



GREENBERG QUINLAN ROSNER RESEARCH

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To: Interested Parties

From: Stanley B. Greenberg, James Carville, Jeremy Rosner, Democracy Corps/GQR
Jon Cowan, Matt Bennett, Andy Johnson, Third Way

Making the Case on National Security as Elections Approach

New Democracy Corps-Third Way National Security Survey Shows Opportunities for Progressives to Make an Effective Case on the Obama Record and Vision on National Security

A new Democracy Corps-Third Way survey¹ shows opportunities for progressives to deliver an effective message on national security during this campaign season, even in the face of a very negative political environment and new signs the Republicans plan to attack Democratic candidates on national security. President Obama and his administration continue to receive relatively positive ratings on their national security performance, and the public remains relatively supportive of the administration's strategy in the war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

There remain real obstacles, however, to making an effective case on these issues. Persistent concerns about the economy continue to undermine the public's confidence about America's standing in the world, and Democrats' efforts to bolster it. And as the electoral environment tilts more Republican, the public's confidence in *Democrats*, as a party, on national security is showing signs of erosion.

As always, the best way to win public support on national security issues is through sound policies; messaging is no substitute for effective actions on the world stage. Yet Democrats should welcome a debate on national security and not shy from it. The strongest Democratic messages tested consistently beat the strongest Republican messages. The new survey points to several specific ways that progressives can present a strong national security narrative that resonates with voters, including:

- ***Stress the steps the Obama administration and Democrats have taken to improve conditions of military service and increase the effectiveness of our troops.***
- ***Highlight the success of the Obama administration in the war on terror, especially the record number of al Qaeda operatives and allies captured or killed since January 2009.***
- ***Give the public a clearer understanding of the military mission in Afghanistan, and be aware that the public – including Democratic base voters – favor continuing the war effort rather than immediately ending it.***

¹ The survey was based on telephone interviews with 1,000 2008 voters, conducted between September 11-14, 2010. The survey included interviews with 835 respondents who are likely voters for the 2010 elections, and all figures in this report refer to the "likely voter" results unless otherwise noted. The margin of sampling error is approximately +/-3.1 percent for results from the full sample, and approximately +/- 3.4 percent for results from likely voters.

- *Stress the Obama administration accomplishments on national security that most resonate, especially strengthening the military, gains in anti-terrorism, and bolstering America’s alliances abroad.*
- *With regard to the proposed mosque and cultural center in Manhattan, stress that whatever people think about the project, government and public leaders have no place taking steps to block it.*

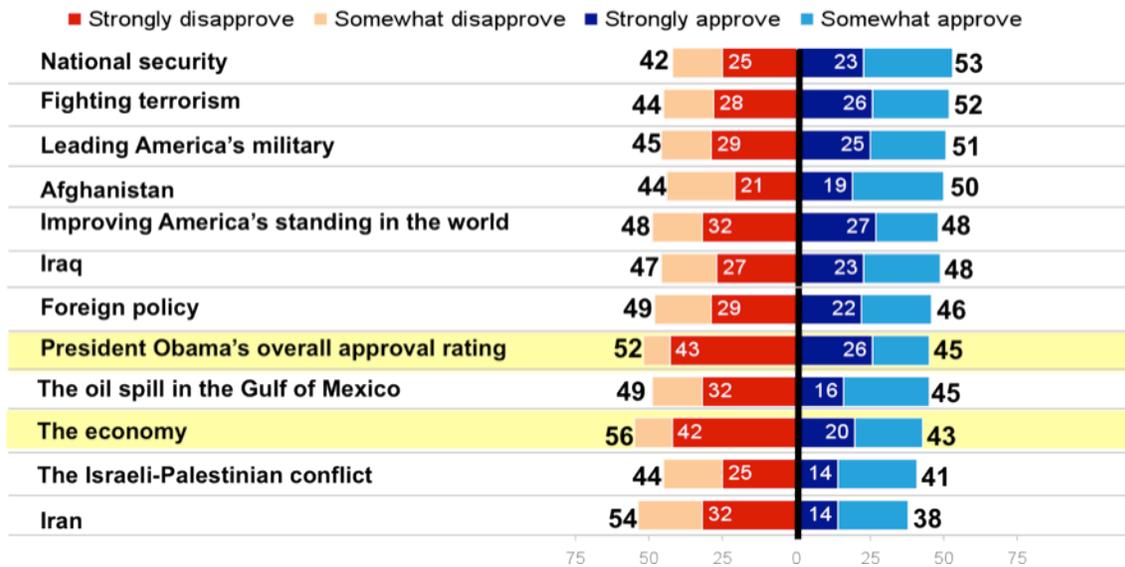
Despite Harsh Political Environment, Relative Strength on National Security.

