

Rethinking Opinion Leadership: An Evolved Framework for the Digital Age

2024 AAPOR Conference

The Harris Poll

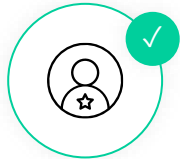
Michele Salomon

Edward “Paul” Johnson

Research Questions



Is the existing/traditional definition of a thought leader or opinion elite still relevant in a digital era?



Should subject matter expertise be used as a criterion for defining a thought leader?



Should frequency of sharing their opinion be considered?



How does the size and demographic profile of the group change as the criteria are updated?



What recommendations are there moving forward?

Research Method



Audience:
2,085 U.S. adults 18+



Survey Timing:
April 9 – 11, 2024



Mode:
14 question online survey



Weighting:
Data are weighted as needed to reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18+

Split Sample

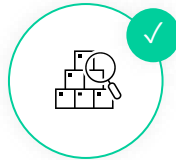
Sample was split between the original thought leadership definition and the expanded thought leadership definition.

Additional Detail

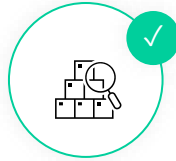
Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within +/- 2.5 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

Key Observations



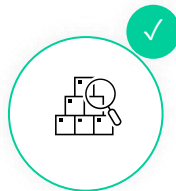
Both definitions effectively identify an important segment of the general population, more likely to be engaged with issues



Thought leaders are generally more optimistic than the general public, with higher proportions believing the country to be on the right track

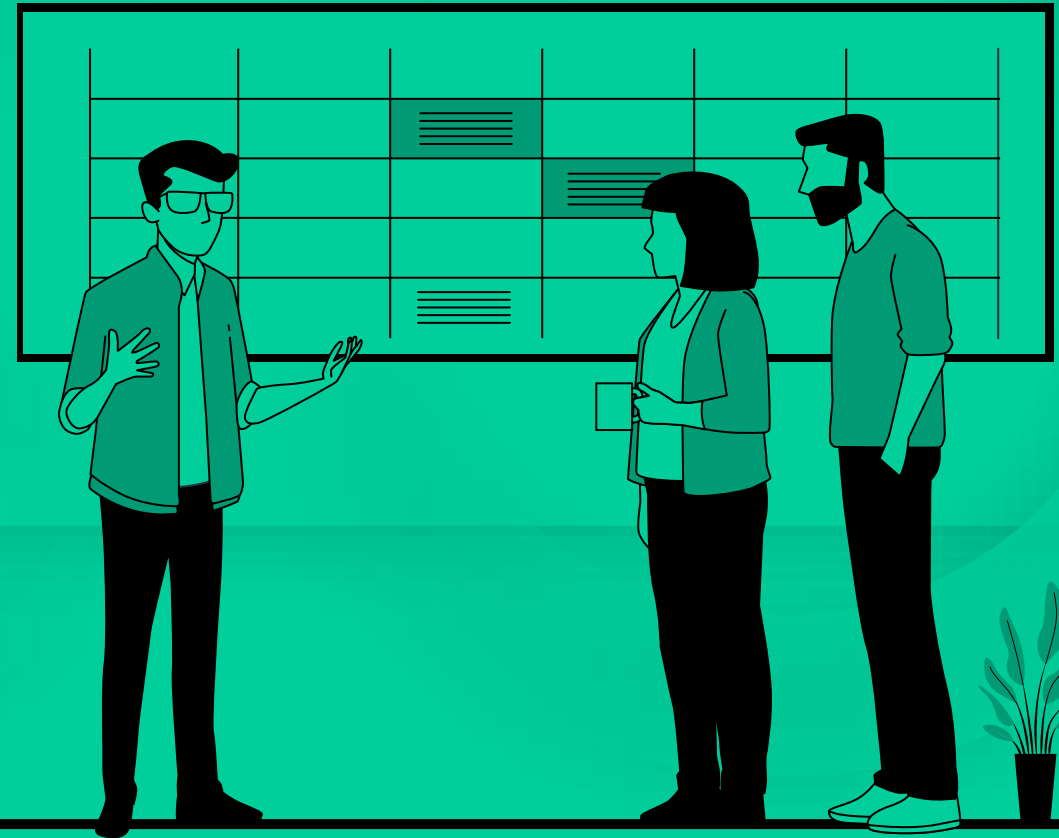


Frequency of sharing or being sought out is likely a useful addition in specific engagements



While the groups closely resemble each other, thought leaders tend to be Liberal and more Democratic, qualities further emphasized when looking at the influence of sharing or the impact of talking about national politics weekly

Behavioral Definitions



Current definition: Behavioral & attitudinal only

A thought leader does 3 or more activities, follows political or social issues closely (5-7) and is informed (5-7)



Activities

Q2 The following questions are about your level of involvement in political or social issues. Which of the following, if any, have you done in the past 12 months? (Please select all that apply.)

1. Written or called any politician at the local, state, or national level
2. Attended a political rally, speech or organized protest
3. Attended a public meeting on town or school affairs
4. Held or ran for public office
5. Served on a committee or as an officer for a local organization
6. Written a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine
7. Called a live radio or television show to express an opinion
8. Worked for a political party
9. Made a public speech
10. Written an article for a magazine or newspaper
11. Been an active member of any group that tries to influence public policy or government
12. Regularly read local and national publications (e.g., my local newspaper, NY Times, Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, BusinessWeek)
13. Regularly read local and national publications via the Internet
14. Regularly consume other media (e.g., local and national news broadcasts, websites, other specialty publications)
15. Authored a blog
16. Participate in an online forum or chat room on local, state or national issues
97. None of these



Follow political or social issues

Q4 There are a number of different issues in the news today. We would like to know how closely you follow certain ones. Please tell us how closely you follow political or social issues today.

1. 1 – Not at all
2. 2
3. 3
4. 4
5. 5
6. 6
7. 7 – Very closely
98. Not sure



Informed about political and social issues

Q5 Now please tell us how informed you are about political or social issues today.

1. 1 – Not at all
2. 2
3. 3
4. 4
5. 5
6. 6
7. 7 – Very informed
98. Not sure

Expanded definition: additional behaviors

A thought leader does 3 or more activities, follows political or social issues closely (5-7) and is informed (5-7)



Activities

Q3 The following questions are about your level of involvement in political or social issues. Which of the following, if any, have you done in the past 12 months? (Please select all that apply.)

Bolded items are additions to the list

1. Written or called any politician at the local, state, or national level
2. Attended a political rally, speech or organized protest
3. Attended a public meeting on town or school affairs
4. Held or ran for public office
5. Served on a committee or as an officer for a local organization
6. Written a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine
7. Called a live radio or television show to express an opinion
8. Worked for a political party
9. Made a public speech
10. Written an article for a magazine or newspaper
11. Been an active member of any group that tries to influence public policy or government
12. Regularly read local and national publications (e.g., my local newspaper, NY Times, Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, BusinessWeek)
13. Regularly read local and national publications via the Internet
14. Regularly consume other media (e.g., local and national news broadcasts, websites, other specialty publications)
15. Authored a blog
16. Use social media to follow news on local, state or national issues
- 17. Donated to a local organization in my community**
- 18. Volunteered for a local organization in my community**
- 19. Advocated for an issue I care about through a local organization in my community**
- 20. Started a newsletter or video series to express my opinion on issues I care about**
- 21. Started a podcast**
- 22. Commenting on news stories or opinion pieces**
97. None of these



Follow political or social issues

Q4 There are a number of different issues in the news today. We would like to know how closely you follow certain ones. Please tell us how closely you follow political or social issues today.

1. 1 – Not at all
2. 2
3. 3
4. 4
5. 5
6. 6
7. 7 – Very closely
98. Not sure



Informed about political and social issues

Q5 Now please tell us how informed you are about political or social issues today.

