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## **The Democrats' Turn**

### *First Steps on the Road Back*

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The 2014 election was a devastating defeat for the Democratic Party, with consequences that may be felt for many years to come. Even so, we wrote in the aftermath of the 2014 election, “Despite the deep losses of 2014, the partisan predispositions of the Democratic coalition remain very much intact. There just is not any reason to think the compositional changes will not continue their long-term trends – and the Rising American Electorate will be key.” This prediction certainly holds true in this survey, as the Obama coalition asserts itself in dramatic fashion. But it is also shocking how quickly other changes produce a profoundly different America than the one that showed up last November.<sup>1</sup>

On almost all measures, Democratic numbers improve on this survey, beginning with voters' overall mood. Right direction numbers jump nearly 10 points since the election and are likely to improve further with the growing economy and falling price of gasoline. Numbers also rebound for President and the Democratic Party. Democratic messages and Democratic policies outmuscle Republican messages and Republican policy, suggesting room for further advances. Meanwhile, the honeymoon for Boehner and McConnell barely lasted through the wedding reception as negatives for both, and the Republican Party as a whole, grow sharply. Most striking, the Tea Party Republican is back, defining the Republican brand.

These changes and the emergence of the Obama presidential year electorate leave the Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton comfortably ahead of Mitt Romney (49 to 43 percent) and well ahead of Jeb Bush (52 to 40 percent). Voters' hostility to George Bush's brother is one of the more notable outcomes of this survey.

Given her support among white college educated women and strong support among most RAE voters, Clinton can win a national election without competing among white non-college voters; but this outcome would likely leave most of the Republican 2014 gains intact. Obviously, a lot can change over the next 22 months, but questions at this point are whether the Democratic presidential candidate can grow and protect her lead, and whether 2016 can build a big enough win to recover congressional and down-ballot losses from the 2014 cycle.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey of 950 likely 2016 voters was conducted from January 7-11, 2015. Voters who voted in the 2012 election or registered since were selected from the national voter file. Likely voters were determined based on stated intention of voting in 2016. Data shown in this deck is among all 2016 likely voters unless otherwise noted. Unless otherwise noted, margin of error for the full sample= +/-3.2 percentage points at 95% confidence. Margin of error will be higher among subgroups. 50 percent of respondents were reached by cell phone, in order to account for ever-changing demographics and trying to accurately sample the full American electorate.



The answers to those questions depend in large measure on two overlapping dynamics: Democrats' ability to build on and consolidate their support among RAE voters and Democrats' ability to improve on their dismal performance among white working class voters. On the combined measure, Clinton opens strong among RAE voters—unmarried women, people of color, youth--winning 64 percent of RAE voters overall and 62 percent of unmarried women. Obama won 67 percent of unmarried women in 2012, however, and Clinton's margin among white unmarried women (just 1 percent) is unimpressive. The news here is less edifying for Democrats among white working class voters.

President Obama won 40 percent of these voters in 2008 and 36 percent in 2012,<sup>2</sup> and Democratic Congressional candidates won only 34 percent of the white working class vote last year. Clinton fares no better, winning just 35 percent of white non-college voters and 37 percent of non-college white women on the combined measure.

Critically, the goals of maximizing support among unmarried women and minimizing Republican support among white non-college voters overlap. Nearly a quarter of white non-college voters are unmarried women. The key to both groups is about getting the economy right. Overall, Democrats lead the Republicans on every issue tested in this survey, except the economy, which is the most important one. White non-college voters and white unmarried women are much more pessimistic about the direction of the country (76 percent wrong track among white non-college voters); both believe the road to the middle class is blocked for them. Progressives need to understand what they once understood--rising tides do not lift all boats and gains at the macro-economic level do not necessarily improve the economic prospects of these voters.

Both unmarried white women and white non-college voters prioritize jobs that pay; both focus on protecting Social Security and Medicare and college affordability. Critically, there is no evidence in this survey that the Democratic focus on the "women's economic agenda" undermines support among white working class voters or white working class men. In fact, some of the gender-specific messages and proposals—equal pay, paid-sick time, help for working mothers—test as well or better among white working class voters as the non-gender-specific proposal. For both groups, this election needs to be about helping working men and women.

It also needs to be about reform. These are people who pay a lot in taxes, but do not believe the government works in the interests of middle families. They see special interests dominating government, often at their expense. They also see waste and inefficiency and are convinced they do not get their money's worth out of Washington. Reform messages do as well for Democrats as broader economic messages and work particularly well among white working class voters. Reform policies constitute the most popular Republican policy proposal tested, and one of the most popular Democratic policies tested among unmarried women.

In one of the most important and interesting findings in this survey, a reform message opens votes up to a progressive economic narrative. Voters who heard the reform message before

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<sup>2</sup> From *Center for American Progress*: <http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/ObamaCoalition-5.pdf>

