



February 2025

How do we make the case for digital technology that benefits the many?

Findings from research commissioned by Omidyar Network

We conducted qualitative research with policy elites, tech leaders, and opinion elites, and survey research with workers.

QUALITATIVE:



DC Policy Elites: On December 9, 2024, we conducted two focus group sessions with DC policy elites.

- Participants were mid-senior level officials on the Hill, at a federal agency, in the executive branch, a think tank, trade association, or lobbying or law firm
- One session with Democrats, one with Republicans



Atlanta and Bay Area Tech Opinion Elites: On December 5, 2024, we conducted two focus group sessions with tech opinion elites

- Work in the technology sector or closely follow technology trends, and are higher educated, higher income voters
- One session in Atlanta, one session in the Bay Area



Technology Industry Leaders: From December 2–13, 2024, we conducted 9 in-depth interviews with technology industry leaders in Austin, Miami, San Francisco, and New York City.

QUANTITATIVE:



Workers: On January 13-23, 2025, we conducted an online survey of workers.

- 800 union workers: Working full-time or part-time and they or a member of their family belongs to a union
- 800 non-union workers: Working full-time, part-time or self-employed, and no one in their family, including themselves, belongs to a union

*Where do audiences start on
digital technology?*

Excitement for the future of digital technology outweighs elites' concerns – a view held by policy elites as well as those working in technology.



Tech is malleable

Technology is not seen as a force for good or evil, but rather a blank slate that humans have the power to shape

“It probably won’t be any different from the rest of human history. Of course, human history includes the Dark Ages. We don’t yet know where this is going to go.” – Technology Industry Leader

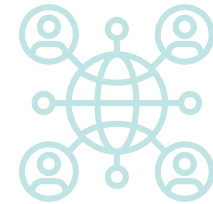


Expected advances

People feel “optimistic,” “hopeful,” “excited,” and “intrigued,” especially by:

- Advancements in medicine and science
- The possibility of creating efficiency for average workers

“The intersection of AI and science is the next big thing for pharmaceutical research, material science, high-energy physics, and climate science.” – Democratic Policy Elite



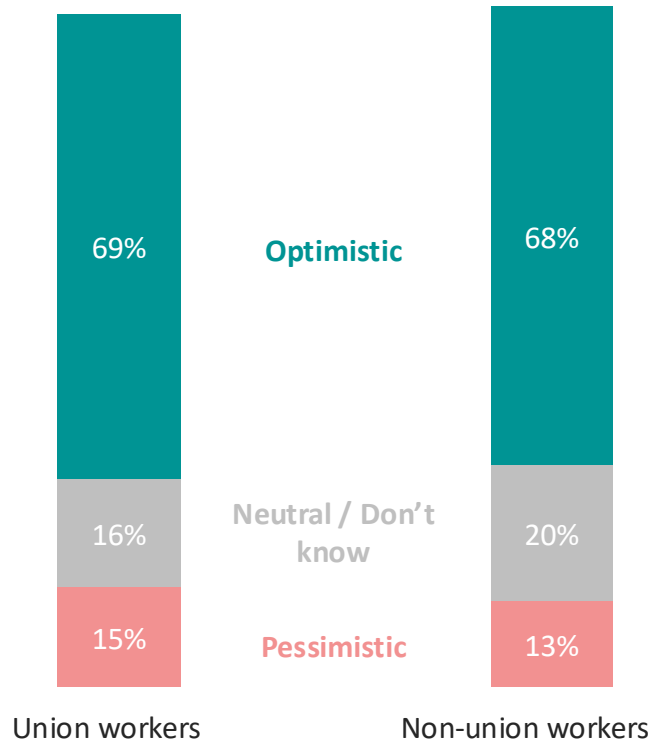
Connecting people

Tech enables communication and connection across the globe – this is one of the few ways people point to in which most of humanity benefits from tech

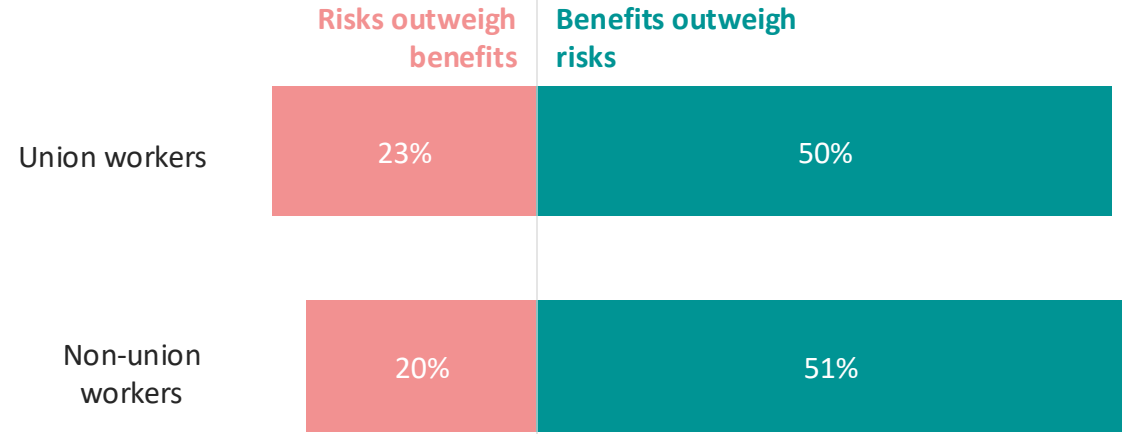
“I want to double down on the communication part. AI is able to kind of asynchronously translate so many things... it's kind of democratized knowledge and information.” – Bay Area Tech Opinion Elite

Workers, too, are excited about the future of digital technology and generally feel the benefits outweigh the risks.

Feeling about the future of digital technology



Benefits/risks of digital technology



Technology is steerable, but audiences feel strongly that individuals have very little control vis a vis those controlling Big Tech firms.



The average individual is seen to have very little power to control the overall direction of tech

- Elites give some credence to an individual “voting with their pocketbook” – and cite examples like Myspace (extinct) and Uber (an internal culture shift) – but this is limited
- While people now have more options when it comes to *how* they engage with technology, few feel they have any choice when it comes to *whether* they engage in technology

“Any one person's actions can't really influence the state of the industry, but I do think we have more personal control over how technology affects us than we had before (optionality, types of hardware, software, etc.). I can be mad that it exists and that I didn't have a say in that, but I also have a sense of freedom beyond the fact that I probably have to be on the internet to be a person operating in society.” – Democratic Opinion Elite



In contrast, a select few tech leaders are seen to play an outsized role in how tech is created, utilized, and implemented

- Few expect technology itself to become autonomous any time soon; there is a sense that humans – even if just a small group of them – will be at the helm for the indefinite future

*“Right now, I would say that humans have closer to full control; we created it, and we have the power to shut it off. But I see why the question is coming up as new technologies – like AI – appear.”
– Republican Policy Elite*

“I think it's human-directed, but I don't think it's human-controlled. I don't know that the analogy is perfect, but it's not a rocket ship that once you aim it, it goes, but it's also not a bicycle that you're pedaling.” – Technology Industry Leader

Control over the direction of technology is held in the hands of very few “tech barons.”