1. 1 – Not at all
2. 2
3. 3
4. 4
5. 5
6. 6
7. 7 – Very informed
98. Not sure

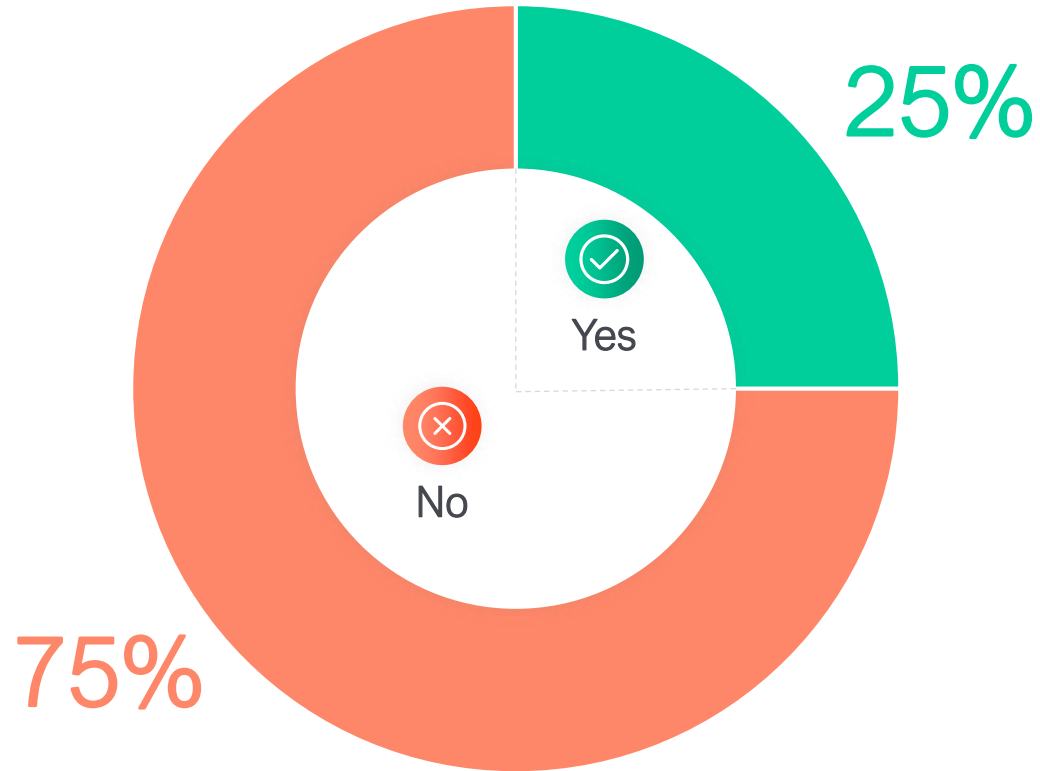


Expanded behavioral definition includes larger share of public



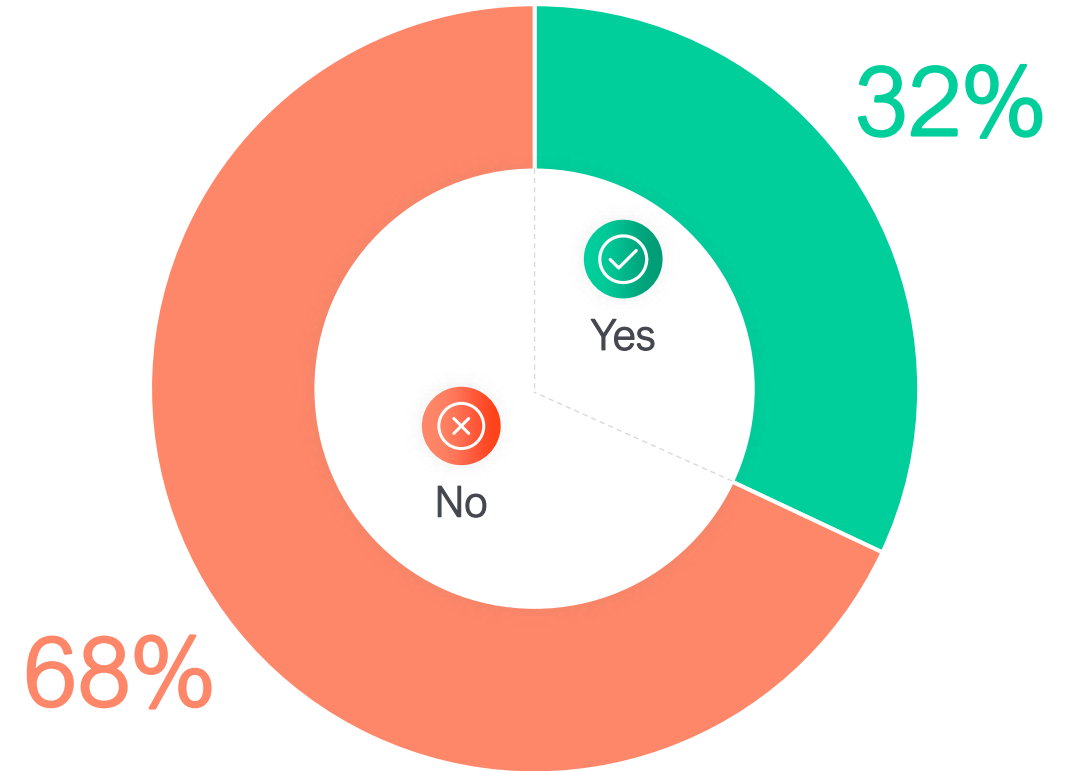
Thought leader

Original



Thought leader

Expanded



Consistent profiles across definitions though Thought Leaders are more male & highly educated

	Total	Original definition	Expanded definition
Gender			
Man	48%	56%	55%
Woman	51%	44%	44%
Other/Prefer not to answer	1%	1%	1%
Age			
18-34	29%	29%	29%
35-44	17%	15%	16%
45-54	16%	16%	12%
55-64	16%	15%	16%
65+	23%	26%	26%
Ethnicity			
Yes	17%	21%	18%
No	83%	79%	82%
Race			
White	73%	77%	76%
Black or African American	15%	15%	14%
American Indian or Alaska Native	3%	3%	4%
Asian Indian	1%	1%	3%
Chinese	2%	2%	2%
Korean	1%	1%	1%
Japanese	1%	0	1%
Filipino	2%	1%	2%
Middle Eastern or North African	0	0	0
Vietnamese	1%	-	1%
Other Asian	1%	1%	0
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	1%	0
Some other race	4%	3%	2%

	Total	Original definition	Expanded definition
Education			
Less than high school	9%	3%	3%
High school graduate or equivalent (e.g., GED)	18%	12%	12%
Job-specific training programs after high school	4%	1%	3%
Completed some college, but no degree	19%	16%	23%
Associate's degree	14%	14%	12%
College graduate (e.g., B.A., A.B., B.S.) or higher	35%	54%	47%
Region			
Northeast	17%	15%	24%
Midwest	21%	26%	17%
South	39%	36%	33%
West	23%	23%	26%
Urbanicity			
Urban	29%	34%	35%
Suburban	52%	51%	50%
Rural	19%	15%	15%

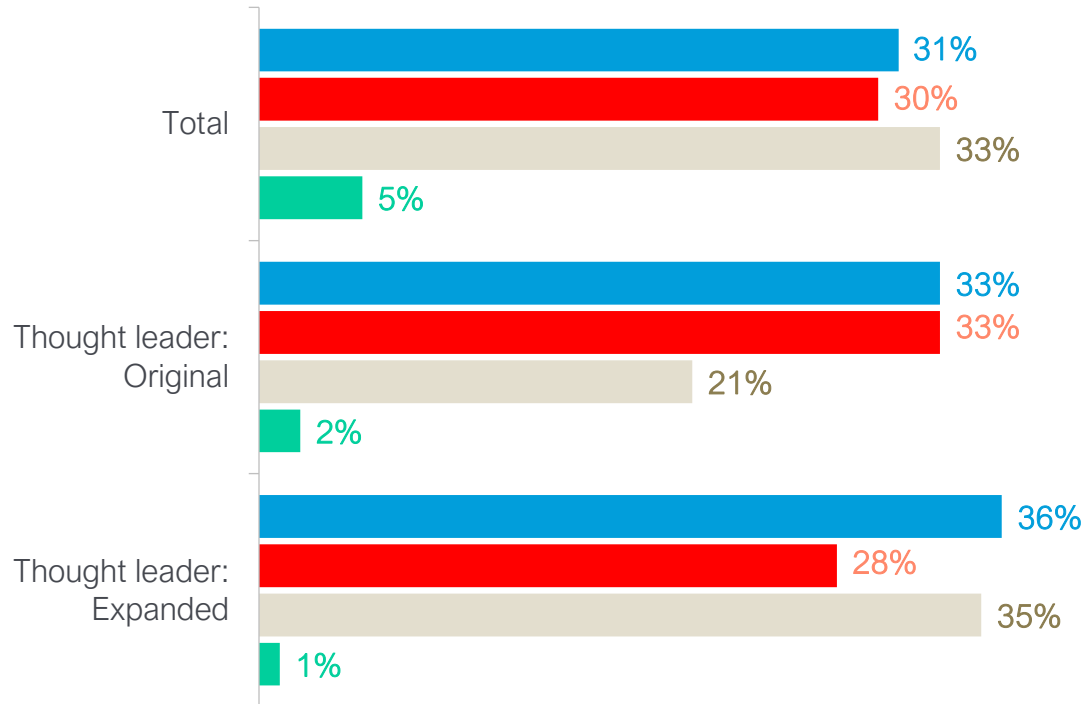


Thought leaders directionally more Liberal and Democratic, particularly the expanded definition



