



Building Support to Make College Free

Research for the Campaign for Free College
Tuition

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Campaign for
FreeCollegeTuition



Research Objectives and Methodology

PSB conducted two surveys of the American general public to identify the most effective ways to build support for free college tuition.

Research Objectives

- **Gauge overall support** for free college tuition
- Measure the popularity of possible **requirements** for free-college eligibility
- Determine which free-college **messages** are most believable and persuasive.

Quantitative Survey Methodology

PSB conducted **two online surveys** of Americans ages 18+:

- December 5-8, 2016 N=834 (MOE +/-3.39%)
- April 3-6, 2017 N=1001 (MOE +/-3.10%)

Samples were weighted by age, gender, race, education level and region.

Key Findings: Support and Potential Requirements

- ▶ **Over 3 in 4 Americans support free college tuition for those “academically qualified”**
 - That includes 9 in 10 Democrats, but also 83% of independents and 6 in 10 Republicans
- ▶ **Support for free college tuition has tracked upward over the past six months**
 - National support up 4 points overall, and up 12 points among independents
- ▶ **There is near-consensus support for imposing academic (GPA) standards on free-tuition beneficiaries**
 - Of stipulations tested, GPA requirements are most popular and least divisive for both parties
- ▶ **Hypothetical income qualifications prove politically divisive**
 - And all parties are more opposed when income levels are referenced
- ▶ **Americans prefer academic stipulations over requirements for non-academic commitments**
 - Less-popular requirements include military service, mentoring, community service and a pledge to stay in-state

Key Findings: Messaging and Advocacy

- ▶ **Influential messages focus on economic fairness and the societal benefits of college education**
 - Across parties, Americans agree lack of funds should not prevent college opportunity
 - Ability to contribute economically and provide for family are top arguments for free tuition
- ▶ **Many doubt overarching claims that free college is economically vital or transformative**
 - Republicans least likely to find such claims believable or persuasive
- ▶ **Referring to free college as an “investment in the future” is especially politically divisive**
 - Phrasing compels Democrats but drives GOP skepticism

Measuring Support for Free Tuition

Respondents were first asked their **level of support** for free college tuition. Specifically:

“Do you favor or oppose your state providing free tuition at public universities or colleges for anyone who is academically qualified?”

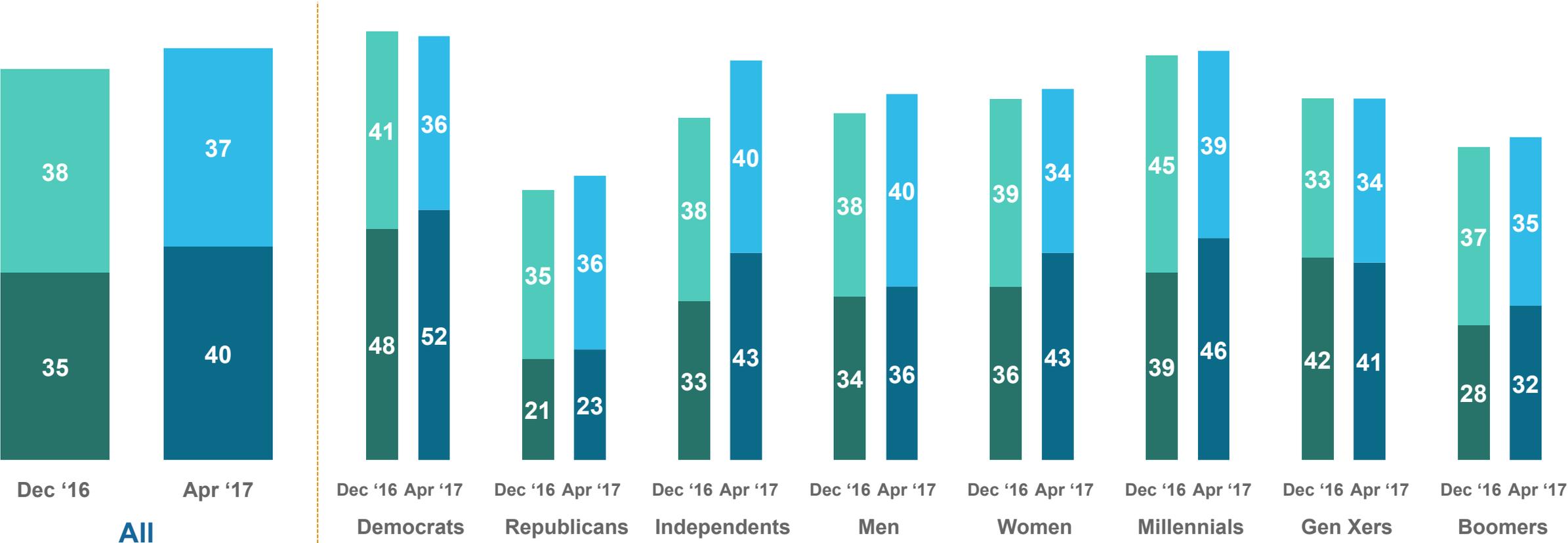
Respondents could choose:

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

3 in 4 Americans support free tuition – trending up in 2017

Support for state-sponsored free tuition for those academically qualified

Somewhat Support: ■ ■
 Strongly Support: ■ ■



QPRETUITION2. Do you favor or oppose your state providing free tuition at public universities or colleges for anyone who is academically qualified?

Support for Possible **Requirements** for Free Tuition



Testing Possible Requirements

PSB tested **thirteen hypothetical requirements** states could impose upon recipients of free tuition

- For each requirement, respondents decided whether:
 - It **must be included** in the plan (for free tuition)
 - It **doesn't matter** to me if it's included in the plan, *or*
 - I **wouldn't want that** to be included in the plan

Hypothetical requirements to be eligible for free tuition

Academics:

- ▶ **College GPA/Hours:** Maintain minimum academic standing in college including GPA and credit hour minimum
- ▶ **HS GPA:** Minimum high school graduating grade point average (GPA)
- ▶ **Academic Pledge:** Sign a pledge that student will do his or her best in school

Commitments:

- ▶ **Military Service:** Agree to provide military service to the country
- ▶ **Community Service:** Participate in a mandatory community service program
- ▶ **Mentoring Program:** Participate in a mentoring program

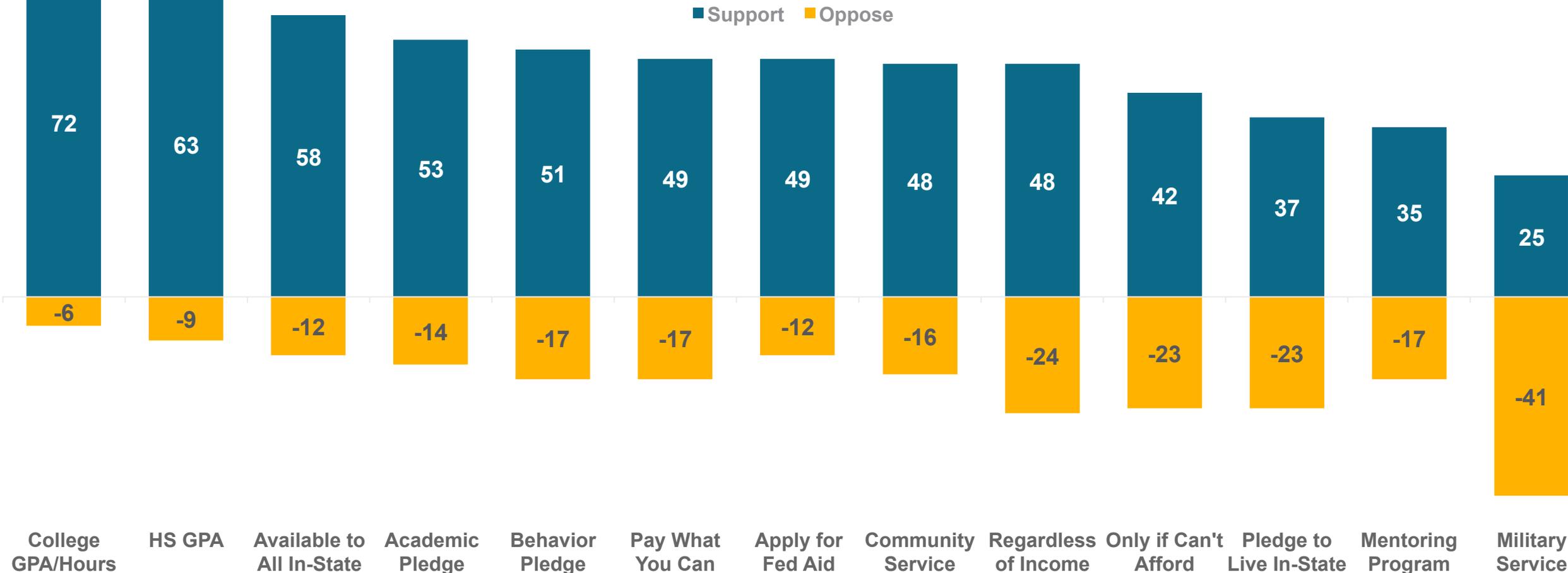
- ▶ **Behavior Pledge:** Sign a pledge that student won't get in trouble
- ▶ **Pledge to Live In-State:** Sign a pledge to live in the state for a certain amount of time after college