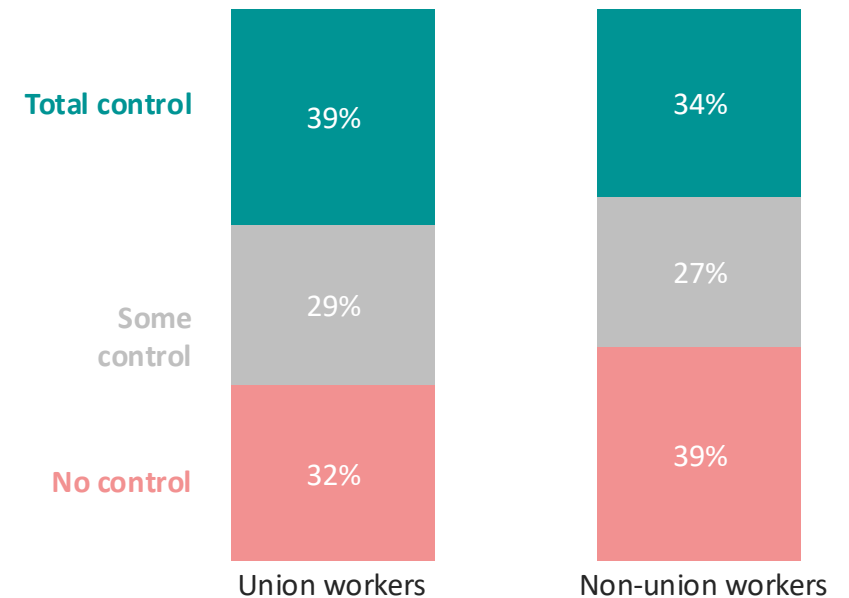
Technology & policy elites

- **Control of technology is held by a select few:** Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg are mentioned often, by both Republicans and Democrats
- These same **leaders are also those who benefit the most from tech**, the data it collects, and the resulting financial windfall
 - Early adopters of new tech and average people who use tech daily are seen as secondary beneficiaries, far behind this top-tier segment in control
 - For many – especially Democrats – the advancement of digital technology is showcasing and exacerbating the gap between the haves and the have-nots
- There is a sense of **defeatism in how audiences speak of this power dynamic**, as they don’t see a system today that seeks to put guardrails or checks on these corporations and their leaders

“The rich are getting even richer. Elon, Zuckerberg, Bezos. Like the richest men in the world are all tech giants, and it’s just showcasing the inequality across the country and the globe.” – Democratic Policy Elite

Workers

Control you have over the future of digital technology (10-pt scale)



Across audiences, concerns with technology – and AI especially – tend to be about immediate and current anxieties.

Technology & policy elites

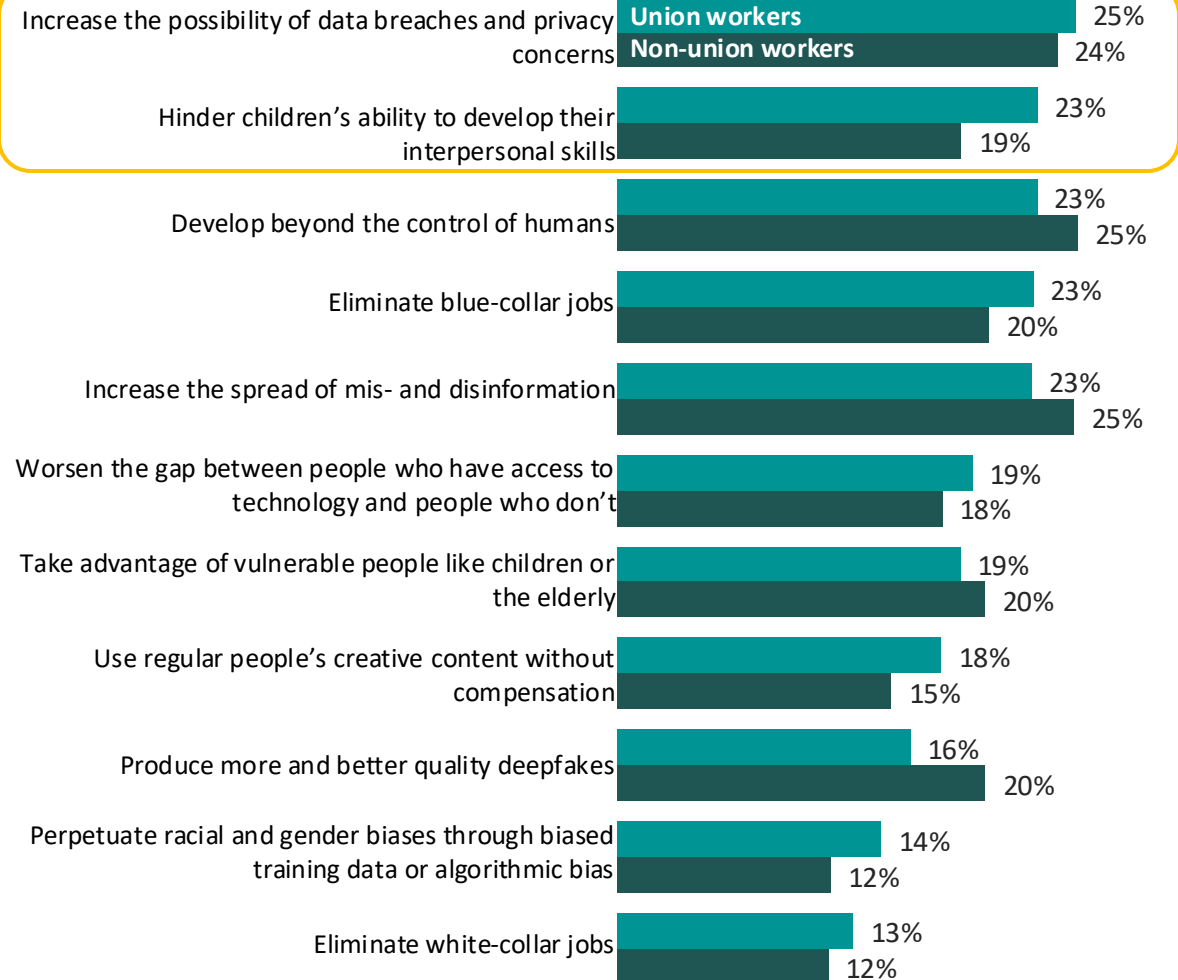
“NERVOUS”

- Data concerns:
 - Privacy of data and concerns about hacks
 - Ownership of data, which is increasingly seen as the currency of the digital world
 - Misuse of data, including Big-Brother-esque monitoring, lack of compensation for IP (mentions of LLMs using content to train models, such as NYT articles)
- Misinformation and disinformation
- The use of AI in the military – a non-starter for many who fear a world in which humans cede control over weapons

“OVERWHELMED”

