



# ATTACKS ON AID: WHAT LANDS & HOW TO RESPOND

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- /// [www.developengagementlab.org](http://www.developengagementlab.org)

Development Engagement Lab



# ATTACKS ON AID

How are opponents attacking aid?

What arguments are they using that really land?

How is the sector responding?

How might attacks change in the future?





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# MOTIVATION

- Attacks on aid & development are becoming easier, cheaper & more frequent
- The arguments used to criticise aid are not (always) new
  - Claims about waste, national interest, or prioritising domestic needs are already common and likely to intensify
- Not all attacks work as well with the public: some are more credible than others, resonate with specific audiences, and may be harder to counter once people have seen them
- Important considerations in an ever-growing AI environment

# APPROACH

- Two main questions
  - Which attacks weaken public support the most
  - Whether that damage can be repaired and for whom
- Simulates a future communications environment in which anonymous, AI-generated attacks on development cooperation are cheap and scalable
- Exposes audiences to common anti-aid arguments and then testing whether targeted antidotes can repair trust, optimism, and attitude strength
- Identify which attacks pose the greatest risk to public support and which can be neutralised by antidotes

# SET UP

- Stage 1

- Treatment: Randomise message content (placebo, waste, rich countries, France first) & messenger type (doctor, businesswoman, news anchor). 12 (3x4) treatments
- Outcome: Agreement, accuracy, authenticity, believability, hopefulness + strength of one's attitude

- Stage 2

- Treatment: Randomise antidote videos (placebo, 1, 2)
- Outcome: Agreement, accuracy, authenticity, believability, hopefulness + change in strength of one's attitude about the negative messages

# APPROACH

## STAGE 1

Videos containing anti-aid messages



Questions

(Agreement, perceptions – accuracy, authenticity, believability, sense of hope around the impact of aid, certainty of their responses)



## STAGE 2

Videos containing antidotes



Questions

(Agreement, perceptions – accuracy, authenticity, believability, sense of hope around the impact of aid, certainty of their responses)

# WHAT PEOPLE SAW: VIDEOS W/ NEGATIVE MESSAGES

## PLACEBO

- In today's world, we are constantly flooded with digital information. But our brains are not actually designed to multitask effectively. Focusing on a single task at a time has been proven to boost performance. True productivity comes not from doing more things, but from focusing better.

## NEGATIVE MESSAGE #1 'WASTE'

- Your tax money is being sent overseas to fund projects that are **doomed to fail**. Instead of going to the people who need it, this money gets swallowed by **waste** and **corruption**. The projects **achieve nothing**, and your money is gone for good. It's time we **stopped throwing money down the drain**.

## NEGATIVE MESSAGE #2 'RICH COUNTRIES'

- Your tax money is being sent to **wealthy superpowers** like China and India. While they build their economies and space programmes, you're footing the bill for their investments. We are **paying our global competitors** to get ahead of us. It's time to **stop funding rich countries** that don't need our cash.

## NEGATIVE MESSAGE #3 'FRANCE FIRST'

- Your politicians claim there's no money left to **fix our crumbling roads and schools**. Yet, every year they are busy rushing billions out the door in international aid. They are **putting people in other countries ahead of your family**. It's time to fix our own house before we try to fix everyone else's.



# WHO PEOPLE SAW: MESSENGERS



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Businesswoman



Vos impôts sont envoyés à

Doctor



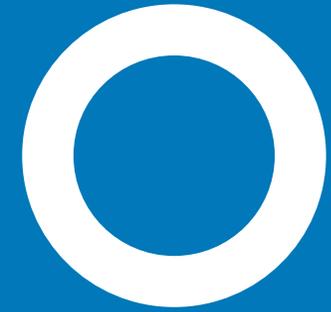
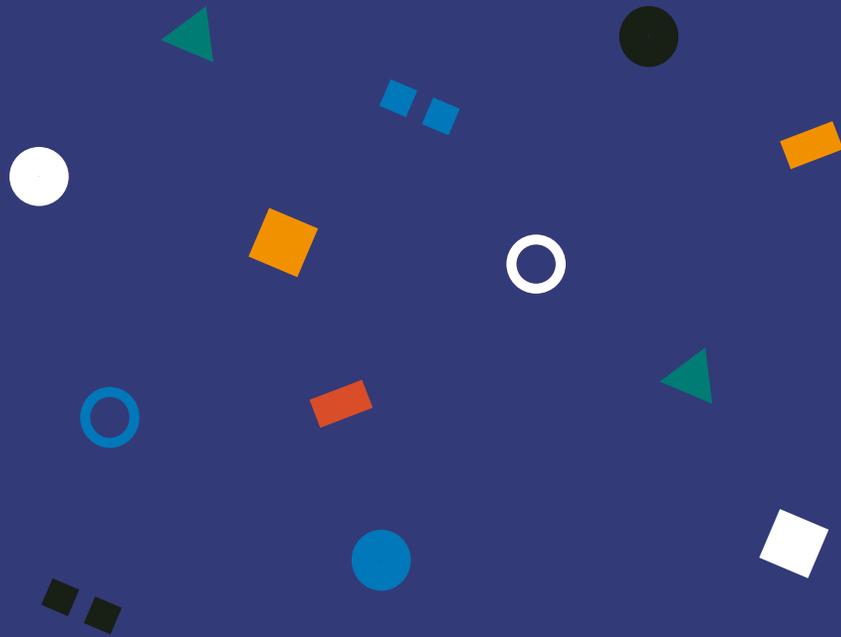
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News Reader

# WHAT PEOPLE RESPONDED TO

AGREEMENT	ACCURACY	AUTHENTICITY	BELIEVABILITY	HOPEFULNESS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the video you just watched?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "describes very poorly" and 5 means "describes very well", how well do the following adjectives describe the content of the video you just watched?</li><li>Accurate</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "describes very poorly" and 5 means "describes very well", how well do the following adjectives describe the content of the video you just watched?</li><li>Authentic</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "describes very poorly" and 5 means "describes very well", how well do the following adjectives describe the content of the video you just watched?</li><li>Believable</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means "Not at all optimistic" and 10 means "Very optimistic", how optimistic do you feel that international aid has a real impact?</li></ul>

