



# Where We Go From Here

## Funders on the State of our Country and Philanthropy's Role

Results from September 2024 + February 2025 survey waves

For additional information about this survey or the results, please reach out to [partnerships@democracyfund.org](mailto:partnerships@democracyfund.org)

# Overview

Before and after the 2024 November election, **Democracy Fund** conducted a short survey to understand the perspectives of funders of democracy work. These two survey waves were an experiment in measuring funder attitudes and part of a larger effort to better understand the philanthropic field. They included questions about:

- The health and resilience of democracy
- Levels of concern about challenges to organizations and key actors
- Preparedness of philanthropy and the field to adapt and respond to potential challenges
- Efforts to support frontline organizations
- Organizations' plans going forward

The materials in this deck represent the results from 227 private foundations, individual donors, donor networks and collaboratives, funding intermediaries, and donor/philanthropic advisors who responded to the first wave (N=156), the second wave (N=151), or both. Respectively, the surveys were fielded between September 16 - October 11, 2024 and February 10 - March 7, 2025. Please see the data and methodology section at the end for additional details.

Given the limited sample size and the difficulty of surveying special populations like the groups identified above, we encourage readers to approach these results as being suggestive and indicative of philanthropic attitudes. They should not be understood as either hyper-precise estimates or the final word on any of these questions.

We will likely be conducting this survey again in the latter half of 2025. We invite feedback and would love to hear your ideas about future topics as we continue to study the philanthropic field.

# Grant amount

Throughout this deck, results have also been broken out by the amount of giving by the respondent's home institution. These categories are based on the grant making we've been able to identify to democracy-related organizations between 2020 and 2023 by those institutions. For ease of analysis, we use three groupings:

- **Small:** \$1M or less in democracy-related giving; N=38
- **Medium:** Between \$1M and \$10M in democracy-related giving; N=42
- **Large:** More than \$10M in democracy-related giving; N=48

For more details, please see the methodological appendix.

# Topline findings

**Pessimism about democracy and institutions.**<sup>1</sup> Respondents believe that democracy is under threat - they are very concerned about its future and are more concerned now than before the election. Prior faith in institutions appears to be declining.

- Overwhelming majority (94%) report being unsatisfied with the way democracy is working and say that democracy is under threat (97%).
- Fewer than one in five (16%) say they are optimistic about the future of American democracy.
- Only four in ten (40%) say American democratic institutions are able to address emerging challenges while eight in ten (80%) say the country's democratic system is broken and in need of fundamental reform.

**Split views about philanthropy's role and impact.**<sup>2</sup> Respondents are split on the role of philanthropy in strengthening American democracy and the efficacy of those efforts.

- Roughly equal numbers of respondents are optimistic (43%) and pessimistic (45%) about the role of philanthropy in strengthening American democracy. This is a notable shift from 2024, when respondents were more optimistic (64%) than pessimistic (27%).
- Similar numbers agree (44%) and disagree (41%) with the idea that philanthropic efforts over the past decade to promote a healthy democracy in the U.S. had been largely unsuccessful.

1. See slides 9-11

2. See slide 28

# Topline findings

**Concerns for democracy organizations and key actors.**<sup>3</sup> Respondents are concerned about harassment and intimidation of pro-democracy organizations and key actors as well as a variety of potential challenges faced by pro-democracy organizations.

- Two-thirds or more report being *very concerned* about harassment and intimidation of journalists (77%), advocates for social justice (74%), opposition leaders and activists (74%), pro-democracy non-profits (66%), and civil servants (65%).
- Majorities are *very concerned* about pro-democracy organizations facing legal challenges (68%), declines in donor funding (58%), staff burnout (54%), declining donor interest in equity and social justice (51%), and legislative and regulatory scrutiny (51%).

**Signs of action around grantee safety.**<sup>4</sup> While it is uncertain how large these efforts are, there has been an increase in the number of respondents saying that they are helping grantees respond to legal challenges as well as helping improve their physical and cyber security.

- Relative to 2024, respondents are now more likely to say they are helping grantees respond to legal challenges and scrutiny (30% vs 47%).
- Relative to 2024, respondents are now more likely to say they are helping grantees improve their physical and cyber security (23% vs 34%).

3. See slides 15-17

4. See slide 26

# Topline findings

**Mixed signals on future funding.**<sup>5</sup> Many funders and pooled funds are planning to give more on democracy in 2025 than they did in 2024, but a significant number of donor advisors and networks also expect the donors and philanthropies they work with to give less.

- While more than seven in ten funders and pooled funds say their democracy giving is going to increase (30%) or be stable (46%) in 2025, a similar number of networks and advisors say they are expecting a decrease (36%) in 2025 giving among the donors they work with or that they are uncertain (36%).

**Some organizations revisiting strategy, few pausing giving.**<sup>6</sup> A significant percentage of donors and pooled funds report that they will be revisiting their strategy in 2025, but far fewer say they will be pausing giving during this period.

- About four in ten (39%) donors and pooled funds say they will be revisiting their long-term strategy in 2025. A similar number (42%) say they will not be revisiting strategy while 19% said they are not sure.
- Among those that say they are revisiting strategy, just one in ten (10%) say they will pause giving during this period.

5. See slides 22

6. See slides 23-24

# Topline findings

**No clear consensus on go-forward strategies.**<sup>7</sup> Respondents are generally dissatisfied with previous strategies used by democracy philanthropy but are divided between seeing a need to double down versus write a new playbook. Many express support for countering authoritarian threats, grassroots movement building, and developing a robust media ecosystem to help better inform the public. Many also believe that philanthropy does not currently have the strategies it needs.

- Just 21% of respondents said philanthropy properly invested in movement building and grassroots organizing in preparation for the 2024 election. About three-quarters (76%) say it is something philanthropy needs to do better for future cycles.
- Relative to 2024, respondents are now more likely to say that countering authoritarianism (41% vs. 52%) and ensuring an informed public through a robust media ecosystem (37% vs. 49%) should receive more resources and attention.
- Seven in ten (70%) respondents agree that philanthropy does not currently possess the strategies needed to significantly improve U.S. democracy.