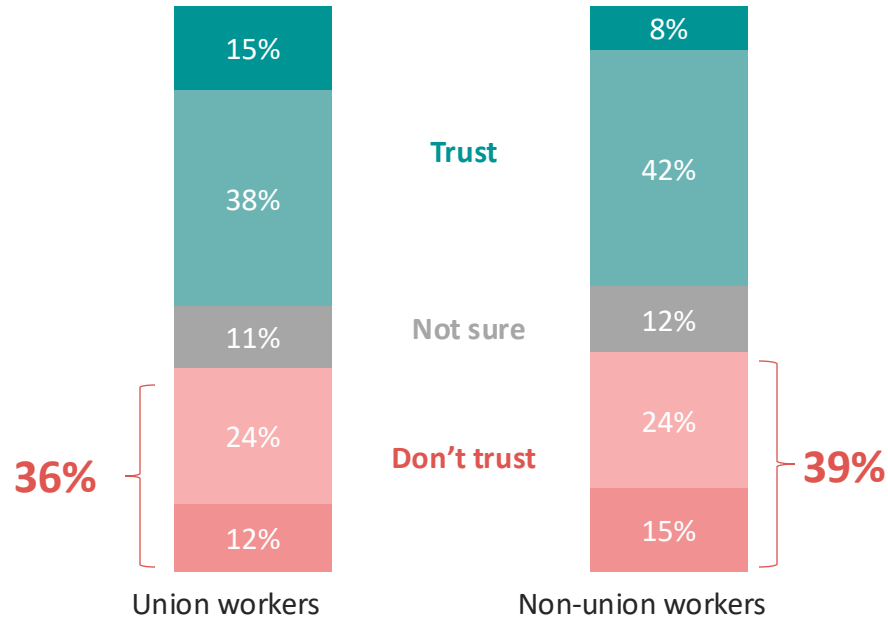
- Overreliance on tech at the expense of other skills, including interpersonal relationships
- Feeling inundated with tech and powerless to opt-out

Workers: Top 3 most concerning possible impacts of AI

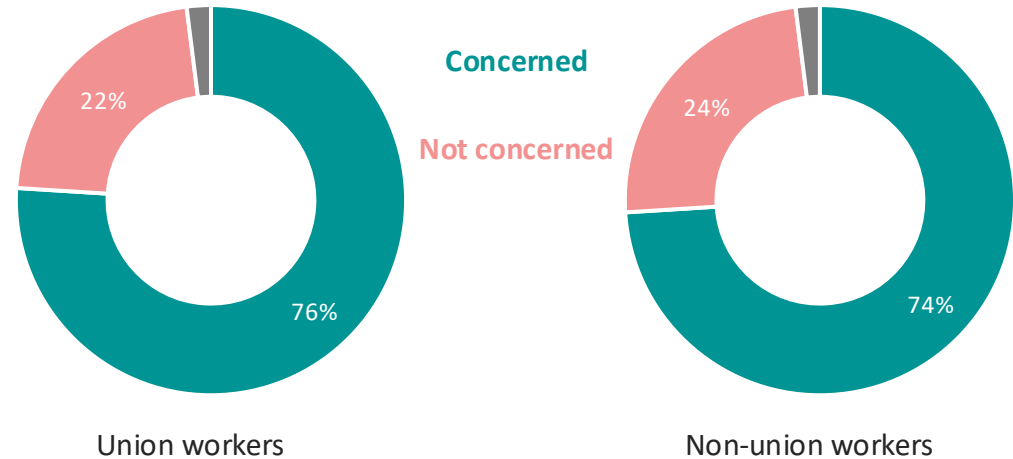


Workers, especially, express deep-seated concerns and mistrust about AI and data privacy.

Trust in AI tools



Concern about privacy of personal data given the growth of AI



Technology and policy elites see the biggest “losers” in digital technology as populations that generate sympathy.



CHILDREN

Seen as missing out on social interactions while being faced with the challenges of social media

“Kids: I am seeing the effects of technology and how they're not communicating right in person. They'll be sitting next to each other, texting. The human connection aspect [is lost], it's creating a bigger divide.” – Bay Area Tech Opinion Elite



POOR & RURAL COMMUNITIES

Lack access to even basic digital technologies let alone advanced tools

“When you are a family living in rural America, or you can't necessarily afford to have access to technology or digital technology – it sets you back.” – Democratic Policy Elite



WORKERS

Though not top of mind, audiences admit when pushed that some workers – both white and blue collar – might lose their jobs due to AI

“They're talking about how AI is going to take all these jobs; who's gonna benefit from not having to pay salaries and healthcare? It's not gonna be the people making a living wage; it's gonna be CEOs, owners, billionaires.” – Atlanta Tech Opinion Elite



OLDER PEOPLE

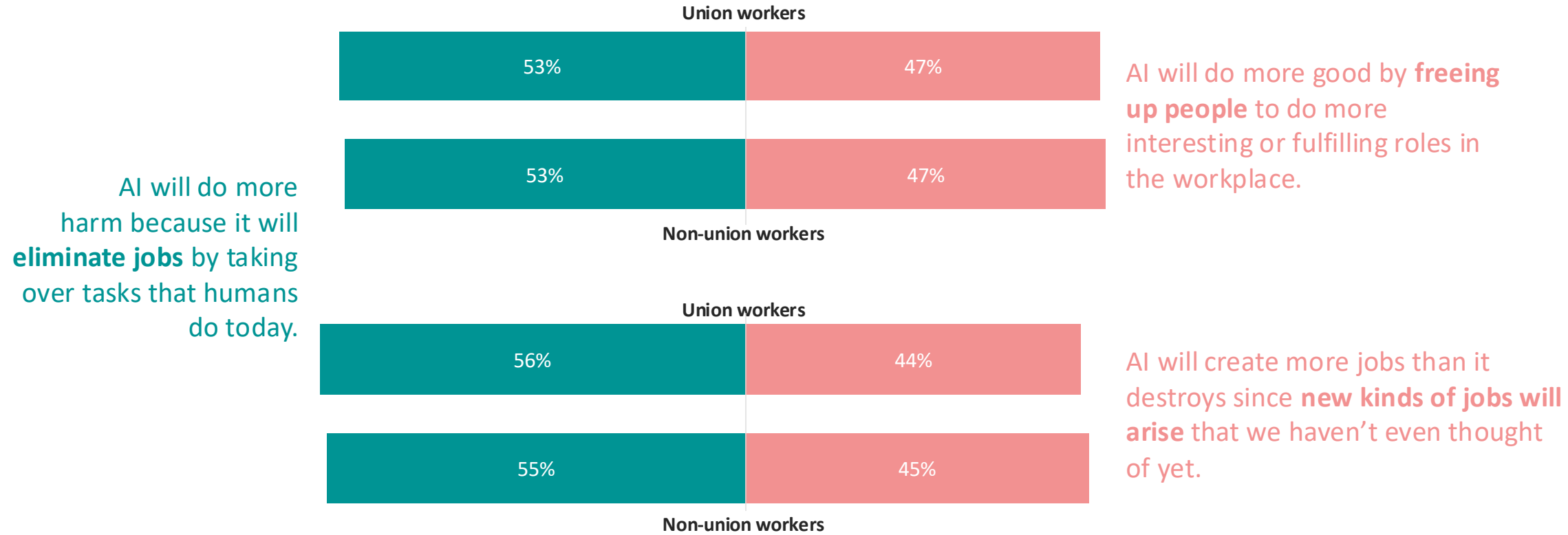
Seen as unable or unwilling to adopt new ways and technologies

“I think an older generation that has always done their job the same way will kick, fighting and screaming against any type of change.” – Technology Industry Leader

*What is AI's expected impact
on the workplace?*

Half of workers understand that AI has the potential to free up people to do more interesting things – or even create new kinds of jobs.