# STAGE 1: NEGATIVE ADS

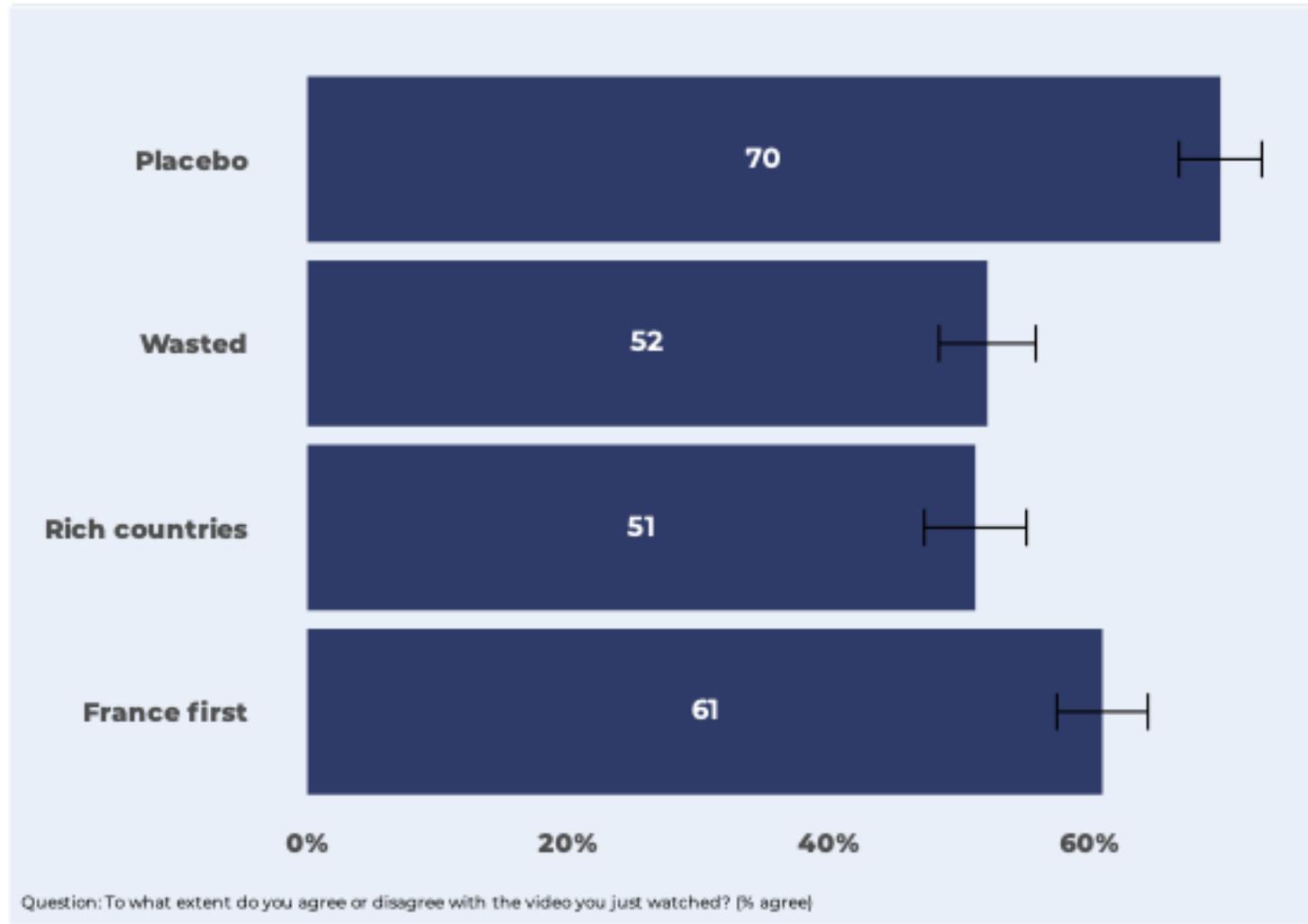


Which attacks are the most dangerous and why?

## HOW DID THE NEGATIVE VIDEOS LAND?

- How much did the French public **agree** with the videos?
- How did they **perceive** the videos (accurate, authentic, believable)?
- What effect did the videos have on their **optimism** around the impact of international aid?
- What, if any, were the effects of **messengers**?

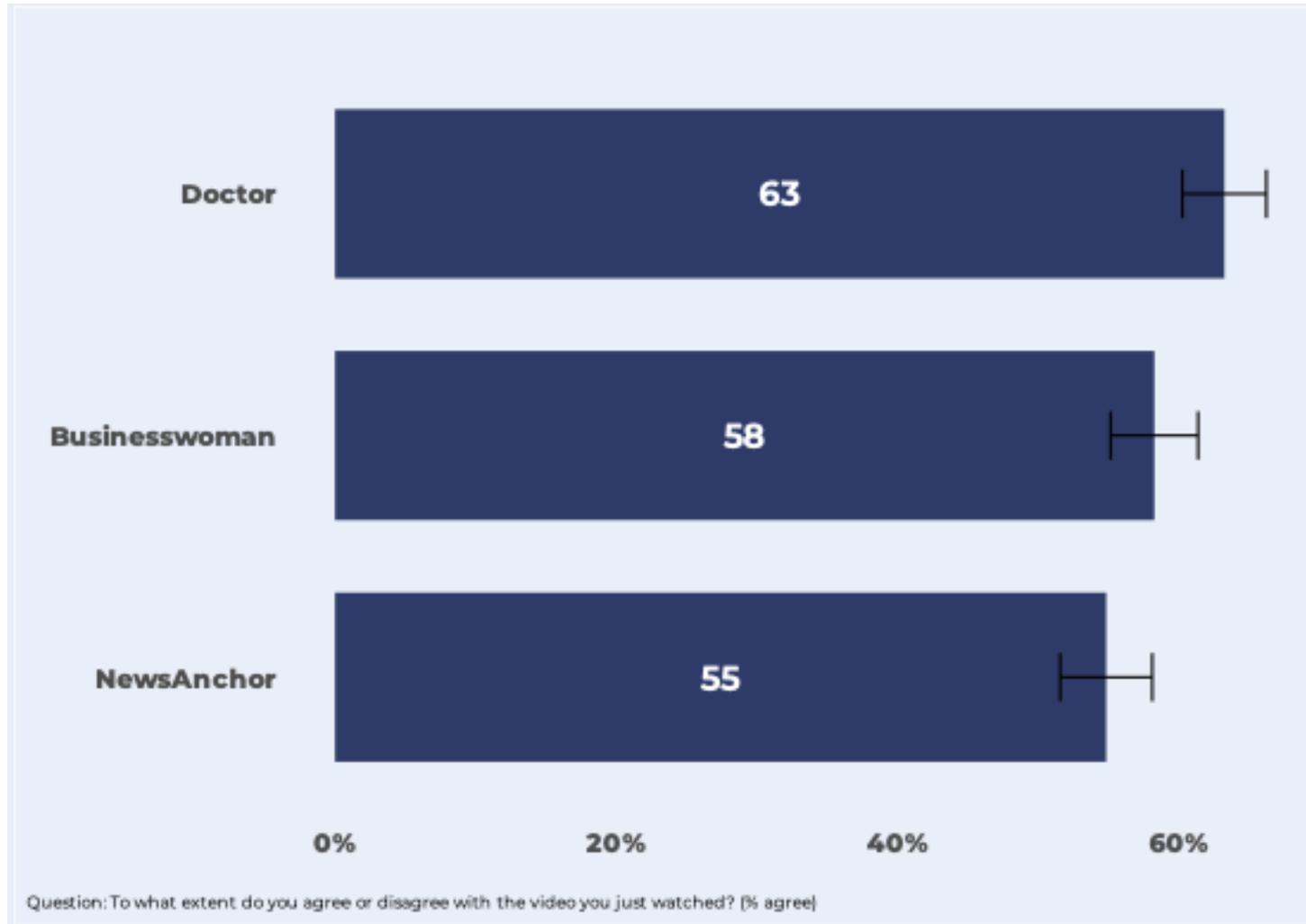
# 'FRANCE FIRST' ARGUMENT RESONATES WITH THE FRENCH PUBLIC