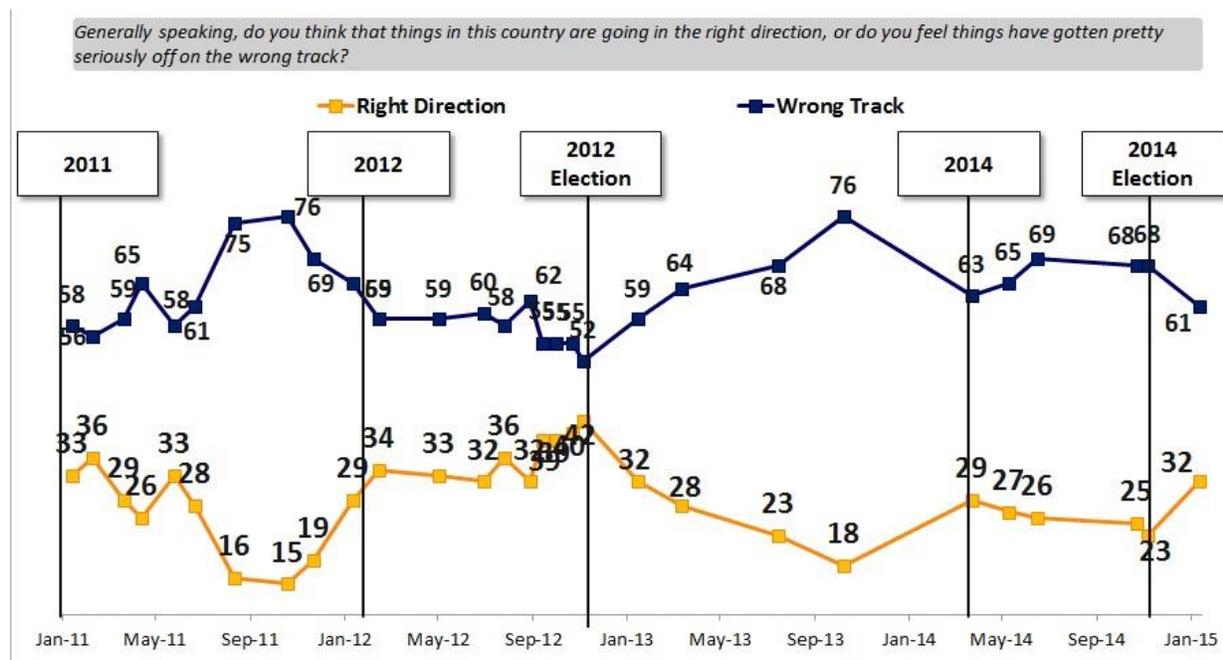


hearing the Democratic economic messages were more than 10-points more likely to describe the Democratic framing as “very convincing” as voters who heard the Democratic framing first (43 percent very convincing and 32 percent very convincing, respectively).

For Democrats, this represents an incredibly optimistic study. The road back may not be as long as many in the Party feared. But this road requires some improvement among white working class voters and some consolidation among base voters like white unmarried women. This means speaking directly to the economic experience of these voters, not the experience of Wall Street, focusing on the plight of the middle class and forwarding a set of policy options that directly improve the economic lives of these still-struggling families. And this road will likely be made much easier if Democrats make a serious effort on a government and campaign reform agenda.

### A Different America

By almost every measure, this is not the same America that voted last November, beginning with voters’ moods. A majority of voters still believe the country is headed in the right direction, but there has been a nearly 10-point jump in voter optimism since November. Voters have not been this optimistic since shortly after the 2012 election.



Democrats lead this jump in optimism (+17 from Election Day to 59 percent right direction), but the change reflects improvements among Independents, moderates, and college educated voters as well.

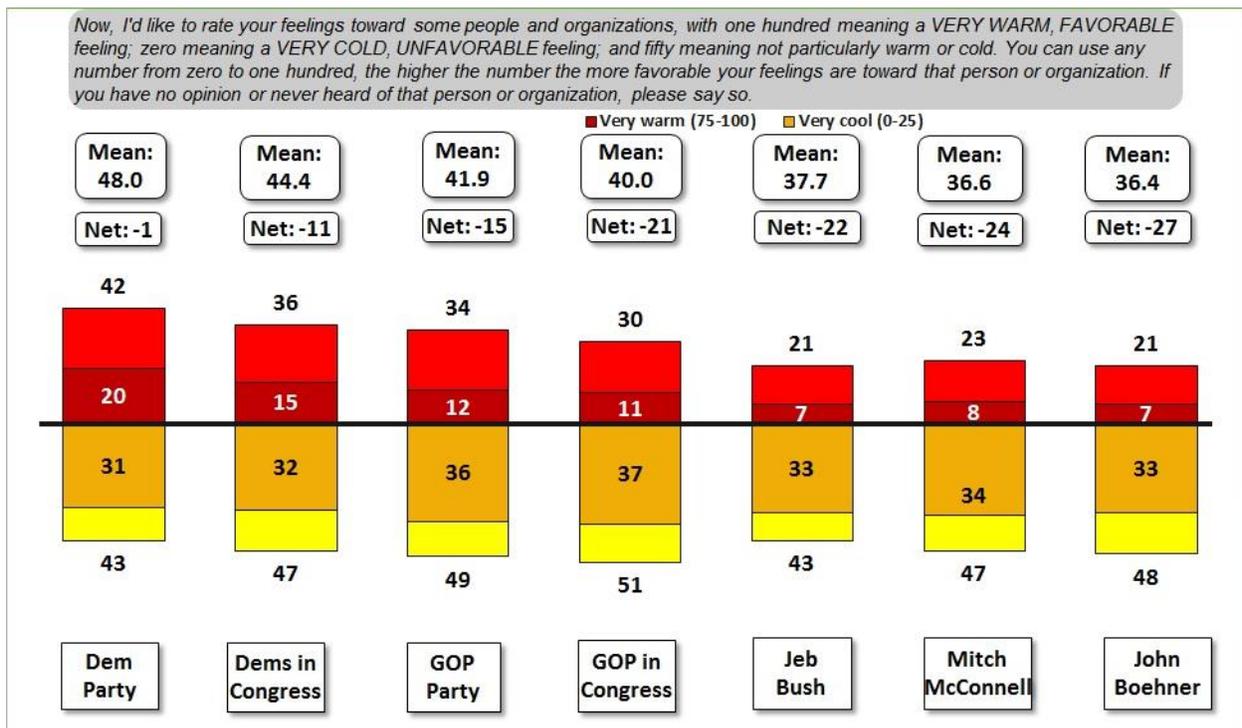
Importantly, two groups who do not share in this rising optimism are white non-college voters and white unmarried women, who remain despondent about direction of the country (76 percent



wrong track and almost no change from pre-2014 election results) and, not coincidentally, withhold support from the President's party.