Agree with each statement



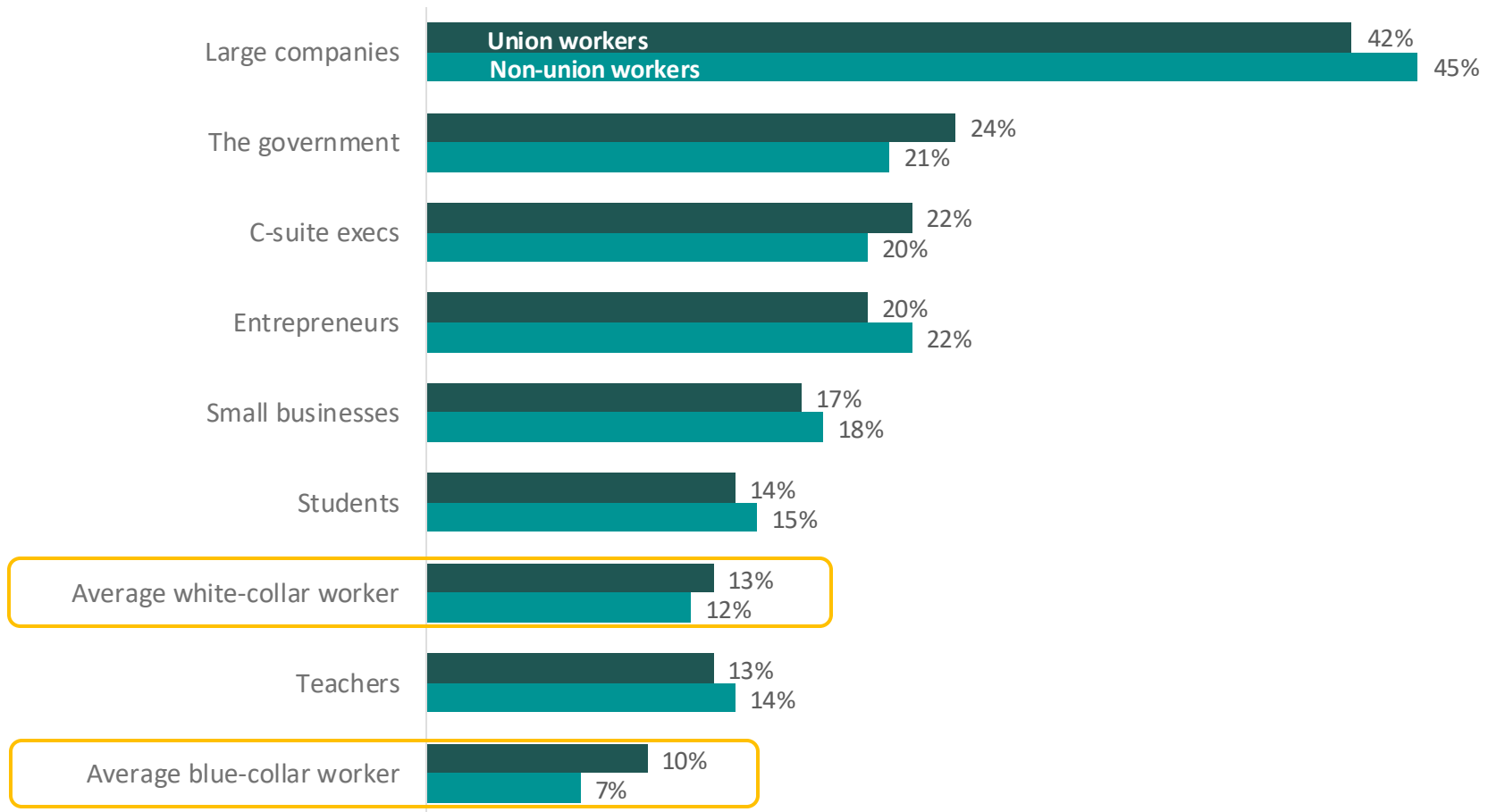
Workers also see the value in a number of potential benefits stemming from AI use in the workplace – especially around flexible hours.

Excitement about AI benefits in the workplace:



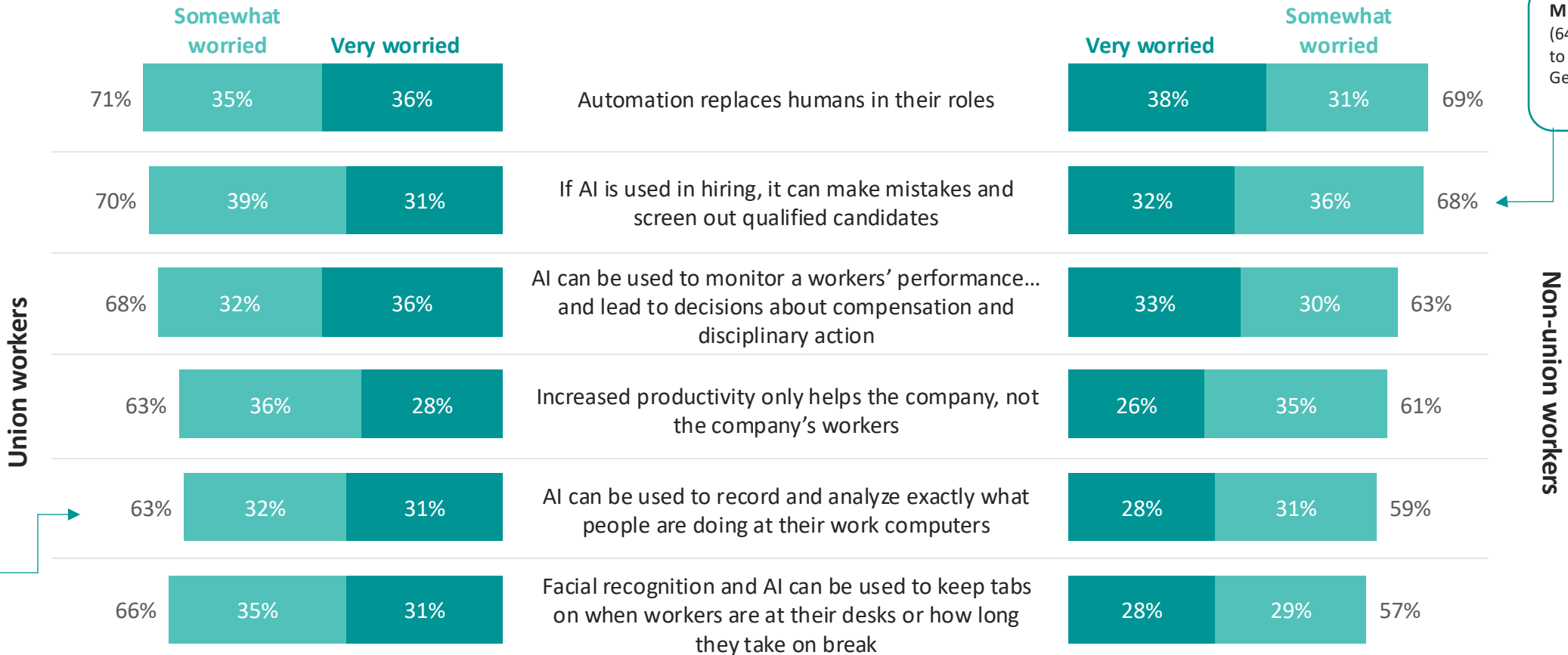
But, workers don't believe they will share in workplace gains the same way large companies will.

