



**MEMORANDUM**

**June 28, 2018**

**To: Interested Parties**

**From: Navin Nayak, Executive Director of the Center for American Progress Action Fund, Tiffany Muller, President and Executive Director of End Citizens United**

**Re: The Political Opportunity Democrats Need to Seize**

Change is never easy—in our personal lives, in business and certainly in politics. But Democrats have a golden opportunity to be the party that breaks up the status quo. Democrats can change how they are perceived by the public in order to both win more elections and begin restoring trust in our government.

In more ways than we can count, Americans have repeatedly made clear over the past several years that they have lost confidence in our democracy and the status quo. More precisely, they no longer trust the politicians who run our government—irrespective of their political party. It is the primary reason why 5 of the last 6 federal elections have been “change” elections, dating back to 2006. There are obviously several reasons why voters have lost trust in our government, but the biggest reason is quite simple: money. Specifically, Americans believe that all of the corporate and lobbyist money pouring through our political system has tilted our government decidedly against their interests.

The most recent data came this week from a bipartisan poll which found that three out of four Americans think that “the laws enacted by our national government mostly reflect what powerful special interests and their lobbyists want.” In an era when Democrats and Republicans seemingly agree on almost nothing, that sentiment was shared by 70 percent of Republicans and 81 percent of Democrats. This is true even as 58 percent of Americans agreed in an NBC/WSJ poll this year that “government should do more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people”—Americans have not adopted a conservative anti-government outlook, but they are deeply skeptical their current government is operating in their interests.

**The findings should be a wake-up call to all politicians** but unfortunately, most have ignored the reams of other data that have confirmed this simple point for years. In fact, the Center for American Progress released a similar poll earlier this year which found that 78 percent of Americans believe that “government serves the special interests” while only 22 percent believe it “serves the public interest.” These numbers have gotten decidedly worse given that the Trump Administration and Republicans in Congress have been ruthless in advancing their donors’ wishes. But the same question was asked in

2010, when Democrats were in charge of Washington, and even then, 66 percent of Americans thought government served the special interests, including 73 percent of Independents. That is hardly a winning recipe for electoral success.

While discouraging, the public's outlook on our democracy provides Democrats with a golden opportunity. **There is an important way in which Democrats can demonstrate that they aren't corrupted by the corporate special interests who voters believe are running Washington: Stop taking their money.**

We don't want to pretend like this is easy; as we stated, change is hard. But this is the critical first step that Democrats must take on their path to enjoying more electoral success—both in the short and long-term. There are now several signs that this is a smart political move in the current political environment.

- This week, in a Democratic primary Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, an underfunded challenger, defeated a 10-term Congressman who served in leadership. Even though he'd been a good public servant with a long-track record on a range of progressive priorities, it wasn't enough for Democratic primary voters in his district. She made her rejection of corporate PAC money central to her campaign and attacked the incumbent for his ties to that very money.
- Earlier this year, Conor Lamb won a Special Election in a seat Trump had won by 20 points. End Citizens United commissioned a poll soon after the election which found that 18 percent of voters in the district said Lamb's refusal of corporate special interest money was the biggest reason they supported him—the second highest reason. Among Independents, 26 percent said it was the top reason. Moreover, a stunning 76 percent of voters were aware of Lamb's pledge in large part because he made it a prominent part of his campaign. Lamb and Ocasio-Cortez had very different races, but in both cases the rejection of corporate PAC money signified a dramatic break from the status quo in government.
- Potential Democratic 2020 Presidential candidates have begun declaring that they will not take corporate PAC money. Currently, 6 potential candidates have made such a pledge.
- This cycle, 140 Democratic candidates have already pledged that they will not accept money from corporate PACs, more than 50 have won their primaries and advanced to the general election.
- 31 out of 54 challengers in Red to Blue races—the most competitive in the country—are not taking corporate PAC money.
- End Citizens United polling has found that 62 percent believe rejecting corporate PAC money demonstrates that a candidate is serious about reform and makes 75 percent of voters more likely to vote for that candidate.

While Democratic challengers are demonstrating that rejecting corporate PAC money is smart politics, there are less than a dozen incumbent Democrats who have made the same pledge. That has to change. And it's a huge opportunity, in large part because Republican politicians, whose agenda is actually driven by their donors, will never even consider such a measure. In fact, Republicans celebrate the status quo, unlike Democrats who largely feel trapped by it.

But in the private sector, when such an imbalance exists, it's viewed as a market opportunity. Democrats can corner the political market on being the only party that isn't beholden to corporate special interests. The CAP poll referenced earlier found that 71 percent of Americans said a candidate for Congress would be more appealing if they took such a step. That is a significant foundation for winning elections.

Of course, we don't want to suggest that this alone will fix the problem with our democracy; our political system is fueled by big money and ultimately, we need to enact major legislative reforms to change that. Democrats have introduced critical components of that reform agenda already, while Republicans oppose virtually any changes. As a result, big reforms to our political system are not going to happen in the near-term and certainly not when we have a president who is utilizing the office to enrich himself at every turn.

Therefore, in the interim, Democrats should take the initial step of rejecting money from corporate PACs and removing the primary barrier to Americans trusting them. While this won't be easy for incumbents, there's nothing easy about losing elections either. We fundamentally believe that Democrats face two hard paths but only one is a strategy for long-term political success.