

February 2024

## It's Not Just the Vibes — How the Economic Recovery Is and Is Not Translating to Working-Class Voters

We're hearing a lot of talk about how 2024 is "[the vibes election](#)," meaning voters seem to be driven by negative perceptions of the economy that don't necessarily match up with the big-picture economic data, which has been largely positive.

Over the last several months, macroeconomic news under the Biden Administration has been remarkably positive. [GDP growth has risen faster than expected while inflation has fallen](#). The predicted recession has been avoided and the Dow Jones is up [13 percent](#) over the last year. With the overall numbers of jobs growing and total wages rising, headline writers last week described the US labor market as "[hot](#)", "[sizzling](#)" and "[shockingly good](#)."

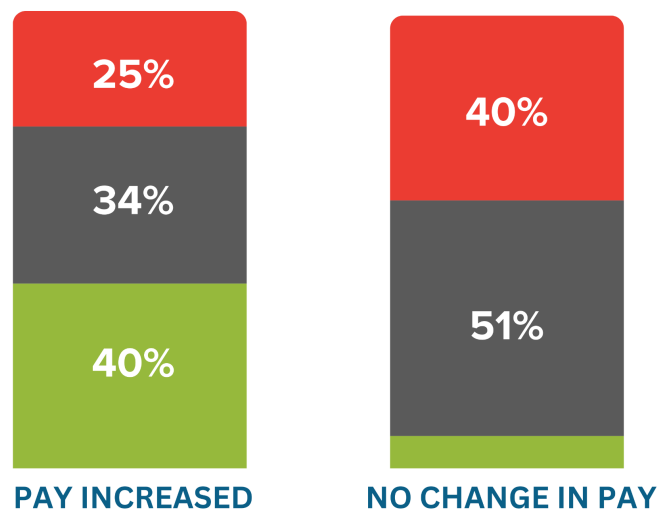
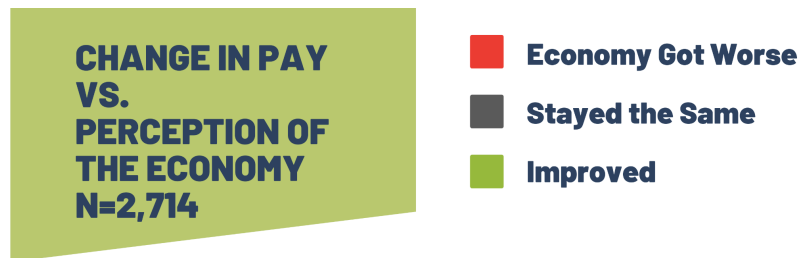
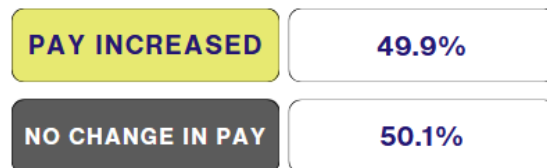
But while it has increased slightly since the depths of the fall, the [Fed-tracked consumer sentiment](#) index—one of the most widely used measures of Americans' confidence in the economy—is still stuck below 70. Those are levels not seen since 2008's Great Recession and its aftermath. [Gallup's economic confidence tracker](#) shows Americans more pessimistic than they were in July 2020, when the pandemic still raged uncontrolled. Politically, this economic melancholy has translated into [historically low approval](#) for President Biden. Almost [60 percent of voters disapprove of Biden's handling of the economy](#), according to polling averages.

What's driving this [nearly unprecedented](#) disconnect? And how can Biden reverse Americans' perceptions of his performance? As always when trying to understand presidential politics, the headlines written in DC and New York will ultimately be less impactful than the perspective of working-class voters in swing states. It's the vibes of these voters that will decide the election.

Working America has unique insight into these questions because of the deep and durable connections we've built with working-class voters through our years of canvassing. In this case, we spoke to 11,000 voters at their front doors last week across Arizona, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Wisconsin, and got thousands of them to talk to us about their feelings and personal experiences with the economy to produce this: the latest of our [Front Porch Focus Group](#) reports. We asked these voters two questions: Do you think the economy is doing better or worse, and have you or haven't you recently received an increase in pay?

The bottom line — this is not just about vibes. **We found that a person’s view of the economy was strongly tied to whether or not they had personally seen a recent pay increase, which many people have not.** Biden will need to communicate how his policies address the real economic concerns driving working-class voters if he wants to change their view of the economy.

