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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

From: Stan Greenberg, James Carville, Andrew Baumann and Erica Seifert

The Budget Battle in the Republican-Obama Battleground

Budget Debate Moves Voters Away From Republicans

The Republicans' proposed budget cuts are in trouble in the 50 most competitive Republican-held Congressional districts – nearly all of which gave a majority to Obama in the last presidential election. Support drops dramatically after respondents hear balanced information and messages, and incumbents in these battleground seats find themselves even more endangered.¹

These battleground voters are currently split on the Republican plan to cut domestic programs by \$61 billion, with 46 percent in favor and 46 percent opposed. This would be a dramatic decline in support from January when Democracy Corps found 60 percent support for the Republicans' budget cuts.

And after a balanced debate on the issue, support for the Republican budget plan drops sharply, to 41 percent, with a 52 percent majority opposed. The more voters hear from the Republicans on this issue, the less they like. In fact, after hearing the budget debate, 53 percent agree, the more they hear from Republicans like their incumbent, "the less I like." Just 39 percent say the more they hear, "the more I like." And this is reflected in the vote, as it moves a net of 5 points towards the Democrats, giving them a 47 to 44 percent lead on the ballot.

Much of the shift up to this point has come among Democrats and Democratic base groups, with independents still holding back from Democrats on budget issues. But it is independents that move in response to the messages and attacks tested in this survey.

Democrats and progressives have a strong case to make against the Republicans by focusing on their budget priorities: specifically, the Republicans' plan to protect wasteful special-interest

¹ This memo is based on a survey of 1,000 likely voters in 50 battleground congressional districts conducted March 13-17, 2011. This battleground was split into two tiers of 25 districts each. These districts include 44 that were won by President Obama in 2008 and were chosen based on the 2008 presidential margin, the 2010 congressional margin and race ratings from Charlie Cook and others. The margin of error for the entire sample is +/- 3.1%. In each tier it is +/- 4.5%. See our website, www.democracycorps.com, for a separate memo on the political situation in these districts.



subsidies for oil companies and tax breaks for millionaires, while cutting support for veterans, education and Medicare and Social Security. Other critiques are weaker, but progressives clearly can win this debate – even in the battleground of Republican seats.

Key Message Recommendations

- Throughout this poll, the strongest framework and attacks center on the priorities and choices Republicans are making, not the severity of the cuts. Democrats strongly defeat the Republican arguments in the former framework, but not within the latter. This is a powerful direction here.
- The following framework is dominant.

Democrats say: we have to cut spending, but the Republicans have the wrong approach. They make big cuts to education and veterans' benefits while gutting Social Security and Medicare. Our approach is different - we want to measure every government program to see if it's achieving results and eliminate the ones that don't. Then we should eliminate government subsidies to the oil and drug companies and the taxpayer-funded handouts for the wealthiest Americans.

This argument defeats a very strong Republican argument by 8 points in these Republican districts.

- The Democrats' strongest thematic attack again is grounded in an attack on priorities – raising serious doubts for over 60 percent of respondents and driving voters away from the Republican budget in our regression modeling.

(HOUSE INCUMBENT) is making the wrong choice at this critical time. (He/She) should be cutting tax breaks for the oil companies and CEOs and wasteful special-interest spending projects. Instead, (he/she) started by cutting education, hurting the middle class and working families with children.

- Republican cuts to funding for homeless veterans, their support for oil subsidies, their support for privatizing Medicare and Social Security, and their cuts to Head Start and anti-poverty programs are their biggest specific vulnerabilities.
- The most popular Democratic proposals for addressing the deficit are “eliminating subsidies for oil and gas companies” and “instituting a surtax on families making over one million dollars a year” – which is totally consistent with the priorities framework in this memo.



Democrats United Against Republican Budget Plan, but independents receptive

In our January national survey, a solid 60 percent majority supported the Republican plan to cut \$100 billion in spending. Last month, that support had dropped to 50 percent, with 33 percent opposed. And while this poll surveyed a different geography (making an apples-to-apples comparison impossible) these results are still significant: voters in the battleground are split 46 percent to 46 percent on the Republican plan to cut \$61 billion in domestic programs.