Financials:

- ▶ **Regardless of Income:** All students would qualify regardless of income
- ▶ **Apply for Fed Aid:** Apply for federal student aid
- ▶ **Only if Can't Afford:** Available only to those students who otherwise couldn't afford college
- ▶ **Available to All In-State:** Available to all students who qualify for in-state tuition
- ▶ **Pay What You Can:** Pay as much as they can afford

GPA requirements and universality have highest support and lowest opposition

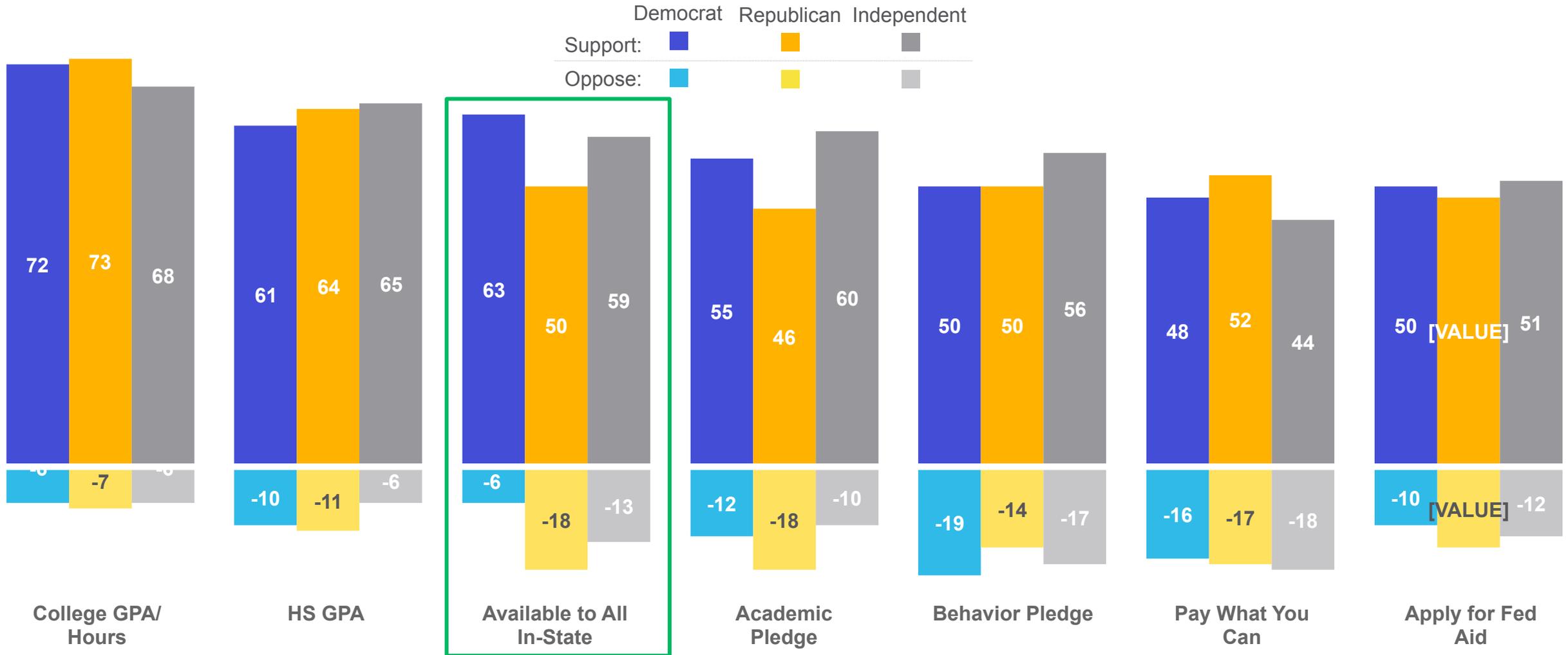
Support vs. opposition for various requirements to access free tuition
(among all respondents)



GTUITION3. Many states are now considering programs to provide residents free public college tuition. They are considering several requirements for students to qualify. Some of those requirements are listed below. Using the scale provided, how important is it that your state would include the following requirements in a free public college tuition program?

Democrats/Independents drive interest in universal access

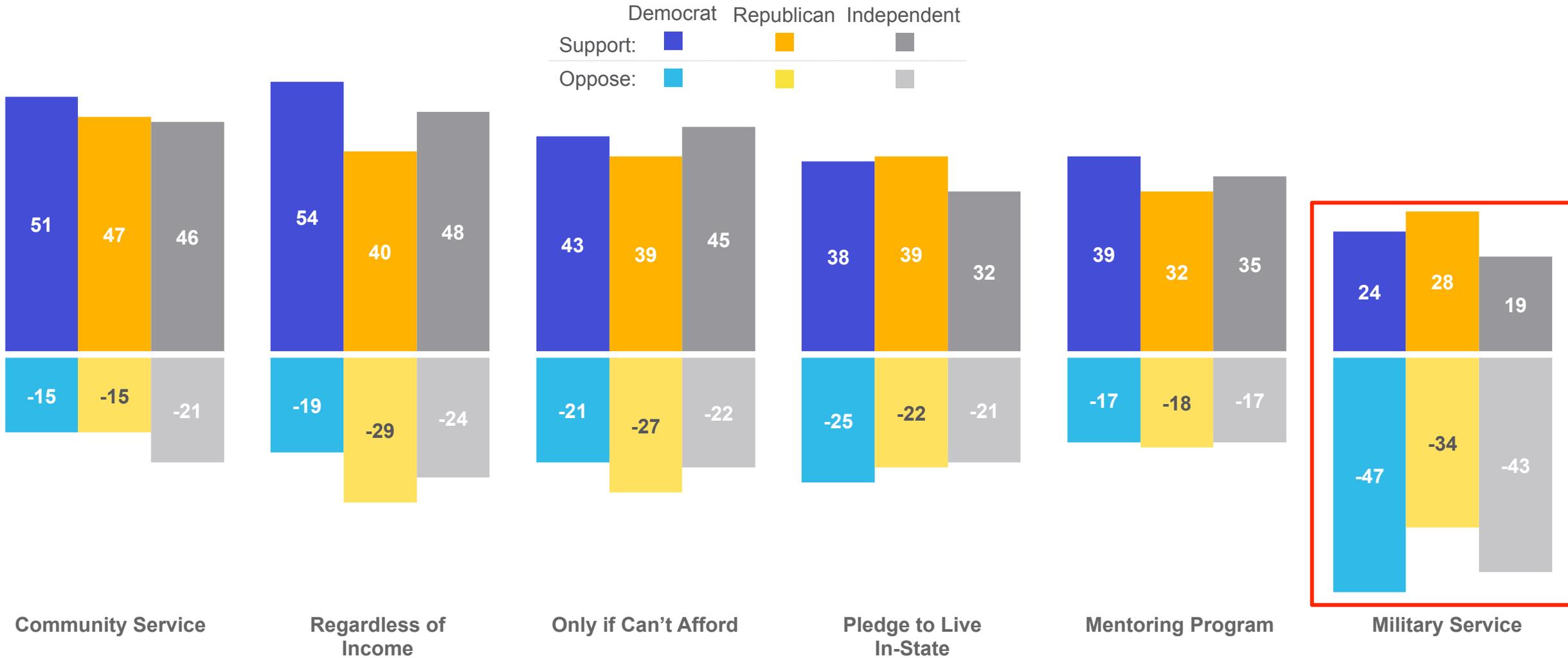
Support vs. opposition for various requirements to access free tuition
(by partisan affiliation)



GTUITION3. Many states are now considering programs to provide residents free public college tuition. They are considering several requirements for students to qualify. Some of those requirements are listed below. Using the scale provided, how important is it that your state would include the following requirements in a free public college tuition program?

