



Poking the Bear

REPORT

A Revolt report on purpose in the
age of polarization

About this report: Purpose is at a crossroads

2023 has been a challenging year for brand purpose practitioners. As political polarization took its toll on some brands taking stands, marketers found themselves in the crosshairs of the culture wars.

At Revolt, we are purpose transformation specialists, helping brands navigate the opportunities and obligations purpose provides. To help brands meet the moment, we set out to explore some questions: How are marketers feeling about the path forward? What do consumers expect from brands now? What can we learn from the brands getting it right? What might a refined purpose playbook for the era of polarization look like?

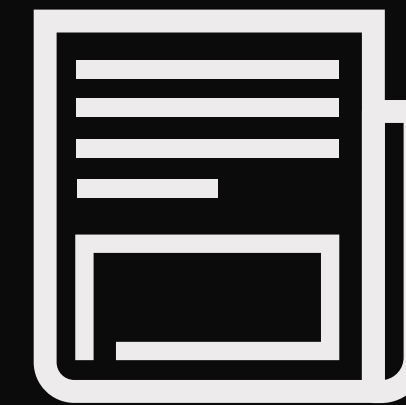
This report provides answers. The recommendations are informed by conversations with 30+ purpose, ESG and sustainability professionals and research among 1000 US consumers.

With a US election super-charging the atmosphere, the time to take stock, recalibrate and plan a path forward is now.

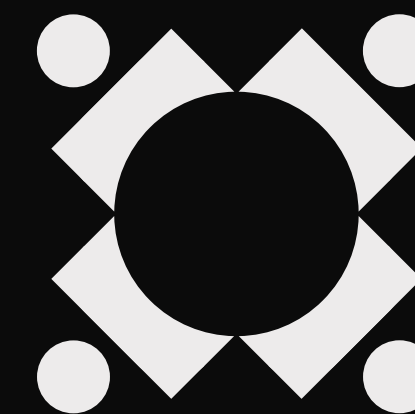
If you're seeking to navigate purpose in the era of polarization, this is your new playbook. We'd love to support. Give us a call.



Interviews with 15 purpose, ESG and sustainability leaders



Qualitative research among 1000 nationally representative US consumers



Roundtable discussions with 20+ purpose practitioners

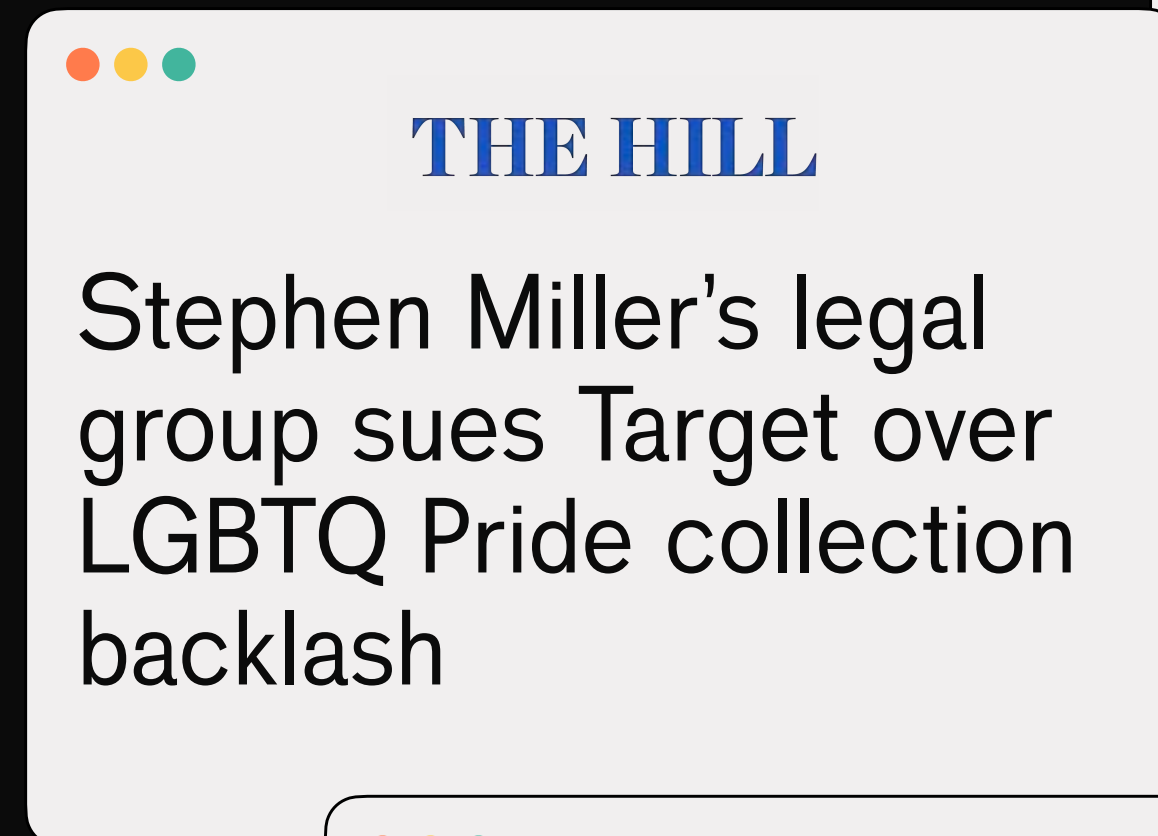
In 2023, purpose is no teddy bear's picnic...in fact it can feel like poking the bear.

In the past, leading & vocal brands received praise for taking a stand. Today, brands embracing issues find themselves increasingly at risk of 'Poking the Bear' - touching on polarizing issues that can be as divisive as they are growth-driving. The result? Backlash more acute than we've seen before.

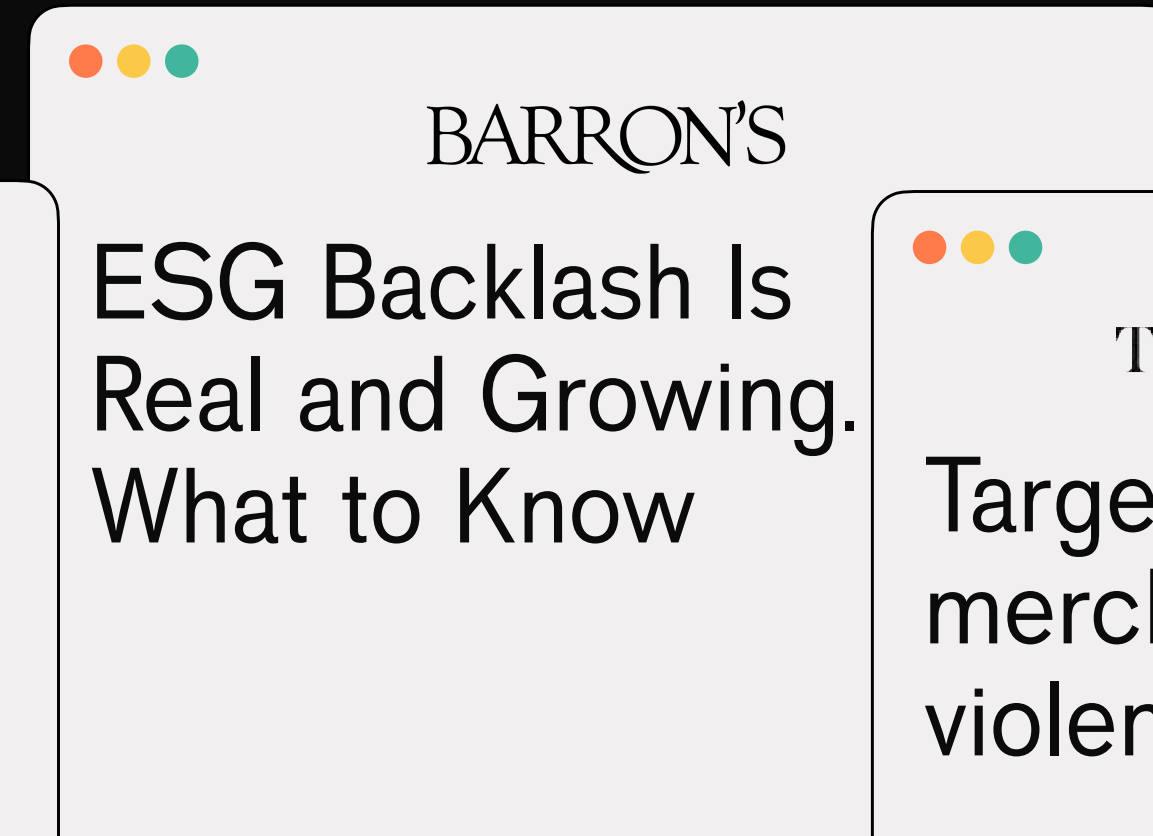
Nearly half of large companies say they have experienced ESG backlash and expect it to intensify. The stakes are higher than in times past where backlash remained mostly limited to social media dissent. Today it's well funded and well organized, with sales and share price hits, shareholder resolutions, legal threats and even physical threats to employee safety all on the rise*.

In 2023, it seems like more companies are entering 'bear country' - whether they want to or not.

* Source: Revolt Interviews



THE HILL
Stephen Miller's legal group sues Target over LGBTQ Pride collection backlash



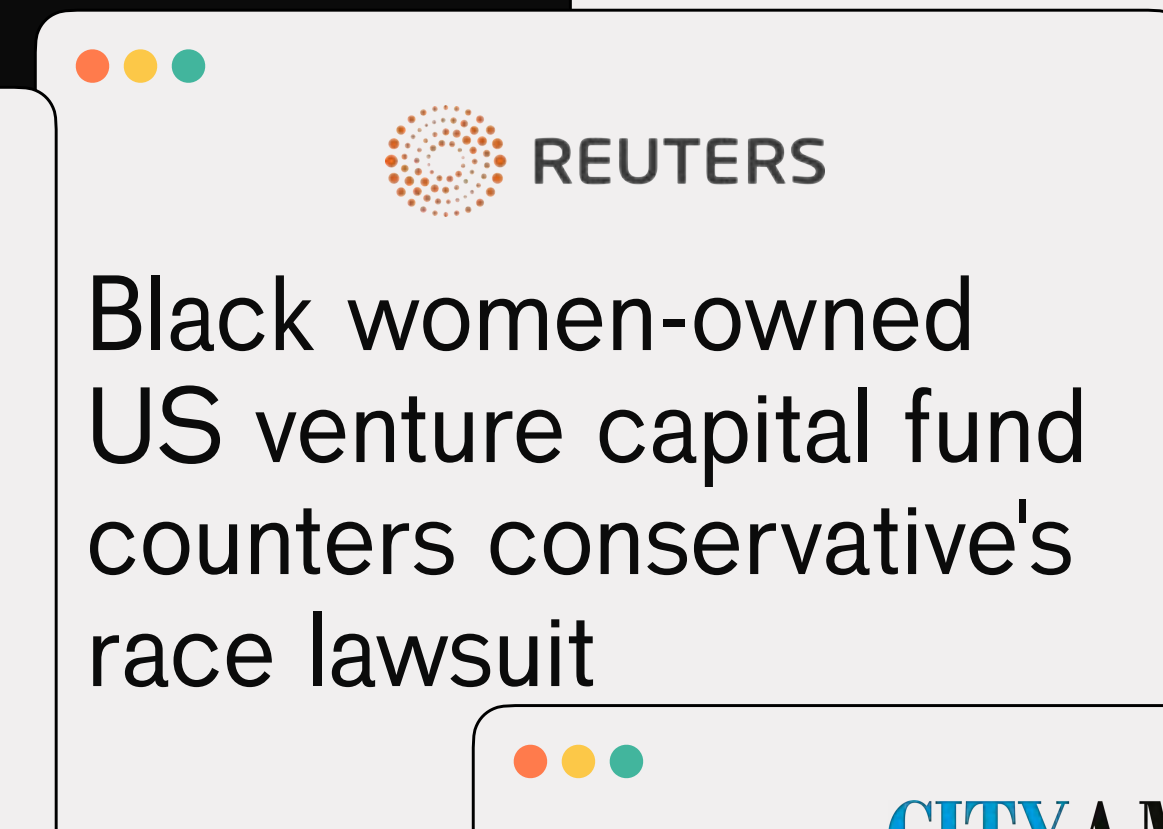
BARRON'S
ESG Backlash Is Real and Growing. What to Know