7. Sees slides 28-29, 33

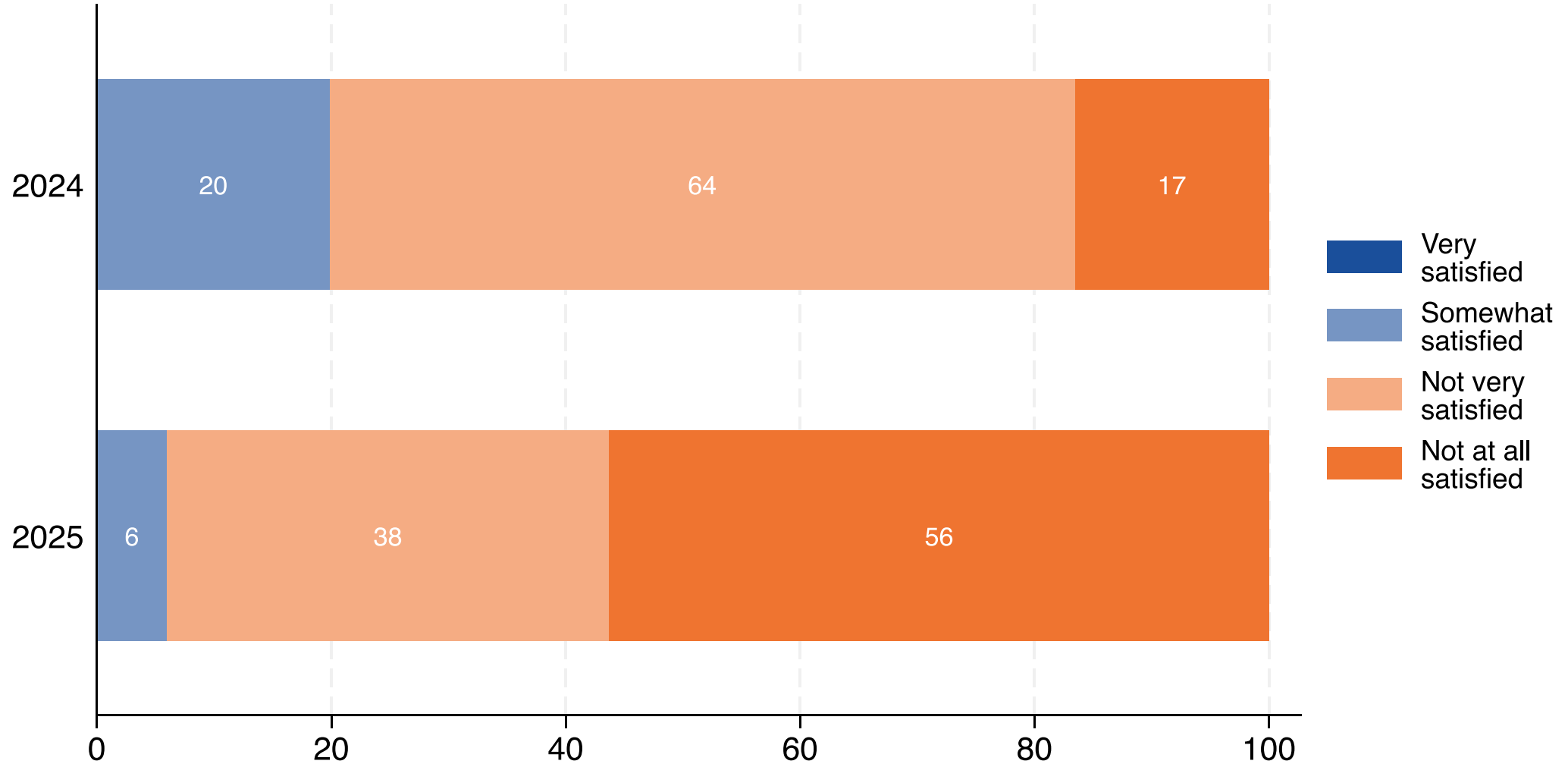
**What is the mood now?**

**What are funders concerned about?**



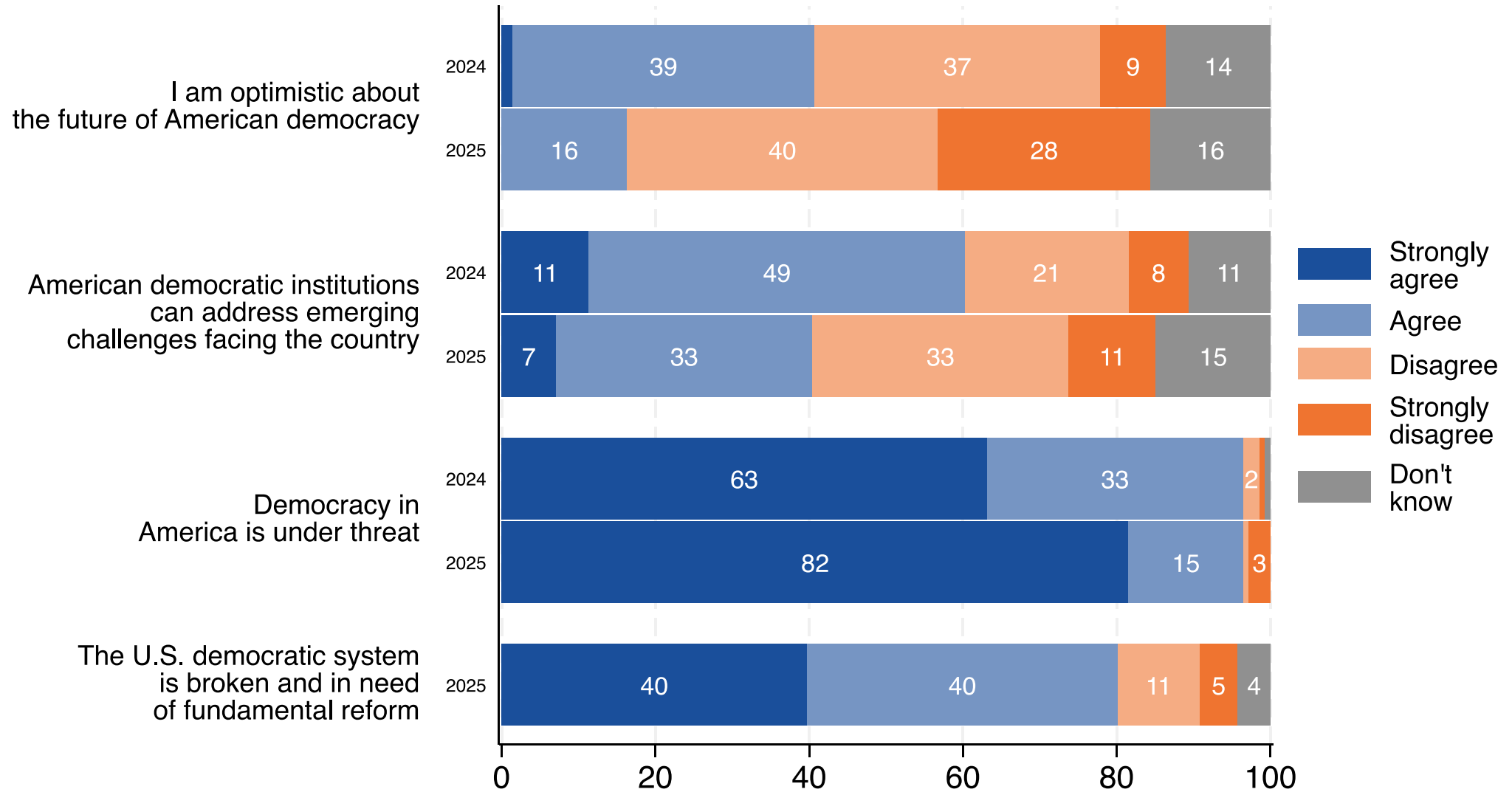
# Rising dissatisfaction with American democracy

