

Date: April 15, 2011  
To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Campaign for America's Future  
From: Stanley Greenberg and Robert Borosage

## **Paul Ryan to Seniors: Drop Dead**

Congressman Paul Ryan's budget proposal, to be embraced by the House Republican majority today, faces serious obstacles in winning public support, according to a new national survey by Democracy Corps and Campaign for America's Future. The Republican plan provides Democrats with a strong argument that Republicans have the wrong priorities for America and will break the long-standing agreement the country has with its seniors. The budget opens up a fundamental debate about values that could end up defining Republicans in the public mind and allowing Democrats to draw sharp differences and regain their standing on the economy and spending priorities and advocacy for the middle class. The decision to end Medicare and shift costs to seniors in continuing tough times may be the Republicans' undoing.

Confidence in Washington is at a low. This new survey shows an electorate increasingly doubtful about the economy and country's direction, the performance of the president and particularly the 'Republicans in Congress.' They are also pretty negative about the Democrats in Congress, the Tea Party movement and above all, the 'Tea Party Republicans.'

The Republican deficit reduction plan does not even win majority support, but when voters learn almost anything about it, they turn sharply and intensely against it. They have particularly grave concerns about the plan to end Medicare and slash Medicaid spending, pushing seniors into the private insurance market and costing them thousands of dollars more in out-of-pocket expenses.

The following are some key findings from our recent survey.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Political Cauldron**

The Republican plan has been dropped into a cauldron where voters are increasingly upset with the economy and direction of the country, with the Republicans in Congress and to a lesser extent with the president. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) say that the country is pretty seriously off on the wrong track. This is the worst we have seen since the 2008 election. Independents are

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<sup>1</sup>This memo is based on a poll conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps and Campaign for America's Future. The survey was of 1000 likely 2012 voters conducted April 10-12, 2011. Margin of error: +/-3.1 percentage points unless otherwise noted.



particularly troubled, with more than three quarters saying we are off track; a mere 11 percent feel things are moving in the right direction. Two thirds also give negative ratings to the economy, which has not moved for the last six months – as people struggle with prices, declining income and meager job growth.

The country does not like what they see with the new Republicans in Congress, with 55 percent disapproving of their performance. That has jumped 9 points since February, and reflects voters' short and waning patience with these new Republicans and with their Tea Party agenda. 'Tea Party Republicans have the lowest thermometer rating of all political actors in the survey, with 47 percent viewing them negatively.

But right now, voters do not have a lot of confidence in Democrats on the economy, jobs, the budget deficit and even retirement issues. That changes dramatically when they hear about the Republican budget, but it is important to note the starting point on the economy and the deficit. The Democrats trail the Republicans by 16 points on "has the right approach to spending and deficits" (35 to 51 percent) and by 10 points on the economy (38 to 48 percent.) Even on Democrats' core issues—Medicare, Retirement and Social Security, Democrats start from a much weaker position than we would expect. While Democrats begin with an 8-point advantage on Medicare, they begin with just a 2-point advantage on retirement and Social Security.

This survey fielded *before* the President laid out his agenda and made his case on the Ryan budget, but the negotiated battles of the last months and accompanying gas price rises have not helped him. In this survey, the president's job performance rating fell to 44 percent – after moving over 50 percent earlier in the year. His approval rating was just 32 percent with independents. He is doing better in the Republican-Obama congressional districts, which will be a key battleground in the election and in the budget debate.

### **The Republican Budget Proposal**

Voters are clearly wary about the debate in Washington. Less than half the public initially approves of the Republican House budget proposal — described simply as a "budget for the next 10 years that they say will cut 6.2 trillion dollars from the federal budget." A fifth do not know the plan enough to respond, but it is noteworthy that a budget described only as deficit reduction gets just 48 percent support at the outset.

Even among groups that have been strong on the deficit all year, this budget opens with only moderate support. Just over half (53 percent) of white non-college voters initially favor this plan. The numbers are similarly modest for white seniors (51 percent) and in the rural non-South areas (50 percent). There is stronger initial support among white men (58 percent favor the plan at the outset) but this support erodes as soon the plan is described.