The **INDEPENDENT**
Target removes Pride merchandise after violent threats to staff



ADWEEK
Marketers Reveal Their Changing Attitudes to Purpose and Entertaining Ads



REUTERS
Black women-owned US venture capital fund counters conservative's race lawsuit



REUTERS
Kellogg's 'woke' workplace diversity programs are illegal, group claims



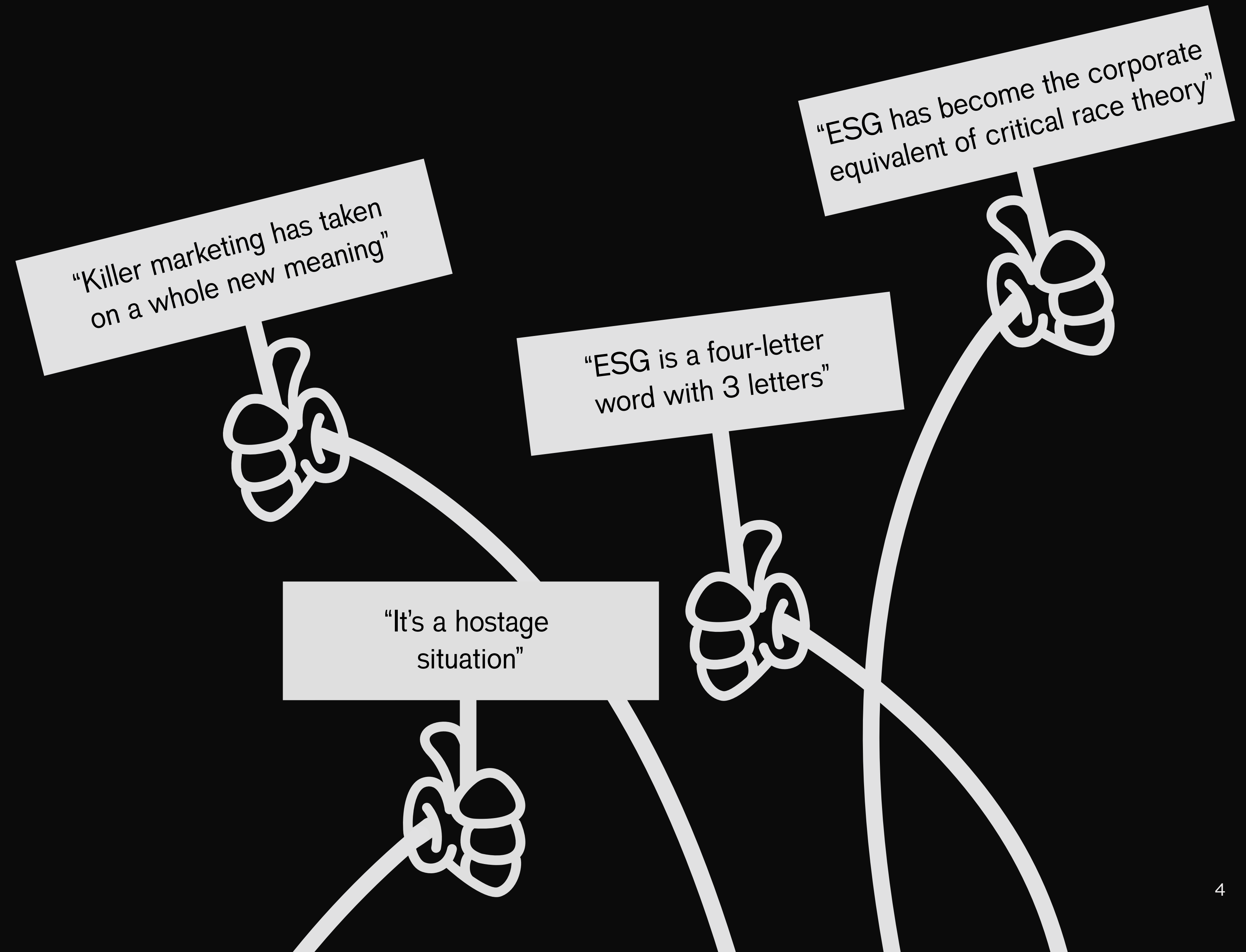
CITYA.M.
A year on from Mayonnaise-gate, Terry Smith mounts another attack on Unilever

And in the US, the bears are even scarier.

Escalating political polarization is creating an increasingly challenging environment for purpose, ESG and sustainability professionals. It started with ESG, which one practitioner described as 'a four-letter word with three letters', but has contaminated the whole purpose pool as the anti-woke backlash gains traction.

One respondent described it as 'a hostage situation', with a small group of more extreme voices using pressure to try to limit marketing freedoms. Another described situations in which new considerations such as, employee safety have become part of the marketing planning process.

As ideological divisions deepen, crafting purpose messages and campaigns that resonate with a diverse and fragmented audience feels harder than ever. Managing the reservations of internal stakeholders is also becoming a significant job for purpose professionals.



Some brands have been tempted to respond by going into hibernation...

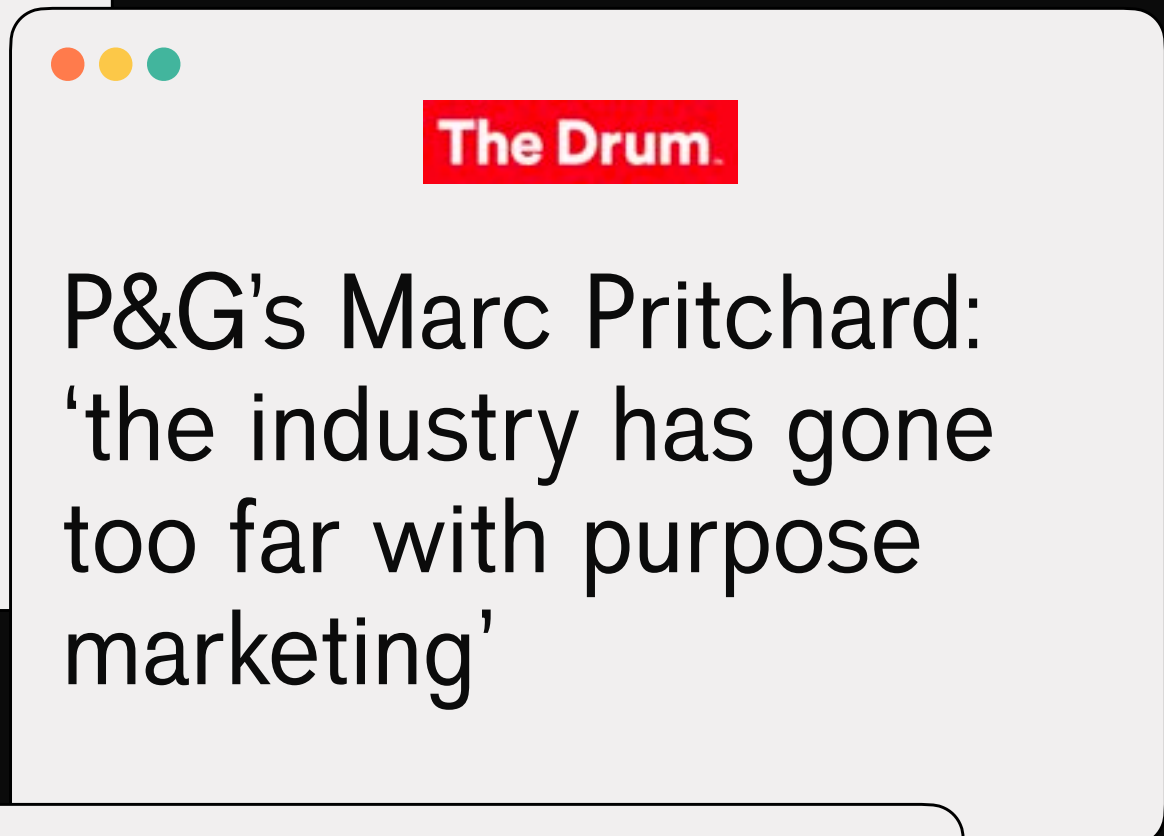
To steer clear of backlash, brands told us they are deploying a range of strategies. Some are pausing their purpose-driven marketing initiatives. Others are adopting a strategy of "quiet advocacy," wherein they continue their social and environmental efforts without actively promoting them. Yet others are using "neutralizing language" to provide air cover for continued action.

For example, McDonald's has taken ESG off parts of its website. BlackRock CEO Larry Fink has famously stopped using the term ESG. Procter & Gamble Chief Brand Officer Marc Pritchard, who has spearheaded some of the most acclaimed purpose-driven ads over the past decade, has flipped the script, claiming the industry has gone too far with purpose marketing. Cannes jurors were advised to avoid focusing on purpose campaigns at this year's Lions.

There's even talk of a 'post-purpose era' in marketing. Purpose practitioners, who are steadfast in their commitment to this work, told us they fear a sense of 'purpose paralysis' could set in.



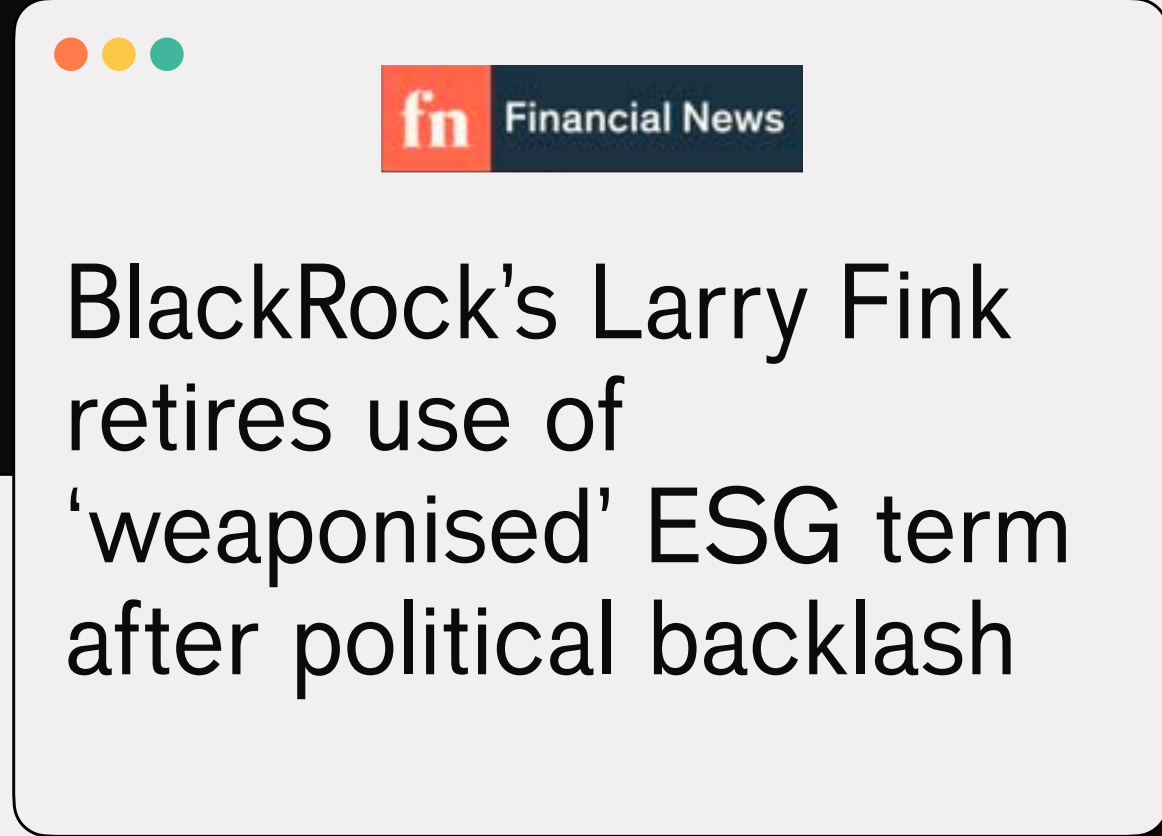
Bloomberg
McDonald's Removes ESG Abbreviation From Some Parts of Its Website



The Drum.
P&G's Marc Pritchard: 'the industry has gone too far with purpose marketing'



ADWEEK
Brand purpose goes into hibernation



fn Financial News
BlackRock's Larry Fink retires use of 'weaponised' ESG term after political backlash



SEMAFOR
Dial down the politics, Cannes Lions ad festival tells jurors

...But hibernation isn't an option.