*How satisfied are you with the way democracy is working in the United States?*



**Note:** N between 150-151 for both waves

# Rising concerns about democracy, American institutions



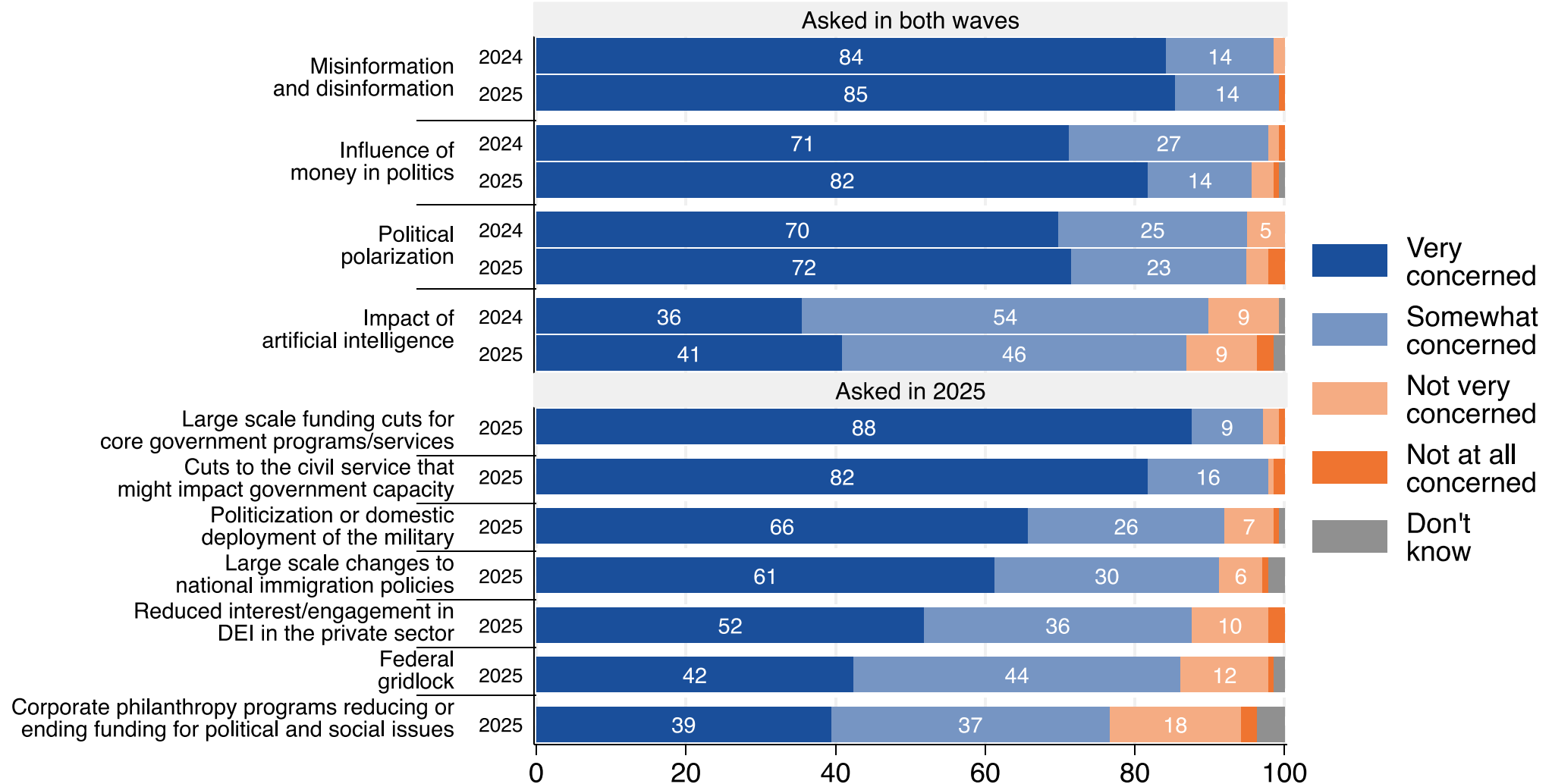
Note: N=141 for both waves

# Breakouts by grant amount

- Small donors (70%) are less likely than medium (86%) and large donors (78%) to agree that US democracy is broken and in need fundamental reform.
- Small donors (70%) are more likely than medium (51%) and large donors (54%) to be optimistic about the future of US democracy.
- Small donors (51%) are most likely to agree that democratic institutions can address emerging challenges - with medium (41%) and large (29%) donors being less likely to agree.
- There are similar views about democracy being under threat across donor groups.

# High concern about new administration's actions, rising concern about money in politics

How concerned are you about these potential challenges to the American democratic system?



Note: N between 137-139 for both waves

# Breakouts by grant amount

Across a wide variety of issues, small donors have a higher intensity of concern. Relative to large donors, small donors are more likely to be *very concerned* about:

- Political polarization (94% small donors vs 54% large donors)
- Largescale changes to immigration policies (77% vs 50%)
- Reduced private sector interest/engagement in DEI (68% vs 39%)
- Corporate philanthropy reducing/ending funding for political and social issues (68% vs 22%)
- Misinformation and disinformation (55% vs 28%)
- The impact of AI (52% vs 37%)

