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To: Page Gardner, Women's Voices Women Vote Action Fund

From: Stanley Greenberg, Greenberg Research  
Nancy Zdunkewicz, Democracy Corps

## 2018 at a breaking point?

Impressive gains among base and persuasion targets, and potential for more

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Over the last three months, Democrats have doubled their margin in the generic congressional ballot to an 11-point advantage among registered voters and an 8-point lead among likely voters nationally. That is near the 9-point margin Democrats won in 2006 when they flipped 30 congressional seats and retook the majority, though reapportionment makes it harder to cross that threshold today.<sup>1</sup>

Democrats sit at the edge of a wave thanks to the impressive vote gains among their minority base, unmarried women, millennials and women with college degrees. That mirrors the exceptional performance of these groups witnessed in so many special elections in 2017. But the wave also depends on the turnout of the Rising American Electorate (minorities, millennials and unmarried women) whose enthusiasm for voting is falling. This new research shows that all voters across the RAE base become more supportive of Democrats and more interested in voting when they hear Democrats make the election about a rejection of trickle-down, target Trump for betraying his promise to end politics as usual, and articulate a disruptive message for change. Democrats can take this election to another level, but only if they prioritize the RAE in this way.

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Clear fault lines and strategic advice for realizing the incipient wave have emerged from *Democracy Corps'* unique mostly cell-phone poll and on-going panel on behalf of *Women's Voices. Women Vote Action Fund*—the first research fielded in 2018 and the third wave of this innovative research program. This program has been carefully designed to accurately sample the American electorate by using an industry-leading two-thirds cell phone rate to reach more diverse and

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<sup>1</sup> This is the third release in the innovative phone and on-going panel research program for *Women's Voices. Women Vote Action Fund* to deeply understand the diversity of America and the potential to shape the electorate and outcome in 2018. It is the third in a series of three waves of 1,000 national registered voter phone surveys with accompanying registered voter web-surveys among an on-going panel of minorities, millennials, unmarried women and white non-college educated women (the RAE+), with 4,000 respondents in the first wave, 2,425 respondents in the second wave, and 1,459 in the third wave. The national phone survey of 1,000 voter-file matched registered voters with 65 percent of respondents reached on cell phones was conducted January 6-11, 2018. The voter-file matched RAE+ web-panel of 1,459 registered voters was conducted January 8-15, 2018. Where changes from prior web-surveys are displayed, wave 1 and wave 2 responses are filtered to wave 3 respondents only.

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young voters and by beginning with non-political values exercises to improve completion rates among more conservative working class voters. An on-going web-panel that began with a large 4,000 voter sample of the 'Rising American Electorate' (minorities, unmarried women and millennials) and white working class women voters allows us to conduct repeated interviews with the same turnout and persuasion targets to learn why they change their vote preference and intent to vote—as they have in January 2018.

One year into the Trump presidency, the biggest surprise that will require new strategic thinking is the pullback of white working class women from Donald Trump and the Republicans. Since October, their vote for the generic Republican congressional candidate has dropped in both our national phone poll and the on-going web-panel. But where you really see movement is agreement that Trump is “dangerous,” “out of touch,” “shares [their] values” and even whether he is a “strong leader.” Their retreat at this junction is reducing GOP margins and potential turnout.

The second finding with strategic significance is the need to put Donald Trump rather than the Republican Congress, at the center of the Democrats' 2018 strategy. Feelings about Donald Trump in the Rising American Electorate and across the electorate are stable and run very strong. Trump alone was referenced in messaging presented to half the respondents, and at the end, they gave the Democrats additional support. On the other hand, Democratic support slipped when voters heard messaging focused on the Republicans in Congress.

The focus should not be on Trump's temperament, fitness for office or treatment of different groups, but on his broken promises, betrayal of trust and personal enrichment when he was supposed to end politics as usual.

***However, the biggest opportunity before progressives is presented by the unmarried women and millennials of all races who are now giving Democrats big majorities but whose interest in voting in 2018 has fallen in each consecutive wave, now reaching dismal levels. They are the biggest possible targets for turnout programs and organization.***

This core of the progressive base has not heard Democrats express how “fed up” they are with an economic and political status quo rigged in favor of the rich and powerful and ready to battle for *change* against Trump's trickle-down tax cuts and assault on Medicaid. But when they do in this survey, the Democratic margin grows by 2 points and, critically, nearly all RAE groups see an 8-point increase in the number expressing the highest level of interest in 2018 on an interest ladder.

