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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner
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An Exploration of the Conservative Shift Among Independents

Analysis of Democracy Corps' Database From 2006 to the Present

Democrats are currently at a precarious point in this cycle, with favorability ratings at their lowest point in years and in a virtual tie with Republicans on the generic ballot. Much of the focus has been on the middle of the electorate – the independent voters that helped create a Democratic wave in 2006 and usher Barack Obama into office in 2008 have moved sharply to the right, endangering the same majority they brought to power four years ago.

A new *Washington Post*-ABC News poll conducted right after the most recent Democracy Corps survey also shows an unprecedented anti-incumbent electorate, though it also shows for the first time some warming of independents to President Obama and the Democrats. Our own polling has not shown that yet – and thus it is important to understand what has produced this extraordinary turn since 2006 and 2008. This special report uses the Democracy Corps database of more than 17,000 interviews with independent voters in our national surveys conducted since 2006 (and thousands more from earlier years).

Since the Democrats' high-point in late 2006, a 15-point lead on the Congressional vote among independents has become a 17-point deficit. Meanwhile, independents are now identifying as conservatives at a rate higher than ever before. Why is that?

Part of the shift is, counter-intuitively, due to the decline of the standing of the Republican Party among its own base, as some conservatives who used to identify as Republicans have shifted into the independent column. Some of the shift is due to the nature of the 2010 electorate, as Democratic-leaning independents who turned out to support Obama drop off in a non presidential year.

But the largest factor, particularly in the remarkable movement over the last 9 months, is a sharp decline in the standing of the Democratic Party driven by increasing anger over the economy and a possible rising anti-government sentiment among independents.¹ The decline is greatest with older, non-college, male and southern voters, reflected in their choice for Congress.

¹ This analysis is based on Democracy Corps' database of all national surveys conducted since January of 2003. These surveys were broken into six-month chunks (with the exception of our first four surveys in 2010, which were grouped together) and analyzed for trends. To look at shorter-term trends, we also created a time series of our surveys going back to 2007, combining every two surveys together to enable us to look at subgroups with sufficient sample size.



Dramatic Shift Among Independents Driving More Conservative, Anti-Democratic Electorate

As we exit the first quarter of 2010, the likely November electorate has shifted since Barack Obama's 2008 victory, moving in a more conservative and Republican direction. The Democrats' party identification advantage has evaporated to zero from a 6-point advantage last year. Voters are indentifying as conservatives at a 44 percent rate, up 4 points since Obama's election and, most important, the Democrats' 8-point lead on the named Congressional ballot has turned into a 1-point deficit.

This movement is important, but not overly dramatic. What makes it particularly significant, however, is that these changes have been driven almost entirely by movements among independents, who have become dramatically more conservative and hostile to Democrats in a trend that started just over three years ago and has only picked up steam in the last nine months.

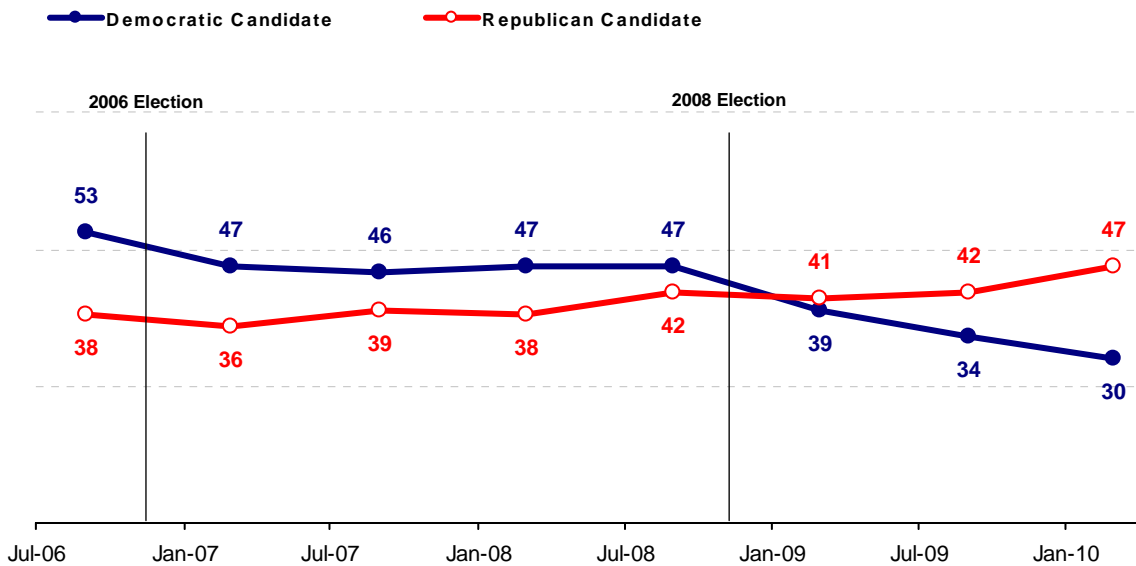
Democrats reached their high-point with independents in late 2006 and rode that advantage to a Congressional majority, winning this key bloc by 18 points in November of that year (our polling over the second half of 2006 gave Democrats a similar 15-point advantage with independents). That lead has steadily eroded since then, falling to a 5-point margin in our polling in late 2008,² dropping to about even by early 2009, and then plummeting to a 17-point disadvantage over the first four months of this year. Among white independents, the shift has been even larger, with the margin moving from +12 points for the Democrats in late 2006, to -1 in late 2008 and plunging to -22 this year.