When the budget is described — using as much of Paul Ryan's description as possible (see text box below)— support collapses to 36 percent, with just 19 percent strongly supporting the plan. The facts in the budget lose people almost immediately – dropping 12 points. Putting the spot-



light on this budget is damning. A large majority of 56 percent oppose it, 42 percent strongly. The impact is much stronger with seniors where support erodes from 48 percent to just 32 percent, with 57 percent opposed. Support with independents drops from 55 percent to 43 percent.

The plan cuts 6.2 trillion dollars below the president's budget and reduces the debt as a percentage of the economy. It makes small cuts in defense spending. It cuts spending for domestic programs in the coming year by 72 billion dollars, almost 20 percent, and freezes it for five years. It repeals the new health care bill and the new Wall Street reform law, makes major cuts of almost 800 billion dollars to Medicaid and Medicare for seniors over the next ten years. Starting in 2022, new retirees will no longer get health coverage through Medicare, but instead will get a voucher that will partially pay for insurance they purchase from private health insurance companies. The proposal cuts taxes for corporations and people making over 370 thousand dollars a year.

After we present the arguments on both sides –not only on the budget plan but on economic messages more generally—support moves back to 44 percent — but over 50 percent remain opposed with intense opponents outnumbering intense supporters by 11 points. The fact that Republicans win back some support tells us that although the Republicans’ plan loses at the end of the day, Democrats have to take the goal of deficit reduction seriously.

The information and debate on the Republican budget brings new Democratic base voters to life. At the end of the survey, almost 60 percent of young voters and two-thirds of unmarried women and African American and Hispanic voters oppose the plan. Getting these voters back and energized should be a top priority for Democrats heading into the election season. In challenging the budget, Democrats are creating the kind of intensity that made such a difference in the last national elections.

The debate over the budget shifts important swing groups as well and erodes support, though they end up fairly evenly split at the end. Independents are initially supportive of the Republican budget (55 percent), dropping to 43 percent with information and coming back to 50 percent after the debate. Among suburban voters, opposition jumps from 37 percent to 53 percent with bare information about the budget and after the debate of issues, 50 percent remain opposed.

White seniors are very volatile – with opposition rising from 32 percent to amazingly, 54 percent. However, after hearing arguments on Medicare and other budgetary issues, many white seniors return, ending the survey with 48 percent in favor and only 42 percent opposing the budget plan. The same pattern holds for white non-college voters.



## Deconstructing the Republican Plan

The strongest specific attacks center on Medicare. Cuts to Medicare raise concerns for nearly two-thirds of respondents. The description of the program—that it would cut Medicare spending overall and replace the existing system with a voucher program and seniors will have to pay more—raises very serious doubts for 40 percent and serious doubts for 66 percent of all respondents and for 68 percent of seniors. In regression analysis, this attack was correlated to movement toward Democrats. The attack is presented below.

**(VOUCHER WITH MORE COST)** This plan would cut Medicare spending and replace Medicare with a voucher system, which will force seniors to negotiate with private insurance companies, which are free to raise rates and deny coverage. Medicare's guaranteed coverage of care would end, and seniors would have to pay more and more out of pocket.

The attack focusing on cost increases for seniors causes 65 percent of all voters and 67 percent of seniors to doubt this budget plan. It raises very serious doubts for 37 percent of all voters and for 35 percent of seniors.

**(SENIOR COSTS)** This plan reduces benefits and raises health care costs for seniors. Under this plan, the average 65-year-old beneficiary will be expected to pay 43 percent more than in the current Medicare system, as much as twenty thousand dollars out of pocket annually for premiums to health insurance companies.

## Framing the Debate

The Democrats' strongest thematic attack also centers on Medicare. The “Broken Contract” framework gains traction with a striking diversity of voters, including swing groups, base groups, and voters of all ages.