## HAS YOUR PAY CHANGED?

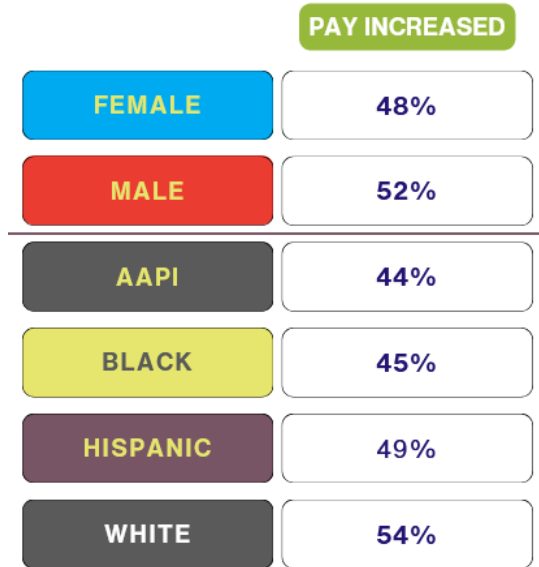


### Wages only up for a select few

Despite the supposedly sizzling labor market, just under half of the people with whom Working America spoke had personally experienced an increase in pay, and these gains were spread unevenly. Only white workers were more likely than not to have received a pay increase. For Black, Latinx, and Asian-American and Pacific Islander workers, a majority reported no recent raise. Men were also more likely than women to have gotten a raise. This has clear implications

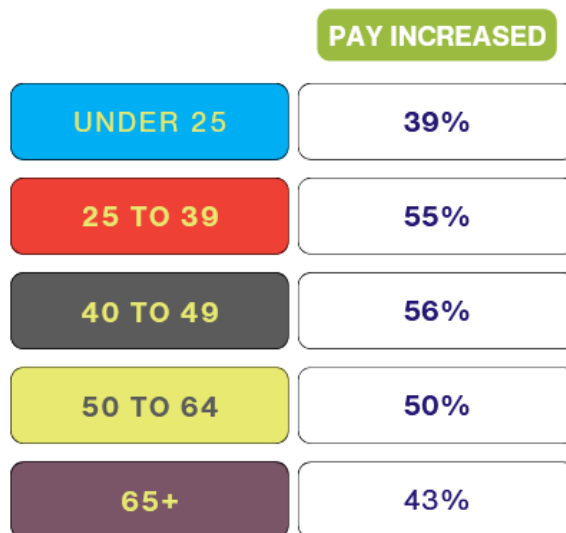
for Biden, whose path to victory depends on strong electoral support from Black and female voters.

## PAY INCREASED BY GENDER AND RACE

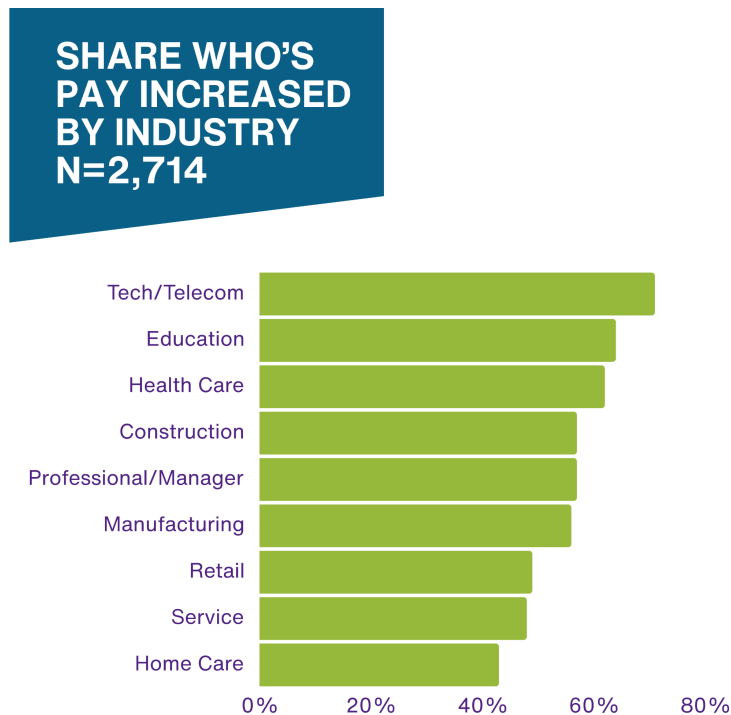


Pay increases were also sharply split by age. Young people—another key element of Biden's coalition—were the least likely of all to have seen any pay bump.

