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Corporate Crackdown Project: Voters Want To Crack Down On Corporate Crime

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Introduction

It's no secret that powerful corporations in the United States operate as if they're above the law. The federal government has long taken a hands-off approach to corporate crime, creating an environment where corporations violate laws with impunity. From cheating workers out of earned wages and benefits to destroying the environment through pollution, corporations continue to get away with harmful activity due to lax regulatory enforcement.

Data for Progress and the Revolving Door Project's collaborative Corporate Crackdown Project makes the case for why and how President Joe Biden can use executive action to crack down on corporate crime. Without needing to pass new legislation, the federal government has an array of tools at its disposal to crack down on corporate wrongdoing.

In doing so, Biden won't just be taking needed steps to rein in corporate harm that has long gone unpunished. Indeed, by aggressively reining in corporate crime, he'll be able to show the American people he is on their side, not that of powerful corporate interests. Polling by Data for Progress in November 2021 found that voters across the political spectrum would welcome a more aggressive approach to reining in corporate wrongdoing.

Executive Summary

The following memo explores the findings of Data for Progress polling conducted between November 10 to 15, 2021. The poll surveyed 1,323 likely voters nationally using web panel respondents. The relevant sample was weighted in order to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, and voting history. Key findings of the polling:

▶ **Voters across party lines worry that wealthy individuals rig the criminal justice system**

By a wide +48-point margin, voters across party lines agreed that the criminal justice system unfairly targets poor people over rich people. Similarly, voters of all parties agreed by a +66-point margin that when wealthy people and corporations commit crimes, they regularly evade fair punishment. On a personal level, 72 percent of voters say they are either “very concerned” or at least “somewhat concerned” about wealthy individuals and corporations evading fair legal scrutiny.

▶ **Voters of all political affiliations believe that corporate criminals harm regular Americans, trust in institutions, and the rule of law**

83 percent of voters of all parties indicated they believe that regular Americans pay the price when the crimes of wealthy people and corporations go unpunished. By a +79-point margin, voters across party lines agreed that failing to hold wealthy individuals and corporations that commit crimes accountable harms public trust in government and the rule of law.

▶ **Crucially, voters across party lines want the Biden administration to crack down on corporate crime**

71 percent of voters across party lines agreed that the federal government should be doing more to punish corporations that break the law. When specifically asked about their view of the Biden administration’s approach to combating corporate crime, 70 percent of respondents across party lines agreed the administration should be doing more to combat corporate impropriety. This number is largely identical across party lines, with 70 percent of Democrats and Republicans as well as 69 percent of Independents wanting a stronger approach from the Biden administration.

▶ **Voters of all parties favor specific proposals to help the government rein in corporate crime**

77 percent of voters across party lines agreed that CEOs of companies that commit criminal acts should face legal penalties, including the possibility of jail time. By a wide +49-point margin, voters across party lines favor efforts to increase funding for federal agencies that investigate corporate wrongdoing in areas such as fraud and safety violations.

▶ **Voters hold favorable views of key federal agencies with power to rein in corporate crime**

Voters were found to hold favorable views of the Department of Justice ([DOJ](#)), the premier federal law enforcement agency, by a +14-point margin. By a wider +29-point margin, voters across party lines indicated they have a favorable view of the Department of Labor ([DOL](#)). This total includes Democrats, Independents and Republicans by +57, +14, and plus-eight point margins, respectively. 63 percent of voters across party lines were found to approve of the DOL’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), an agency with a key role in securing safe workplace conditions. A majority of Democrats (76%), Independents (57%), and Republicans (52%) were found to approve of [OSHA](#).

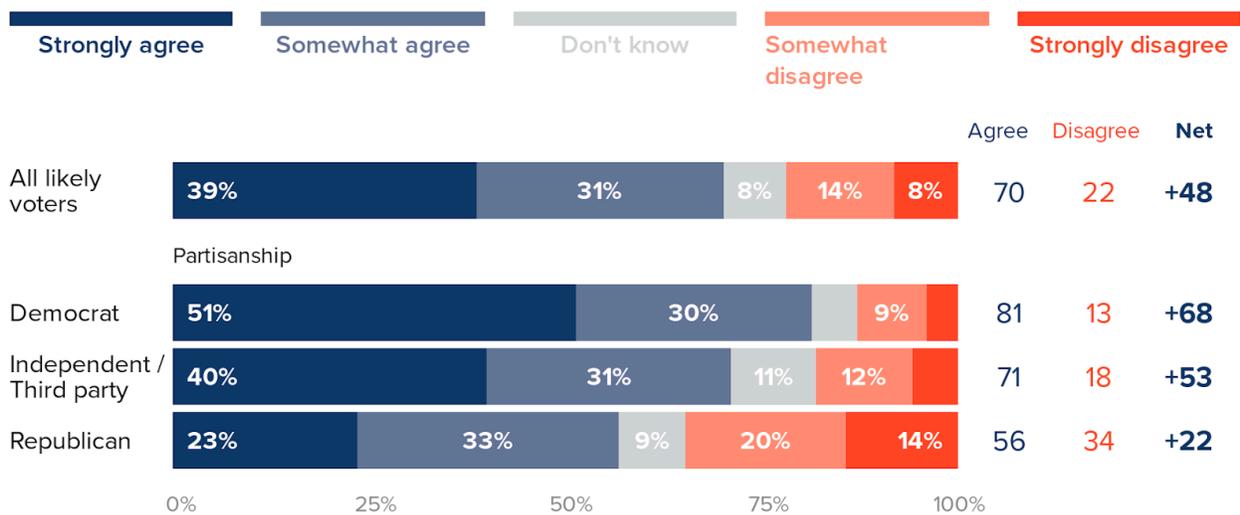
Voters Are Concerned That The Crimes Of The Rich And Powerful Go Unpunished

Americans know there is a two-tiered criminal justice system: An uncompromising one for the poor and marginalized, and a lax one for the wealthy and well-connected. By a wide +48-point margin, voters across party lines agreed that the criminal justice system unfairly targets poor people over rich people. This number includes a majority of Democrats (81 percent), Independents (71 percent), and Republicans (56 percent).