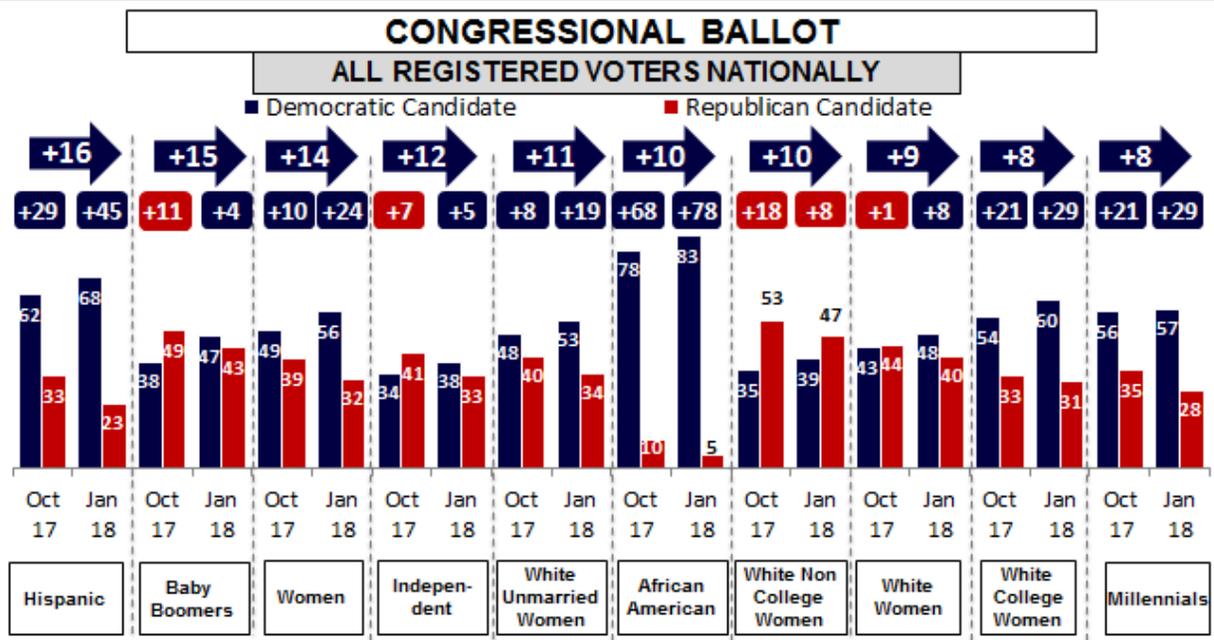
That is why the Rising American Electorate has to be the highest priority for progressives.

### **Electoral gains put Democrats on the edge of a wave, but it could fall short of control**

The doubling of the Democrats' generic vote lead among registered voters is the most significant change over the last three months. Indeed, it positions Democrats on the edge of a big win in November. It is produced by an impressive growth in Democratic margins across the electorate, reflecting the real gains we saw in Virginia and Alabama and beyond.

The potential for a Democratic wave is also produced by deepening differences in enthusiasm and intensity of feelings between partisans. That was witnessed in the 2017 off-year elections and is evident here. Clinton voters are 11 points more likely than Trump voters to rate their interest in the upcoming election a ‘10’ on a 10-point scale and Democrats are 10 points more likely than Republicans to register at the top that scale. There is also an intensity advantage for Democrats: 60 percent of those supporting the Democrat do so strongly while only 52 percent of those supporting the generic Republican candidate do so with intensity.

