



# The Business Case for Climate & DEI

How Communications Matters for Each

December 2024

In Partnership with: maslansky + partners | Bully Pulpit International | Potential Energy Coalition



---

Today, organizations are facing pressure from all sides about if and how to approach **climate action** or navigate **diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)**.



---

Our latest research with Page member chief communication officers (CCOs) in the fall of 2024 (pre-U.S. election) shows how organizations are navigating each issue differently, and how corporate communication leaders are responding.

# The evolving landscape of ESG



- Since the beginning of 2023, more than 320 anti-ESG bills have been introduced at the state level across the United States. While only 30 of these bills passed, they represent a new wave of pressure from the right and raise questions about the resilience of ESG.
- In response, Potential Energy Coalition and maslansky + partners embarked on a multi-phase and multi-country research effort.
- The goal was to assess the state of ESG and to help organizations effectively navigate in a highly polarized environment.
- This Page study, conducted with maslansky + partners, Bully Pulpit International and the Potential Energy Coalition, is the latest installment of that larger effort.

## The Responsible Business Series

### Phase 1 U.S. Consumer Survey

Date: August 2023 | Scale: 1,597  
U.S. consumers

### Phase 2 U.S. Consumer Survey

Date: August 2023 | Scale: 1,524  
U.S. consumers

### U.S. Affluent Retail Investor Survey

Date: April 2024 | Scale: 1,000 U.S.  
affluent investors

### Global Consumer Survey

Date: July 2024 | Scale: 4,509 consumers in  
U.S., UK, DE, JP, BR, and FR

# Page Survey Methodology

Online survey  
conducted August 8 –  
September 8, 2024

**N=84** Page  
member CCOs

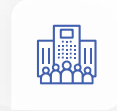
**U.S.: n=56**  
**ex-U.S.: n=28**

n=30 from **small companies**  
(under 10,000 employees)

n=26 from **mid-sized companies**  
(10,000-49,999 employees)

n=28 from **large companies**  
(50,000+ employees)

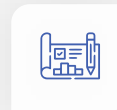
## Topics covered:



Perceptions of company  
**responsibility** and **impact**



Existence of **pressure**  
from internal and external  
stakeholders



Current and planned  
**actions** on climate and DEI



Internal and external  
**communication strategies**  
on climate and DEI



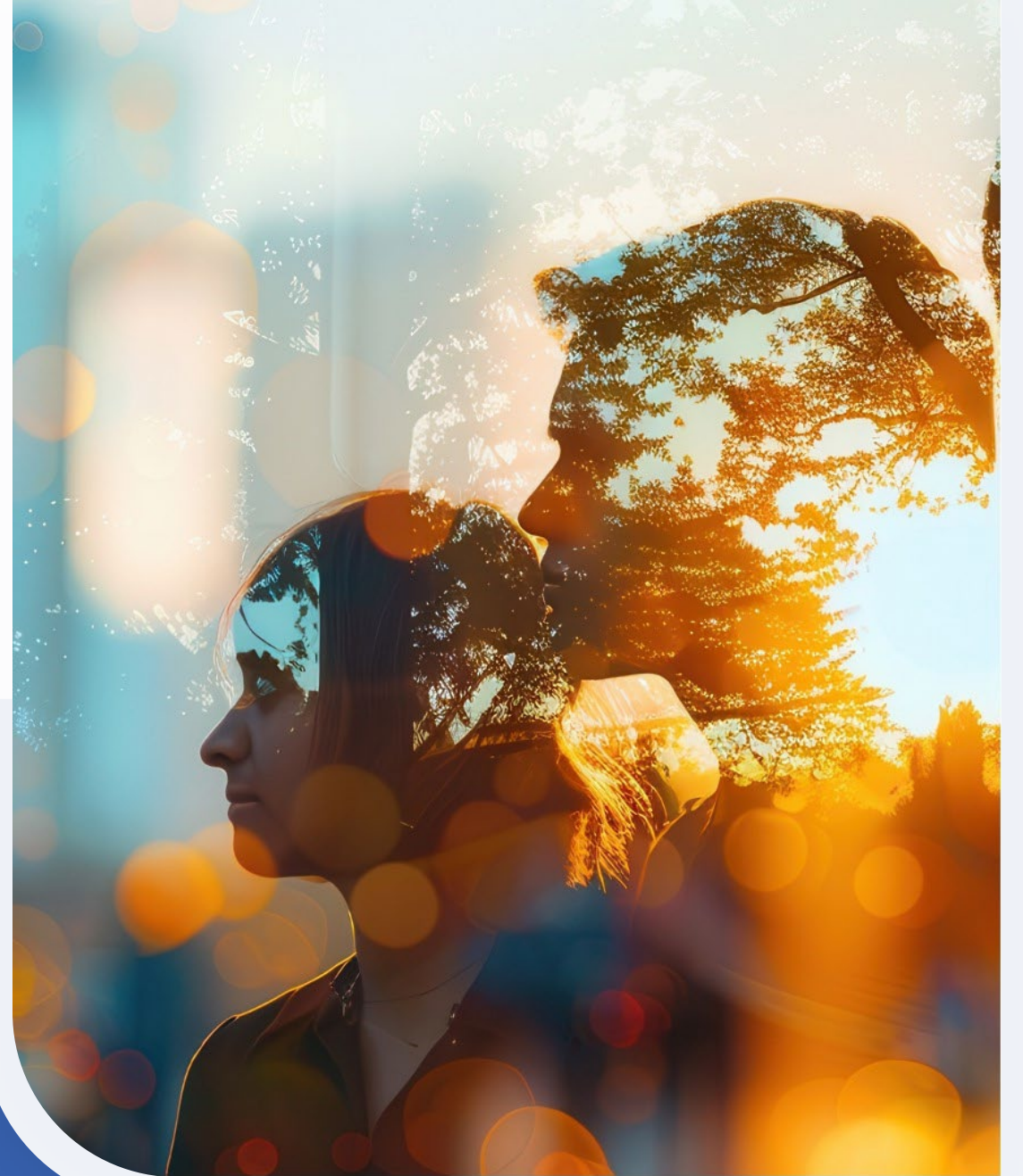
**Language** being used to  
communicate on climate  
and DEI

- Advertising, Marketing, and Market Research
- Aerospace and Defense
- Agriculture
- Assurance and Certification
- Automotive
- Construction and Architecture
- Consumer Packaged Goods
- Education
- Electronics
- Energy and Utilities
- Federal, state, or local government
- Financial Services
- Food and Beverage
- Healthcare
- Hospitality and Tourism
- Information technology
- Insurance
- Legal Services
- Manufacturing
- Media and Entertainment
- Mining and Minerals
- Nonprofit and Social Services
- Office Products
- Pharmaceuticals and Biotechnology
- Professional Services
- Real Estate
- Retail
- Semiconductors
- Sports and Recreation
- Technology
- Telecommunications
- Textiles and Apparel
- Transportation



## I, Parallel Worlds

U.S. companies remain cautiously committed to climate and DEI while the rest of world is all in.

