An Uncertain Future: Scenario Planning in a Pandemic

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A Way to Unpack the Buzzing Confusion Of the Current Moment

An Example:
What is the Future of Higher Education?

?

Step One:
Make a List of Key Uncertainties

If a visitor from the future were to arrive & you could ask them

"what happened about...?"

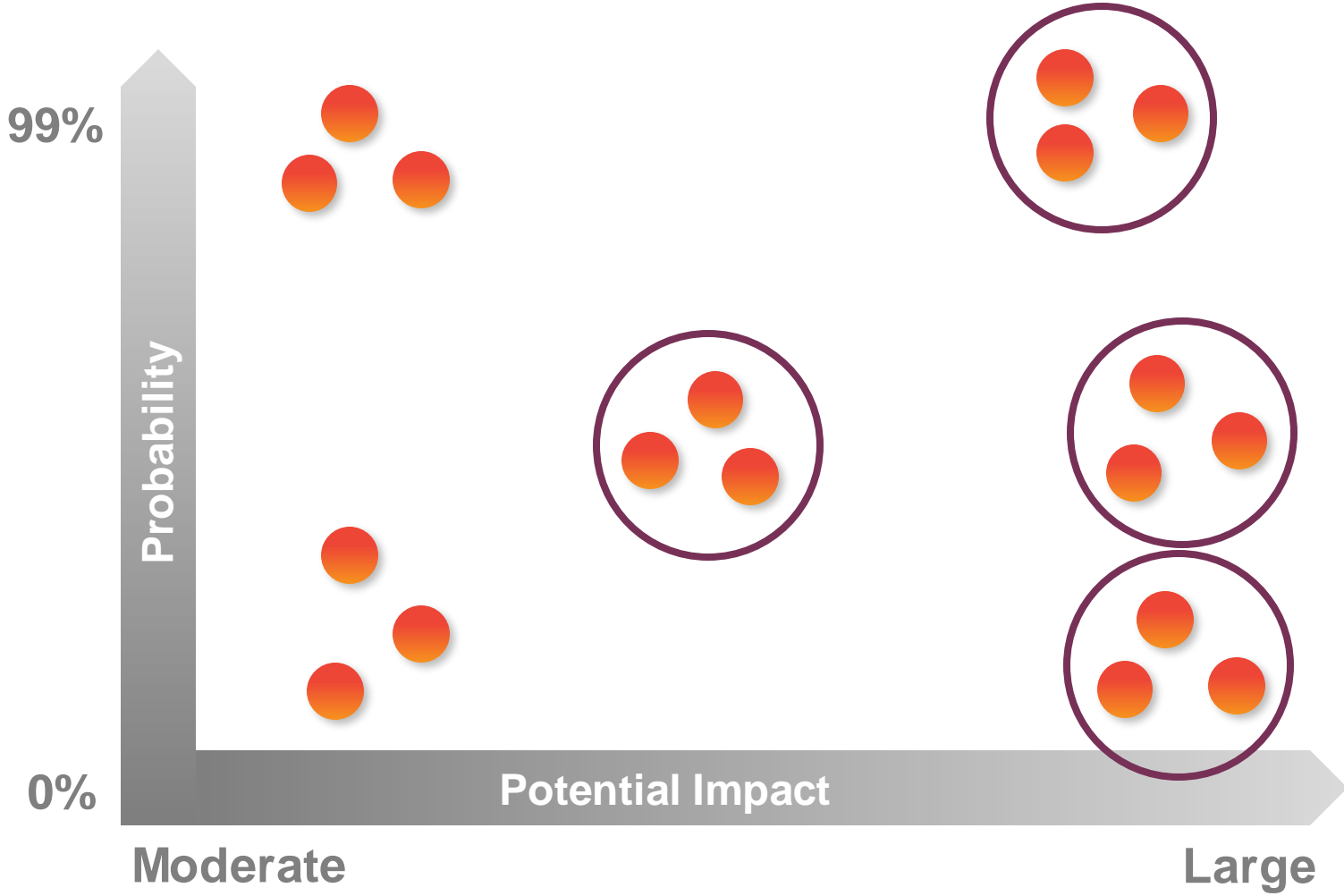What would you ask?

The Future of Higher Ed: Key Uncertainties

? Will the residential experience remain a key part of education?