The change in mood—and demographic change in the electorate—produce some very important political shifts. The President's job approval scores inch up, and for the first time in nearly two years, he is no longer underwater. Numbers for the Democratic Party also improve. As striking, however, is the collapse of the Republican brand and perceptions of the Republican leadership. The Republican Party faces a 34 percent warm, 49 percent cool rating, a net decline six points over the last two months and significantly worse than the Republican brand they carried into the 2012 elections. Republicans in Congress now face majority unfavorable scores and are 10 points lower than Democrats in Congress. Speaker John Boehner's unfavorable scores rise six points and Majority Leader Mitch McConnell draws a 47 percent unfavorable, just 23 percent favorable just a few short weeks after taking the gavel.

Perhaps most striking is voters' hostility to the Jeb Bush, the "acceptable Republican," now saddled with 2:1 negative over positive.

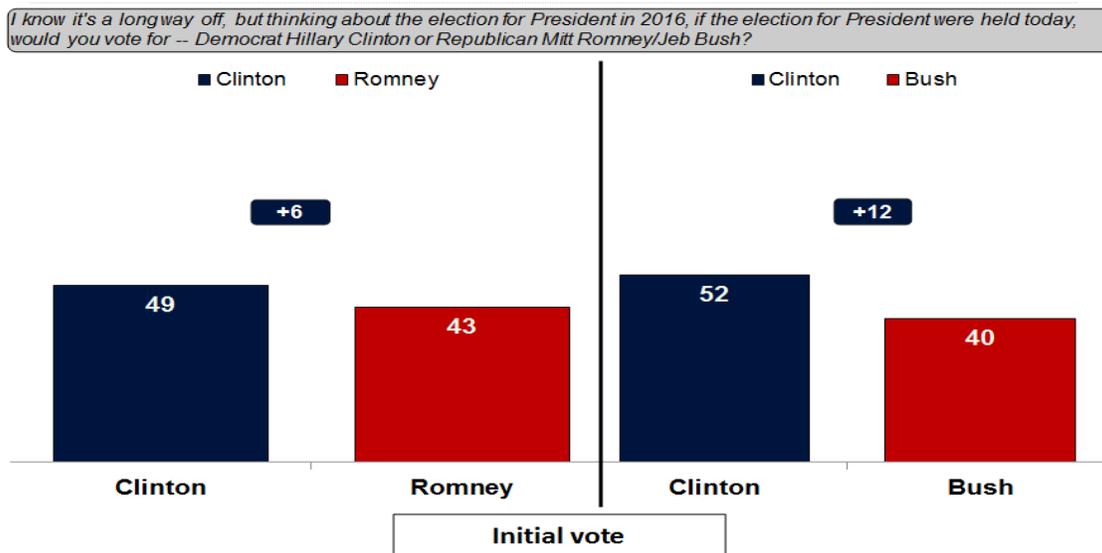


With the economy growing and gas prices falling, it is probable this trend continues and the 2016 electorate will play out in a profoundly different context than 2014—less angry, less cynical, more willing to embrace progressive change.

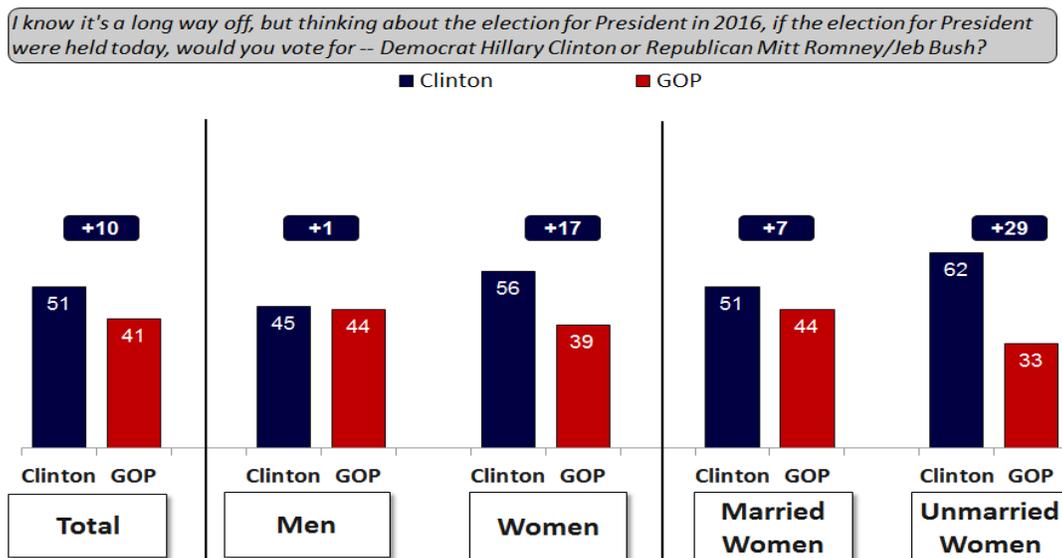


### A Very Strong Start for Hillary Clinton

Riding both an improving political context for Democrats and a more favorable demography in a presidential year election, Hillary Clinton opens with a six point lead over Mitt Romney and double that margin over Jeb Bush.