Voters Across Parties Believe Criminal Justice System Unfairly Targets the Poor Over the Wealthy

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of these statements about corporations and the law:

— The criminal justice system unfairly targets poor people over rich people.



November 10–15, 2021 survey of 1,323 likely voters

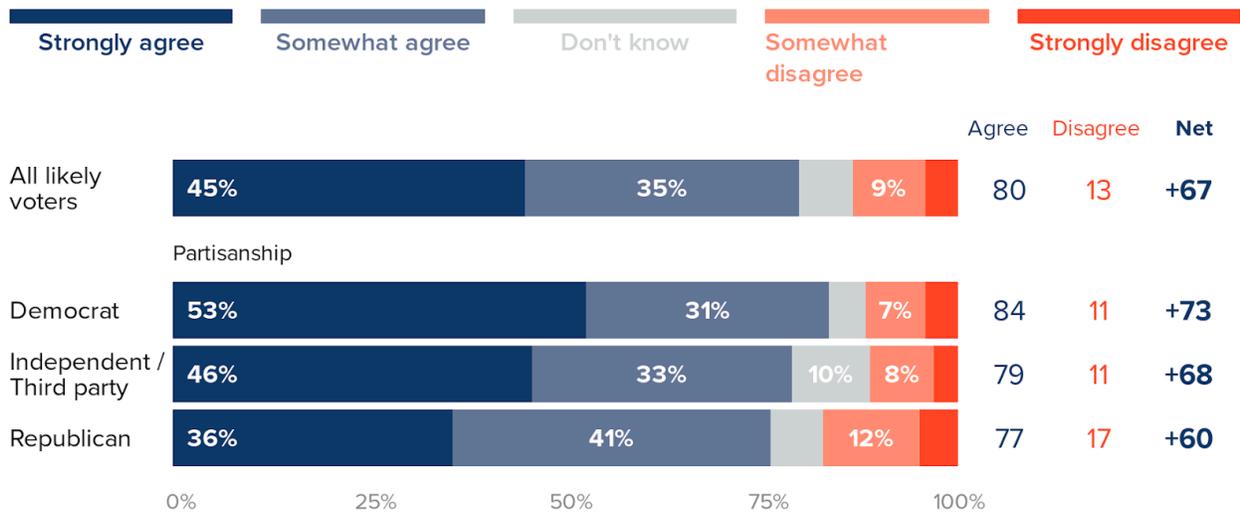
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While petty crimes committed by poor Americans receive harsh penalties, corporate giants are seldom held accountable for their crimes. Our polling found that voters across party lines agree that crimes committed by rich people and corporations often go unpunished. By an overwhelming +66-point margin, respondents agreed that when wealthy people and corporations commit crimes, they regularly evade fair punishment. This number includes the vast majority of Democrats (84 percent), Independents (79 percent), and Republicans (77 percent).

Majority of Voters Believe Corporations and the Wealthy Regularly Get Away With Crime

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of these statements about corporations and the law:

— Wealthy people and corporations are regularly not punished for breaking the law.



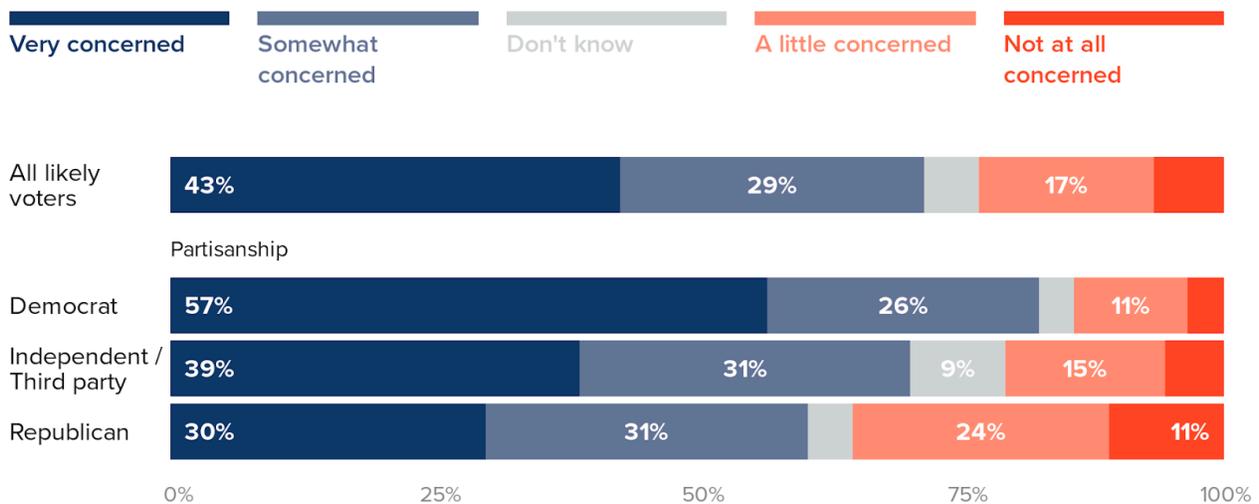
November 10–15, 2021 survey of 1,323 likely voters

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On a personal level, voters are intimately concerned that letting off corporations and wealthy individuals who commit crimes is harmful. 72 percent of voters say they are personally “very concerned” or at least “somewhat concerned” about wealthy individuals and corporations evading fair legal scrutiny. This trend is seen across party lines, with a strong majority of Democrats (83 percent), Independents (70 percent), and Republicans (61 percent) indicating they are either “very” or “somewhat concerned”. In contrast, only 17 percent of voters across party lines said they were only “a little concerned”. In contrast, only 17 percent of voters across party lines said they were only “a little concerned” about it, and even fewer (seven percent) said they weren’t concerned.