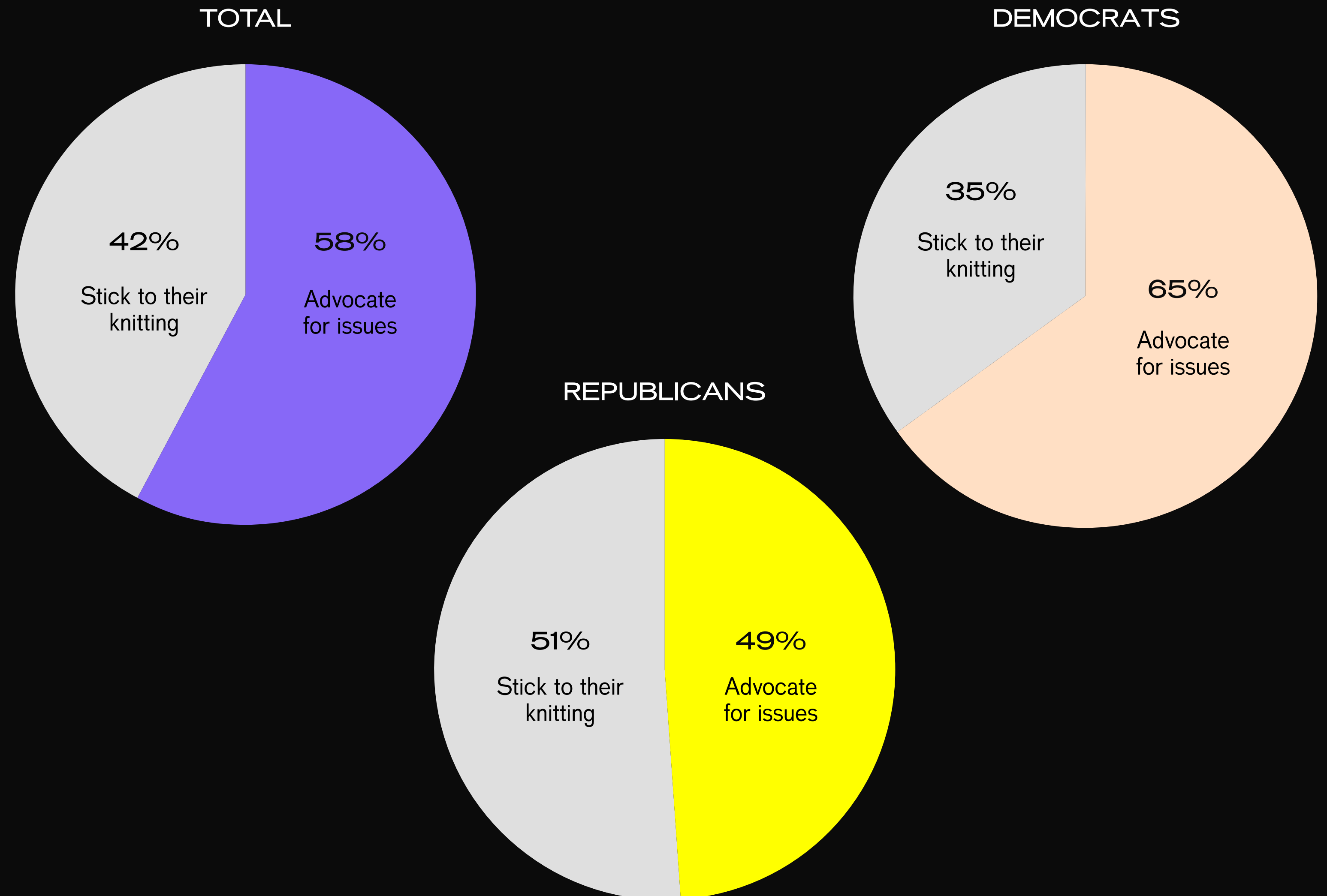
The reality is that the importance of brand purpose remains unchanged — employees, consumers, and the next generation overwhelmingly expect brands to demonstrate a clear sense of purpose. Indeed, our research found that 58% of US consumers state they “prefer it when brands advocate for issues that matter to me and to them”, while 42% think they should “stick to their knitting and focus on the features and benefits of their products”.

And while support for purpose is especially strong among left-leaning respondents, 65% of whom believe brands should advocate for issues, it holds true across the political spectrum, with 1 in 2 Republican-leaning respondents agreeing brands should advocate for issues. In fact, the rise of the self-styled parallel economy is evidence purpose has bipartisan potential.

Support among Gen Z consumers is stronger still.

So, if hibernation isn't the right answer, what is?

“I prefer when brands ‘stick to their knitting’ and focus on the features/benefits of their products” vs “I prefer when brands advocate for issues that matter to me and to them”



Source: Revolt Poking the Bear 2023

IT'S TIME FOR A NEW PLAYBOOK.

Purpose practitioners remain universally committed to this work.

Some even felt this moment of reckoning might end up being a positive, ushering in an end to performative purpose and the beginning of something more authentic and impactful.

But they believe the 'how' we go about it needs a refresh.

We're in bear country now.

So we've got to stick together, make noise, and stand strong.

Here's your new playbook for purpose in the age of polarization.

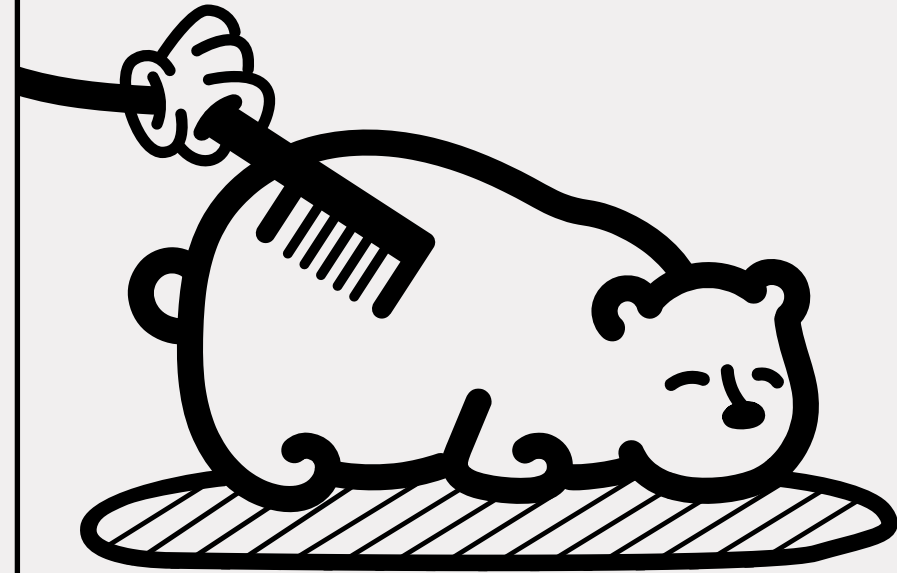
5 PRINCIPLES FOR 'POKING THE BEAR'