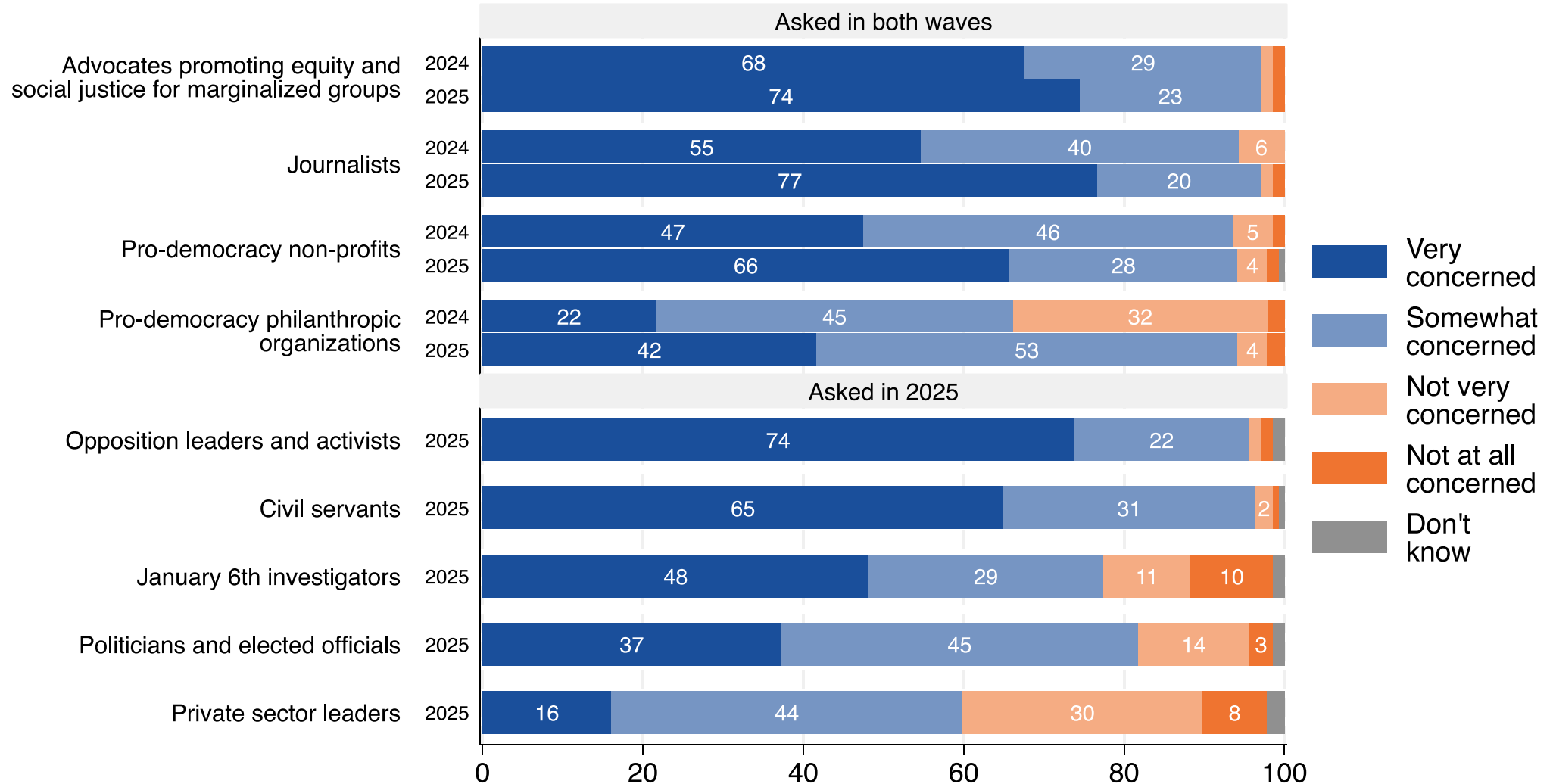
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*The speed with which norms are getting erased, rule of law is being threatened, and corporations are acquiescing [is a serious threat that philanthropy is unprepared for].*

*Respondent quote*

# High or rising concern for key democratic actors

How concerned are you about harassment and intimidation of the following groups?



Note: N between 137-139 for both waves

## Breakouts by grant amount

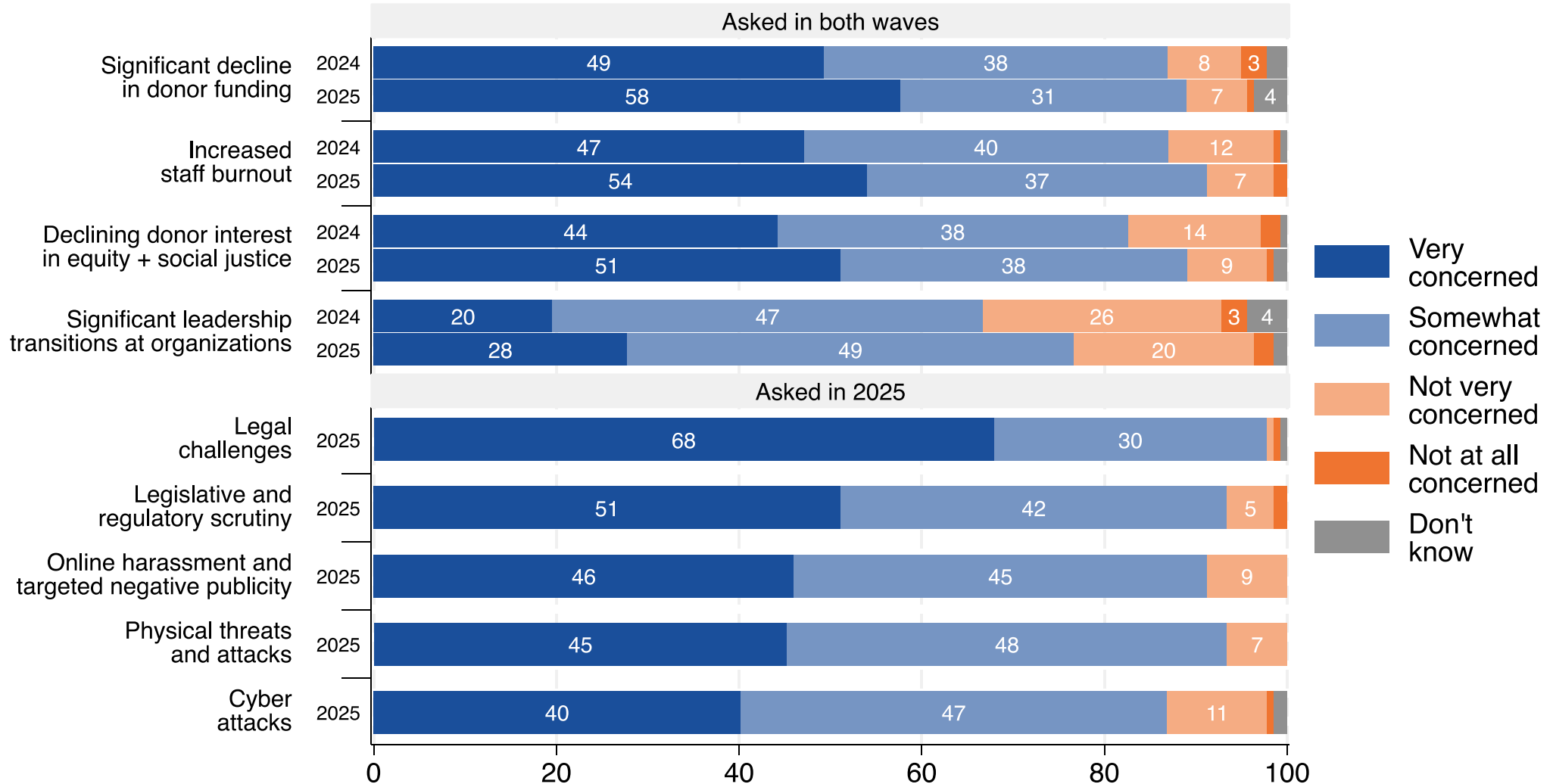
Notably, small donors have a higher intensity of concern about the harassment and intimidation of pro-democratic philanthropic organizations.