Voters Across Parties Are Concerned by Corporations and the Wealthy Getting Away With Breaking the Law

How concerned or not concerned are you that wealthy people and corporations are not held accountable by the government when they break the law?



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Voters Believe That Corporate Criminals Harm Regular Americans And Public Trust In Government

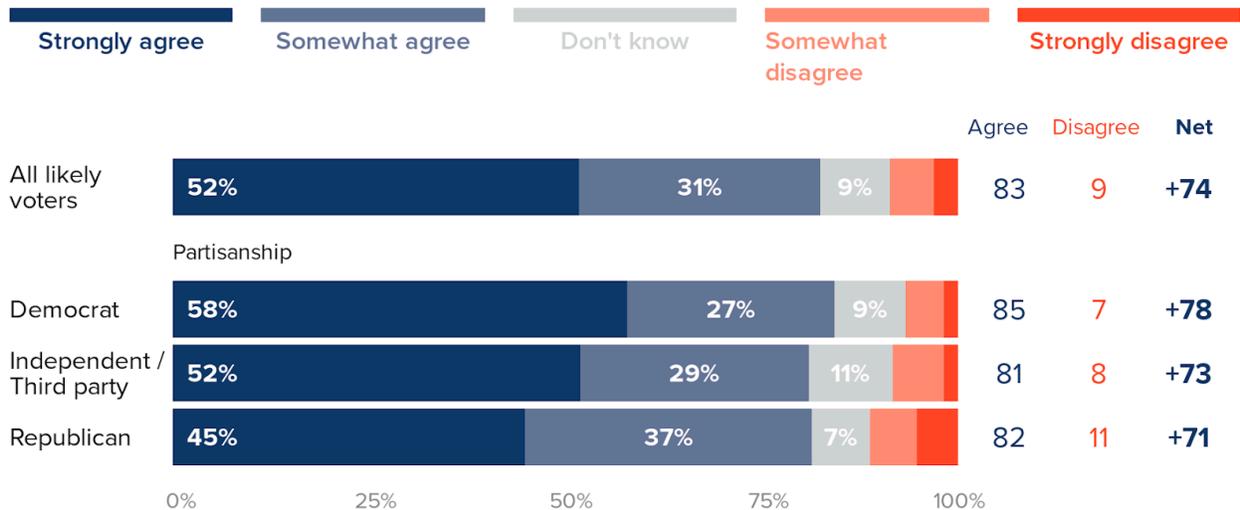
It's clear that voters aren't just alarmed by corporate crime in conceptual terms. Indeed, the vast majority of voters across party lines believe that failing to punish wealthy people and corporations that commit crime comes at the expense of regular Americans.

83 percent of all likely voters indicated they believe that regular Americans pay the price when the crimes of wealthy people and corporations go unpunished. This number is seen almost identically across party lines, with 85 percent of Democrats, 81 percent of Independents, and 82 percent of Republicans indicating their agreement. By taking a hardline approach to punishing corporate criminals, the White House will be able to show the American people that Biden is committed to the interests of regular Americans, not corporate tycoons.

Voters Believe Regular Americans Pay the Price When Corporations and the Wealthy Get Away With Crime

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of these statements about corporations and the law:

— When wealthy people and corporations are not punished for breaking the laws, regular Americans pay the price.



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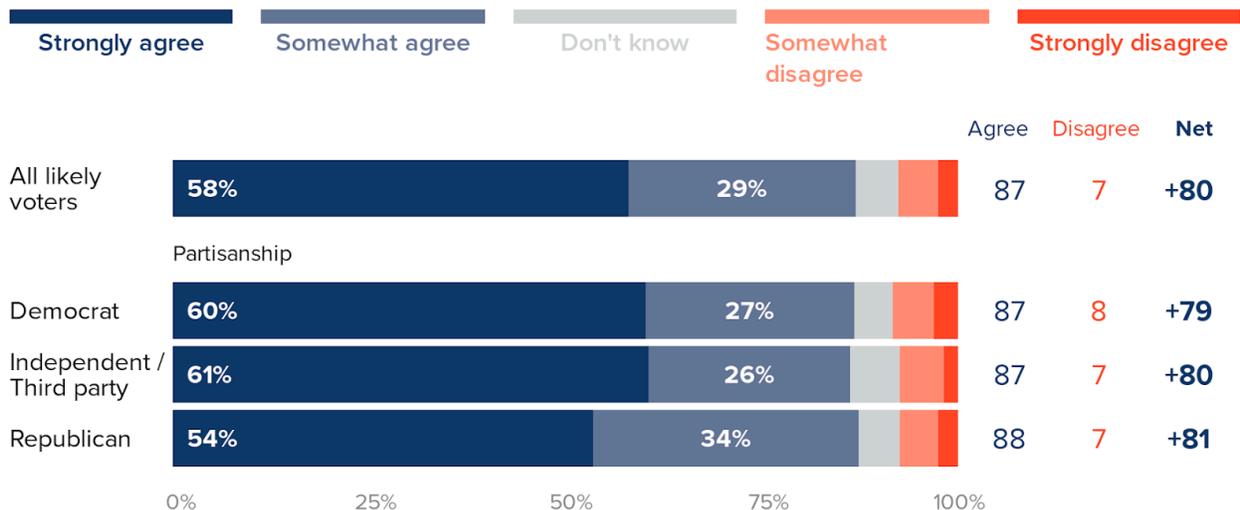
As the last few years have proven, our democracy is in crisis. Catastrophic decisions, such as the failure to punish those responsible for the 2008 financial crisis, has contributed to a decline in trust in established institutions. By a +79-point margin, voters across party lines agreed that failing to punish wealthy individuals and corporations that commit crime leads to declined trust in government and the rule of law.

