

September 20, 2010

AN ALERT: Changing the framework and outcome in 2010

To: Democratic candidates for Congress

From: Stanley Greenberg and James Carville, Democracy Corps

Executive Summary

The 2010 election campaign could not be more daunting, but we believe Democratic congressional candidates can move these races in the final two months if they frame this election as a clear choice and battle for the middle class, against the big financial interests dominating Washington and which Republicans champion. This is a moment to refocus. With the unemployment rate going up, voters deeply frustrated and desperate, and Democrats down 7 points in the congressional vote, we need and can adopt a new formula. Our research demonstrates that Democratic messaging can beat powerful Republican messages, moving voters and closing the congressional gap by an impressive 9 points.

Messages that Move People

Democracy Corps recently concluded a large-scale web-panel experiment and follow-up focus groups to examine tax messages best suited for this election environment.¹ We found that even in the face of powerful Republican messages on debt, spending, government takeover and a failed economic recovery program, the right framework really moves voters to the Democrats, particularly the new Democratic base of young people, unmarried women, and minorities, but also the more independent and conservative white working class.

This election is not over nor fixed in concrete. For all the Democrats' problems, today's Republicans are very suspect and can lose support. Voters are still listening.

¹ The web poll was conducted September 1-2, 2010 among 850 individuals who fall into the following demographic groups: the "Rising American Electorate," which consists of youth, unmarried women, and minorities; and white non-college educated respondents. The two focus groups were conducted in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on September 7, 2010 with white women aged 45-60 without a college degree and white men age 30-45 with a college degree. All participants were independents, weak Democrats, or weak Republicans.

The best framework we tested moved a stunning 12 percent of the electorate to vote Democratic for Congress – a net +9 point effect – even in the face of powerful Republican messages (presented in appendix).

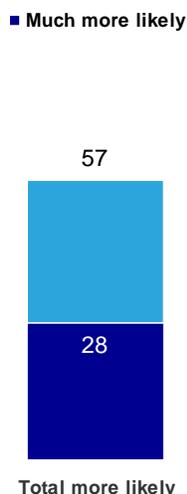
The graph below presents the full-text messages – the Democratic candidate first vowing to change Washington starting with perks and lobbyists, but most powerfully tax breaks, subsidies and special deals for the big corporations. He is first, a reformer and a populist. And second, he fights for the middle class, small business and new industries to create jobs. Meanwhile, the Republican candidate battles for big tax breaks for Wall Street and the super rich and listens to their lobbyists. The message concludes, “make our country work for the middle class.”

Democratic frames: change Washington, pro-middle class, against Wall Street

The following are statements by the Democratic candidate for Congress. After reading this, are you much more likely to support, somewhat more, somewhat less, or much less likely to support (him/her) for Congress?

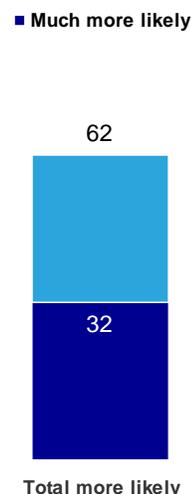
Change Washington

“As people here know better than anyone, we can only get change if we get more common sense in Washington. In such tough times, Congress should not be voting to raise their pay. I want to end the revolving door of lawmakers becoming lobbyists and voted against my own party to crack down on powerful committee chairs. I supported eliminating special tax breaks for big oil companies and corporate subsidies that bust the budget. Republicans want business as usual – allowing corporate lobbyists to have free rein and permitting big corporations to regulate themselves, write their own rules and make unlimited campaign contributions. That’s not right, and I’ll fight to change Washington.”



Pro-middle class/anti-Wall Street

“In these tough times, I’m fighting for the middle class, and wish Republicans in Washington weren’t always looking out for Wall Street and the super rich. They voted to let Wall Street keep the taxpayers’ bailout money and companies to keep tax breaks for exporting American jobs. My opponent favors a \$300,000 a year tax break for the richest, while giving \$5 billion tax cuts to AIG and Goldman Sachs. I’ll take a different approach: new middle class tax cuts, helping small businesses and new American industries create jobs, extending benefits and health insurance for the unemployed, and making sure Wall Street acts responsibly. Let’s make our country work for the middle class.”