- Compared to the placebo, **negative messages on average get less agreement and the difference is significant** (this is good news!)
- Of the negative messages, **'France first'** gains the most traction across the French public
- **Age group differences**
  - "Wasted" – People aged **55+** are **significantly more likely** to agree than those aged **35–44**.
  - "Rich countries" – no difference
  - "France first" – Appeals more to the older age groups than the younger ones.
- **Voting differences**
  - **Le Pen** voters agree with all the negative messages significantly more (~80%) than Macron voters (~50%)



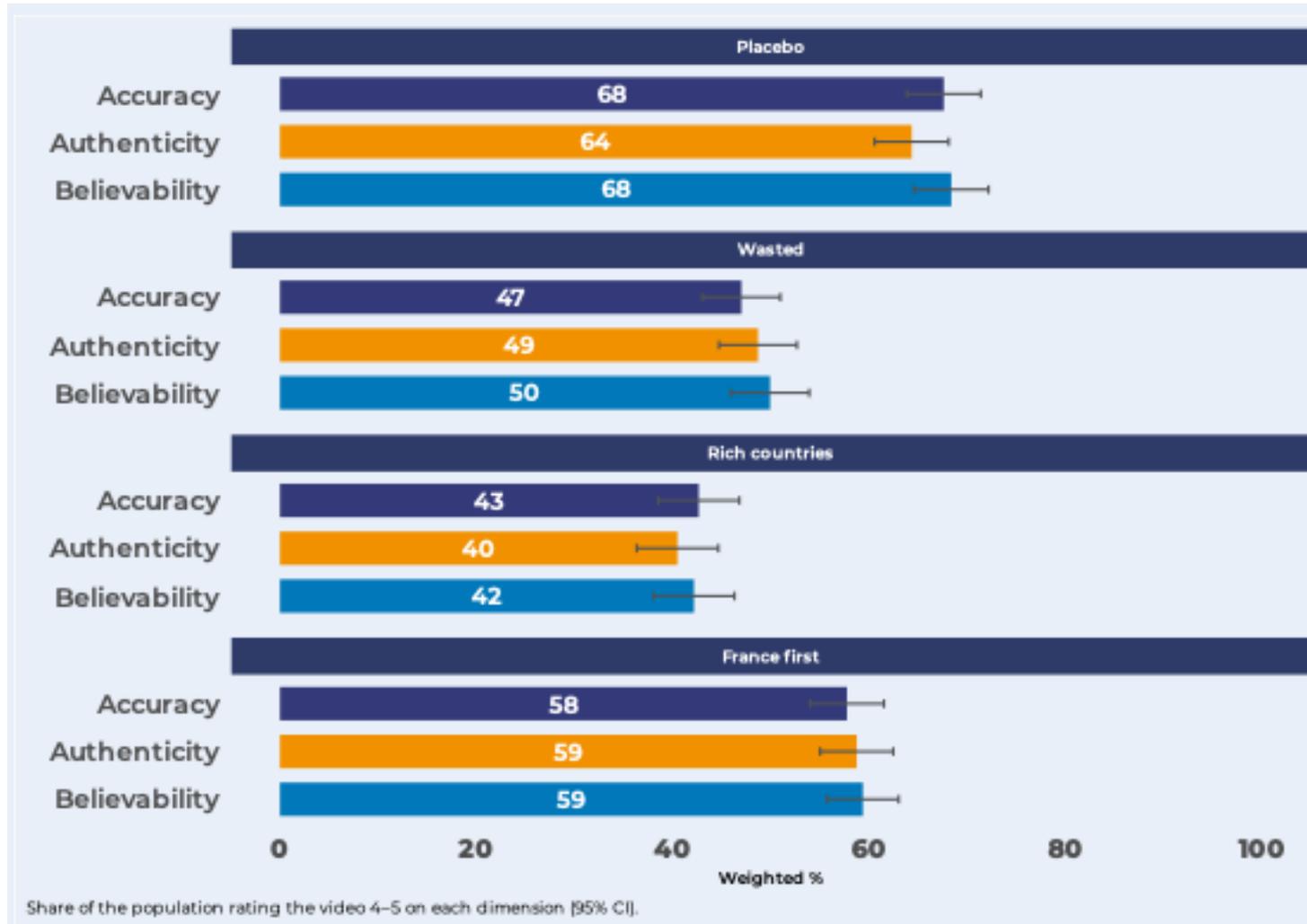
# WHO COMMUNICATES IS LESS IMPORTANT



- We tested three types of messengers – doctor, businesswoman, and news anchor, but there are **no statistically significant differences between the three** in garnering agreement from the French public overall around negative messages
- **Age group differences:** No age differences in preference for messengers, except 55+ (they prefer doctors to businesswomen and to news anchors)
- **Voting differences:** There are no differences for Macron and Le Pen voters; Melenchon voters prefer doctors over news anchors