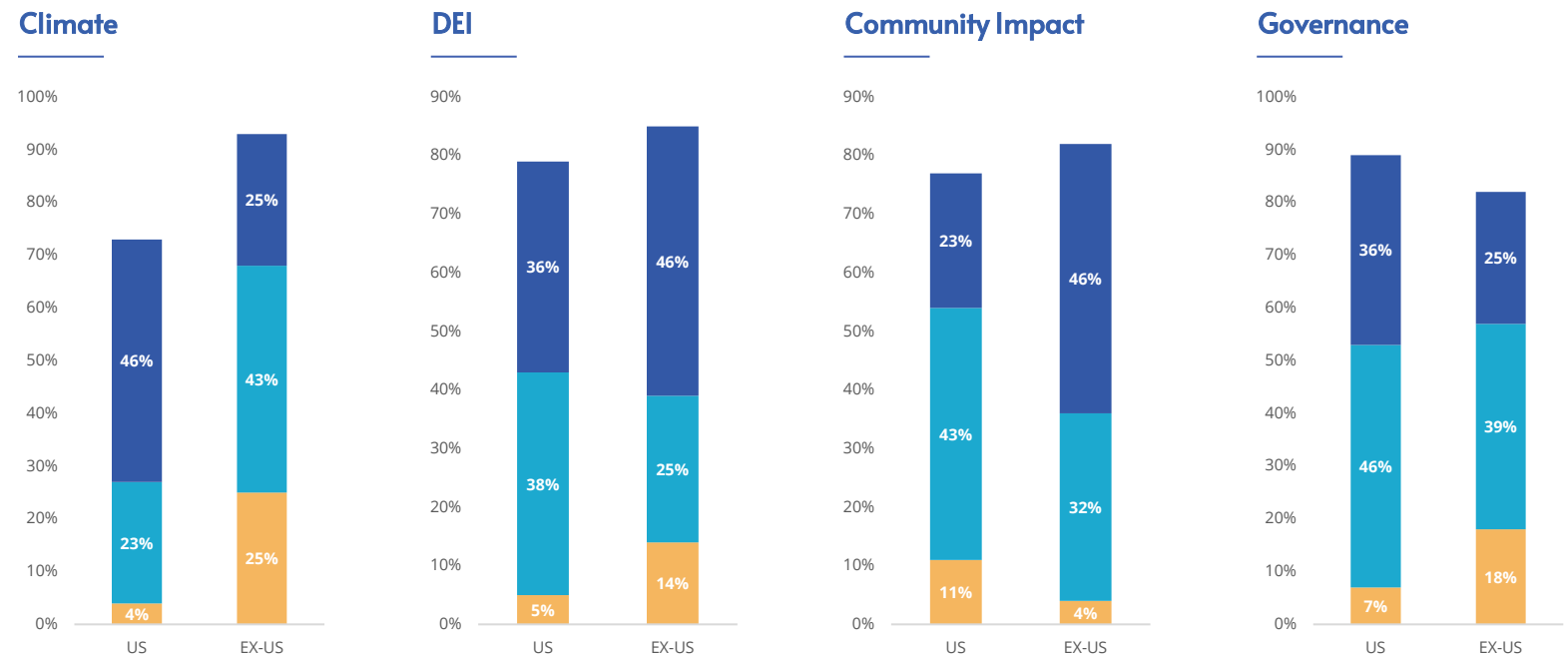
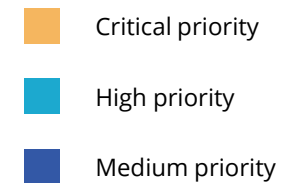


# Most see E, S, & G as priority; higher outside U.S.

- At least 70% of CCOs say each of these areas is a medium priority or higher.
- 93% of companies outside the U.S. say Climate is at least a medium priority compared to 73% in the U.S.
- And despite DEI being very different outside the U.S., it is viewed as critical by three times as many organizations (14%) than in the U.S. (5%).

## What overall priority does your company currently assign to the following types of initiatives and investments?

(% answering "high", "critical", or medium")



Source: Page CCO Member Survey  
 Base: U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)

# 🔄 In U.S., few report strong external pressure to change

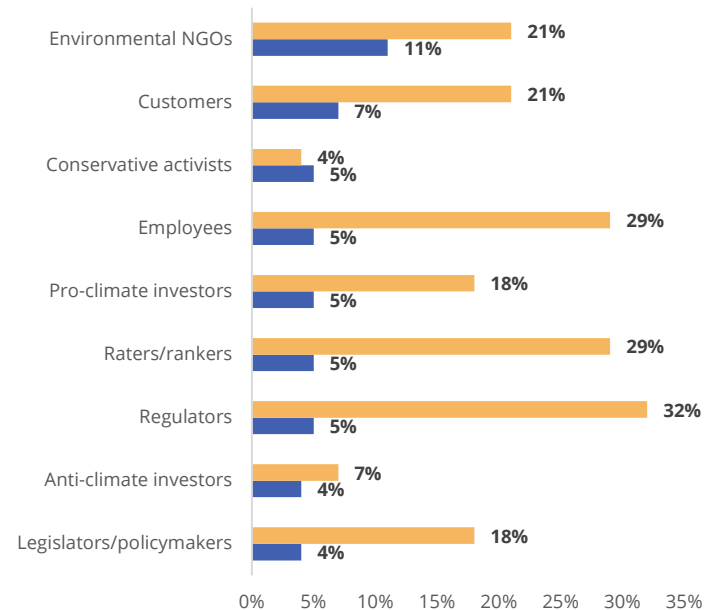
- The lower prioritization on key issues in the U.S. may be, in part, a reflection of companies reporting they feel less pressure.
- Despite significant media coverage, just 11% of U.S. companies say they've faced a great deal or a lot of pressure on climate.
- Pressure from all other stakeholders, on both climate and DEI, are even lower.

How much, if any, pressure has your organization faced to change its position on \_\_\_\_\_ issues from each of the following groups?

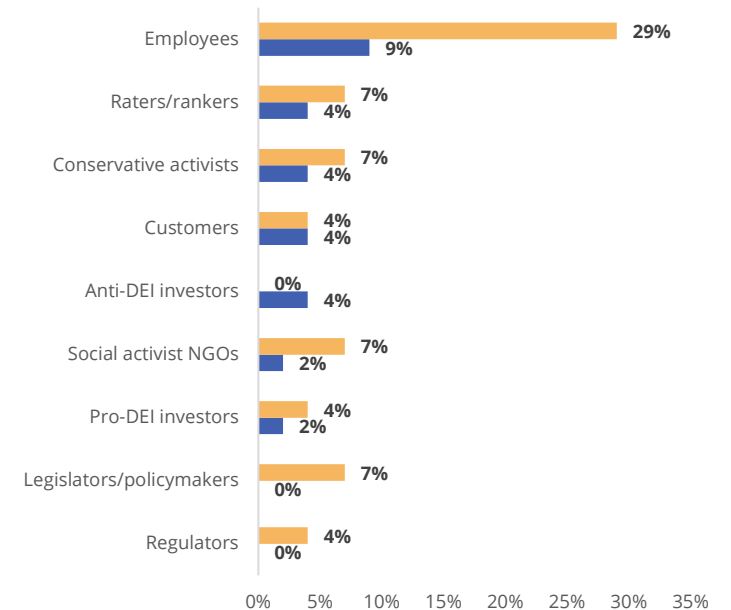
■ ex-U.S.  
■ U.S.