01



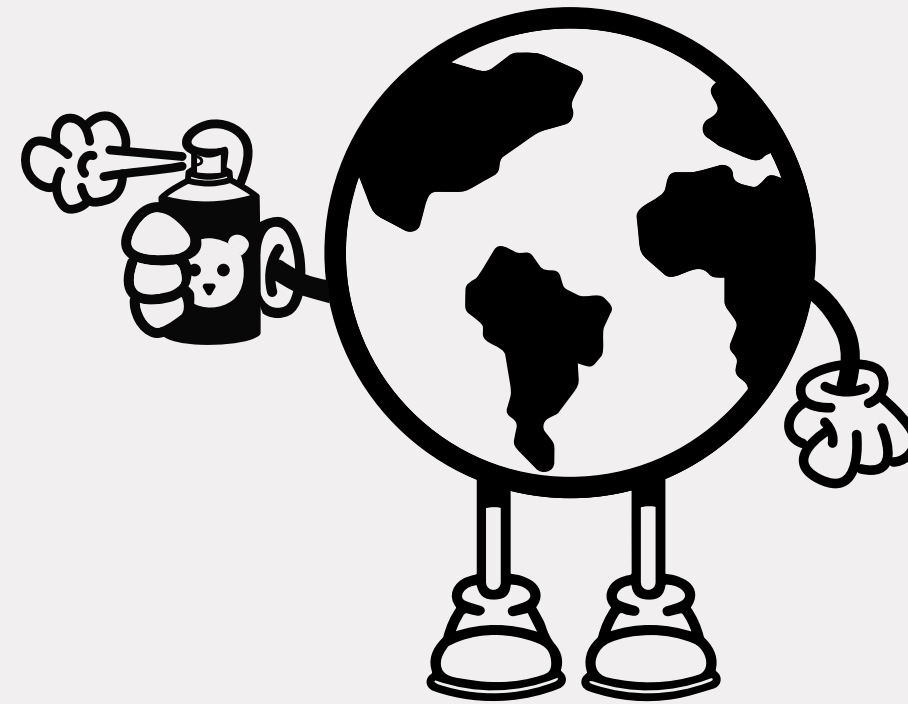
UNDERSTAND
THE BEAR
YOU'RE POKING

02



TAME YOUR
GRIZZLIES

03



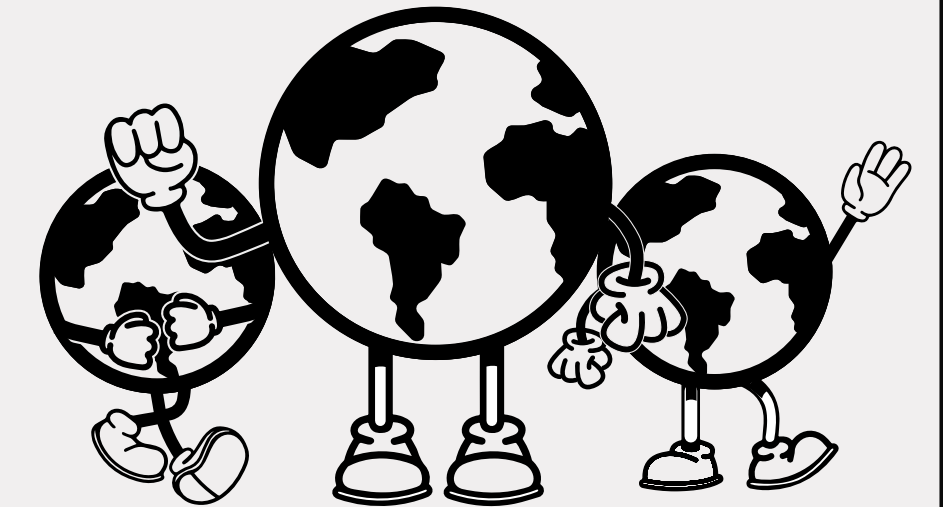
BEAR-PROOF
YOUR STRATEGY

04



PLAN FOR
THE BEAR
TO WAKE UP

05



HAVE YOUR
PACK'S BACK

Understand
the bear
you're poking



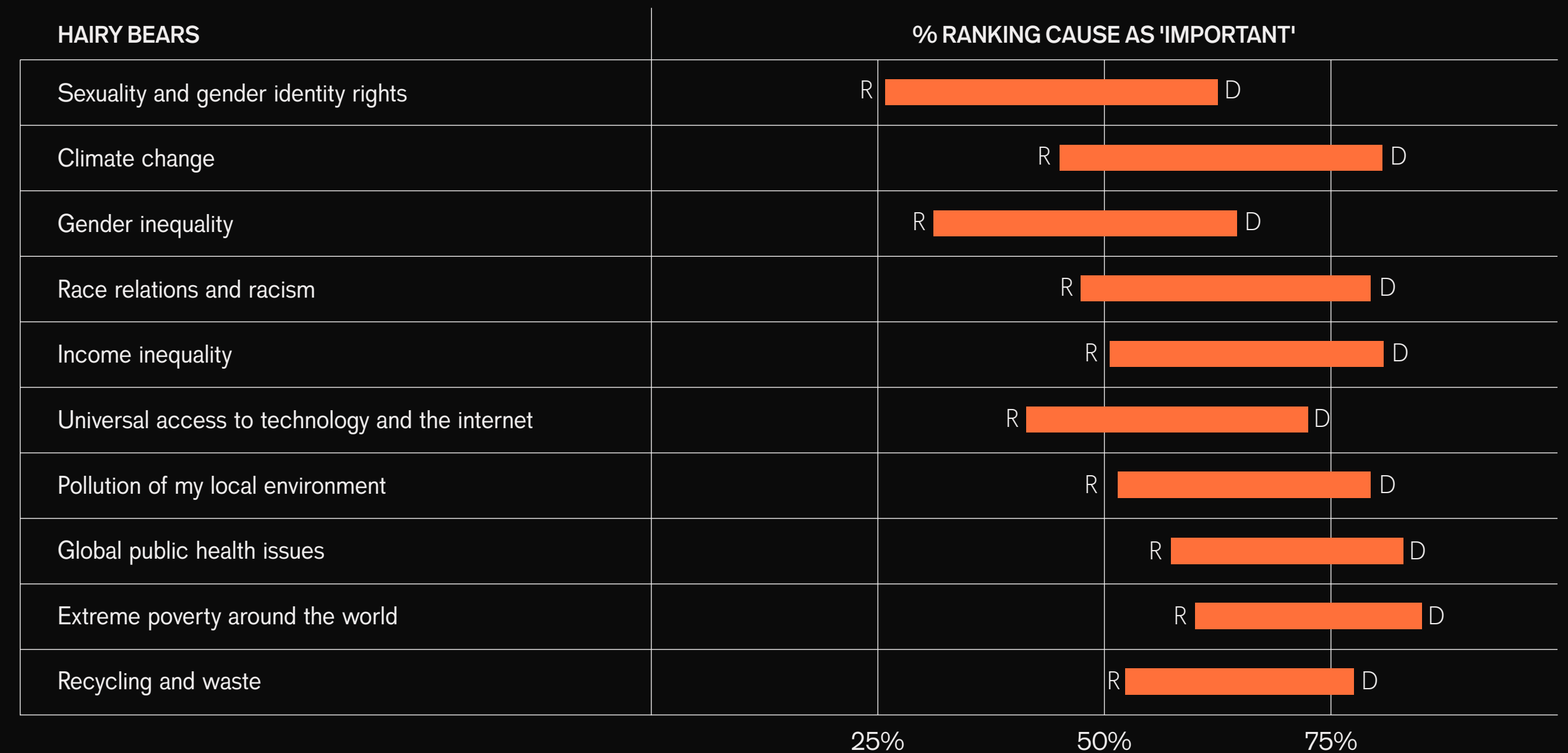
Polarizing issues are like bears - poke them, and provoke attack.

Two key decisions lie at the heart of all 'culture war' brand controversies: choosing which issues to support as a brand, and whether to communicate about those issues publicly.

The key to navigating these decisions correctly is data. Brands must define their audience and know how that audience feels about timely issues. A brand should be able to anticipate whether 'poking the bear' will stoke its audience to attack the brand or the thing the brand is fighting against. Brands that stand on the same side of issues as their audience, especially their employees, usually enjoy a smoother road. Those that back hairier bears must tread more cautiously.

How do we find out which bears are the 'hairiest'? Revolt's Causes that Count 2023 report featured an analysis of which issues Republicans and Democrats are farthest apart on, based on a representative survey of 1,000 Americans. Unsurprisingly, our research found sexuality and gender identity rights comes out as the #1 most polarizing issue. 'Climate change' is number two - but there are plenty of other aspects of sustainability which are less polarizing, such as recycling and waste. 'Race relations and racism' is number four.

Our advice is not to outright avoid hairy bears (although some brands may need to lie low while culture is so challenging). Rather, brands that 'poke the bear' on these issues need to tread carefully. Fortunately, our guide covers how to tame even the hairiest bears.



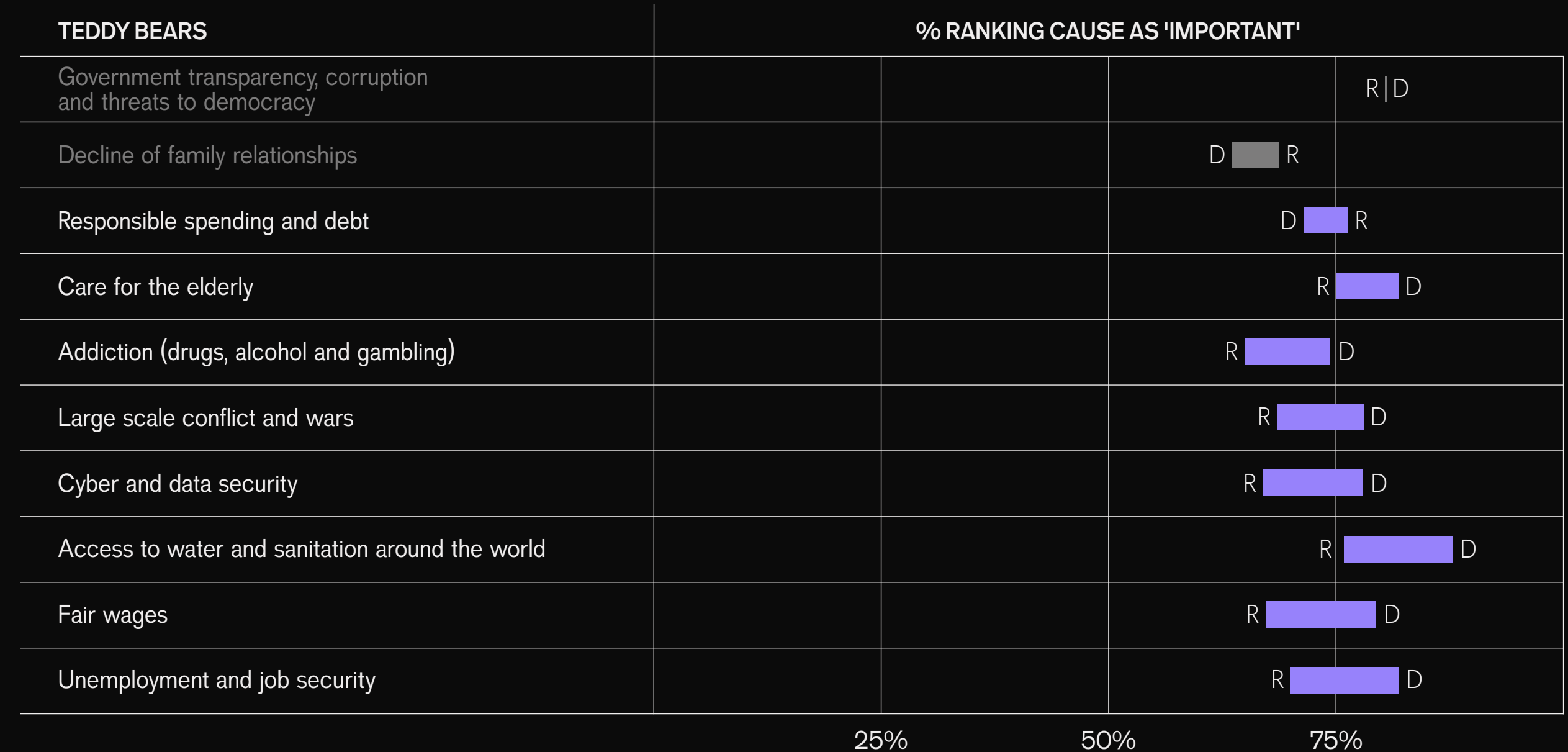
Source: Revolt Poking the Bear 2023

Brands with a general market audience can hunt issues which unify, rather than divide.

If a brand has a general market audience, with high household penetration and market share, it is helpful to look at issues that broad swathes of the population agree are important — we've called these 'Teddy Bears'. Interesting opportunities lie here.

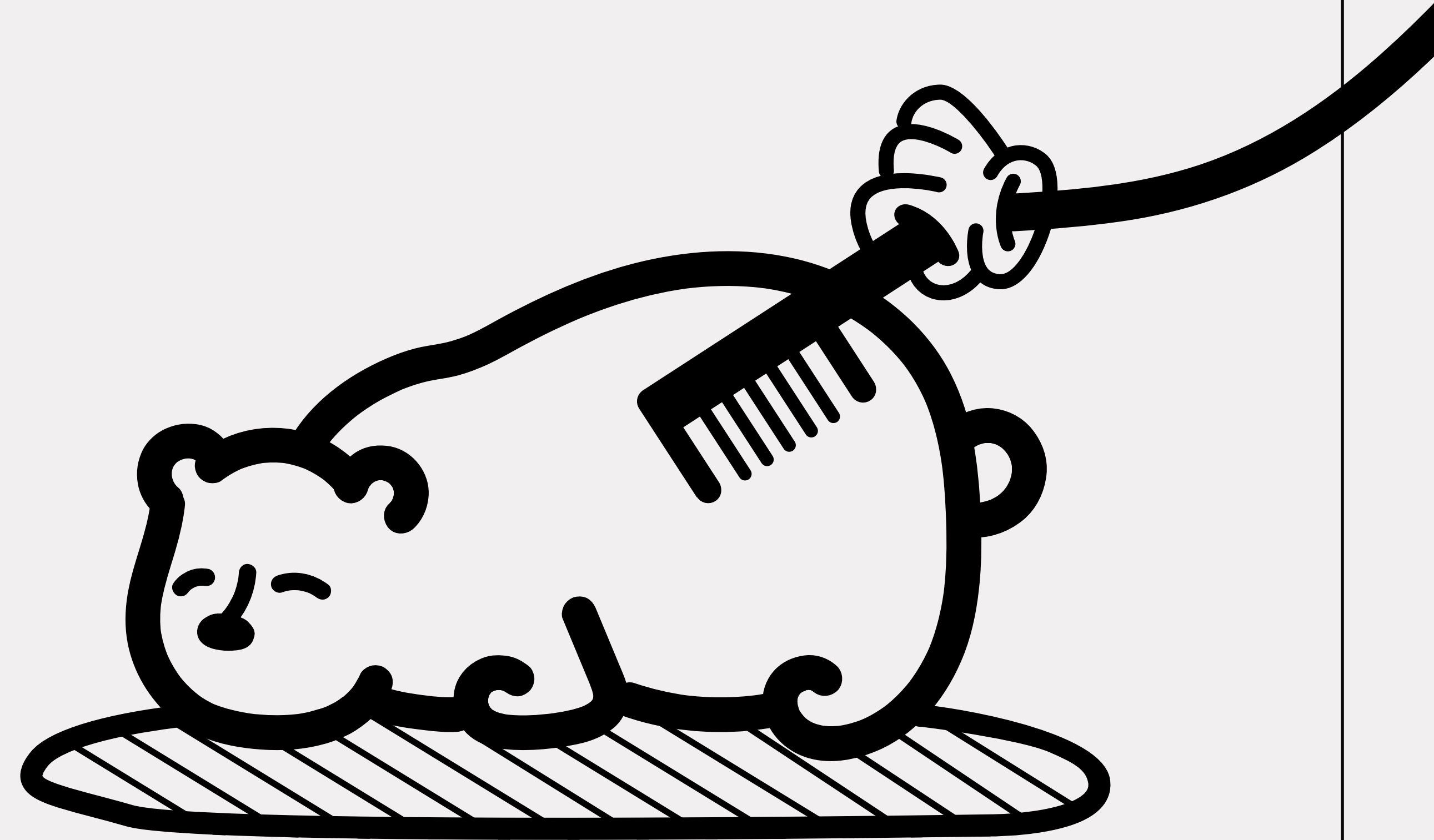
'Teddy bear' issues include 'Care for the elderly' and 'Addiction,' which are both intersectional issues that affect underserved communities, but have not been polarized by media framing. Access to water and sanitation is an environmental issue that many brands are already working on behind the scenes, but they could make this public and come out ahead. And finally, economic empowerment issues around wages, unemployment & jobs prove incredibly relevant and unifying to consumers across both sides of the aisle.