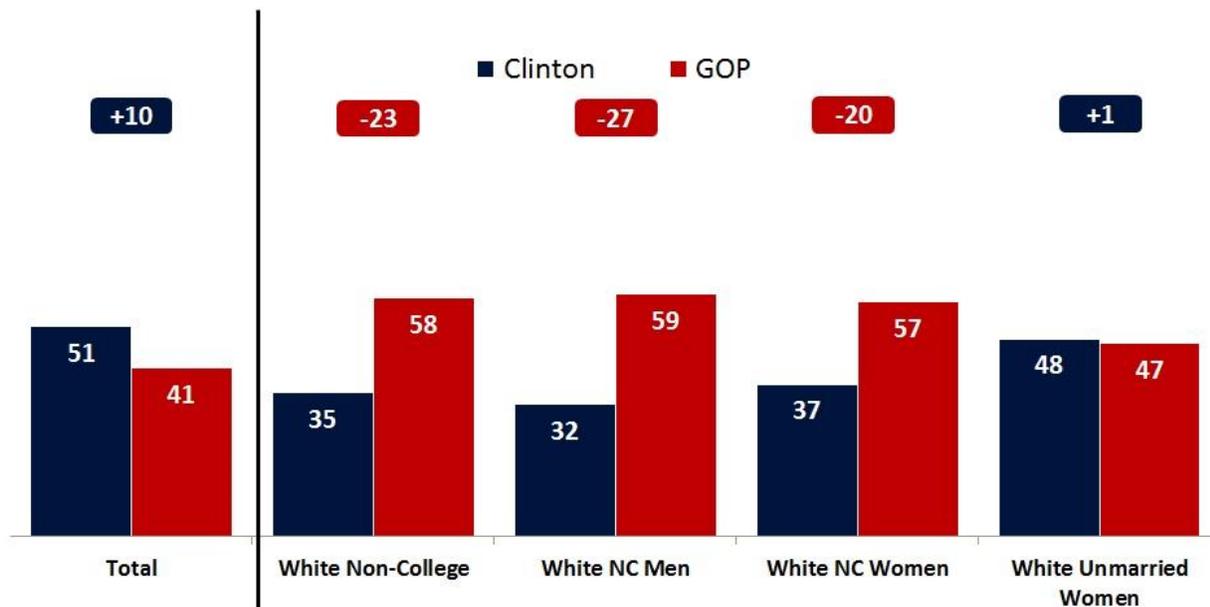
Both parties are unusually consolidated at this very early point in the election cycle with 87 to 95 percent support for their nominees. But Clinton holds an early edge among Independent voters (44 – 39 percent combining Bush and Romney trial heats). More broadly, she builds her margin on strong support among ascendant voters including youth (67 – 25 percent in the combined measure), people of color (77 – 16 percent) and unmarried women (62 – 33 percent). There is a significant and predictable gender gap here (16 points). As has consistently been the case in recent presidential elections, the marriage gap among women is bigger (22 points).





The coalition that elected Obama in 2008 and 2012 remains in place, despite the setback in 2014. Along with Clinton’s impressive support among white college educated women (56 percent Clinton, 39 percent Republican candidate), this coalition is big enough to produce a national win in 2016. The key tactical issue now is whether Clinton can protect and grow this support, and if she can produce a large enough win to recover Democratic losses from the last cycle. That depends largely on Democratic ability to consolidate base support, specifically among white unmarried voters, and reduce the Republican margin among white working class voters. Clinton draws even among white unmarried women (48 – 47 percent). At 35 percent among white working class voters, she does no better than Obama in 2012 or congressional Democrats in 2014. She also does only marginally better among white non-college women, compared to white non-college men.

*I know it's a long way off, but thinking about the election for President in 2016, if the election for President were held today, would you vote for -- Democrat Hillary Clinton or Republican Mitt Romney/Jeb Bush?*



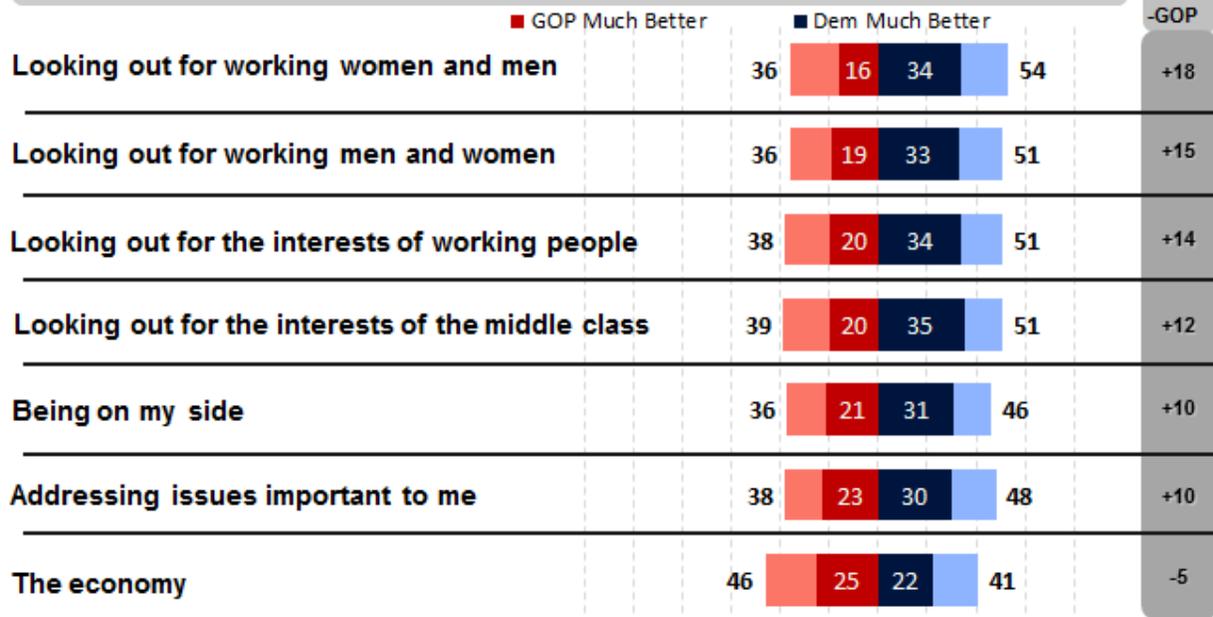
### Getting the Economy Right

The key to consolidating unmarried women and producing at least a somewhat more competitive environment among white working class voters is understanding that the economy so often hailed by the Administration does not reflect the economic reality for these voters. These voters do not see a record-setting Dow, but a middle class that continues to struggle, jobs that do not do enough, college that remains out of reach and stalled economic mobility.

Notably, Democrats lead Republicans on every issue tested in this survey save the most important, the economy. Democrats win an 18 point advantage on “looking out for working women and men,” including a 44-point advantage among RAE voters. But on the economy, voters still prefer the Republicans by 5 points overall; among white working class voters, they prefer the Republicans by 36 points.



Now, I am going to read you a list of issues and I want you to tell me whether, overall, you think (ROTATE) the Democrats or the Republicans would do a better job with each issue.

