

# Private sector social impact and sustainability leadership survey **2024 findings**

October 2024

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## About this report

NationSwell is pleased to share the 3rd annual edition of the *Private sector social impact and sustainability leadership survey*.

The 2024 survey coincided with a period of significant turmoil in the U.S. political arena, and occurred against a backdrop of ongoing backlash to corporate social impact, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), and environmental initiatives.

As in years past, this survey sought to better understand the sentiments, experiences, and priorities of senior leaders overseeing environment, social, and governance (ESG), corporate social impact, sustainability, DEIB, and related functions. Through those leaders, the survey also sought to better understand organizational priorities and behaviors.

Readers will see that the 2024 survey explored three themes in particular depth: perceptions of – and attitudes toward – the overall environment for corporate impact and sustainability initiatives, the amount of influence wielded by social impact and sustainability leaders within their own organizations, and the role of political and cultural forces on their work.

The primary goal of this report is to help meet leaders' need for data and visibility into their field's ongoing evolution, while helping outside observers in media, government, and elsewhere better understand the underlying dynamics at work in corporate impact and sustainability.

# About NationSwell

Founded in 2013, NationSwell is an award-winning, executive membership community and advisory that works with sustainability, ESG, and philanthropy leaders from the most influential, purpose-driven organizations to help them accelerate their impact. NationSwell supports its prestigious membership community with strategic connections, research, and curated programming so that its members can meet the moment and develop more effective solutions for the world's most pressing issues.

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# Summary of findings

## THEME 1:

Leaders continue to face down a difficult environment for their work, but growing optimism is there if you squint

- 1** The 2024 environment was challenging overall for impact and sustainability leaders, though somewhat less so compared with 2022 and 2023
- 2** Leaders remained satisfied with their organizations' social and environmental impact
- 3** A sizable majority of leaders anticipate a difficult year ahead, with slight growth in those who have an favorable outlook compared with last year
- 4** Confidence among leaders about their ability to execute is up considerably over last year

## THEME 2:

Despite ongoing backlash to ESG, impact and sustainability leaders are strengthening their positions within their organizations

- 5** Outside of direct reporting lines, CEOs are most supportive of impact and sustainability leaders' work, with business unit / functional leaders and boards showing the least relative support
- 6** Impact and sustainability leaders are more likely to be gaining than losing influence inside their organizations
- 7** About 8 of 10 leaders saw sustained or increased resourcing of their work in 2024 relative to 2023; expectations for 2025 funding are cautiously optimistic
- 8** Despite recent high profile instances of employee conflict over companies' responses to global issues, a large majority of leaders report that employee sentiment toward corporate social and environmental impact is stable or improving
- 9** All the same, increased c-suite engagement and more resourcing represent the areas of greatest need for leaders' confidence

## THEME 3:

U.S. politics loom large over corporate impact and sustainability programs, with most leaders expecting their organizations to remain on the sidelines

- 10** Politics (both the official and cultural manifestations) and the economy are dominant concerns for impact and sustainability leaders in 2024 and 2025
- 11** The ongoing political backlash against ESG and DEIB is creating minor challenges for most leaders, though the most commonly reported impacts are about language rather than substance
- 12** Amid anxiety over the language of ESG, "Impact" is now companies' most preferred term when describing social and environmental efforts
- 13** About half of companies are changing how they respond to pivotal moments; among those, most are less likely to take action internally or externally
- 14** Nearly half of organizations are not actively promoting civic engagement in the lead up to the 2024 election, only 1 in 8 are doing so "very actively"
- 15** Just half of companies are at least somewhat prepared for election-related impacts, but 1 in 3 are unprepared
- 16** More than 7 of 10 leaders believe their companies are unlikely to take public action if democracy falters this fall

THEME

1

## **Leaders continue to face down a difficult environment for their work, but growing optimism is there if you squint**

Efforts to undermine and delegitimize corporate ESG and DEIB continued apace in 2024, while conflicts abroad and at home brought renewed attention to questions around the role of private enterprise in political and cultural issues.

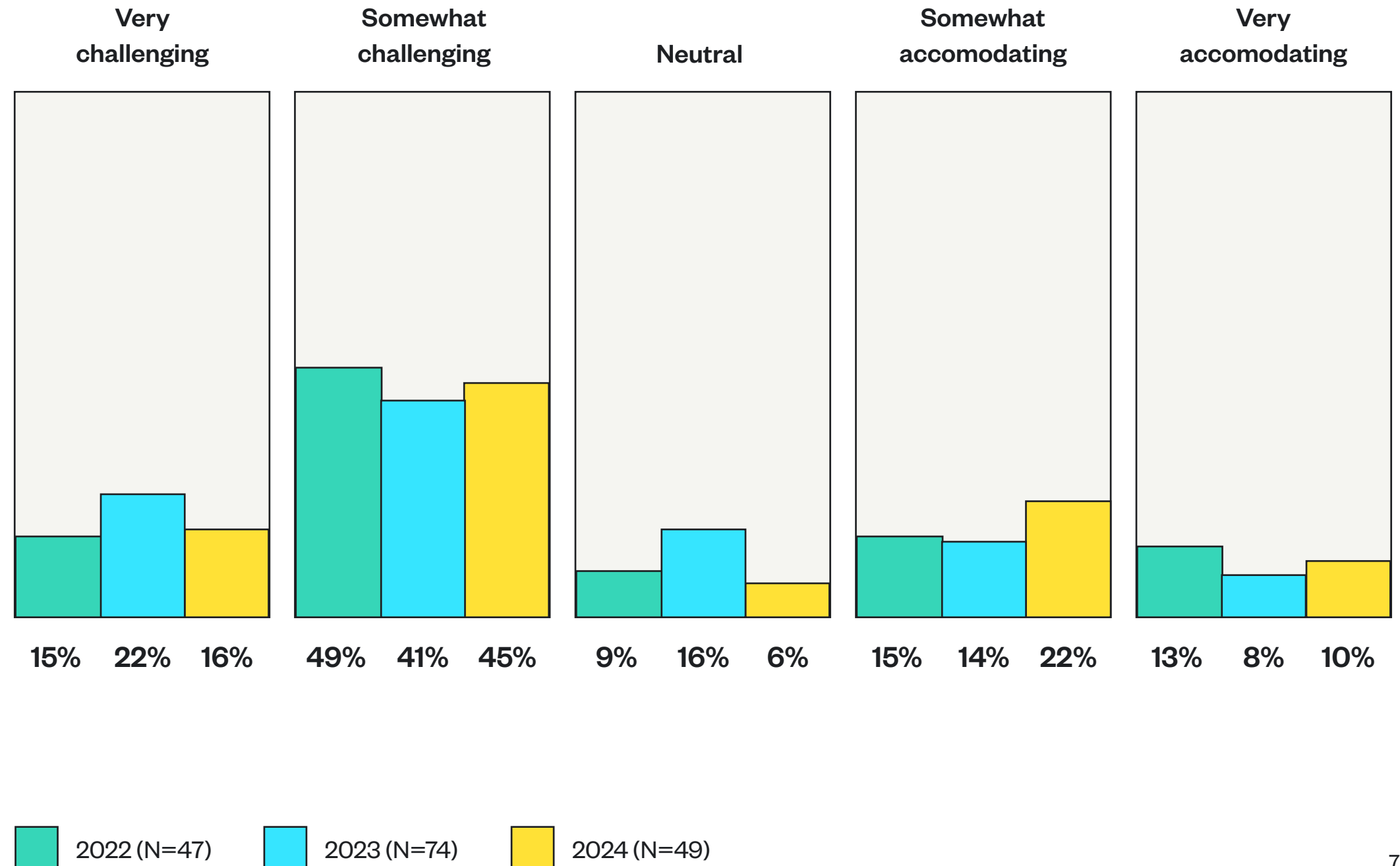
It was, by any formal or informal measure, a fraught environment for leaders overseeing corporate social impact and sustainability work.

Nevertheless, leaders sounded a more hopeful note in this year's edition of the survey, expressing slightly more optimism toward the environment going forward and significantly improved confidence in their own abilities.