Brands that choose one of these issues can unite consumers from across the political divide, while also making a meaningful impact that differentiates their brand and drives growth.



Source: Revolt Poking the Bear 2023

Tame your grizzlies



Before you decide to poke the bear, you want to tame your grizzlies.

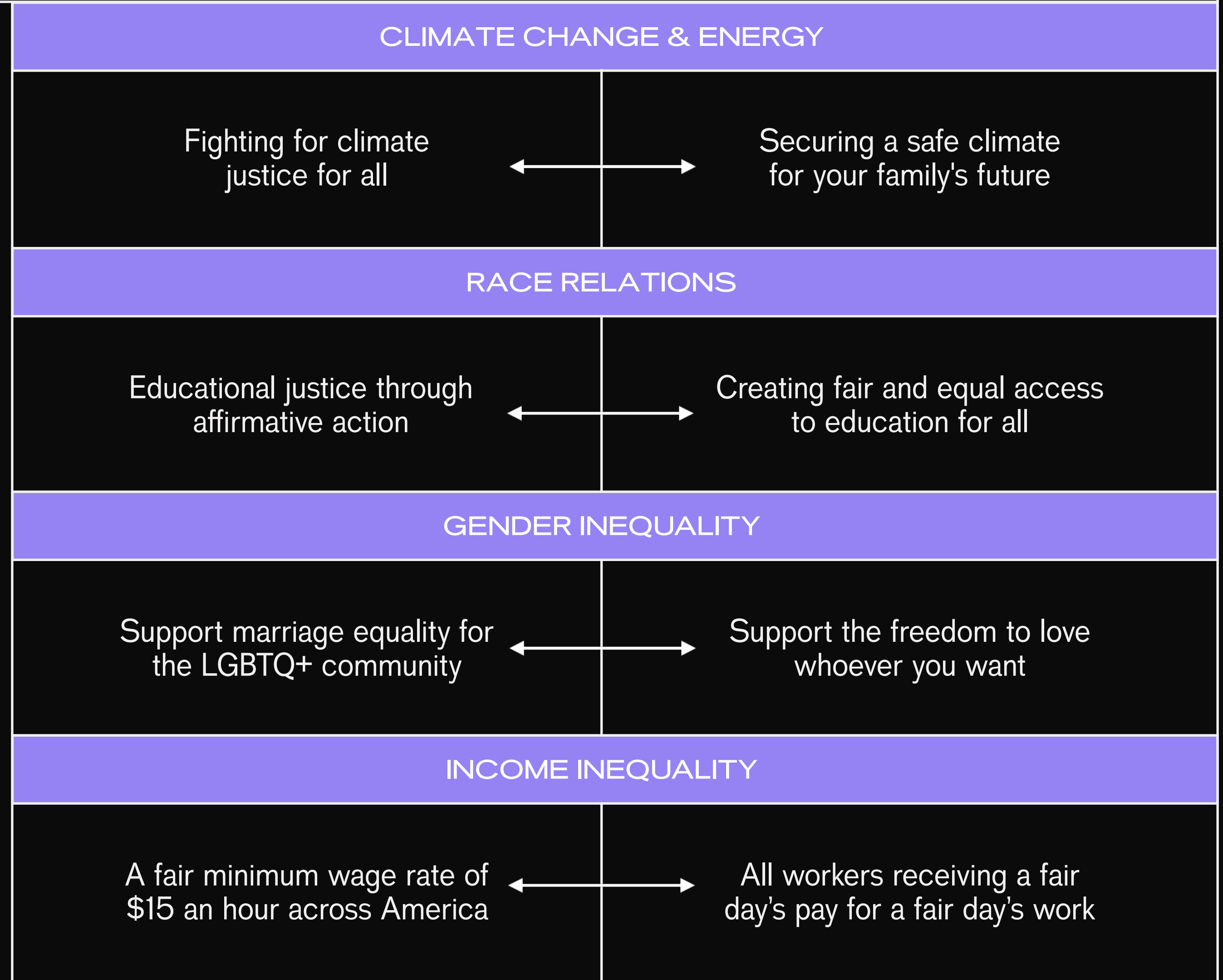
When poking the bear, the language and framing we use is key. Our research with 1,000 Americans backs this up, showing the framing of issues can have a dramatic effect in determining how important respondents find issues and how polarizing they can be.

We first generated a list of social and environmental issues. We then framed each issue in two ways - using more progressive language, and using tamer, more centrist language.

For example, we first framed climate change and energy around climate justice, then used a tamer framing focused on the impact on your family's future. For gender equality, we first framed the issue around LGBTQ+ marriage equality, before framing in it a tamer more centrist way by speaking about the freedom to love whoever you want.

We then asked consumers to rank this list of issues in order of importance to find out whether framing changed the importance of issues and also whether it impacted their polarization potential. We looked at this data for all Americans and then with responses separated according to political leaning (Republican vs Democrat).

The framing was informed by the work of cognitive linguist George Lakoff who emphasizes the importance of tapping into deep-seated human values like love, freedom and family to make issue appeal more universal and less partisan.



Source: Revolt Poking the Bear 2023

The use of more centrist language brings more of our audience on side.

As our data here shows, issues were ranked as more important by our 1000 respondents when framed in the tamer language than issues framed in more progressive language. The top 7 highest ranking issues were all framed in more centrist language.

For example, we see fair pay ranked in 1st place when framed in a tamer way, vs ranking in 11th place when using more progressive language.

We see the same with climate change — where we frame it as 'securing a safe climate for your family's future' it ranks 5th, but when framed more progressively around 'climate justice for all', it ranks 17th.

 Tamer Frames

1	All workers receiving a fair day's pay for a fair day's work
2	The individual right to clean air and clean water
3	Creating fair and equal access to education for all
4	Food grown by American farmers free from hormones or pesticides
5	Securing a safe climate for your family's future
6	Keeping your energy bill low through clean energy
7	Securing healthcare safety and freedom for women
8	Freedom from all forms of harmful pollution including carbon pollution
9	Working towards a greener, cleaner and more sustainable energy future
10	Sustainable food grown by climate smart American farmers
11	A fair minimum wage rate of \$15 an hour across America
12	Making the most of domestic American energy sources like wind and solar
13	Fighting for reproductive justice for women
14	Making use of radical new energy sources like wind and solar
15	Support the freedom to love whoever you want
16	Promoting a culture of belonging at work
17	Fighting for climate justice for all
18	Implementing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives in the workplace
19	Educational justice through affirmative action
20	Support marriage equality for the LGBTQ+ community

Source: Revolt Poking the Bear 2023

The more progressive the language, the more it risks polarizing.

Conversely, we see progressive language making up 10 of the bottom 13 ranked issues, even though the same issues of food quality and sustainability, climate change, education and fair pay exist in the top 5 issues when framed in a tamer way.

Our results suggest that progressive framing makes issues feel less important to Americans — tamer language elevates those same issues. Progressive language may even be getting in the way of progressive progress.

When trying to win the war of ideas, pragmatism may instead offer the path forward.

Our findings suggest that, in the age of polarization, we'd be wise to embrace purpose with pragmatism rather than purity - and with centrist framing, rather than progressive framing.

 Progressive Frames

1	All workers receiving a fair day's pay for a fair day's work
2	The individual right to clean air and clean water
3	Creating fair and equal access to education for all
4	Food grown by American farmers free from hormones or pesticides
5	Securing a safe climate for your family's future
6	Keeping your energy bill low through clean energy
7	Securing healthcare safety and freedom for women
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Source: Revolt Poking the Bear 2023

Hairy bear to teddy bear

We broke our data down by Republican-leaning and Democrat-leaning respondents to give each topic and framing a polarization percentage — created by the difference in the ranking each side gives a topic. This allows us to see significant shifts in the polarization of certain issues when reframed.

For example, climate change was initially one of our top two grizzlies, along with DE&I issues. However, through framing we've transformed that hairy bear into a teddy bear — turning a climate-related issue into our least polarizing statement.

So, whereas 'fighting climate justice for all' is one of our top 3 most polarizing statements with a polarization score of 24%, when talking about 'the individual right to clean air and water,' - an issue adjacent to climate change - the polarisation score falls to 8%.

Similarly, when education access is framed around 'educational justice through affirmative action', the polarization score is 23%. With a tamer frame of 'creating fair and equal access to education for all' we see a 9-point drop in polarization score to 13%, and this issue moves from bottom five (most polarizing) to top six (least polarizing).

The conclusion: tamer frames are less polarizing. In the past, agencies may have advised brands to be bold, to embrace a "confrontational crusader" purpose archetype (that might come with a more progressive vocabulary) but we need to reconsider. This provocative voice can inadvertently make things worse by inflaming tensions and demoting issues when what's needed now is to unify.

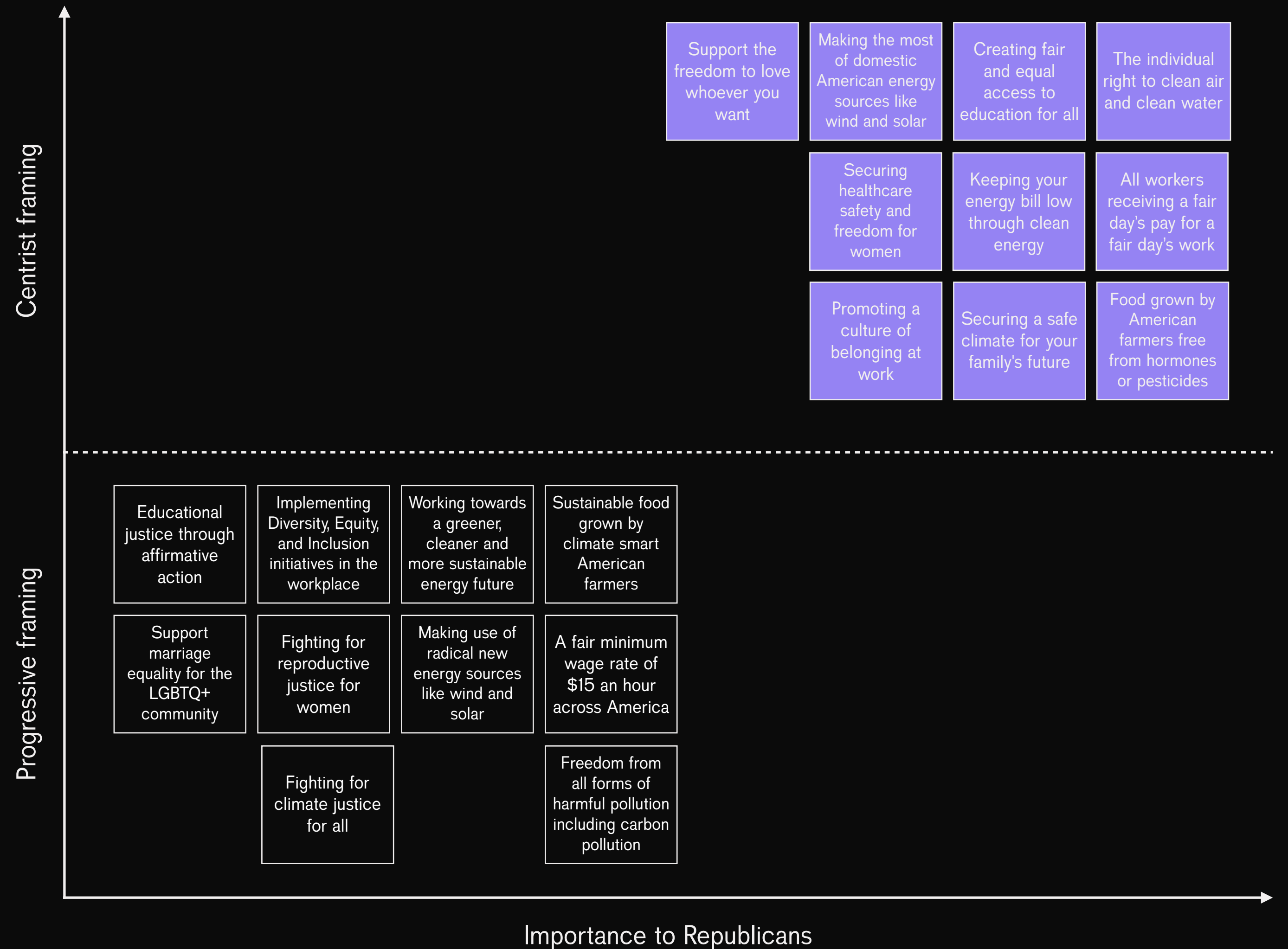
Crucially, our results show that unity is possible — with the right frame.