Showing % that said "a lot" or "a great deal"

## Climate



## Diversity, equity, and inclusion



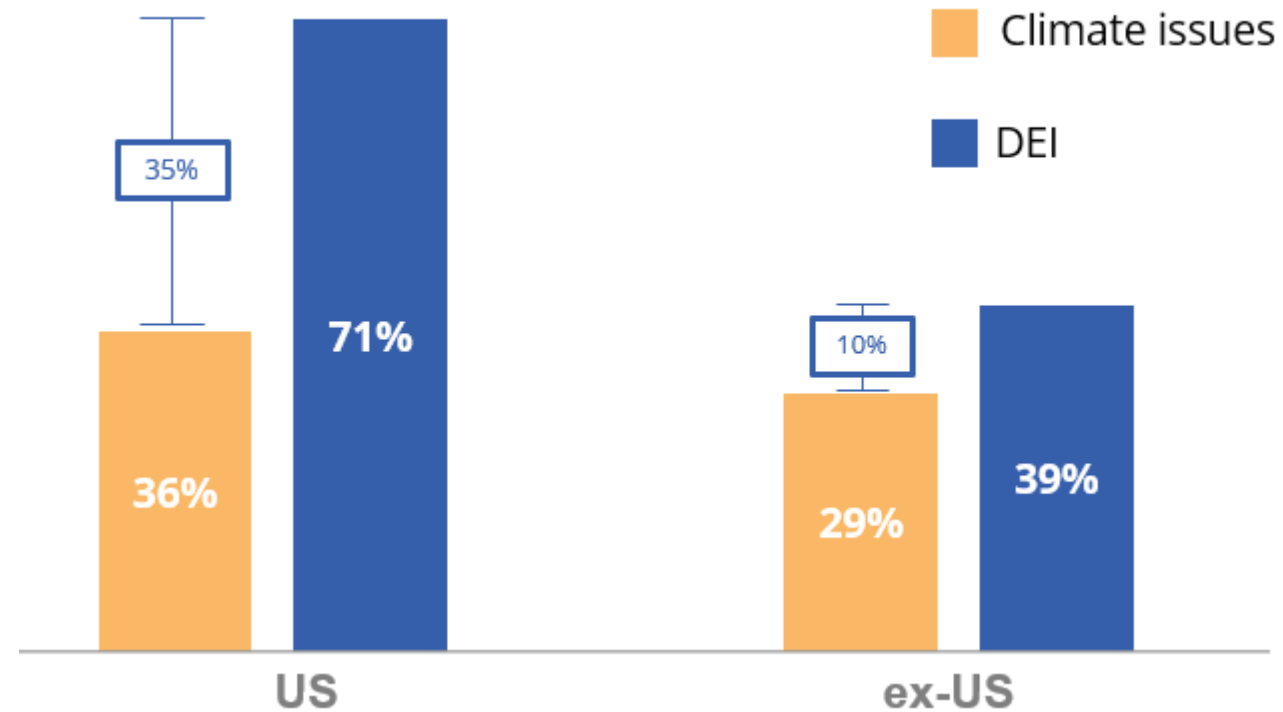
Source: Page CCO Member Survey

Base: U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)

# Perceived backlash risk is lower on climate than DEI

"Overall, my organization believes it faces a significant risk of backlash for taking a public stance on..."

- In the U.S., climate issues are also viewed as only half as likely to create a risk of backlash relative to DEI.
- They are also viewed as safer outside the U.S.



Source: Page CCO Member Survey

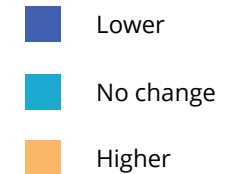
Base: U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)



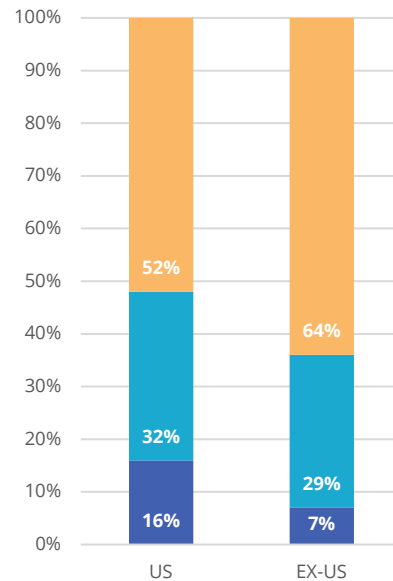
# Climate priorities rising; DEI mixed

- In both the U.S. and the rest of the world, Climate issues are rising in priority for most companies and falling in priority for just a few.
- On DEI, the situation is quite different. Under pressure in the U.S., more companies have de-prioritized DEI.
- At the same time, outside the U.S. nearly half of companies say DEI is growing in importance.

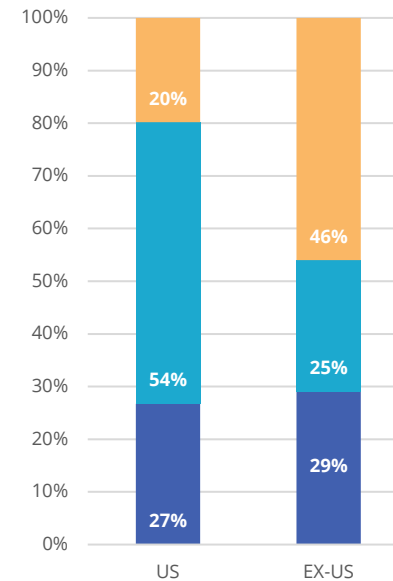
Over the past two years, have these issues become a higher or lower priority for your organization?