² Democrats won the 2008 congressional elections by 8 points among independents.



Strong shift among independents against Democrats since late 2006

I know it is a long way off, but thinking about the elections in (2006/2008/2010), if the election for U.S. Congress were held today, would you be voting for (DEMOCRATIC HOUSE CANDIDATE) or (REPUBLICAN HOUSE CANDIDATE)?



Net Difference	+15	+11	+7	+9	+5	-2	-8	-17
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**Note: Data from Democracy Corps surveys conducted since mid-2006. Data reflects likely voters who self-identify as independents. Incumbent names were inserted preceded by party identification with the generic "the Democratic candidate" or "the Republican candidate" inserted for the opposition. For the cell phone sample and open seat districts, both candidates were generic.*

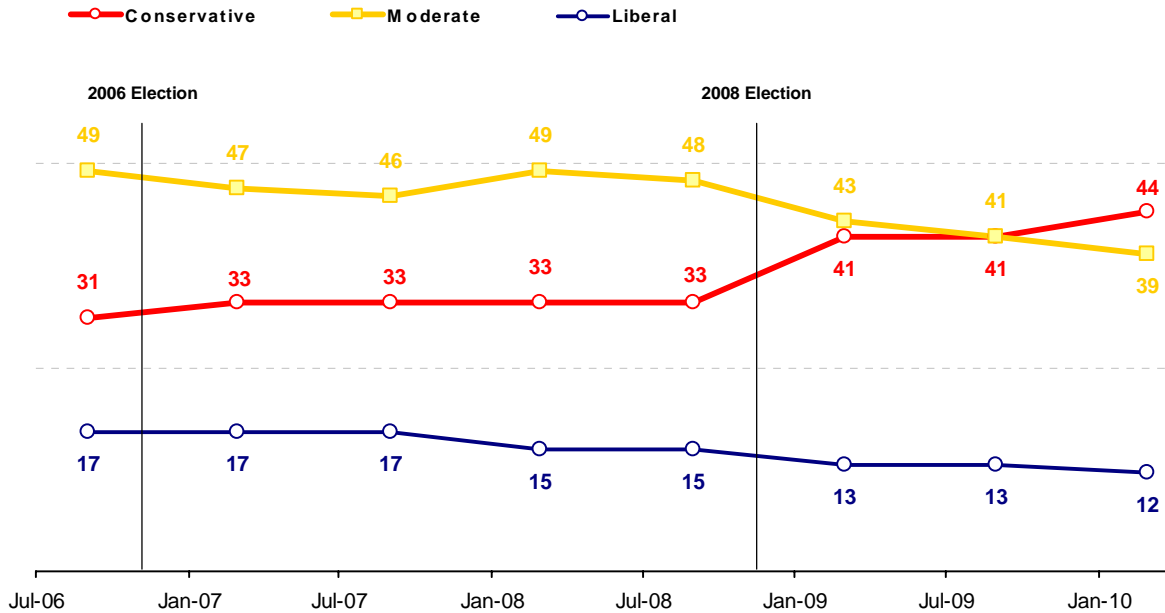
We have observed a similar, though slightly less dramatic, movement in party identification among independents. In late 2006, independents leaned toward the Democrats by an 11-point margin (with 44 percent leaning toward the Democrats and 33 percent leaning toward Republicans), but by this year that has nearly reversed itself, as the group now leans towards the Republicans by 13 points (46 to 33 percent).

Perhaps most striking is the sudden change in the ideological makeup of independent voters. Between 2003 and 2008, about 33 percent of independents identified as conservatives, but since the 2008 election that has spiked 10 points, to 44 percent (with a corresponding 9-point drop in the percent identifying as moderates). As we discuss in more detail below, part of this movement is due to the change in electorate in a non-election year, but even looking at the same universe of 2008 voters, conservative identification has jumped a robust 6 points since 2008.



Stark rise in conservative identification among independents

Thinking in political terms, would you say that you are conservative, moderate or liberal?