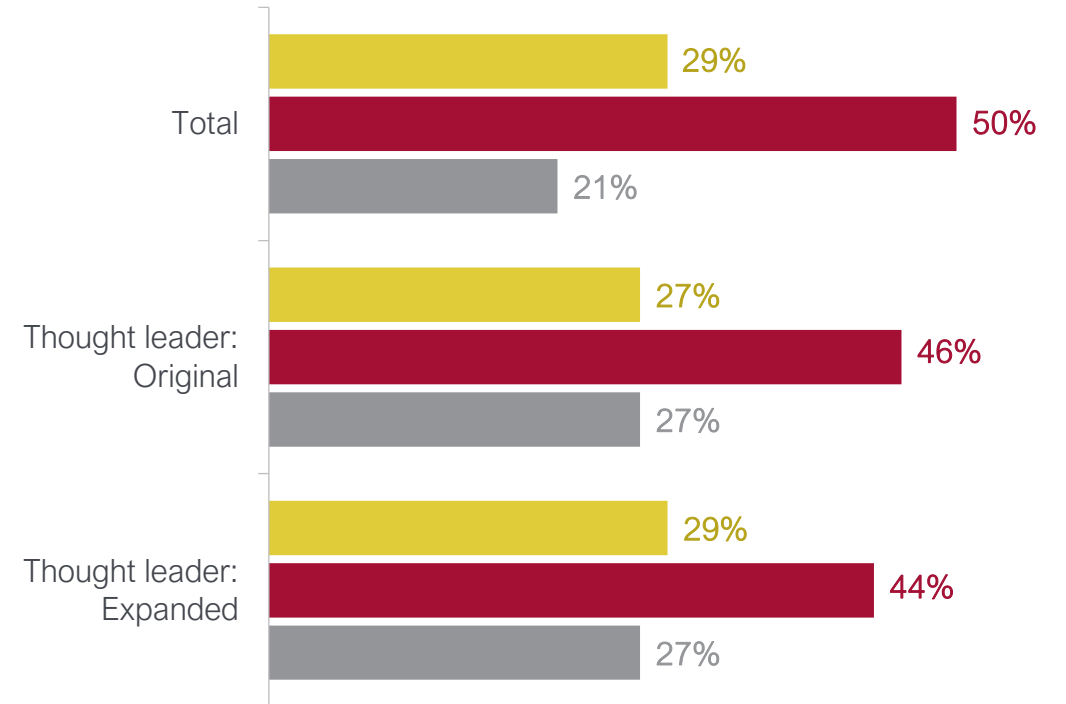
Party Affiliation

■ Democrat ■ Republican ■ Independent ■ Other



Political Philosophy

■ Conservative ■ Moderate ■ Liberal



Opinion leaders share & are sought out more frequently



Frequency of sharing opinion



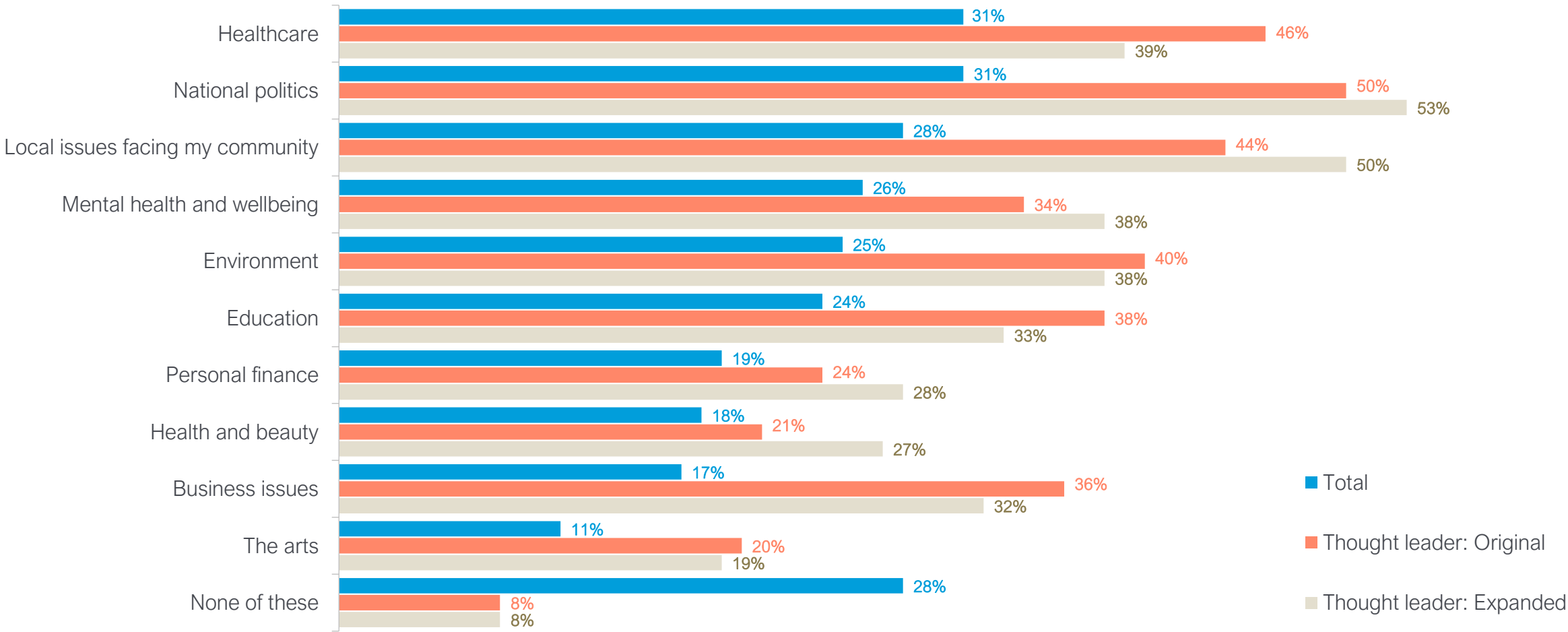
Frequency of opinion being sought

	Total	Thought leader: Original	Thought leader: Expanded	Total	Thought leader: Original	Thought leader: Expanded
Unweighted Base	2,085	254	316	2,085	254	316
Any (Net)	69%	80%	79%	74%	92%	88%
Daily (Sub-Net)	15%	21%	19%	8%	15%	10%
More than once a day	8%	12%	10%	4%	6%	5%
Once a day	7%	9%	9%	4%	9%	5%
Weekly (Sub-Net)	20%	29%	29%	20%	28%	31%
Several times a week	12%	19%	22%	12%	21%	20%
Once a week	8%	10%	7%	7%	7%	11%
2-3 times a month	10%	8%	11%	16%	21%	18%
Once a month	7%	4%	6%	10%	12%	9%
Less often than once a month	18%	17%	15%	20%	16%	20%
Never	31%	20%	21%	26%	8%	12%

