Trump Messaging Experiment

Center for American Progress Action Fund

June 5, 2019

Context & Key Takeaways

- CAP Action Fund undertook research to better understand how voters view Trump's policies on issues such as health care, Rx drug prices, wages and trade, which have been long-standing priorities for the institution.

- Democrats have multiple different messages on Donald Trump and as a result no one clear narrative on him.

- Off the six messages we tested, the best performing message—**Ineffective**—is the one Democrats are driving the least, if ever.

- Quite simply, we need to remind voters that Trump has not delivered for them or on the promises he made as a candidate.

  - We need to tie his ineffectiveness and failures more to the aspects of Trump that persuadable voters agree with: his tweeting and creating more chaos in Washington.

Research Summary

- We tested **six anti-Trump frames** to learn which were most effective at moving attitudes towards Democrats on a variety of metrics: **2020 Vote Choice**, **2020 Vote likelihood**, **Trump Approval**, **Trump Promises Kept**, **Trump Cares about People Like You**. To do this, we ran an in-survey randomized controlled experiment to 7k web panelists nationally in April of 2019.

- **We found that Ineffective was the top-testing message overall, moving voters towards Democrats on every key metric.** While there was not substantial variation, it performed better among younger voters, non-college educated white voters and Republicans.

  - **False Promises** performed particularly well among Latinx voters as well as slightly better among older voters, where as **Corrupt** did best among non-college educated white voters, younger voters, and Obama-Trump voters. Albeit with much smaller effect sizes, Corrupt mirrored Ineffective in performing better among younger and non-college educated white voters. It also did slightly better among Obama-Trump voters.

  - While some messages had suggestively negative movement on some metrics, this research does not provide compelling evidence that any one of the messages tested should be completely excluded from future communication, especially if the content is targeted.

Messages Tested

Voters in the **control group** (N = 2,140) did not receive content- they were asked the outcome questions immediately after the pre-screens.

False Promises (n = 846, 80% MOE on vote choice = 1.2%)

"As a candidate, Donald Trump made huge promises that he would fix many of the problems facing the country. He promised that he would lower drug prices, increase wages and stop factories from moving out of the country. But drug prices keep soaring higher, wages for working families are flat, and tens of thousands of jobs keep moving overseas. Donald Trump just made these promises to get elected and he was never looking out for working people."

Ineffective (n = 828, 80% MOE on vote choice = 1.2%)

"As a candidate, Donald Trump promised that he would cut deals that would fix many of the problems facing the country. He promised that he would lower drug prices, increase wages and stop factories from moving out of the country. But Trump has been more focused on his twitter account than on delivering on his promises. He has created more chaos in Washington and hasn't even tried to pass any legislation to lower drug prices or increase wages. Donald Trump has been totally ineffective as president."

Corrupt (n = 819, 80% MOE on vote choice = 1.2%)

"As a candidate, Donald Trump promised he would fix many of the problems facing the country. He promised that he would lower drug prices and increase wages and stop factories moving out of the country. But instead of helping working people, Donald Trump has only helped himself and his wealthy donors. He put Wall Street bankers in charge of the economy and a former drug lobbyist in charge of health care. Trump and his family have gotten billions in tax breaks but for working people drug prices keep soaring higher and wages are flat. Americans are paying the price for Trump's corruption."

Divisive (n = 825, 80% MOE on vote choice = 1.2%)

"Instead of trying to unite Americans, Donald Trump is just dividing us further. He blames immigrants for the economic challenges facing Americans, and points the finger at Muslims, Hispanics, and African-Americans. He is just dividing us to distract from his agenda of giving trillions in tax cuts to big corporations and the wealthy. But drug prices keep soaring higher and wages for working families are flat. Donald Trump has betrayed all working families--black, brown and white--to pursue an agenda that benefits the wealthiest Americans like himself."