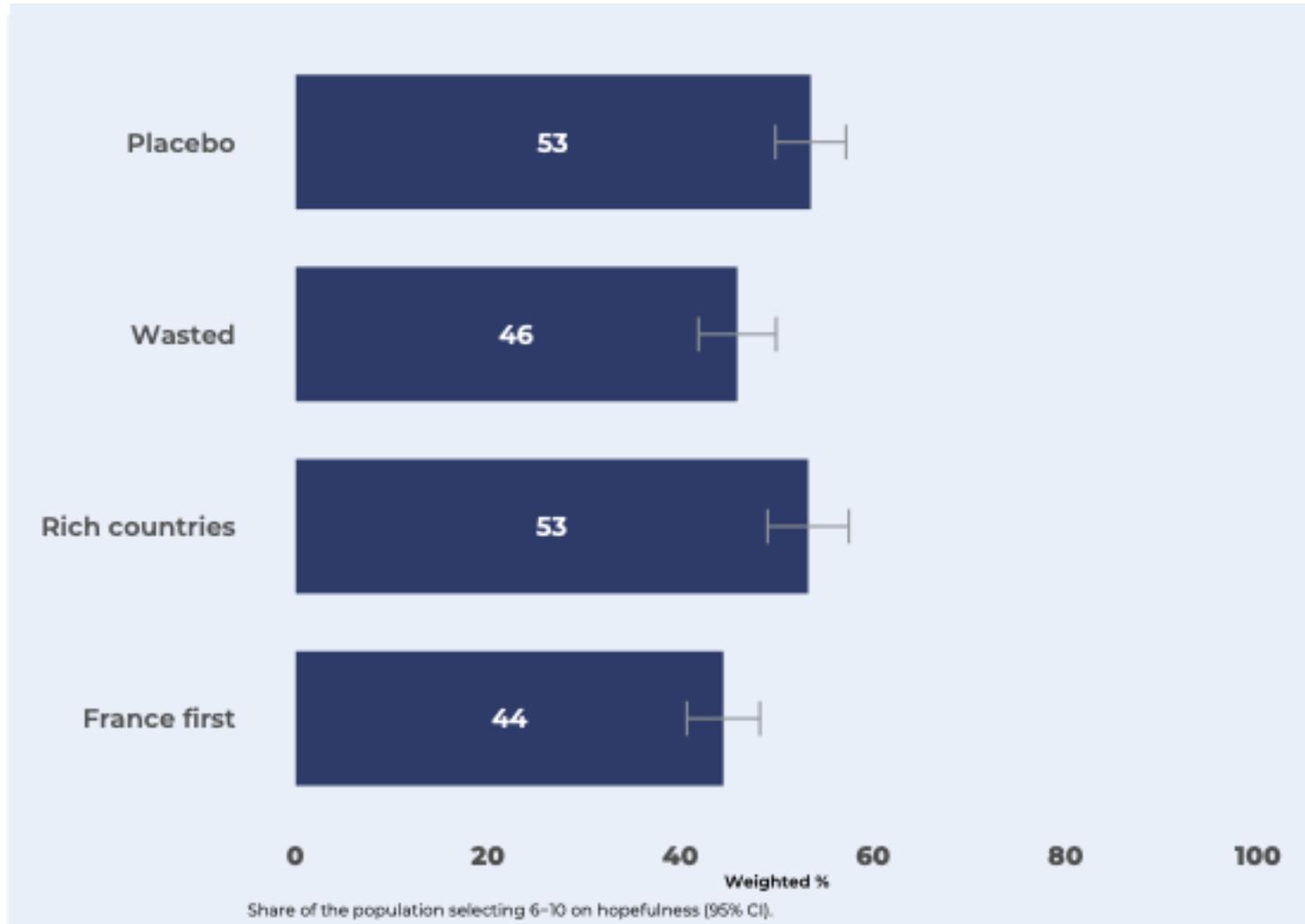


# ACCURACY, AUTHENTICITY, BELIEVABILITY



- We asked respondents how they perceived the negative messages around accuracy, authenticity, and believability.
- All three negative videos are perceived **significantly less positively** than the placebo video (again – good news)
- Among the negative videos, **‘France first’ message consistently outperforms the other two**, being seen as more accurate, authentic, and believable
- Perceptions vary sharply by political alignment. While Macron voters consistently discount negative aid narratives, **Le Pen voters perceive the same messages—particularly nationalist framings—as highly credible and authentic.**
- **Negative aid narratives travel because they feel authentic and credible to the “right” audiences.**

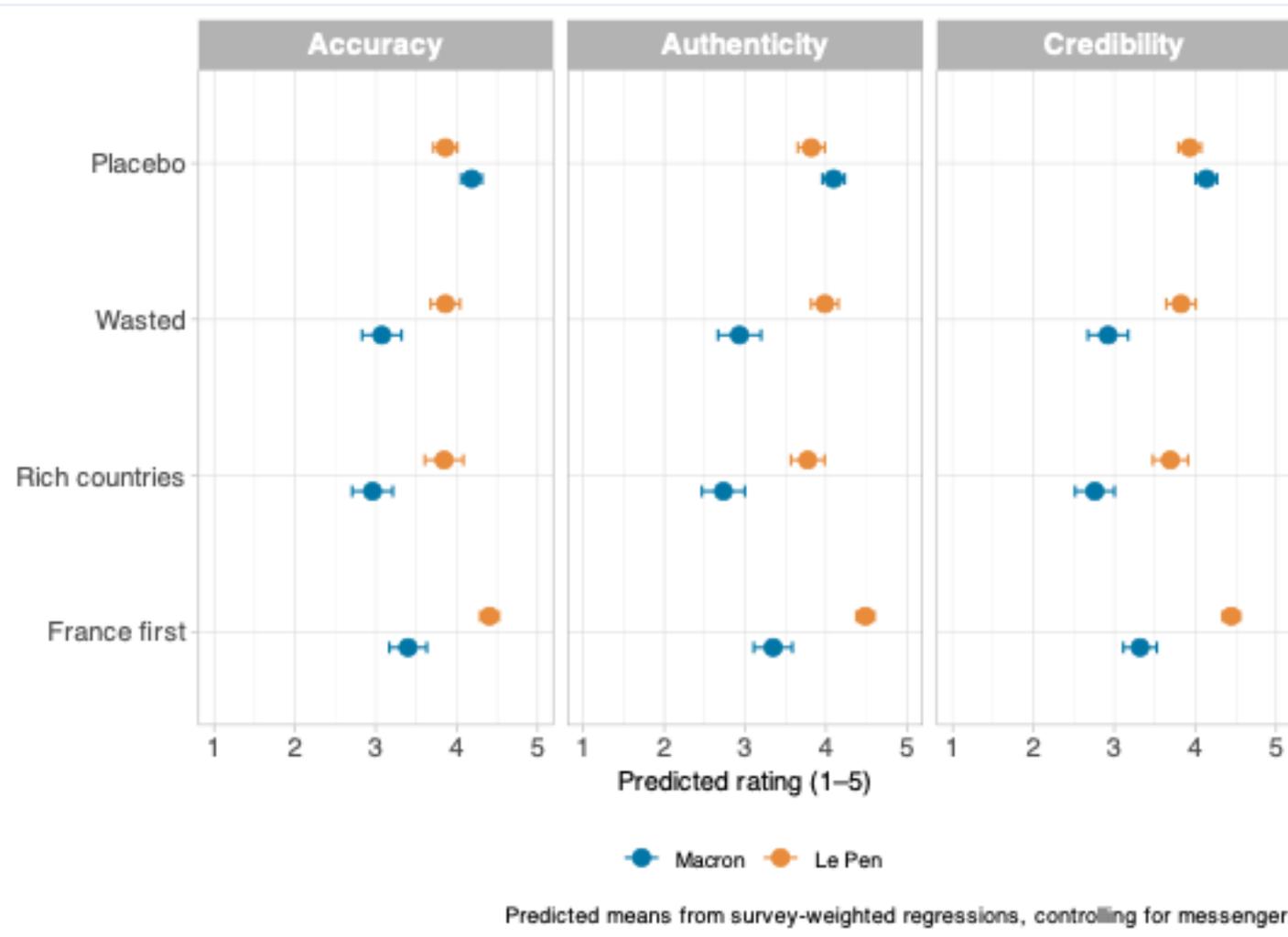
# AID IMPACT OPTIMISM



- We also asked respondents their sense of hope that aid has a real impact. This is to understand whether negative messages diminish people’s sense of optimism (and later, whether it can be mended).
- Not all negative messages undermine optimism equally
- Exposure to messages around ‘Waste’ and ‘France first’ **significantly reduce the respondents’ sense of optimism relative to the placebo**
- In contrast, ‘Rich countries’ does not produce a significant difference
- Putting it together: **Messages that undermine the sense of *effectiveness* or *legitimacy* of aid erode optimism, while critiques about misallocation do not.**