? Will the public continue to be willing to fund higher education?

? Will education become a life long experience?

? Will international providers become competitive?

? Will online/distance learning technologies "work"?

? Will the shift to engineering continue?

? ….

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Step Two:
Choose Two

They should be both uncertain & important

The Future of Higher Ed: Key Uncertainties

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? ….

Step Three:
Use the Two Uncertainties to Draw a "Map"

Mapping the future of MIT

Public support for education stays firm

Distance learning technologies "work"

Distance learning technologies clumsy, ineffective

Public support collapses
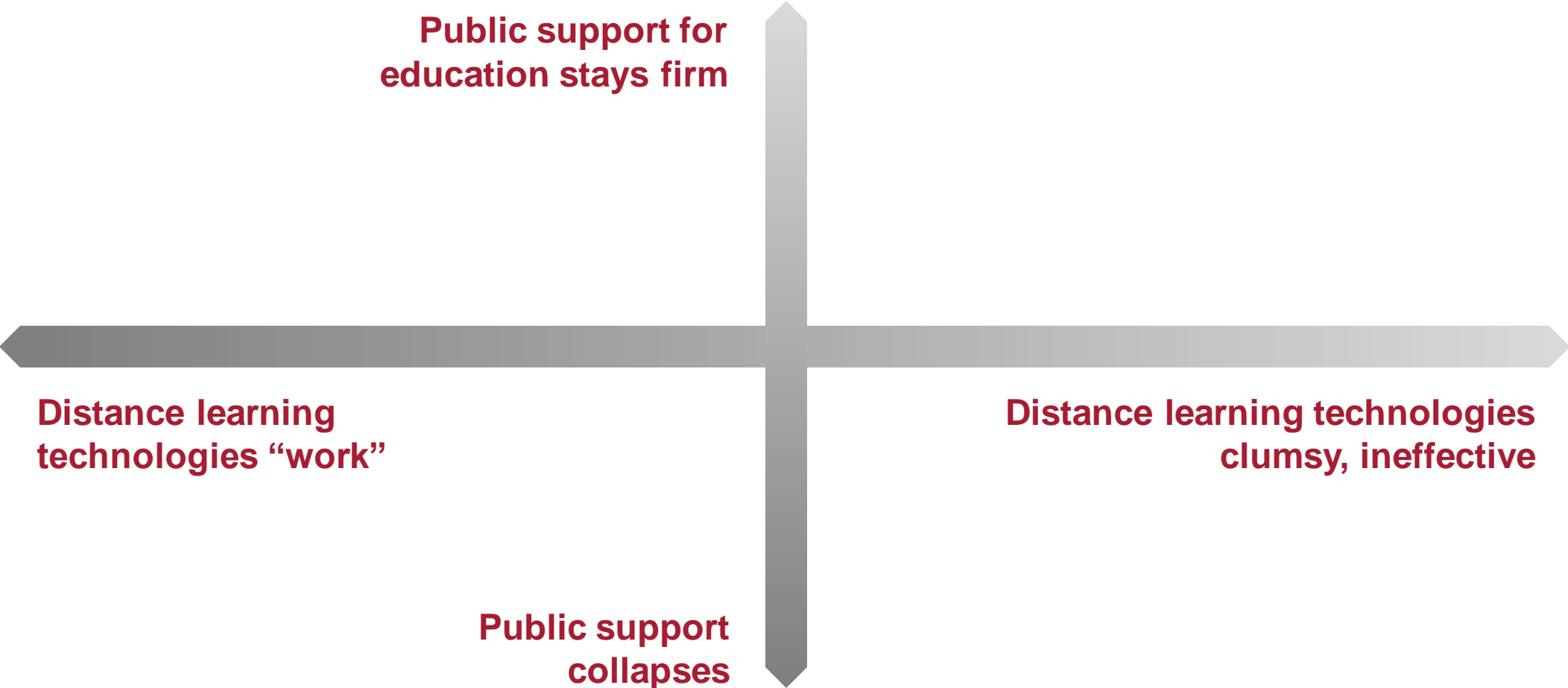
Step Four:
Give the Four Possible Worlds a Name

Mapping the future of MIT

Public support for education stays firm

Education for Life

**Business as Usual
or
The Crossed Fingers Future**

Distance learning technologies "work"