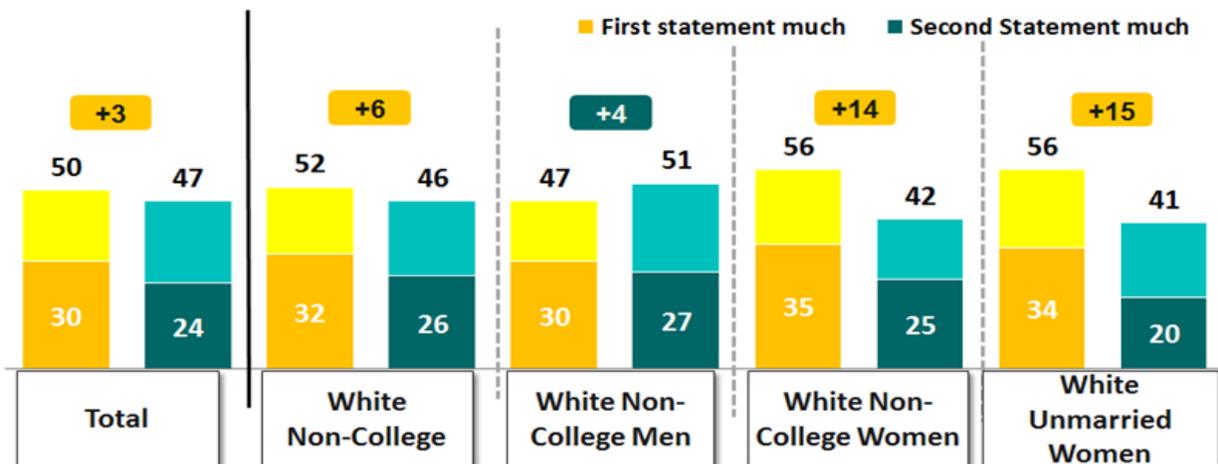


White working class voters and, even more prominently white unmarried women, also feel closed off from middle class aspirations. It is a sobering finding in this survey and a challenge to both political parties that a plurality of Americans believe, “Getting to or staying the middle class is harder than ever and nearly impossible with so many jobs that don’t pay enough to live on.” Unmarried white women and white non-college women are especially likely to hold this view.

Now let me read you some short statements. Please tell me which statement comes closer to your own view.

Getting to or staying in the middle class is harder than ever and nearly impossible with so many jobs that don’t pay enough to live on.

Times are tough but those who work hard can still reach or stay in the middle class.



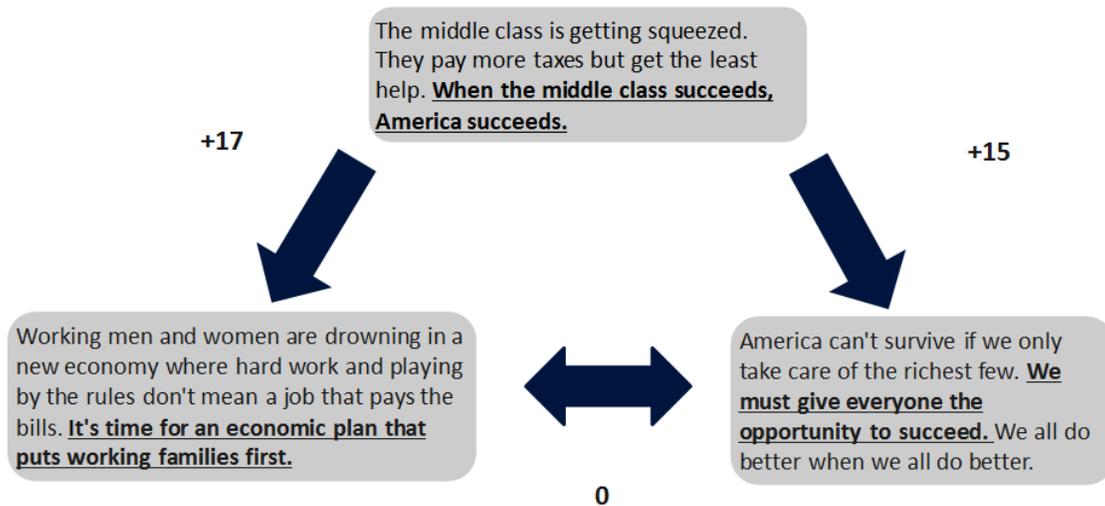


### Message Needs to Focus on Helping the Middle Class

The strategic challenge Democrats face is building an outreach program of messages, narratives, and a policy agenda that can lift support with unmarried women and the broader RAE while also building some support with a diverse and generally Republican leaning white working class.