Military-service requirement opposed across party lines

Support vs. opposition for various requirements to access free tuition
(by *partisan affiliation*)



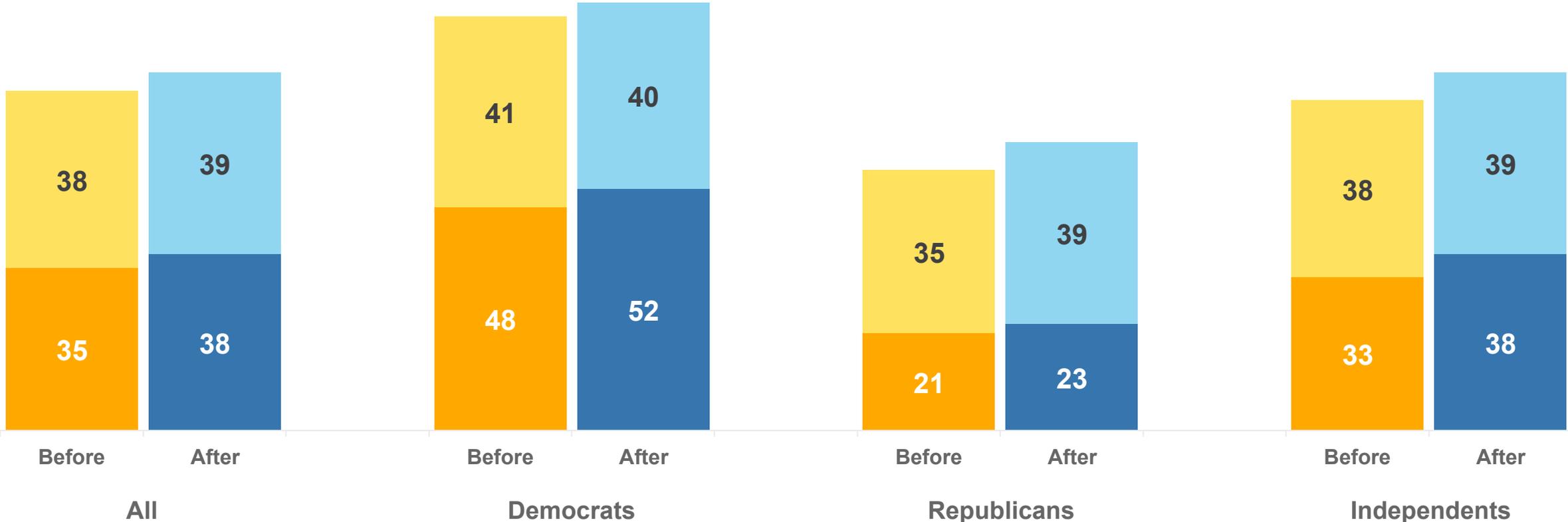
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Exposure to proposed requirements increases support 2-5 points across party lines

Support for state-sponsored free tuition for those academically qualified
(comparing support “before” and “after” exposure to requirements)

Strongly Support: ■ ■

Somewhat Support: ■ ■



QTUITION2. Do you favor or oppose your state providing free tuition at public universities or colleges for anyone who is academically qualified?

QTUITION4. Assuming your state added the requirements important to you, would you be in favor of or oppose providing free tuition at public universities or colleges for anyone who is academically qualified?

Net support among those whose favorability increased after reading all requirements (net support calculated as support minus opposition)

PROPOSED REQUIREMENTS	All	Democrat	Republican
Maintain minimum academic standing in college including GPA and credit hour minimum	81	79	82
Minimum High school graduating grade point average (GPA)	73	65	73
Pay as much as they can afford	51	50	56
Participate in a mandatory community service program	49	58	47
Available to all students who qualify for in-state tuition	42	64	29
Apply for federal student aid	40	39	41
Sign a pledge that student will do his or her best in school	40	46	40
Participate in a mentoring program	36	40	34
Sign a pledge that student won't get in trouble	34	31	35
Sign a pledge to live in the state for a certain amount of time after college	22	27	15
Available only to those students who otherwise couldn't afford college	16	21	15
All students would qualify regardless of income	13	40	-7
Agree to provide military service to the country	-10	-5	-5

Support for Various **Messages** Advocating Free Tuition



Approach to Message Testing

PSB tested **eight messages** advocating free college tuition

- Respondents rated each message on two metrics: **Believability** and **Persuasiveness**
- For each metric, respondents rated each message on a **four-point scale**:

Believability

- Very believable
- Somewhat believable
- Not very believable
- Not at all believable
- Don't know

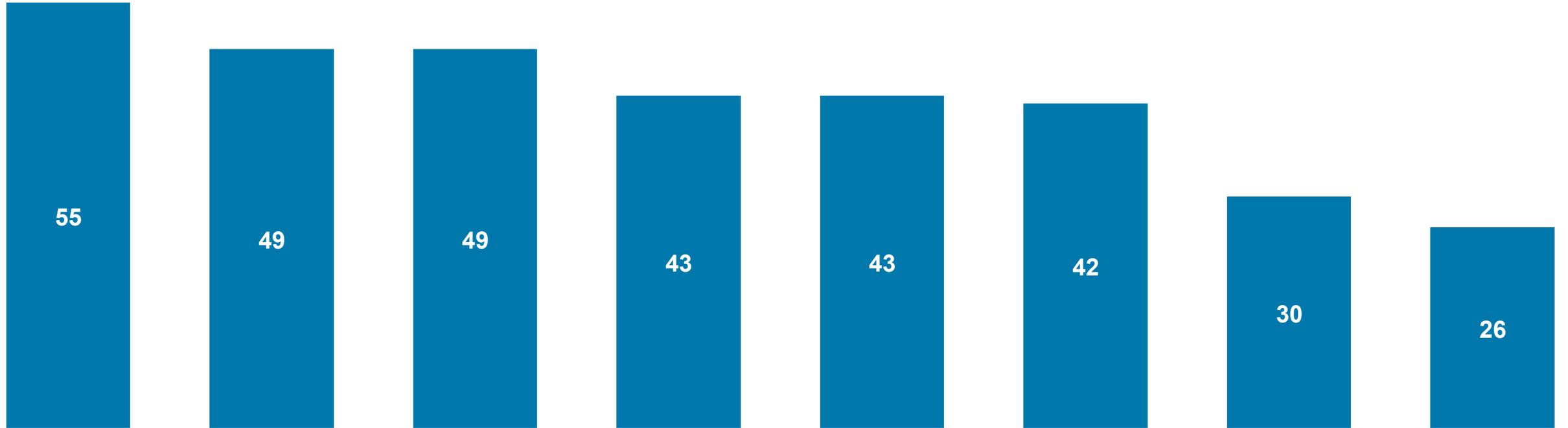
Persuasiveness

- Very persuasive
- Somewhat persuasive
- Not very persuasive
- Not at all persuasive
- Don't know

Americans most likely to believe lack of money should not prohibit access to college

Net Believability of Messaging Around Free College Tuition

(% who call claim very or somewhat believable minus % who call it not very or not at all believable)



Lack of money shouldn't keep qualified students from going to college, and government should help.