This number includes 87 percent of both Democrats and Independents, as well as 88 percent of Republican respondents. Less than a year after the devastating January 6, 2021 Capitol insurrection, it is more important than ever to reverse declining faith in government and the rule of law. Only by holding corporate criminals accountable for their offenses can President Biden begin to reassert the value of sound governance and begin to cultivate a new civil culture.

Voters Believe Trust in Government and the Rule of Law Is Hurt When Corporations and the Wealthy Get Away With Crime

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of these statements about corporations and the law:

— When wealthy people and corporations are not punished for breaking laws, people lose trust in the government and the rule of law.



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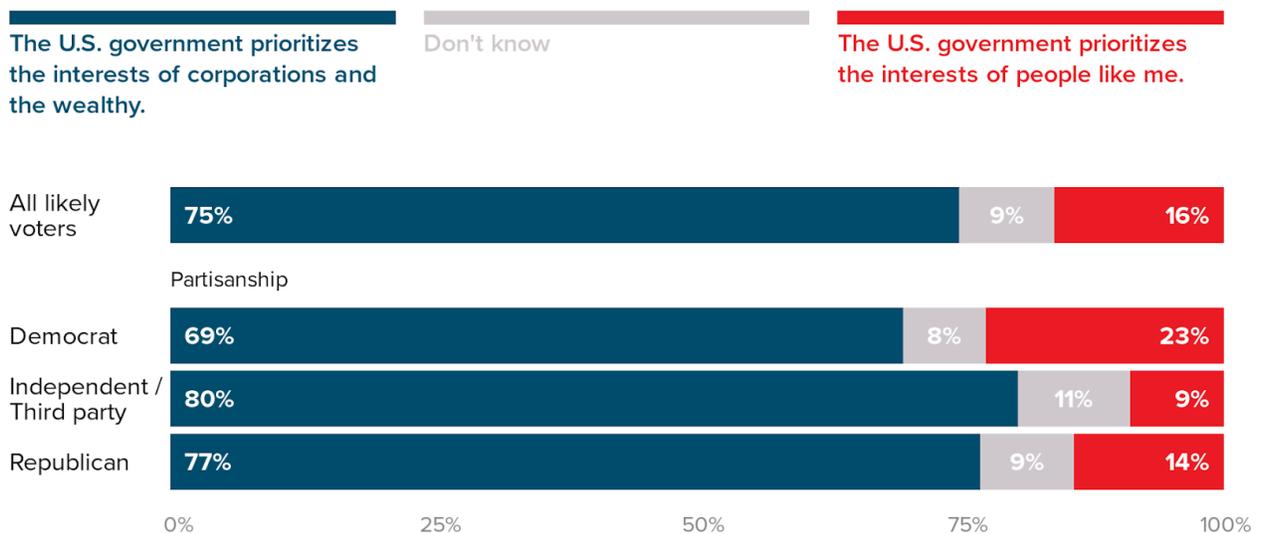
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Furthermore, voters understand that the interests of corporations and the upper-class get top priority from lawmakers, while the needs of working-class Americans are neglected. While the Wall Street firms that crashed the global economy in 2008 were given government bailouts, the federal government continues to ignore the economic crises facing working families.

By a +59-point margin, respondents of all parties said that the government prioritizes the interests of corporations and wealthy people over people like themselves. Indeed, among Republican voters, this number comes out to an even larger +63-point margin. As Biden looks to reach across the aisle and expand his own voter base, taking a strong approach to combating corporate wrongdoing would help shift the perception that the government works only for the rich and powerful.

Vast Majority of Voters Believe the Government Puts the Interests of Corporations and the Rich Above Their Own

When thinking about whose interests the U.S. government prioritizes when making decisions, which statement comes closer to your view, even neither is completely right?



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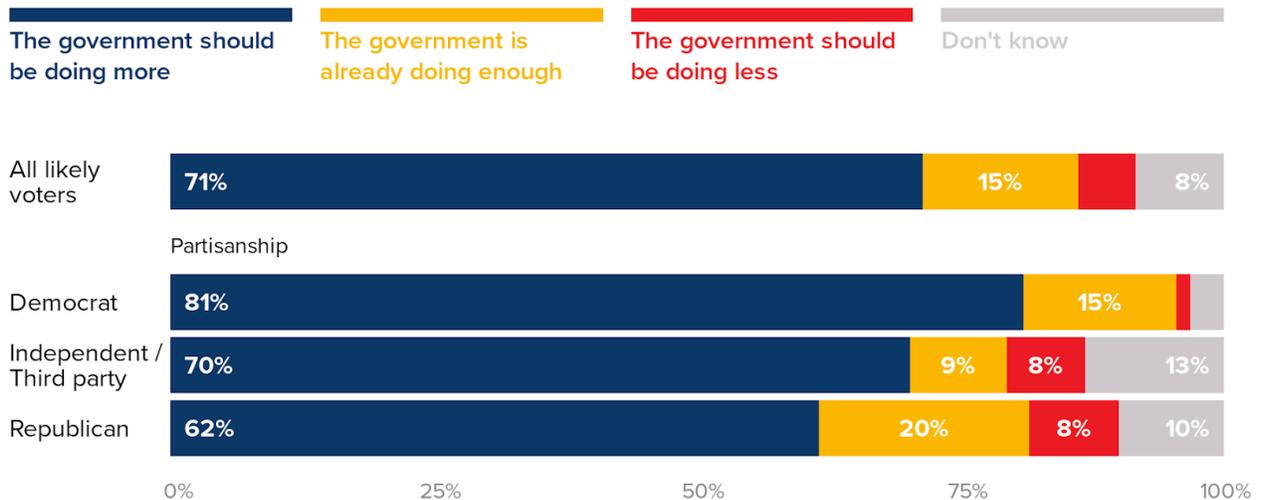
Voters Want The Biden Administration To Aggressively Crack Down On Corporate Crime