*Thinking about the election for U.S. Congress in your district in November 2018, will you vote for – the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate?*

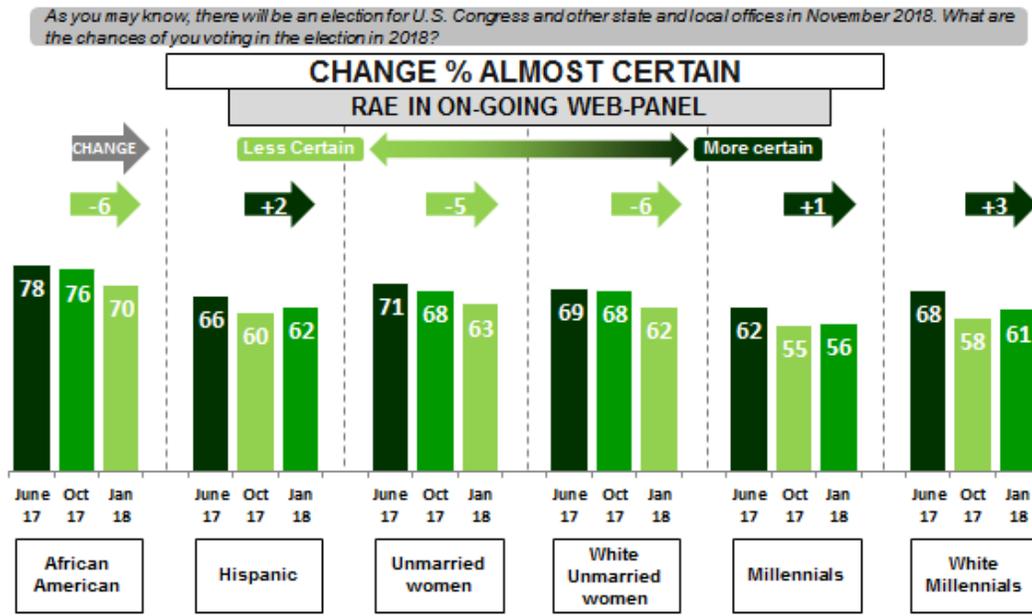


*Generic congressional ballot among registered voters in national phone surveys*

But Democrats won only one Virginia delegate seat carried by Trump because white working class voters and those in rural areas failed to shift to the Democrats in November 2017. That was reflected in the panel surveys where white working class women had been inhospitable territory for Democrats. But the shift of white working class women in both January’s national phone and web panel might mean new electoral ground—like the recent Democratic pick-up in western Wisconsin—is opening up.

More important, this research shows key groups uncertain to participate in the off-year election. In the phone poll, unmarried women and millennials are among those least likely to express the maximum level of interest in the election in 2018.

These are groups that dislike Trump and are intent to oppose him. The Democratic margin will grow further if we target these voters in the right way.

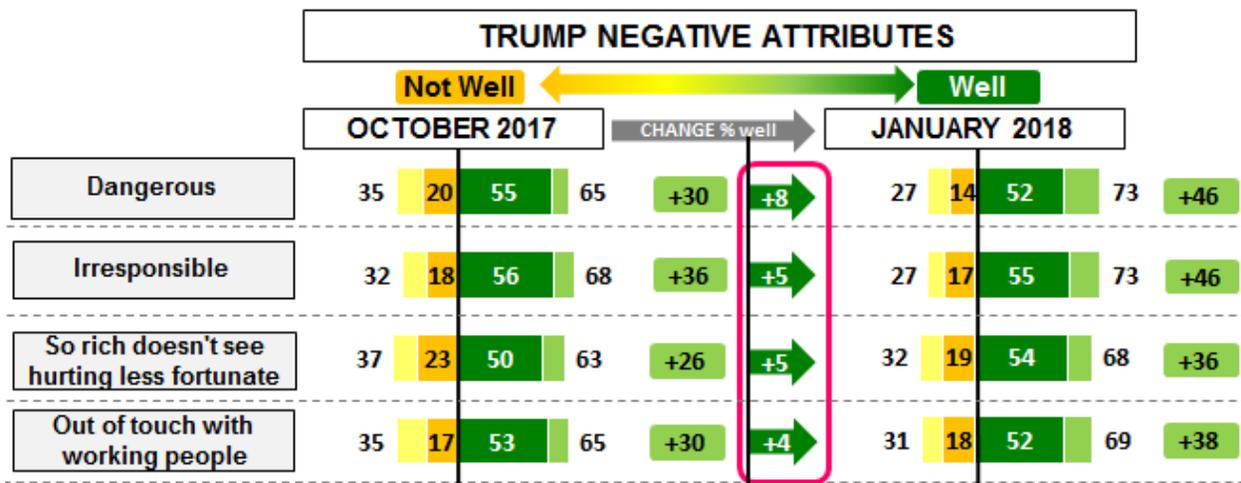


Among registered voters in national phone surveys.