Similarly, 46 percent of voters are more concerned that, when it comes to the budget, “Republicans will go too far in cutting important programs” and a nearly equal 47 percent are more concerned that “Democrats will not go far enough in cutting spending.”

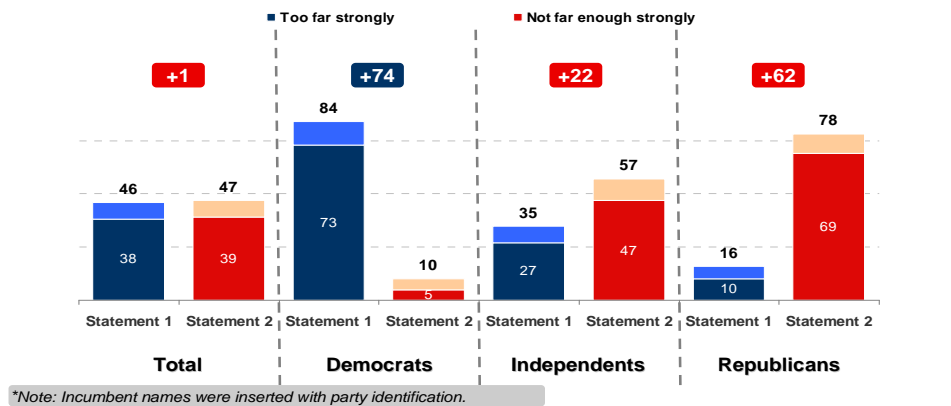
These two questions display similar partisan breakdowns, but the second is more instructive. Democrats are more strongly consolidated. However, independents are still hesitant to trust Democrats on spending and are more worried that Democrats will not go far enough, by a 35 to 57 percent margin.

Dems united against Republicans, but Independents wary

Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements. After I read each pair, please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right.

STATEMENT 1: When it comes to the federal budget, I am more concerned that Republicans will go too far in cutting important programs

STATEMENT 2: When it comes to the federal budget, I am more concerned that the Democrats will not go far enough in cutting spending.



So while it is clear that as voters hear more about the Republican plans their support has faded – independent voters still default strongly to an anti-spending position in the abstract, something Democrats and progressives would be wise to keep in mind.



Budget Debate Moves Voters Strongly Toward Democrats

When voters receive more information about the budget debate (described in more detail below), the calculus changes dramatically in the Democrats’ favor. As noted above, support for the Republicans’ budget plan drops from an even 46 to 46 percent to a 41-52 percent majority against the budget proposal.

Support for the statement, “The more I hear from Republicans in Congress like (HOUSE INCUMBENT), the less I like” shifts from an initial edge of 44 to 42 percent, to wider 53 to 39 percent margin. The vote on the congressional ballot shifts by a less dramatic, but still important, net of 5 points.

Shift in Vote and Key Measures After Budget Debate

Congressional Vote	Net Initial	Net Final	Net Shift
Total	-2	4	+6
Democrats	86	90	+4
Independents	-19	-9	+10
Republicans	-84	-80	+4

Republican Budget	Net Initial	Net Final	Net Shift
Total	0	-11	-11
Democrats	-69	-85	-16
Independents	15	4	-11
Republicans	58	52	-6

Hear more/like less	Initial	Final	Shift
Total	2	14	+12
Democrats	65	85	+20
Independents	-8	3	+11
Republicans	-56	-53	+3

Importantly, the overall movement is led by a large shift among independents (net 10 point shift on the vote) and an even further consolidation of Democrats. Meanwhile, Republicans actually also move slightly toward the Democratic position on these measures, which is unusual – after partisan messaging such as this we usually see both bases consolidate on most issues.



Priorities Message, GOP Protection of Oil Subsidies, Strong For Democrats

We should be clear that Republicans do have some strong messages on the budget. The public, especially independents, strongly favor greater fiscal discipline in Washington—at least in the abstract. And Republican messages that focus on the need to “rein in out-of-control federal spending” and to act on the country’s “crushing burden of debt” score well, particularly with independent and persuadable voters.