The new survey, like other recent polls, reveals a harsh political environment. Although feelings about the country’s direction, perceptions of the economy, and approval ratings for President Obama have all mostly stabilized – albeit at low levels – electoral support for Democrats falls to the lowest we have seen. At this point, Democratic congressional candidates run 10 points behind their Republican opponents among likely voters in a named ballot test.

Despite this harsh political environment, the public’s support for the President’s handling of national security issues continues to be relatively strong. As in our past surveys, he continues to get higher marks on these issues than on the economy or on his overall approval rating.

National security approval still higher than economy, overall numbers

Now I'm going to read you a list of issues. For each one, I would like you to tell me if you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job on that issue.



A 53 percent majority approves of President Obama’s handling of national security. This is 8 points higher than the President’s overall approval rating, and 10 points higher than his approval rating on the economy. He also garners majority approval for his handling of terrorism (52 percent), leading America’s military (51 percent), and Afghanistan (50 percent). All of these measures are relatively unchanged since our last national security poll in May, despite erosion since then in the broader political environment. The only significant decline in President Obama’s approval on a national security issue is on Iran, where the President’s rating drops 5 points to 38 percent.

Public support shows particular durability regarding President Obama's war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is notable that, even at a time when the electorate is leaning markedly toward Republican candidates, a 47-39 percent plurality of the public says President Obama has handled these wars better than his Republican predecessor. Even likely voters, who at this point opt for a Republican congressional candidate by a large margin, are virtually tied on this question, with 44 percent saying President Obama handled these issues better, and 45 percent for President Bush.

Iraq. On Iraq, the President's announcement of the end of combat operations at the end of August produces a favorable reaction, and may be helping to bolster his overall standing on national security. His approval rating regarding Iraq had declined steadily since early 2009, but now moves back up, from 45 percent in May to 48 percent now. Overall, 80 percent of likely voters have heard a great deal or some about his announcement on Iraq, and a 51-37 percent majority feel more favorable toward the President on national security issues as a result.

Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, despite difficulties on the ground, patience with the war effort is notably strong. A 50 to 32 percent majority of likely voters say "the strategy that the US and its allies are pursuing in Afghanistan is achieving results" (rejecting the statement that the strategy is "seriously off course"). The share who say the war effort is off course is even lower among the President's fellow Democrats, at only 26 percent. Patience with the war effort is particularly strong among the youngest voters – often perceived as a war-skeptical block – with 62 percent of voters under 30 years of age saying the Afghan war strategy is producing results.

There are some worrisome signs regarding public views of the Afghan war, as we note below, and there are several things the President and his allies need to do to sustain public support. But overall, public opposition to the President's strategy is relatively limited

Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The Obama administration's success in helping to restart direct talks between the Israelis and Palestinians is a final factor helping to bolster the President's standing on national security. His approval rating on "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" jumps 7 points since the May survey, to 41 percent. Among the minority of likely voters who follow foreign affairs mostly closely, the President's approval on this issue jumps 17 points since May, from 41 to 58 percent.

Economic concerns continue to erode confidence in America's global standing. While there is general stability on many aspects of the country's outlook on national security issues, and support for the President's handling of those issues, the public has festering doubts about America's standing in the world. The share who say America is more respected in the world than two years ago continues to decline, dropping 3 points since May to just 36 percent, while 58 percent say the US is now less respected.