# Finding 1:

The 2024 environment was challenging overall for impact and sustainability leaders, though somewhat less so compared with 2022 and 2023

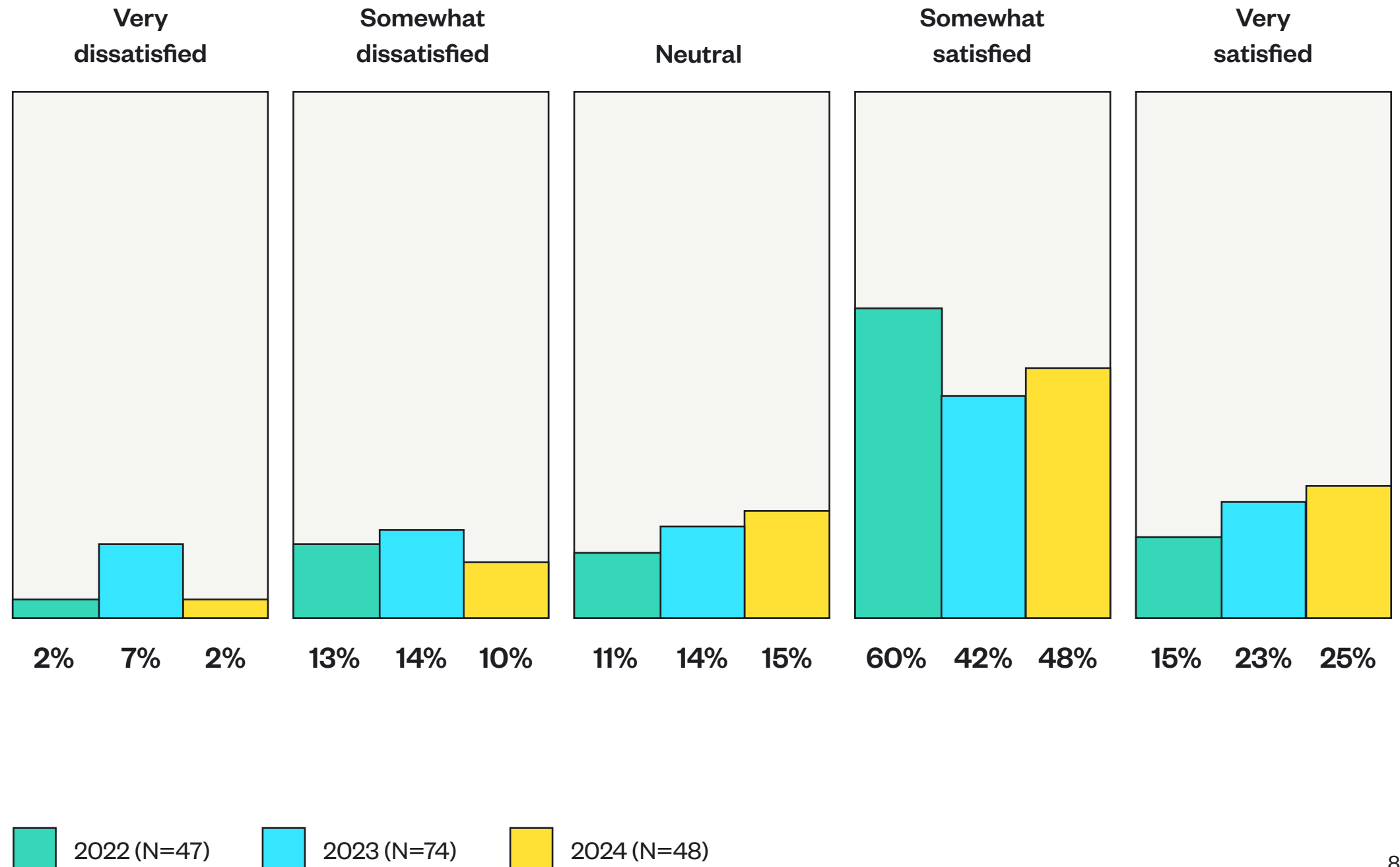
How would you characterize the environment (within and outside of your organization) for advancing your job-related priorities over the past 12 months?



## Finding 2:

### Leaders remained satisfied with their organizations' social and environmental impact

In general, how satisfied were you with the social impact / sustainability performance of your organization over the past 12 months?

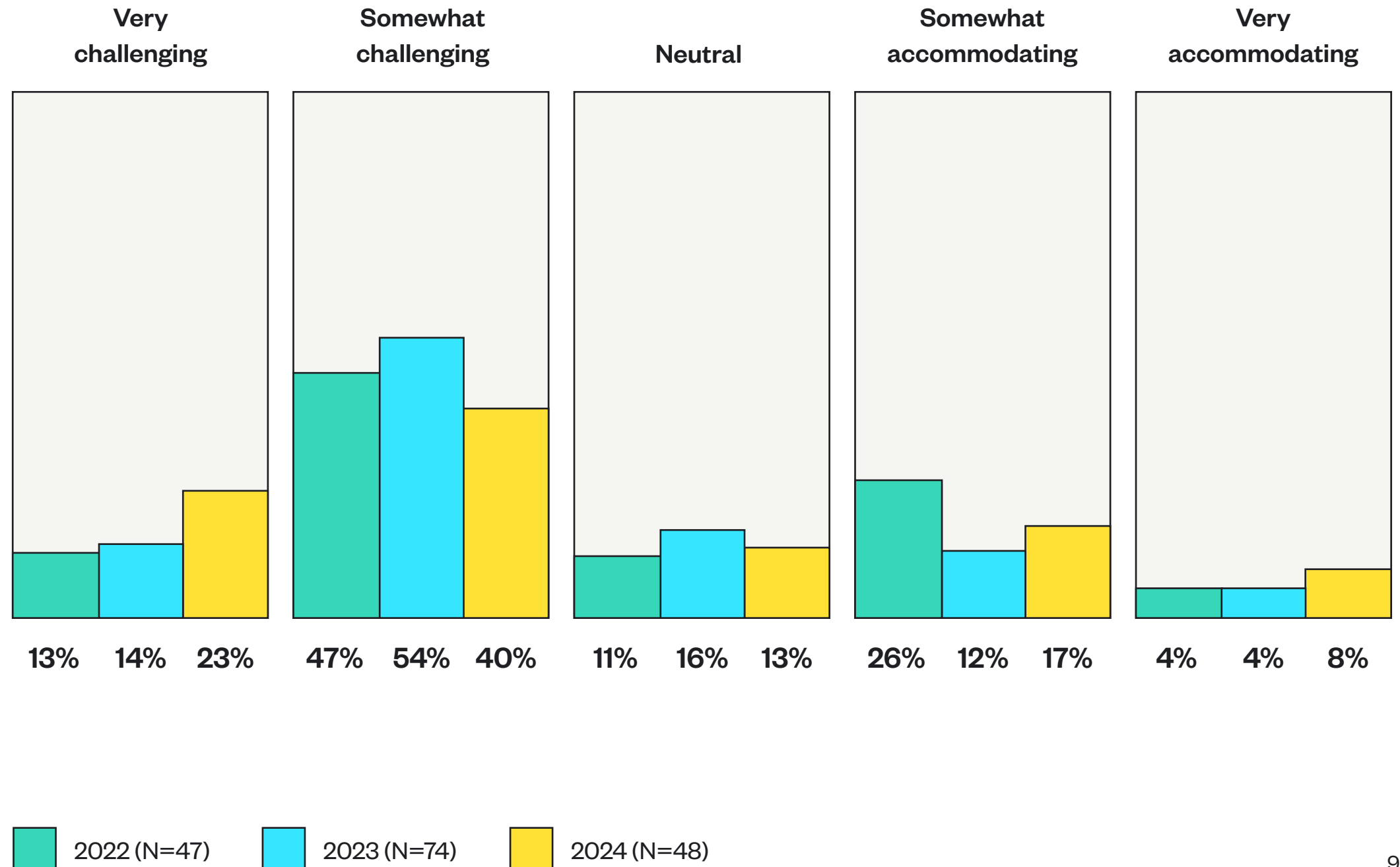




### Finding 3:

A sizable majority of leaders anticipate a difficult year ahead, with slight growth in those who have a favorable outlook compared with last year

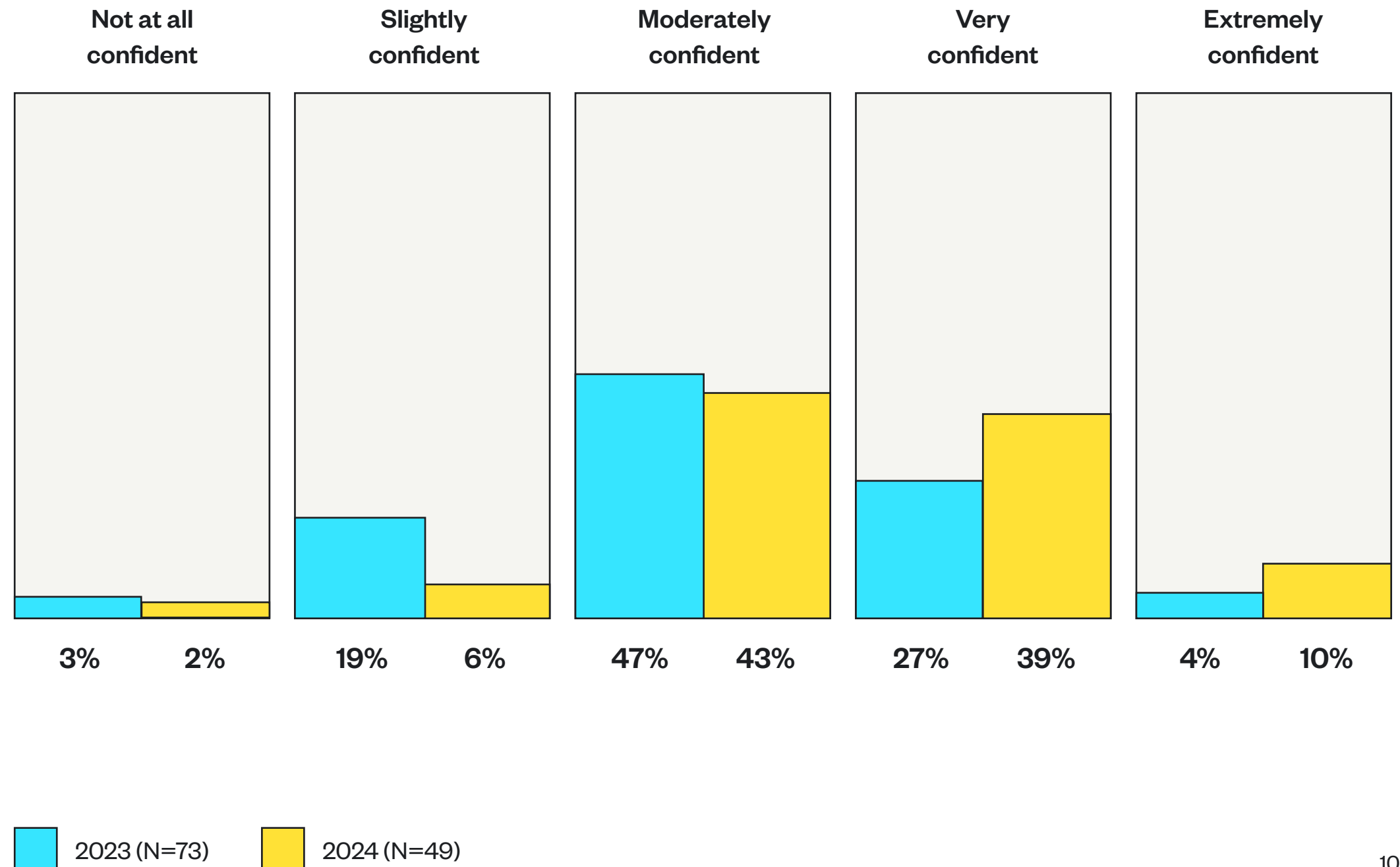
What are your expectations of the environment (within and outside your organization) for advancing your job-related priorities in the next 12 months?