Distance learning technologies clumsy, ineffective

Brand Name MIT

Revenge of the Ivy League

Public support collapses
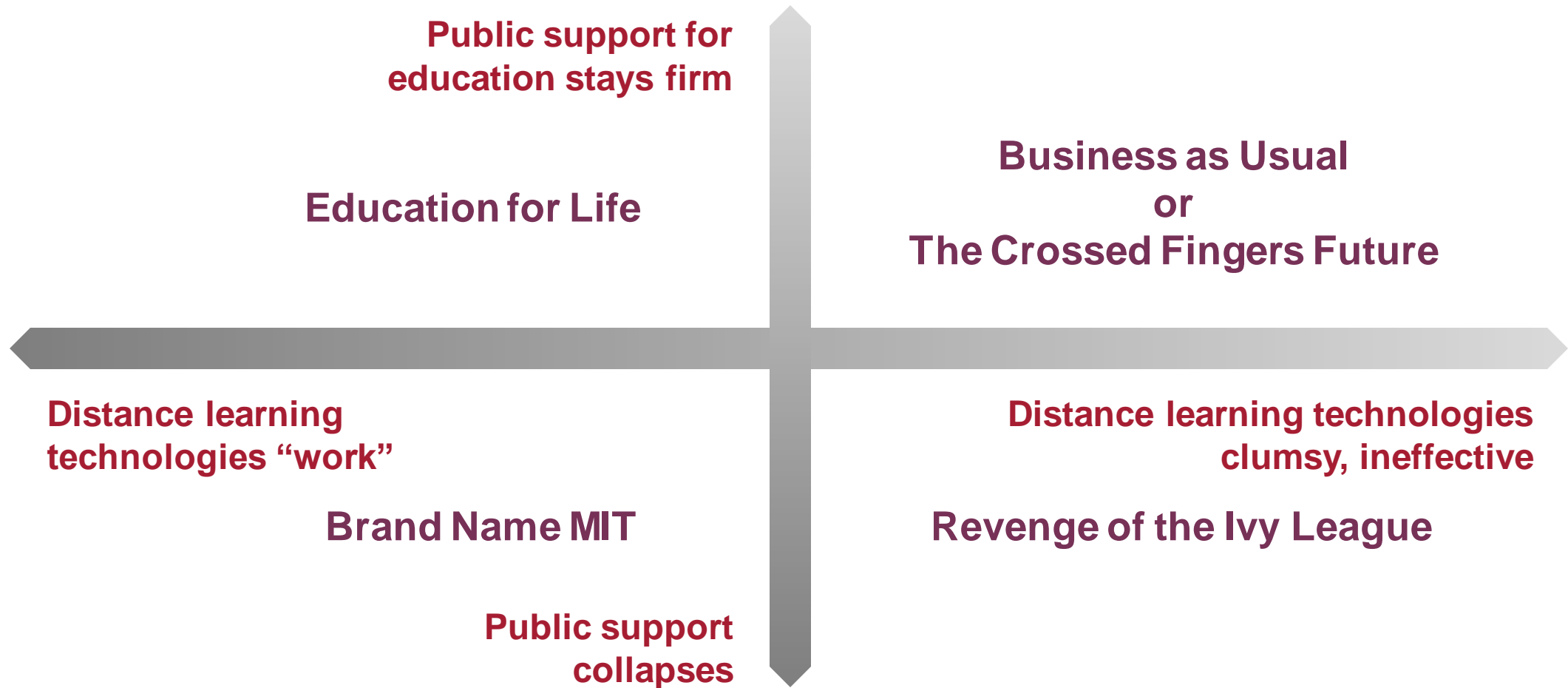
Step Five:
Think About the Odds

Mapping the future of MIT

Public support for education stays firm — 60%

Education for Life

The Crossed Fingers Future

20%

12%

48%

80%

Distance learning technologies "work"