Whereas public concerns about US global standing during the Bush era focused on America's "ways" (unilateralism, torture), now they are focused on our "means" (economic strength). As in our earlier surveys, a strong majority (now 56 to 37 percent) continues to say "America is losing its global leadership as China and other developing countries grow their economies and hold more of our debt" (rejecting the alternative statement, "America remains the world's strongest and most influential country due to our combination of economic strength, military power, and political freedom"). These results suggest that domestic perceptions of America's

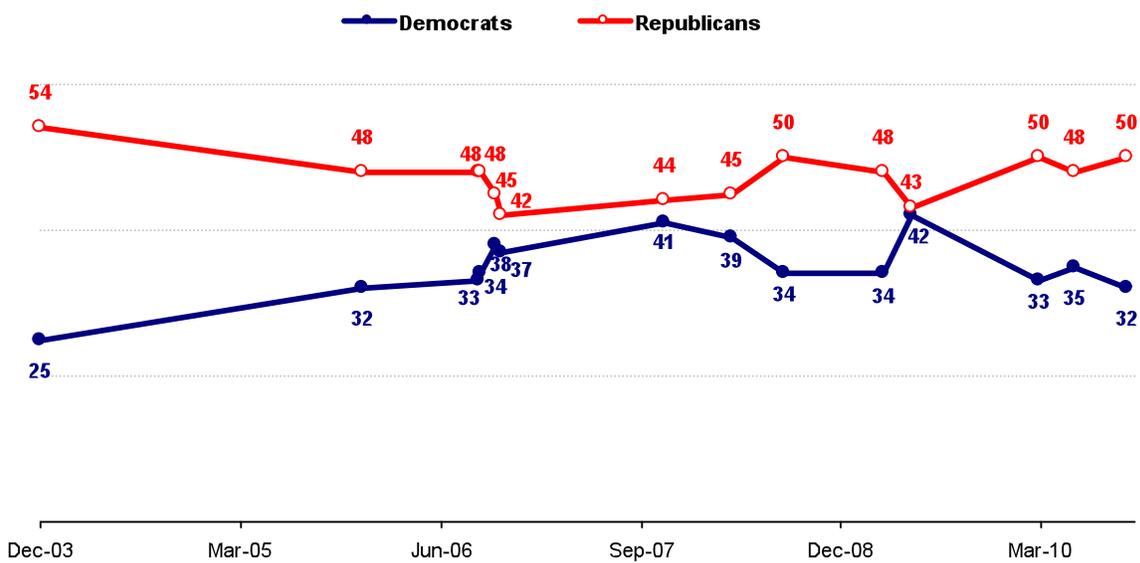
global standing are unlikely to improve much until the US public starts to feel the economy is regaining strength.

Although the President’s Ratings are Relatively Strong, Ratings for Democrats Fall.

While the President’s ratings on national security remain relatively strong and steady, the weakening partisan environment is pulling down voters’ confidence in the Democratic party on many of these issues. Across the six national security areas we have tracked, in terms of which party would do the better job on the issue, Democrats lose ground relative to the Republicans on four, and only make gains on one – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the Democratic administration recently achieved a visible breakthrough.

Most troubling is the re-opening of the Democrats’ deficit on the question of which party would do better on national security. We view this as a core measure of the party’s standing on this whole set of issues. That gap, which Obama and Democrats virtually eliminated by May 2009, has reopened with Democrats trailing by 18 points (32 to 50 percent) on which party would be best on national security – 5 points more than last May. The deterioration is concentrated among younger men, and particularly those with lower levels of education.

Gap re-opening on which party better on “national security”



Winning on National Security as the Elections Approach

With the elections less than six weeks away, the dominant debate in most races is over the economy, not national security. Yet the Republican leadership has signaled an intent, through its new Pledge with America, to increase attacks on Democrats on national security. And ultimately progressives cannot reclaim the public’s confidence in their national security leadership unless they are consistently laying out a compelling vision for how to protect our country and our people. It is therefore important for progressives to have the strongest possible narrative on these issues, and the new survey provides important guidance.

Welcome a debate on security, don't shy from it. One point spans across all our advice: do not run from these issues. When progressives use the right messages, we win the national security debate. In this survey, the strongest Democratic messages outscore the strongest GOP messages by 7 points. This is no aberration. Every one of our national security surveys this year shows that same pattern. When described in the right way, most Americans find the Democrats' national security accomplishments and policies compelling.

Of course, every district in America is different, and our messaging advice here cannot hope to reflect the particular concerns and political dynamics of every community and contest. But we are confident our overall point applies nearly everywhere: progressives should welcome a debate over how best to strengthen America's national security, not shy from it.