## Finding 4:

### Confidence among leaders about their ability to execute is up considerably over last year

How confident are you in your ability to advance your job-related priorities in the next 12 months?



THEME

2

## **Despite ongoing backlash to ESG, impact and sustainability leaders are strengthening their positions within their organizations**

The year was no stranger to economic anxiety: layoffs, market volatility, and the high cost of capital stayed in the headlines and on the minds of business executives.

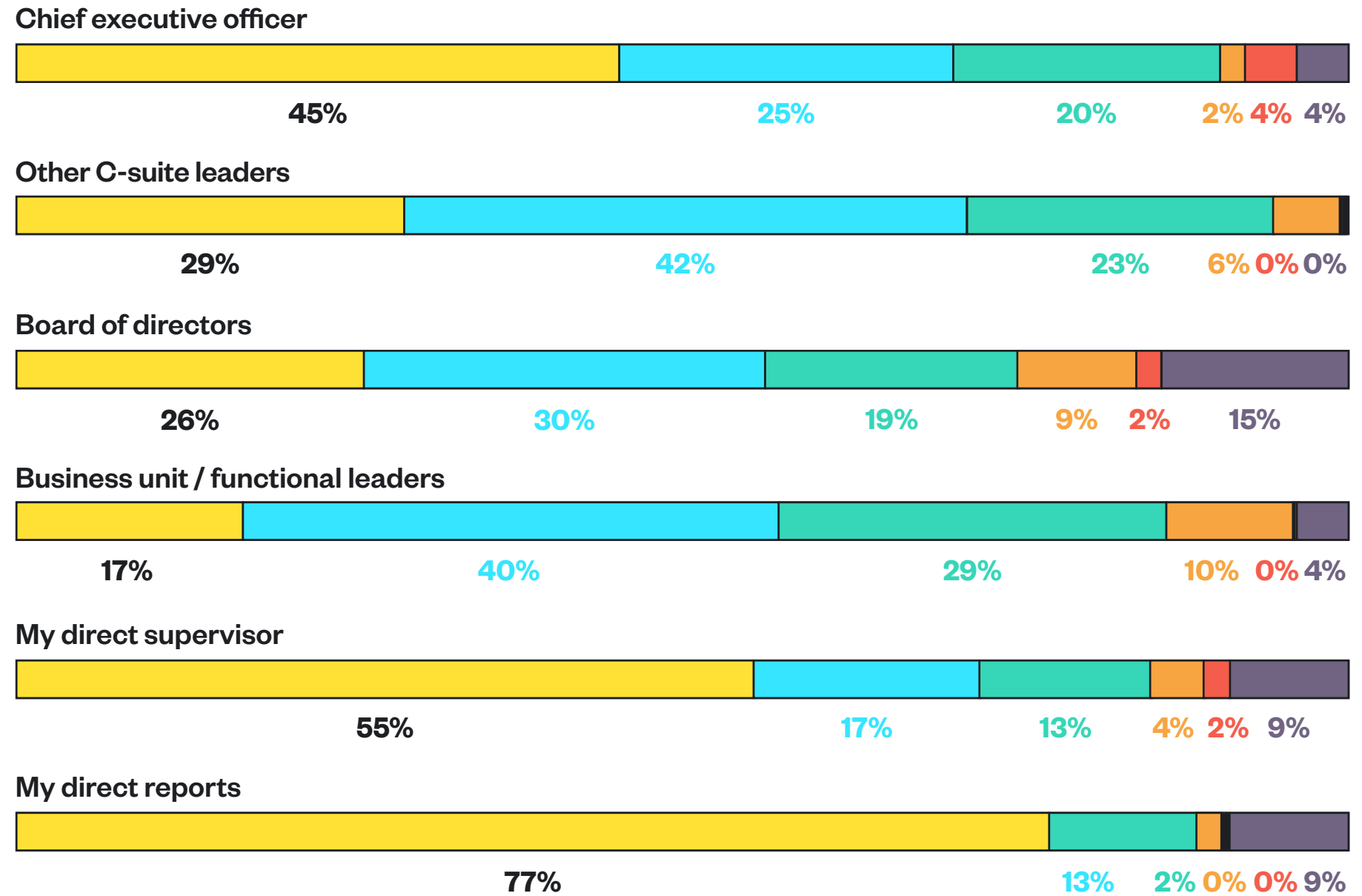
Yet for impact and sustainability leaders, that anxiety hasn't diminished their role within the organization, at least not in aggregate. To the contrary, survey respondents report growing influence inside of their businesses; they also report stable or increasing investment in their work.

## Finding 5:

Outside of direct reporting lines, CEOs are most supportive of impact and sustainability leaders' work, with business unit / functional leaders and boards showing the least relative support

How actively supportive of your work are each of the following individuals/groups?

n=49



## Finding 6:

### Impact and sustainability leaders are more likely to be gaining than losing influence inside their organizations

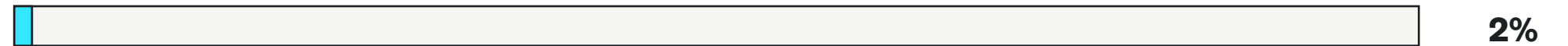
Over the past 12 months, how has your level of influence changed within your organization?

