with that of his would-be competitor. The survey environment is also contrived in that information was made available symmetrically: Both candidates were given equal air time, so to speak, which is unlikely to be the case in 2020. In a case fairly generous to Biden, we detected statistically distinguishable movement away from Biden from relatively balanced, issues-driven negative statements. Considering how much worse things will be in the general election, this should give us pause about Biden's current strong reputation. That reputation is not necessarily as resilient to the vicissitudes of campaigning as it needs to be in order to defeat Trump in 2020.