- While more than six in ten (61%) small donors are *very concerned* about this, medium (33%) and large (33%) donors are about half as likely to express the same intensity of concern.



# Higher concern for legal challenges and scrutiny, declining funding and donor interest

How concerned are you about these potential challenges to organizations working to protect American democracy?



Note: N between 137-138 for both waves

**How prepared is the field?**

**What might this year's funding environment look like?**

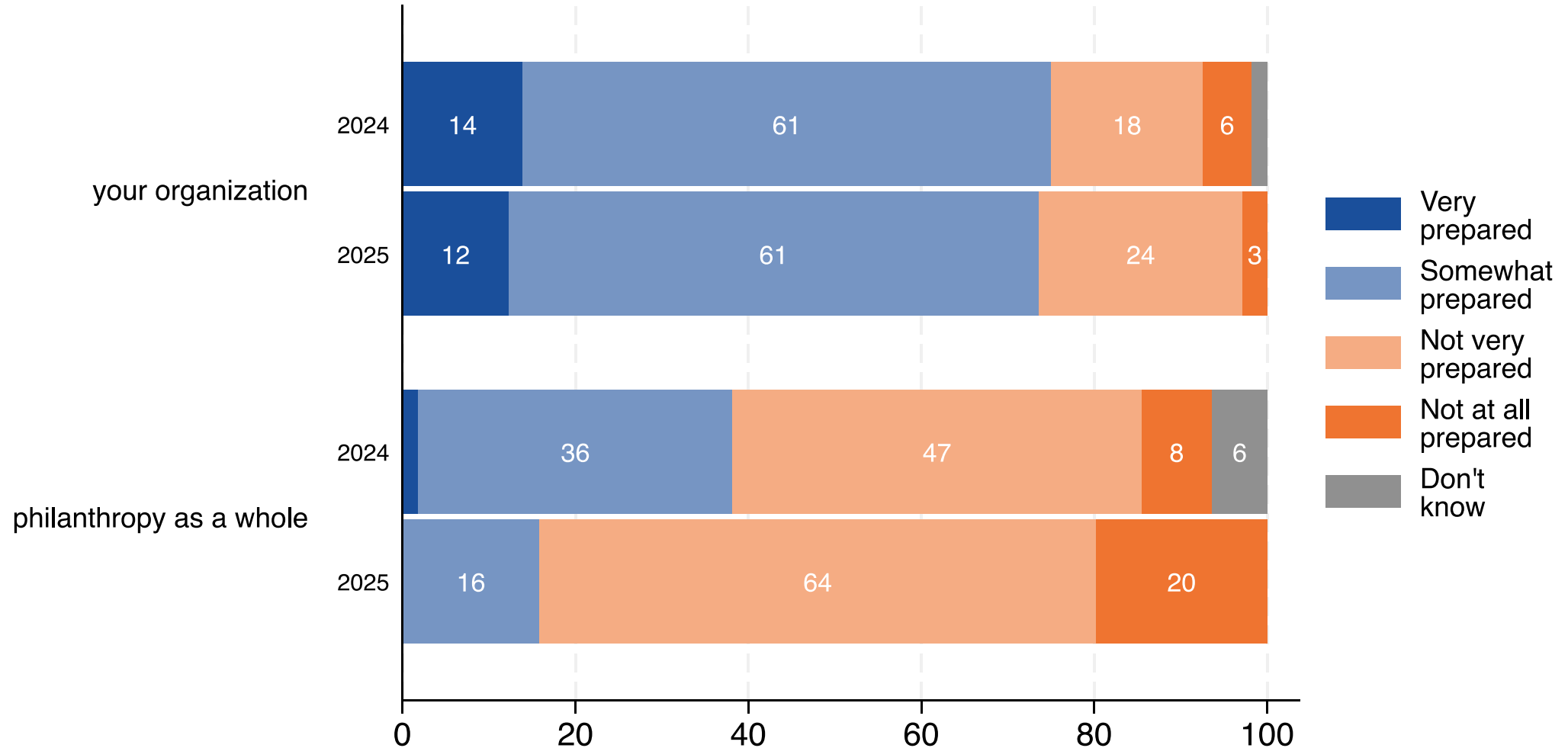
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*The pace at which philanthropy responds is a challenge. The threats to US democracy are happening in real time, and philanthropy has historically not been equipped at responding quickly to evolving/rapidly changing dynamics like this.*

*Respondent quote*

# Organizations confident in their own preparedness, increasingly skeptical about philanthropy as a whole

Asked of funders and pooled funds: How prepared do you feel that \_\_\_\_\_ is to act quickly and support field needs on democracy issues as they emerge?