As covered in previous sections, our polling found that voters believe that corporate crimes commonly go unpunished at the expense of average Americans and the health of our democracy. Crucially, our polling also found that voters explicitly want the federal government to do more to hold corporate criminals accountable.

71 percent of voters across party lines agreed that the federal government “should be doing more” to hold corporations that break the law accountable. Indeed, even among Republican voters, 62 percent want more federal intervention to curb corporate crime. In contrast, only 20 percent of Republicans said they favored the government’s current approach, and an even smaller number of Republicans (eight percent) said the government should be doing less.

Voters Overwhelmingly Want the Government To Do More To Punish Corporate Criminals

Do you think the federal government should be doing more or less, or is already doing enough, to hold corporations accountable when they break the law?



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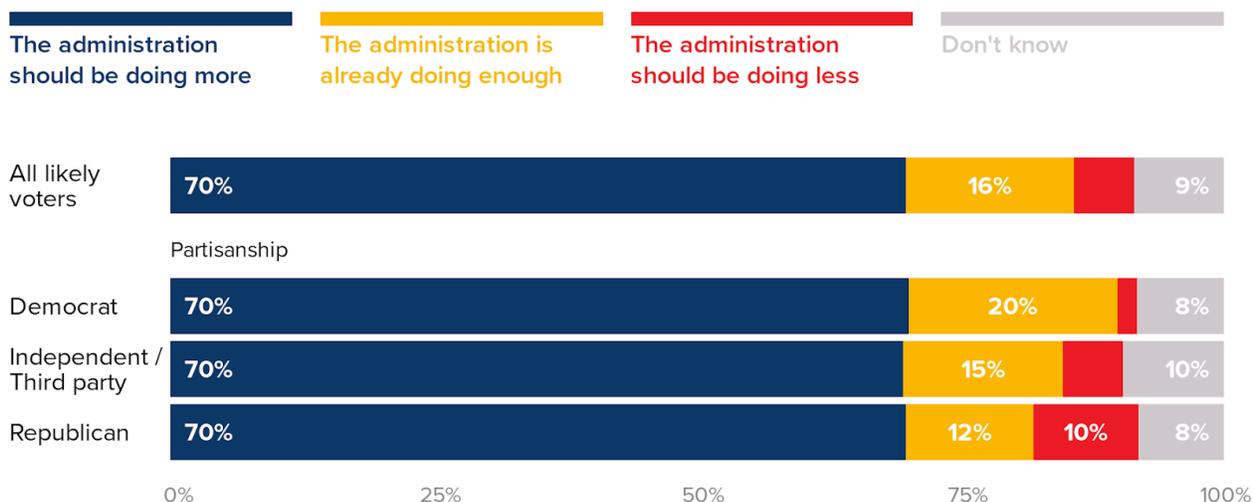
When asked about their views of the Biden administration’s approach to tackling corporate crime, voters across party lines were clear: Biden isn’t taking a strong enough approach to holding corporate criminals accountable.

70 percent of respondents across party lines agreed that the Biden administration should be doing more to combat corporate impropriety, opposed to just 16 percent who favor the Biden administration’s current approach. This number includes 70 percent of Democrats and Republicans and 69 percent of Independents, which shows that Americans across party lines aren’t satisfied with the status quo.

It’s important that the Biden administration doesn’t view the electorate’s opinion that it is not doing enough to combat corporate crime as a warning sign. Instead, the White House should view it as an opportunity: By taking a more aggressive approach to corporate crime, the Biden Administration will be able to shore up his own base of support while leaving a positive impression on conservative segments of the electorate.

Voters of All Parties Want the Biden Administration To Do More To Punish Corporate Criminals

Do you think the Biden administration should be doing more or less, or is already doing enough, to hold corporations accountable when they break the law?



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Voters Support Specific Proposals To Hold Corporate Criminals Accountable