Racist (n = 815, 80% confidence margin of error on vote choice = 1.2%)
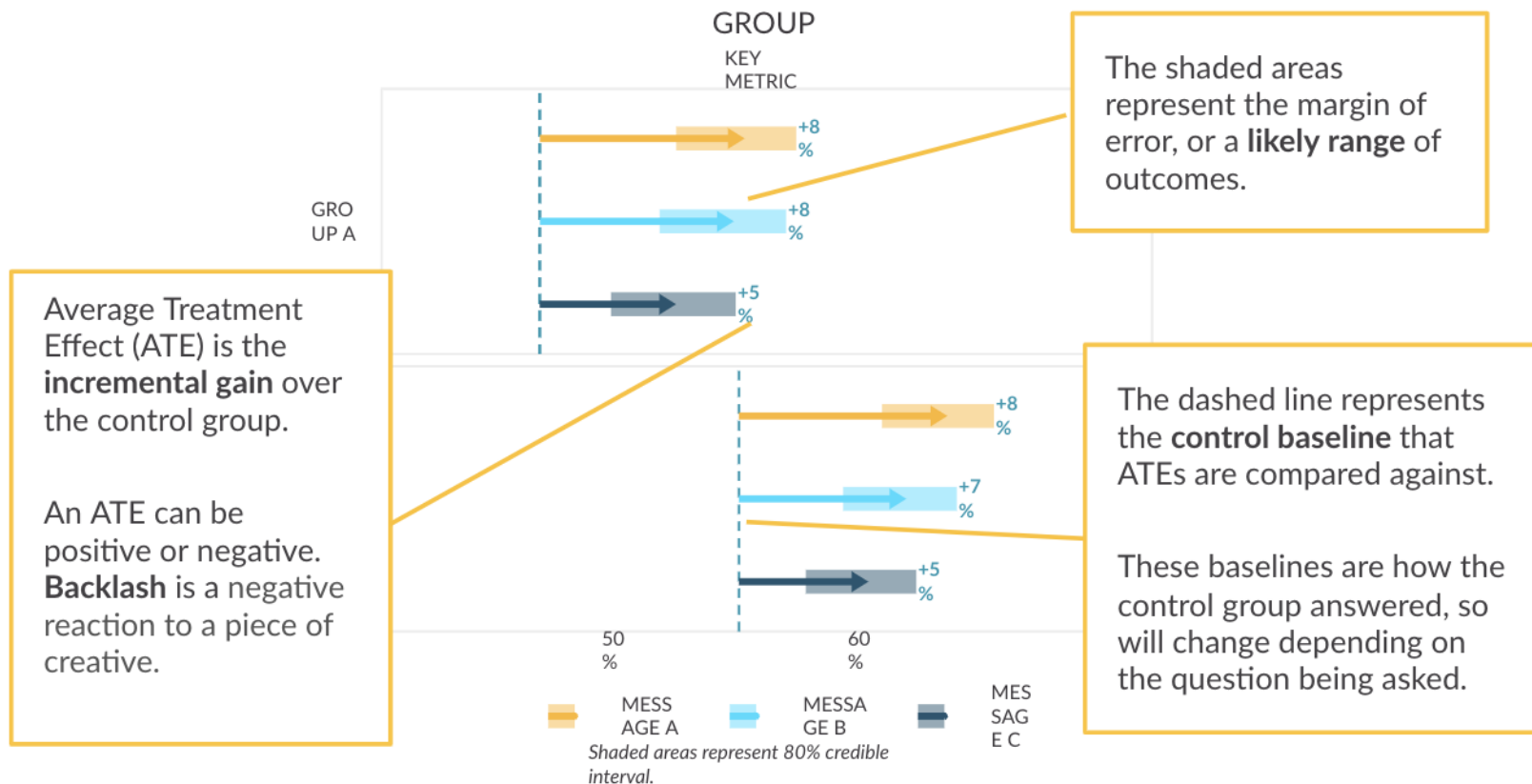
"Donald Trump is a white nationalist who is only interested in helping those who already have power and privilege. As president, his policies help the rich and powerful and as a businessman he deliberately cheated black and brown tenants in his buildings. He uses bigotry to vilify immigrants and he is spreading the hate and anger of some white Americans to marginalize black and brown people, which is undermining the strength of our economy. All Americans—white, black, and brown—are impacted by his racism and bigotry."

For the Rich (n = 818, 80% MOE on vote choice = 1.2%)

"As a candidate, Donald Trump promised he would fix many of the problems facing the country. He promised that he would lower drug prices, increase wages and stop factories from moving out of the country. But instead of fighting for working families, Donald Trump has only helped the wealthy. Trump gave big corporations and the wealthiest Americans a $2 trillion tax cut but drug prices keep soaring higher and wages for working families are flat. Donald Trump is only looking out for his friends, corporations and wealthy Americans."