n=49

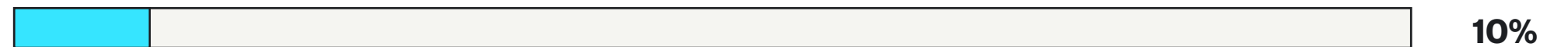


**Recommended resource for leaders:**  
[The Green Seat Guide, Chapter 3: Engaging internal stakeholders](#)

**My influence has decreased significantly**



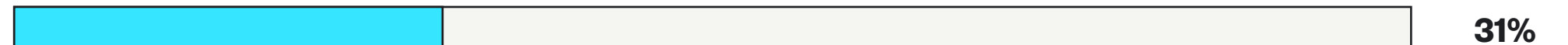
**My influence has decreased somewhat**



**My influence has stayed about the same**



**My influence has increased somewhat**



**My influence has increased significantly**

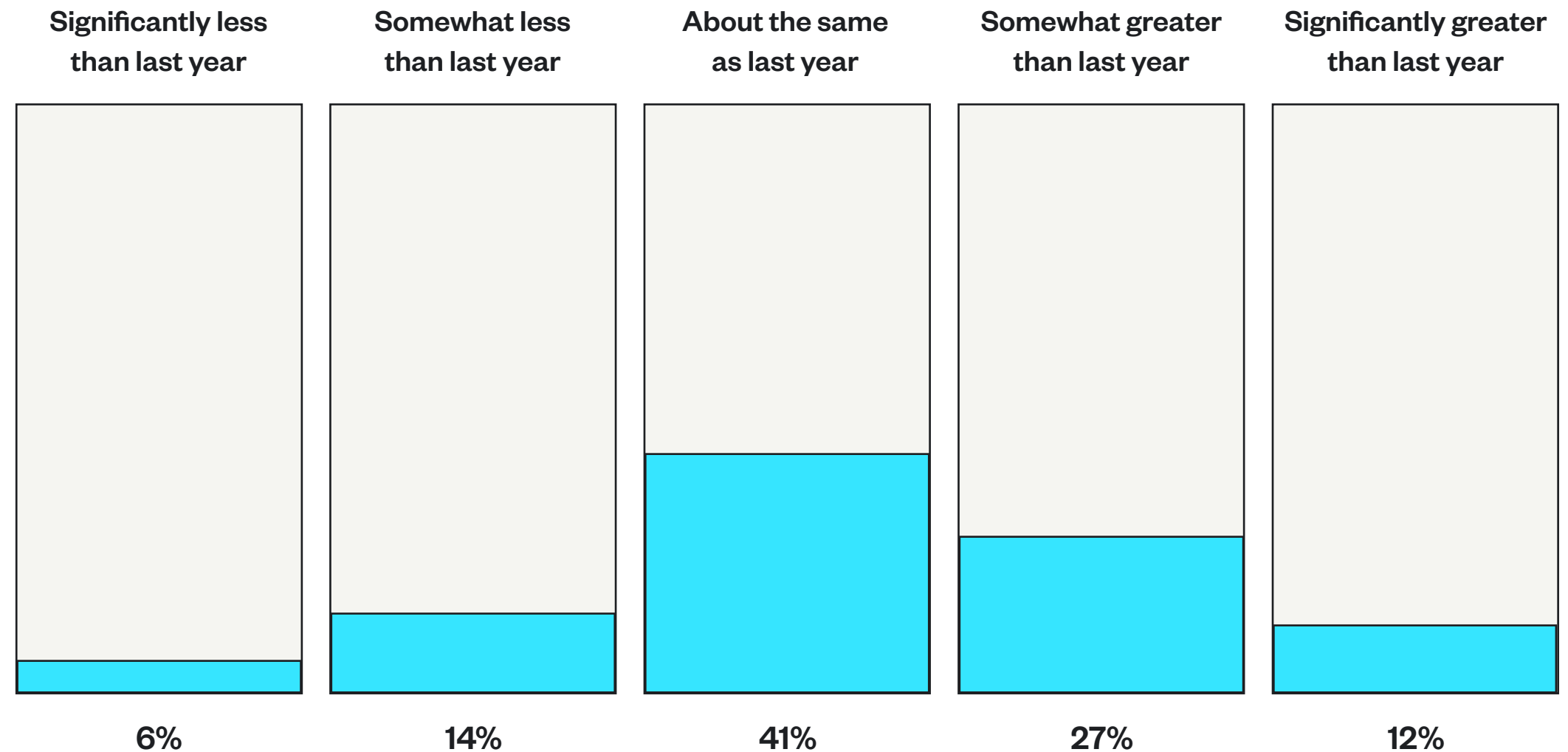


## Finding 7:

About 8 of 10 leaders saw sustained or increased resourcing of their work in 2024 relative to 2023; expectations for 2025 funding are cautiously optimistic

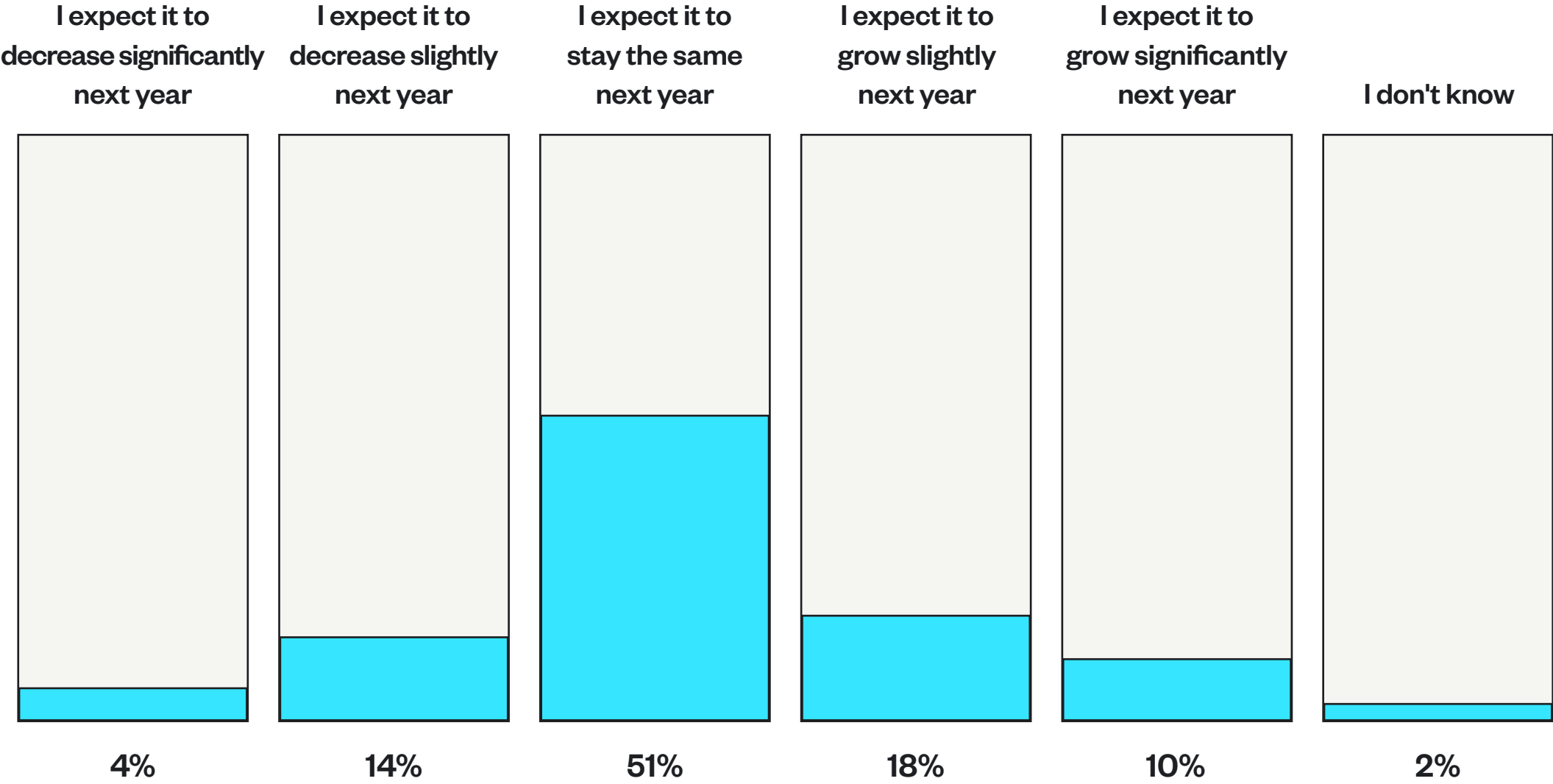
This year, the overall level of investment / resourcing by my company in my strategic priorities is:

n=49



How do you expect the overall level of investment / resourcing by your company in your strategic priorities to change in the next fiscal year?

n=49



## Finding 8:

Despite recent high profile instances of employee conflict over companies' responses to global issues, a large majority of leaders report that employee sentiment toward corporate social and environmental impact is stable or improving

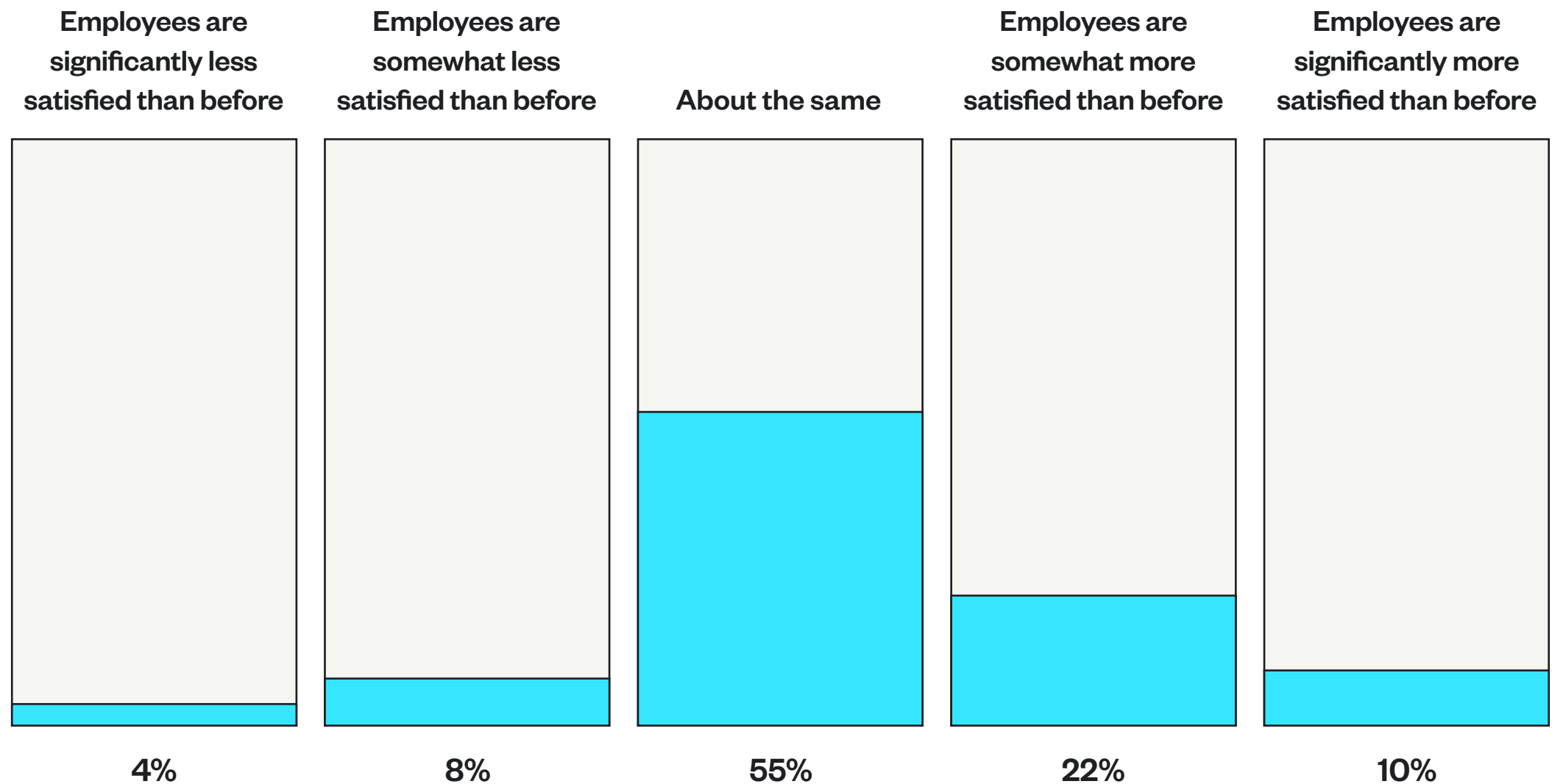
What is your perception of employee sentiment as it relates to your company's actions on social and environmental issues compared to 12 months ago?