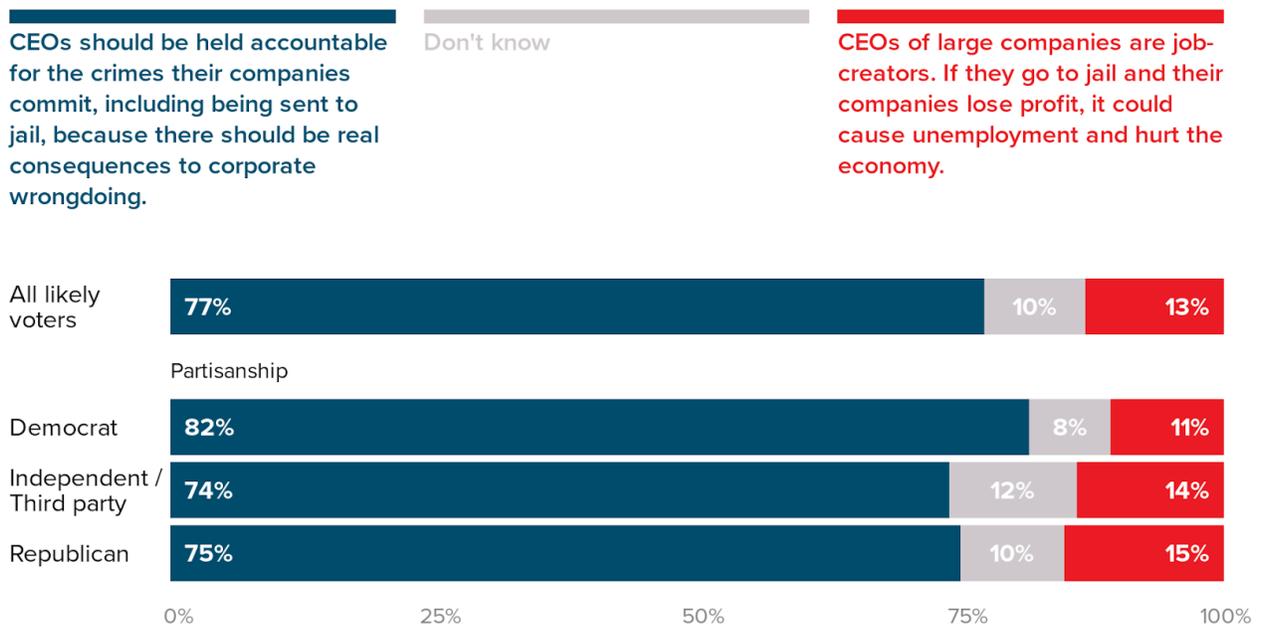
When asked about specific proposals to punish corporate criminals, voters across party lines indicated their support for such measures. In addition to those listed here, polling on specific proposals to stop employer crimes against workers can be found in the “[Protecting Workers From Corporate Crime](#)” report, the first in the Corporate Crackdown Project series.

Our polling found that 77 percent of voters across party lines agreed that CEOs of corporations that break the law should be held accountable for their companies’ activities. This includes the possibility of being sent to jail if said company engages in unlawful behavior. Support for holding CEOs liable for their company’s illegal activity was overwhelming across party lines, with the vast majority of Democrats (82 percent), Independents (74 percent), and Republicans (75 percent) endorsing such a measure.

In contrast, only 13 percent of respondents opposed the proposal, even when given the premise that doing so would lead to the company losing workers and hurting the economy. It’s clear that voters understand the importance of holding executives personally accountable for their company’s crimes.

Voters Support Punishing CEOs of Companies That Break the Law

Some government regulators have proposed possible jail sentences for CEOs if it is found their companies have broken the law. Which of the following statements comes closer to your view, even neither is completely right?



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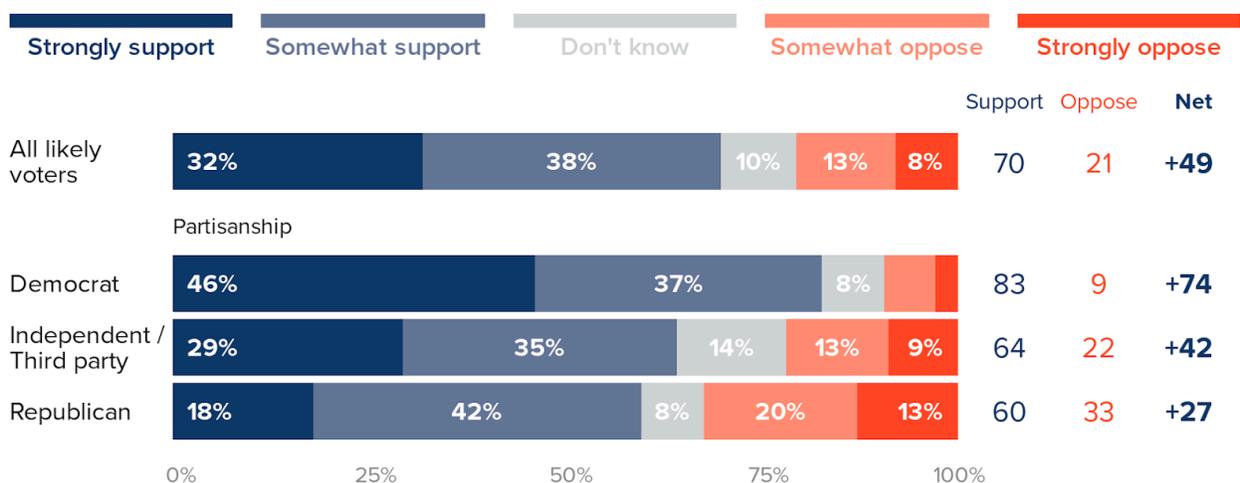
Regulatory agencies with the power to curb corporate wrongdoing, especially harm to workers, often suffer from a paucity of resources. Polling by Data for Progress found strong bipartisan support for increasing funding to federal agencies responsible for investigating corporate impropriety, such as in the realm of safety violations and fraud.

By a wide +49-point margin, voters across party lines favor proposals to increase funding for these agencies. This includes 83 percent of Democrats, 64 percent of Independents, and 60 percent of Republicans. Regardless of party affiliation, it's clear that voters understand that the government's ability to punish corporate crime will be hindered until key agencies receive appropriate funding.

Majority of Voters Want Increased Funding for Agencies That Investigate Corporate Crime

Some lawmakers have proposed increasing funding for federal government agencies that investigate instances of corporations breaking the law, such as fraud and safety violations.