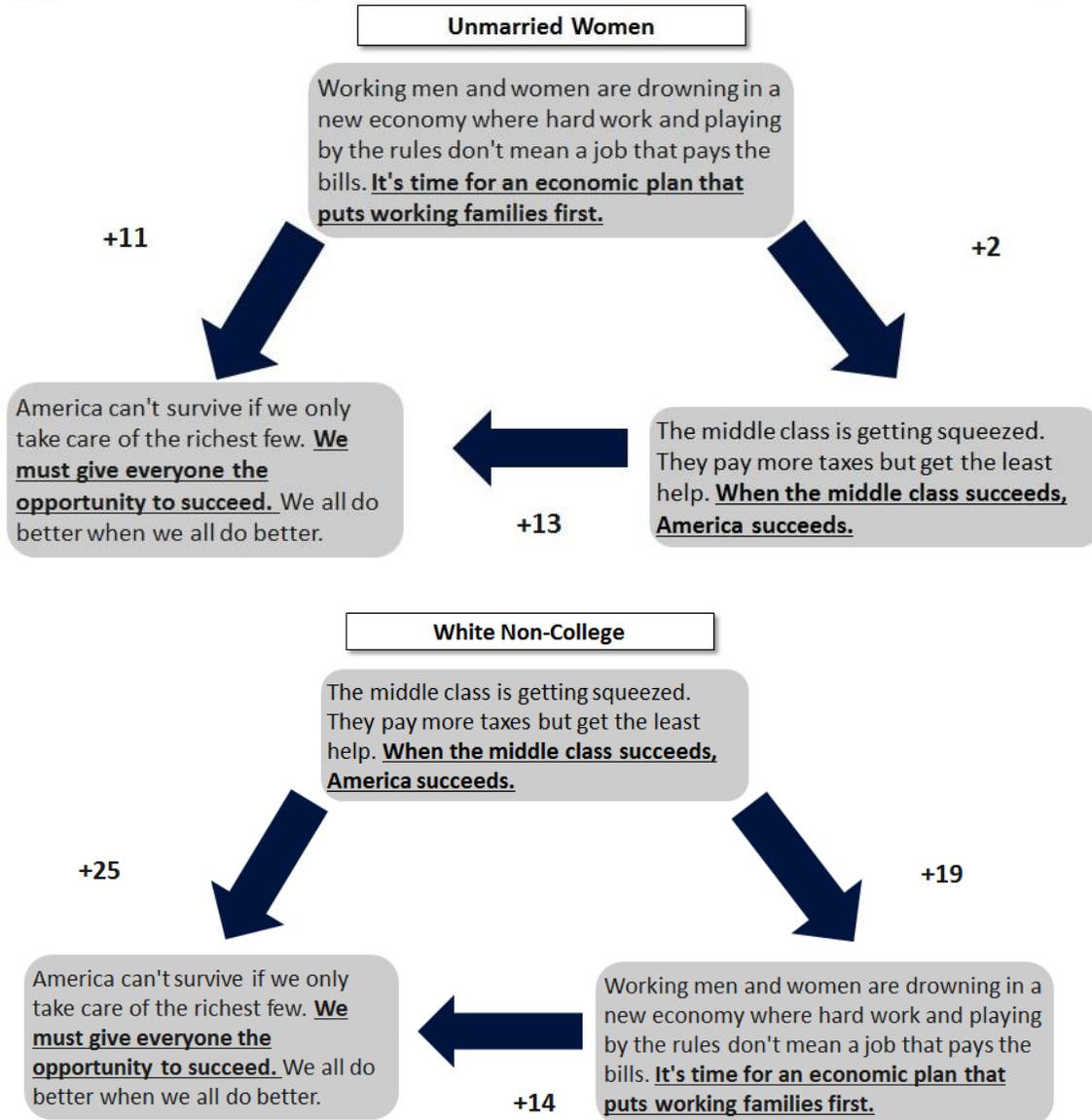
The starting point is the plight of the middle class. This frame dominated the past three election cycles; it is likely to dominate the next one as well. Democrats must acknowledge that while working people and the middle class pay high taxes, the country does not always work for them; when the middle class succeeds, America succeeds.

*Now let me read you some short statements. For each one, please tell me which statement is a better reason to support Democrats' economic plan.*





Now let me read you some short statements. For each one, please tell me which statement is a better reason to support Democrats' economic plan.



A core Democratic narrative that begins with this theme (“people are downing because jobs don’t pay enough”) finds much more traction than Republican economic narratives focused on establishment supply-side growth or a more populist, Tea-Party narrative. This Democratic frame easily dominates Republican economic messaging among unmarried white women—currently dividing evenly in their preference for Congress. While white working class voters prefer the Republican message, the Democratic message is more competitive than a context of 23-point Republican presidential margin or a 27-point Republican Party identification margin might suggest.



Economic Agenda	2016 LV	White Unmarried Women	White Non-College
	Total Convincing (%)		
<p><b>Democratic Economic Agenda [Combined]:</b> People are drowning because jobs don't pay enough to live on. We need leaders who know what it's like to work hard every day and still struggle to pay the bills. We must help people with affordable college, job training, and childcare. <u>Working families should earn wages that keep up with the cost of living/Women must get equal pay so working women and families can keep up.</u> We must help the vulnerable by reducing taxes for low-wage workers and give a tax break for lower and middle class working families. And we must always protect Social Security and Medicare. We need an economy that works for working people and the middle class again.</p>	71	74	67
<p><b>GOP Establishment Agenda:</b> Democrats failed to get our economy back on track. The middle class is struggling with declining paychecks, high unemployment, and rising costs. We must tighten our borders and make sure only those in this country legally who can support themselves can stay, and we need to reform the welfare system so more people have the opportunity to work. We need less government regulation and should fully harness our resources by building the Keystone Pipeline. We can bring back opportunity and stimulate job creation if we just get government out of the way and allow energetic and entrepreneurial Americans to rebuild the economy from the ground up.</p>	53	49	67
<p><b>Tea Party Agenda:</b> Government is out of control. The United States is so in debt that generations of Americans will pay for our bad decisions. Bureaucracy and bloated government continue to force skyrocketing spending. President Obama has seized more power through executive orders that force new policies on Americans without Congress' consent, using departments like the IRS to investigate enemies, and secret wiretaps to spy on our own citizens. We need to dramatically cut the power of the federal government, restore the Constitution, reign in the ability of the executive branch to make unilateral policy decisions, and put more power in the hands of local governments and individuals.</p>	51	48	69

Yet, this populist middle class message represents only half the answer. Part of the framework needs to include an element of government reform. This means going after the power of special interests and big money who dominate government and campaigns, but it is also about tackling the wasteful and inefficient government spending that these groups believe is partially responsible for their economic instability. Voters support equal pay, affordable college, childcare, and other elements of the Democrats' economic agenda (71 percent convincing), but importantly, they want leaders who will clean up Washington, change programs that don't work, and who won't waste their paychecks (72 percent). They want to get their money's worth from government.