Top beneficiaries of AI's increased productivity (top 2):



Majorities worry about the potential misuse of AI in the workplace; union workers are more worried about AI tracking workers than non-union ones.

Worries about AI impacts in the workplace:



Diverse backgrounds are valued in tech; for many, diversity does not extend to education level or intelligence, where only the brightest should participate.



Audiences appreciate what a diverse set of backgrounds brings to the tech world; this view is held by both Democrats and Republicans – though the latter push back on the word itself

- New approaches and ideas
- Ways to reach more end-user populations
- Avoidance of potential bias



Silicon Valley and the wider tech world is still seen as a monoculture: white men from top-tier schools dominate

- Some in the tech world are seeing a slight shift, with more women getting into tech, and more minority racial groups, especially South and East Asians; policy elites in DC aren't seeing this shift as much



Support for diversity typically extends only to demographic characteristics and – to a lesser extent – diversity in backgrounds

- Few believe that there is room for those with lower education levels or intelligence to be in the top ranks of tech; it's seen as an extremely complicated sector, where only the smartest should have decision-making roles
- Some bristle at vague calls for “diversity in tech,” as it can imply that the doors are open for *all* individuals to be at the tech table, including those who may be unqualified

“For like AAPI communities, there's significant representation, but it's all tied to education. So, folks who came here as a farm worker, let's say, from Pakistan, are going to be underrepresented, even though other South Asian folks are highly represented in tech circles.” – Tech Industry Leader

“It's horrible, but if diversity for you is a range of IQ, I think that's not necessarily beneficial to developing technology.” – Tech Industry Leader

*How do audiences view
guardrails?*

Audiences seek more safeguards around digital technology – for four key reasons.

1 Tech leaders need oversight

Few trust tech leaders to act in a way that undermines their bottom line; audiences believe there must be a counterweight to that force

*“There are nowhere near enough guardrails in tech – not even close.”
– Technology Industry Leader*

2 Tech is conspicuously underregulated

Policy elites – even Republicans – reveal some discomfort with the reality that tech is far less regulated than any other industry

*“Part of the AI that I worry about particularly is the privacy implications. I might be more sympathetic to some, prophylactic measures there.”
– Republican Policy Elite*

3 We’ve already seen unintended consequences

Facial recognition mistakes, social media woes, and other negative consequences of tech indicate to audiences that without proper safeguards, more will follow

*“I think development of AI is going so fast right now, and overutilization of AI in certain fields, especially in the health care space, is something that’s concerning.”
– Republican Policy Elite*

4 Guardrails can level the playing field

Some tech industry elites believe that smart guardrails enhance innovation, they don’t inhibit it

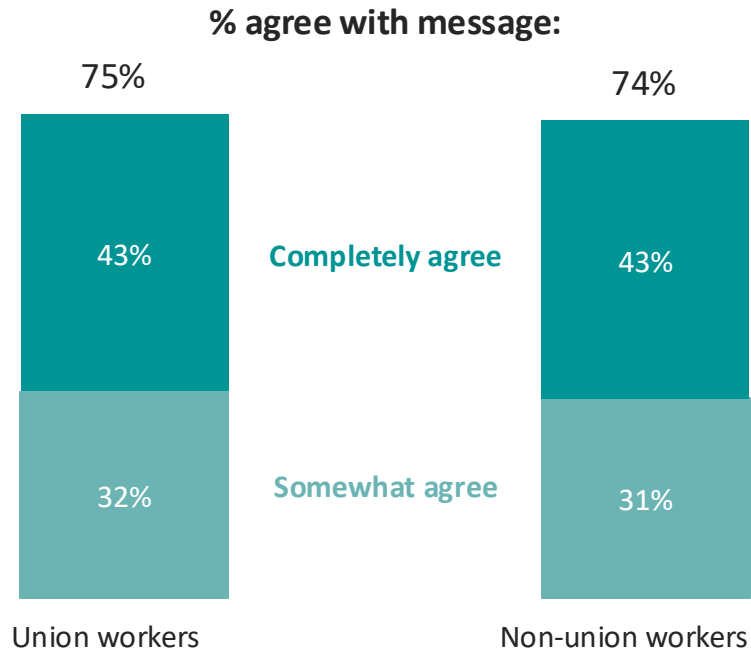
“The idea of guardrails is important – it creates a common floor, a common set of rules around which you compete with others. You need to have guardrails, so the true innovators have the space to innovate.” – Technology Industry Leader



70% of unionized households and 74% of non-unionized households believe there should be *more* safeguards around AI; almost no one wants fewer

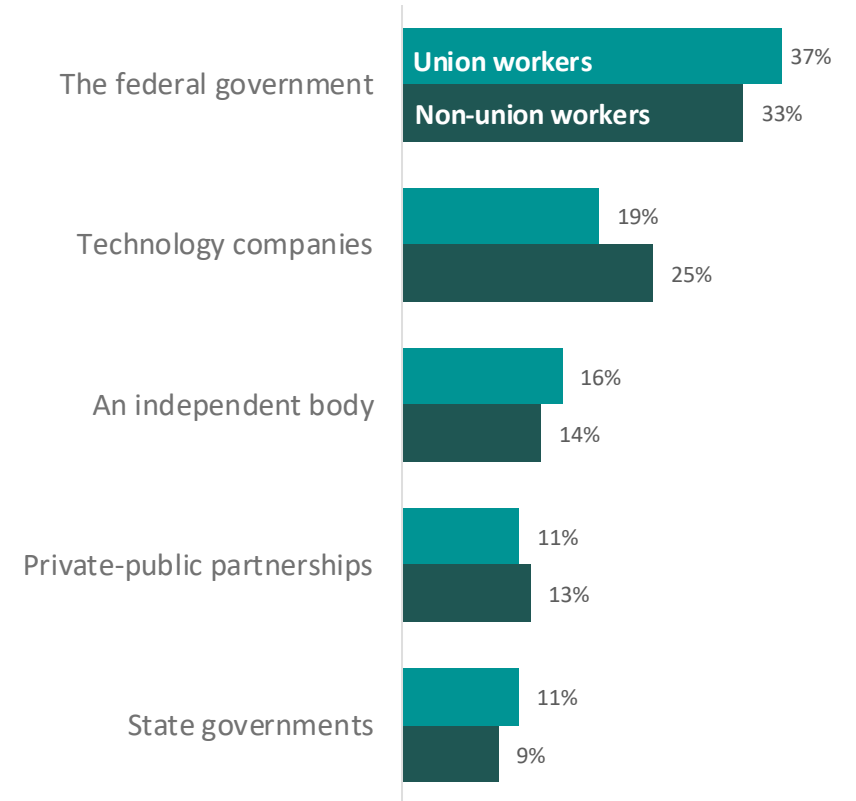
Workers back more safeguards around artificial intelligence, and most see the federal government needing to take ultimate responsibility.