Stress Democratic success in strengthening the military. Although the public still has doubts about Democrats in terms of commitment to a strong military, voters are impressed when they hear the steps the party and the current administration have taken to strengthen the armed forces. Out of five Democratic national security messages tested in the current survey, the strongest is:

Democrats say: We have strengthened America's military by increasing pay for troops in the field, providing our troops more time between deployments, and putting new and better weapons, like more unmanned aerial drones, into the battlefield to support our troops and military objectives.

This message leads 66 percent of all likely voters to feel more confident about the Democrats on national security. This is more than 25 points over their current strength in a named ballot test.

This military-focused message is particularly effective with independents, leading 67 percent to feel more confident about Democrats. That is fully double Democrats' current vote level among independents. Equally important, this 67 percent figure is 13 points stronger than the response we see from independents on the strongest Republican message tested. This is also the single strongest message among target voters in the congressional race – those who are not currently voting for the Democratic candidate, but show a high openness to doing so.

This message leads an even higher share of Democrats – 80 percent – to feel more confident about their preferred party on national security; and that figure shoots up even higher, to 87 percent, when the message is modified to paint a direct contrast to the Bush-Cheney years.²

The power of this message does not come from talking about what Democrats are doing for veterans, as important and positive as those efforts are. Rather, it comes from talking about the steps Democrats are taking to help our troops be more effective in meeting their military objectives in the field. Democrats gain ground by showing they have concern for the military effectiveness of our armed forces, and that they are reversing the over-stretching and under-equipping that was sapping the effectiveness of our armed forces during the previous administration.

Highlight success of Democratic efforts against terrorism. Many progressives continue to worry about Republican attacks regarding terrorism – such as arguments that the current ad-

² *Democrats say: The Bush-Cheney policies overstretched our military with too many deployments and rotations. Democrats have strengthened America's military by increasing pay for troops in the field, providing our troops more time between deployments, and putting new and better weapons, like more unmanned aerial drones, into the battlefield to support our troops and military objectives*

ministration is too lenient in interrogating and prosecuting terrorist suspects. The truth is that progressives should be touting their record on terrorism.

The second strongest Democratic message tested – which leads 62 percent of likely voters to feel more confident about Democrats on national security – stresses the tangible gains the country has made in the fight against terrorism over the past two years under Democratic leadership:

Democrats say: Since the day Obama took office, we've stepped up the fight against terrorists. Using our Special Forces and unmanned Predator planes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen, we captured or killed dozens of al Qaeda leaders and hundreds of al Qaeda extremist allies over the past 19 months, and earlier this year, US forces helped capture the Taliban's top military commander.

By contrast, the strongest GOP message on terrorism, attacking Democrats for their interrogation and detention policies, tests 6 points weaker with likely voters. This margin is even larger among independents. Among target 2010 voters – those not currently voting Democratic but open to doing so – the Democratic anti-terror message out-tests the Republican message by 25 points – 65 percent compared to 40 percent.

Afghanistan: Clarifying the mission and supporting the goal. The public remains generally supportive of the administration's war effort in Afghanistan. But there are important ways in which progressives can and should strengthen their messaging in talking about the war.

After our May 2009 survey we noted that the public was evenly split on whether the military mission in Afghanistan was clear, and we urged the President and progressives to do more to give the public a sense of a clear mission. Now, even after the President's late August Oval Office address stressing this issue, the mission is even less clear to the public. A 55 to 37 percent majority now says the mission there is *not* clear. Although that view partly reflects partisan divisions and is strongest among Republicans, even half of Democrats feel the mission is not clear.

The lack of clarity about our mission in Afghanistan could endanger continuing public support for the war effort. The President and all those who support his policy in Afghanistan should make efforts to underscore the President's goal: to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda, while preventing Afghanistan from again serving as a base for terrorists.”

Indeed, the new survey shows that stressing this goal is not only helpful for educating the public; it is also the strongest message progressives can adopt regarding the war, overall.

We test four potential message frames for Democrats regarding the Afghan war: 1) supporting the course President Obama is pursuing; 2) stressing the need for more time, now that the President has raised troop levels; 3) urging the President to set a clearer schedule for drawing down troops there, as he did in Iraq; or 4) saying the US should start bringing all of our troops home as soon as possible, since the war is “simply not winnable.”