Note: N between 101-110 for both waves

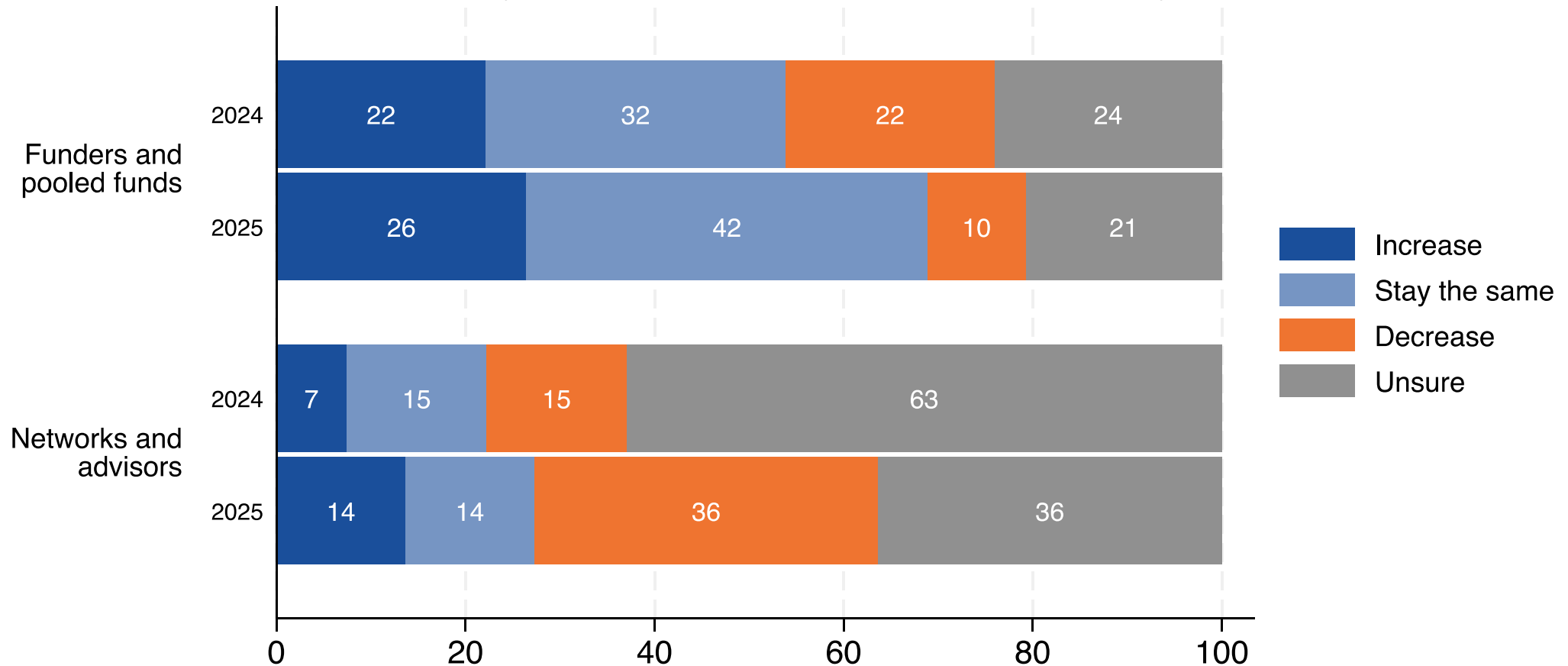
## Breakouts by grant amount

- Large (82%) and medium donors (75%) are more likely to say they are *very or somewhat prepared* to meet emerging field needs than small donors (60%).
- Donors with different levels of giving to democracy-related organizations are all similarly skeptical about the preparation of philanthropy as a whole.

# Majority of funders and pooled funds report stable or increased giving, majority of networks and advisors report uncertainty or declining giving

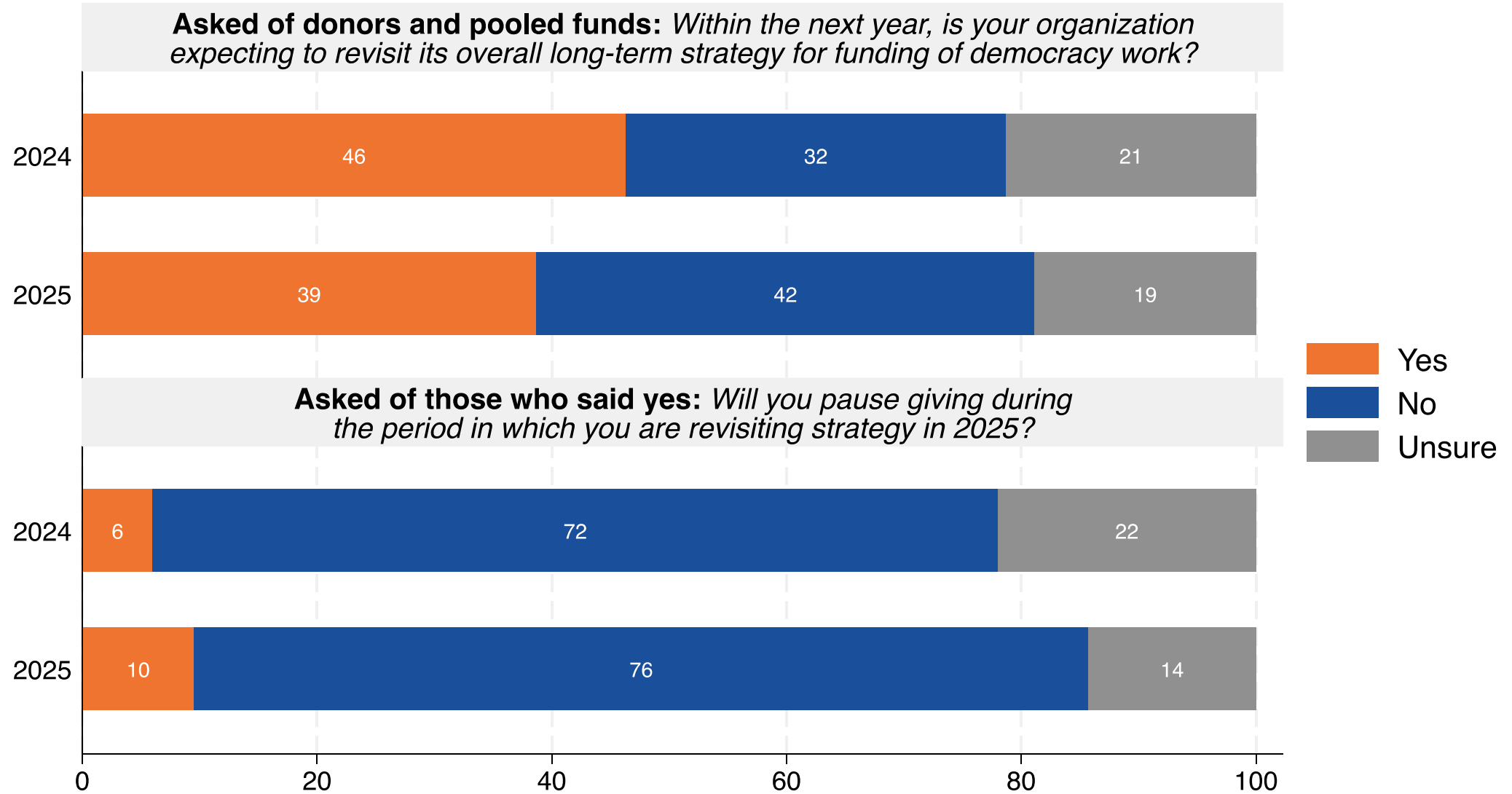
**Asked of funders and pooled funds:** *Relative to 2024, is your organization's giving to democracy-related organizations expected to increase, decrease, or stay the same in 2025?*

**Asked of networks and advisors:** *Relative to 2024, is the giving to democracy-related organizations from donors/philanthropies you work with expected to increase, decrease, or stay the same in 2025?*



**Note:** N between 104-106 for funders/pooled funds for both waves; N between 22-27 for networks/advisors for both waves

# Significant share of funders revisiting long-term strategy, few pausing giving



**Note:** N between 106-108 for first question; N between 42-50 for second question

## Breakouts by grant amount

- Large (45%) and medium donors (38%) are more likely to say they are revisiting long-term strategies in 2025 compared to small donors (26%).
- Due to sample size issues, it was not possible to break down the question about potential pauses in giving.