Environment, climate and sustainability



Diversity, equity and inclusion



The recent U.S. judicial decisions on DEI have raised fear of backlash from investors on DEI goals or disclosures that include numbers. So far, our goals have not changed but there is a reduction in spending on culture and DEI in general. We have increased our focus on human rights. Climate and governance remain unchanged



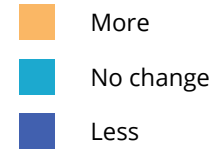
CCO respondent

Source: Page CCO Member Survey  
 Base: U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)

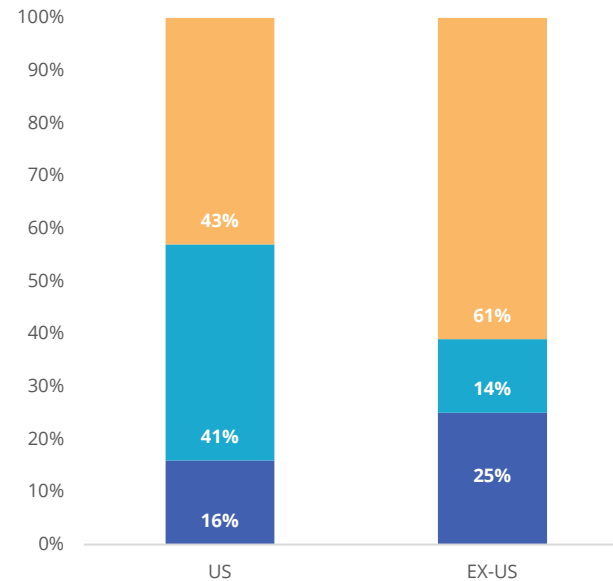
# External communications increasing on climate

- As priorities are rising, so are communications on Climate, both in the U.S. and around the world.
- Companies increasing external communications on Climate outpace those reducing it by more than 2:1.
- On DEI, U.S. companies are communicating less while those outside the U.S. are twice as likely to expand external communications as to reduce them.

## Compared to two years ago, CCOs are communicating with external audiences about...



### Environment, climate and sustainability



### Diversity, equity and inclusion



Source: Page CCO Member Survey

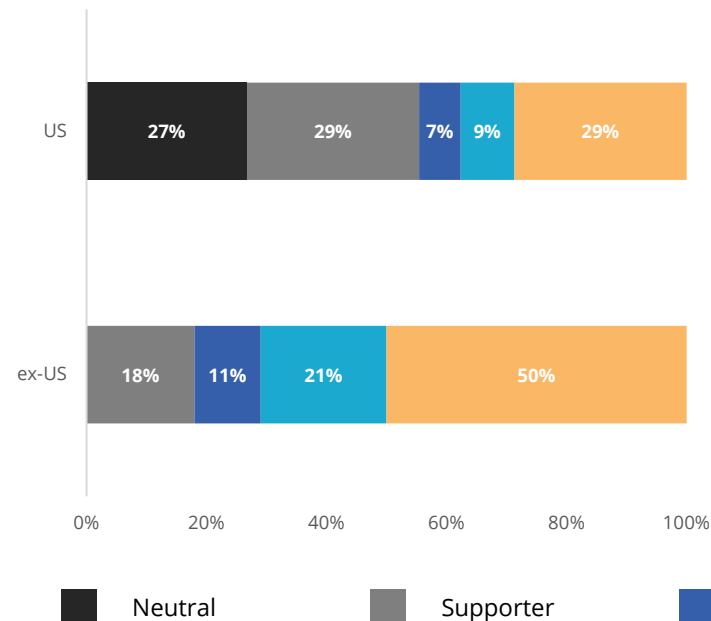
Base: U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)

# Climate commitment is cautious in U.S.

- On both issues and across markets, companies have stopped short of activism.
- On Climate, there is still strong commitment outside the U.S., where 50% of companies say their organization wants to be seen as a leader.
- In the U.S., commitment exists but is more cautious. While only 29% want to be seen leaders, more than 75% say their organizations want to at least be viewed as supporters.

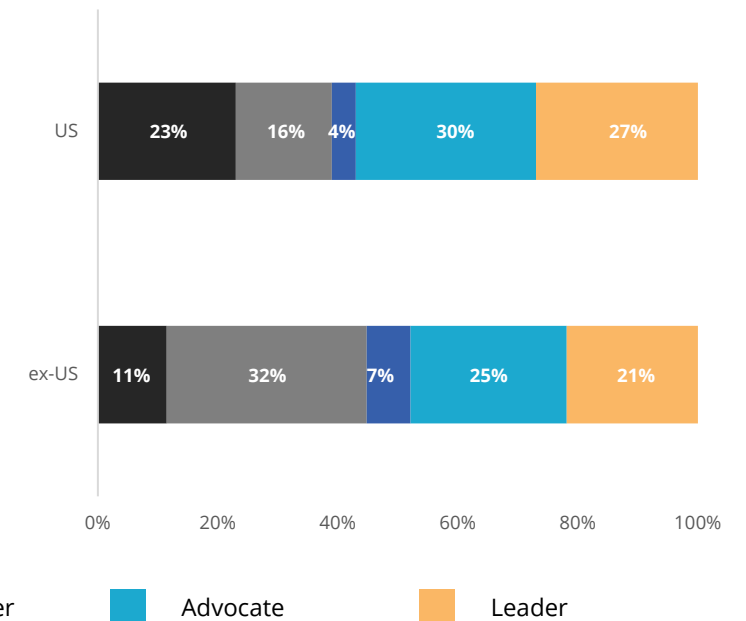
## On environment and climate

Our organization wants to be seen as (a)...



## On diversity equity and inclusion

Our organization wants to be seen as (a)...



0% chose "Skeptic"

On DEI, 4% in ex-U.S. chose "Activist"

Source: Page CCO Member Survey

Base: U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)



## II, The Business Case for Climate

Companies are behind consumers when it comes to seeing the business case for climate.



# Organizations are acting on climate more

...much more outside the U.S.

% who say their organization is likely to take each action over the next two years