College graduates have more stable, high-paying jobs and therefore contribute more to the state's economy.

Free college tuition will strengthen our nation by giving young people the tools they will need to provide for their families.

Offering free college tuition is the best investment we can make for the future.

We need to make college free so our young people don't have a mountain of debt when they finish school.

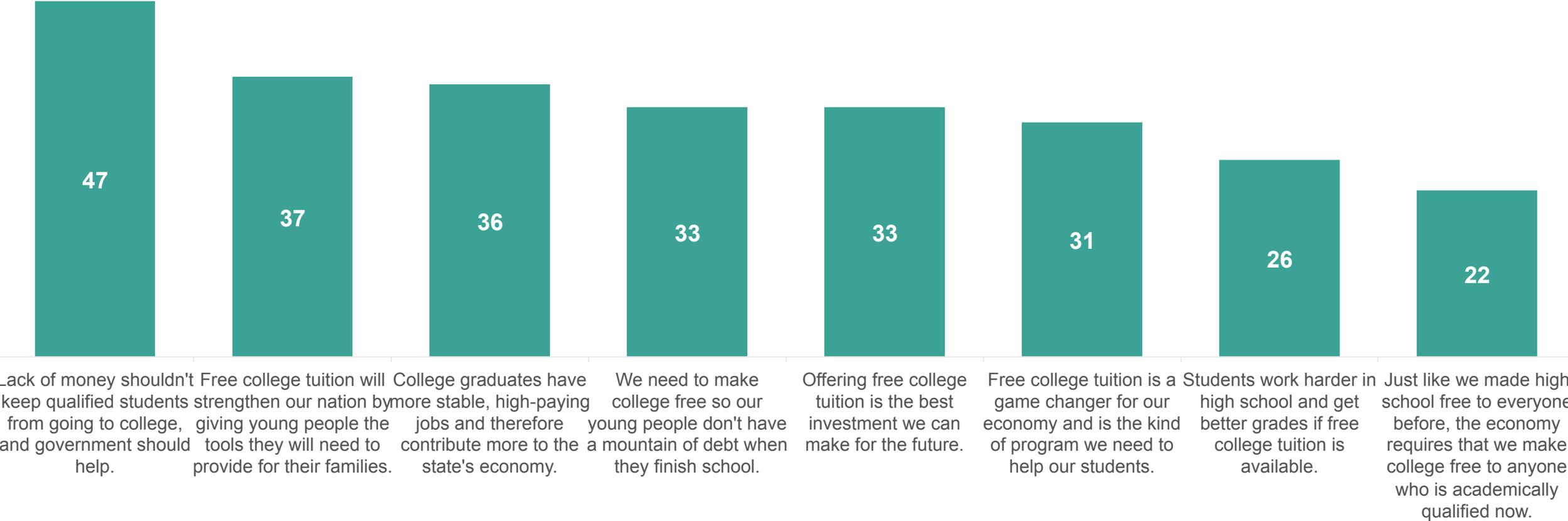
Free college tuition is a game changer for our economy and is the kind of program we need to help our students.

Just like we made high school free to everyone before, the economy requires that we make college free to anyone who is academically qualified now.

Students work harder in high school and get better grades if free college tuition is available.

Most persuasive message: Lack of money should not deny access; gov't should help

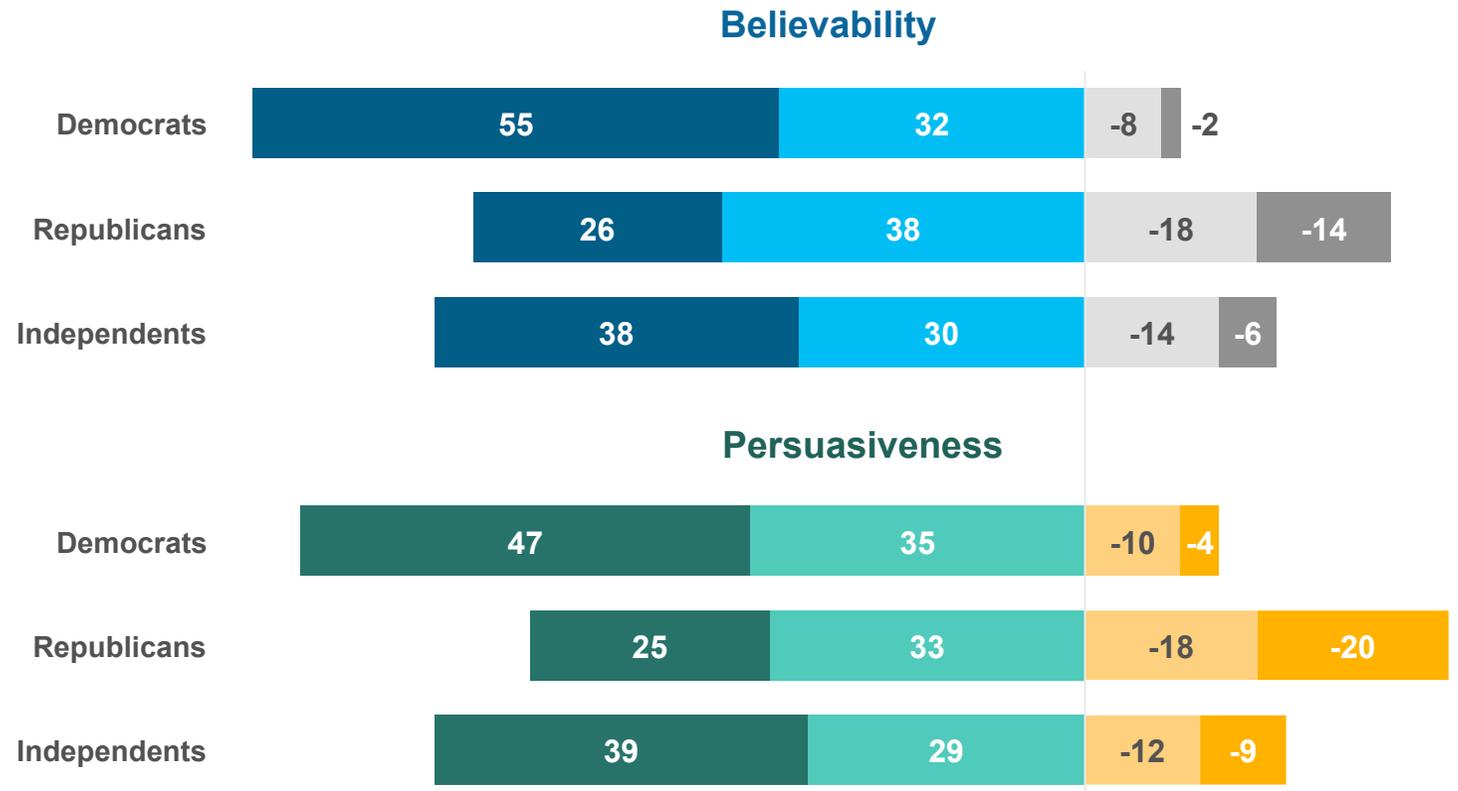
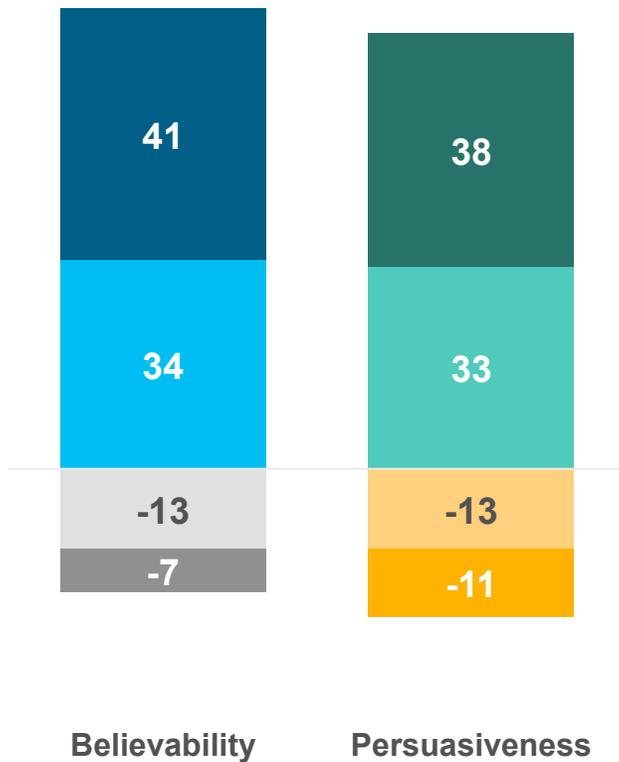
Net Persuasiveness of Messaging Around Free College Tuition
(% who call claim very or somewhat persuasive minus % who call it not very or not at all persuasive)



“Lack of money ... gov’t should help” message most believable and persuasive

Message: Lack of money shouldn't keep qualified students from going to college, and government should help.