**What are funders doing right now?**

# More funders report offering legal, physical/cyber security assistance

*Which actions is your organization taking to help grantees prepare for the environment in which they will operate going forward?  
(asked of funders and intermediaries)*

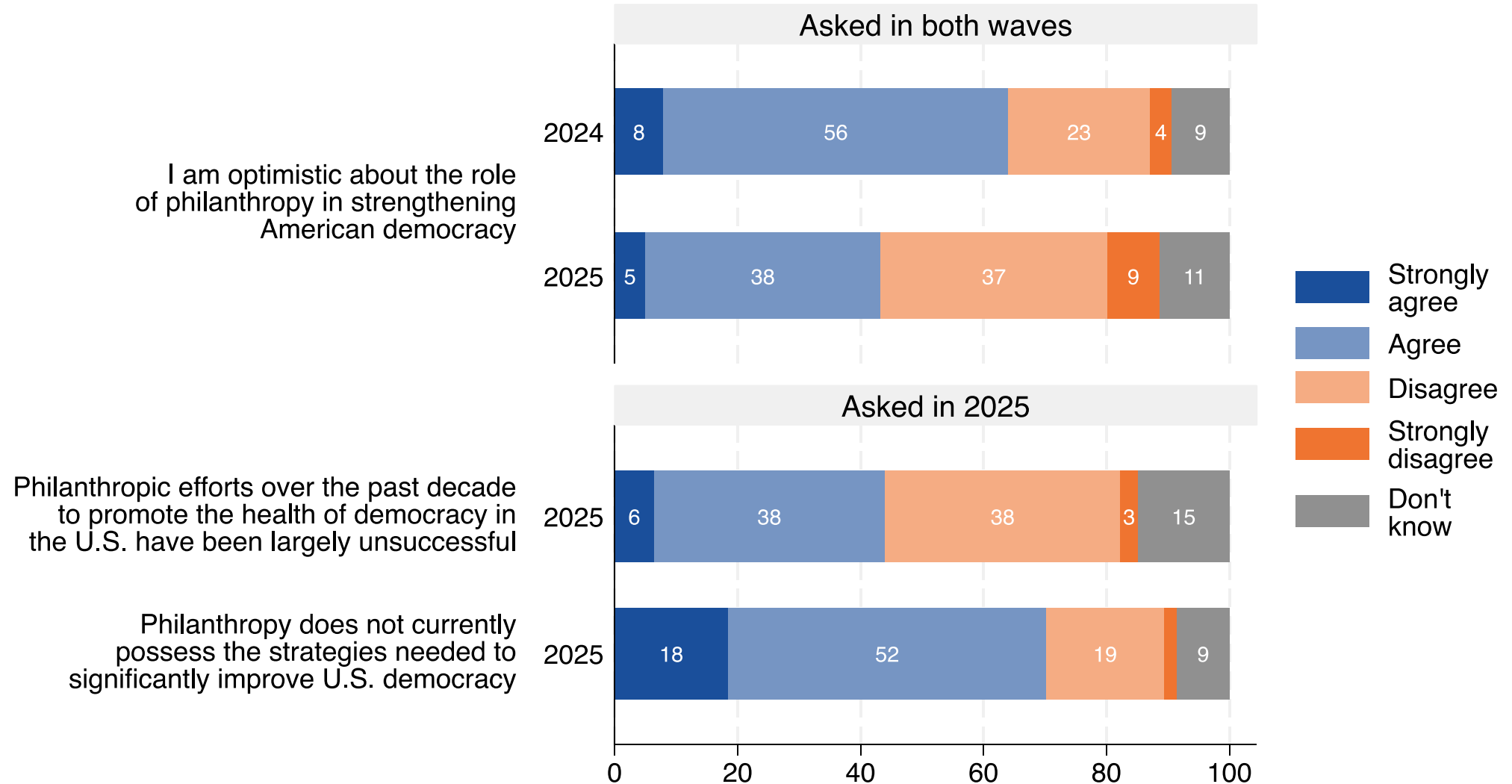
	2024	2025	Change
Providing multi-year support or otherwise communicating funding commitments early	52%	57%	+5
Organizing peer funders and other donors to resource the field	-	53%	-
Increasing the availability of flexible funding	43%	52%	+9
Helping grantees respond to legal challenges and scrutiny	30%	47%	+17
Supporting scenario or contingency planning	42%	42%	0
Helping grantees improve cyber and physical security	23%	34%	+11
Providing wellness supports and other strategies to combat staff burnout	24%	27%	+3
Other	18%	21%	+3
Providing support for leadership transitions	27%	19%	-8

Note: N between 98-101

**What do funders think the pro-  
democracy coalition did wrong?**

**What do they want to do going forward?**

# Funders split on the role of philanthropy and the efficacy of past efforts, pessimistic about current strategies



Note: N between 139-141

# For future elections, funders see investing in movement building and effective messaging as areas of improvement

- Which of the following did pro-democracy philanthropy do well in preparation for the 2024 U.S. elections?

- Which of the following does pro-democracy philanthropy need to do better in preparation for future election cycles?

	Did well in preparation for 2024	Need to do better in the future	Difference
Investing in movement building and grassroots organizing	21%	76%	+55
Supporting effective messaging on key issues	8%	69%	+61
Providing additional support to grantees (e.g. legal, communications)	38%	61%	+23
Providing early or on-time funding for pre-election needs	58%	55%	-3
Supporting voter engagement efforts	60%	46%	-14
Preparing for immediate post-election needs	37%	44%	+7
Communicating funding commitments to grantees further in advance	34%	44%	+10
Supporting election administration	50%	30%	-20