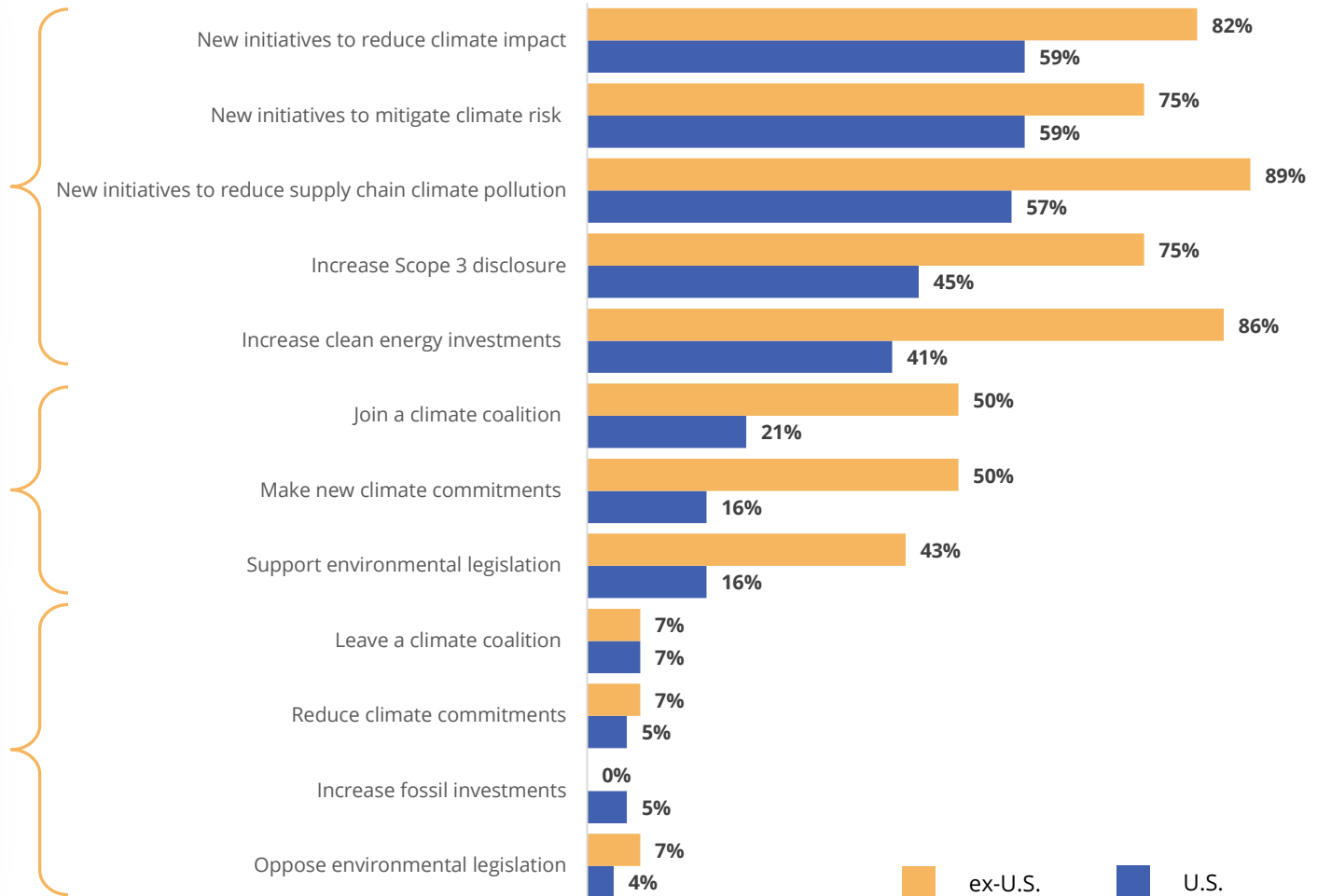
**Business action.**  
(most likely)



**Political, performative.**  
(less likely)



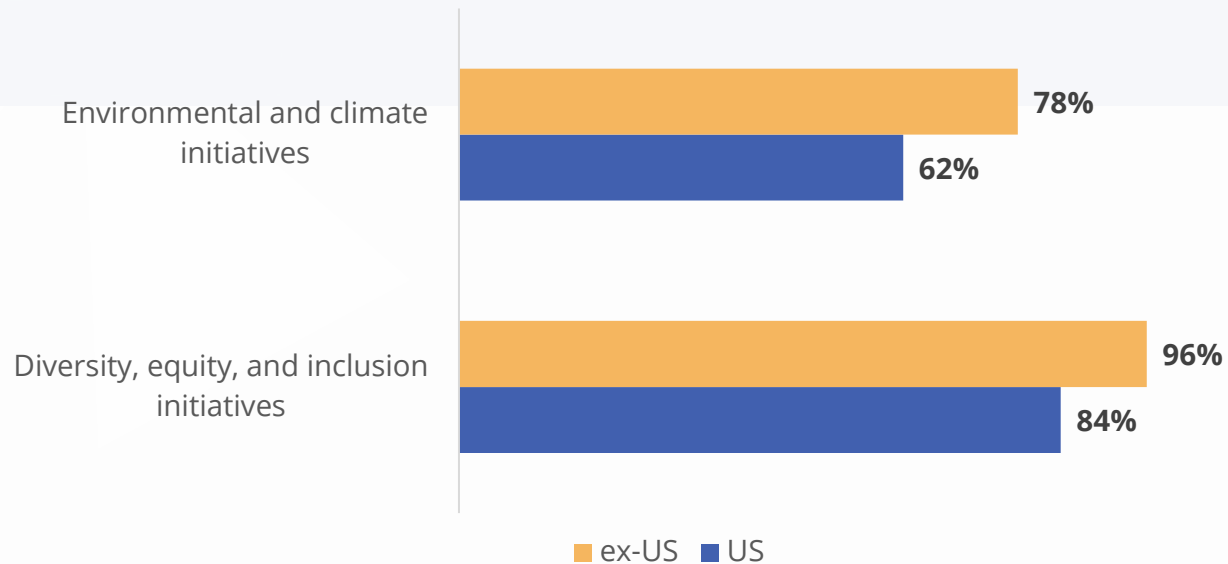
**Backing off.**  
(unlikely)



Source: Page CCO Member Survey  
Base: U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)

# And they DO more than they SAY

Overall, we invest in \_\_\_\_\_ MORE than we talk about publicly



[We are] threading the needle with political pressure. Doing the work rather than focusing on telling the story.

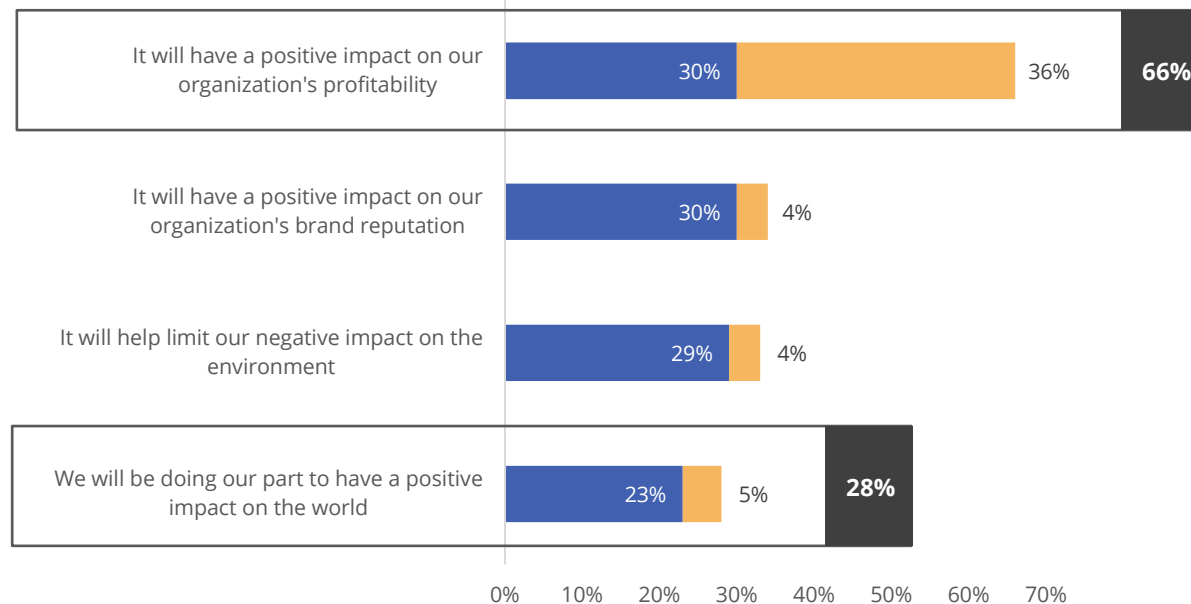


CCO respondent

# For U.S., the business case is essential

Hypothetically, if there was an internal discussion around whether or not your organization should increase its use of cleaner energy sources like solar and wind, how persuasive would each of the following arguments be to your organization's key decisionmakers?