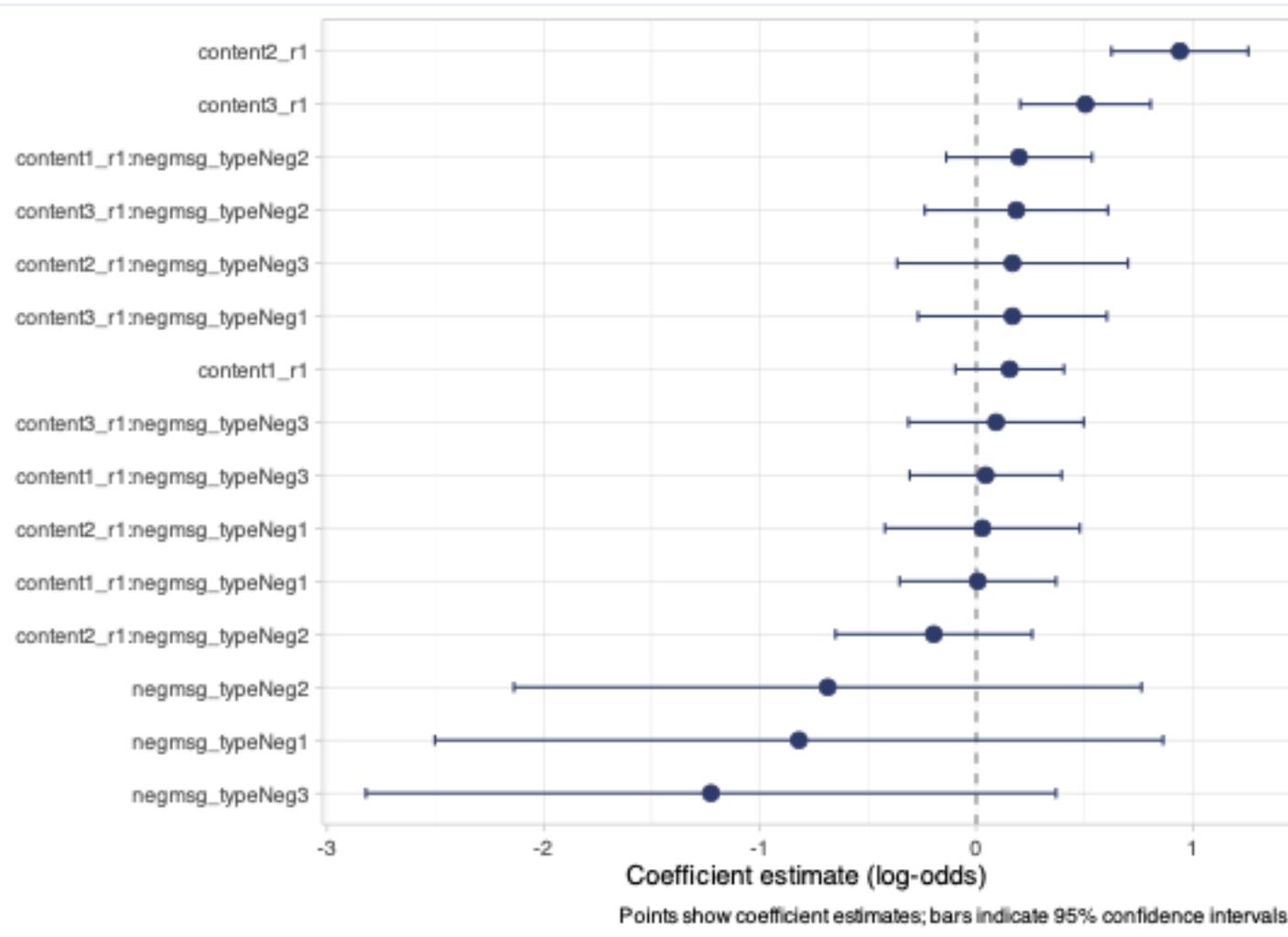
# BY PARTISANSHIP



- Perceptions of message accuracy, authenticity, and credibility vary sharply by political alignment. While Macron voters consistently discount negative aid narratives, **Le Pen voters perceive the same messages—particularly nationalist framings—as highly credible and authentic.**
- **Negative aid narratives travel because they feel authentic and credible to the “right” audiences.**



# DO PERCEPTIONS OF ACCURACY, AUTHENTICITY, AND BELIEVABILITY MATTER?



- Perceived **authenticity** and **believability** are strongly associated with agreement, whereas perceived accuracy is not.
- These associations do not differ significantly between placebo and negative messages, indicating that respondents evaluate negative narratives using the same credibility heuristics as neutral content.
- Agreement with the message is associated less with whether the message is factually correct, and more with **whether it feels authentic and believable**.
- **What we can glean from this: Traditional fact-checking may miss the mark if they focus narrowly on facts and figures (and we see this in the analysis of ‘antidotes’ – next section)**

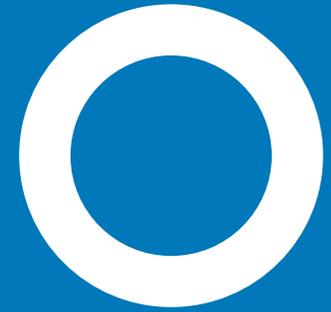
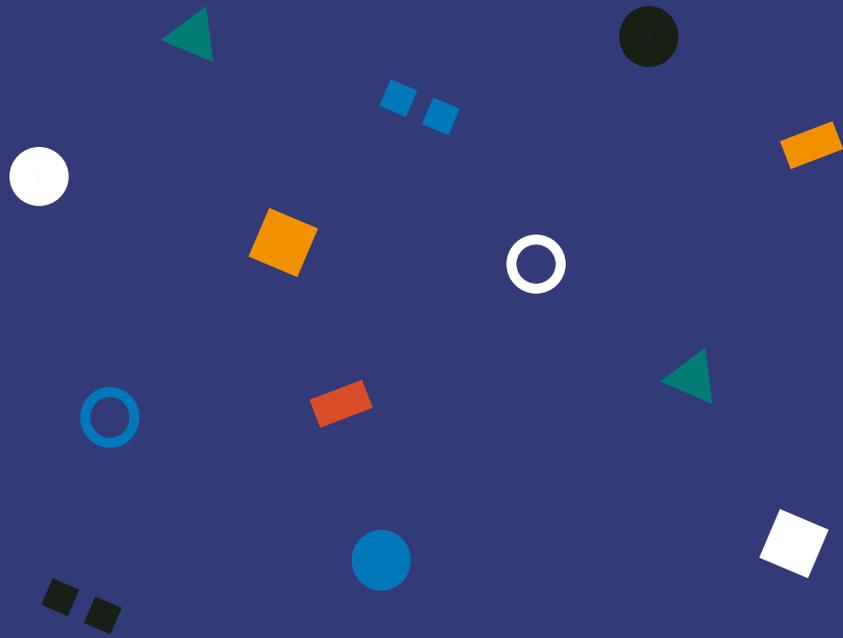


# KEY INSIGHTS



- 'France first' has the biggest (negative) impact on the French public
- Negative videos damage **hope** – especially 'waste' and 'France first'
- When content is seen as authentic and believable, the more the public agree with content
  - Building believable and authentic content is becoming cheaper and easier

# STAGE 2: ANTIDOTES



Can the damage be repaired?

# CAN THE DAMAGE BE REPAIRED?

- Can 'antidotes' or response repair the public's sense of optimism around aid?
- Can they reduce certainty with the perceptions they hold about negative messages?
- Approach
  - After seeing the first video, we showed them another video – the 'antidote' – and asked the same questions
  - Two types of antidotes were shown, based on the typical responses from sector bodies

# WHAT PEOPLE SAW: ANTIDOTES

## PLACEBO

- Studies show that taking short breaks during focused work can boost productivity and creativity. Even a two-minute pause to stretch or walk can help people return to their tasks with renewed focus.