### Changing views of Trump

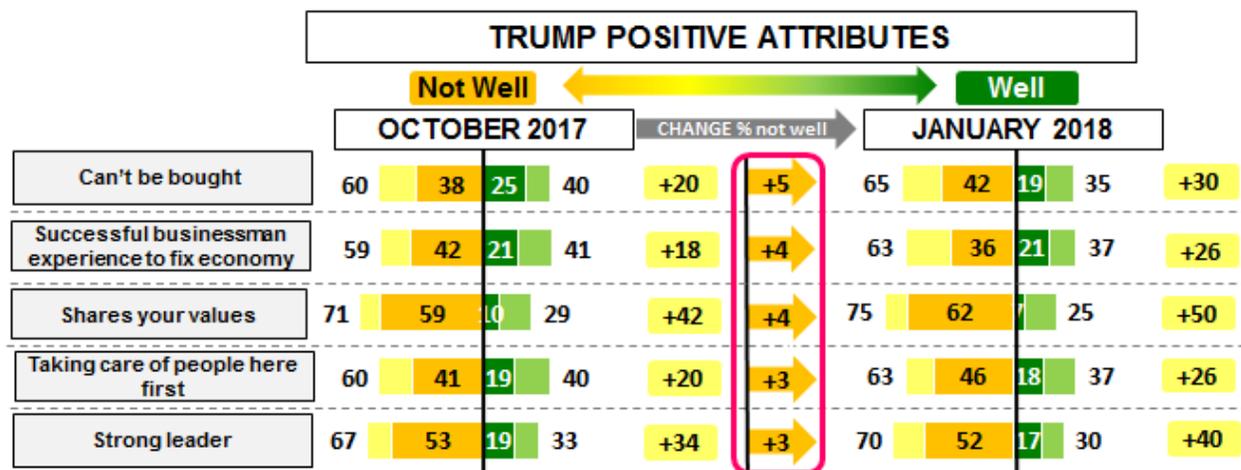
Trump is a powerful, emotive element in people’s consciousness. Nothing, not even the loathed Republicans in Congress, is as inescapable as Trump or as motivating as people’s strong desire to change his direction. The 2018 election will be all about motivation, so Trump must be central to the appeals progressives make.

In the on-going web-panel, 7-in-10 Rising American Electorate voters disapprove of the job Trump is doing as president, and almost 60 percent do so strongly. Compared to last fall, more of the minority, millennial and unmarried women participating in this ongoing panel say Trump is “dangerous,” “irresponsible,” “so rich he doesn’t see how he is hurting the less fortunate,” and “out of touch with working people.” In terms of motivation, well over half of these voters now believe those things about Trump with intensity.



Among RAE only (minorities, millennials, unmarried women) in on-going RAE+ panel

Many more now doubt Trump “can’t be bought,” has the business experience to fix the economy, shares their values, or even is a “strong leader.” That erosion is critical, as these are the traits that are so often cited as Trump’s best qualities in focus groups with Obama-Trump voters. They are traits that said he was “not a typical politician” and “could get things done.”