How do I interpret these results?

Across 200+ ad tests in 2018, the average "treatment" moved the horse race by 1-2 percentage points.

GROUP

KEY METRIC

GRO UP A

+8 %

+8 %

+5 %

The shaded areas represent the margin of error, or a **likely range** of outcomes.

Average Treatment Effect (ATE) is the **incremental gain** over the control group.

An ATE can be positive or negative. **Backlash** is a negative reaction to a piece of creative.

+8 %

+7 %

+5 %

50 %

60 %

The dashed line represents the **control baseline** that ATEs are compared against.

These baselines are how the control group answered, so will change depending on the question being asked.

MESS AGE A   MESSA GE B   MES SAG E C

Shaded areas represent 80% credible interval.

Ineffective was the best testing attack on Trump overall

It moved voters towards Democrats on every key metric.
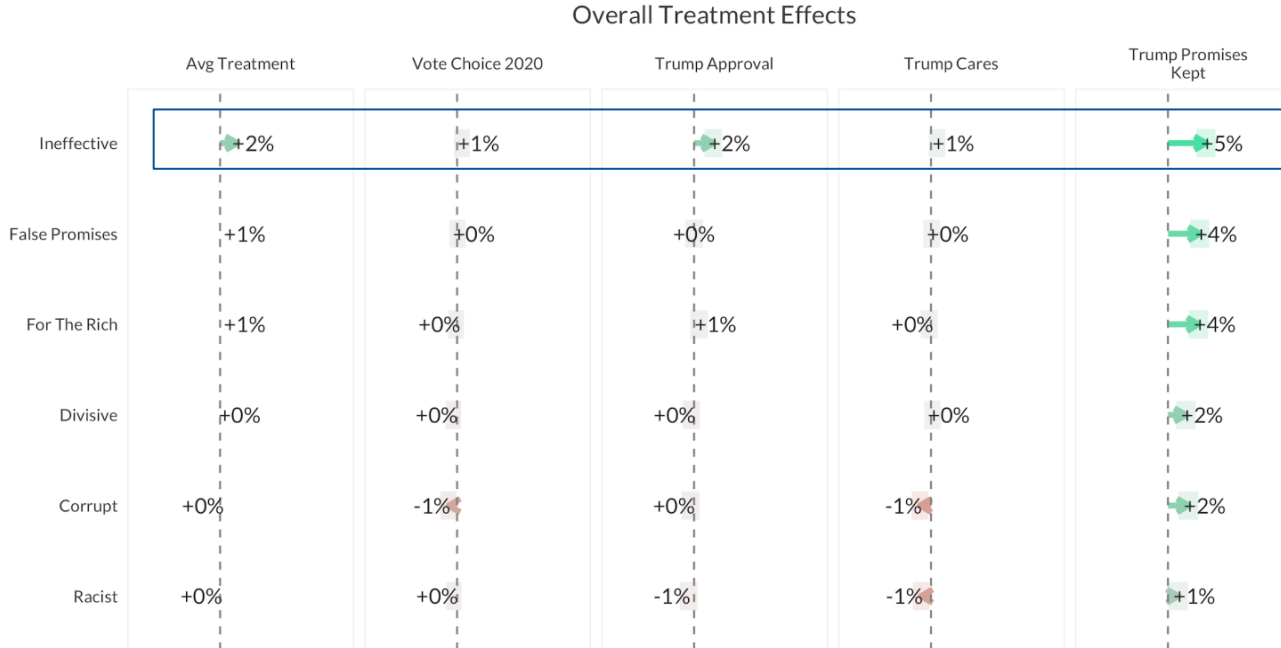
Overall Treatment Effects

	Avg Treatment	Vote Choice 2020	Trump Approval	Trump Cares	Trump Promises Kept
Ineffective	+2%	+1%	+2%	+1%	+5%
False Promises	+1%	+0%	+0%	+0%	+4%
For The Rich	+1%	+0%	+1%	+0%	+4%
Divisive	+0%	+0%	+0%	+0%	+2%
Corrupt	+0%	-1%	+0%	-1%	+2%
Racist	+0%	+0%	-1%	-1%	+1%

All positive movement indicates greater support for the pro-Democratic position after treatment exposure.

Of the messages tested, **Ineffective** did the most to move vote choice toward a Democratic candidate.