		Total	Rep	Dem	Polarization
1	The individual right to clean air and clean water	77%	78%	85%	8%
2	Food grown by American farmers free from hormones or pesticides	82%	71%	80%	9%
3	All workers receiving a fair day's pay for a fair day's work	64%	77%	87%	10%
4	Sustainable food grown by climate smart American farmers	72%	68%	78%	10%
5	Promoting a culture of belonging at work	82%	62%	72%	10%
6	Creating fair and equal access to education for all	69%	72%	86%	13%
7	Keeping your energy bill low through clean energy	74%	68%	82%	14%
8	Securing a safe climate for your family's future	81%	68%	83%	15%
9	A fair minimum wage rate of \$15 an hour across America	77%	64%	80%	16%
10	Securing healthcare safety and freedom for women	69%	66%	85%	18%
11	Making the most of domestic American energy sources like wind and solar	76%	61%	80%	18%
12	Implementing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives in the workplace	72%	57%	75%	18%
13	Freedom from all forms of harmful pollution including carbon pollution	67%	63%	82%	19%
14	Working towards a greener, cleaner and more sustainable energy future	70%	63%	82%	19%
15	Making use of radical new energy sources like wind and solar	74%	58%	78%	20%
16	Educational justice through affirmative action	77%	52%	75%	23%
17	Support the freedom to love whoever you want	67%	57%	80%	23%
18	Fighting for climate justice for all	56%	55%	79%	24%
19	Fighting for reproductive justice for women	71%	56%	85%	29%
20	Support marriage equality for the LGBTQ+ community	72%	38%	69%	32%

Tamer framing increases importance of issues to Republicans

By splitting the data according to political leanings, we see that Republican-leaning respondents find issues less important when framed in progressive terms. Progressive language fails to motivate Republicans and increases the risk of those topics creating polarization.

However, with simple language tweaks we can significantly increase the importance of these issues to Republicans. When framed in our tamer, more centrist language, Republican-leaning respondents rank every single issue as significantly more important. Remember, these are the same topics, just described using different words.



Source: Revolt Poking the Bear 2023

And the story isn't inverted for Democrats: The Goldilocks zone.

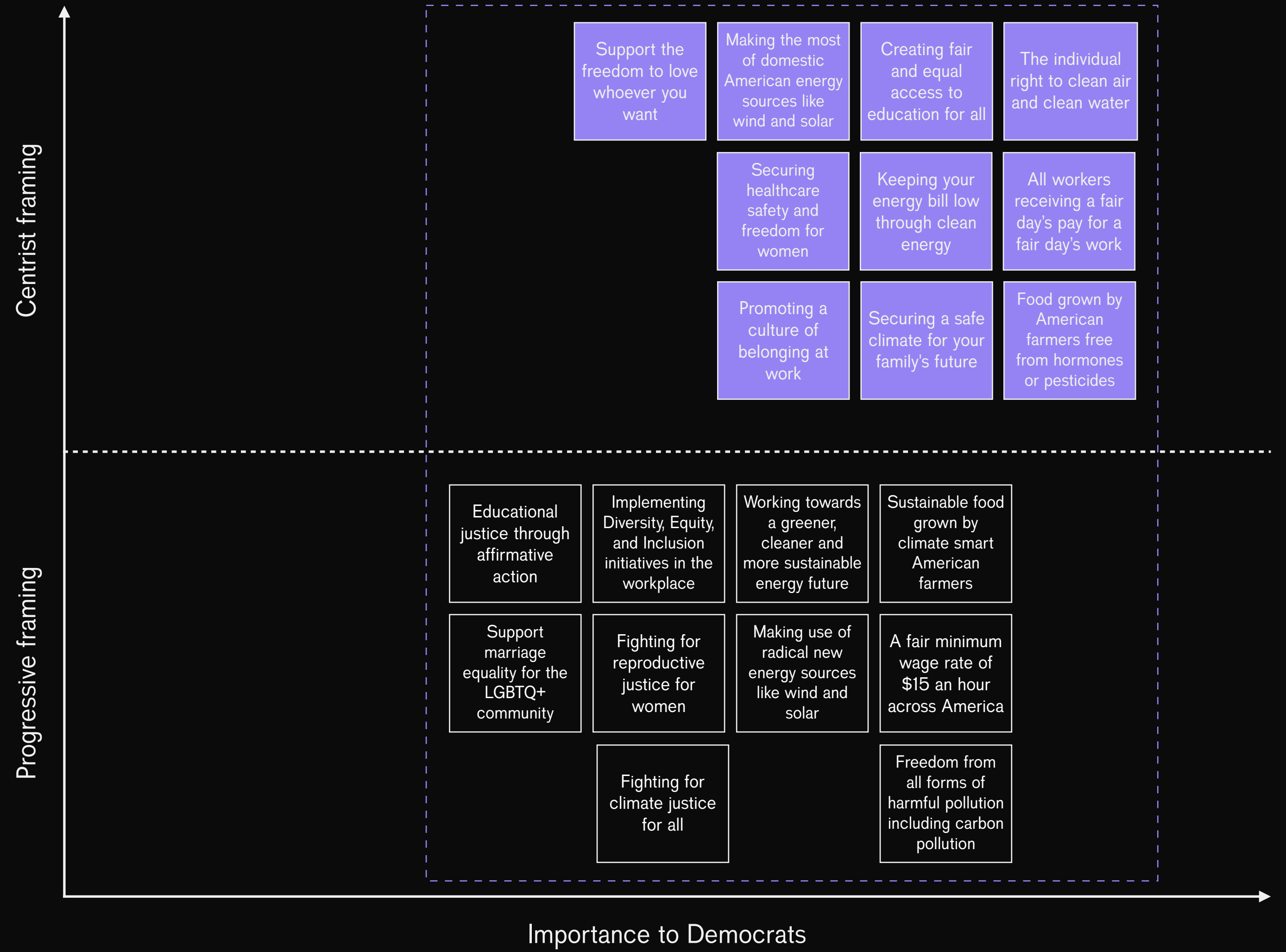
An insight that truly surprised us was that the tamer frames outperform progressive frames with Democrat-leaning respondents too. While they respond more favorably to progressive frames than Republican-leaning respondents, Democrat-leaning respondents still see issues when framed in tamer terms as slightly more important than the issues when framed in progressive terms.

In other words, progressive frames aren't working as well for anyone — and we lose nothing in terms of Democrat support when we tone the language down; indeed we even make gains.

This exciting finding suggests the existence of a "Goldilocks Zone" — a space where issues can be framed in a way that is 'just right', driving importance to both Democrats and Republicans, while reducing polarization between them.

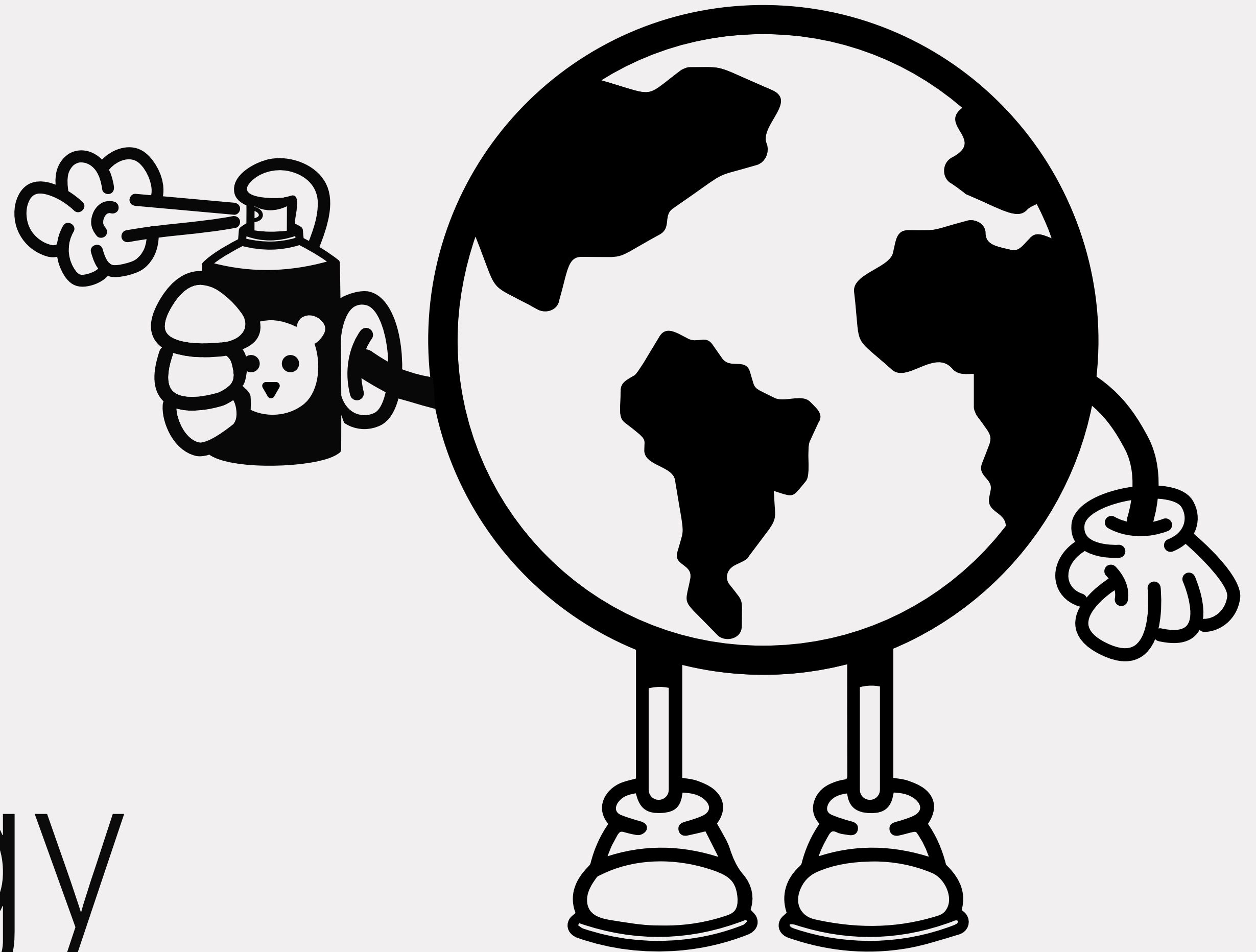
This offers clues on how brands can advocate effectively on important issues in this age of polarization while reducing the risk of backlash. We shouldn't underestimate the power of words. Indeed much of this backlash is over a few terms — 'ESG' and 'woke', first and foremost.

In the battle for ideas, words really matter. Counter-intuitive though it may feel to some, taming your grizzlies by embracing more centrist language may in fact provide air cover for more radical action.



Source: Revolt Poking the Bear 2023

Bear-proof your strategy



When going into bear territory, ensure that your brand has permission to play

When going into bear country, it's crucial to understand where you have permission to participate and to ensure you've earned your stripes, especially if you're heading into hairy bear territory.

We've all seen the negative examples of brands that have poked the bear and ultimately paid the price — but we haven't seen as much media analysis of brands that got it right. We want to show a positive example to reassure brands that purpose doesn't have to be polarizing.