Among RAE only (minorities, millennials, unmarried women) in on-going RAE+ panel

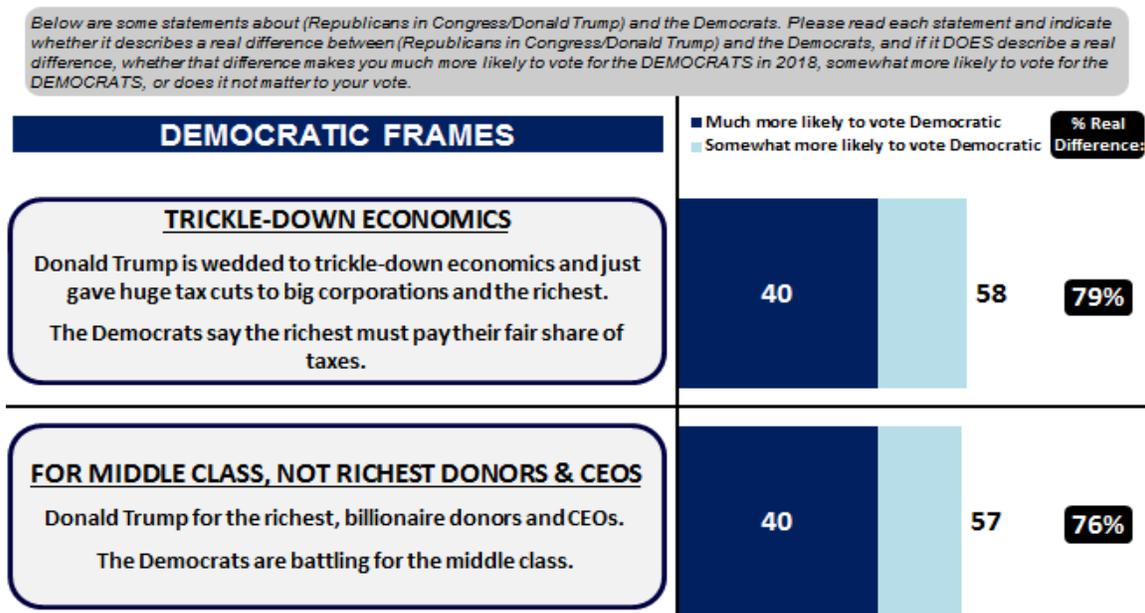
The white working class women who have been repeatedly interviewed in the panel are now 17 points more likely to see him as “dangerous,” 14 points more likely to call him “out of touch with working people,” and 11 points more likely say Trump is “irresponsible” compared to this fall. You can expect that to bring down the GOP margin, perhaps because they will choose not to vote in off-year elections.

As you will see later, when Democrats make Trump the focus of their negative messaging—and are focused on his broken promises that make him a typical politician and how his administration

and policies are putting people’s livelihoods at risk, rather than focusing on his temperament and fitness for office and how he treats people—they improve Democratic margins and motivate their base.

**Defining the election**

Potential Democratic voters are looking for a candidate who begins with a progressive, populist economic choice. Donald Trump and the Republican Party are associated with trickle-down economics and must own the huge tax cuts they just gave to big corporations and the richest, billionaire donors; the Democrats, on the other hand, are for the middle class. That is the most credible and motivating contrast Democrats can make this year – as seen in the top testing frames below.



*Among RAE only (minorities, millennials, unmarried women) in on-going RAE+ panel*

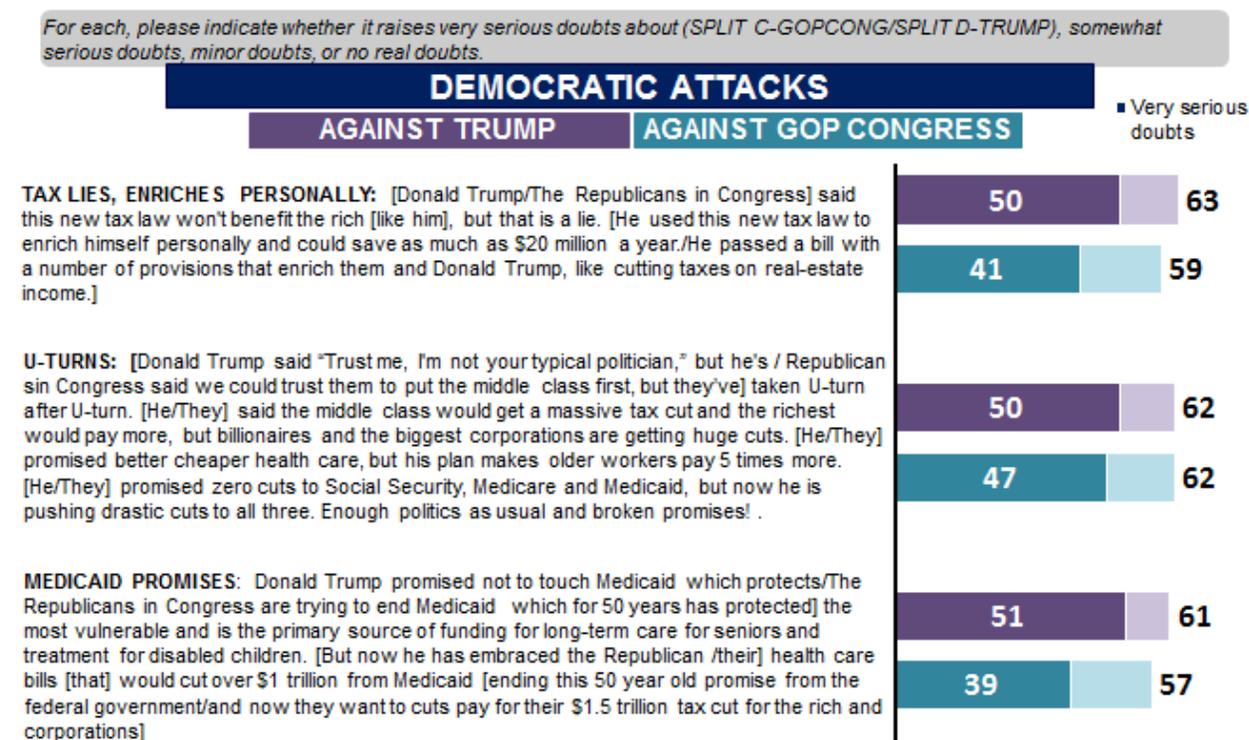
These frames are particularly strong with African Americans, unmarried women and millennials.