*Note: Data from Democracy Corps surveys conducted since mid-2006. Data reflects likely voters who self-identify as independents.

As the table below shows, the shift among independents on all of these measures has been driven primarily by movement among older, non-college, male and southern voters with some of these groups showing net shifts on the congressional vote of nearly 50 points since 2006.



■ **Table 1: Strongest Shifts Away from Democrats Among Independents since 2006**

	Shift in Party ID ³	Shift in Congressional Vote	Shift in Conservative Ideology
Total	-24	-32	+13
Older Men	-39	-47	+17
Older Non College	-41	-50	+15
White 50 and Older	-35	-41	+16
White Deep South	-37	-43	+17
50 and Older	-34	-41	+15
White Men	-29	-34	+18
White Non College	-32	-36	+16

Clearly, the shift among independents since 2006, and especially in the 18 months since Obama’s election, is a big problem for Democrats, but the question is what is causing it. There are three main possible causes:

1. More former Republicans are identifying as independents, but still acting like Republicans.
2. The 2010 independent electorate is more conservative because Democratic-leaning independents are dropping off from 2008 and before.
3. There has been a real shift in attitudes among people who have always classified themselves as independents.

Our analysis shows that all three of these factors are contributing to the shift, but that the most significant factor is a large drop in the standing of Democrats, driven by anger over the economy and, we believe, an increasingly anti-government sentiment.

Some Evidence That Former Republicans Now Calling Themselves Independents

As the numbers among independents started shifting away from Democrats in the early part of 2009, there was much speculation that this was driven in large part by the migration of conservative voters who once identified as Republicans into the independent column as they be-

³ Table shows net shift in partisan identification, congressional vote, and percent identifying as conservative among independents and subgroups between late 2006 and 2010.

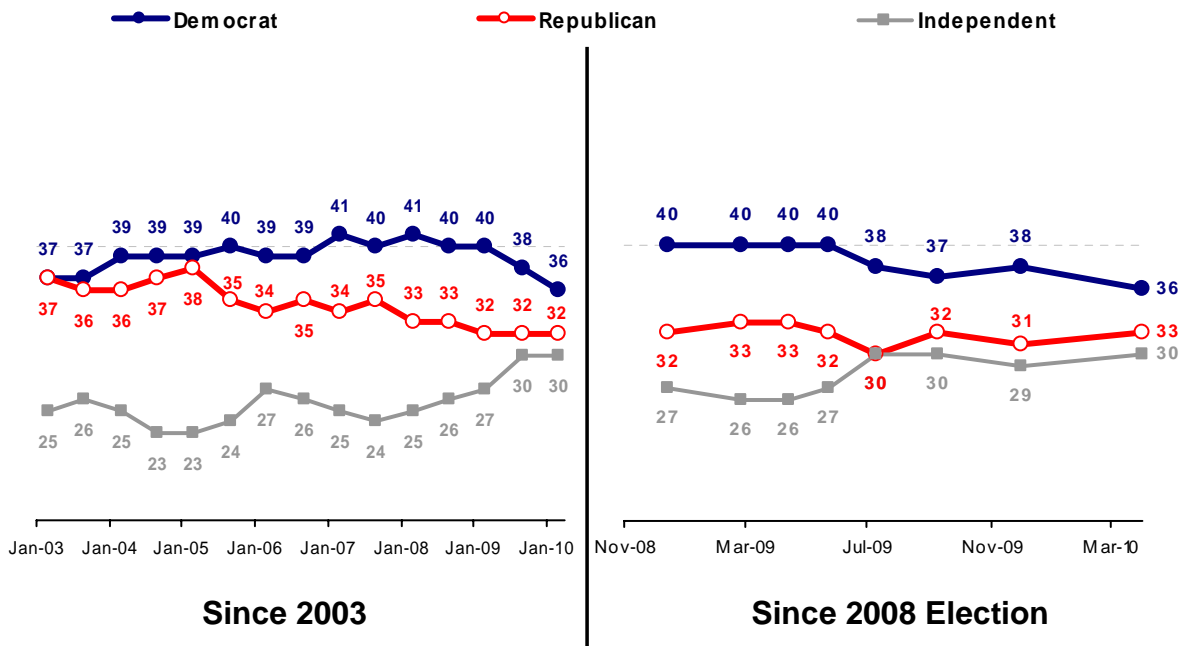


came disillusioned with the Republican Party. Our data suggests that this phenomenon was indeed occurring from 2006 into the first part of 2009, though not at dramatic levels. But since the middle of 2009, the opposite trend has occurred, as independent identification has continued to increase but at the expense of Democrats, not Republicans.