While some messages had slight negative effects on some metrics, there was no message that caused backlash overall. As a result, this research does not provide compelling evidence that any of the messages tested should be avoided entirely.

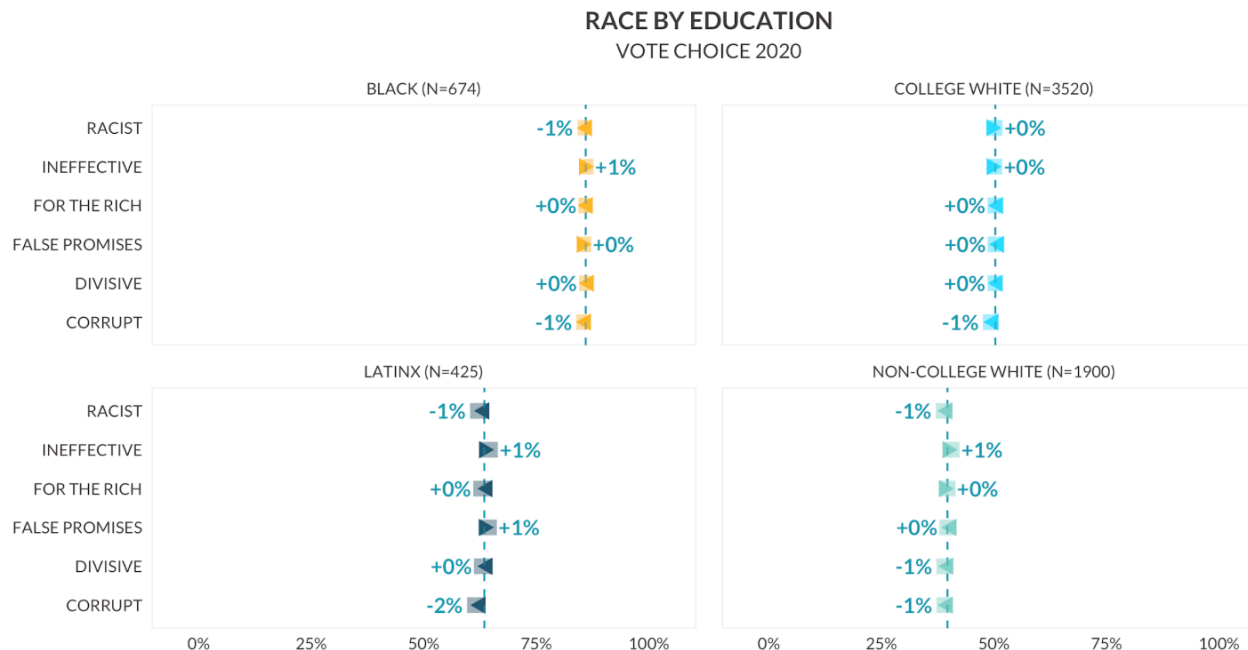# Ineffective worked by increasing Dem support among non-college whites

Control baselines (Dem support): 55% college white, 40% non-college white, 90% Black, 77% Latinx

RACE BY EDUCATION
VOTE CHOICE 2020

Takeaways

Looking at effects on support: most of the movement as a result of the **Ineffective** frame happened among panelists who were white voters without a college degree.

College educated white respondents had the least treatment responsiveness of all groups.

All positive movement indicates greater support for the pro-Democratic position after treatment exposure.

# Ineffective worked by increasing Dem support among Obama-Trump voters

Control baselines (Dem support): 7% Romney-Trump, 94% Romney-Clinton, 9% Obama-Trump, 96% Obama-Clinton

VOTE CHOICE 2012/2016
VOTE CHOICE 2020

Takeaways

The messages had basically no effect on strong Republicans (Romney-Trump voters) and negligible effect on Obama-Clinton voters. This indicates that hard-partisans are comparatively **locked-in** and hard to move on the 2020 vote choice metric.