A striking 62 percent are more likely to vote for this candidate, half of those much more likely. This message is at least 5 points stronger than that in the forward-backward framework – and at least 10 points stronger among the new base voters and white working class voters.

To get at the real impact of the messages, however, we conducted a more involved experiment. In the web survey, conducted among 800 respondents, each bloc of 200 received the two Republican messages below and then two Democratic messages, both within a single framework for defining the election. This experiment tested not only the

strength of the Democratic messages, but more importantly, the ability of those messages to drive voters to Democrats.

The Republican framework focusing on spending, deficits, big government, taxes and failed recovery, is all too familiar and effective. Indeed, in the focus groups, a frequent reason people wrote down for holding back from the Democrats was “too much spending” or “out of control spending.”

But after the respondents heard these Republican messages against Democratic messages framed in this “change Washington, for middle class, against Wall Street” outsider context, the Democratic candidate makes major gains. This is the only framework in the contest with the Republicans that moves voters to be more supportive of Democrats on handling the economy. But this is the framework and electoral battle that dislodges the most number of voters – 16 percent of the sample in this experiment – three-quarters of them moving to the Democrats in the vote for Congress.

It becomes apparent from this experiment and the focus groups that to get the full power of this framework, you also need to get some other things right.

1. ***You must first communicate a commitment to change Washington – within this same framework.*** The Democratic candidate regrets the influence of the lobbyists and fights for ending oil company tax breaks, big corporate subsidies, self-regulation and unlimited corporate campaign money. Candidates have to be reformers – focused on helping the middle class and reining in corporate power. Hearing the candidate’s determination to change Washington first increases the impact of the middle class versus Wall Street message.
2. ***This message weakens when combined with attacks on Republicans for spending cuts bad for the middle class.*** We tested another set of messages that included the identical language of the “battling for the middle class, against Wall Street” message, but combined with attacks on the Republicans for supporting the Paul Ryan budget with its Medicare and Social Security cuts. While the message scores just as high, it does not effect voters in the same dramatic way. The Democrats’ net gain on the congressional vote is only 2 points, compared to 9 points for the ‘change Washington, pro-middle class, against Wall Street frame.’ Raising spending issues complicates the story.
3. ***Being authentically for the middle class is the key to bringing voters back.*** Voters think most Democratic members of Congress have ‘gone Washington,’ backed bailouts, forgotten their promises, and cashed in. But when asked to write down one thing they want the Democratic candidate to know, most of the focus group participants wrote something about the middle class: “We need to know the facts as to how you will help the middle class – STOP – the corporate spending – walk in our shoes”; “Emphasize that you are for the middle class.” And when asked what holds them back from the Republicans, it is –

“Not for the middle class”

“They seem to be more for the wealthy people.”

“Focus on wealthy”

“They are for the upper class + big business”

“Republicans have previously been more for upper class instead of middle class.”

The respondents are a little skeptical of candidates who describe themselves as “champions of the middle class,” but fighting for change in Washington, bucking privileges, being for small business and American jobs and against breaks for Goldman Sachs makes this an authentic claim.

This frame has the ability to change these races in significant ways. This is a battle of who will be advocating and advancing policies for the middle class and small business in tough times versus who will be listening to the big corporate lobbyists and advocating for Wall Street and the very wealthiest. It really is a battle for the future and voters clearly get it.

Not All Democratic Messages Work – and Some Make it Harder

The weakest messages assert we should “go forward, not back.” Voters are not moved by Democratic messages that say ‘go forward, not back,’ mention President Bush, compare then and now, or even that hint the economy is “showing signs of progress.” No matter how dramatically these messages set out the record of Republican obstructionism, their work for the wealthiest and Goldman Sachs, the millions of jobs lost and Democrats’ support for jobs, small business and new industries – these messages falter before the Republican attack.

The messages get lower scores and lose voters. After hearing this battle of Republican and Democratic messages, 8 percent shift their vote to support the Republican, while only 5 percent move to the Democrats. We lose ground. These messages are helping the Republicans.

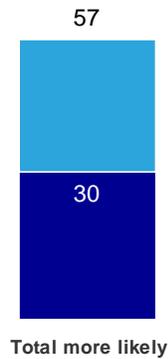
Democratic frames: forward-back

The following are statements by the Democratic candidate for Congress. After reading this, are you much more likely to support, somewhat more, somewhat less, or much less likely to support (him/her) for Congress?

