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To: Friends of Democracy Corps  
From: Stan Greenberg, James Carville, and Erica Seifert

## Winning the Budget Debate

The Republican assault on the budget is starting to lose the country – just as they unveil the scale of their cuts and the specific targets. And this survey conducted by Democracy Corps shows how Democrats and progressives can best frame their budget message, link it to the economy, and put the Republicans on the defensive.<sup>1</sup>

The Republicans do not go into this battle protected by any honeymoon with voters. In our congressional ballot, Democrats have closed the margin to within 2-points—a 6-point gain since November; Republican incumbents already trail in the seats won by Obama. Just 40 percent of presidential voters approve of the new Republicans in Congress, which drops to just over a third among independents. On that critical battleground, the Republicans are losing the intensity war, with strong disapproval outpacing strong approval by two-to-one.

Still, Democrats are struggling on the economy, jobs and spending. Voters trust the Republicans more on handling the economy and jobs and employment (by 5 points) and on making the right choices on deciding how to reduce the federal budget deficit (by 15 points). Democrats have a lot of work to do to get this debate right.

But the more Americans hear about Republican plans, the less they like them. In our first survey in 2011 just one month ago, a full 60 percent of respondents supported the plan to cut \$100 billion from the budget, but that support has dropped to just 50 percent with a supposedly less austere \$32-billion plan. (The poll was conducted before the Republicans doubled the cuts.)

And the more the issue is debated, the more voters pull back from the Republicans' budget plan. Respondents heard Republican arguments on the compelling need to cut spending that kills jobs, but as respondents heard more about the actual cuts, the Democratic arguments, and reassurances on spending, almost a quarter pulled back from the

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<sup>1</sup> This memo is based on a poll conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps. The survey was of 1,000 likely 2012 voters conducted February 7-9, 2011. Margin of error: +/-3.1 percentage points unless otherwise noted.



budget plan. Voters are paying a lot of attention to how these cuts impact them and the country.

This debate produces important potential shifts among swing voters—independents, non-college whites, seniors and suburban voters. We also saw dramatic shifts among the new Democratic base of unmarried women and younger voters. These are people who will be hit hardest by these cuts, which will erode support for families and communities, which will have to pick up the burden by spending out of pocket or losing the programs they rely on most.

The key is not just opposition to budget cuts, but credibility building on spending, making an economic argument and identifying the cuts that are most problematic.

### Message To Do's

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- **Be serious about deficit and spending reductions. Critical to our economic well-being and creating American jobs.**
- **Clear that must start with waste, special interest subsidies and tax breaks, and demanding accountability, ending programs that don't deliver value.**

**What works the best:**

*"We must start by cutting wasteful and unnecessary spending, but before we cut middle class programs, we need to close tax loopholes, end subsidies for oil companies, and make government more accountable to people, not the special interests that dominate Washington."*

- **Link to the state of the economy: In these tough economic times, don't start by cutting those who can least afford it – the middle class folks trying to educate themselves, working families with children and the elderly.**

**What works the best:**

*"In these tough economic times, these budget cuts hit those who can least afford it - working families with children and the elderly." It slashes funding for K-12 education, Head Start, college aid and work study, food safety inspectors, and cuts meals on wheels and energy assistance for homebound elderly.*



The cuts mostly strongly opposed by voters. In tough economic times...

**(EDUCATION)** It cuts funding for K-12 education and support for special education, students with disabilities and schools in high poverty areas, cutting off almost 4 million students and losing thousands of teachers. It cuts student aid and work study that many use to get new skills and jobs.

**(MEALS FOR ELDERLY)** It eliminates 5 million meals now delivered to the homebound elderly.

**(FOOD SAFETY)** The cuts will require the Food Inspection Service to lay-off all its inspectors for up to a month and a half and without inspectors, some meat and poultry plants will have to stop operating.

**(HEAD START)** It cuts Head Start funding for 120,000 children in pre-school and eliminates 40,000 jobs.

**(LOCAL GOV)** It cuts funding to local government, which will mean further loss of middle class jobs in police, fire and teaching and likely higher local property taxes.

**(POOR)** Major cuts in help for the poor, including school funding in poor neighborhoods and removing 600,000 people from the nutrition program for women, infants and children and cutting support for work study.

### **Link to the Economy**

The President made his link to the economy on America competing for the future and Republicans made their link by focusing on high government spending, the deficit and taxes. But Democrats get their strongest entry points on the two problems a near majority of voters say are most important to address – “high prices and the declining income of the middle class and working people” (24 percent) and government being “dominated by special interest waste and not accountable to people” (23 percent).

That is why the Democrats are able to best enter the budget debate if they begin with waste and link to the impact on the middle class and working people—those who are being responsible and watching their finances every day.