In the summer of 2023, we saw Barbie embrace purpose and reap the benefits of doing so. The Barbie movie delves into the themes of patriarchy and its impact on women's empowerment. The brand had earned the right to play in the gender rights space over the past several years during which it redefined its purpose as “to inspire the limitless potential of girls everywhere” and bravely redesigned its core product to be more inclusive and to challenge the exact traditional gender roles and stereotypes it originally helped to create.

The Barbie movie received an overwhelmingly positive cultural response, with attempts at negative feedback failing to gain traction. The movie has become the highest grossing of 2023 to date and highest grossing for Warner Bros of all time.

The lesson? Earn your stripes and ensure alignment before heading into bear country.

Barbie

ACTIVITY



LINK



CULTURE

The Right-Wing Backlash Against 'Barbie' Is Hilariously Flopping

REACTION



Research and don't shy away from your points of weakness — they leave you vulnerable to attack.

In the purpose-washing era, there are many skeptical sleuths who research and expose hypocritical companies and brands. The truth about which causes companies really support is out there — and it isn't hard to find. Brands engaging with issues must absolutely be aware of and prepared to respond to investigative challenges to their authenticity on issues.

Political donations in countries where they are permitted (US) can be a source of inauthenticity as brands publicly voice support for an issue whilst contributing to politicians who oppose it behind closed doors. Both Anheuser-Busch and AT&T were publicly outed for supporting republican candidates opposing trans rights, whilst affiliated with LGBTQIA+ advocacy organizations.

HR policies pose a risk if they don't align to public demonstrations of inclusivity. For example, Nike's commitment to gender equality was questioned when a female athlete announced she'd seen her sponsorship revoked when she became pregnant.

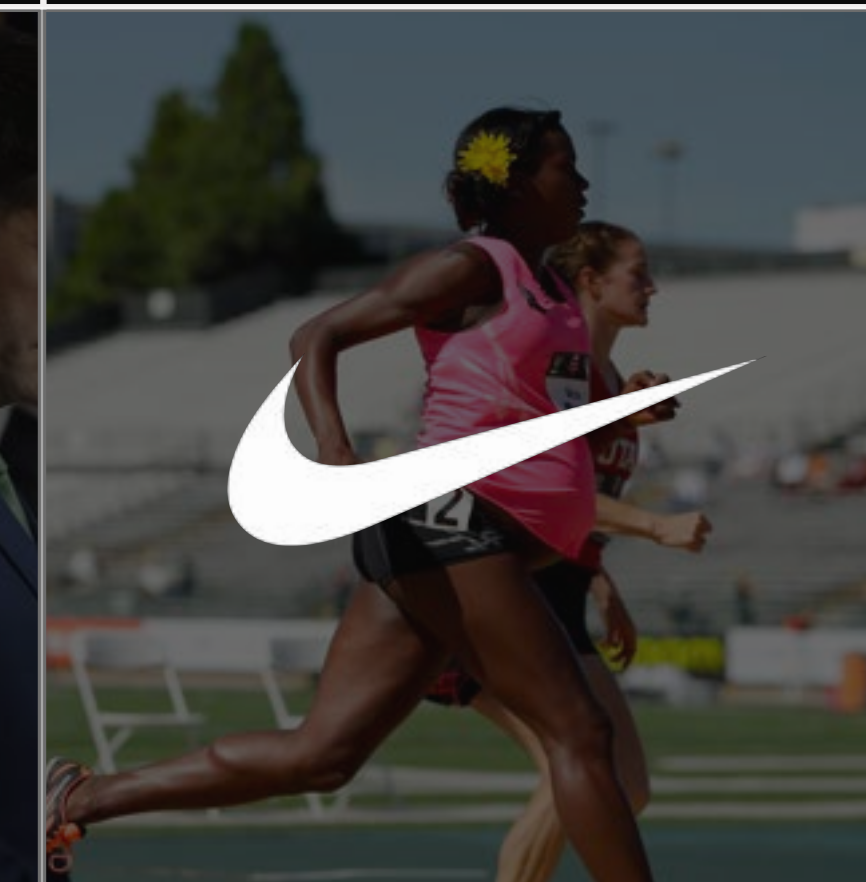
Company culture and norms can contradict public perceptions of purpose if employees feel intimidated and bullied behind closed doors (Brewdog), or if the company acts in a way that is inconsistent with its stated values (Google couldn't exactly claim to 'not be evil' when laying off 6% of its workforce).

Now especially, don't make the backlash bears' jobs easier by leaving yourself vulnerable to attack.

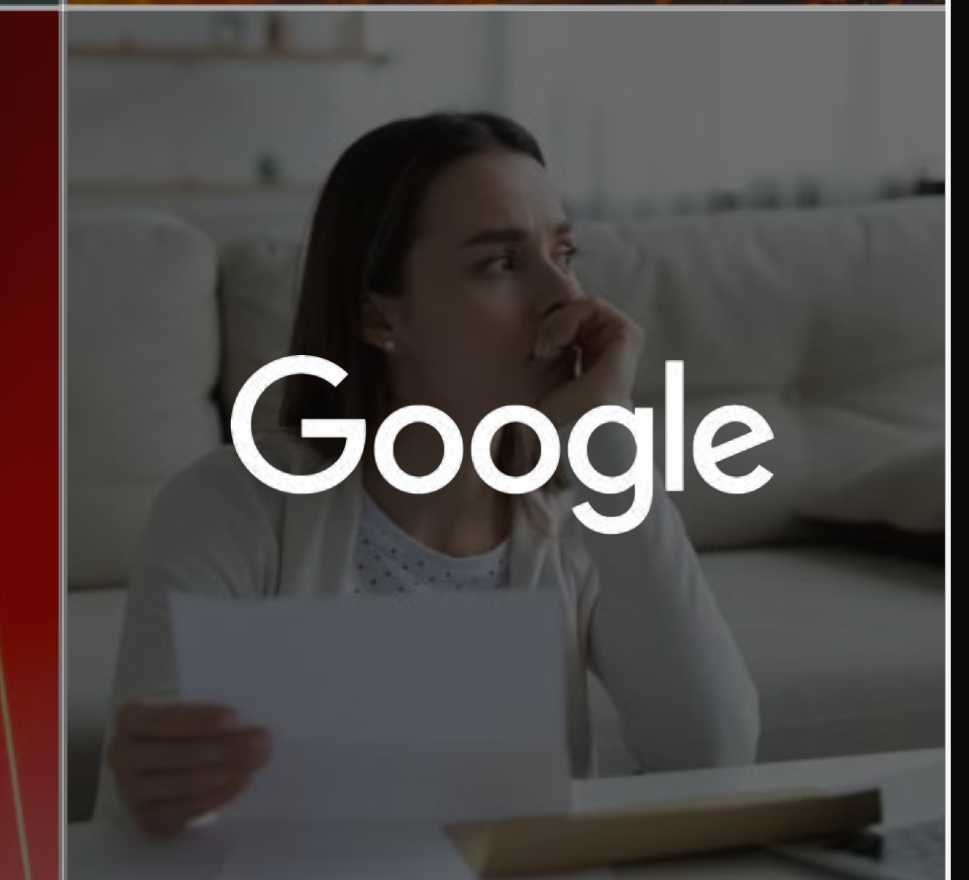
POLITICAL DONATIONS



HR POLICIES



COMPANY CULTURE



Source: trackyourcompany.org and opensecrets.org

If you're
poking the
bear, plan for
it to wake up



Brands that take calculated risks and plan for backlash are more likely to survive attacks unscathed.

When confronted with an angry bear, the worst thing you can do is rile it up by running away or changing course. Instead, brands need to stand their ground and practice de-escalation techniques to diffuse the tension.

When M&Ms received backlash against its new gender neutral character and character costume changes, the brand used humor to diffuse the tension. M&Ms trolled the haters by faking the decision to cancel its own characters, only to bring them back during the biggest media moment of the year, the Superbowl.

Carhartt provoked the ire of its employees by mandating vaccines, but stood by its decision and on the right side of history.

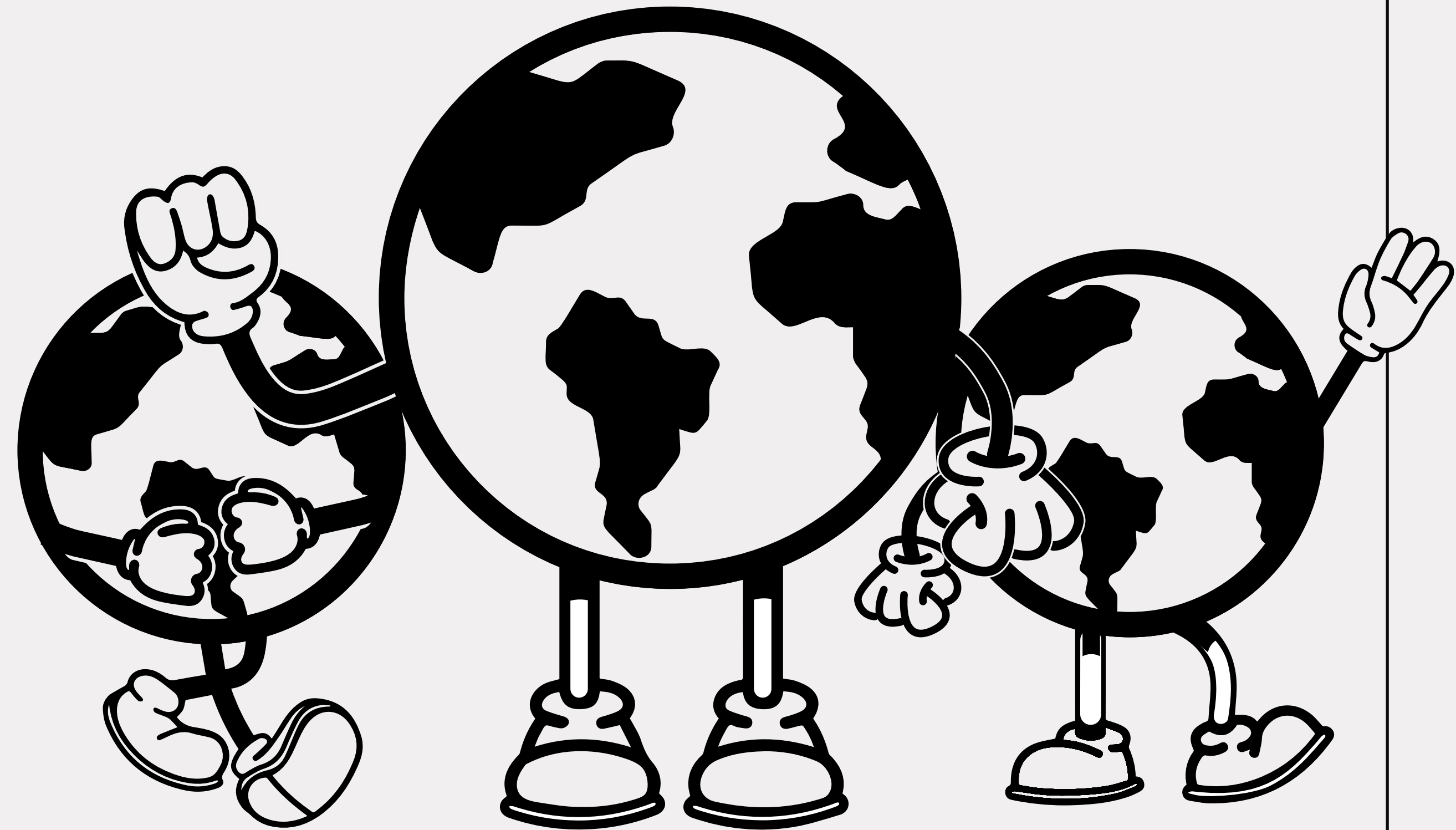
The North Face created a Pride campaign with drag queen Pattie Gonia, leading to calls for a boycott of the brand. The brand didn't back down though, expressing its brand belief that the outdoors should be an equitable and safe space for all.

Liquid Death's 'evil mission' is to make people laugh and get them to drink more water, all whilst tackling plastic pollution. Using this fun approach, they tackle tough issues and protect themselves against backlash through their humorous approach to action.