Message tested:
We need smart guardrails, backed by the government, to keep the development of AI in check.



Top choice for Democrats (37%) and Republicans (33%)

Who should be responsible for protecting against possible negative consequences of AI:



Among elites, though, a belief that government is not capable of regulating tech alone; a few propose ideas of what a working model might look like.

The government cannot and should not regulate alone

Cannot keep up, out of touch, older



Companies cannot be trusted to police themselves

Have skin in the game

POSSIBLE APPROACHES

A dual or tripartite solution of existing bodies

- Consumer groups + companies [+ government]
- Work together to steer tech oversight
- Republicans see this as oversight to start – morphing into regulation if necessary

A new entity created for this purpose

- Some see this as looking like the UN – an international organization working adjacent to government
- Others would model this after a Parent-Teacher Association, wherein invested parties (consumers and the government) have a direct line to decision-makers (companies)

Fitting tech companies into already-regulated sectors

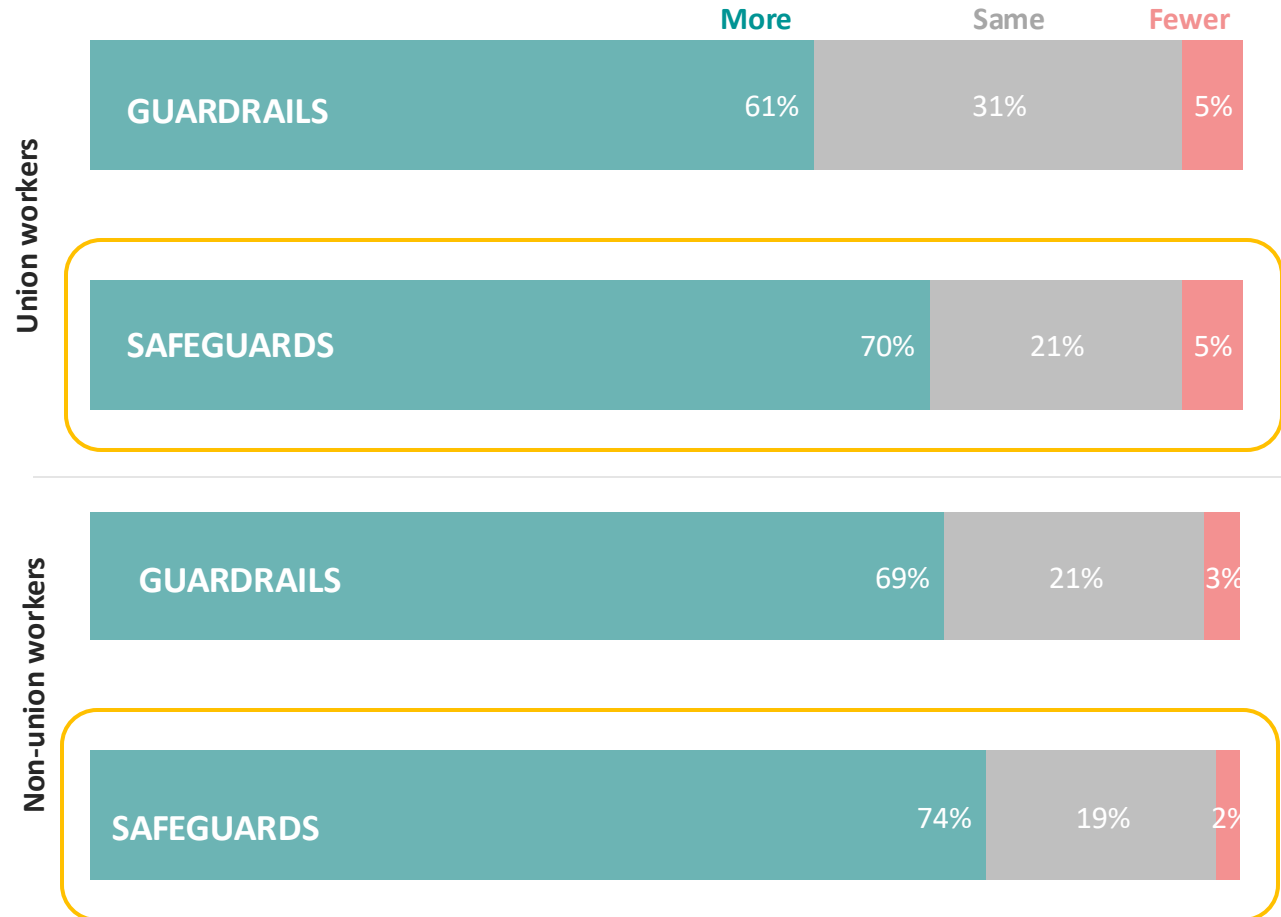
- The Dept. of Transportation would regulate autonomous vehicles; the FCC would regulate AI in banking, etc.

“Safeguards” is a more effective descriptor than “guardrails”; “regulations” is also effective.

Preferred term:

- 1 REGULATIONS**
 30% union workers
 28% non-union workers
- 2 SAFEGUARDS**
 27% union workers
 27% non-union workers
- 3 LAWS**
 17% union workers
 18% non-union workers
- 4 GUARDRAILS**
 9% union workers
 9% non-union workers

Should there be more ____ or fewer ____, or the same as there are now, when it comes to artificial intelligence overall?



Policy and tech elites see the Trump administration as pro-tech – or at least pro-tech leaders – and anti-regulation.

Elites anticipate technology being largely untouched by the new administration – with the exception of protections around free online speech

- They cite Elon Musk in his new position as evidence of the administration's stance on tech regulation
- Some tech industry elites worry that the relationship between the new president and Musk or Peter Thiel will lead to the government looking in the other direction as Big Tech operates in ways counter to the public good

“That’s why Elon and others don’t want regulation – it removes their inherent advantage as oligarchs, and it makes it easier for startups to come in.”
– Tech Industry Leader