Do you support or oppose increasing funding for the federal government agencies to investigate instances of corporations breaking the law?



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Voters Have A Favorable View Of Agencies That Can Crack Down On Corporate Crime

To effectively rein in corporate crime, the agencies responsible for doing so will have to have the trust of the public. Fortunately, polling by Data for Progress found wide public support for the DOJ and the DOL. Additionally, we found that the OSHA also commands wide public support.

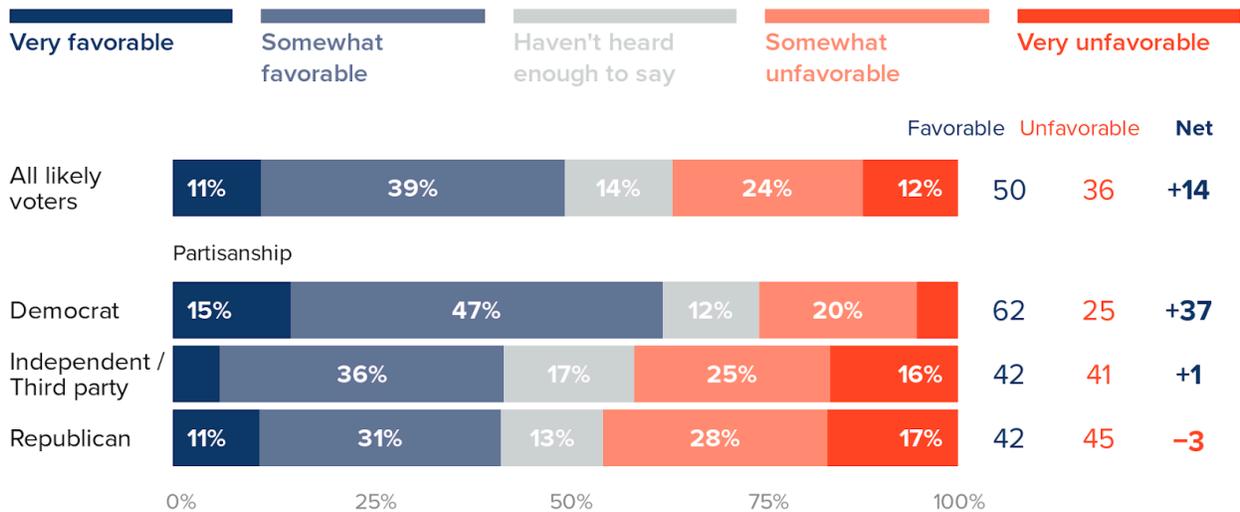
As the top law enforcement agency in the United States, the Department of Justice (DOJ) has a crucial role in reining in corporate crime. Within the DOJ exists subdivisions devoted to penalizing, among others, environmental crimes, abusive market activity, and illegal discrimination. In October, the DOJ publicly indicated it would take a stronger approach to penalizing corporate misconduct. Given both the moral imperative and established popularity of the cause, it is crucial the department makes due on its publicized intent to punish corporate wrongdoing.

Polling by Data for Progress found that voters held favorable views of the DOJ by a +14-point margin. This includes the vast majority of Democratic voters as well as a small plurality of Independent respondents. However, it should be noted that Republican voters were found to hold unfavorable views of the DOJ by a small -3-point margin. Given that Republican voters were found to be very receptive to the cause of penalizing corporate crime, it stands to reason that the DOJ can improve its standing among Republicans with a strong approach to reining in corporate wrongdoing.

Strong Plurality of Voters Hold a Favorable View of the Department of Justice

Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of each of the following?

— U.S. Department of Justice



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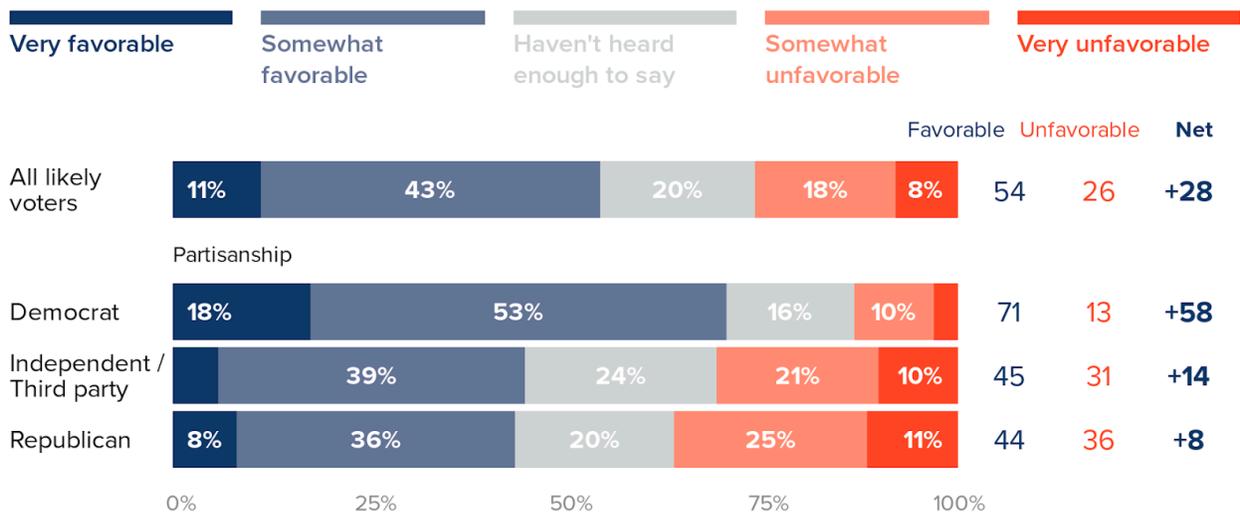
As outlined in the “Protecting Workers From Corporate Crime” report released in November 2021, the Department of Labor (DOL) has a crucial role to play in reining in corporate impropriety. From cracking down on wage theft to ending workplace discrimination, the DOL and associated agencies can and must take a hard line against employer impropriety.