8%

32%

Distance learning technologies clumsy, ineffective

Brand Name MIT

Revenge of the Ivy League

Public support collapses — 40%
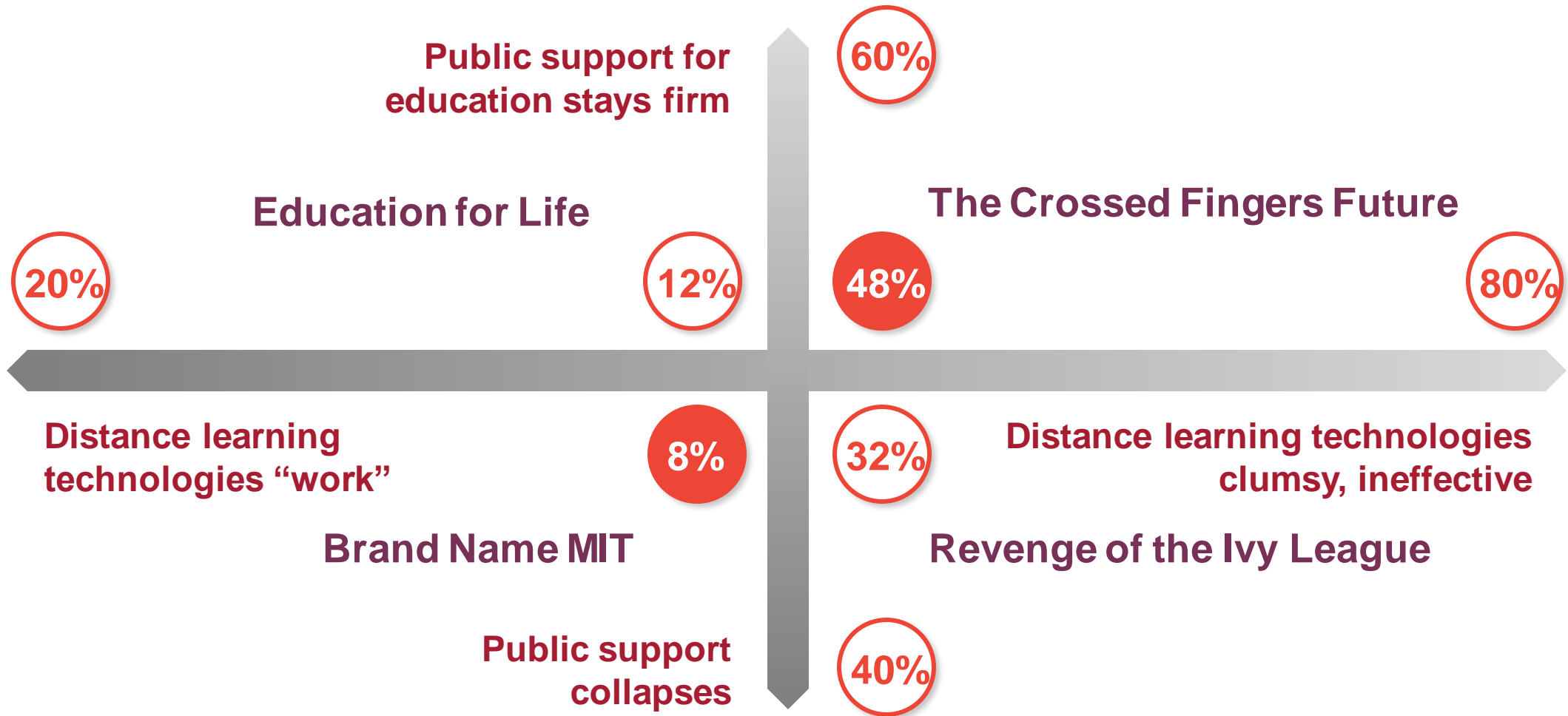
In Summary

1. Generate a list of critical uncertainties
2. Choose the two most critical
3. Draw a "map"
4. Add Names
5. And Odds

6. Discuss
7. Iterate

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Your Turn
What is the Future of Your City?

You wanted to know:

? Did we open too soon?

? Did we open too late?

? What were the biggest mistakes we made?

? What could we have done better?

? How did we manage to get through this and remain hopeful?

? What economic or health care tools worked well?

? How did we resolve the disparity between black and white people? What did we resolve to do to make sure it didn't happen again?

? How did we manage the tough interpersonal issues?

? What didn't we do for small businesses that we could have?

? How did we deal with armed protestors?

? What were the long term transformations that Covid enabled?

? Did humanity finally learn to care for each other?