Economic Agenda	2016 LV	White non-college	Unmar. women
<p><b>Democratic Economic Agenda [Combined]:</b>                      People are drowning because jobs don't pay enough to live on. We need leaders who know what it's like to work hard every day and still struggle to pay the bills. We must help people with affordable college, job training, and childcare. <u>Working families should earn wages that keep up with the cost of living/Women must get equal pay so working women and families can keep up.</u><sup>3</sup> We must help the vulnerable by reducing taxes for low-wage workers and give a tax break for lower and middle class working families. And we must always protect Social Security and Medicare. We need an economy that works for working people and the middle class again.</p>	Total Convincing (%)		
	71	67	80
	Very Convincing (%)		
	39	35	48
<p><b>Government Spending &amp; Reform Agenda:</b> There is too much money in politics and government. Big corporations and lobby groups spend millions getting their candidates elected, and then get tax breaks and special laws that protect their special interests. Billions are spent on government programs that are often out dated or don't even work--but special interests and government bureaucracy protect them. We need leaders who will clean up Washington by restricting the campaign dollars that come in, changing programs that don't work and using that money to help middle class working families--not big campaign donors.</p>	Total Convincing (%)		
	72	66	75
	Very Convincing (%)		
	40	36	40

Democrats must recognize that the economic and reform agendas are equally strong across most demographic groups, even among the Democratic base. Given that these folks are struggling economically and believe an unresponsive, gridlocked, and probably corrupted government will not help them, **reform is critical in equal measure.**

In one of the more dramatic findings in this survey, by sequencing a reform message first, Democrats open voters up to a progressive economic vision and win a hearing for their Democratic message. Among voters who heard the reform message first, 43 percent describe the larger economic narrative (“People are drowning...”) as very convincing. Without this antecedent, this number falls to 32 percent very convincing. Among white non-college voters, the order affect produces a 13-point jump in intensity for the Democratic message (40 percent and 27 percent, respectively).

<sup>3</sup> Respondents heard either the Working Families economic agenda (“Working families should earn wages that keep up with the cost of living”) or the Women’s Economic Agenda (“Women must get equal pay so working women and families can keep up.”)



People are drowning because jobs don't pay enough to live on. We need leaders who know what it's like to work hard every day and still struggle to pay the bills. We must help people with affordable college, job training, and childcare. **(Working families should earn wages that keep up with the cost of living/Women must get equal pay so working women and families can keep up.)** We must help the vulnerable by reducing taxes for low-wage workers and give a tax break for lower and middle class working families. And we must always protect Social Security and Medicare. We need an economy that works for working people and the middle class again.



As important, broadening our support with the currently hostile white working class does not mean Democrats need to abandon an economic agenda that includes specific policies focused on helping women. There is no price for bringing in pay equity as policy. Among all voters, an economic frame that includes equal pay performed just as well as one that did not (71 percent for both). The white working class—and even white working class men—were not turned off by a frame that acknowledged the need for equal pay. The economy has changed and they understand it is critical to their families and women in their lives.

Economic Agenda	Total Men	White Non-College	White Non-College Men
	Total Convincing (%)		
<b>Women's Economic Agenda:</b> People are drowning because jobs don't pay enough to live on. We need leaders who know what it's like to work hard every day and still struggle to pay the bills. We must help people with affordable college, job training, and childcare. <u>Women must get equal pay so working women and families can keep up.</u> We must help the vulnerable by reducing taxes for low-wage workers and give a tax break for lower and middle class working families. And we must always protect Social Security and Medicare. We need an economy that works for working people and the middle class again.	65	68	65
<b>Working Families Agenda:</b> People are drowning because jobs don't pay enough to live on. We need leaders who know what it's like to work hard every day and still struggle to pay the bills. We must help people with affordable college, job training, and childcare. <u>Working families should earn wages that keep up</u>	62	66	60



<p>with the cost of living. We must help the vulnerable by reducing taxes for low-wage workers and give a tax break for lower and middle class working families. And we must always protect Social Security and Medicare. We need an economy that works for working people and the middle class again.</p>			
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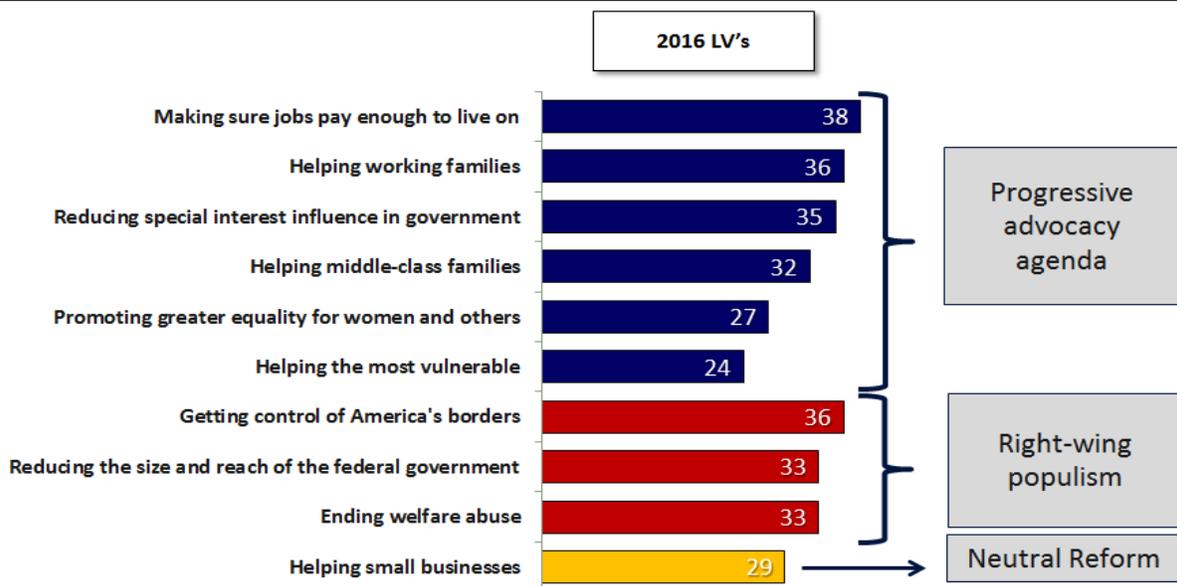
### A Policy Agenda That Reaches

The agenda that emerges from this sentiment focuses strongly on economic advocacy—on helping working men and women. Issues like protecting middle class entitlements, a long-term plan for jobs and economic growth, pay equity, help for working mothers, and paid sick leave all speak to the immediate economic lives of many of these voters. As above, there is no conflict or dissonance among white working class voters, including working class men, on issues that call out specifically the economic struggles of women, like help for working mothers or pay equity.