Healthcare, politics and local issues are of interest

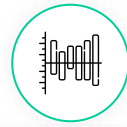


Topics of Interest

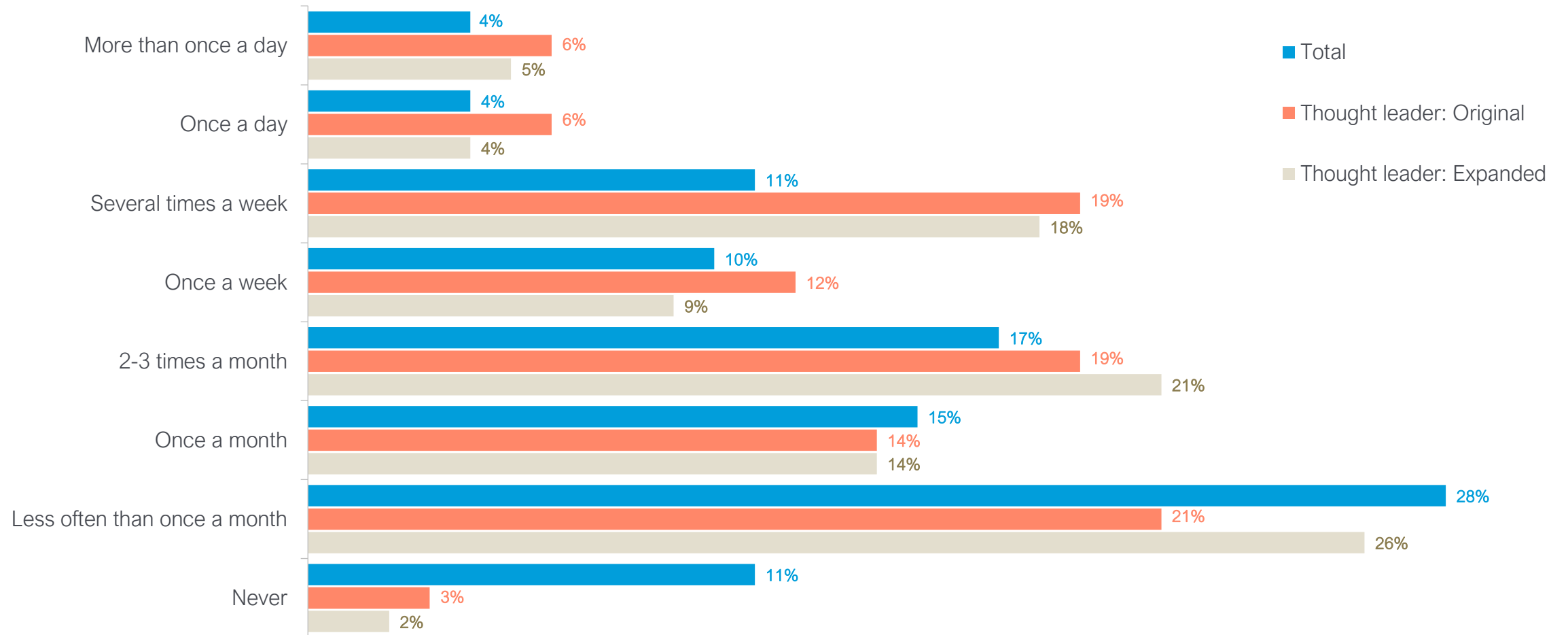




Original thought leaders more frequently recommend brands



Frequency of recommending brands

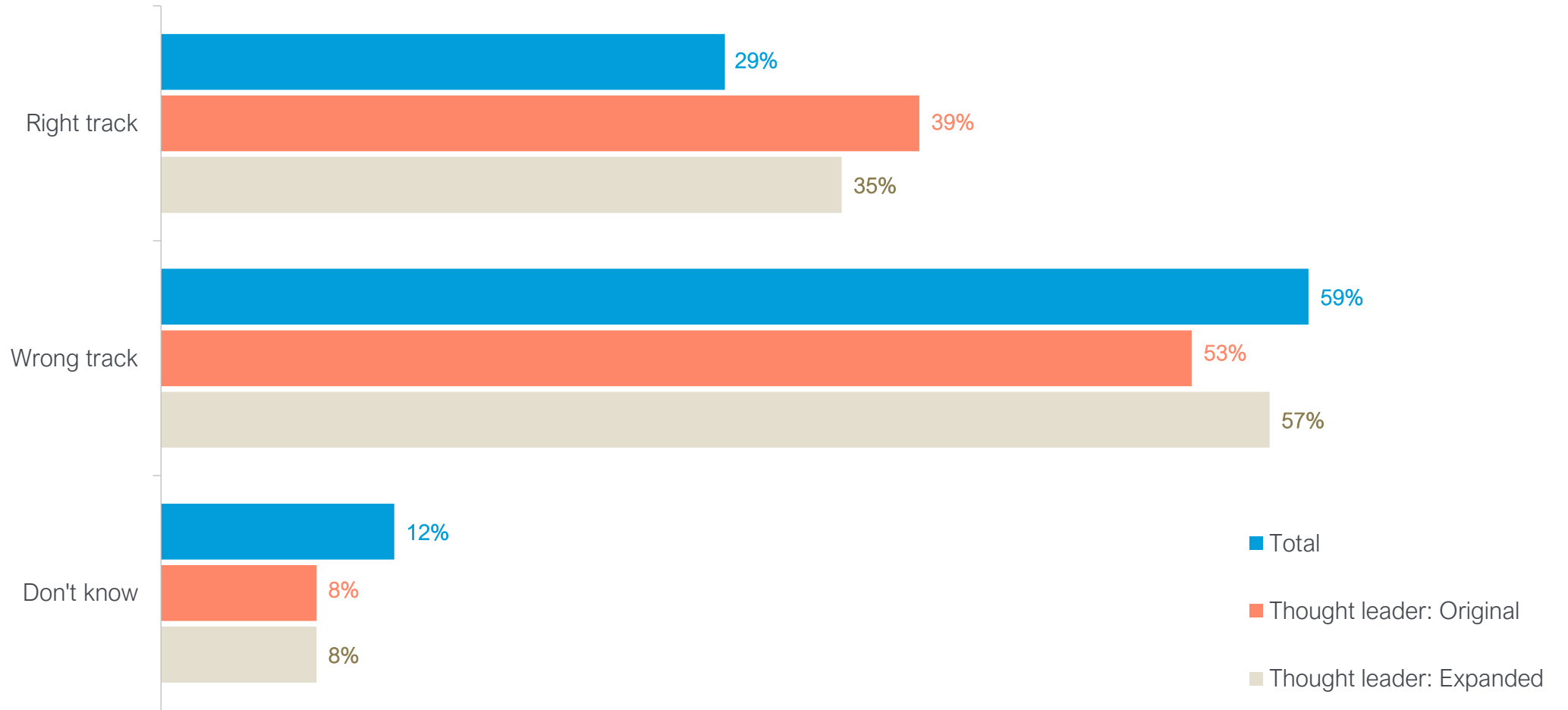




Thought leaders directionally more positive than adults in general

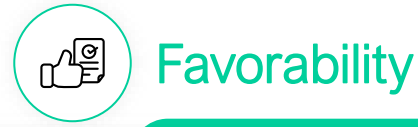


Direction of Country

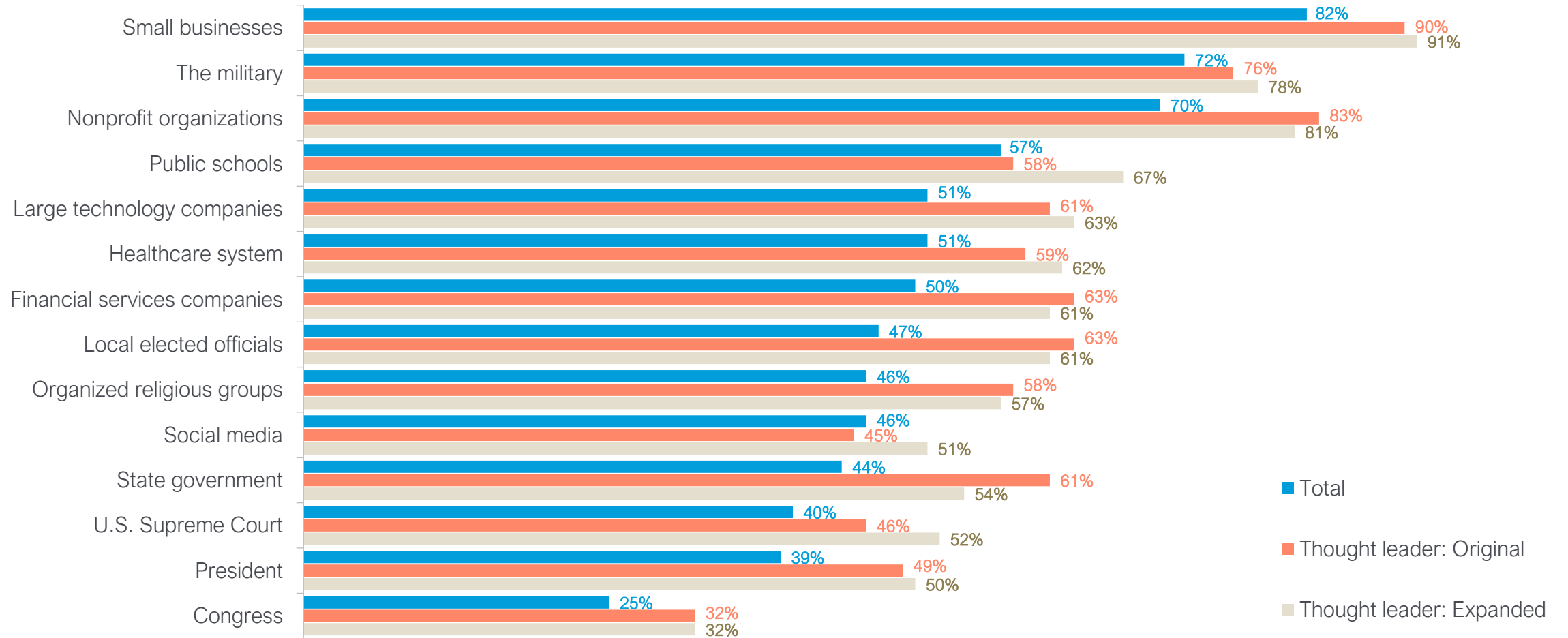




Both groups generally more favorable than the public at large; and similar to each other