But – alas – Scenario analysis cannot answer these kinds of questions

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But you also wanted to know:

- ? Will the economy mostly bounce back – *or will there be 3-5 years of pain?*

- ? Will we have a vaccine *in 6 months or in 2 years?*

- ? Will there be another pandemic/similar emergency *in the next five years*?

- ? Will track and trace work? *Or will Covid still be shutting things down a year from now?*

- ? Will there be another wave? *Or will we be back to "normal" in six months?*

- ? Will people be willing to ride public transit?

- ? To eat out?

- ? To go back to college in person?

- ? To go on vacation – to fly, to stay in hotels?

- ? Something else…

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On Your Own: Choose Two & Draw a Map

? Will the economy mostly bounce back – *or will there be 3-5 years of pain?*

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? Something else…?

Uncertainty 2

Scenario Grid

Uncertainty 1

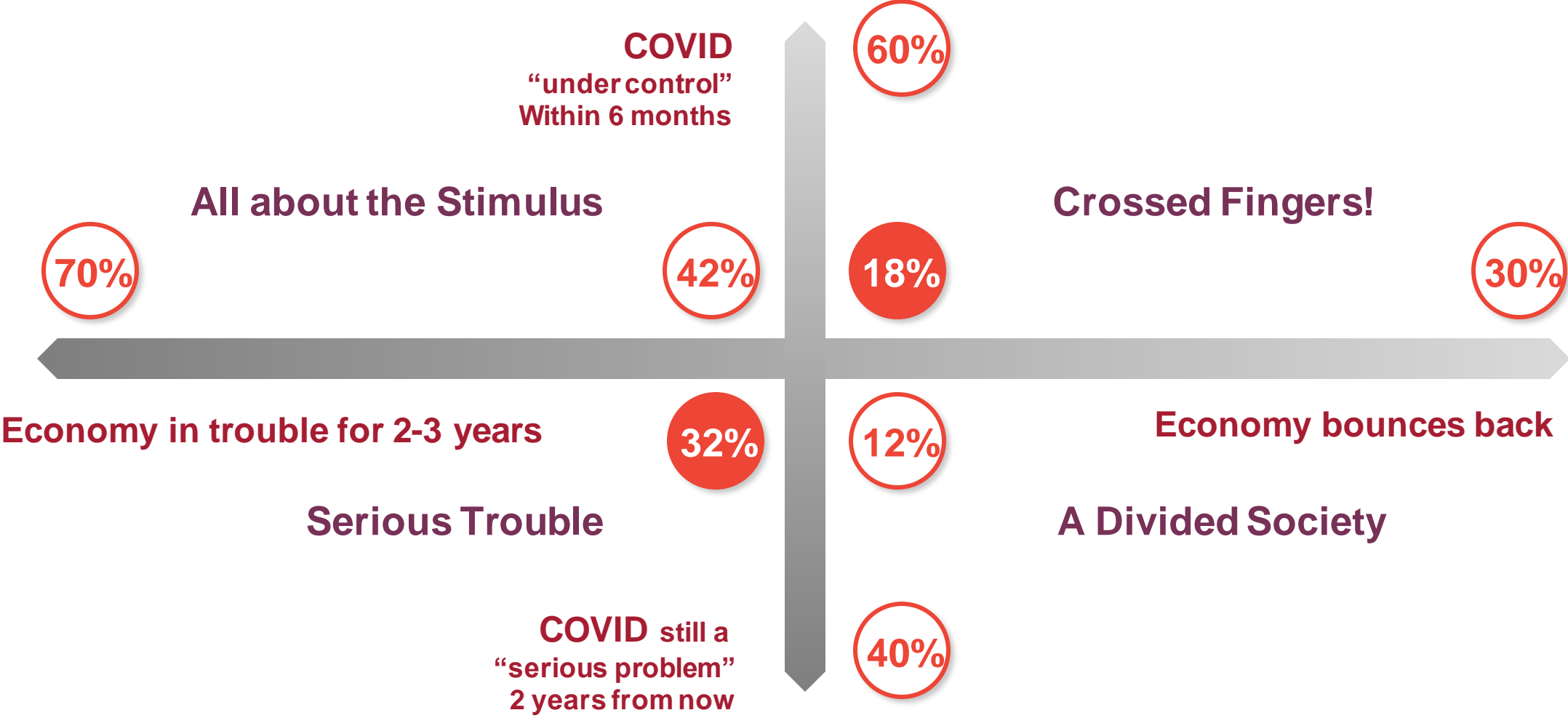BLOOMBERG HARVARD | City Leadership Initiative

What did you come up with?