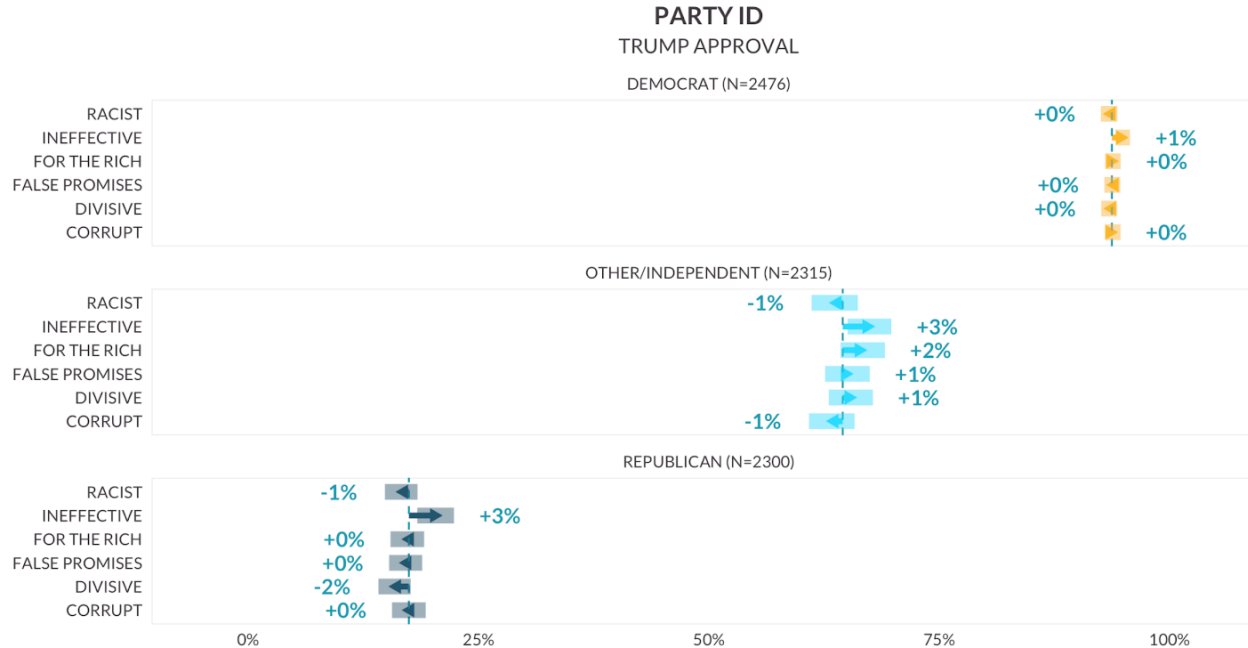**Ineffective** appears to do especially well among Obama-Trump voters, while Racist does worst.
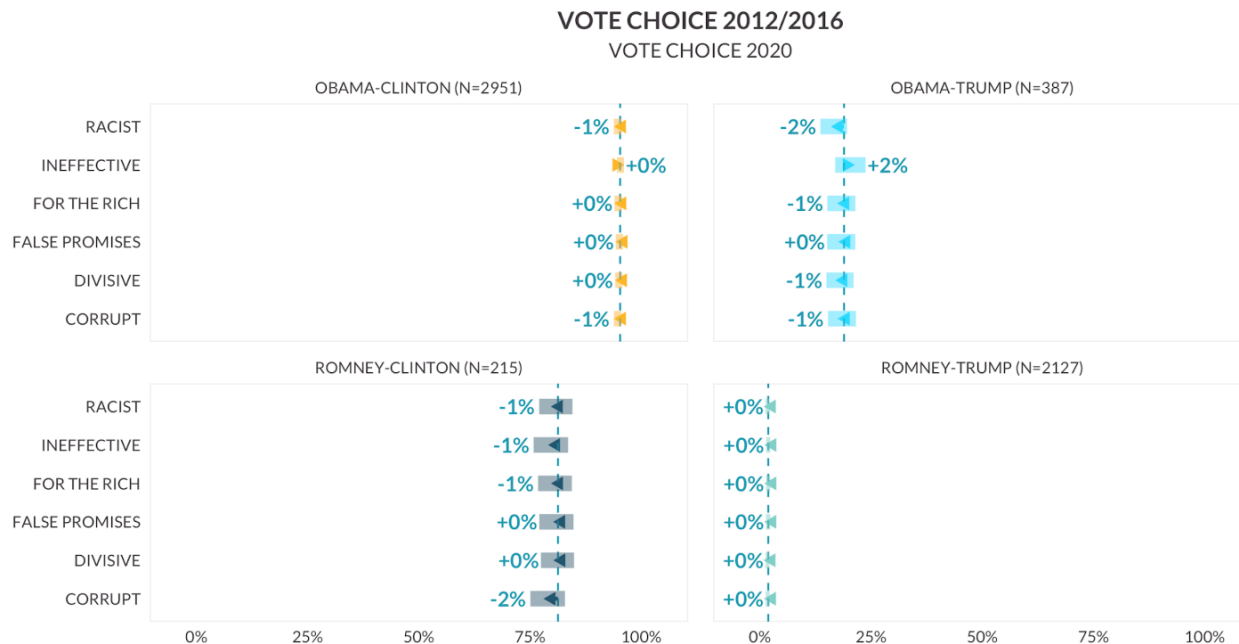
All positive movement indicates greater support for the pro-Democratic position after treatment exposure.