Republican identification remains at its low of 32 percent in our polls since 2003, 3 points lower than in 2007 and 6 points lower than its high in 2005, but virtually unchanged from 2008. Meanwhile, independent identification is at its historical high of 30 percent in 2010, growing from a low of 23 percent in 2005. But since the middle of 2009, that growth has continued while Democratic identification has fallen to 36 percent, down about 4 points from the consistent 39 to 41 percent level it had held at from 2004 to early 2009.

Democratic identification declining while Republicans remain stable

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, or what?



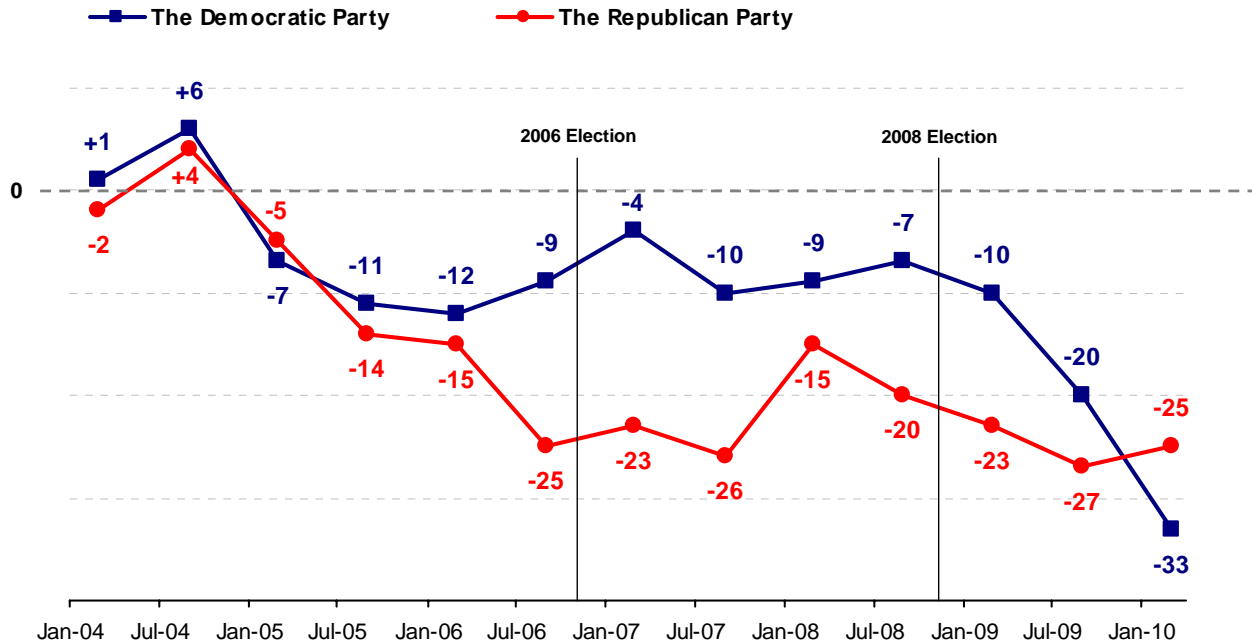
*Note: Data from Democracy Corps surveys conducted since 2003. Data in left graph reflects combined surveys per every six months, while the right graph reflects combined surveys per every two months.

As noted above, independents are indentifying as conservatives at a much higher rate this year (44 percent) than previously (about 32-33 percent). But despite this more conservative tilt, they do not rate the Republican Party highly. In fact, independents' ratings for the GOP have declined steadily since 2004. Meanwhile, the ratings for the Democratic Party among independents declined more slowly through the 2008 election and the first part of 2009, only to tank in the last 9 months, dropping from a -10 net favorability rating to -33 in less than a year.



Dem. Party ratings tank; Rep. Party stable but low with independents

Now, I'd like to rate your feelings toward some people and organizations, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold. The Democratic/Republican Party...



*Note: Data from Democracy Corps surveys conducted since 2004. Data reflects likely voters who self-identify as independents. Data also reflects net favorability ratings.