n=49



**Recommended resource for leaders:**

[Guide to engaging employees in corporate volunteerism](#)





## Finding 9:

All the same, increased c-suite engagement and more resourcing represent the areas of greatest need for leaders' confidence

What do you need most to be more confident in your ability to advance your job-related priorities in the next 12 months?

Respondents selected up to 4 items

n=49



Recommended resource for leaders:  
[Making the case for investment in corporate social impact and sustainability](#)



THEME

3

**U.S. politics loom large over corporate impact and sustainability programs, with most leaders expecting their organizations to remain on the sidelines**

It's an election year in the U.S., one that is among the most consequential of our lifetimes. For businesses and their leaders, the election brings with it a host of uncertainties: about the regulatory and policy landscape in the coming years, about the social and cultural impacts the election will bring, and about the possibility of another more successful effort to undermine the legitimacy of our democracy.

Survey respondents underscored the importance of American politics over their work, and revealed a significant hesitancy among the business community to assert itself in the promotion and protection of democracy.

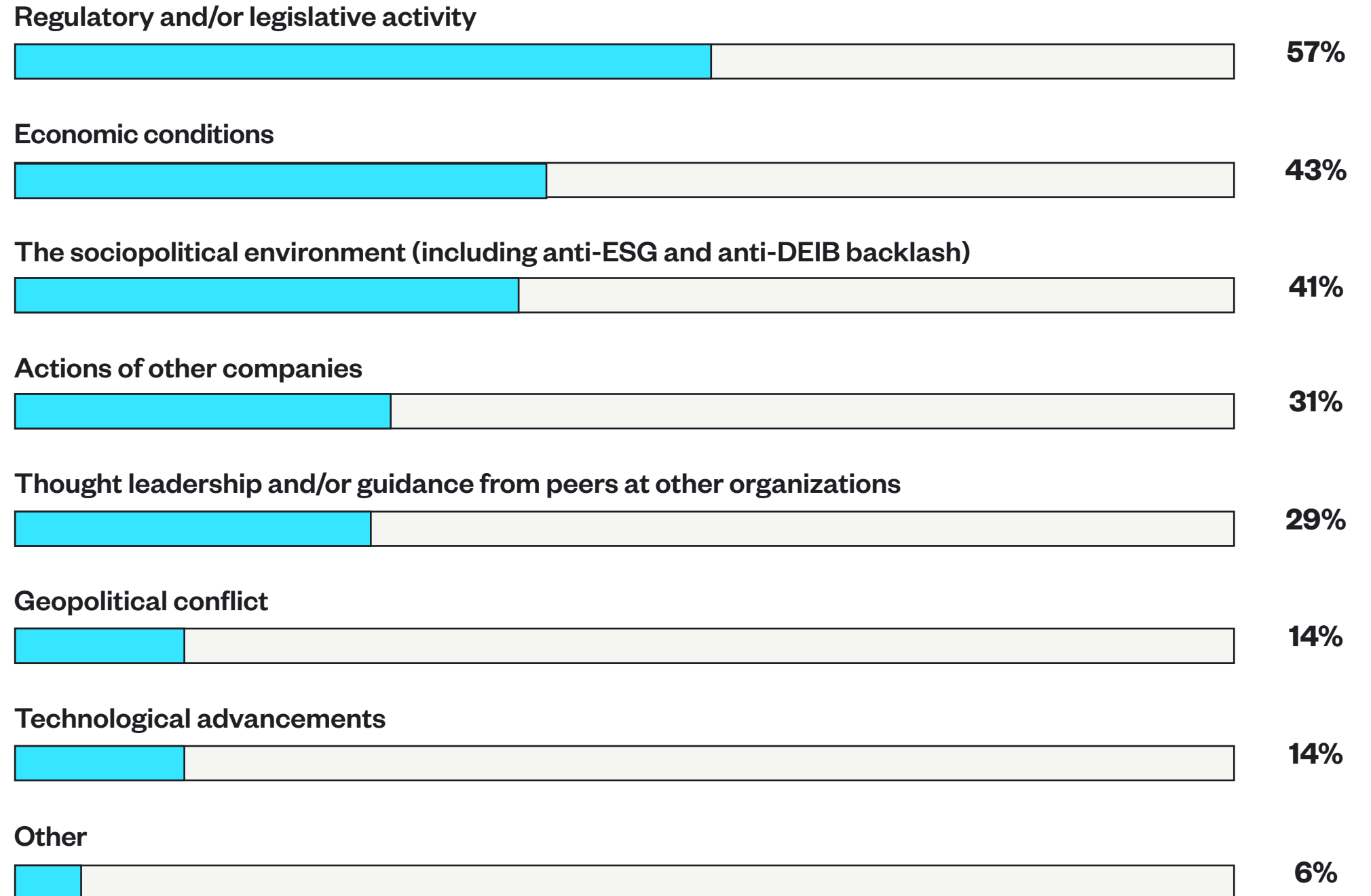
## Finding 10:

Politics (both the official and cultural manifestations) and the economy are dominant concerns for impact and sustainability leaders in 2024 and 2025

Which of the following external forces had the greatest influence over your job-related priorities and decision-making over the past 12 months?

Respondents selected up to 3 items

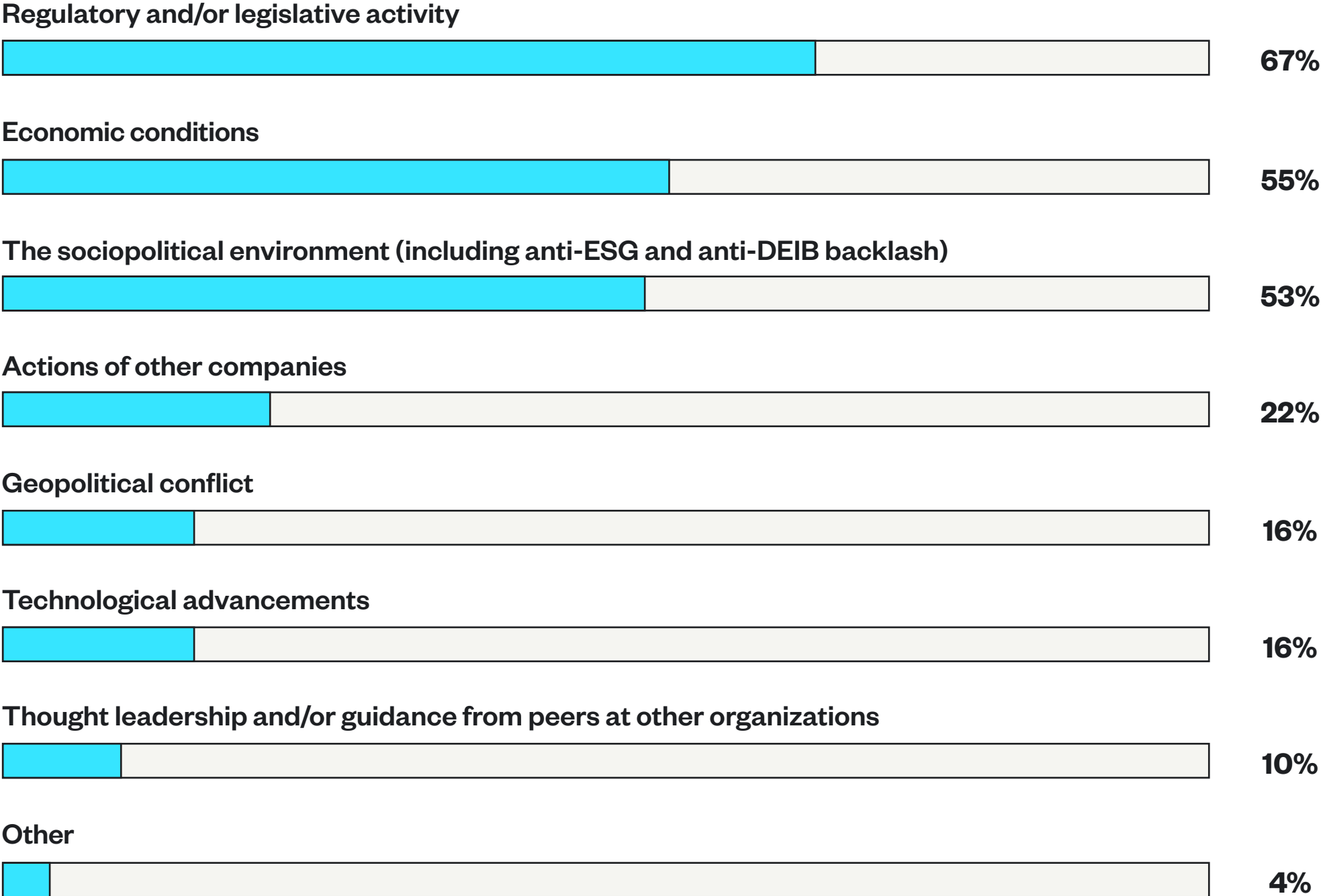
n=49



Which of the following external forces do you anticipate will have the most influence over your job-related priorities and decision-making in the next 12 months?