**(ENDING MEDICARE BROKEN CONTRACT)** This budget shreds the contract that this country has with seniors after a life time of work. We promised seniors that the cost of health care and long-term care would not bankrupt them and their families in their retirement. By ending Medicare, this plan will force seniors to pay more out of pocket and negotiate with private drug and insurance companies. By slashing Medicaid it takes away the last protection for seniors late in life.

This message gains traction with voters of all ages, including 78 percent of young voters under 30 years, 43 percent intensely. Among seniors, 68 percent say it raises serious doubts, 37 percent very serious doubts. It was also significant in regression analysis, correlated to movement toward trusting Democrats more on the economy.



This values-centered broken-contract message moves key swing voters. It raises intense doubts among the swing voters that voted for Barack Obama in 2008 but Republican in 2010 (45 percent very serious doubts and 70 percent serious doubts.) This raises comparable doubts among suburban voters, independents and white non-college voters. Among white seniors, this argument raises doubts for 63 percent. Had this survey focused only on Medicare and retirement issues, the shifts against the Republicans would have been more sweeping.

Given its popularity among swing voters, it is notable that this message is so popular, intensely so, with the base: 82 percent of Democrats say that this message causes them to seriously doubt the Republican budget, 59 percent very seriously. Similarly, 80 percent of minority voters, 82 percent of unmarried women, and 71 percent of all women, say this message causes them to seriously doubt this plan to reduce the deficit.

What is striking about this thematic is that it is grounded on values and on a broken promise. This suggests that the Republican proposal on Medicare/Medicaid raises far broader concerns than simply a policy proposal. This has the potential to help define for people who Republicans really are.

While focusing on Medicare is the strongest approach, it is buttressed by a critique of Republican priorities – prioritizing corporate special interests, not reducing the deficit or helping the country. It says this plan “actually raises taxes for the middle class, while cutting them for the wealthiest.” In the end, this budget is wrong-headed because the budget is employed not primarily “for reducing the deficit, but to help the most privileged.”

**(FOR THE TOP)** This plan has the wrong priorities. It is focused on helping corporate special interests and Wall Street, not reducing the deficit or helping the country. It actually raises taxes for the middle class, while cutting them for the wealthiest. It repeals the Wall Street reforms for the big banks. And it abolishes Medicare, cuts funding for education, health care, alternative energy, and job training programs and uses the money not for reducing the deficit, but to help the most privileged.

This message was significant in regression analysis, correlated to movement toward trusting Democrats more on Social Security and retirement. It caused 61 percent of all voters to seriously doubt the Republican budget plan and was powerful for a broad spectrum of voters.

It is important to note here that Republicans also have effective arguments in support of the budget proposal, in particular that their plan will end “the reckless path of over-spending and borrowing” that “leaves our children burdened by debt” and that this plan will help small businesses create jobs. These arguments are particularly resonant with the “deficit hawk” groups we discuss above and Democrats will need to keep the debate centered on the Republicans’ wrong priorities and their dismantling of Medicare.



In the end, these Democratic messages shift voters towards Democrats on defining issues—Medicare and Social Security and retirement issues, but most important, handling the deficit.

- Those who believe that Democrats are better than Republicans at handling Social Security and retirement climbed a net 7 points (from net +2 to net +9.)
- Perhaps most important is the shift on having the right approach to the deficit. Trust that Democrats have “the right approach to spending and deficits” rises a net 9 points.

Democrats gain a lot of ground with independents, which suggests that this budget is a winning issue for Democrats and a losing proposition for Republicans (especially those who are legislating under the influence of the Tea Party.) Democrats need to be heard and gain trust on these key issues. Fighting back hard on this budget is the place to start.

This can be a defining debate that can help settle fixed concepts of two parties in voters’ minds. The extended debate—over the budget, debt ceiling, and taxes – should be waged on Democrats turf. In this battle, it must become clear that Republicans insist on breaking the promise to seniors and shifting costs to them, while failing a fundamental test of priorities—fighting for further tax cuts for corporations and the very wealthy rather than cutting the deficits and helping the country. While the immediate proxy war will be waged over this budget, the argument is much bigger than a budget debate, and one that may leave much more indelible images than the dizzying barrage of big numbers for which the public has little patience.