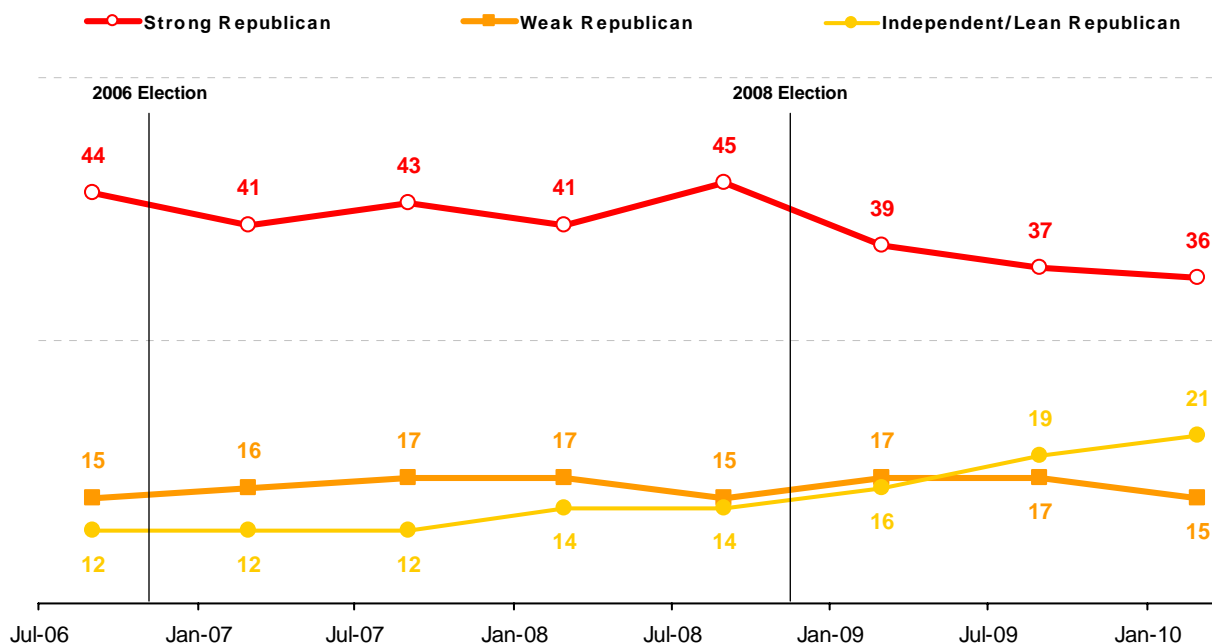
At the same time, the rating of the Republican Party among conservatives also declined through 2009, dropping from a +45 net favorability rating in early 2006 to a low of +17 at the end of last year, only to slightly rebound to +20 in 2010. And combining those two, conservative independents, after giving the Republican Party a net favorability rating of +22 in 2006, now give the GOP a net -7 rating.

Looking at this a different way, conservatives are identifying as independents at a much higher rate now than at anytime before. A full 30 percent are now identifying as independents, up 9 points from 2008. This is largely due to an increase in the percentage identifying as Republican-leaning independents (up to 21 percent from 12 percent in late 2006) and has come at the expense of strong Republicans (down to 36 percent from 44 percent in 2006).



Conservatives identifying as independents at highest rate ever

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, or what?



**Note: Data from Democracy Corps surveys conducted since mid-2006. Data reflects trends in partisan identification among those who self-identify as having a conservative ideology.*

Conversely, since early 2009, the percentage of liberals self-identifying as strong Democrats has dropped from its high of 61 percent to 56 percent now, with many of those former Democrats shifting into the independent column.

Putting all of this together, it is clear that between 2006 and early 2009, some conservatives who became disillusioned with the Republican Party stopped self-identifying as Republicans even though they, for the most part, continued to act (and vote) like Republicans. This trend has leveled off in the last 6 to 9 months, but the GOP still remains near its lowest all-time standing with conservatives. Meanwhile, since the middle of 2009, we are seeing the beginning of a similar trend among former Democrats, though on a smaller scale.

This creates great uncertainty in how things will play out on a partisan level in 2010. The larger numbers of conservative independents have no love for the Democrats (see below), and that anger would likely turn them out in 2010. But their less than enthusiastic view of the Republican Party leaves them very receptive to possible third-party challengers from the right (like the Tea Party), and could result in a schism in the Republican ranks in places where more mod-



erate establishment Republicans are facing off against Tea Party true believers in Republican primaries.

The Drop-off of Democratic-Leaning Independents

Much has been made of the difference between the 2008 electorate and the electorate that is likely to turn out in 2010, particularly in the wake of the 2009 elections which had a much whiter, older, and more conservative electorate, especially in Virginia. The main problem for Democrats is that fewer of their base voters, self-identifying Democrats, are likely to turn out. But this also extends to the group of self-identifying independents who are likely to show up at the poll on Election Day 2010.

Last year, Democracy Corps expanded the universe of our national surveys to all 2008 voters, instead of simply 2010 likely voters, so we could compare voters likely to vote in 2010 and those who are likely to drop off.⁴ An analysis of our combined data from this year shows that those independents most likely to vote in 2010 are more Republican and conservative than those more likely to stay at home, which is part of the reason independents have moved to the right this year.

This is most evident in the congressional vote, as drop-off independents favor the Democrat in our named congressional vote by a 17-point margin (44 to 27 percent) while 2010 likely independent voters favor the Republican by 12 points (44 to 32 percent).