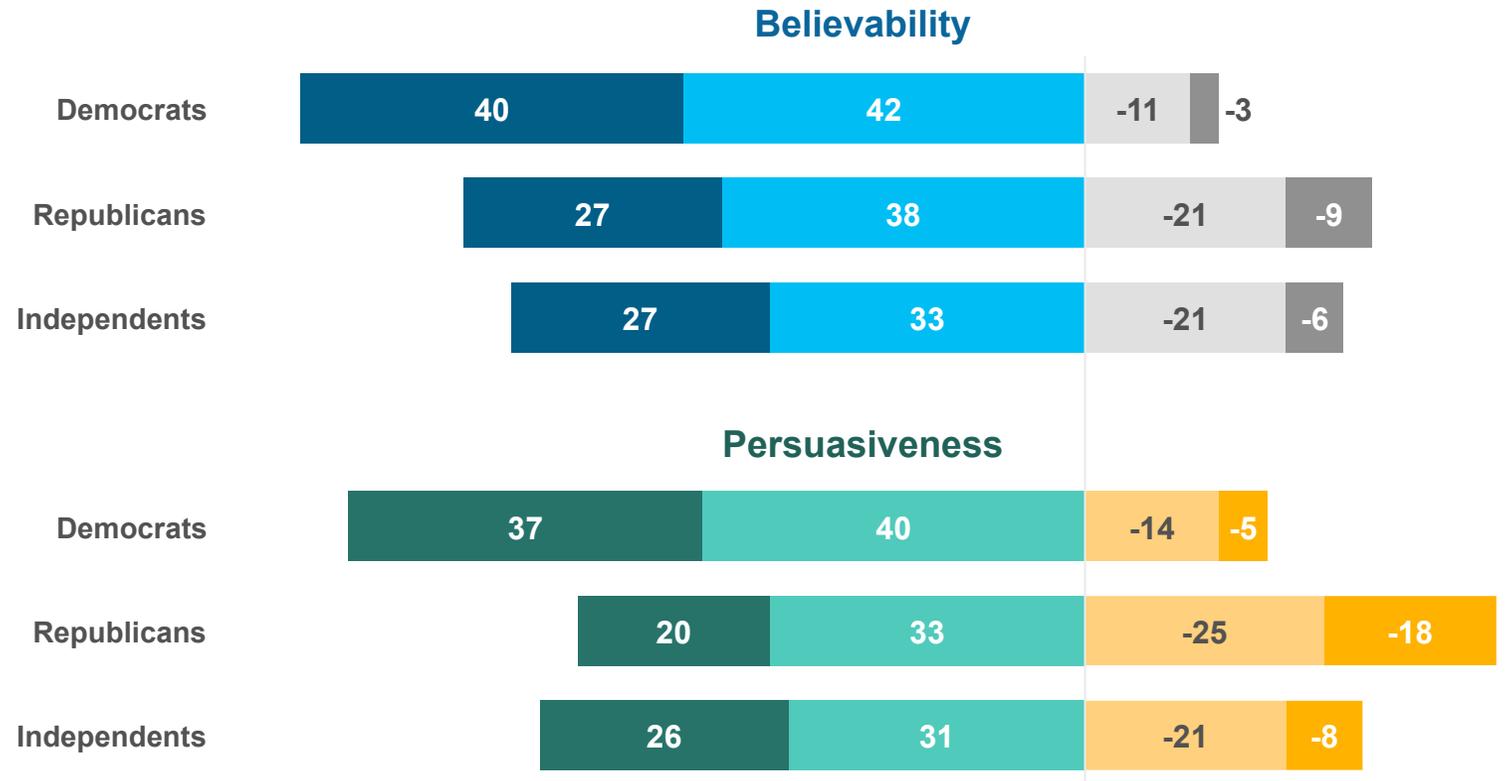
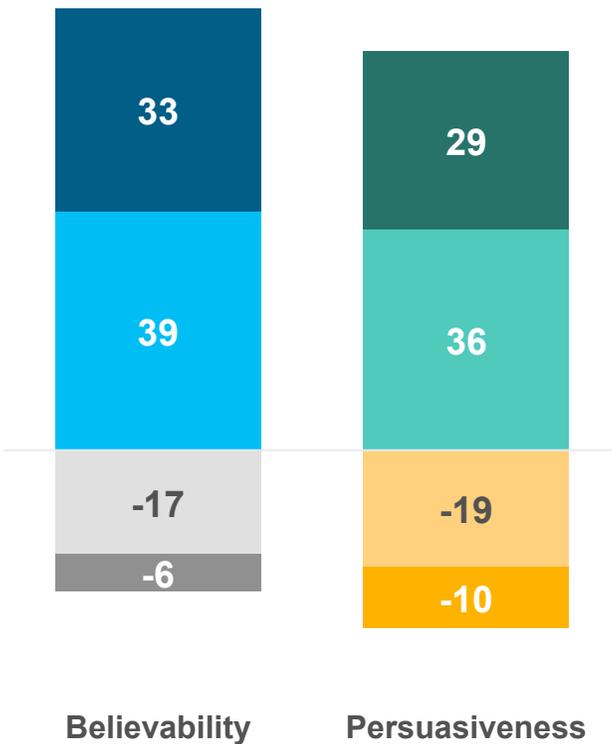
■ Very Believable
 ■ Somewhat Believable
 ■ Not Very Believable
 ■ Not At All Believable
■ Very Persuasive
 ■ Somewhat Persuasive
 ■ Not Very Persuasive
 ■ Not At All Persuasive



Republicans find economic-contribution message most believable

Message: College graduates have more stable, high-paying jobs and therefore contribute more to the state's economy.