Respondents selected up to 3 items

n=49

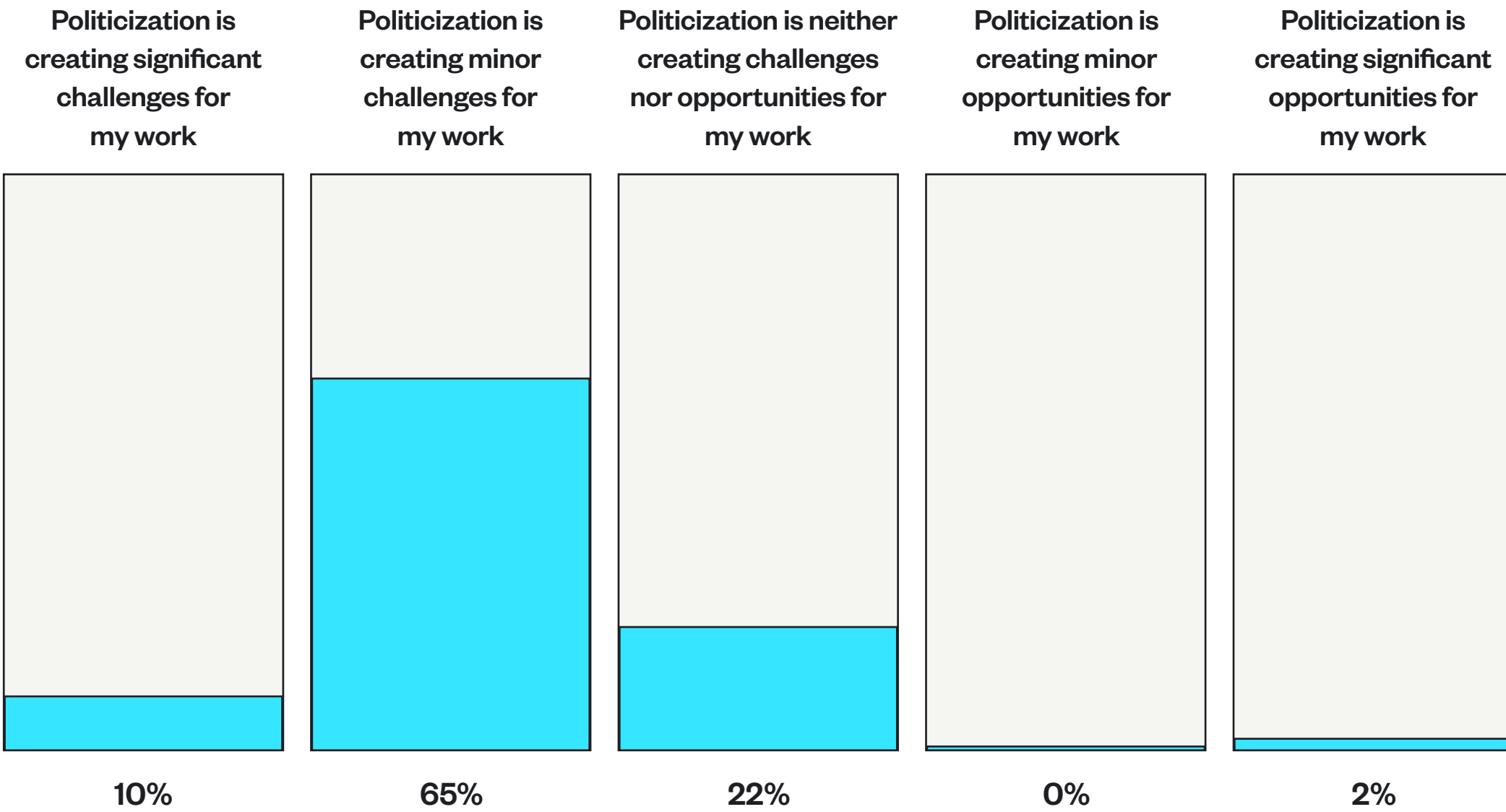


**Finding 11:**

The ongoing political backlash against ESG and DEIB is creating minor challenges for most leaders, though the most commonly reported impacts are about language rather than substance

How would you characterize the impact that politicization of corporate social and environmental initiatives has had on your work over the past 12 months?


n=49

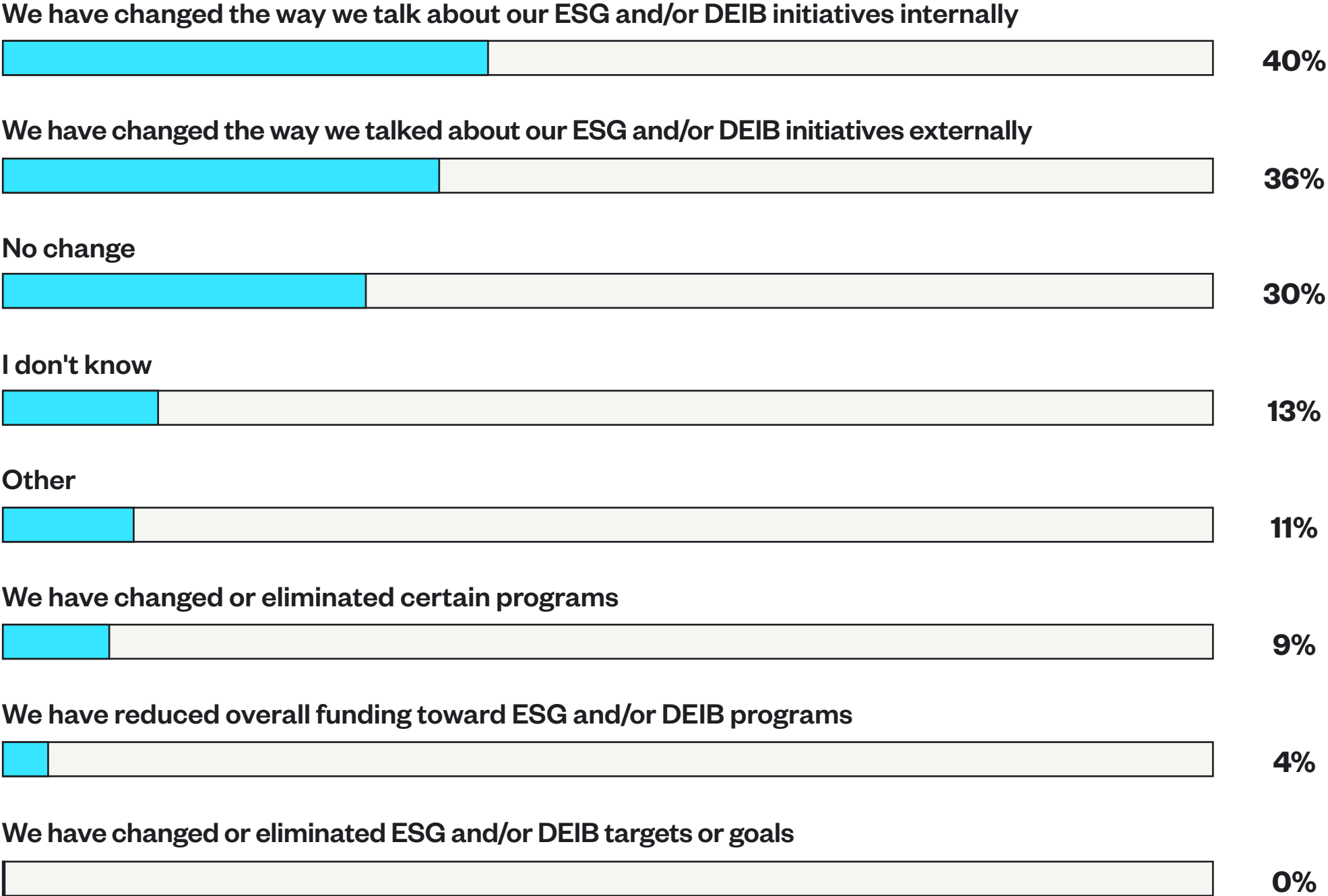


To the best of your knowledge, how has recent anti-ESG and anti-DEIB backlash impacted your company's related initiatives and communications?