Framing the election as a choice between pro-trickle-down governance for the rich and powerful or finally putting the middle class first is much more credible and motivating than focusing on a choice between division and unity, bigotry and acceptance, the NRA lobby and safety, an extreme conservative agenda and checking that power, or any other choice tested.

There is also some potential in forcing Trump and the GOP to pay a price for their impact on the affordability of health care. In a comparison of the parties, the Democrats hold their strongest advantage on “making health care more affordable” (+36) and “accessible for all” (+41). In order to be successful, Democrats must be alert to how many in their own base worry about the cost of ACA policies and deductibles. Their frame has to be centered on getting affordable health care for everyone.

**Strongest attacks**

With McConnell and Ryan taking some of the edge off their negative images with passage of the tax bill, progressives’ strongest attacks must center on Donald Trump, who is so loathed and motivating. Specifically, the best mid-term attacks include Trump’s broken promises: contrary to his vow to not be a typical politician, he has made a series a U-turns, enriched himself , given massive tax cuts to the rich and him personally—and hurt the most vulnerable, like massively cutting Medicaid, Social Security and Medicare. These attacks on Trump’s “broken promises” raised very serious concerns with over 50 percent of African Americans, Hispanics, unmarried women and millennials.



*Among RAE only (minorities, millennials, unmarried women) in on-going RAE+ panel*

These attacks are powerful because Trump has so dramatically betrayed his promise not to engage in “politics as usual.” That is exactly what he has done with respect to taxes, health care and entitlements. Democrats undermine his claim to be a change agent in Washington by demanding an end to his “broken promises!”