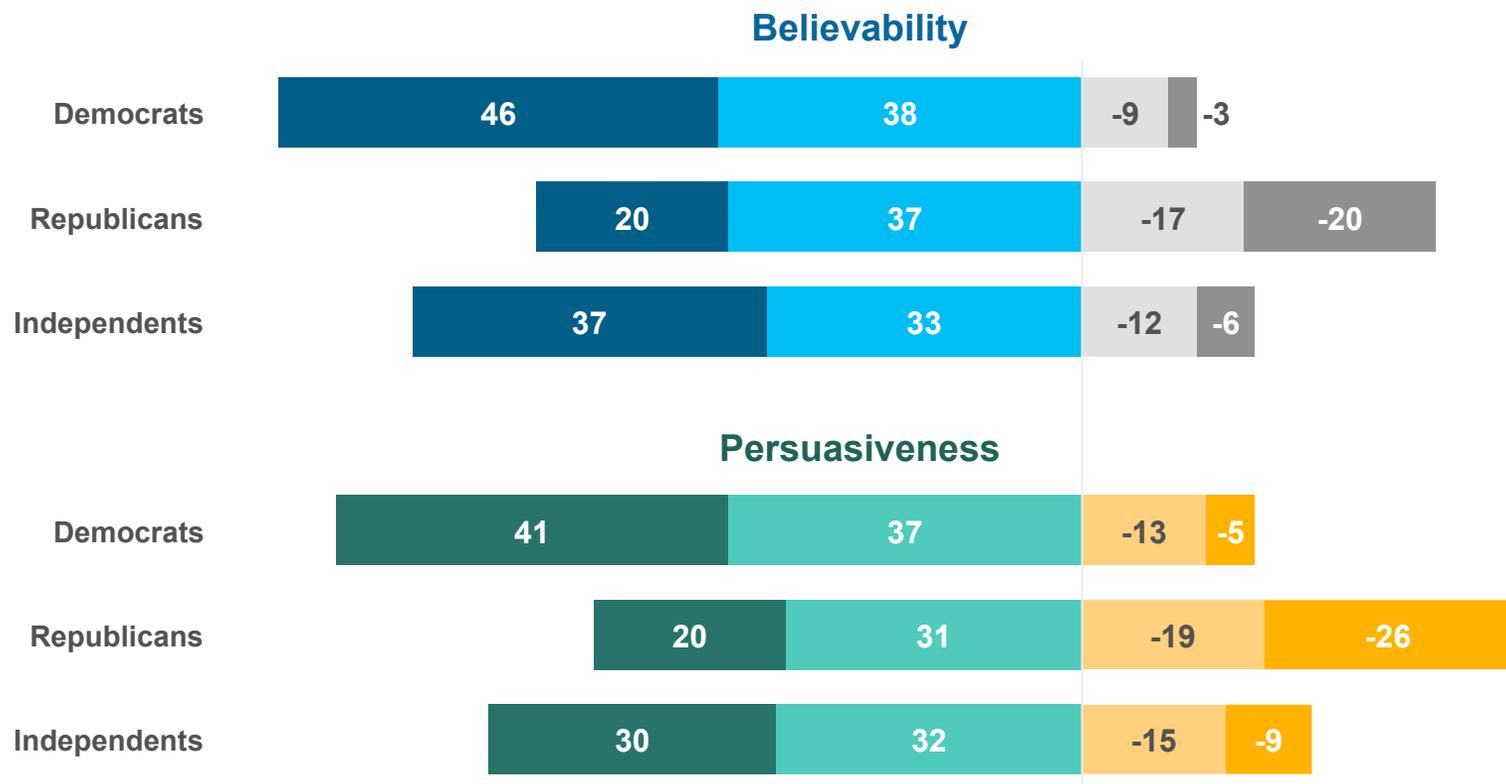
■ Very Believable
 ■ Somewhat Believable
 ■ Not Very Believable
 ■ Not At All Believable
■ Very Persuasive
 ■ Somewhat Persuasive
 ■ Not Very Persuasive
 ■ Not At All Persuasive



Independents most likely to believe “strengthen nation” message

Message: Free college tuition will strengthen our nation by giving young people the tools they will need to provide for their families.

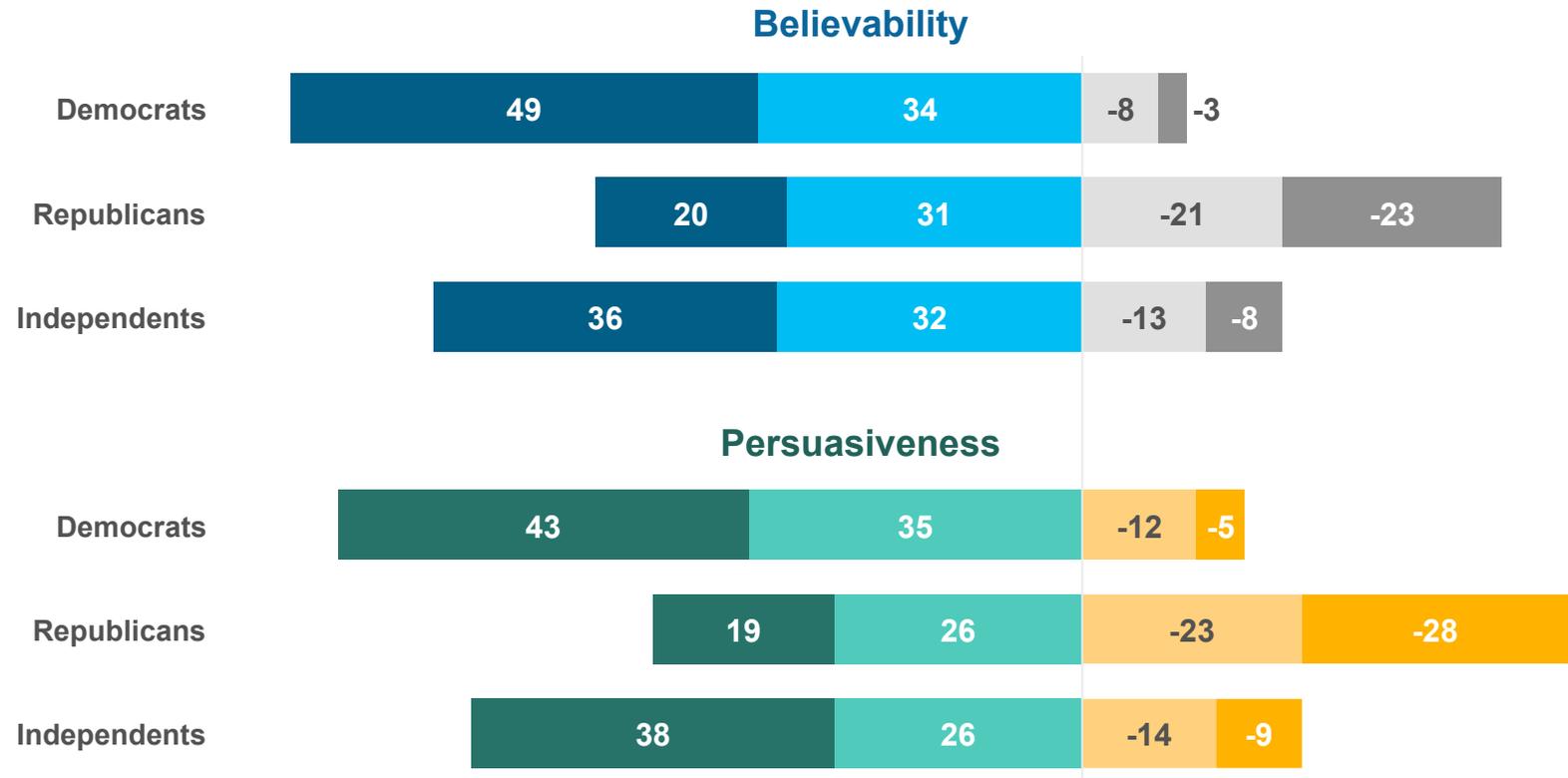
■ Very Believable
 ■ Somewhat Believable
 ■ Not Very Believable
 ■ Not At All Believable
■ Very Persuasive
 ■ Somewhat Persuasive
 ■ Not Very Persuasive
 ■ Not At All Persuasive



“Investment in future” message most politically divisive

Message: Offering free college tuition is the best investment we can make for the future.