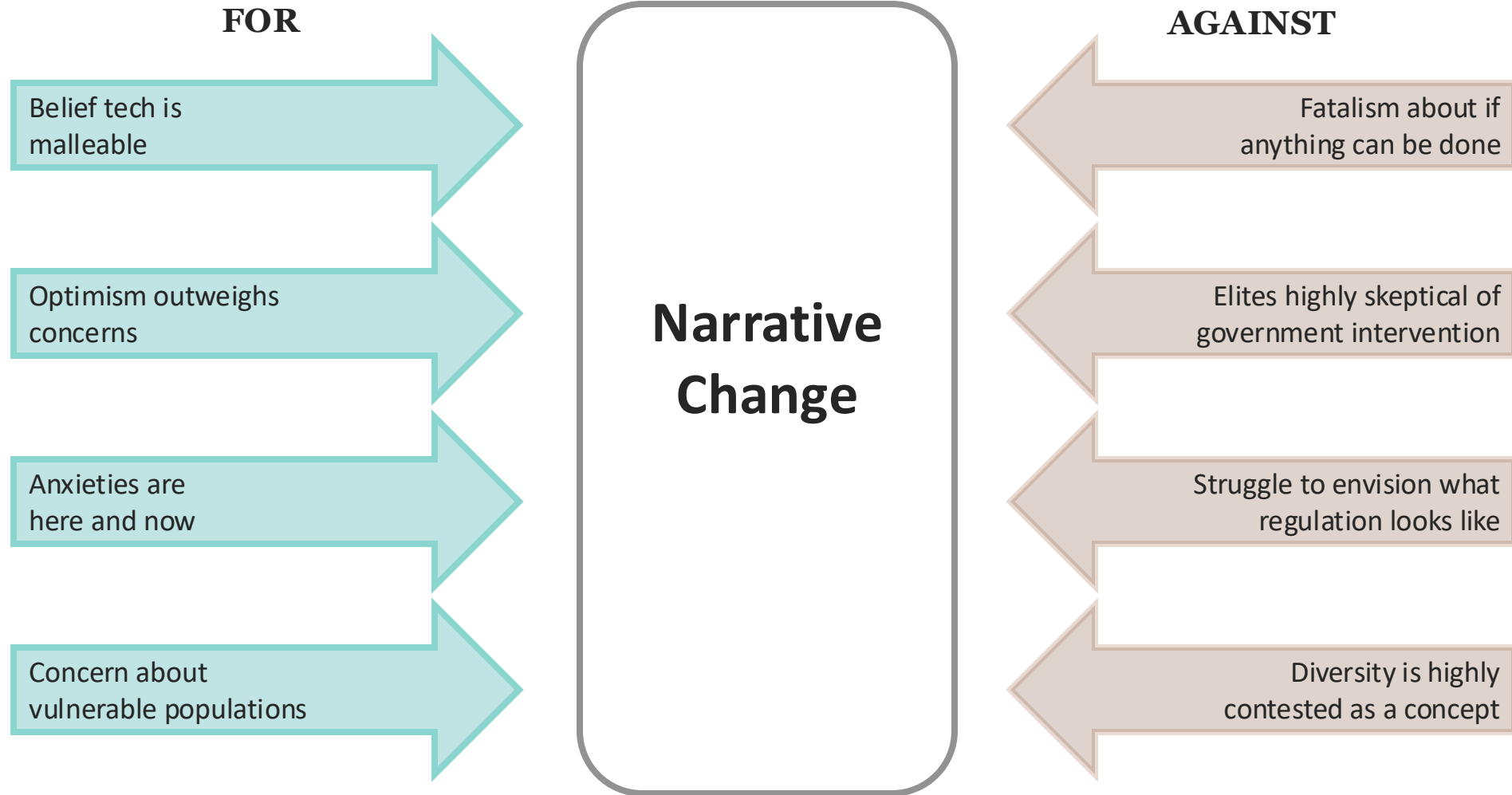
“And then on the regulatory side, I don't think the Trump administration wants to touch it with a 10-foot pole because it's not in their benefit.” – Democratic Policy Elite

“I don't think it's an accident that Elon Musk just spent a quarter of a billion dollars to get a position in the new presidential administration – because he doesn't want anything that he does to be regulated. And of course, Elon's buddy, Peter Thiel, is the main funder of Palantir, one of these giant surveillance state database companies; and [Thiel] certainly doesn't want to be regulated or have to disclose where their AI is training.” – Tech Industry Leader

“I think [the new administration will prioritize] protecting some of the IP, especially as it relates to tech, and also wanting to ensure that we're not exporting the technology – ensure things are made here. So, I think maybe we'll see a little bit more of a protectionist stance than we've seen before.” – Republican Policy Elite

*How can our narrative help
make our case?*

What works in our favor and what works against us?



The frame of individuals having more control over technology strikes a chord and is effectively conveyed by the concept of “digital rights.”

Taking back control

Digital rights

You say...

“True protagonists”
“We have the power to shape the path ahead”

“People should maintain their digital rights”

Why it works...

Sentiment rang true and helped counter the concept of the tech itself holding the reins. Republicans particularly like the concept of personal accountability

Many had never heard the phrase “digital rights” before, and it resonated across audiences

In respondents’ words...

*“People are the true protagonists in our society, so I think that statement is more likely to have a greater effect.”
– Tech Industry Leader*

“I like that. I’d like to know what my digital rights are.” – Republican Policy Elite

Highlighting how AI can augment skills aligns with optimism about AI, with the concept that workers should share in benefits resonating.

AI and threats to jobs

You say...

“When AI augments workers’ skills, they should share in those productivity gains.”

Why it works...

Focusing on how AI will take over routine tasks – not full jobs – freeing up people for creative work reassures and resonates with audiences

In respondents’ words...

“It addresses the concerns with productivity and using AI. It also calls out the human aspect of having and keeping human beings able to do the jobs that they’re supposed to do while embracing AI and technology.” - Democratic Policy Elite

Diversity can trigger sensitivities in the current climate and is best addressed by speaking to how diversity creates commercial advantage.

Diversity in tech

You say...

“Embracing diversity in the tech industry is not just a moral imperative but a strategic advantage that will propel us toward a better future”

“A McKinsey study shows, diverse teams – including those with greater gender diversity – are on average more creative, innovative, and, ultimately, associated with greater profitability”

Why it doesn't work...

Both Republican and Democrat audiences note that “diversity” has become a polarizing word in the U.S.

In respondents' words...

“I'm very wary about pushing diversity for the sake of diversity and representation, whatever it is. I just think that the more qualified individuals should be encouraged to participate.” - Republican Policy Elite

Instead...

This language works best when calls for diversity are targeted and specific, leaving no room for fears that decision-making positions may be filled using quotas, and when it explains the business advantages of diversified viewpoints

Positioning the government as the solution runs directly against elites' biases against the effectiveness of government interventions in tech.

Government involvement

You say...

“The government – as the body representing the people’s interests in a democracy – has greater control over the direction tech takes”

Why it doesn't work...

Audiences are hesitant about the idea of government being solely in charge of controlling and regulating digital tech: – they see government as inefficient and filled with luddites

In respondents' words...

“I have a fairly low opinion of government's ability to regulate.” – Tech Industry Leader

Instead...

Position the government as a supporting partner in the mission to guide tech forward responsibly, working in conjunction with tech companies, consumer interest groups, etc.

Language that is too inclusive can feel too reminiscent of “socialism” for some and puts many off.

Tech that serves all

You say...

“Tech that serves all of society”

“Power to create true prosperity for everyone”

Why it doesn’t work...

Audiences feel language that indicates a desire to serve all people can feel too socialist or communist to people, in part because it contradicts their fatalistic sense that tech will inevitably benefit some more than others

Language like this also triggers audiences’ concerns that attempting to shape tech that works for everyone will water it down – catering to the lowest common denominator

In respondents’ words...

“The more I read it, it starts to me sound a little like communism, I feel like Bernie Sanders would heartily approve this message. Oftentimes if you are doing this kind of thing, tech will not innovate at all or not in the way that you want it to. So, this can stifle more than produce, despite what they say there.”

– Democratic Policy Elite

Instead...

Use language that calls for average people to “share in the productivity gains” and other benefits that come from tech

Giving workers too much of a voice in decision-making can trigger fears that perceived decision-by-committee will slow down the pace of tech innovation.

A voice for workers

You say...

“Workers should have a voice in AI decision-making in the workplace”

“That will only happen when workers have more of a say in how tech is used in the workplace.”

Why it doesn't work...