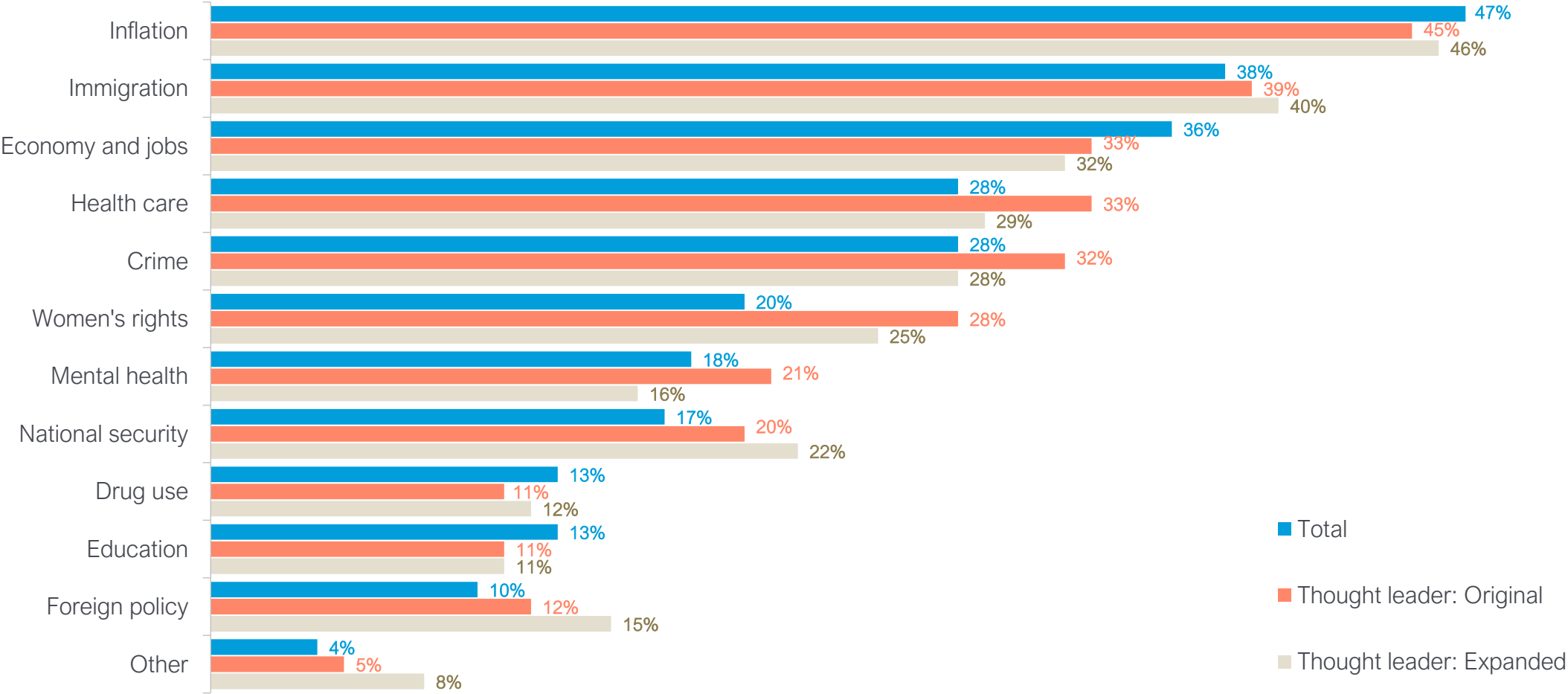
Favorability



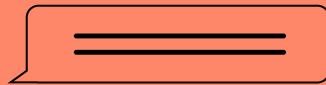
Issue relevance largely similar for both groups.



Most Important Issues Facing the Country



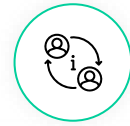
Impact of Sharing



This section explores each group, based on behavior, by the frequency with which they share information or are sought out for their opinion.



Groups are roughly evenly split regardless of whether they are sharing information or being asked their opinion



Shares Information



Opinion Sought Out



Thought leaders engaged weekly are younger, more male, tend to be Liberal

	Impact of information sharing					Impact of opinion being sought			
	Total	Thought leader: Original		Thought leader: Expanded		Thought leader: Original		Thought leader: Expanded	
		Shares weekly	Shares less than weekly	Shares weekly	Shares less than weekly	Shares weekly	Shares less than weekly	Shares weekly	Shares less than weekly
	A	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Unweighted Base	2,085	126	128	141	175	106	148	112	204
Average Age	48.2	42.2	56.7	40.6	58.3	39.8	56.8	39.7	56.9
Gender									
Man	48%	55%	56%	62%	49%	65%	48%	63%	50%
Woman	51%	44%	44%	36%	50%	34%	52%	36%	49%
All others	1%	1%	-	2%	0	1%	-	1%	1%
Party Affiliation									
Democrat	31%	39%	27%	40%	32%	35%	31%	40%	34%
Republican	30%	34%	31%	28%	29%	39%	28%	23%	32%
Independent	33%	26%	39%	31%	38%	24%	38%	37%	33%
Other	5%	1%	3%	1%	0	1%	3%	1%	1%
Political Philosophy									
Conservative	29%	26%	27%	28%	30%	28%	26%	22%	34%
Moderate	50%	44%	49%	42%	46%	47%	45%	47%	42%
Liberal	21%	30%	24%	30%	24%	25%	28%	30%	24%



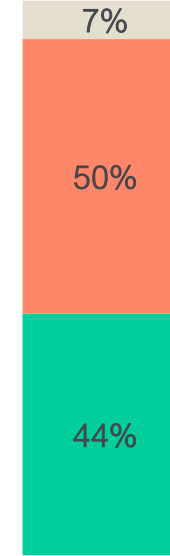
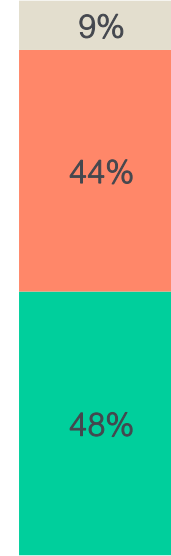
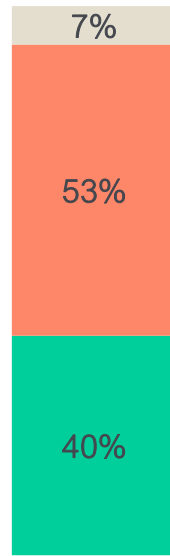
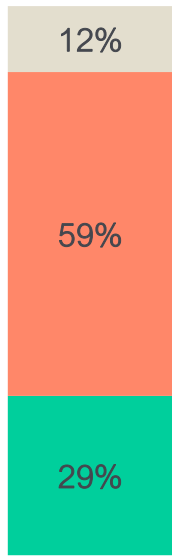
Those engaged weekly are more positive toward mood of country



Mood of Country

Shares Information Weekly

Opinion Sought Out Weekly



- Not sure
- Wrong Direction
- Right Track

Original

Expanded

Original

Expanded

Thought leaders who share weekly are more favorable toward various groups and institutions



Thought leader: Original Shares at least weekly



Thought leader: Expanded Shares at least weekly

	% Favorable	% Unfavorable	Net favorability	% Favorable	% Unfavorable	Net favorability'
Small businesses	85%	12%	73%	89%	7%	82%
The military	74%	17%	57%	71%	21%	50%
Nonprofit organizations	85%	12%	73%	75%	20%	55%
Public schools	57%	35%	22%	70%	27%	43%
Large technology companies	69%	23%	46%	71%	26%	45%
Healthcare system	64%	34%	30%	68%	31%	37%
Financial services companies	65%	25%	40%	65%	31%	34%
Local elected officials	65%	30%	35%	62%	30%	32%
Organized religious groups	65%	25%	40%	63%	26%	37%
Social media	61%	34%	27%	69%	28%	41%
State government	70%	28%	42%	61%	34%	27%
U.S. Supreme Court	59%	40%	19%	58%	37%	21%
President	53%	40%	13%	53%	45%	8%
Congress	46%	50%	-4%	48%	48%	0%



Thought leaders whose opinion is sought out at least weekly are universally more favorable