### **Starting With Waste, Spending and Accountability**

The strongest arguments tested in this survey focus on Democrats demanding that the budget process begin with wasteful spending and accountability. Arguments that imply a lack of interest in the right cuts score less well, as do arguments that downplay the importance of the deficits.



A stunning 59 percent say they are more confident of the Democrats when they hear the following:

**We must start by cutting wasteful and unnecessary spending, but before we cut middle class programs, we need to close tax loopholes, end subsidies for oil companies, and make government more accountable to people, not the special interests that dominate Washington.**

This Democratic message targeting waste, inefficiency, excess, and accountability wins 7 points more support than the Republican statement targeting small government and Washington’s spending spree.

### Framework for Opposition to Cuts

The Democrats must make an argument why they oppose the cuts – and they have strong ones – starting with acknowledging that these are hard times and emphasizing that we must not hit those who can least afford it. These are middle class families trying to access education, working families with children trying to access opportunities, and the elderly trying to stay afloat. They must attack the Republican priorities on these same grounds– forcing the middle class to pay for special interest deals that drive up spending and tax breaks for the top 2 percent. Both link our argument to the economic problems people want to solve.

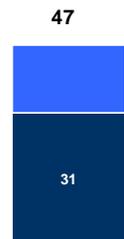
### Democratic frameworks increase opposition to budget cuts

Let me read you some statements the Democrats are making about the budget cuts. After each statement please tell me whether it makes you MUCH LESS LIKELY, SOMEWHAT LESS LIKELY, JUST A LITTLE LESS LIKELY, NO LESS LIKELY or MORE LIKELY to support these budget cuts.

#### **Tough economic times, don't start with those who can least afford them**

■ Much less likely

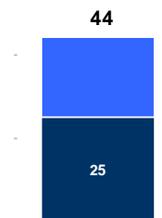
In these tough economic times, these budget cuts hit those who can least afford it - working families with children and the elderly. It slashes help with childcare and Head Start, cuts scholarships to college, and cuts health care benefits for seniors.



#### **Don't leave the breaks for top 2 percent while slashing for middle class**

■ Much less likely

This budget maintains all the tax breaks for the top 2 percent and special deals for corporate lobbyists that increase spending and the deficit, while slashing education and student loans that help the middle class and struggling families.



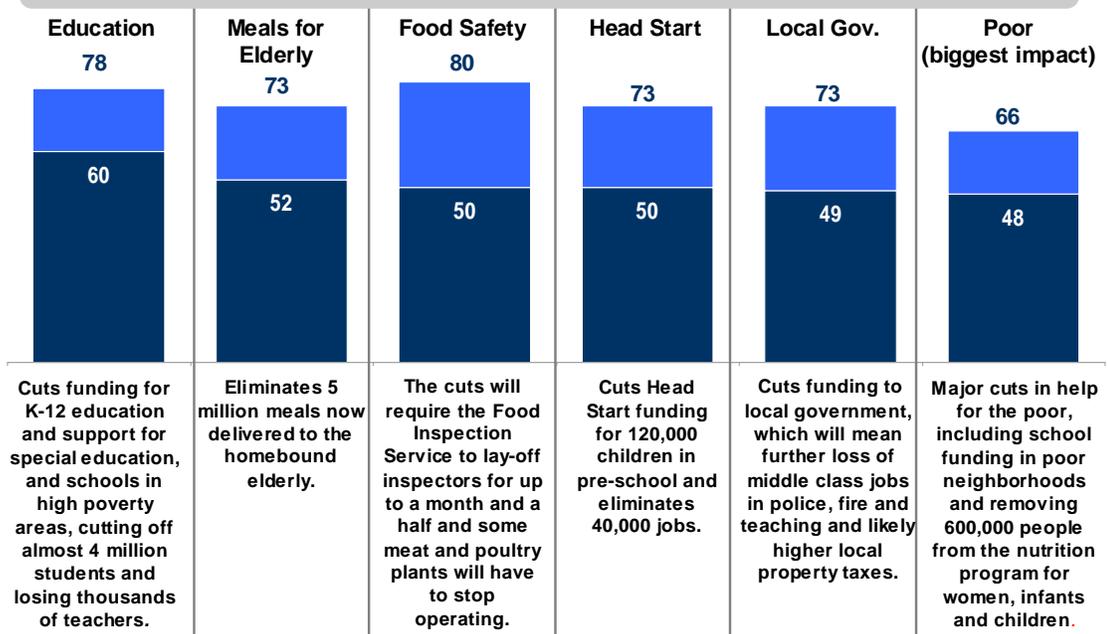


## The Budget Cuts

The actual cuts get voters’ attention. The cuts below begin with the 60 percent who strongly oppose K-12 education cuts – re-enforced by opposition to cutting Head Start and student aid as students try to get the skills to get new jobs. It is hard to underestimate how strongly people oppose these. Over half strongly oppose the cuts to meals delivered to homebound elderly (and we would suspect also aid for energy assistance). Voters are opposed to cuts that start with hurting the poor.

