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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Women's Voices Women Vote Action Fund

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Revolt against Congress: Game On Survey of the Battleground House Districts

The final Democracy Corps battleground survey of 2013 is the only survey of its kind and virtually the only window into what is happening right now. This survey, of the 50 most competitive Republican house districts and the 36 most competitive Democratic districts shows that the structure of the race has not changed fundamentally—despite pundits' insistence that the Obamacare roll out is having big consequences for Democrats in 2014.¹

This is not to say that there has not been a price for the ACA website debacle. Other polls have not overstated the president's drop in poll ratings, which this survey confirms. However, the pundit class is premature in thinking that the hardened impressions of the Republican Congress and the Republican Party—shaped by crisis, shutdown, and obstruction—would somehow suddenly be crowded out. Voters have not forgotten why they dislike the House Republicans, Speaker Boehner, and the Tea Party. The Republican brand hangs over their incumbents and candidates. Indeed, voters' negativity toward Republican incumbents, John Boehner, the Republican Congress, and the Republican Party remain entrenched. And the vote, which has not budged since June in the most competitive Democratic and Republican districts, has in fact worsened in the safer Republican Tier 2 districts—suggesting the battleground may be bigger than believed.

Key findings:

- **Yes, the health care roll-out and reduced presidential standing has hurt Democrats, but keep it in perspective:**
 - Voters are evenly divided on this issue; the big health care debate in this poll ends in a draw. Health care is not a wedge issue.

¹ This memo is based on a unique survey of 1,250 likely 2014 voters in the most competitive Democratic and Republican Congressional districts. This survey was conducted from December 3-8, 2013 using a list of 2006 voters, 2010 voters, and new registrants. Some questions were asked only in Democratic-held or Republican-held seats. For questions asked of all respondents, the margin of error = +/- 2.77% at 95% confidence. For questions asked just in Republican districts, the margin of error = +/- 3.58% at 95% confidence. For questions asked in just Democratic districts, the margin of error = +/- 4.38% at 95% confidence.



- A majority of voters want to implement the law in Democratic districts and a plurality do so in the Republican ones.
 - This fight is hurting the GOP image and re-enforcing that members are part of the partisan battle.
 - Obamacare keeps Republicans on their weakest case for their role in bringing change.
 - This battle created the platform for the Democrats' strongest attack on Speaker Boehner: he has damaged the economy and done nothing on jobs.
 - The health care debate is an opportunity to reach affected groups, particularly unmarried women.
- **The big structural forces that leave the Tea Party Republican brand deeply tarnished are undiminished:**
- All incumbents are damaged, but Republicans much more so.
 - Republicans are at their lowest point ever on all key metrics — compared to any prior elections.
 - Democrats have a continuing brand advantage in these districts.
 - Voters want their members to work with Obama, not to keep stopping his agenda.
 - A serious plurality are now ready to vote against their representatives because they support Speaker Boehner and his impact on the economy and jobs.
- **The congressional vote is stable in the named ballot, but Republicans have weakened in the 2nd tier of less competitive seats — possibly indicative of growing vulnerability.**
- **More voters want to implement and fix rather than repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act and they respond very positively to a Democratic member backing specific fixes while defending the benefits in the new law.**
- **There is now a singular message framework from this work:**
- “Now is the time to vote out GOP incumbents for supporting Speaker Boehner whose policies have hurt the economy and done nothing about jobs”*
- **Two big demographic dynamics that will determine what happens in 2014:**
- *Seniors.* Republican incumbents trail Democratic challengers among seniors across the Republican battleground. That's right and the trend improves in each poll.



- *Unmarried women.* If they turn out and vote as they did in 2012 and in Virginia in 2013, Democrats will make major gains. They are underperforming now at 52 percent in Republican districts, but shift 9 points after a health care debate, which moves the race overall to even. That puts one-half of these 50 seats really at risk.
- **The women's economic agenda is at the center of a strategy for strengthening the Democratic position.**

The battleground is now shaped by four dynamics.

Dynamic one. The Affordable Care Act: have perspective.

Democrats should want to engage on health care. Yes, there has been some decline in overall support for the the law. However, the decline has come almost totally from strong supporters and the people most likely to benefit, like unmarried women, who have lost sight of benefits.

Voters are evenly divided on the health care issue in the battleground seats; they break evenly after they hear the big debate. This is not a wedge issue. (A wedge issue would be the minimum wage increase, which has two-thirds support.)