Thought leader: Original
Opinion sought out at least weekly



Thought leader: Expanded
Opinion sought out at least weekly

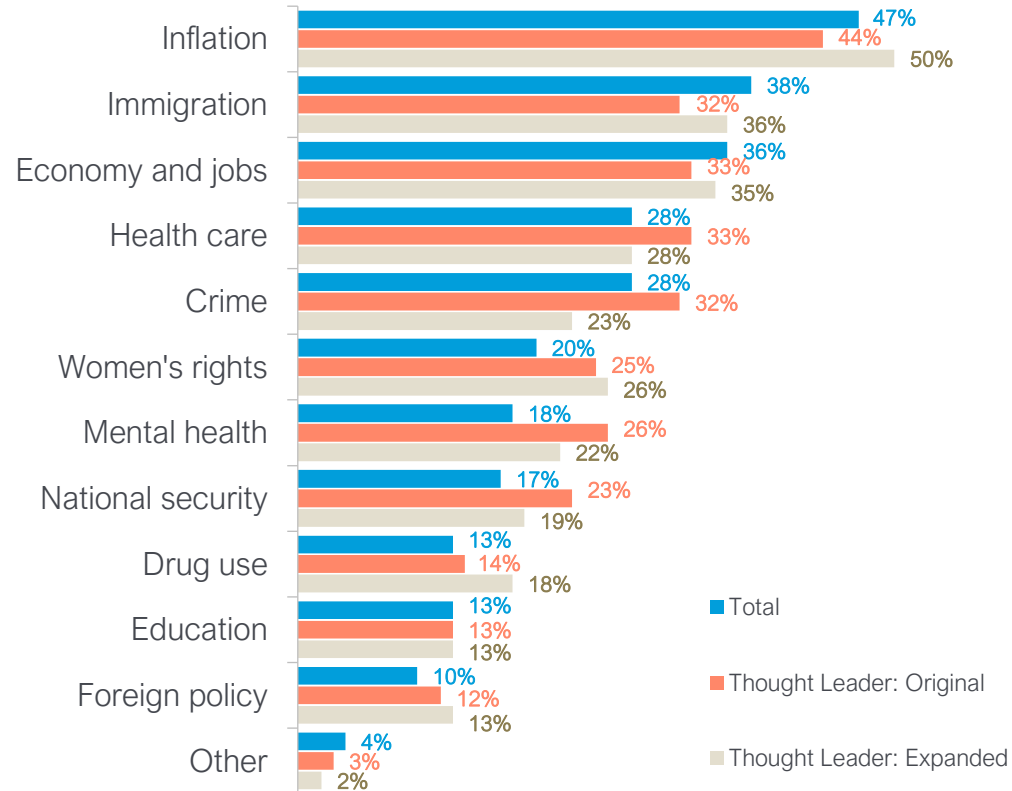
	% Favorable	% Unfavorable	Net favorability	% Favorable	% Unfavorable	Net favorability'
Small businesses	87%	11%	76%	90%	7%	83%
The military	75%	18%	57%	78%	14%	64%
Nonprofit organizations	81%	16%	65%	78%	17%	61%
Public schools	65%	26%	39%	76%	21%	55%
Large technology companies	66%	27%	39%	78%	18%	60%
Healthcare system	69%	29%	40%	69%	24%	45%
Financial services companies	71%	19%	52%	71%	23%	48%
Local elected officials	68%	26%	42%	69%	22%	47%
Organized religious groups	62%	26%	36%	62%	26%	36%
Social media	54%	41%	13%	69%	29%	40%
State government	72%	26%	46%	63%	30%	33%
U.S. Supreme Court	57%	41%	16%	58%	35%	23%
President	49%	41%	8%	56%	39%	17%
Congress	49%	45%	4%	50%	44%	6%



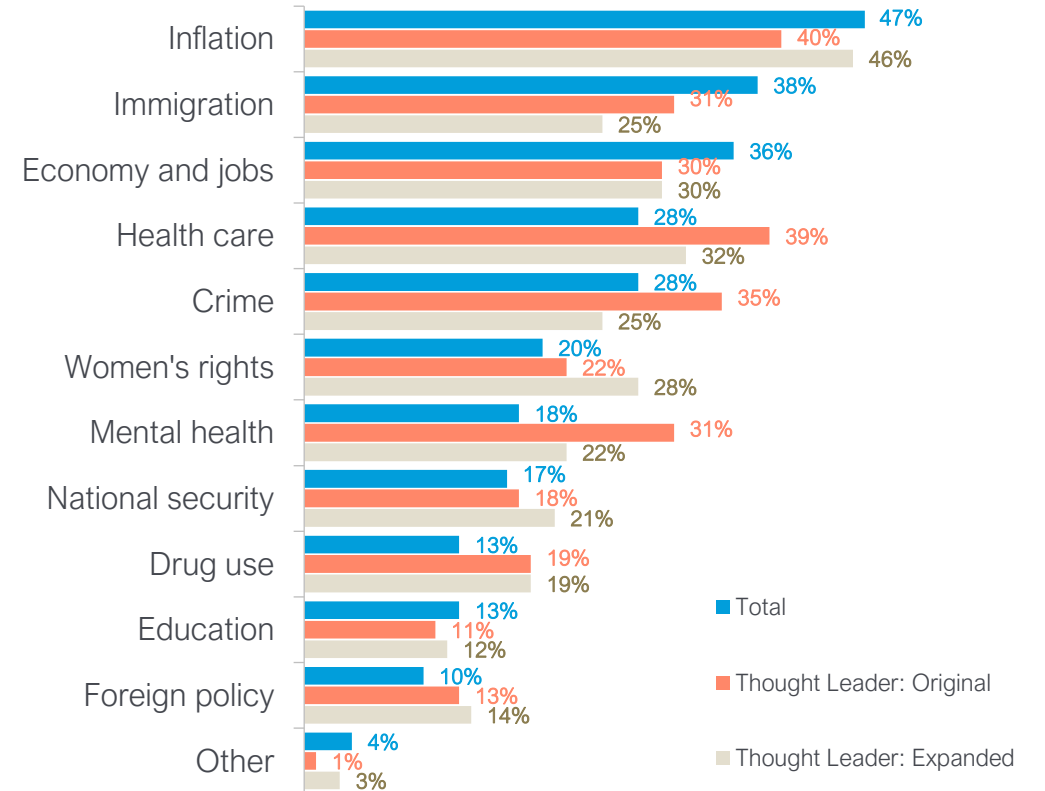
Variations across most important issues



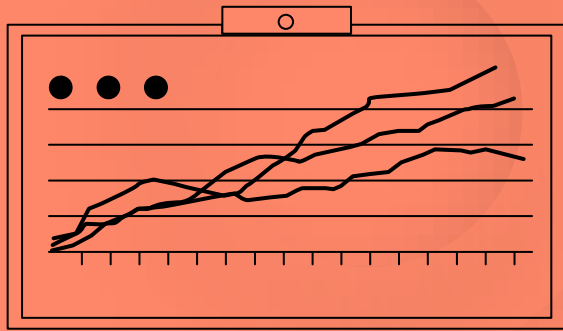
Shares Weekly



Opinion Sought Out Weekly



Subject Matter Impact: Discusses National Politics Weekly



Those discussing national politics weekly are more male, Democratic and liberal

Discusses National Politics Weekly

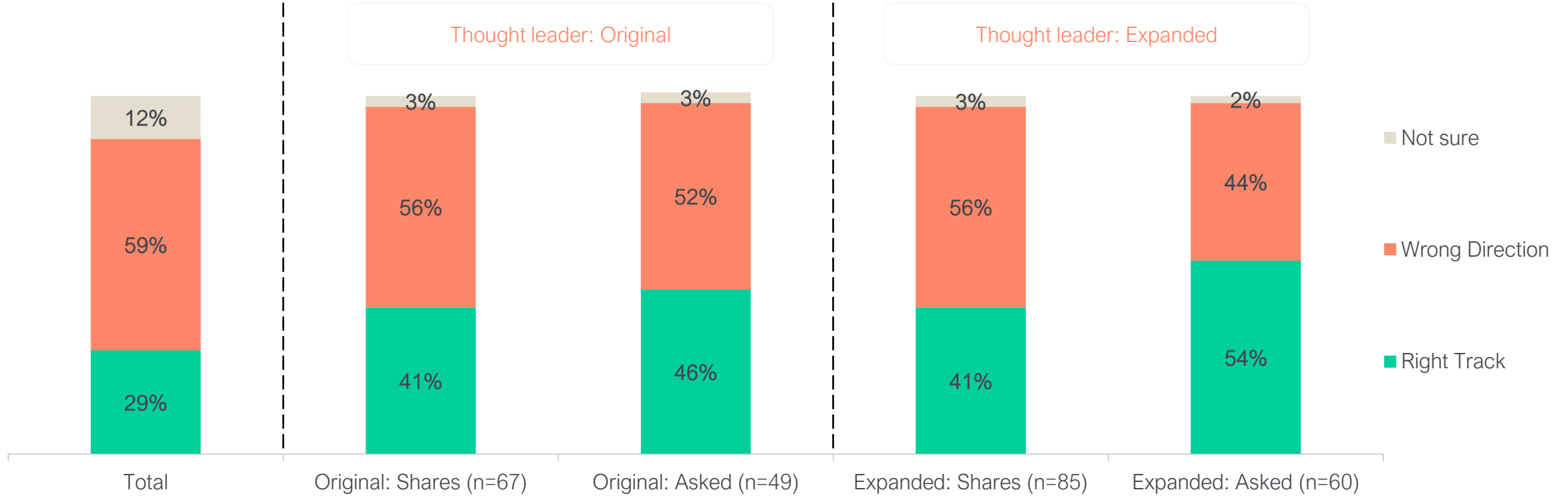
	Total	Thought leader: Original		Thought leader: Expanded	
		Shares weekly	Opinion sought out	Shares weekly	Opinion sought out
Unweighted base	2,085	67	49	85	60
Average age	48.2	46.5	43.3	43.9	42.6
Gender					
Man	48%	63%	73%	64%	66%
Woman	51%	37%	27%	33%	33%
All others	1%	-	-	2%	1%
Party affiliation					
Democrat	31%	52%	39%	34%	34%
Republican	30%	27%	32%	30%	26%
Independent	33%	22%	29%	35%	39%
Other	5%	-	-	1%	1%
Political philosophy					
Conservative	29%	22%	21%	31%	24%
Moderate	50%	44%	52%	48%	48%
Liberal	21%	33%	28%	21%	28%