Sometimes it's better to fight fire with funny than to fight fire with fire. It also can't hurt to bring your crisis response team in proactively at the planning stage - leading brands are scenario-planning well ahead of launch so they're ready for whatever bear-fueled backlash may lie ahead.



Have your
pack's back



Safety in numbers is a crucial advantage when hiking in bear territory

As we said, we're in bear country now so we've got to stick together, make noise and stand strong. That is what our new playbook is designed to enable.

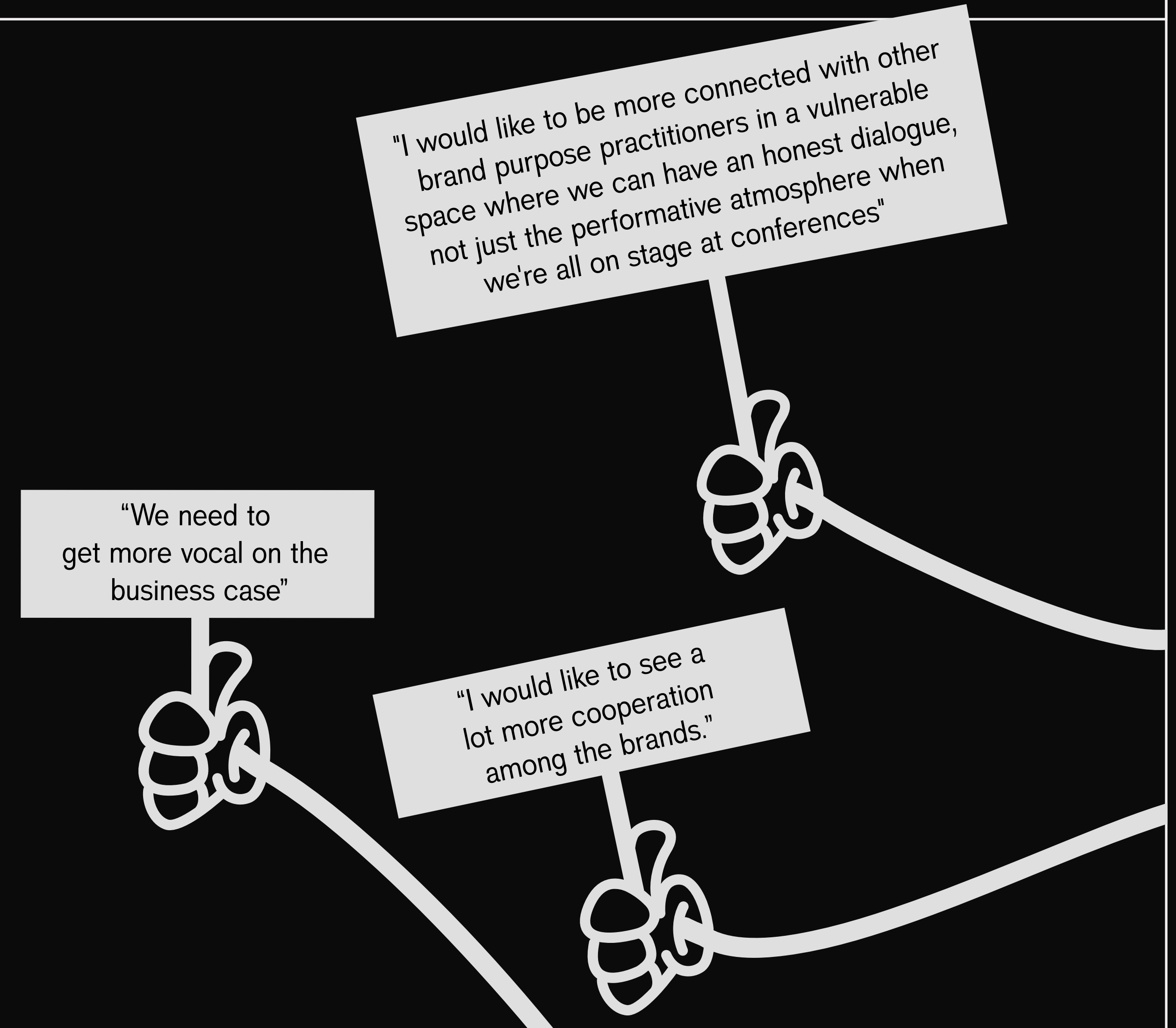
But to do so we also need to support each other. As marketers who believe that purpose pays back, it's key that we don't get distracted and that we create the conditions for each other to be successful.

We heard this point echoed through our conversations with purpose, ESG and sustainability practitioners. They highlighted the need to work together as an industry to share best practice, have an open and honest dialogue about the challenges that we're facing and cooperate with each other to ensure that all of our brands can continue to be a force for good in the world. Ongoing advocacy around the business case for purpose is also key.

Part of that is continuing to hike into bear territory whilst bear-proofing your strategy, sharing the results so that all can see that purpose still has a place - ensuring that other brands can follow in our footsteps.□

Part of it is to have a community around you to fall back on and support in moments of need.

We hope that this playbook is a first step in making that a reality. We'd welcome a continued relationship with purpose practitioners to identify the right forum and support structure to enable this critical work to continue.



IN SUMMARY

Now is a moment to reflect on the current climate and consider the steps we can take to ensure we continue to do purpose properly in a polarizing world. All brands should consider whether they are 'poking the bear' and ensure they are prepared if the bear wakes up.

Here are a few questions to guide your reflection:

WAS THIS A NECESSARY INDUSTRY-WIDE SHAKE DOWN? CAN WE USE THIS MOMENT TO STRENGTHEN THE DISCIPLINE AND FIND MORE AUTHENTICITY?


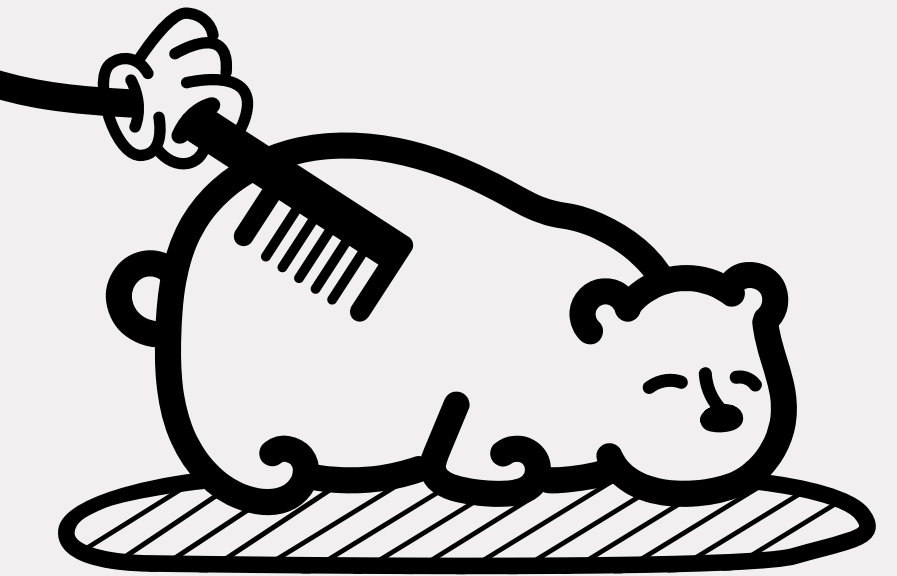
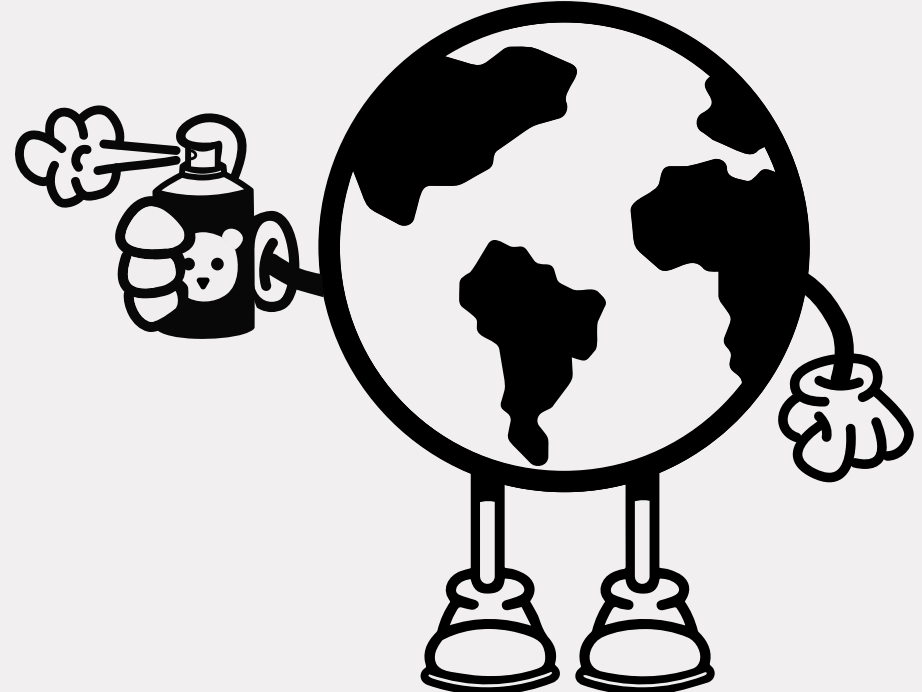

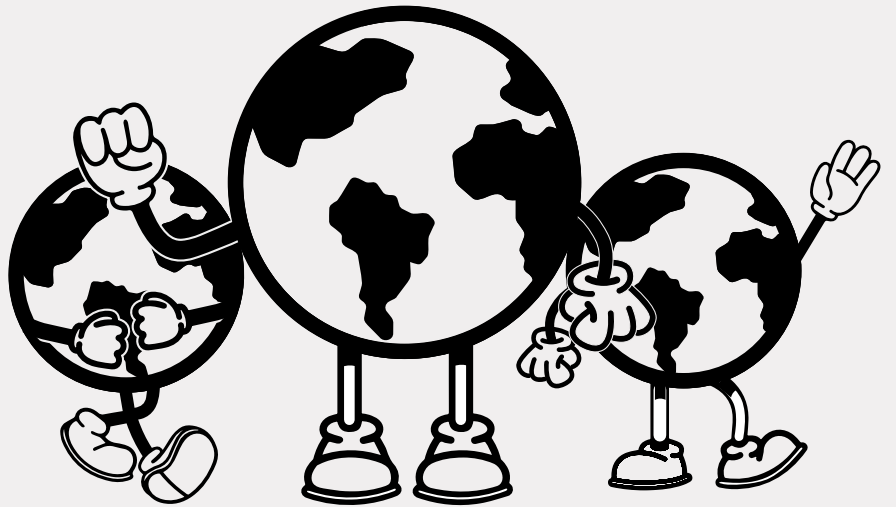
IS YOUR BRAND POKING THE BEAR? WOULD YOU LIKE TO STOP... OR START?

WHICH OF THE 5 PRINCIPLES CAN YOU BRING TO YOUR ORGANIZATION?

Reach out to us at hello@revoltlondon.com to start the conversation — we promise, we won't bite.



5 PRINCIPLES FOR 'POKING THE BEAR

01	02	03	04	05
				
<p>UNDERSTAND THE BEAR YOU'RE POKING</p>	<p>TAME YOUR GRIZZLIES</p>	<p>BEAR-PROOF YOUR STRATEGY</p>	<p>PLAN FOR THE BEAR TO WAKE UP</p>	<p>HAVE YOUR PACK'S BACK</p>
<p>Start by knowing your audience's stance on issues, and have eyes wide open if poking hairy bears.</p>	<p>Even the hairiest grizzlies can be tamed with the right framing. Find the Goldilocks Zone to drive relevance up and polarization down.</p>	<p>Ensure the bear you're poking is connected to your brand and earn the right to play.</p>	<p>Brands with a crisis management plan in place are much more likely to survive attack.</p>	<p>Safety in numbers is crucial when in bear country. Support each other as people who believe purpose pays.</p>

The intelligence brands need on their
purpose transformation journey.

Revolt Intelligence

Find out more
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REPORT