■ Critical priority ■ High priority



Getting more focused on the 'business of our business' has been our priority.



CCO respondent

Source: Page CCO Member Survey  
Base: U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56)

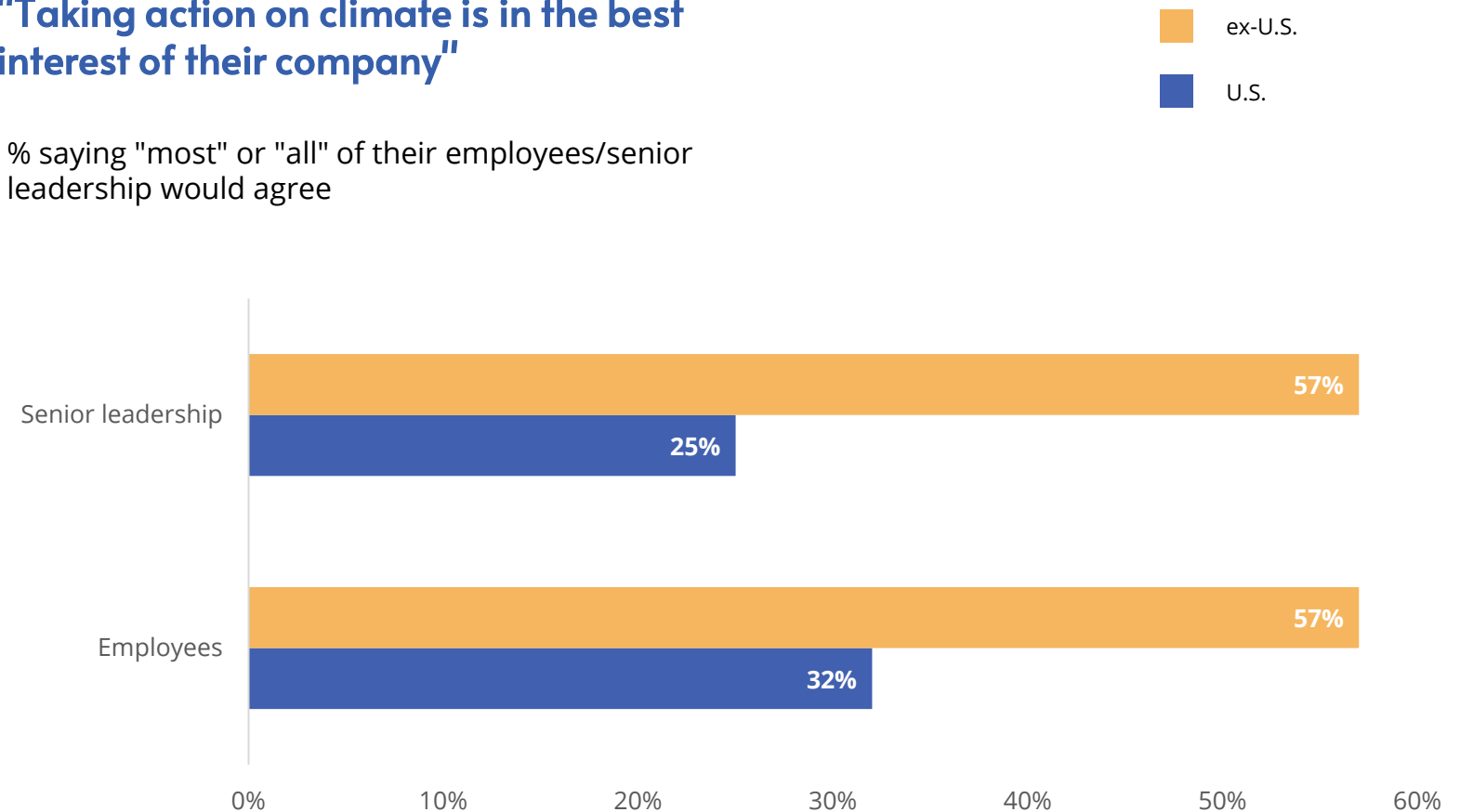
- As we have seen in work with consumers and investors, the most effective messages to support climate action are focused on materiality to the business rather than morality or good intentions.

# For many the business case is not yet clear

- Just 1 in 4 CCOs in the U.S. think that “most” or “all” of their senior executives see “taking action on Climate as being in the best interests of their company.”
- Given the importance of materiality-focused messages in driving support, there is significant opportunity to learn from companies outside the U.S., where 57% see climate action as consistent with the best interests of the company.