At least 4 in 10 who discuss national politics weekly think country on right track



Mood of Country

Discusses National Politics Weekly



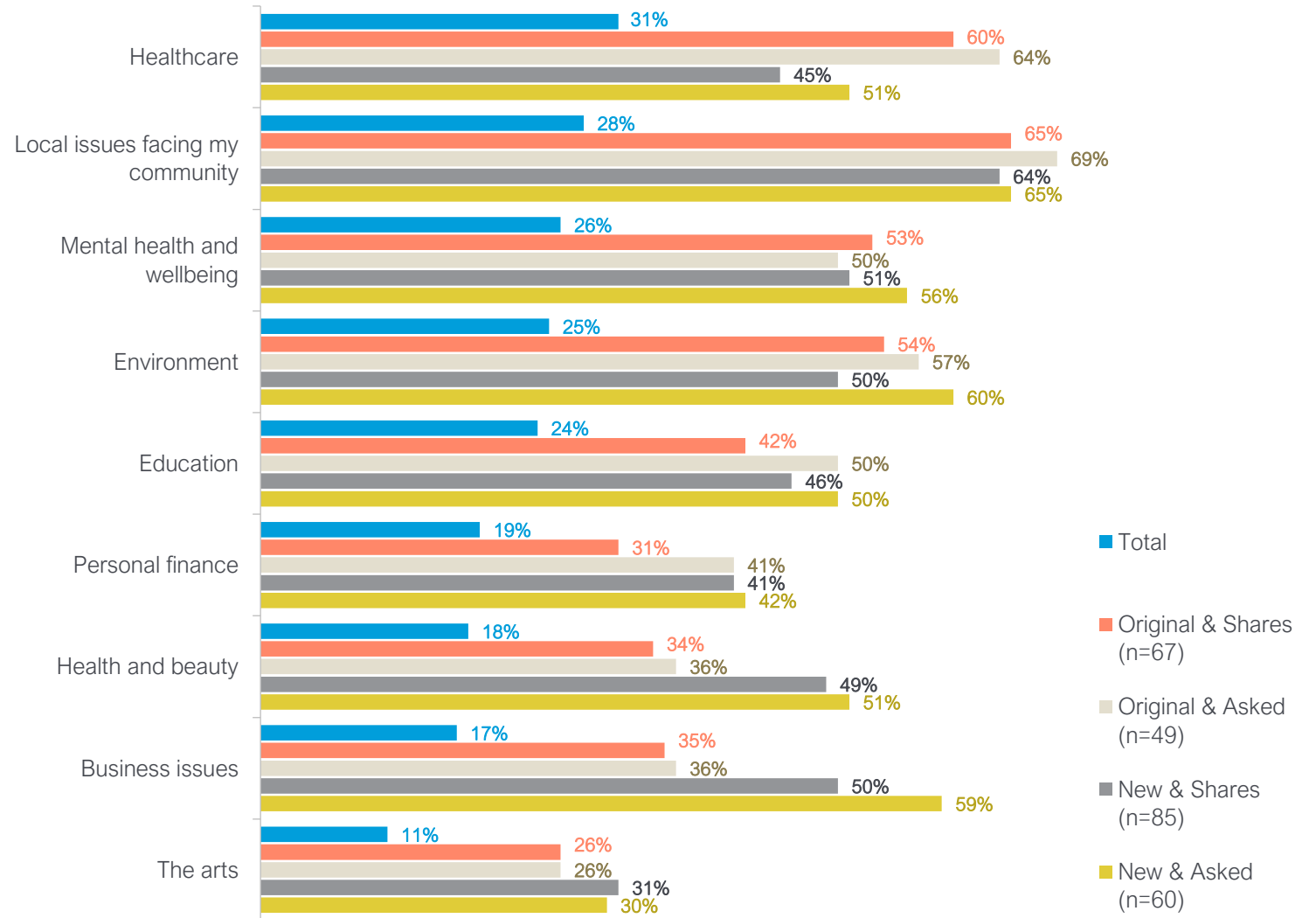
Subject Matter Impact



Those discussing national politics also discuss other issues particularly local issues