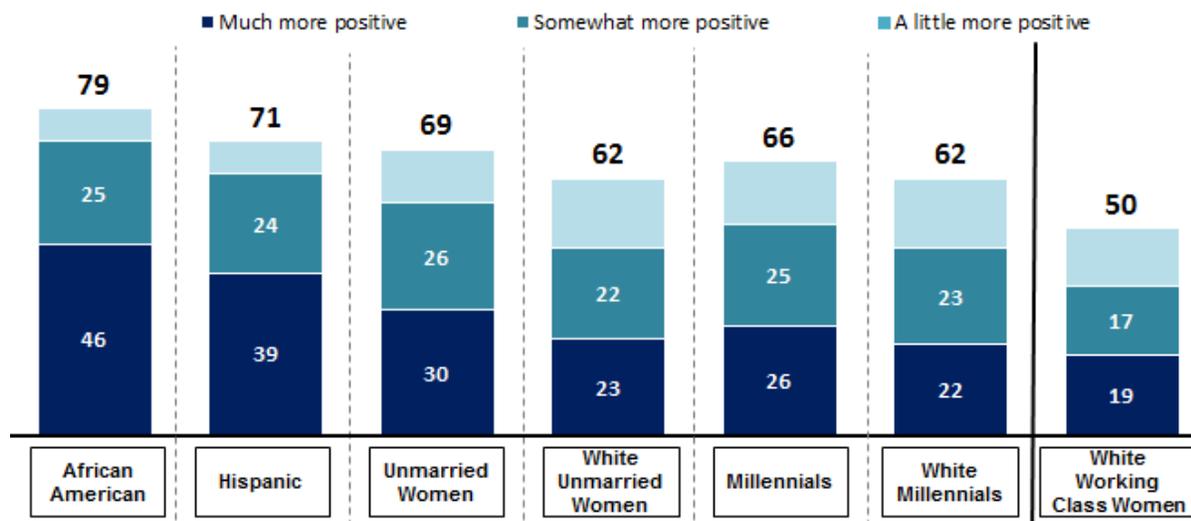
**Change message**

Finally, it is critical that Democrats run as change agents who want to take on the way Washington works so it finally helps the hard-working middle class, not the rich and powerful and corporations who are rigging politics so they get more trickle-down economics – like the new tax cut.

## DEMOCRATIC FED UP! MESSAGE

I'm fed up. Our economy and politics are rigged so they work against the hard-working middle class. Corporate lobbyists and billionaires spend unlimited sums to get their way. But people who play by the rules are crushed by the cost of health care, child care, housing and student debt. And what do Republicans propose? More trickle-down tax cuts for the richest. Democrats say we need an economy that ensures better skills, better jobs, better wages and a better future. Let's ban unlimited secret campaign donation, raise taxes on the richest, close corporate loopholes, and reduce the cost of drugs and health care so the middle class grows again.

This evolution of the “better deal” message has been developed over several waves of focus groups and survey research. It says Democrats are “fed up!” with the status quo. It is credible because it promises to start by going after the money that allows the game to be rigged against the middle class, and then trickle-down itself. It is particularly strong with the African American and Hispanic voters who are so desperate for change, but also the unmarried women and millennials who are turnout targets.



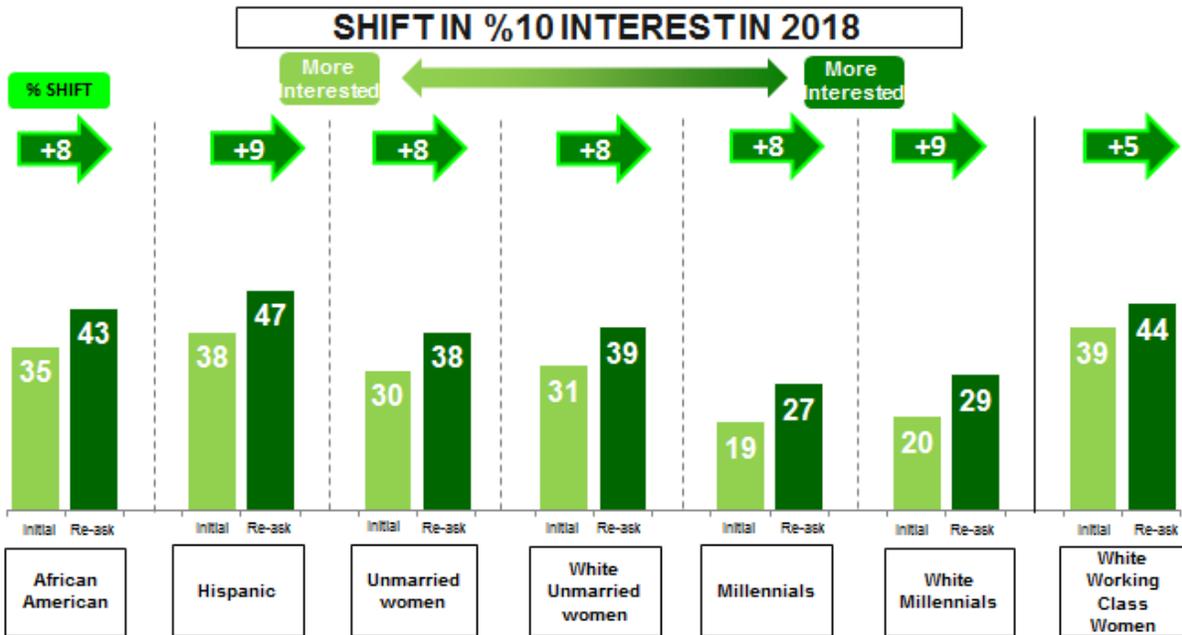
*White working class women shown for full RAE+ sample.*