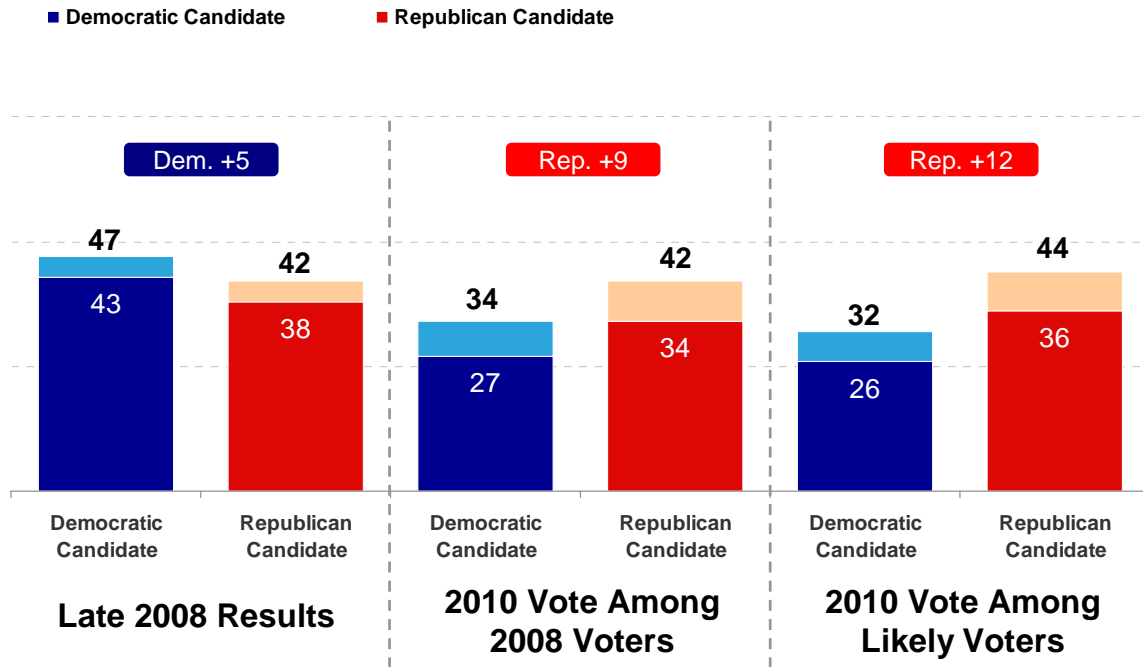
In fact, drop off accounts for about 20 percent of the change in Congressional vote since 2008. Late that year, the Democrats' lead was +5. Among the same electorate of 2008 independent voters, the margin is -8, but when the electorate is restricted to likely 2010 independent voters the margin, as we noted, is -12. Thus the drop off of Democratic-leaning independents has caused 4 points of the 20-point shift.

⁴ Likely voters are defined as those who voted (or were not eligible to vote) in 2006 AND who say they are almost certain or are probable to vote in 2010. All others are classified as likely drop-off voters. Because Democracy Corps uses an RDD screen, we must rely on respondents' self report, which is not as reliable as vote history because of social desirability bias.



Drop-off of Dem-leaning independents is a quarter of vote change

I know it is a long way off, but thinking about the elections in (2008/2010), if the election for U.S. Congress were held today, would you be voting for (DEMOCRATIC HOUSE CANDIDATE) or (REPUBLICAN HOUSE CANDIDATE)?



**Note: Data from Democracy Corps surveys conducted since late 2008. Data reflects likely voters who self-identify as independents.*

The trend is also apparent when we look at the partisan leanings and ideology of likely and drop-off independents. Likely independent voters lean toward the Republican Party by a 10-point margin (33 to 43 percent). Drop-off independents are reversed, favoring Democrats 43 to 29 percent. Meanwhile, just 22 percent of drop-off independents identify as conservative while 43 percent of likely independent voters do.



■ **Table 2: Congressional Vote, Party ID and Conservative ID of Likely and Drop-off Independents**

	Net Congressional Vote ⁵	Net Party ID Difference	Conservative
All Independents	Reps +8	Reps +7	40
Likely Ind. Voters	Reps +12	Reps +10	43
Drop-off Ind. Voters	Dems +17	Dems +14	22

Real Movement Away From Democrats on the Economy, Government and Deficits

While part of the shift in the vote of independents is due to a rise in conservative ideology and the changing nature of an off-year electorate yielding drop-off independents, that does not explain away all, or even most, of the movement. A significant part is real movement away from Democrats that started in the beginning of 2009 and accelerated greatly in the last nine months.

As noted above, the ratings of both parties among independents declined steadily from 2004 to early 2009 with Republicans suffering more, but that trend changed dramatically in the last half of 2009 and this year. Since the middle of 2009, the Republican Party has remained equally or even slightly more unpopular among independents, but Democrats have been declining dramatically.