Independents moved most for all messages on Trump Approval

Control baselines (respondents who strongly/somewhat disapprove): 90% Democrats, 14% Republicans, 56% Independents

PARTY ID
TRUMP APPROVAL

DEMOCRAT (N=2476)

RACIST	+0%
INEFFECTIVE	+1%
FOR THE RICH	+0%
FALSE PROMISES	+0%
DIVISIVE	+0%
CORRUPT	+0%

OTHER/INDEPENDENT (N=2315)

RACIST	-1%
INEFFECTIVE	+3%
FOR THE RICH	+2%
FALSE PROMISES	+1%
DIVISIVE	+1%
CORRUPT	-1%

REPUBLICAN (N=2300)

RACIST	-1%
INEFFECTIVE	+3%
FOR THE RICH	+0%
FALSE PROMISES	+0%
DIVISIVE	-2%
CORRUPT	+0%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

All positive movement indicates greater support for the pro-Democratic position after treatment exposure.

Takeaways

Looking at Trump job performance, **Ineffective** increased Trump disapproval among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans.

Racist actually increased Trump's approval with both Independents and Republicans.

All messages increased the share of those who think Trump broke promises

Control baselines (respondents who say "no"): 92% Democrats, 18% Republicans, 60% Independents

PARTY ID
TRUMP PROMISES KEPT

DEMOCRAT (N=2476)

RACIST	+1%
INEFFECTIVE	+2%
FOR THE RICH	+2%
FALSE PROMISES	+2%
DIVISIVE	+1%
CORRUPT	+2%

OTHER/INDEPENDENT (N=2315)

RACIST	+2%
INEFFECTIVE	+7%
FOR THE RICH	+7%
FALSE PROMISES	+6%
DIVISIVE	+4%
CORRUPT	+4%

REPUBLICAN (N=2300)

RACIST	+1%
INEFFECTIVE	+5%
FOR THE RICH	+3%
FALSE PROMISES	+4%
DIVISIVE	+1%
CORRUPT	+2%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

All positive movement indicates greater support for the pro-Democratic position after treatment exposure.

Takeaways

Ineffective, False Promises, and For the Rich appear most effective here, especially in their ability to move **Independents** by over 5pp on the metric.