But, as the shifts above illustrate, Democrats can trump this with the right message. We tested two overall approaches against the same Republican message, a Democratic message that emphasized priorities, and one that echoed the language used by some Democrats calling Republican cuts “too severe.”² Both messages were strong, but the priorities message was stronger overall and significantly stronger with most key groups, including independents, “persuadable” voters (as defined by our Voter Choice Scale), those who voted for Obama in 2008 but not for a Democrat in 2010, and those who shifted on the vote in the survey.

Additionally, in half of the sample, we tested thematic attacks on the incumbent and the Republican Party’s approach on the budget. The strongest attack was, again, a priorities message: hammering the Republicans for cutting education and hurting the middle class while protecting tax breaks for oil companies and wasteful special interest spending projects. This raised serious doubts for 62 percent of voters and was easily the strongest among nearly every swing target group, as well as those in upscale metro and suburban districts that are friendliest to Democrats. In regression analysis, this message drove both the final ballot vote and final budget vote.

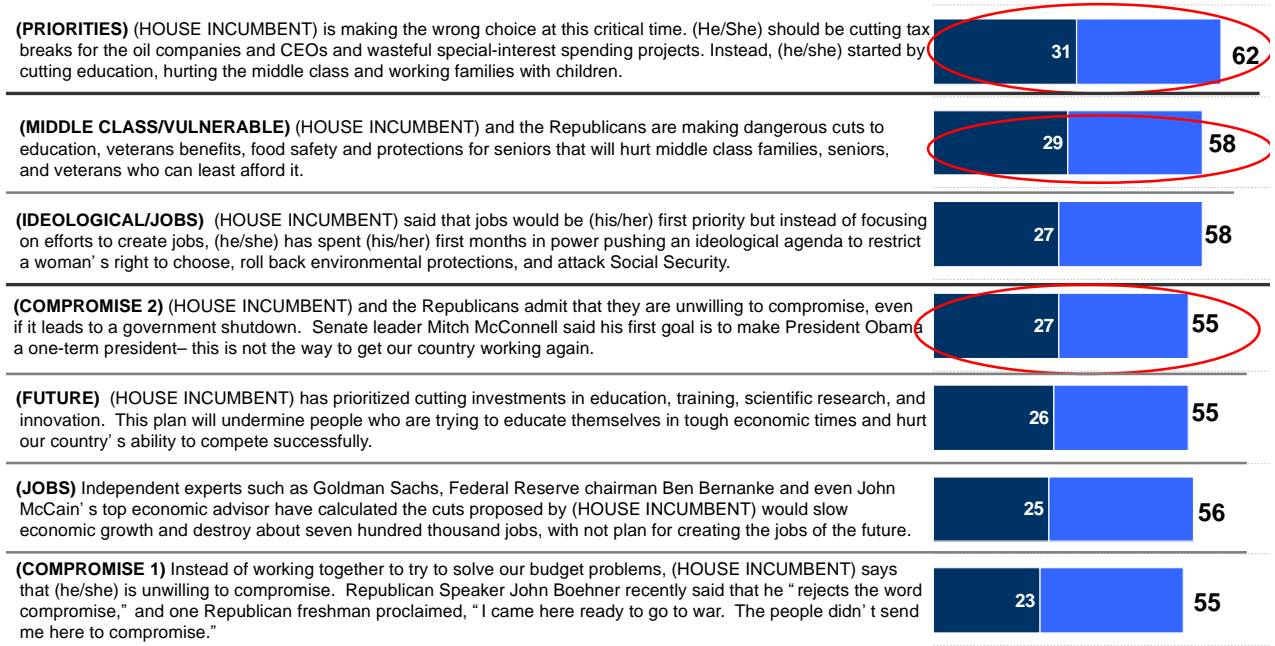
² For full text of messages, please see the Frequency Questionnaire, posted on our website, www.democracycorps.com



Priorities message best thematic critique for Democrats

Now let me read you some statements about the economy and budget and the votes cast by Republican (HOUSE INCUMBENT). After I read each statement, please tell me whether this raises very serious doubts, serious doubts, minor doubts or no real doubts in your own mind about (HOUSE INCUMBENT).