## STATS AND FACTS/FIGURES

- Let's take a step back from the political noise and look at the actual results. In the last 25 years, global development work has helped cut child mortality by more than half, saving over 100 million lives.
- This is one of the greatest success stories in human history, and our country has been a proud leader in making it happen.

## CHARITY DEBUNKS/RESPONDS

- This message is incorrect and intentionally misleading, from someone with questionable motives.
- The reality is that global instability—from pandemics to conflict—is one of the biggest threats to our own economy and security. Investing in a stable world isn't a cost; it's the most fundamental way of securing our own future.

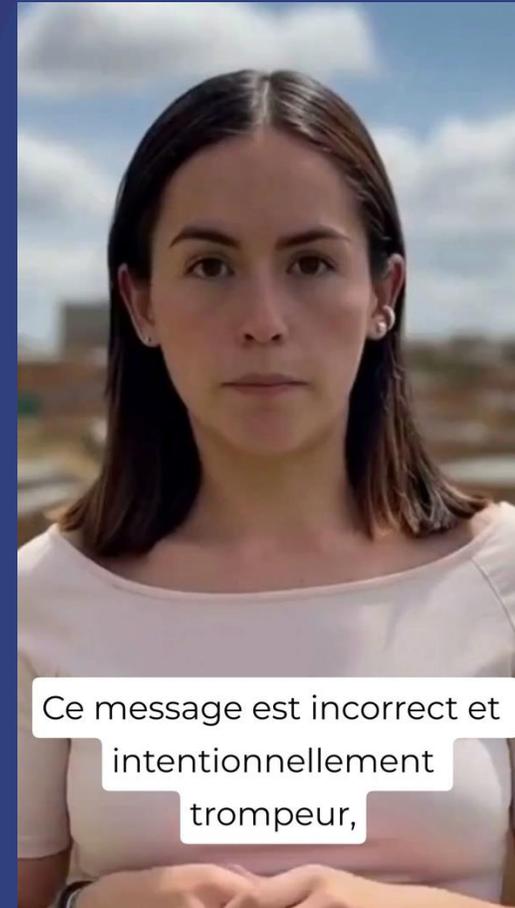
# WHAT PEOPLE SAW: ANTIDOTES



PLACEBO



ANTIDOTE 1



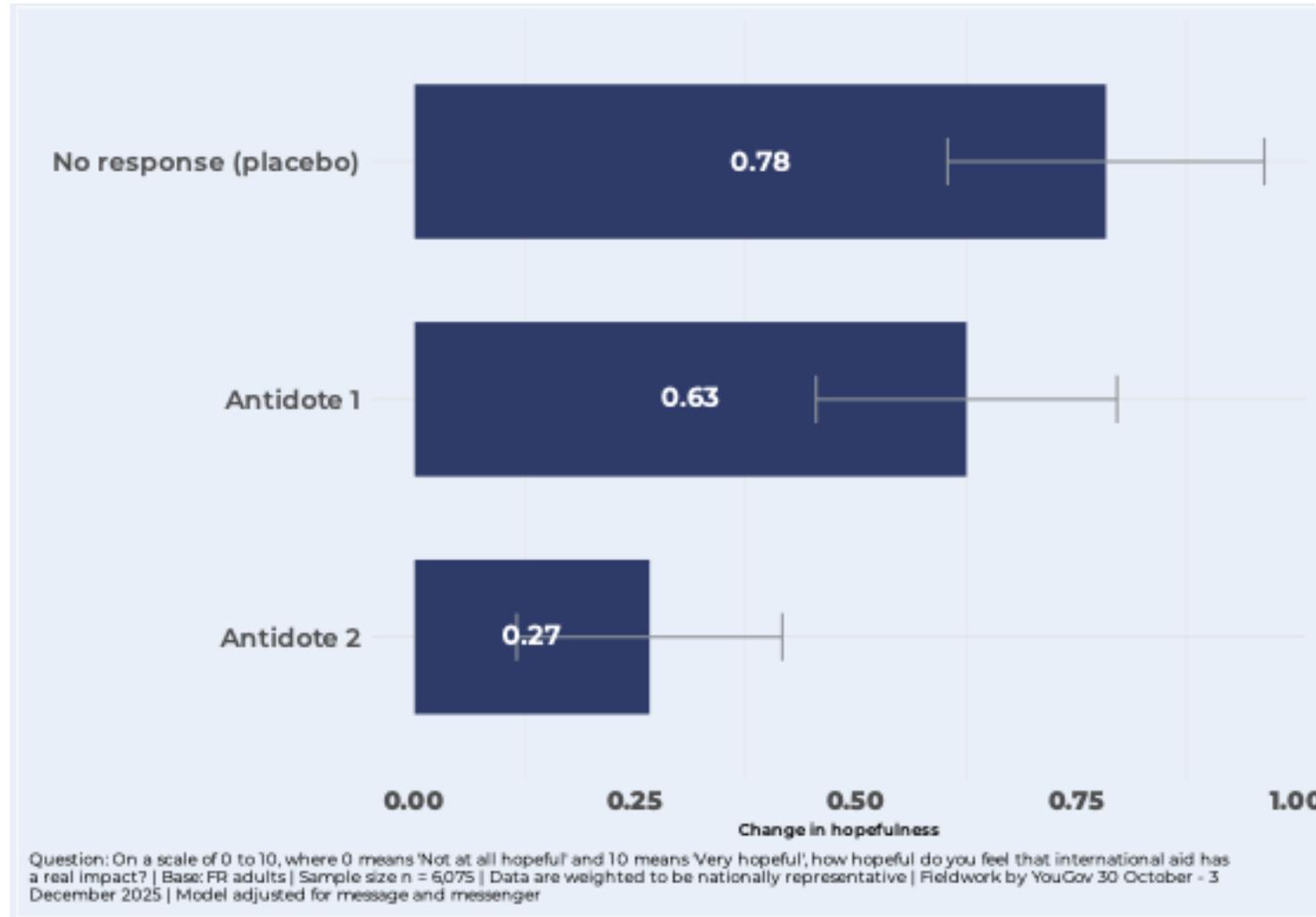
ANTIDOTE 2

# DO ANTIDOTES RESTORE OPTIMISM?

- No!
- Showing respondents antidote 2, actually makes them less optimistic (reads as defensive or not authentic, believable)
- Antidote 2 performs worse with 35-44 and 45-54 age groups and Le Pen voters
- Prevention matters more than correction: antidotes do not 'repair' optimism and defensive antidotes may do more damage for politically sceptical voters