## PAY INCREASED BY AGE



Whether or not someone got a raise was also closely tied to the industry they worked in. Highly skilled workers in tech, health care, and education were about twice as likely to have gotten a raise than not (even more for tech workers). People working in construction, manufacturing, and as managers were also more likely to get raises. But the majority of workers we spoke to in the low-wage economy, including those in retail, service, and home care fields, did not experience a pay raise.



The anecdotal evidence Working America canvassers collected at the doors suggests that wage increases have been experienced most by those who switched jobs or started a business, not those who have stayed with their current employer. These worker accounts also revealed another stark economic reality — even those who did get a raise often said it wasn't enough.

### The inflation hangover

Negative views of the economy, while higher among some groups than others, spanned all demographics, occupations, and geographies. Even many of those who had experienced personal pay increases reported ongoing difficulties. Many people told our canvassers that their pay raise was “eaten up” by inflation, citing the rising costs of groceries and medical bills. Some reported working more hours just to keep up. Others said their wages were too low to begin with for a raise to make a real difference.

*“Everyone at my job got raises of \$1 per hour. By the end of the year I checked to see if it made a difference, and the change was literally by dollars.” — Georgia voter*

*“The economy is about the same because everything keeps going up.”* — Black female voter in Georgia

*“I received a small increase. Not bad, but not saving money.”* — Pennsylvania voter

*“Small raises, but costs keep up.”* — White male voter in Georgia

*“My pay has gone up, but not enough to keep up with inflation.”* — Hispanic male voter in Arizona

*“I’m making more than I’ve ever made, and the crazy part is I can’t tell. I’m also struggling more.”* — Georgia voter

At the same time, many of those with positive views about the economy talked more about changing work conditions or a reduction in household costs than about pay increases.

*“My mom has done better this year due to finally being accepted for Medicaid.”* — Black female voter in Georgia

*“I got a good raise from job hopping.”* — Black male voter in Georgia.

*“I am doing better than ever before because I am working for myself now.”* — Black male voter in Pennsylvania

*“I make more money because I got a better side job.”* — Elderly white male voter in Arizona.

*“The kids moved out.”* — Arizona voter

These stories of workers who are troubled by the economy track what we have consistently heard in hundreds of thousands of front porch conversations in these communities in the last year. Listen to them in their own words [here](#).

### **Ok, some of it probably IS about the vibes.**

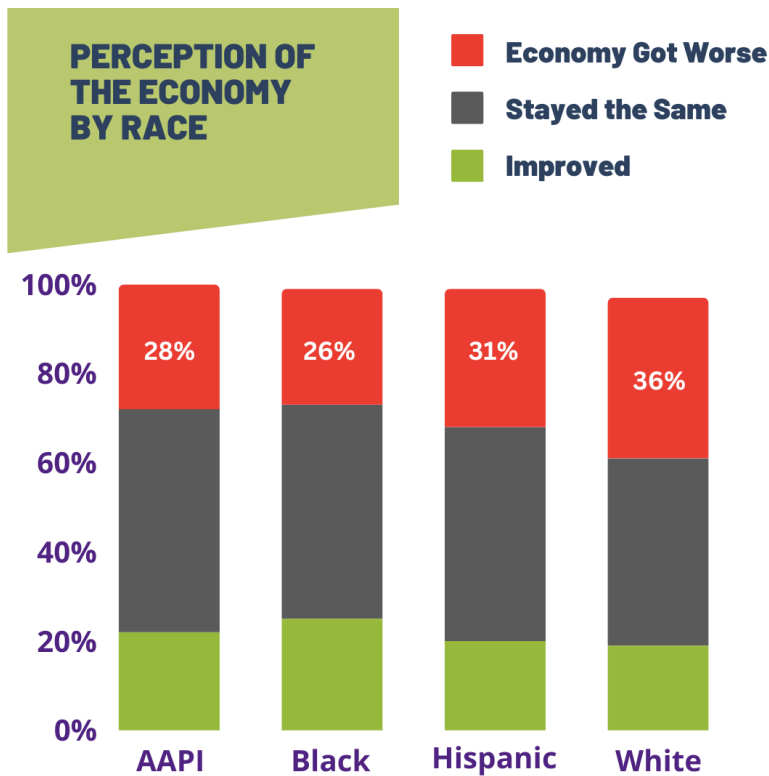
Party has long predicted how people feel about the economy. It’s usual for voters in the party out of power to see the economy as doing worse, because it supports their view that a change is needed. Voters with the party in power tend to see the economy more positively.