Many audiences push back on the idea that everyone – even average workers – should have a role in tech decision making. This kind of language can lead to concerns of watering down tech for the sake of bringing everyone along with us and leads people to question the efficiency of decisions-by-committee.

In respondents' words...

“I'm not sure what it means by workers should have a voice in AI decision-making in the workplace. Like to what extent?” – Bay Area Tech Opinion Elite

Instead...

“Workers should have more input into how tech is used”

“Workers have digital rights: they should know when and how new technologies, like AI, are used in their workplace.”

*What do these insights mean
for messaging?*







The research points to ways we can make the link between placing checks on Big Tech to make the industry more dynamic and better digital technology.

Because they feel...		We can...
Optimistic about tech and wary of anything implying regression or pessimism that feels driven by political agendas.		Elevate how we are seeking to make the industry more dynamic and competitive, leading to better digital technology.
Individuals should have control but currently have little autonomy.		Highlight the need for curbs and checks on Big Tech and the need for “digital rights” - with the concept acting as a powerful umbrella term for advocates.
Skeptical of overly-ambitious goals or placing too much confidence in the government to regulate.		Avoid utopian-sounding messaging or asks and language as well as inferring only government has the answers and all solutions depend on regulation.

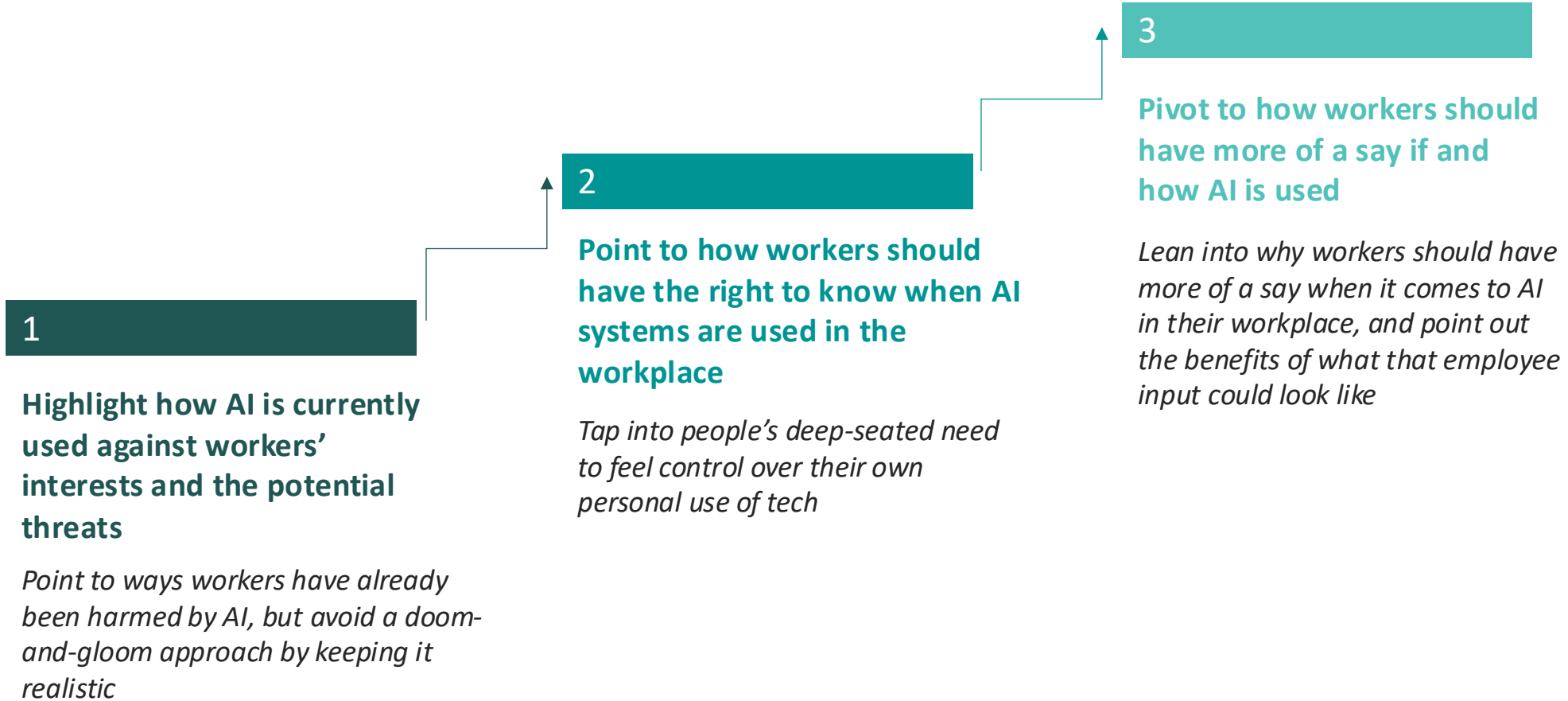
Do say action is needed to make the tech industry more dynamic, leading to better digital technology including AI for everyone.

Do say...		Don't say...	
✓	We will get better digital technology when diverse teams are developing and guiding it - as it helps avoid blind spots.	✗	Diversity is a moral imperative.
✓	If guided well AI can free people up to be more creative and do the things only humans can do.	✗	AI will destroy all jobs.

Do say it's about curbing abuses by companies and checks on concentrated power.

Do say...	Don't say...
 <p>Curbing market abuses.</p> <p>Taking on vested interests.</p> <p>Having checks on concentrated power in the tech industry.</p>	 <p>Tech companies are fundamentally immoral or evil.</p>
 <p>How smart safeguards channel innovation, before irreversible harms are caused.</p> <p>How with the right incentives and guardrails in place we will get better technology.</p>	 <p>“Guardrails” (or “regulations” among Republicans), without context.</p> <p>The government should have greater control over the direction tech takes.</p>
 <p>Workers have digital rights: they should know when and how new technologies, like AI, are used in their workplace.</p>	 <p>All employees should have control over tech usage in their workplace.</p>

Advocates should ladder up to the idea of workers having more say over the use of AI.



Messengers that can speak directly to your various stakeholder groups can act as important ambassadors.



Tailor your message and messenger based on your target audience:

Parents and youth	Given the universal concern about the possible effects of digital tech on children, parents and youths can serve as powerful messengers for all your intended stakeholders
Consumer rights advocacy groups	These groups are expected to play a major role in helping direct the development of tech and should have a vocal role in conveying the narrative from the outset
Expert bodies / Academics	Expert organizations focused on the use of tech, its potential impact on different populations, risk mitigation strategies, etc. can back up the narrative with helpful facts and statistics
Former government officials	Former government officials with knowledge of the inner workings of regulatory bodies could help make your case, especially with the wider public or journalists
Former tech leaders	Former leaders of tech firms can help validate the narrative from an "insider" perspective
Workers	Given the potential benefits <i>and</i> drawbacks that people see AI bringing to the workplace, workers of all kinds – creative, health care, tech – can be powerful spokespeople for their own interests
Faith leaders	Faith leaders can help make an emotional case for protecting society against the possible harms of digital tech
Journalists	Traditional media can be a helpful ambassador, especially when communicating with policymakers and the public
B-Corps	When speaking directly to the tech community – entrepreneurs and investors – it could be useful to reference B-corps leadership who can reinforce the idea of tech for good



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