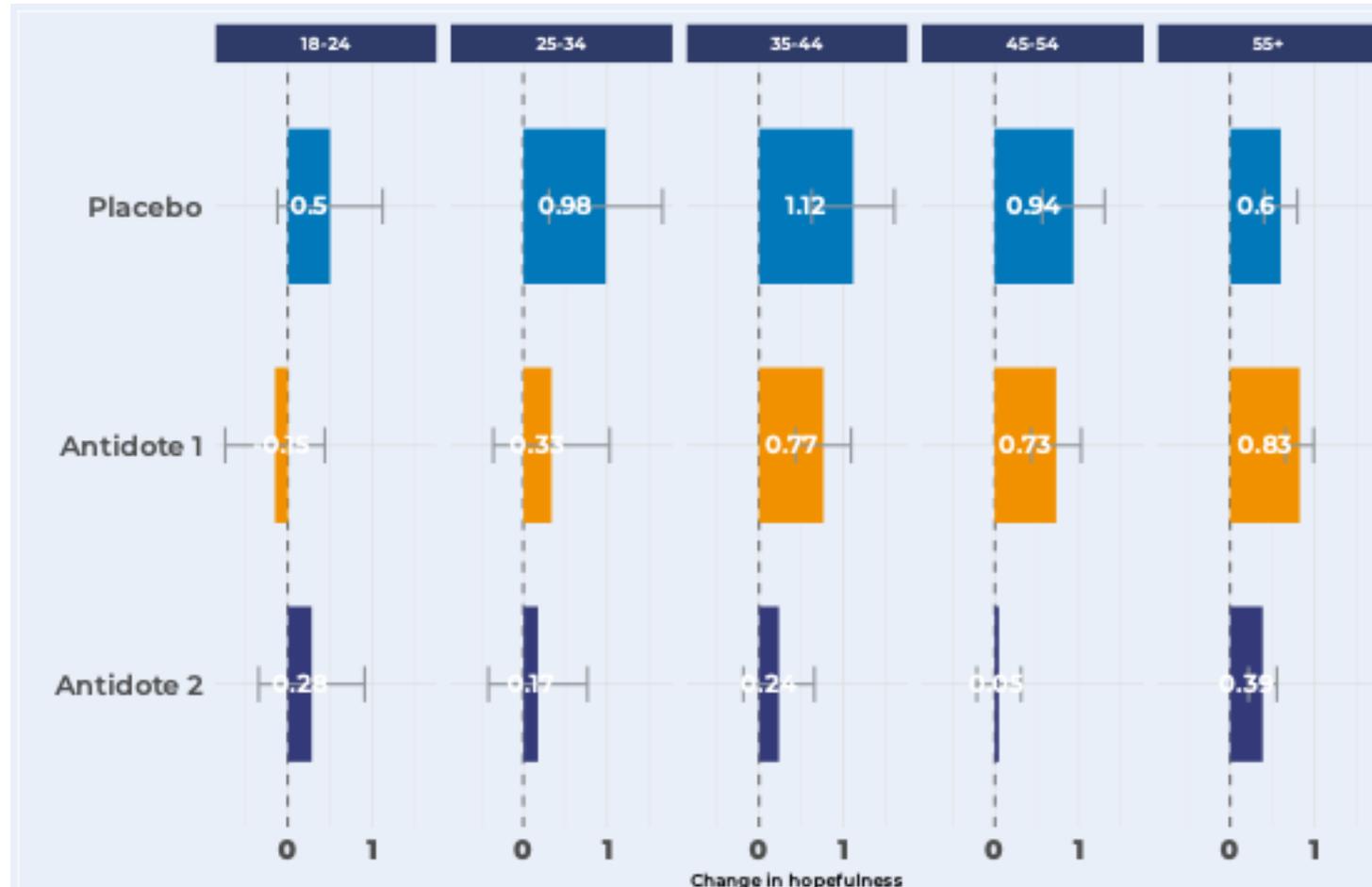
# DO ANTIDOTES RESTORE OPTIMISM?



- We modelled 'restoration' directly by looking at changes in optimism before and after the antidote
- We find that **people naturally regain some optimism over time without any antidotes (placebo)**
- However, **neither of the antidotes increases this recovery.** Antidote 1 (stats/facts/figures) does not affect hope any more than the placebo.
- Recovery of hope for **antidote 2** (charity debunks/responds) is **significantly lower** than that of the placebo, i.e., it leaves people less hopeful than if no response had been shown at all.



# DO ANTIDOTES RESTORE HOPE? BY AGE GROUP

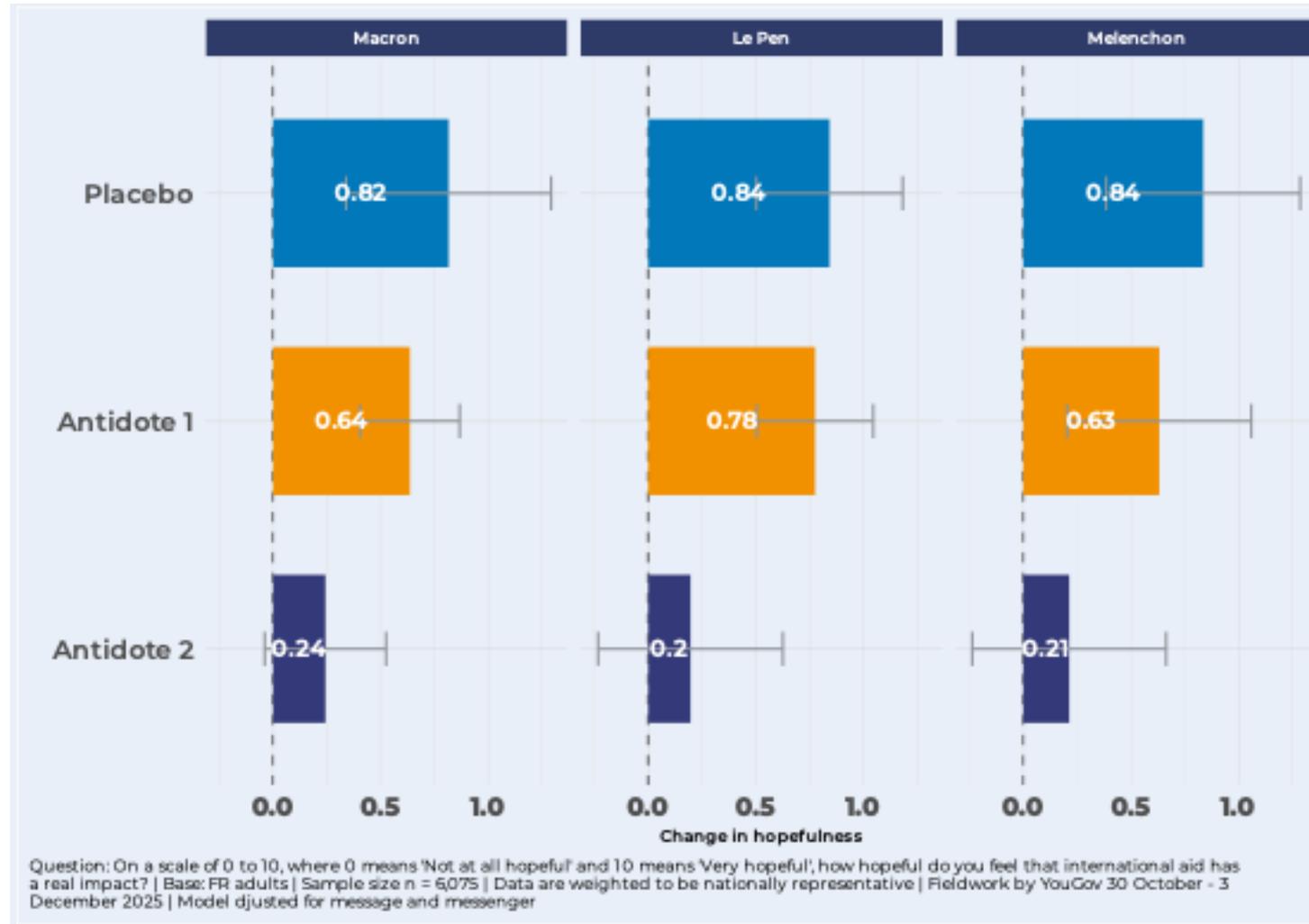


- We look at different age groups to see if the antidotes restore hope for different generations.
- For 18-24 and 25-34 year olds, as well as 55+, antidotes do not have an effect of restoring optimism in aid any more than the placebo
- For 35-44 and 45-54, antidote 2 has the effect of reducing hope relative to the placebo – they are worse off in their sense of optimism around aid than if they were not to see any antidotes