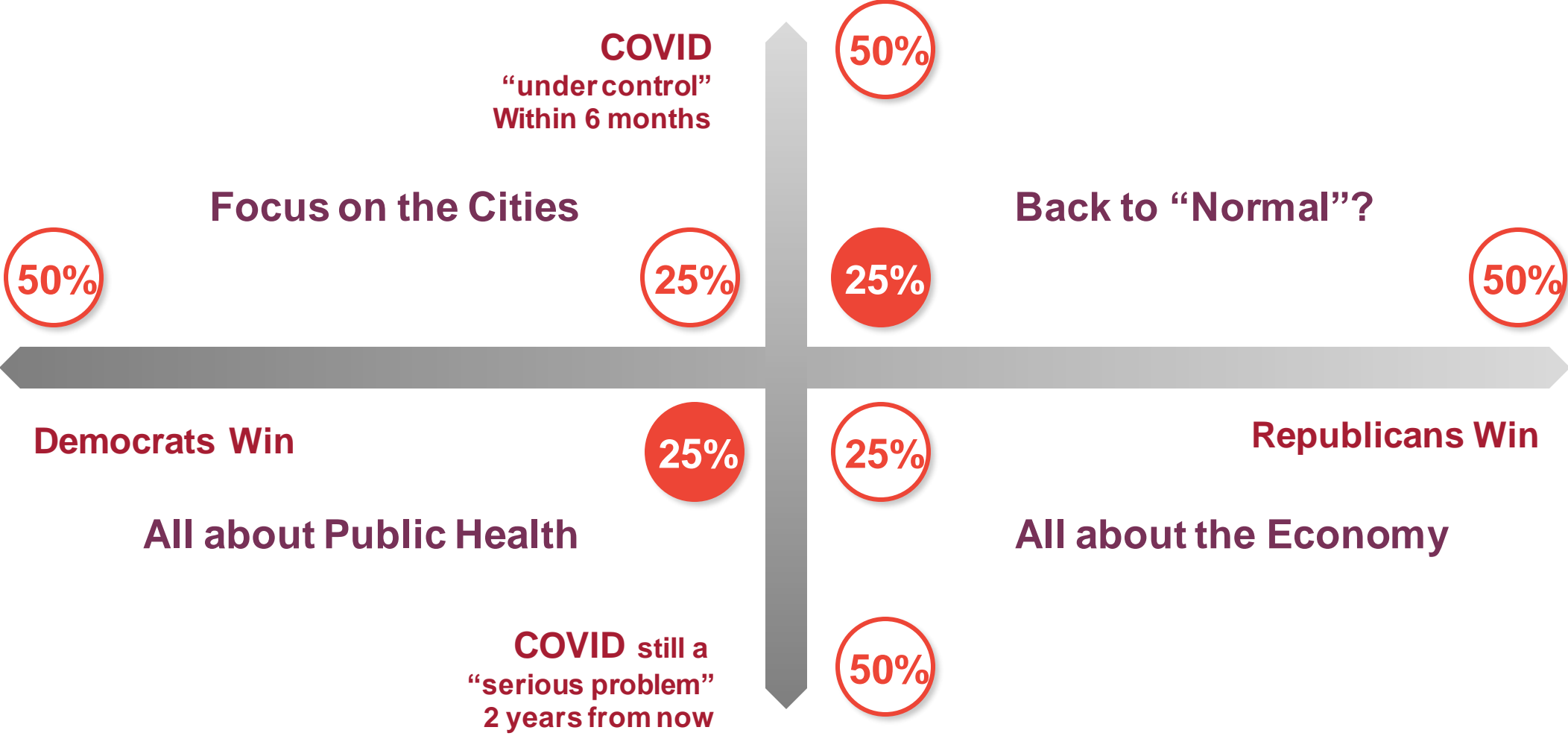# Poll: Which uncertainties are the most critical?