Right now, a plurality in GOP districts (47 percent to 45 percent) and a majority in Democratic districts (52 percent to 42 percent) want to implement and fix the health care law rather than repeal and replace it. Support for repeal and replace has not increased in Republican districts since October, and has declined in Democratic districts.

Voters do not trust Republicans to handle this issue. By a 27-point margin, voters trust Democrats over Republicans to handle implementing the health care law. Just a quarter (24 percent) trust Republicans on implementing the ACA, only 14 percent strongly.

When Democrats are for implementing and fixing the law, voters lean to Democrats—even more so when the Democratic candidate describes the fixes. In the short-term, voters want to hear that Democrats are both supporting it and have a plan to fix it.

In Democratic districts, voters select the message advocating fixes and the benefits of the law over the Republican case for repeal by a 6-point margin.

I'm angry that the healthcare website was not ready. But this law makes critical changes, and I want it to work. So, I joined both parties to extend enrollment, delay fines, and stop insurers from dropping policies. This law means insurance companies can't raise rates when you get sick, older, or have a baby and can't charge women more than men. We will get health insurance that's there when you need it and fix it together.



Republican members are hurt by their total focus on Obamacare. In fact, Obamacare has become a trap for Republicans—making them part of partisan gridlock, too focused on fighting Obama, and above all, aligned with speaker Boehner whose plans are hurting the economy and doing nothing on jobs. This total focus on Obamacare also prevents them from making a case on the economy—instead they appear distracted and not focused on the economic issues that actually matter to voters right now.

We tested a series of messages for the Republicans. Stopping Obamacare is their weakest case for re-election. In their own districts, this message performs below their vote at just 44 percent, and is much weaker than their messages focused on moderating extremism in their own party or cutting spending to reduce the deficit. Their obsession with Obamacare undermines their case for re-election.

By contrast, Democrats have strong message on implementation, the benefits of the law, and the fixes they want to make. Democrats' two strongest health care messages emphasize that this law forces insurance companies to actually act like insurance companies and makes critical changes to benefit women's health. These two messages are strong among all voters, but especially the Rising American Electorate (unmarried women, young people, and people of color) and unmarried women. These are the voters Democrats will need to turn out and support Democrats next year. They are also the voters whose performance is currently more on par with 2010, rather than 2012—a potential warning sign for Democrats. However, unmarried women, in particular, produce some of the biggest shifts toward voting for Democrats after hearing these messages. These voters need to hear this case from Democrats.

(INSURANCE COMPANIES) The biggest change in this law is that insurance companies actually have to provide health coverage when you need it. They can't raise your rates or drop you when you get sick, get older, or have a baby, charge women more than men or set lifetime limits. And they can never again deny you coverage because of a pre-existing condition.

(WOMEN'S HEALTH) We must not let the opponents stop the critical changes for women in the new law. Women can no longer be charged more than men. Having a baby is no longer considered a pre-existing condition. All plans must cover preventive health services, mammograms and contraception. This coverage is long overdue and a big deal for women.

**Dynamic two: Republicans focused on creating gridlock and not working for jobs.**

This should be Democrats' principal framing of the election. Republicans jump for every opportunity to try to crash the Affordable Care Act, which hurts them.

In 2010, voters came to believe that the President and Democrats were focused on health care, not the economy, at a time of economic crisis. Accurate or not, they believed that, and Democrats paid a price at the polls. Voters now think the Republicans are obsessed with Obamacare and stopping President Obama. Speaker Boehner is the face of that unpopularity. Democrats now have a central message that integrates the attack in a powerful way. By 47 to 40 percent, a strong plurality says they are done with such House members, 37 percent strongly. When this is the message, only 23 percent say their Republican member is doing an okay job.

It is time to vote out members of Congress, like [named incumbent] who might be okay but they support Speaker John Boehner and his policies that have hurt the economy and done nothing about jobs.

Dynamic three: The race is close across both Democratic and Republican battlegrounds and anti-incumbent mood against all.

In both Democratic and Republican districts, a majority of voters now say "I can't vote to reelect [named incumbent] because we need new people that will fix Washington and get things done." This anti-incumbent/anti-Washington mood makes it hard for incumbents of either party to break through, even though the underlying dynamics favor Democrats, who have a stronger party image both in their own districts and Republican districts, and whose incumbents are less associated with the gridlock and mess in Washington.