Forward-back obstacle

“The Republicans in Washington want to go back to the same Bush policies that took us down. I support common sense policies to help states keep critical employees and to help the unemployed with benefits and health care. To move forward, I’ve helped win permanent tax cuts for the middle class, small businesses and new industries so they can hire and create jobs. The economy is showing signs of progress. But the Republicans say no to score political points – no to unemployment benefits, to cracking down on Wall Street, and to stopping outsourcing. We must go forward, not back to the same old Bush policies that cost 8 million jobs.”

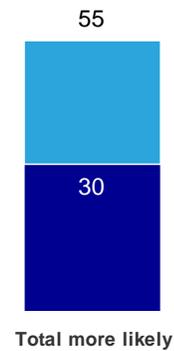
■ Much more likely



Forward-back middle class

“The Republicans in Washington want to go back to the Bush policies that crushed the middle class. My priority is to cut middle class taxes and for small businesses to create jobs. Extend unemployment benefits and health insurance for the unemployed. Support new industries that create jobs and end tax breaks for exporting jobs. And the economy shows signs of improving. But the Republicans have different priorities. They want to give another \$300,000 a year tax break to the very wealthiest and \$5 billion in tax breaks to AIG and Goldman Sachs. We must go forward for the middle class, not back to old policies for Wall Street that cost 8 million jobs.”

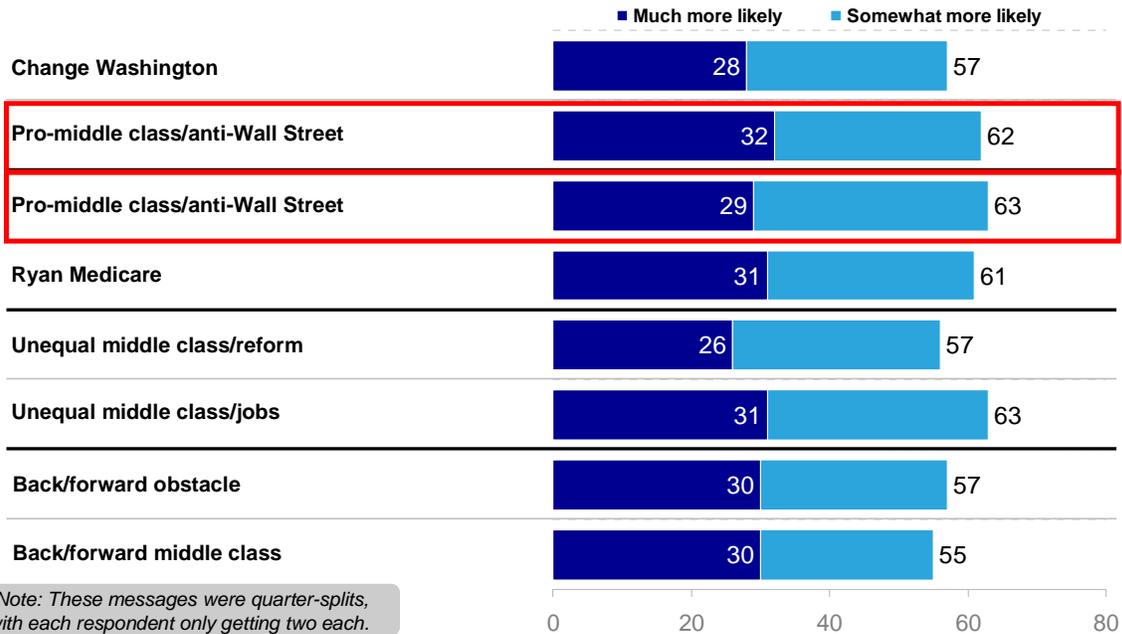
■ Much more likely



But, as we can see in the rank order summary of the different messages tested, this is the weakest way to go into the election.

Summary of Democratic messages

The following are statements by the Democratic candidate for Congress. After reading this, are you much more likely to support, somewhat more, somewhat less, or much less likely to support (him/her) for Congress?



SHIFTS: frames change congressional vote - Total

Now, thinking again about your vote for Congress, if the election for U.S. Congress were held today, would you be voting for the Democrat or the Republican?