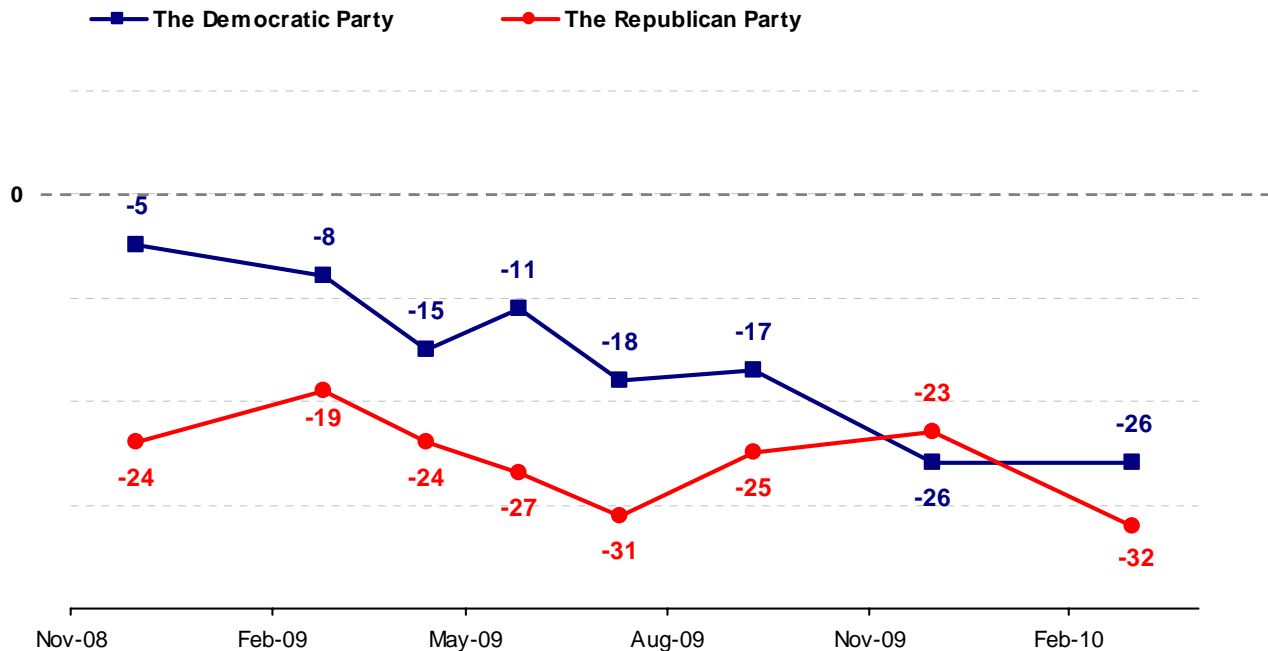
At the beginning of 2009, the Democratic Party had a net favorability rating of -8. But that declined throughout the year, reaching -17 in our September surveys, -26 in our November and January and -34 in our February and March surveys. Ratings of the Republican Party have been more stable over this period, currently at -26.

⁵ Tables shows the net Congressional vote, net Party ID difference and percent self-identifying as conservative of all independents, likely independent voters and independents who are likely to drop off from our four 2010 surveys.



Recent months show both parties hit lowest ratings with independents

Now, I'd like to rate your feelings toward some people and organizations, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold. **The Democratic/Republican Party...**



**Note: Note: Data from Democracy Corps surveys conducted since the 2008 election. Data reflects likely voters who self-identify as independents. Data also reflects net favorability ratings. Combined surveys for every two months.*

This deterioration in the Democrats' overall standing with independents has been strongly driven by losses on the economy. In late 2006, independents gave Democrats a 20-point edge on the economy. By early 2009 that had dropped to a 7-point lead and in the last nine months has plummeted to a 16-point deficit. That is an incredible 36-point net shift on the economy among independents since late 2006.

And looking again at the groups of independents who have shifted the hardest against Democrats since 2006, the correlation between ratings on the economy, the standing of Democrats and the congressional vote is clear. Democrats have simply crashed, even though Republicans have not seen any improvement in their standings. This is particularly true among the white, non-college independents who have moved against Democrats on the economy by a net of 54 points.



■ **Table 3: Standing of Democrats Declining Rapidly with Shifting Groups Among Independents**

	Shift in Congressional Vote ⁶	Shift in Better Job on the Economy	Shift in Dem Therm Mean	Shift in Rep Therm Mean
Total	-32	-36	-10.3	-1.1
Older Non College	-50	-59	-14.1	-2.7
Older Men	-47	-44	-12.7	-2.5
White 50 and Older	-41	-44	-13.1	-2.1
50 and Older	-41	-42	-12.1	-1.7
White Deep South	-43	-55	-14.6	-0.9
White Non College	-36	-54	-13.5	-1.7
White Men	-34	-43	-12.1	-2.9

Meanwhile, spending-conscious independents have also turned harshly sour on the Democrats on the issue of the deficit. A year ago, Democrats held a 5-point advantage on the deficit, but by November that had shifted to a 22-point gap that has now further expanded to 33 points in our April survey.