## “Taking action on climate is in the best interest of their company”

% saying “most” or “all” of their employees/senior leadership would agree

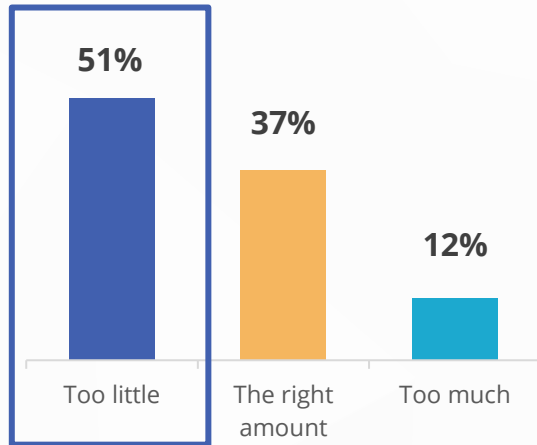


**Source:** Page CCO Member Survey  
**Base:** U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56)

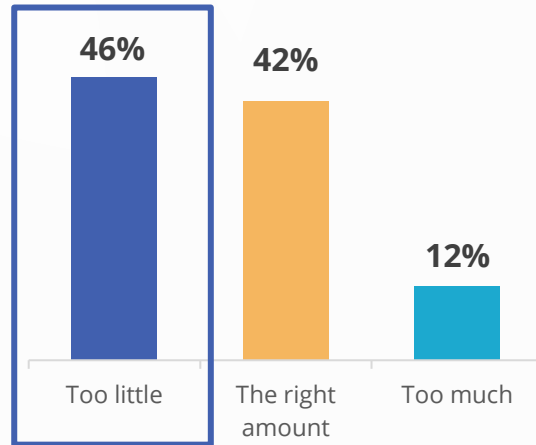


# Consumers want more, especially on climate

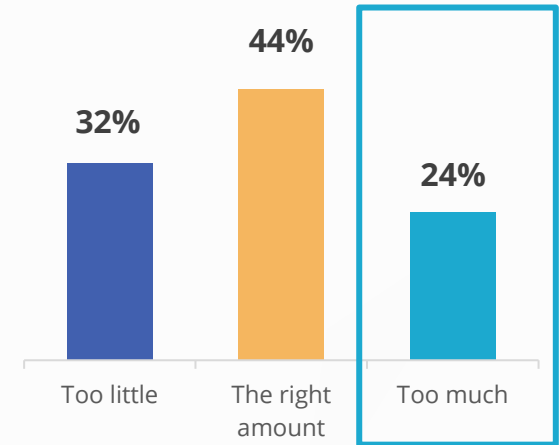
Do for-profit companies today focus too little, the right amount, or too much on...



Reducing their impact on the **climate** by using more clean energy and reducing carbon pollution



Taking advantage of **clean energy** opportunities



Advancing **social causes**, including promoting diversity and addressing issues of equity in the workplace

U.S. only



### III, The language of ESG Responsible Business

Language is evolving  
to less polarizing  
terms, but progress  
is slow.

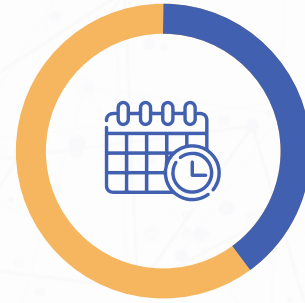


# “DEI” and “ESG” terms declining in U.S.



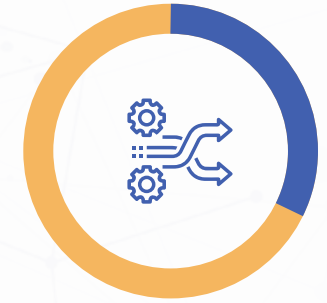
**37%**

say they're using  
“ESG” less than  
two years ago



**41%**

say they're using  
“DEI” less than  
two years ago



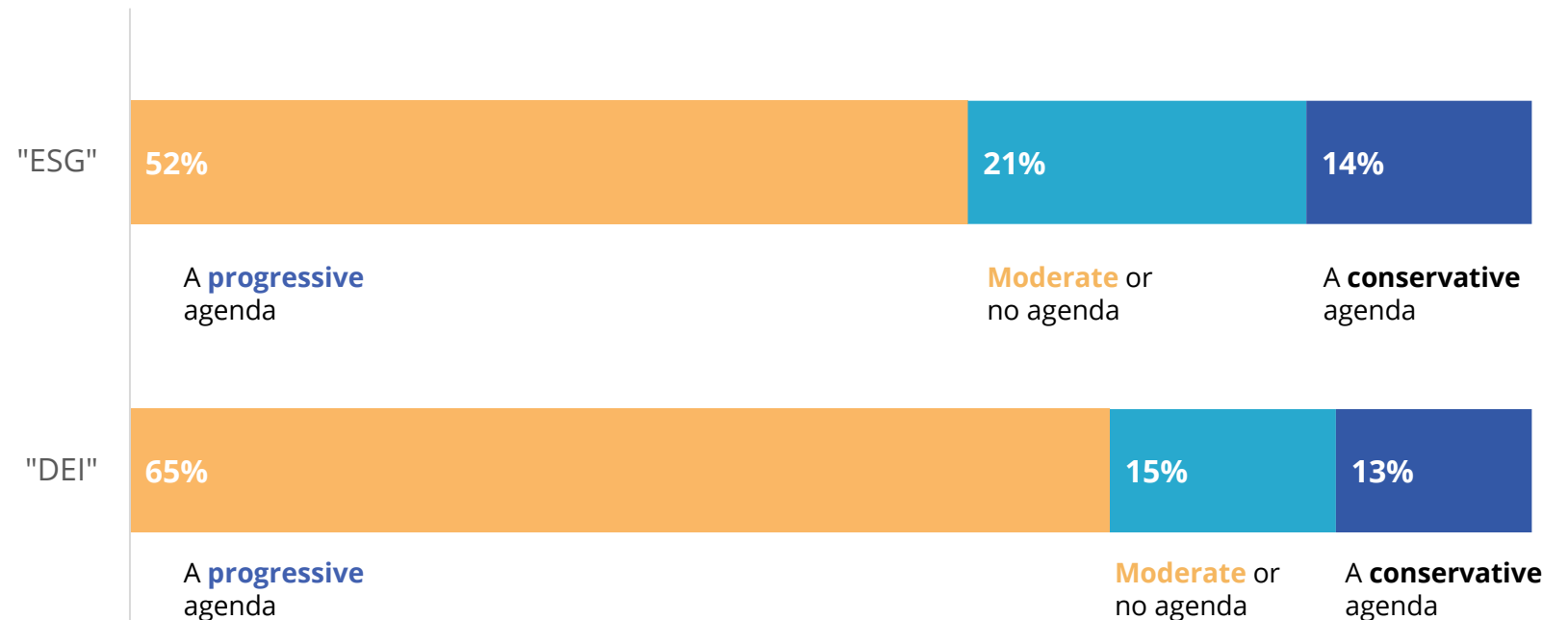
**30%**

say they've changed the  
name of their corporate  
reports or web pages  
related to these topics

# “DEI” and “ESG” have political baggage

- This data, from the maslansky + partners Global Consumer Survey, highlights one of the main reasons companies have moved away from the terms ESG and DEI.
- Most people do not understand the concepts or even know what the acronym stands for.
- Instead, they have come to associate the acronyms with a progressive political agenda. This makes the concept polarizing even before people take the time to understand the substance.

Do you associate \_\_\_\_\_ with a conservative political agenda, a progressive agenda, or no political agenda?