The strongest message is the first – expressing support for the President's course, and specifically stressing the mission:

The Democratic candidate says: The war in Afghanistan is difficult, but President Obama has pursued the right course by increasing our troop levels, getting our

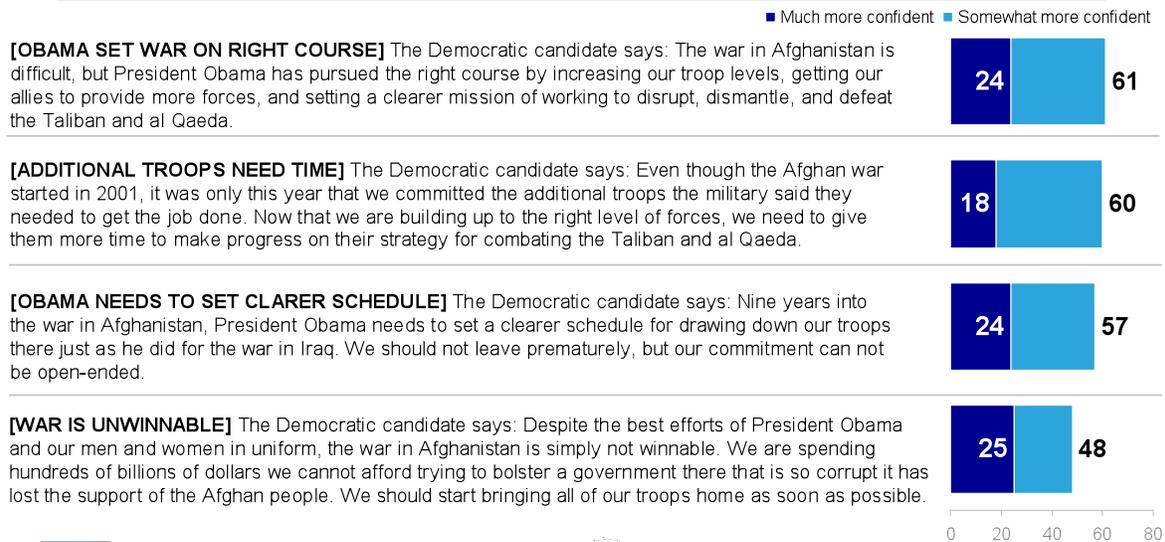
allies to provide more forces, and setting a clearer mission of working to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat the Taliban and al Qaeda.

This message leads 61 percent of all likely voters to feel more confident about the Democrats on national security – a strong figure. It is especially dominant among independent voters and the other target voters Democrats need to win over in order to gain ground in the coming congressional balloting.

By contrast, the message urging that we start bringing our troops home as soon as possible³ is the *weakest* of all the Democratic messages tested, leading only 48 percent to feel more confident about the Democrats – 13 points weaker than the message supporting Obama’s course. The immediate withdrawal message is not only weakest overall; it is also weakest among self-identified Democrats, and even liberal Democrats. Indeed, with the lone exception of senior citizens, there is not a single major demographic or political group that favors the immediate withdrawal message over the alternatives.

Democratic messages on Afghanistan

*Now I am going to read you a set of statements about the war in Afghanistan by Democratic candidates for Congress. For each statement, let me know whether it makes you feel more confident or less confident about the Democrats on national security. **Democrats say...***



There is no evidence in this survey that opposition to President Obama’s Afghan war effort is depressing enthusiasm among the Democratic base, or that core Democrats would respond strongly to an “end-the-war” message. To the contrary, even among the most pro-Democratic voting blocks, the most effective messages about the war all express basic support for the President’s existing policy. Among self-identified Democrats and 2008 Obama voters, there is a slight preference for a message that endorses the war effort and calls for a clear time table. But that is quite different from having a preference for immediate withdrawal.

³ *The Democratic candidate says: Despite the best efforts of President Obama and our men and women in uniform, the war in Afghanistan is simply not winnable. We are spending hundreds of billions of dollars we cannot afford trying to bolster a government there that is so corrupt it has lost the support of the Afghan people. We should start bringing all of our troops home as soon as possible.*

Stress the right accomplishments. The public readily believes that the Obama administration and the Democrats in Congress have scored some real accomplishments in national security over the past two years. In order to connect with that sentiment, it is important to stress the right ones.