But progressives need to understand that voters do not believe the middle class woke up one day and decided to go into decline. In their view, the middle class decline is a product of a government that sacrificed their well-being in service to special interests and too often seems a poor steward of their tax dollars. As above, a reform agenda is critical to the policy menu Democrats provide voters.

When asked about the role of government, voters advocate for a strong, activist role in improving their economic lives. The leading response is “making sure jobs pay enough to live on,” reaching 38 percent overall and fully 54 percent among unmarried women and 39 percent among white working class women. Liked-minded responses include helping middle class families, helping working families and, notably, promoting greater equality for women and others. But right-wing populism plays a significant role as well, as a significant number of voters argue for getting control of borders, reducing welfare dependency and reducing the size of government.

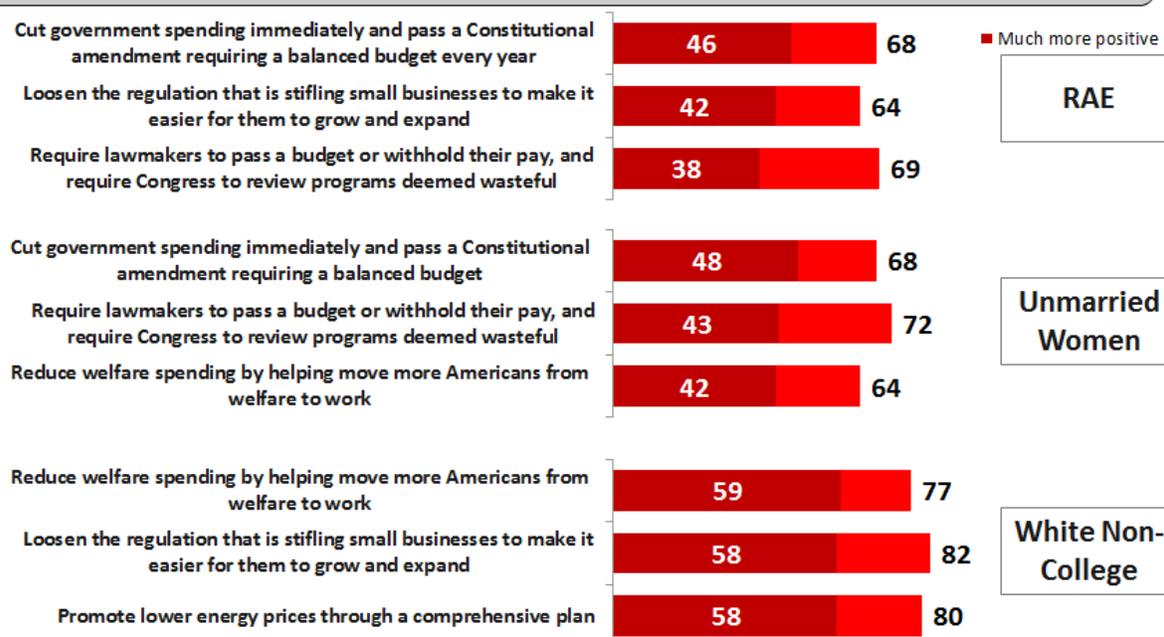
Now I want to ask you about government. I am going to read you a list of statements that describe what some people believe about the role of government today. After I read the list, please pick the three you believe are the most important.





In partisan terms, Democrats start with a significant advantage on forward-looking policy. The Democratic initiatives carry more power than the most powerful Republican proposal. The most popular Democratic initiative—and easily the most popular initiative on either side—is protecting Medicare and Social Security. This finds more traction than any Democratic initiative among unmarried women, white unmarried women and white working class voters alike. Voters also advocate for a long-term plan for jobs and college affordability. Critically, many of the same policies that appeal to Democratic base voters among RAE and unmarried women also appeal to white working class voters. While these voters differ wildly in their current political disposition, they share much of the same agenda.

*Now I am going to read you some things being proposed by Republicans as part of their plan to deal with the economy. After each item, please tell me whether that policy makes you feel much more positive about their plan, somewhat more positive about their plan, a little more positive, or not at all positive.*



Similarly, gender-specific proposals work particularly among unmarried women, but remain popular among white working class voters. An 87 percent majority of unmarried women and 85 majority of white unmarried women react favorably to a proposal that would “make sure working women have equal pay to men for doing the same work;” 73 percent of white non-college voters also react favorably to this proposal, 68 percent among white non-college men, 77 among white non-college women.

The other critical piece is reform. This is about weaning government from the patronage of special interests, but it is also about reducing waste and bureaucracy and guarding taxpayer dollars. Reducing waste and redundancy is the most popular Republican policy tested, reaching 74 percent positive overall and 72 percent among unmarried women. “Streamline government and re-



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duce waste and bureaucracy to make sure every dollar spent is a dollar spent serving people, not government,” is also one of the most popular Democratic initiatives tested. At 77 percent total positive, it is comparable to protecting Social Security and Medicare (79 percent). Among unmarried women, it creates a stronger “very positive” response than pay equity. And it is the most successful Democratic initiative among white working class voters outside of entitlement reform (79 percent total positive, 46 percent much more positive).

The messaging and policy in this survey—carefully balanced with Republican counter-messaging and policy—do not produce huge movement electorally and, regardless, it is very difficult to move a presidential horse-race already so consolidated along partisan lines. But in terms of partisan brands, voters move significantly toward the Democrats on “looking out for working women and men” (+7 net toward Democrats overall, +14 among white unmarried women, +12 among white non-college voters) and on “looking out for the interests of the middle class,” (+4 overall, +7 among white non-college voters).