Respondents selected all that apply

n=47

 Recommended resource for leaders:  
[Making corporate DEIB more durable: Four components of a resilient approach](#)



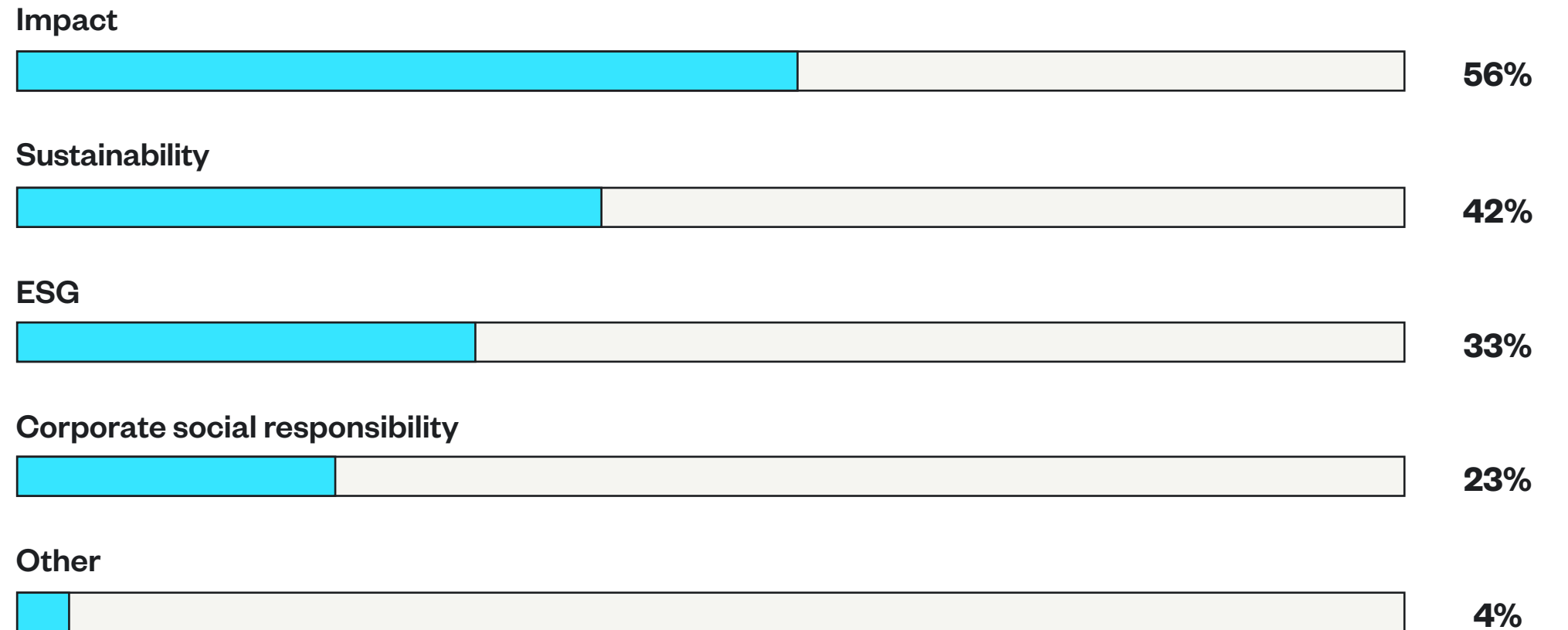
## Finding 12:

Amid anxiety over the language of ESG, “Impact” is now companies’ most preferred term when describing social and environmental efforts

Which of the following most closely matches the preferred term(s) your company uses to describe its social and environmental initiatives in public communications?

Respondents selected all that apply

n=49



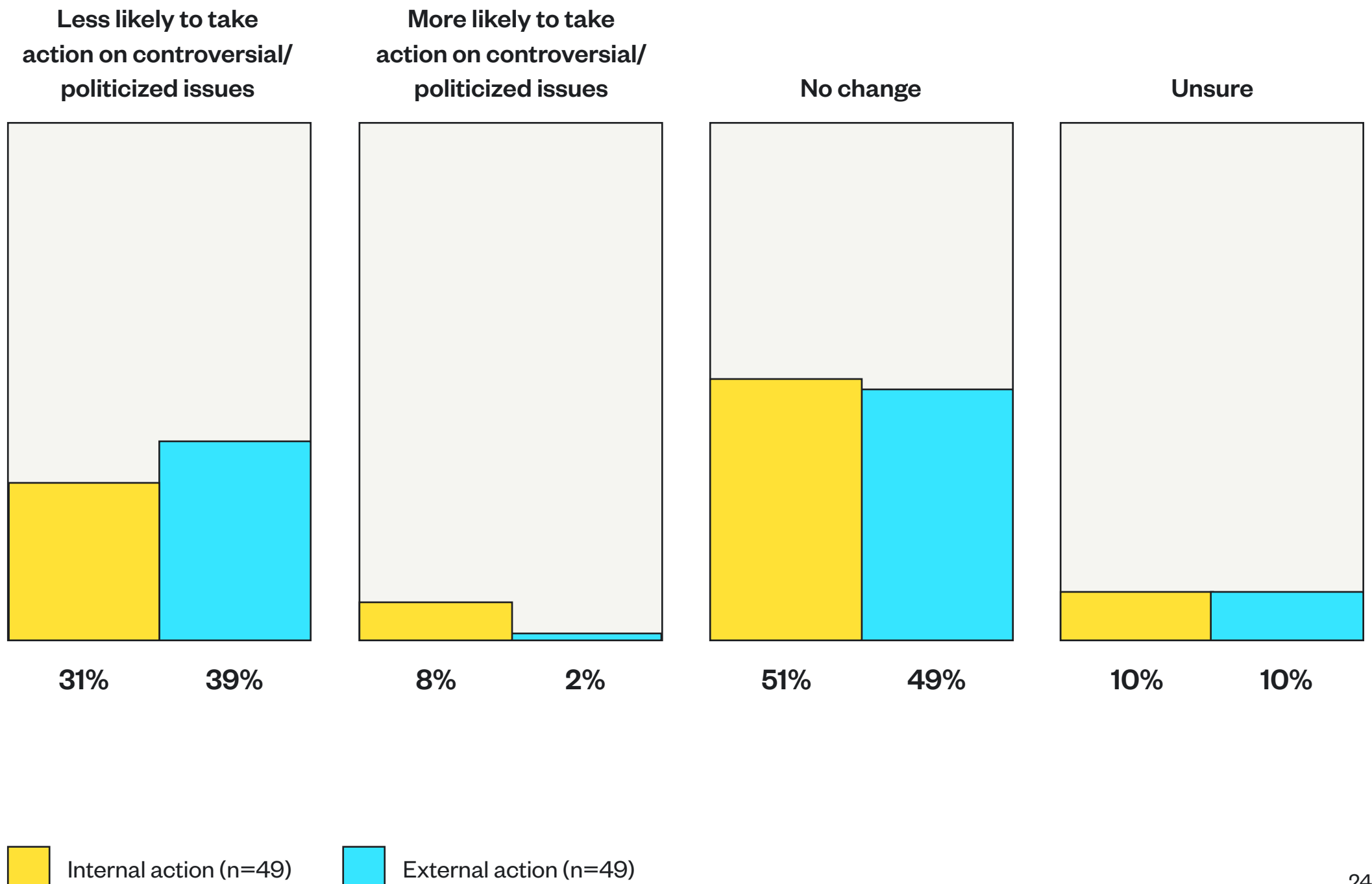
## Finding 13:

About half of companies are changing how they respond to pivotal moments; among those, most are less likely to take action internally or externally

How has your organization changed its response to social, cultural, environmental, and political issues as a result of the anti-ESG and anti-DEIB movements?



Recommended resource for leaders:  
[Pivotal moments: Responding to social, cultural, and political events](#)





## Finding 14:

Nearly half of organizations are not actively promoting civic engagement in the lead up to the 2024 election, only 1 in 8 are doing so “very actively”

In your opinion, to what extent is your company and its leadership taking steps to encourage civic participation among employees during the 2024 U.S. general election?

n=49



Recommended resource for leaders:  
[Civics Inc.: How every business can help promote a healthy democracy](#)