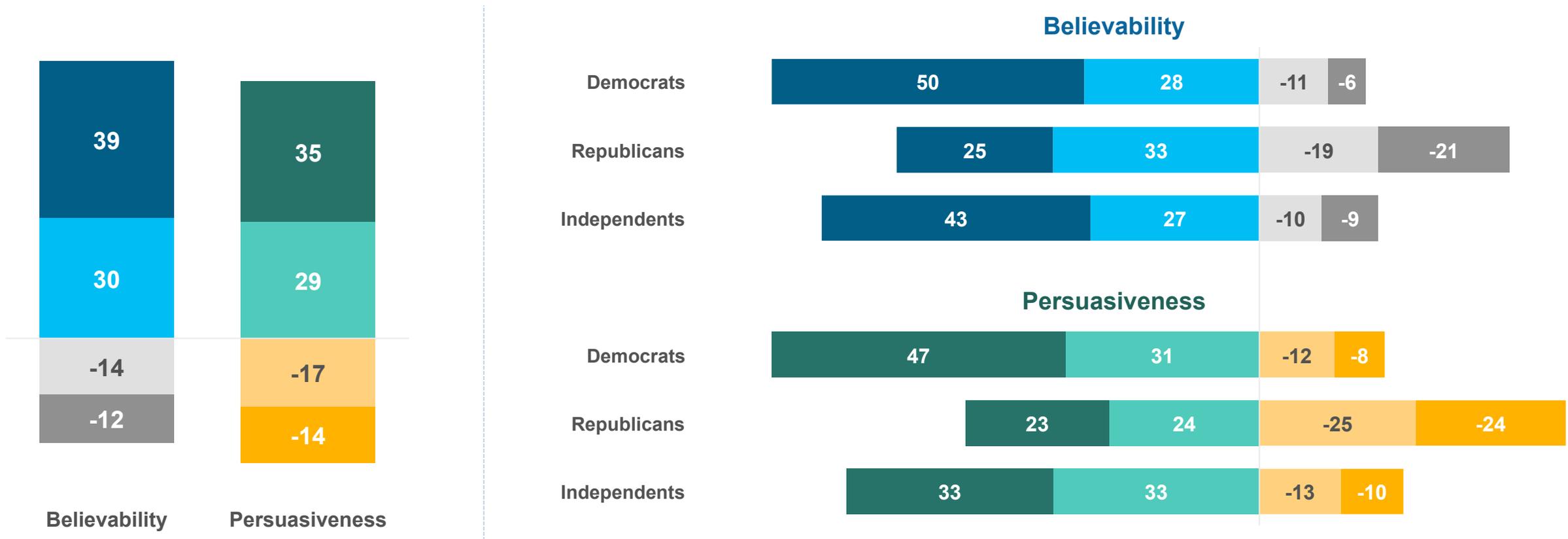
■ Very Believable
 ■ Somewhat Believable
 ■ Not Very Believable
 ■ Not At All Believable
■ Very Persuasive
 ■ Somewhat Persuasive
 ■ Not Very Persuasive
 ■ Not At All Persuasive



Democrats/Independents find debt message very believable and persuasive

Message: We need to make college free so our young people don't have a mountain of debt when they finish school.

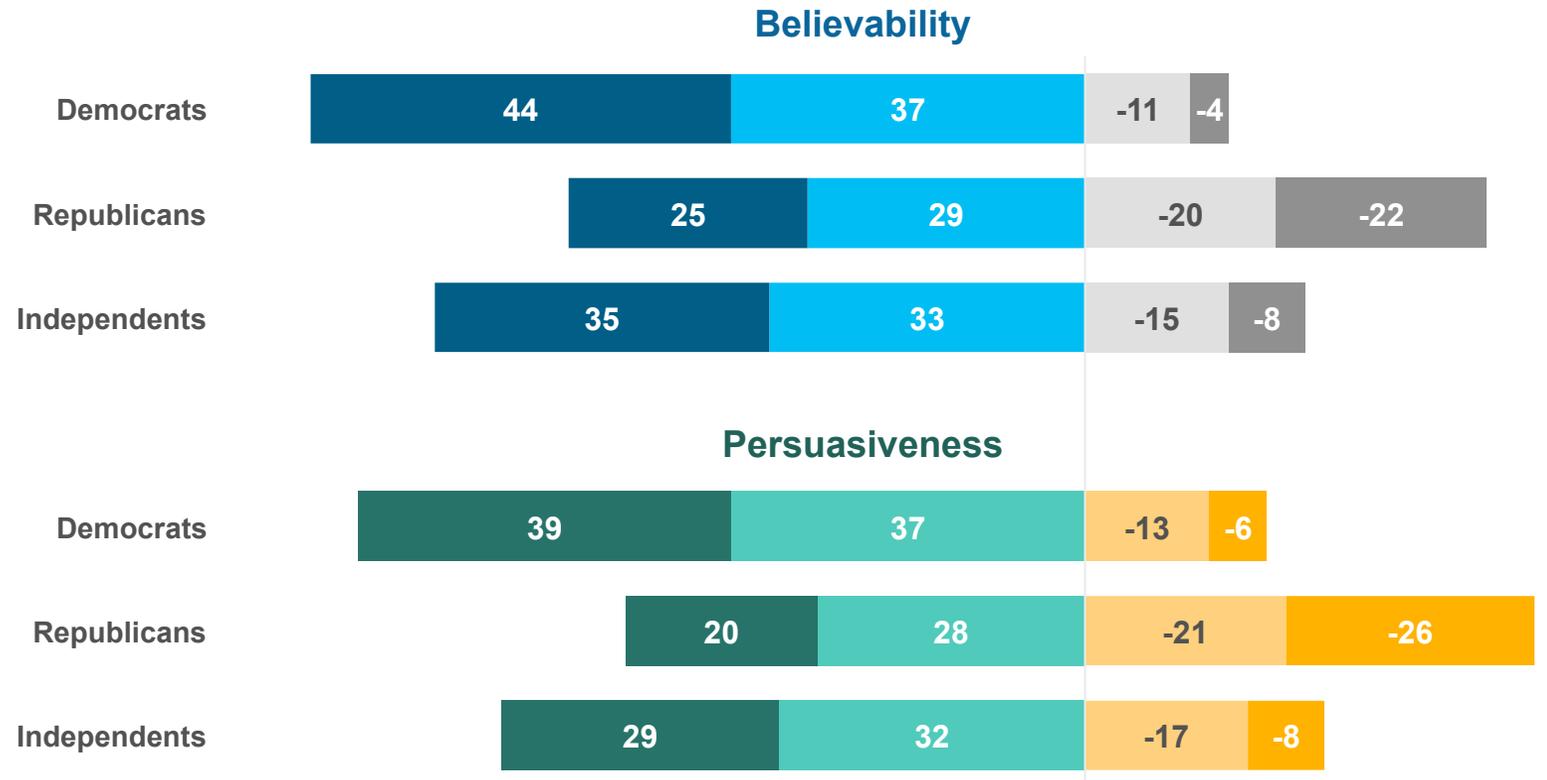
■ Very Believable
 ■ Somewhat Believable
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 ■ Somewhat Persuasive
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 ■ Not At All Persuasive



“Game changer” message more believable than persuasive

Message: Free college tuition is a game changer for our economy and is the kind of program we need to help our students.