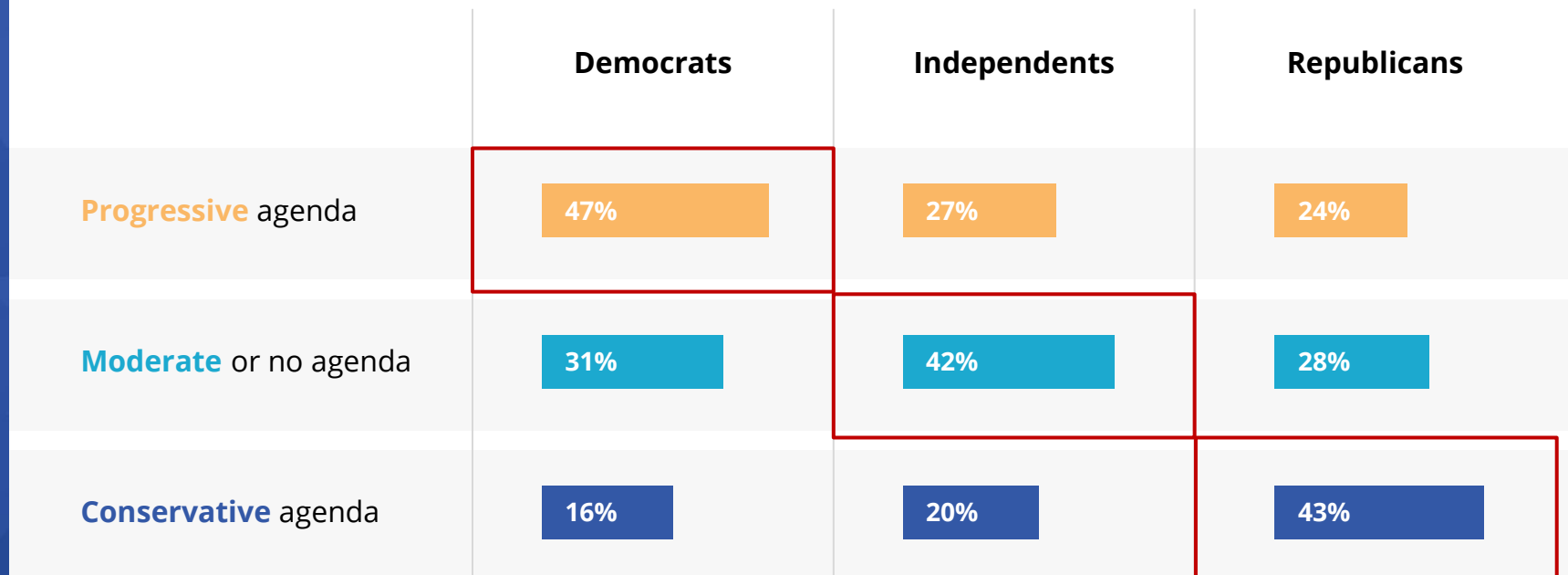


Source: maslansky+partners Global Consumer Survey  
Base: U.S. Consumers (n=1,002)

# “Responsible business” fits across the aisle

- Based on extensive testing of alternative terms, “responsible business” has become a recommended alternative to ESG.
- The chart highlights the reason why. “Responsible business” carries little of the political baggage of other terms. It is viewed favorably across the political spectrum. Even better, regardless of where consumers stand politically, they tend to associate “responsible business” with their own ideology, making it significantly less polarizing.

Do you associate “responsible business” with a conservative political agenda, a progressive agenda, or no political agenda?



Source: maslansky+partners Global Consumer Survey  
Base: Democrats (n=758); Independents (n=532); Republicans (n=714)

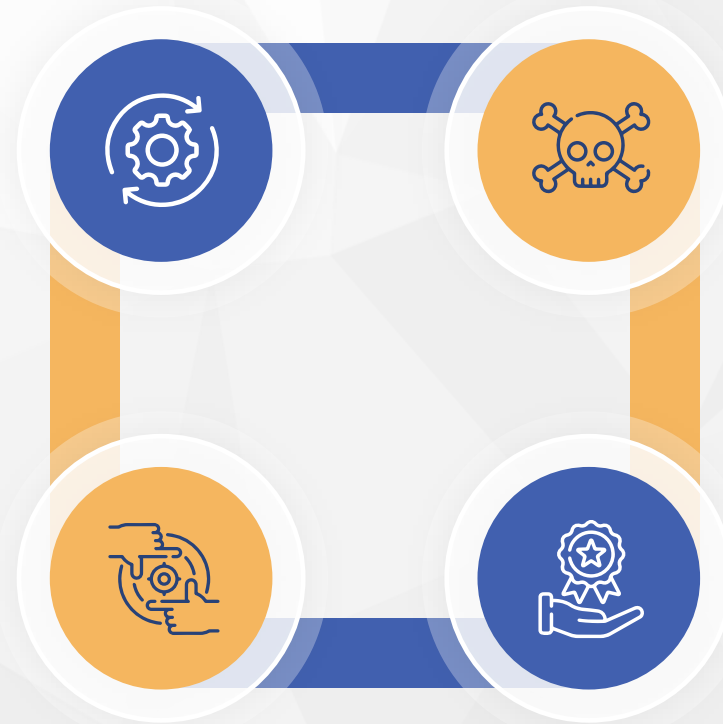
# Key Takeaways

**A shift in frame can allow U.S. organizations to move from cautious continuation to profitable progress.**

Using the right language paired with the actions already being taken can earn credit while minimizing backlash.

**Those who are skeptical are appeased when you frame through the lens of business.**

There's baseline support for environmental and climate initiatives, and potentially more support to be found with a message rooted in profitability.



**Rumors of ESG's death have been greatly exaggerated.**

While news stories are kicking dirt on ESG, its clear organizations are continuing to invest in the underlying components.

**Most consumers will reward, not punish, organizations for corporate climate action.**

Overall, consumers want MORE, not less, concrete corporate action on climate-related issues. The same is true to a lesser degree on DEI-related efforts.



## Materiality not Morality

Across all audiences – consumers, retail investors, and CCOs – the most effective messaging to build support for climate action connects the actions to business objectives and outcomes. This approach also significantly reduces backlash risk, which is often focused on companies who are advocating for social change and a political morality that is rejected by a significant portion of customers or employees, especially in the U.S.



## Return on Responsibility

To effectively connect climate messaging to business, follow the “R.O.R.” framework.

### **Responsibility:**

use the language of “responsible business” by explicitly connecting actions to benefits to customers, employees, communities or other stakeholders.

### **Opportunity:**

the future is “clean.” Focus on where you are going including “clean energy,” “clean technology,” “reducing carbon pollution.” Avoid focusing on fossil fuels which are highly polarizing.

### **Risk:**

Climate risk is viewed as real business risk, so actions that are explicitly connected to how they reduce a company’s physical and financial risks are more likely to resonate.



## Make the Language Inclusive

The language of ESG, DEI, and sustainability was created by subject matter experts. It is filled with jargon that alienates or excludes many of the people it is intended to engage. To broaden support, start with understanding. Eliminate jargon and replace with plain language.



### Materiality not Morality

---

For more guidance on this simple, essential **framing shift** in your “ESG” messaging, check out maslansky + partners’ Responsible Business playbook [here](#).



### Return on Responsibility

---

For more information on using this framework to **spell out the business** case for climate-related action specifically, check out maslansky + partners’ and Potential Energy’s Return on Responsibility report, released in partnership with the We Mean Business Coalition, [here](#).



page

# Special Thanks To Our Partners

maslansky  
+ partners



Bully Pulpit  
International

P( )TENTIAL  
ENERGY