Topics of Interest Discusses National Politics Weekly



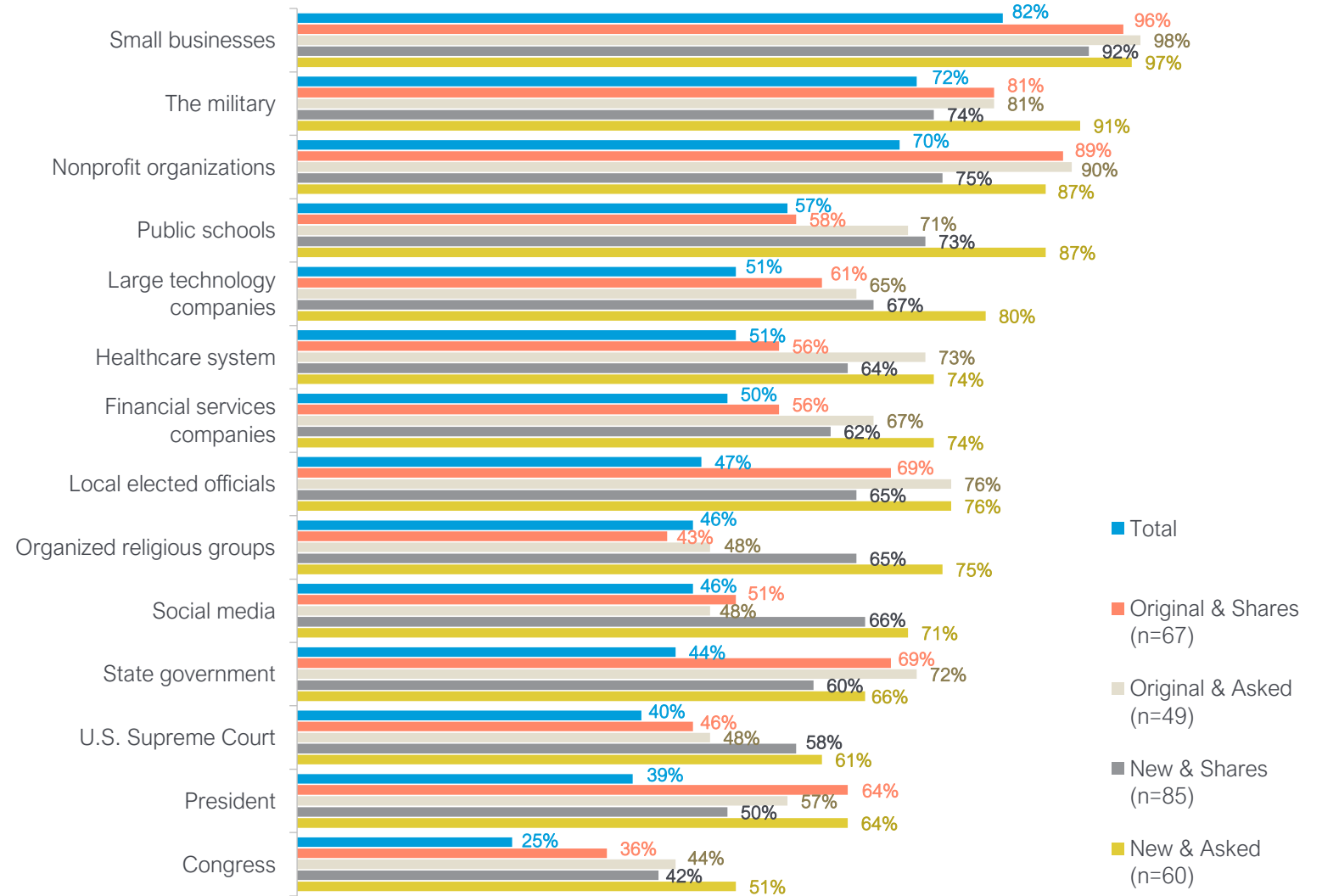
Subject Matter Impact



Those discussing national politics weekly favorable across the board



Discussed National Politics Weekly Favorability

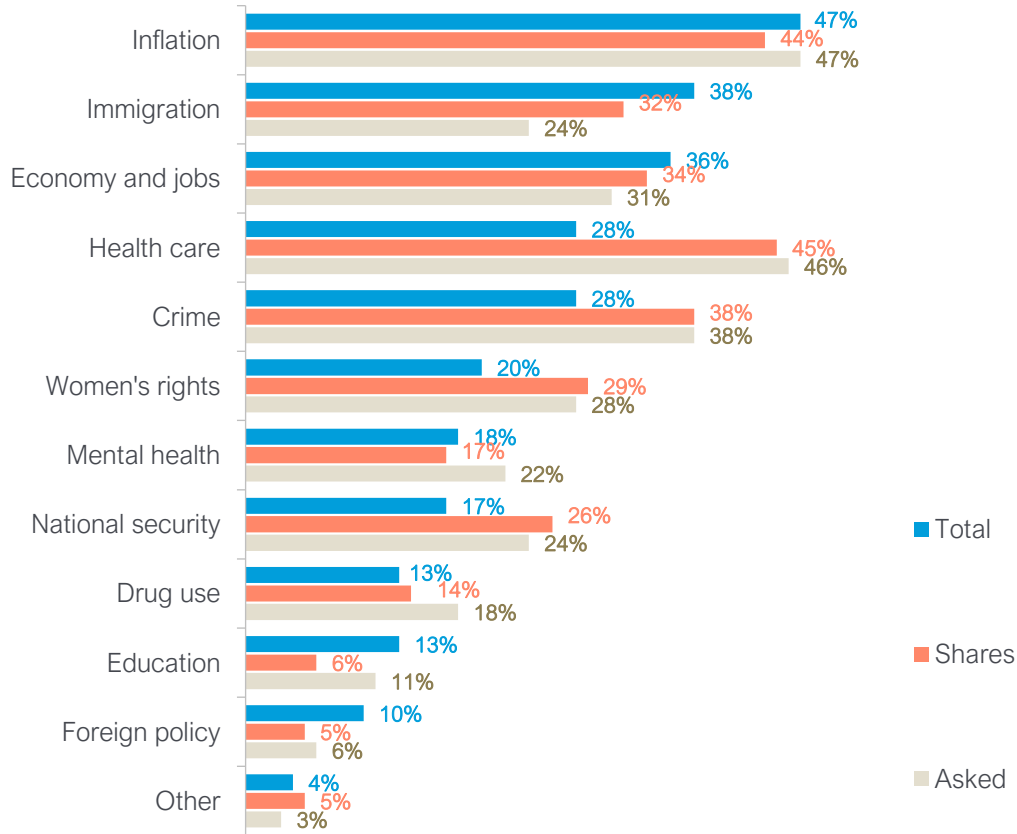




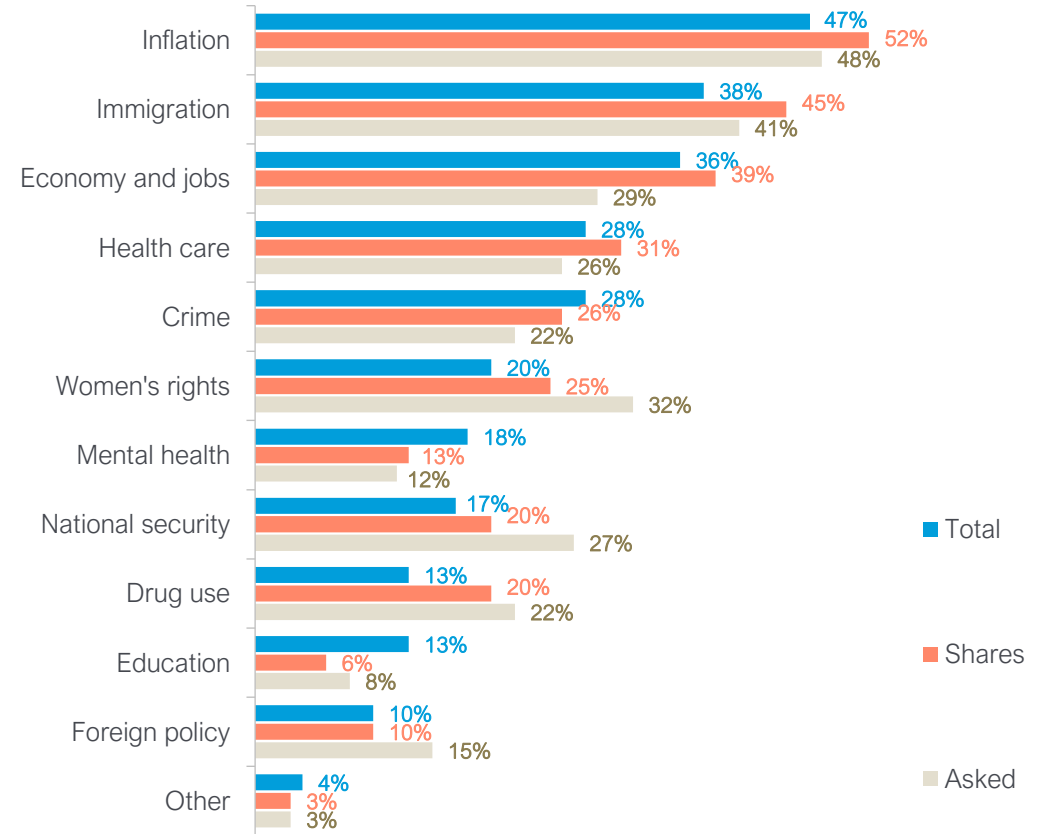
Some issues more acute for those discussing national politics



Thought leader: Original Discusses National Politics Weekly



Thought leader: Expanded Discusses National Politics Weekly





Discussion



Discussion







- Thought leaders trend more Liberal and Democratic, also more male
- Is optimism due to a feeling of taking action, not feeling helpless, or actually being better or more well-informed?
- Men appear to be more sought out for their opinion than women



Further Research

- More in-depth research to include exploration of
 - Size of network
 - Information sources, in general, and the breadth of sources (i.e., to address polarization)
 - Specific subject matter expertise attributed to field of study, or via the workplace
 - Kinds of information that is shared (i.e., advice, opinion, resources)

Limitations

-  Topic list was not exhaustive
-  We considered frequency of sharing, though we didn't measure the size of the respondent's network
-  We asked about topics they speak about, but specific subject matter expertise was not measure
-  We did not explore or investigate their information sources
-  Sample size prevents looking at more granular levels of frequency other than weekly or less than weekly
-  Use of nonprobability-based sample panel

Abstract



In the era of rapid technological advancements, an evolving media landscape, and a rise in influencer marketing, opinion leadership is a malleable term in public opinion research. The traditional Roper Leadership definition needs to evolve to capture the nuanced interplay of influence in a modern information environment. This research seeks to update the traditional definition of opinion leader by incorporating factors such as digital behavior, sphere of influence, and subject matter expertise.

The original Roper definition measured opinion leadership on 12 behaviors indicating a level of civic engagement and the ability to influence. With the rise of digital platforms and the democratization of information, more and varied voices are shaping the public discourse, making it more difficult and important to identify trusted voices. This requires a reevaluation of how to conceptualize opinion leadership. Building on 2009 work by Nisbet and Kotcher which explored influence, behaviors, and domain knowledge independently, this work proposes that an updated framework is needed, including all three aspects.

Using a split-sample approach, the research, conducted among a representative sample of 2000 US adults, compares the original Roper definition with an updated definition that includes measures of digital behavior, sphere of influence and domain knowledge. Analyses focus on identifying both the size and demographic profile of opinion leaders using each framework, noting which voices are included or excluded, how this varies based on subject matter and, importantly, measuring the level of influence of each group.

The original Roper definition measured opinion leadership on 12 behaviors indicating a level of civic engagement and the ability to influence. With the rise of digital platforms and the democratization of information, more and varied voices are shaping the public discourse, making it more difficult and important to identify trusted voices. This requires a reevaluation of how to conceptualize opinion leadership. Building on 2009 work by Nisbet and Kotcher which explored influence, behaviors, and domain knowledge independently, this work proposes that an updated framework is needed, including all three aspects.

Using a split-sample approach, the research, conducted among a representative sample of 2000 US adults, compares the original Roper definition with an updated definition that includes measures of digital behavior, sphere of influence and domain knowledge. Analyses focus on identifying both the size and demographic profile of opinion leaders using each framework, noting which voices are included or excluded, how this varies based on subject matter and, importantly, measuring the level of influence of each group.

Insights from this research will contribute to public opinion research methodologies and offer insights for targeted communication strategies where influence is both broad and highly specialized.

Thank You

Michele Salomon, Vice President
Michele.Salomon@harrispoll.com

Edward 'Paul' Johnson, Vice President
Paul.Johnson@harrispoll.com