Question: On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means 'Not at all hopeful' and 10 means 'Very hopeful', how hopeful do you feel that international aid has a real impact? | Base: FR adults | Sample size n = 6075 | Data are weighted to be nationally representative | Fieldwork by YouGov 30 October - 3 December 2025 | Model djusted for message and messenger



# DO ANTIDOTES RESTORE HOPE? BY PARTISANSHIP



- No evidence that antidotes restore hope among any voter type
- For **Le Pen voters**, antidote 2 (charity debunks/responds) significantly **'backfires'** relative to both the placebo and antidote 1 (stats/facts/figures)
- Prevention matters more than correction. After the damage, antidotes do not 'repair' hope and defensive antidotes may do more damage for politically sceptical voters.

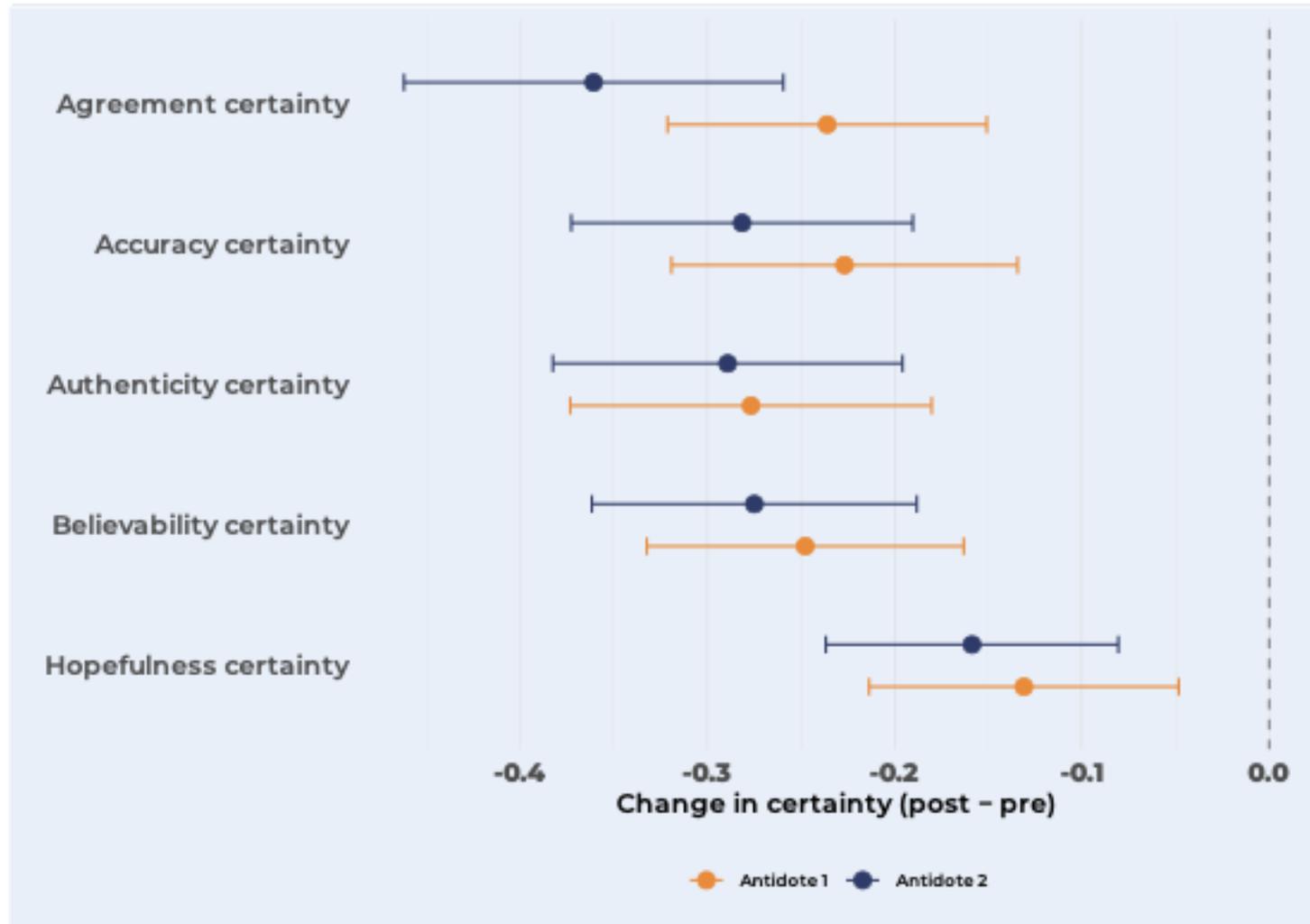


# DO ANTIDOTES WEAKEN ATTITUDES?

- Yes!
- Across all measures - agreement, perceived accuracy, authenticity, believability, and hope, the antidotes **significantly reduce people's certainty** in their earlier responses
- Antidotes don't reverse opinions, but they make them less rigid and potentially more open to change
  - Especially for 35-54 age groups
  - And for all party groups
  - Especially effective for Le Pen/centre right voters who were most receptive to anti-aid messages
- Antidote 2 is the most consistently effective strategy, especially against ideologically loaded frames such as 'waste' and 'France first'



# DO ANTIDOTES SOFTEN ATTITUDE STRENGTH?



- Relative to the placebo, antidotes weaken how firmly people hold negative views about aid.
- Across agreement, perceived accuracy, authenticity, believability, and hope, antidote videos **significantly reduce people's certainty** in their earlier responses.
- This suggests antidotes don't immediately reverse opinions, but they make them less rigid and potentially more open to change.





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The Development Engagement Lab (DEL) is a five-year study of public attitudes and engagement with global development in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States (2018-2023).

DEL is a partner focussed research programme, convening and co-producing research and insights with over 30 international development NGOs and government agencies to understand the drivers of engagement and inform development communications.

Fieldwork is carried out by YouGov and surveys are weighted to be a nationally representative of the adult population. DEL is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and led by Professor Jennifer Hudson (University College London) and Professor David Hudson (University of Birmingham).

The **Development Engagement Lab**

(Aid Attitudes Tracker Phase 2) has three goals:

1. Co-production of an evidence base for development campaigning
2. Enabling collaboration across the sector
3. Increasing advocacy capacity through the sharing of research and strategic insights

You can find out more information about DEL research at [www.developmentcompass.org](http://www.developmentcompass.org), follow us on Twitter [@DevEngageLab](https://twitter.com/DevEngageLab) or by contacting [del@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:del@ucl.ac.uk).

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