### The impact on the vote and engagement

The biggest change and opportunity at the end of the poll is in interest in the 2018 election. Across the RAE—after hearing messages, contrast and attacks that make the election about Trump and Republicans being typical politicians offering trickle down for the rich and powerful at the expense of the middle class, while Democrats offer an end to politics as usual and real re-

form for the middle class—there is an 8-point increase in those saying they are a ‘10’ on a 10-point scale of interest in the 2018 election (from 32 percent to 40 percent).

*Let me ask you again, there will be an election for U.S. Congress and other state and local offices in 2018. What are the chances of you voting in the election in 2018?*

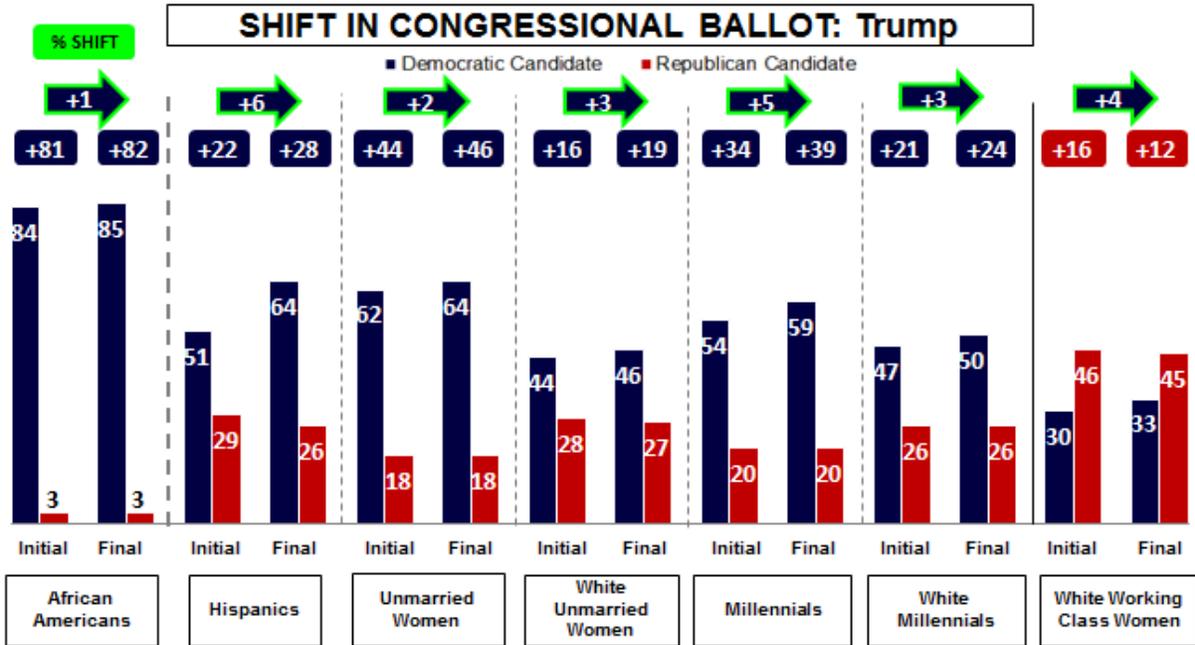


*White working class women shown for full RAE+ sample.*

RAE voters become more likely to vote Democratic when Democrats focus on Trump instead of Republicans in Congress. The congressional margin for Democrats grew 4 points with the RAE that heard Trump-messaging, but it fell 4 points with those who heard Republican-messages. The shift was greatest with Hispanics, millennials and white working class women; Democrats lose ground or are stagnant with those groups if they focus on the GOP instead.

Advice to Democrats is clear: to push their advantage and potential wave as far as it can go, focus on Trump, his broken promises to not offer politics as usual, and promise change from trickle-down governance for the rich and powerful.

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*White working class women shown for full RAE+ sample.*