### Unpopular cuts: 60 percent strongly oppose education; ½ elderly & food

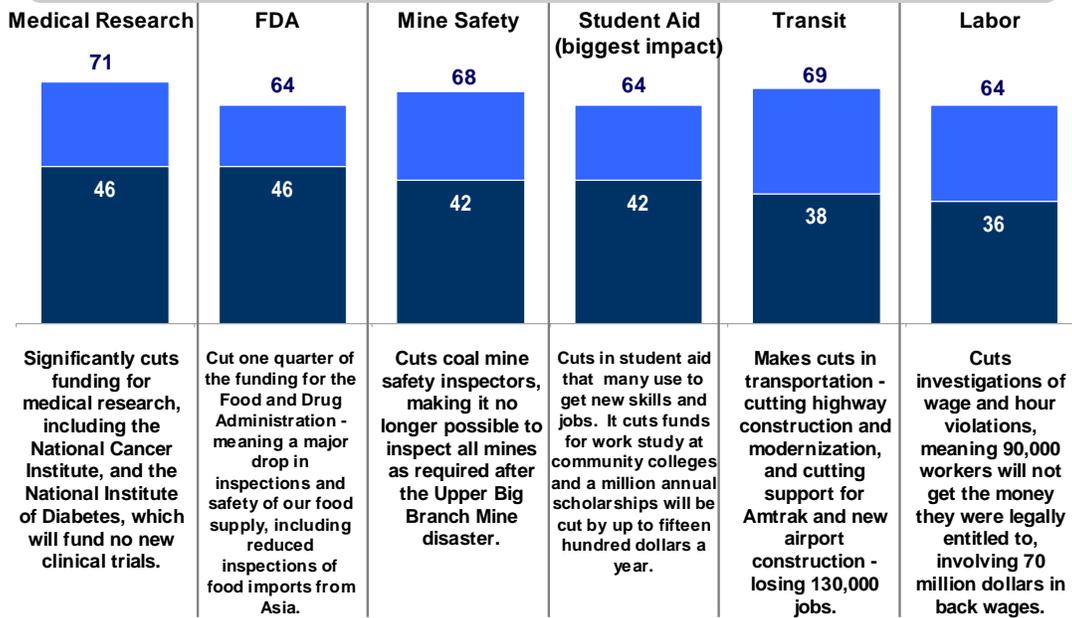
*Now I am going to read you some of the specific spending cuts proposed in the House Republicans' budget for this year. After I read each one, please tell me whether you favor or oppose it.*





### Also unpopular: medical research, FDA and student aid

Now I am going to read you some of the specific spending cuts proposed in the House Republicans' budget for this year. After I read each one, please tell me whether you favor or oppose it.



These cuts can be the rallying cry to reach a broad range of voters—from independents and seniors to unmarried women and suburban voters. The framework has to be right, starting first with wasteful spending and programs that are ineffective, but then hitting Republicans for starting with cuts that hurt middle class families who are trying to do better and working families and the elderly who are just struggling to get by.

### Long-term Deficit Reduction

Saying Democrats have to be serious about the deficit and spending is not the same as saying Democrats should champion cuts to Social Security. Voters are open to fixes that protect benefits, raise the tax income cap, and extend the life of Social Security—but only in the context of addressing Social Security. They do not believe Social Security is the cause of the long-term deficits.

Democratic and progressive plans for deficit reduction compete very effectively against Republican ones – according to our post-election survey – but not if Democrats include changes in Social Security. Their position is completely undermined by inclusion of Social Security reforms in the context of deficit reduction.



## **Winning the Budget Debate**

Our survey points to key message frameworks on which Democrats can win this debate:

- Democrats must offer an ambitious deficit reduction plan and show that they are serious about responsible spending. They must start by targeting wasted special interest spending, tax breaks for the wealthiest, and accountability to insure that taxpayers get the most out of their tax dollars.
- In tough economic times, we cannot start by cutting programs for those who can least afford it – the middle class struggling to get educated, working families with children, and the elderly.
- Democrats must link government spending to solving problems that improve the US economy – helping the middle class and eliminating special interest waste.

Democrats must immediately put the spotlight on the cuts to education, meals and energy assistance for the elderly, and cuts aimed at the poor and local governments.