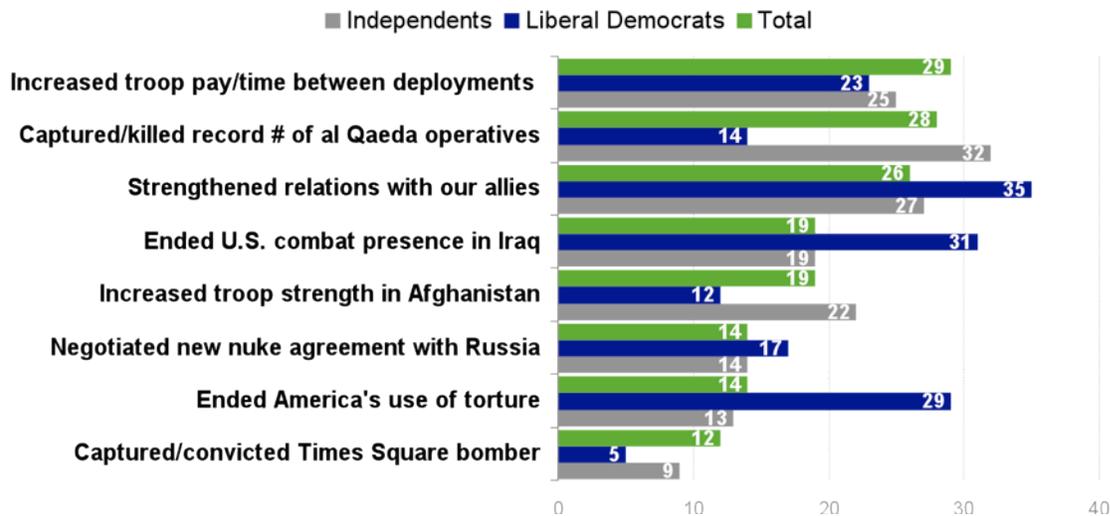
The most persuasive accomplishments involve Democratic efforts to strengthen the military and fight terrorism – the same messaging priorities we single out above. Out of eight possible accomplishments tested, the strongest two are “increased pay and time between deployment for our troops (cited as one of the top two accomplishments by 29 percent of likely voters), and “captured and killed a record number of al Qaeda operatives (28 percent). The third strongest is “strengthened relations with our allies” (26 percent). Those are followed by “ended the US combat presence in Iraq” and “increased troop strength in Afghanistan” (both 19 percent).

The ordering of this list varies, however, based on audience.

- Among the base (self-identified liberal Democrats, voters extremely likely to vote Democratic this November), the strongest accomplishment is strengthening ties with our allies, followed by ending the US combat role in Iraq, and also ending the use of torture.
- Among swing voters (self-identified independents, voters not currently planning on voting Democratic in 2010 but most open to doing so), the strongest accomplishments are the recent strides against terrorism and al Qaeda, strengthening ties with allies, and improving pay for the troops, as well as efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Stress the right accomplishments

Now I'm going to read you a list of things President Obama and the Democrats say their national security policies have achieved over the past two years. Assuming these are true, which TWO of the following strike you as the most important accomplishments for America's national security?



Dealing with the debate over the New York mosque and cultural center. Finally, the survey provides useful guidance about how to deal with the controversy regarding the proposed Cordoba Muslim community cultural center and mosque in Manhattan, near Ground Zero.

Populist and fear-mongering attacks by many leading Republicans have whipped up public concern over the issue, and many recent public polls have found that a majority now opposes the project.

While most Americans may not favor the project, our new survey also shows that a majority nonetheless understands the core principle of the First Amendment on such issues – that government should not interfere with the free exercise of any religion. A decisive 53 to 39 percent majority of likely voters opposes “the government taking action to block the building of this community center and mosque.” Among Democratic-leaning and undecided likely voters for the 2010 races, the sentiment is even stronger, 61 percent.

Across the political spectrum, only strong Republicans voice majority support for government taking active steps to block the project – a notable finding for a party that claims to stand for more adherence to the Constitution and less intrusion by government.

At a minimum, then, progressives can make this point when the issue arises: whether or not we favor the idea of this project, the Constitution is crystal clear that it is not the place of government to interfere with the plan or block it.