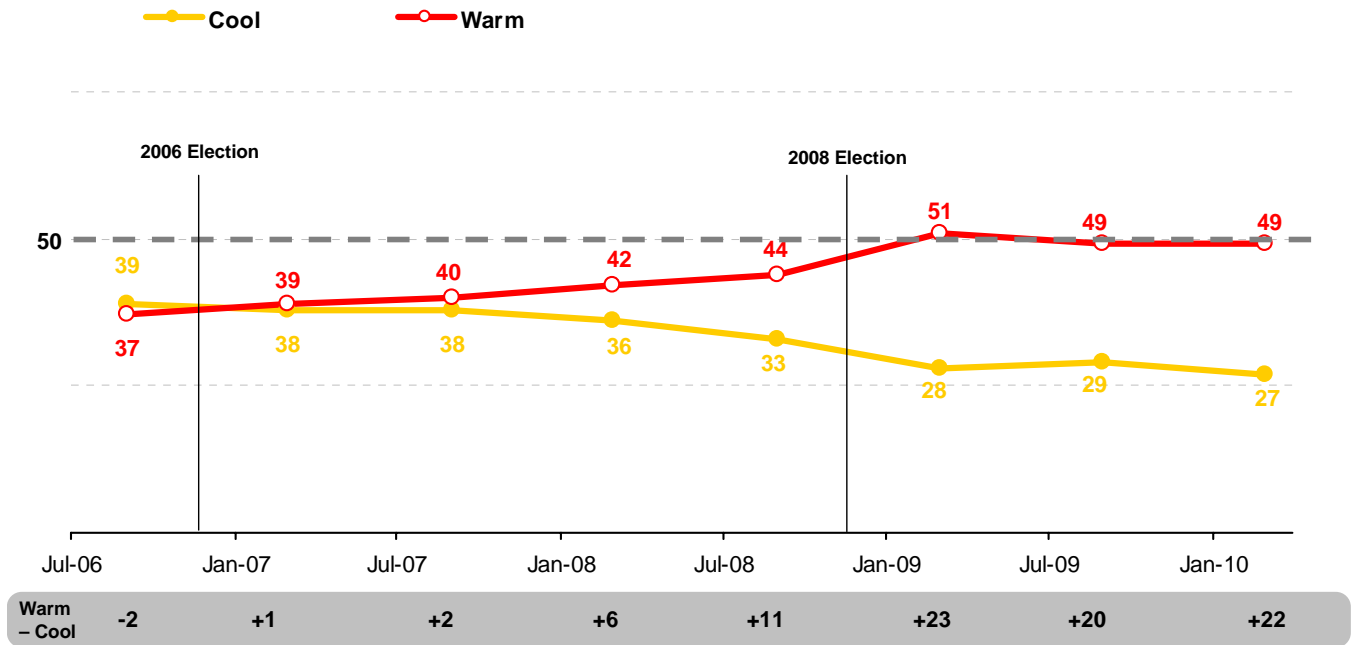
Finally, there are indications that a surge in anti-government, pro-libertarian sentiments is playing a part in the movement of independents. Among independents, the favorability ratings of the NRA (which signals itself as a defender of personal liberties from an overreaching government), have moved from about even in late 2006 and early 2007 to +11 in late 2008, then +22 in early 2009 (they currently hold a net favorability rating of +22).

⁶ Tables shows net shift in Democratic margin on congressional vote and who would do a better job on the economy among all independents and key groups between late 2006 and now. Also shows change in mean thermometer ratings of the Democratic Party between late 2006 and now and of the Republican Party between early 2007 and now – late 2006 not used for Republican Party because data from that time period showed a transitory drop in thermometer score that is out of line with previous and subsequent months.



NRA thermometer sees strong uptick with independents

Now, I'd like to rate your feelings toward some people and organizations, with 100 meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and 50 meaning not particularly warm or cold... **The N.R.A., or National Rifle Association.**



**Note: Data from Democracy Corps surveys conducted since mid-2006. Data reflects likely voters who self-identify as independents.*

Interestingly, this has not been accompanied by an increase in the thermometer score of pro-life groups or a decrease in the score of gay marriage. We are not entirely sure about the reason for the NRA surge, but this combination suggests that the increasing conservative leanings of independents is not based in a reaction to social conservative flash points, but is rather more anti-government and anti-elite in nature.