Nonetheless, Democrats have a way to make Republicans pay a price and a way to make their own case within a powerful framework for the election. Even though the dynamics look harder now than a month ago, there is a path and Republicans remain vulnerable.

Dynamic four: two demographic dynamics that matter—Seniors and unmarried women.

Seniors are key to this election. This poll finds significant movement among seniors, who may be the big story in 2014. Democratic challengers now hold a 4-point lead among seniors in the Republican battleground. Seniors have kept the ballot in the Republican battleground stable in their move away from Republicans. Remember, Republicans won seniors nationally in 2010 by 21 points, and congressional Republicans won seniors by 12 points just last November. A 4-point lead among seniors in Republican districts is a very big deal. Seniors are further moved



after hearing the debate back-and-forth, particularly the Democratic attack on Medicare and other issues. This is a very big opportunity for Democrats.

However, Democratic base voters, the Rising American Electorate—especially unmarried women—are currently underperforming. They need to hear from Democrats on health care, women’s health, Medicare/Medicaid, and jobs. One in ten unmarried women shifts in the vote after hearing the debate back and forth on healthcare, women’s health, Medicare, and minimum wage. But these voters lag their potential performance to start. They need to hear from Democrats on these issues that matter.

Theme five: Strongest attacks – Medicare, Minimum Wage, and Women’s health

The strongest attacks against Republicans produce a significant shift in the vote, particularly in the second tier of districts. The vote in the most vulnerable districts shifts from a three-point advantage (43 percent to 46 percent) to just a one-point advantage (44 percent to 45 percent.) In Tier 2, however, these attacks produce a significant shift, from 6 points (41 percent to 47 percent) to 1 point (44 percent to 45 percent.) This kind of movement in the second Tier suggests that these districts are more vulnerable than they appear right now and could potentially upend the current dynamics.

We tested a range of attacks on the Republicans - and many of them relate to health care, women, and raising incomes in tough times. These messages move the vote against Republicans—especially in the Tier 2 less vulnerable seats. After a debate back and forth, Democrats move to within 1 point of the Republican incumbent in these “safer” Republican districts.

Best attack: Medicare. [Named Republican] voted to dramatically reduce spending on Medicare by turning it into a voucher program, forcing seniors to pay over six thousand dollars more a year for their health care. (The Republican candidate) also voted to cut funding for Medicaid and opposed a plan to expand the program to cover the working poor.

Best attack: minimum wage/working families. [Named Republican] voted against increasing the minimum wage from seven to ten dollars an hour and voted to eliminate overtime pay for working families. (He/She) voted against raising the minimum wage even as (he/she) protected tax breaks for millionaires.

Best attack: women’s health. [Named Republican] voted to put insurance companies back in charge of your health care, allowing them to once again discriminate against women by charging women higher rates than men, not cover mammograms, screenings for cervical cancer, birth control and other services.

After hearing these messages, the exact voters Democrats need to move in this election produce significant shifts: 15 percent of moderate Republicans, 12 percent of moderates, and 10 percent of independents shift toward Democrats in the vote. The Democratic vote jumped 9 points among unmarried women and the Rising American Electorate.



These voters are further moved by an economic agenda and message that focuses explicitly on the pocketbook issues they face everyday. Unmarried women, critical to this election, care deeply about about these issues. The strongest message among unmarried women focuses on financial pressures brought on by the cost of childcare, education, and groceries. It presents a clear solution in the policies addressed by the women’s economic agenda, and 60 percent of unmarried women say they are much more supportive when hearing this vision and plan. In Democratic districts, 68 percent of unmarried women are much more supportive—an important case to make if Democrats are to bring back a potentially significant portion of the 2014 electorate.

(FINANCIAL PRESSURE) With the cost of childcare, education, and groceries, it's hard to keep up, especially women. We should finally pass paycheck fairness. We need to prevent women from being fired or demoted when they get pregnant or care for children. We should expand access to scholarships and affordable childcare to make it possible for women to get ahead and succeed.

Empathizing with women in this economy, focusing on policies which promote a living wage for women very positively received among unmarried women and Rising American Electorate

Now I'm going to read you some things some people are saying about why we need to address economic issues facing women and their families. After I read each statement, please tell me whether it makes you much more supportive of policies to address issues facing women and their families, somewhat more supportive, a little more supportive, no more supportive, or less supportive of policies to address issues facing women and their families.