Note: N=117

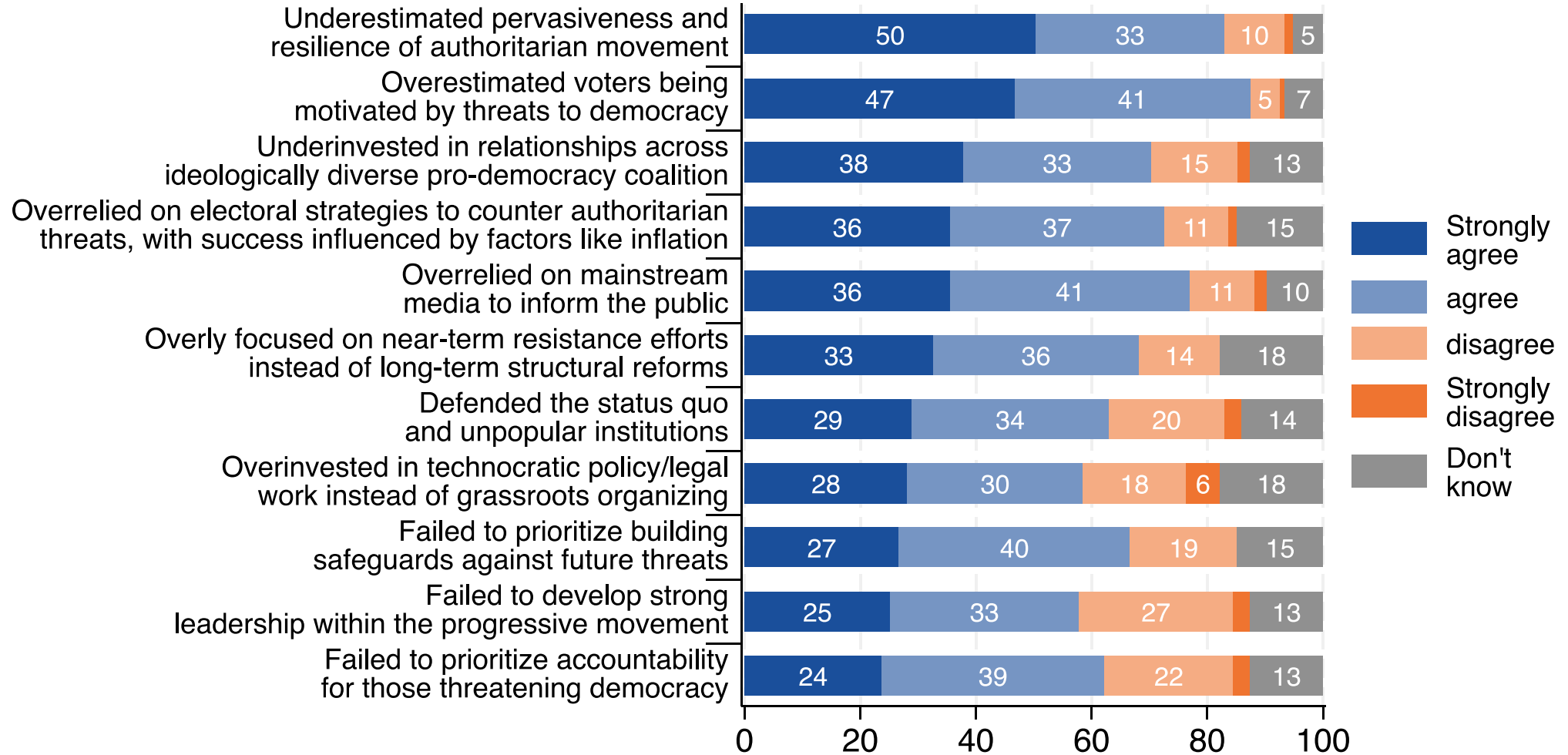
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*People don't vote because they love democracy, they vote because there are material problems in their lives they need solved. If we're not [focusing on material needs], we are losing these people.*

*Respondent quote*

# Highest agreement with narratives about misreading authoritarian movement, American voters

Over the past decade, the pro-democracy coalition has achieved victories but faces growing challenges. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about the pro-democracy coalition's strategy over the past few years.



Note: N=135; all questions were asked in the 2025 wave

# Breakouts by grant amount

- Donors with different levels of support for democracy-related organizations have largely similar views about coalitional strategy.
- One exception: While about three-quarters (73%) of large donors agree that the pro-democracy coalition defended the status quo and unpopular institutions, fewer medium (59%) and small donors (48%) hold the same view.



# Rising interest in countering authoritarianism, creating robust media ecosystems

*Relative to what is happening now, what areas of democracy work do you think need more resources and attention? (pick three)*

	2024	2025	Change
Countering authoritarian threats, extremism, and political violence	41%	52%	+11
Ensuring an informed public through a robust media ecosystem and other educational efforts	37%	49%	+12
Supporting free and fair elections as well as ensuring broad participation through an empowered electorate	49%	41%	-8
Growing the grassroots to build a just society, including efforts around racial justice, gender equity, the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, disability justice, civil rights, and climate and economic justice	46%	39%	-7
Building effective governing institutions that are accountable, responsive, participatory, and transparent	34%	36%	+2
Bridging divides, fostering belonging, and building consensus in communities	29%	25%	-4
Creating a vision for a vibrant democratic future through imagination, the arts, and storytelling	11%	16%	+5
Identifying, recruiting, and developing a diverse array of leaders for democracy	19%	15%	-4
Strengthening field infrastructure and capacity, such as supporting networks or conducting research to build field-wide knowledge	15%	15%	0

Note: N between 136-140

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*Continuing to behave politely and simply moving from one cycle to the next, as though slight modifications to previous strategies will suffice, has already proven catastrophic.*

*Respondent quote*



# Data + Methodology



- These surveys were conducted by Democracy Fund and its partners at Freedman Consulting, LLC.
- Organizations were invited to participate if they were identified as having provided an average of more than \$100,000 per year to non-profit groups advancing a wide range of work aimed at promoting a healthy American democracy. They represent private foundations, individual donors, donor networks and collaboratives, funding intermediaries, and donor/philanthropic advisors.
- The surveys were fielded via email between September 16 - October 11, 2024, and February 10 - March 7, 2025. These results represent responses from 227 organizations who participated in the first wave (N=156) and/or the second wave (N=151). In total, 77 organizations were represented in both waves. Organizational contacts included key leaders, where known, as well as many publicly available general intake addresses.

# Respondent characteristics

Which of the following best describes your role or organization, even if none of them are perfect?

	2024	2025
Private Foundation	38%	37%
Individual Donor or Family	8%	3%
Funding Intermediary	25%	17%
Donor Network or Collaborative	10%	11%
Donor/Philanthropic Advisor	8%	4%
Other	-	15%
Skipped	10%	13%

**Note:** The “other” option was introduced in the 2025 wave.

Please select the response that most closely corresponds to your role in your organization.

	2024	2025
Board Member or Trustee	1%	3%
CEO or President	38%	39%
Director	27%	28%
Program Officer	13%	8%
Associate or Entry-level Role	-	1%
None apply	4%	4%
Skipped	17%	17%

**Note:** The “associate or entry-level role” option was introduced in the 2025 wave.

# Respondent characteristics

Race/Ethnicity		
	2024	2025
White	47%	48%
Black/African American	8%	6%
Asian/Pacific Islander	10%	8%
Hispanic/Latino	9%	7%
Other racial group/Multiracial	3%	3%
Prefer not to say	7%	8%
Skipped	17%	21%

Gender		
	2024	2025
Woman	51%	51%
Man	28%	28%
Some other way (open end)	1%	0%
Prefer not to say	5%	4%
Skipped	16%	17%

# Respondent characteristics

Grant size groups were constructed using organizational grant data between 2020 and 2023. Those designated as small, medium, and large were identified as having cumulatively given less than \$1 million dollars, between \$1 million and \$10 million dollars, and more than \$10 million dollars between those years, respectively.

Respondents who do not represent a single home organization with an identifiable EIN were excluded from this analysis.

Organization grant amount – 2020 to 2023		
	2024	2025
Small	27%	25%
Medium	32%	28%
Large	24%	32%
Unidentifiable	17%	15%