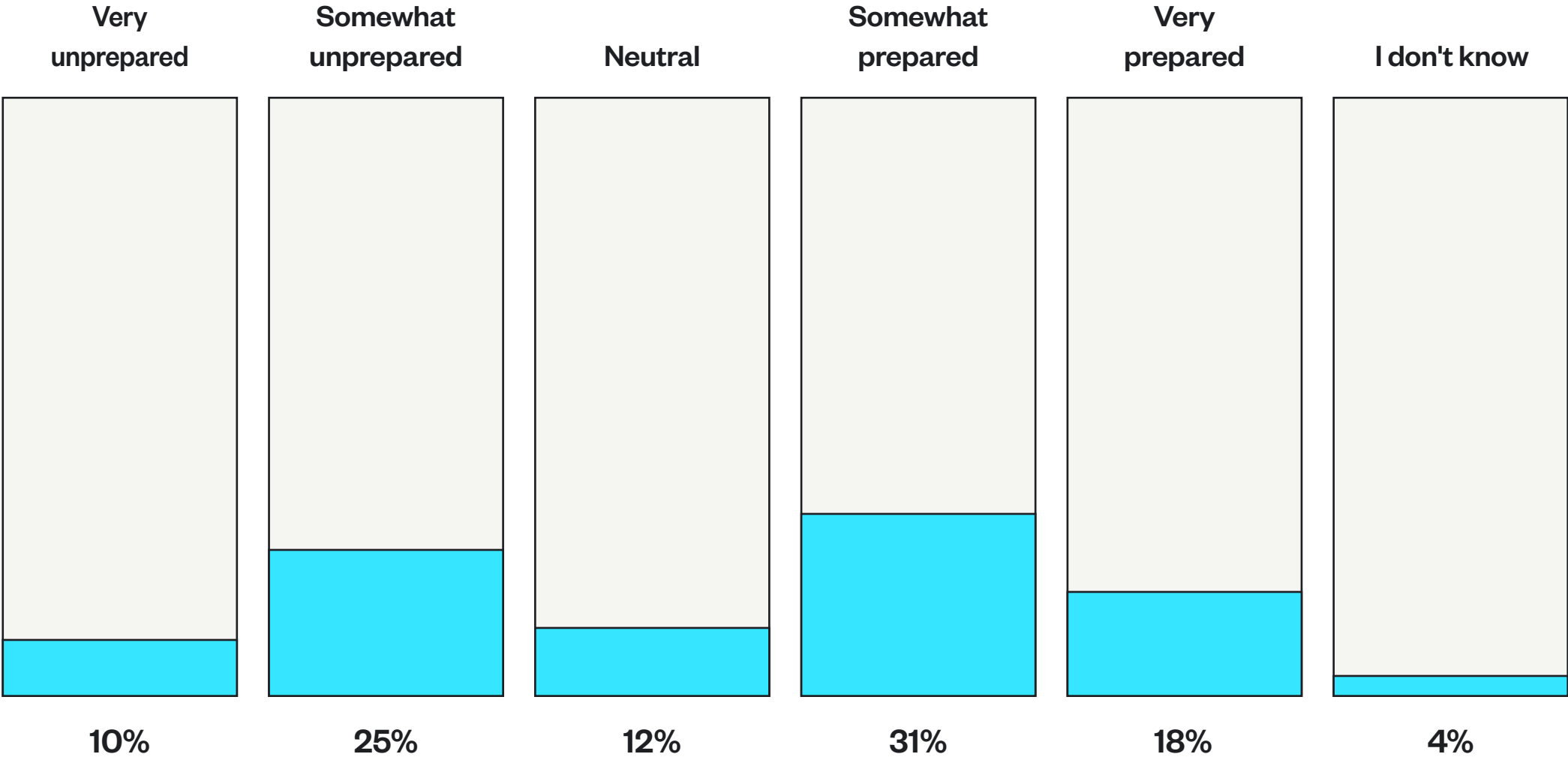
**Finding 15:**

**Just half of companies are at least somewhat prepared for election-related impacts, but 1 in 3 are unprepared**

How prepared do you believe your company is for the potential impacts of the 2024 U.S. general election on your business, its employees, customers, and communities?

n=48

 Recommended resource for leaders: [2024 election scenario planning toolkit](#)

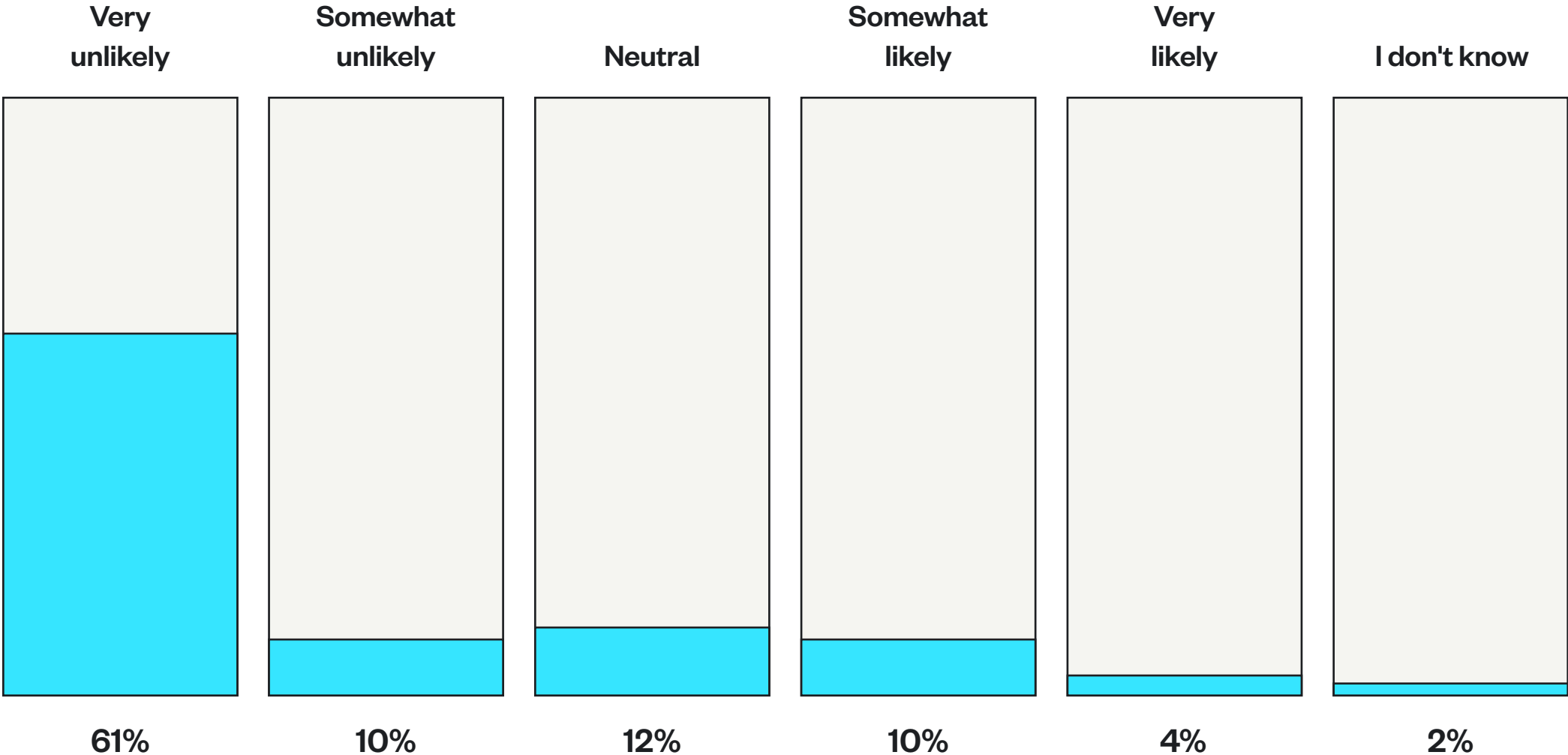


**Finding 16:**

**More than 7 of 10 leaders believe their companies are unlikely to take public action if democracy falters this fall**

In your opinion, how likely is your company to take public action around the promotion of democratic norms during the 2024 U.S. general elections (e.g., making public statements about election integrity)?

n=49



## Survey methodology

NationSwell fielded this survey from early July through early August 2024.

The online questionnaire was confidential and did not require membership to NationSwell as a condition for participation.

To be eligible for completing the survey, leaders must have been:

- Currently employed at a public company, private company, or company-sponsored foundation (leaders at nonprofits, foundations, or government agencies were not eligible to participate)
- At the level of vice president or above inside their organization

## Survey participants

The 2024 survey garnered responses from 49 individuals, representing 47 unique institutions. More detailed information on participating individuals and the organizations they represent is below:

# Organizations in the sample

## Breakdown by type

Type of organization	Respondents (%)
Public company	25 (53%)
Private company	20 (43%)
Company-sponsored foundation	2 (4%)

## Breakdown by type

Size of organizations (# of employees)	Respondents (%)
1-999	13 (28%)
1,000-9,999	17 (36%)
10,000-99,999	13 (28%)
100,000+	4 (8%)

# Individuals in the sample

## Breakdown by gender

Gender	Respondents (%)
Female	33 (67%)
Male	15 (31%)
Non-binary / non-conforming	0 (0%)
Prefer not to respond	1 (2%)

## Breakdown by race / ethnicity

Race / ethnicity	Respondents (%)
White	36 (77%)
Black or African American	7 (15%)
Asian	5 (11%)
Hispanic, Latino, Spanish Origin of any race	2 (4%)
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0 (0%)
Middle Eastern or North African	0 (0%)
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0 (0%)
Other	2 (4%)

## Breakdown by functional duties

Functional duties	Respondents (%)
Corporate social responsibility	35 (73%)
Employee volunteerism and engagement	29 (60%)
Philanthropy	28 (58%)
ESG	27 (56%)
Sustainability	25 (52%)
Communications and/or public affairs	17 (34%)
Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging	11 (23%)
Impact investing	10 (21%)
Public policy and/or government relations	7 (15%)
Talent acquisition / workforce development	4 (8%)
None of the above	2 (4%)

# Thank you for engaging with this resource.

NationSwell invites you to reach out with questions, feedback, and suggestions for how we can further support your work.

Please feel free to email us at [Insights@nationswell.com](mailto:Insights@nationswell.com).

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