	Toward Dem	Toward Rep	Total shift	Net shift
Change Washington	12	4	16	+9
Pro-middle class/anti-Wall Street	12	4	16	+9
Pro-middle class/anti-Wall Street	8	6	14	+2
Ryan Medicare	8	6	14	+2
Unequal middle class/reform	7	3	10	+4
Unequal middle class/jobs	7	3	10	+4
Forward-back obstacle	5	7	12	-2
Forward-back middle class	5	7	12	-2

**Note: These messages were quarter-splits, with each respondent only getting two each.*

This framework provides the least help to Democrats running in this election, indeed, leaves the Democratic congressional candidate a net 2 points weaker, which we can hardly afford. This is the only framework tested in this project that leaves the candidates in a weakened position.

When listening to people react to this message in focus groups or watching them react to video clips of this message, they respond with a common sense that we should heed. People are intensely dissatisfied with the economy and are looking for solutions – anything less sounds like excuses or some political blame game. Though voters agree the economy was an “inherited” problem, they do not like to hear politicians blaming Bush or looking backwards.

For some, going back to four years ago does not look so uninviting right now: *“I was doing a heckavah lot better under Bush.”*

“Who wouldn’t want to go back to 6 or 8 years ago? There was less unemployment back then. I’d rather go back. I’d go back to 8 years ago. I would rather go backwards than forwards right now.” White non-college female.

Because a “go forward” framework implies that Democrats and Congress have made progress those voters do not feel, the message re-enforces the Republican framework for the election – a referendum on the Democrats’ performance on the economy. In the

experiment described above (where voters read the two Republican messages and the two Democratic 'go forward, not back' messages), votes shifted to the Republicans not only on which party can best handle the economy but also on the congressional vote. The 5 percent who shifted to the Democrats was exceeded by the 7 percent of voters who moved to the Republicans – a net negative 2-point worsening of the race.

Dos:

- Show you understand the economic pain people experience and that you are listening to ordinary people, not the powerful.
- Make this a choice between the Democratic candidate and Republicans – who remain unpopular and not trusted. Describe who you fight for and your values and contrast it with who Republicans fight for and their values. That shifts the election.
- Show that you are independent and determined to change Washington – with a focus on refusing perks, limiting lobbyists, and stopping corporate special breaks, subsidies and self-regulation. You will not get heard on your message unless you are trying to change business as usual.
- Show that you are battling for ordinary, middle class voters in tough times, while Republicans in Washington are still looking out for Wall Street.
- You are fighting for the middle class and American jobs, while Republicans are fighting for Wall Street and protecting outsourcing jobs. This is consistent with 'Made in America.'
- Your agenda is middle class tax relief, helping small business, keeping companies from exporting American jobs, and fostering new industries ('made in America') and making sure Goldman Sachs and the richest pay their taxes and their bailouts.
- You are battling for new middle class tax cuts, small business and new American industry.
- They are with the corporate lobbyists, protecting companies exporting American jobs, protecting the top 2 percent and big tax breaks for AIG and Goldman Sachs.

Don'ts:

- Try to convince people things are good/getting better – that is out of step with what they see and feel everyday.
- Read your resume of accomplishments. Things as they are aren't good enough – explain how we will do better.
- Talk a lot about spending – when most important is who you are fighting and who the Republicans are defending.
- Run on the past. People are more concerned with how we get out of the mess than how we got here.

APPENDIX

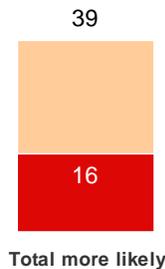
Republican message frameworks

The following is a statement by the Republican candidate for Congress. After reading this, are you much more likely to support, somewhat more, somewhat less, or much less likely to support (him/her) for Congress?

Trillions for government

“The Democrats’ “Washington-first” policies have spent trillions we don’t have and pushed our nation to the brink of another financial crisis – all while failing to get people working again. They are pushing to have government take over health care, the auto companies, student loans and the banking industry, and my opponent supports these policies that harm our country. He will raise your taxes, but I won’t. I’ll work in Congress to move forward by returning to common sense policies. I support reining in excessive spending, decreasing burdensome regulation on business, and cutting taxes to get the private sector hiring again. This is what I’ll stand for, while fighting against the Obama-Pelosi agenda.”