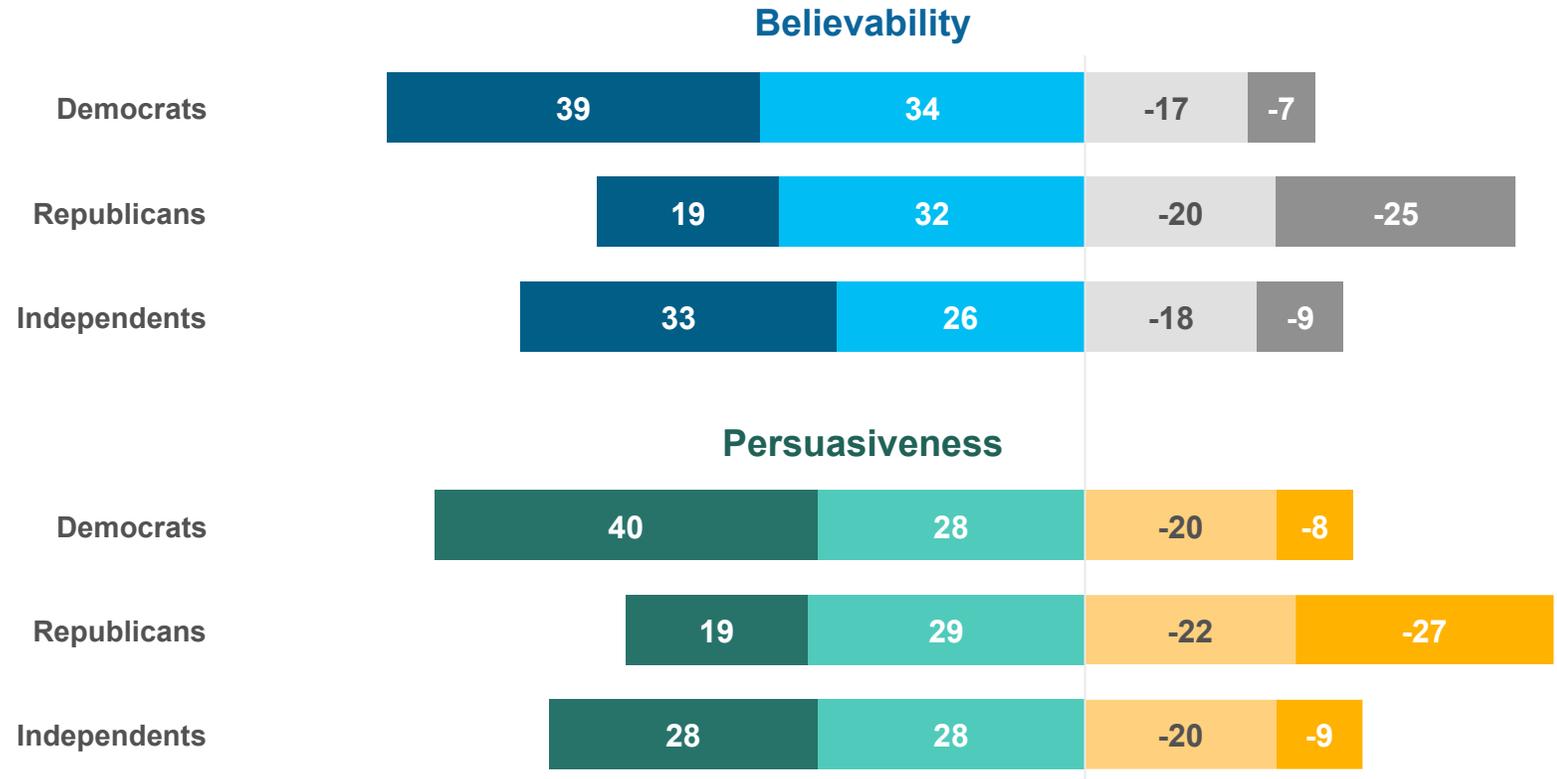
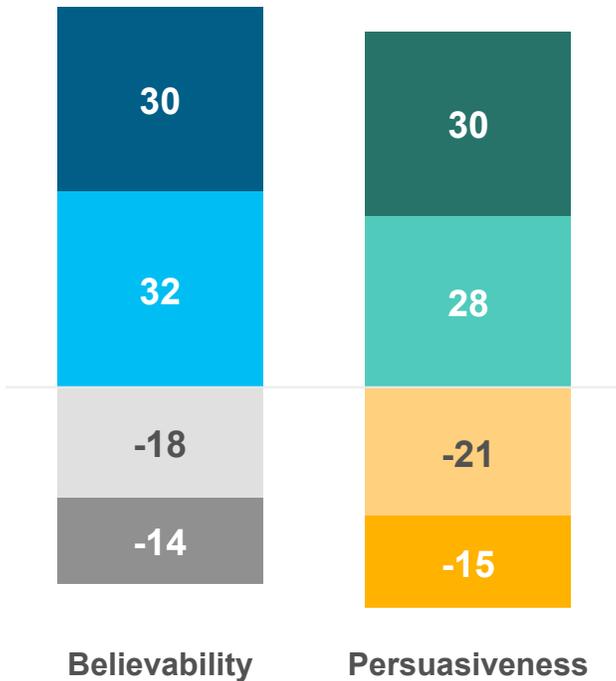
Very Believable Somewhat Believable Not Very Believable Not At All Believable
Very Persuasive Somewhat Persuasive Not Very Persuasive Not At All Persuasive



Extension of high school least persuasive overall

Message: Just like we made high school free to everyone before, the economy requires that we make college free to anyone who is academically qualified now.

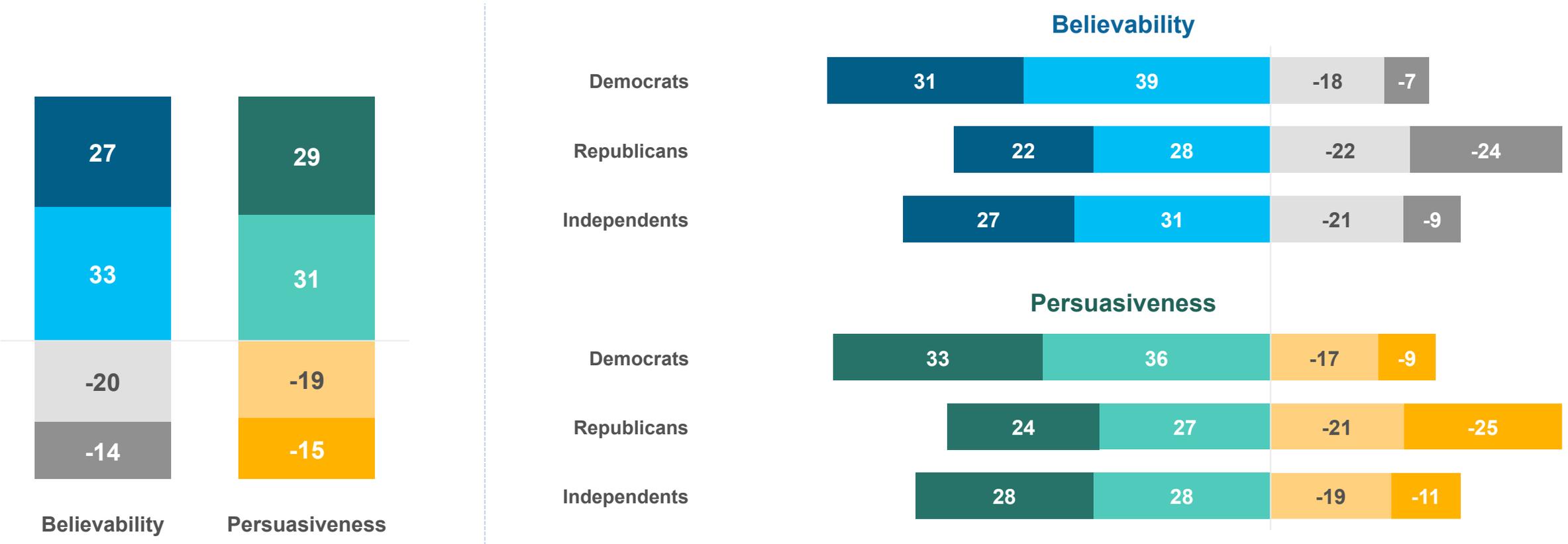
■ Very Believable
 ■ Somewhat Believable
 ■ Not Very Believable
 ■ Not At All Believable
■ Very Persuasive
 ■ Somewhat Persuasive
 ■ Not Very Persuasive
 ■ Not At All Persuasive



All partisan groups find “students work harder” message least believable

Message: Students work harder in high school and get better grades if free college tuition is available.

■ Very Believable
 ■ Somewhat Believable
 ■ Not Very Believable
 ■ Not At All Believable
■ Very Persuasive
 ■ Somewhat Persuasive
 ■ Not Very Persuasive
 ■ Not At All Persuasive



GTUITIONMSG1.mA. How believable is this statement?
 GTUITIONMSG1.mB. How persuasive is this as a reason to support providing free college tuition?

Strategic Recommendations

- ▶ **Emphasize the wider social and economic benefits of free tuition**
 - Free tuition does not just benefit the student, but also empowers them to contribute to their family, economy and nation
- ▶ **Present free college as a policy for all state residents**
 - The push for free tuition has a Goldilocks challenge: It must not seem too much like a gift to the rich or a wealth redistribution scheme to the middle class and poor
- ▶ **Position free college as a matter of fairness**
 - Escalating price unfairly withholds opportunity to gain necessary skills, and free tuition restores it
- ▶ **Convey that students still have to earn their success – it's not a giveaway to lazy, coddled kids**
 - Free tuition is only available for the “academically qualified” – and college level performance is required too
- ▶ **Highlight free tuition's bipartisan appeal**
 - Assuage partisan concerns by noting 6 in 10 Republicans support free tuition

Questions?



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