■ Very serious doubts



In the other half of the sample, we tested attacks on the incumbents for their support of various specific elements of the Republican budget. Three attacks stood out at the top with another three grouped slightly behind.

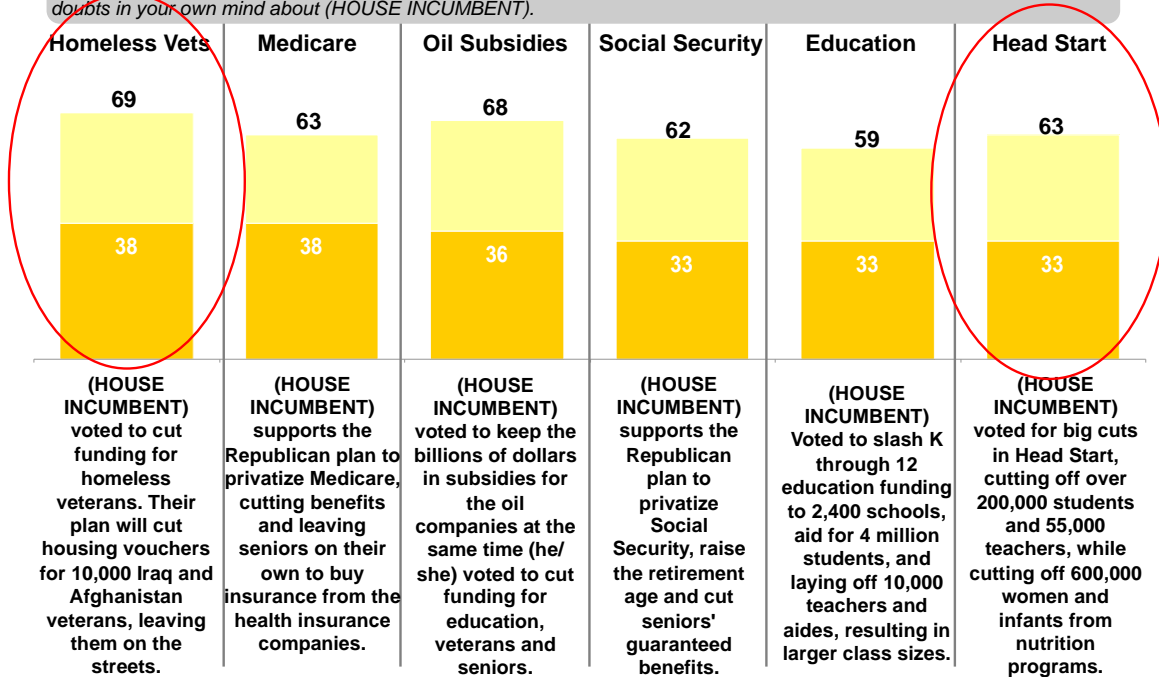
The top three attacks focused on the Republicans' plan to cut funding for homeless veterans (also a driver in regression analysis) and their votes to protect billions of dollars worth of subsidies for the oil companies (while also voting to cut funding for education, veterans and seniors). Both created serious doubts with nearly 70 percent of voters, but the oil attack is actually slightly stronger with most swing groups. Joining these in the top tier of attacks is the Republicans' support for privatizing Medicare (very strong with seniors and those over 50, but weaker with younger voters.)

Below these are a second tier that include: cutting Head Start and poverty programs (strong in metro districts and a driver in regressions), privatizing Social Security (also stronger with older voters but below Medicare), and cutting K-12 education.



Cuts to vets, entitlements and support for oil companies raise biggest doubts

Now let me read you a series of statements about the votes cast by Republican (HOUSE INCUMBENT) on the budget. After I read each statement, please tell me whether this raises very serious doubts, serious doubts, minor doubts or no real doubts in your own mind about (HOUSE INCUMBENT).



Bringing all of this together suggests that the strongest Democrat message centers on priorities: the Republicans support for special-interest subsidies for oil companies and tax breaks for millionaires, while slashing support for veterans, education, Medicare and Social Security.