Ineffective had by far the largest effect at moving Republicans on this metric as well.
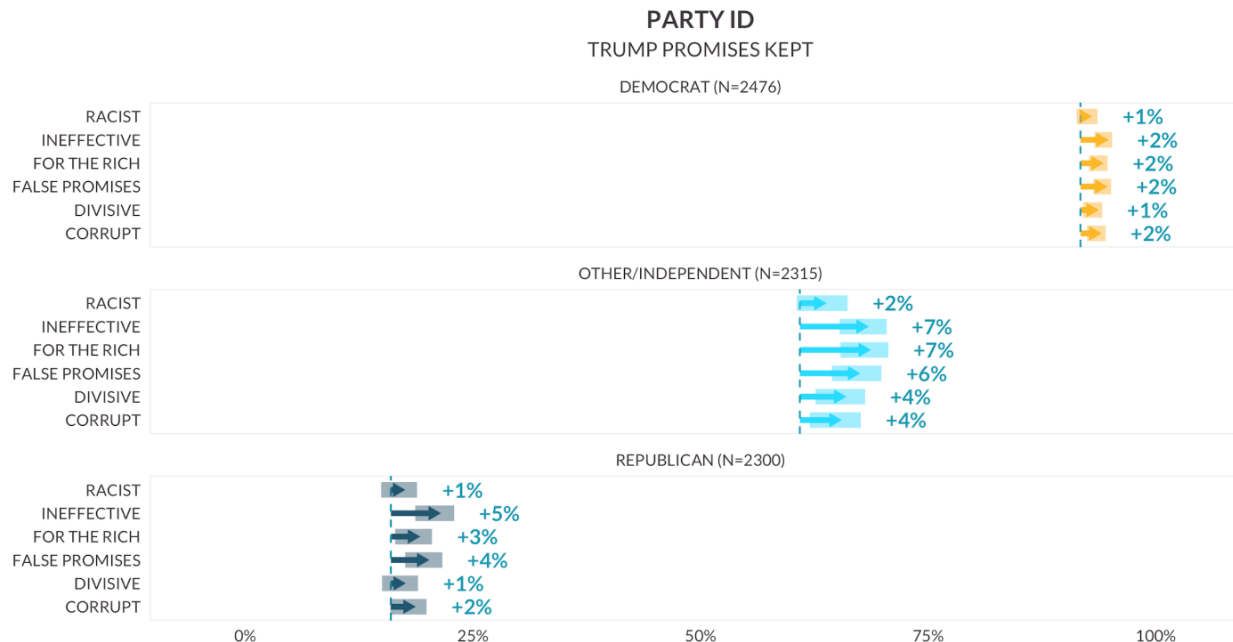
Ineffective made Obama-Trump voters less likely to say he cares about them

Control baselines (respondents who say "no"): 10% Romney-Trump, 99% Obama-Clinton, 40% Obama-Trump, 88% Romney-Clinton
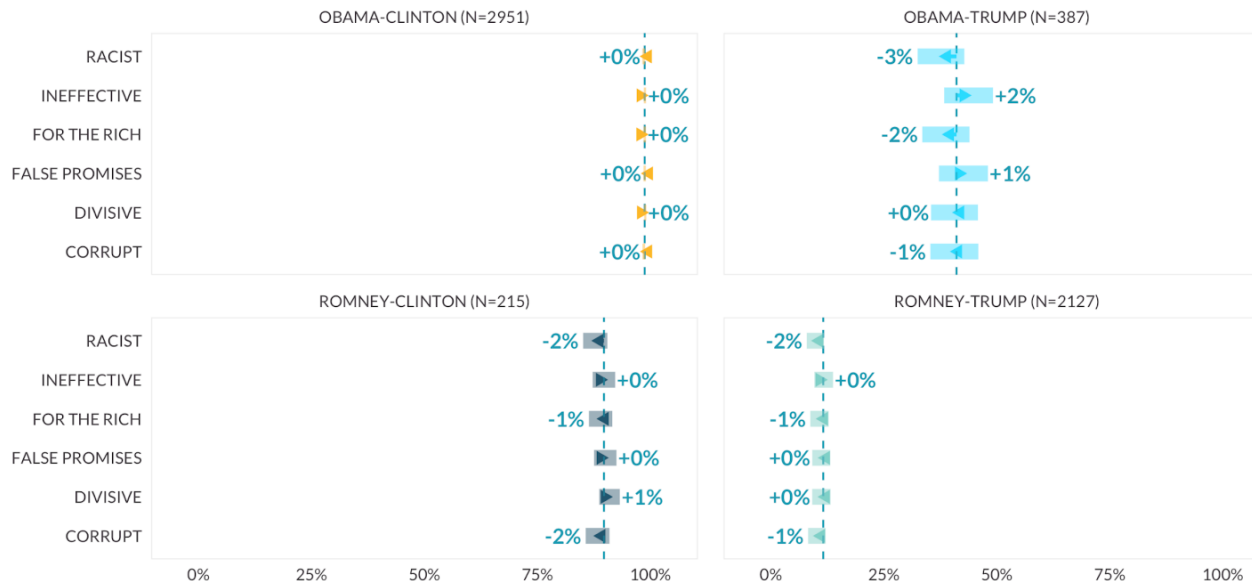

VOTE CHOICE 2012/2016
TRUMP CARES

All positive movement indicates greater support for the pro-Democratic position after treatment exposure.

Ineffective and **False Promises** also did the most to move voters to saying Trump does not care about "people like me" -- they were the only group that saw notable positive movement.

Racist and **Corrupt** made strong GOP partisans more likely to think Trump does care about their interests.

11