As Democrats work to reconnect with working people, it should be noted that the DOL is largely popular with the American public. By a +29-point margin, voters across party lines indicated they have a favorable view of the agency tasked with protecting workers. This includes Democrats, Independents, and Republicans by +57, +14, and +8-point margins, respectively.

Majority of Voters Have a Favorable View of the Department of Labor

Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of each of the following?

— U.S. Department of Labor



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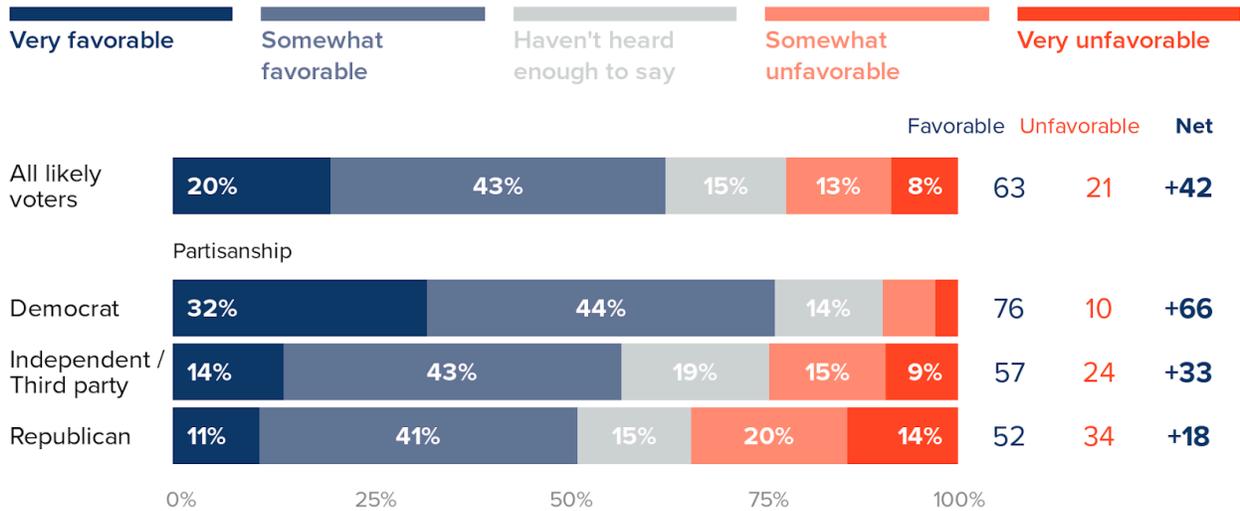
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Among the most crucial of the DOL’s agencies is the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The agency is tasked with enforcing workplace safety standards, which unfortunately remain weak in the United States. The “Protecting Workers From Corporate Crime” report outlines a number of ways in which OSHA can do more to protect workers, including through increasing the number of agency investigations, ending workplace violence, and protecting workplace whistleblowers.

Given that OSHA is widely popular with the public, it should be assumed that aggressively clamping down on employers who leave workplaces unsafe would be met well with the public. An absolute majority of Democrats (76 percent), Independents (57 percent), and Republicans (52 percent) polled indicated they have a favorable view of OSHA. This amounts to voters across party lines favoring OSHA by a massive +41-point margin, a clear indication Americans want increased penalties for employers who preside over unsafe workplaces.

Voters Across Party Lines Have a Favorable View of OSHA

Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of each of the following?
 — Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA)



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Conclusion

With midterms approaching, the White House faces tough political choices ahead as it looks to garner popular support. By pursuing the widely popular cause of cracking down on corporate crime, Biden will be able to broaden his base of support and help vulnerable Democrats in 2022. While a closely-divided Congress complicates Biden’s agenda, the White House would not need to navigate harsh legislative realities to rein in corporate crime. Instead, the bulk of it can be done through the vigorous enforcement of existing laws.

The data is clear: Taking an aggressive approach to punishing corporate crime would be politically advantageous for Biden. More importantly, the cause of holding corporate giants accountable for their grave offenses against workers, communities, and society at-large is a moral one. Every time a corporate polluter is given a pass for its offenses, another will be enabled to harm the health of children in marginalized communities. Whenever an employer avoids punishment for stealing employees wages, others will be empowered to rob workers of the fruits of their labor. And, as the world learned in the years following 2008, failing to punish financial criminals only encourages Wall Street to gamble our collective future away.

Enough is enough: The Biden Administration can—and must—rein in corporate criminality through executive action. In doing so, Biden will be able to begin the process of levelling the playing field of criminal justice in the United States. And, as polling shows, Americans across party lines will thank him for it.

The “Voters Want To Crack Down On Corporate Crime” memo is part of Data for Progress and the Revolving Door Project’s “Corporate Crackdown Project” series. The first report in the series, “[Protecting Workers From Corporate Crime](#)”, focuses on labor issues and was released in November 2021. In coming months, reports on how the Biden administration can combat corporate wrongdoing in specific issue areas will be released.

Authorship & Methodology

Aidan Smith is a Senior Advisor at Data for Progress

From November 10 to 15, 2021, Data for Progress conducted a survey of 1,323 likely voters nationally using web panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, and voting history.

The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is ± 3 percentage points. N=1,323 unless otherwise specified. Some values may not add up to 100 due to rounding.