1 Will the economy mostly bounce back – *or will there be 3-5 years of pain?*

2 Will we have a vaccine *in 6 months or in 2 years?*

3 Will there be another pandemic/similar emergency *in the next five years*?

4 Will track and trace work? *Or will Covid still be shutting things down a year from now?*

5 Will there be another wave? *Or will we be back to "normal" in six months?*

6 Will people be willing to ride public transit?

7 To eat out?

8 To go back to college in person?

9 To go on vacation – to fly, to stay in hotels?

One Possible Grid

COVID
"under control"
Within 6 months

60%

All about the Stimulus

Crossed Fingers!

70%

42%

18%

30%

Economy in trouble for 2-3 years

32%

12%

Economy bounces back

Serious Trouble

A Divided Society

COVID still a
"serious problem"
2 years from now

40%

Another One

COVID
"under control"
Within 6 months

50%

Focus on the Cities

Back to "Normal"?

50%

25%

25%

50%

Democrats Win

Republicans Win

25%

25%

All about Public Health

All about the Economy

COVID still a
"serious problem"
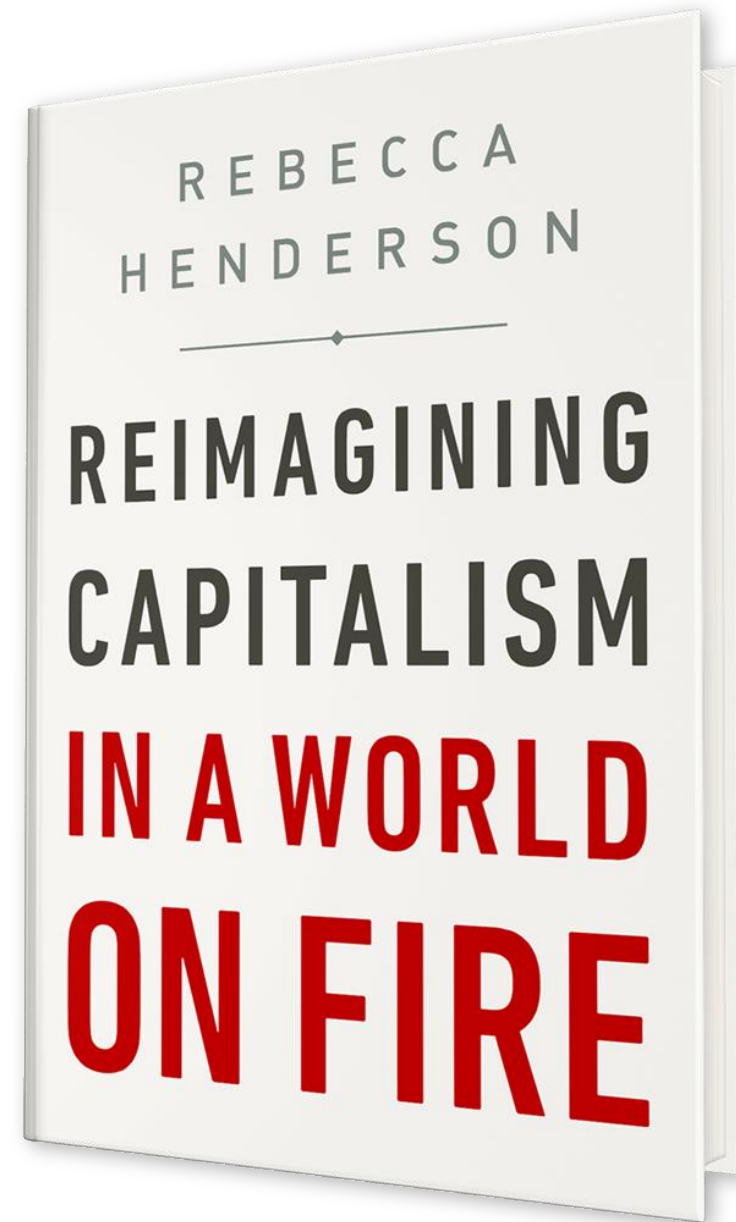2 years from now

50%

In Summary

- Scenario analysis can be a useful way to structure the current confusion

- It can also be a useful way to persuade those around you to prepare for several possible futures

Any Questions?

?

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And Just for Fun

REBECCA
HENDERSON

REIMAGINING
CAPITALISM
IN A WORLD
ON FIRE

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