Given the current messaging of Republican leaders, we were not surprised to see that axiom hold true in last week’s focus group. Despite being more likely than Democrats to have gotten a raise, Republicans in our survey said the economy is doing worse.

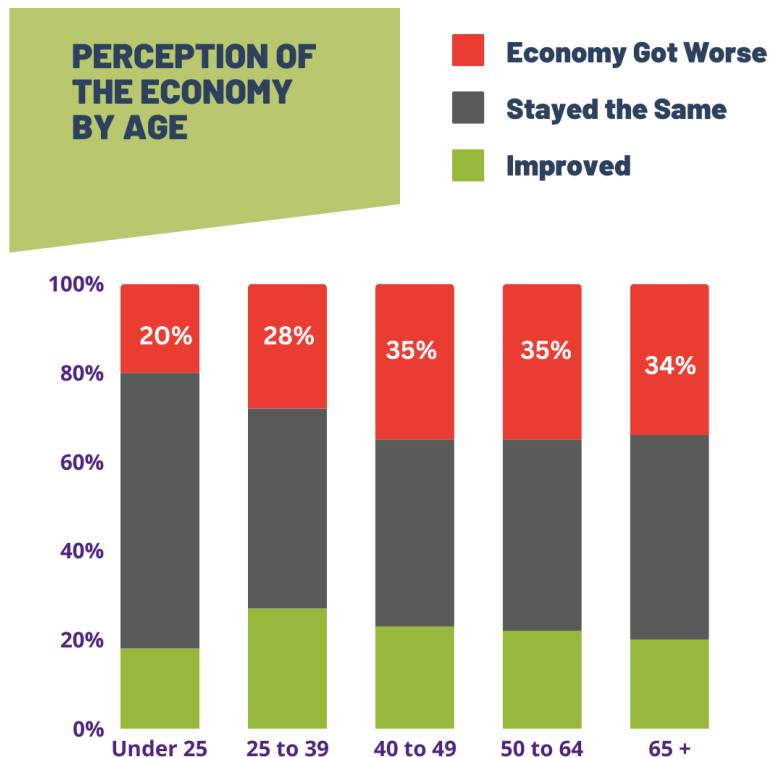
## ECONOMIC SENTIMENT AND PAY INCREASED BY PARTISAN LEAN

	PAY INCREASED	ECONOMY GOT WORSE
STRONG GOP	51%	48%
LEAN GOP	50%	45%
MIDDLE	53%	32%
LEAN DEM	48%	27%
STRONG DEM	49%	26%

This partisan lens also probably explains some of the disparities in race that we observed. For example, white working-class voters are generally more likely to identify as Republican. In our focus group, white voters overall had a worse view of the economy than voters of color, despite being the most likely to have gotten a raise.



However, it's notable that young people, who are more likely to identify as Democrats, were the least likely among any age group to say the economy had improved, consistent with their low experience of pay increases. This presents a potential vulnerability for the Biden Administration.



Taken together, this data suggests that the gains being reported in the macroeconomic data are doing the least for core parts of the progressive community.

### The road ahead

Although there is still lots of time for the economic narrative to shift, these results suggest that elected officials should be wary of basing their decisions solely on national-scale macroeconomic numbers. Indeed, even within our survey of working-class voters, we saw enormous variation across different geographies. Workers in Arizona, for example, were more likely to have experienced a pay raise, yet had a much gloomier view of the economy.

## ECONOMIC SENTIMENT AND PAY INCREASED BY STATE

	PAY INCREASED	ECONOMY GOT WORSE
ARIZONA	54%	39%
GEORGIA	45%	27%
PENNSYLVANIA	53%	24%
WISCONSIN	63%	17%

Those seeking to understand the real situation on the ground in these states can continue to count on Working America to provide insight and data. Our canvassers, texters, and phonebankers will be working relentlessly from now through the end of the year, using our data-driven operation to constantly improve our understanding of the electorate and the economy. We look forward to providing updates from the ground as the year continues.

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