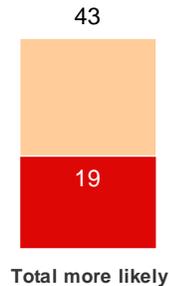
■ Much more likely



Debt, bailouts and taxes

“Democrats were supposed to change Washington but instead betrayed the middle class by spending our country into endless debt on a failed economic recovery and bailouts for banks and car companies instead of focusing on average Americans. They will raise your taxes for sure, but I will stand up for you in Washington by working to restore fiscal responsibility, balance our budget, and focus on job creation. We need to extend the tax cuts for all Americans, create incentives for the private sector to start hiring again, and end costly regulation on our small businesses. Send a message to my Democratic opponent who has not been listening to the American people.”

■ Much more likely



*Note: These messages were given to the entire sample of respondents.

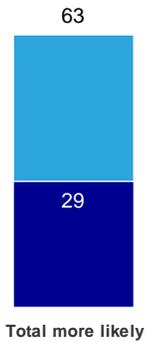
Democratic frames: Pro-middle class/anti-Wall Street and Ryan

The following are statements by the Democratic candidate for Congress. After reading this, are you much more likely to support, somewhat more, somewhat less, or much less likely to support (him/her) for Congress?

Pro-middle class/anti-Wall Street

“In these tough times, I’m fighting for the middle class, and wish Republicans in Washington weren’t always looking out for Wall Street and the super rich. They voted to let Wall Street keep the taxpayers’ bailout money and companies to keep tax breaks for exporting American jobs. My opponent favors a \$300,000 a year tax break for the richest, while giving \$5 billion tax cuts to AIG and Goldman Sachs. I’ll take a different approach: new middle class tax cuts, helping small businesses and new American industries create jobs, extending benefits and health insurance for the unemployed, and making sure Wall Street acts responsibly. Let’s make our country work for the middle class.”

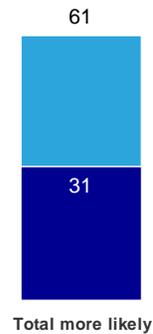
■ Much more likely



Ryan Medicare

“Republicans have vowed to cut long-standing programs for the middle class, like Social Security and Medicare. The official Republican budget and the plan of their budget chairman is very clear about what will happen if they win back control: proceed with privatizing Social Security just like President Bush tried to do, shifting Social Security savings to the stock market, and ending guaranteed benefit levels. Medicare as we know it will end, as seniors will have to purchase private insurance using a voucher that will cover some of the costs. I have a different view. Medicare and Social Security are critical to the survival of the middle class – and they paid for them.”

■ Much more likely



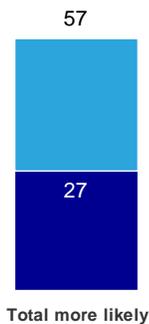
Democratic frames: unequal for middle class

The following are statements by the Democratic candidate for Congress. After reading this, are you much more likely to support, somewhat more, somewhat less, or much less likely to support (him/her) for Congress?

Unequal middle class/reform

“The rich have recovered. Big corporations are raking in massive profits, paying out big bonuses, and are just sitting on almost \$2 trillion in cash. I support reforms to rein in CEO pay, protect consumers from credit card companies and health insurers who drop people with pre-existing conditions. I fought against the special interests. The Republicans are for tax breaks for shipping jobs overseas, proposed \$5 billion in new tax breaks to Goldman Sachs and AIG, and want to give each of the wealthiest Americans a new \$300,000 a year tax break. Republican policies already cost us 8 million jobs and now the \$8 trillion in new deficit-financed tax cuts for the rich and corporations they propose will run the economy back into the ground and destroy even more jobs. We must go forward, not back to policies that got us into this mess..”

■ Much more likely



Unequal middle class/jobs

“The middle class and working Americans are struggling, but the rich and big banks are back with the same bonuses and big profits. I want to narrow that gap by investing in education to train workers for emerging new industries. I want to protect the jobs we have and spur small business and new industries to start hiring and bring manufacturing jobs back to America. I support new tax cuts for the middle class and small businesses that hire and create jobs. Republicans want \$8 trillion in new deficit-financed tax cuts for the rich and corporations, even as they’d kill even more jobs by halting investments in infrastructure projects, clean energy, and schools. We need to invest in new jobs rather than give more to those who are ahead.”

■ Much more likely

