

To: Center for American Progress

From: GBA Strategies

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Culture of Corruption: 2018 Congressional Battleground Survey Results

A new battleground survey of Republican-held congressional districts shows Democrats are poised to make major gains this November, and that—with Republicans in Congress abandoning oversight of the Trump Administration—an anti-corruption theme has the potential to put Democratic candidates over the top by drawing support outside their traditional voting blocs. In addition, the survey identifies the most concerning examples of Republican corruption, as well as opportunities for challengers to seize the mantle of change by refusing perks and distancing themselves from lobbyists and corporate donors.

This memo highlights the key findings and strategic recommendations from a surveyⁱ of 1,200 registered voters across 48 Republican-held congressional districts. It was conducted July 2-5, 2018 using an online panel in which respondents were matched to the voter file to verify their registration status and congressional district.

Key Findings

- **In the 48-district battleground of Republican-held seats, Democrats lead Republicans by 4 points on the generic congressional ballot, 46 – 42 percent.** This is a noteworthy lead for Democrats given that Republican candidates dominated their opponents in the battleground by an average of 14 points over the last two cycles. Self-identified Democratic and Republican voters are about equally consolidated behind their parties' candidates, but Democrats lead with Independent voters by 11 points (though many are still undecided).
- **President Trump and congressional Republicans' standing in the battleground is poor.** Trump's job approval stands at 43 – 57 percent approve/disapprove, close to where public polls put his approval nationally. Meanwhile, voter assessments of the job Republicans in Congress are doing are even worse at 36 – 64 percent. It should be noted, however, that Democrats in Congress don't fare much better than their Republican counterparts. Their job approval rating is only 3 points better than Republicans, 39 – 61 percent, which underscores the need for Democratic challengers to distinguish themselves from politicians in Washington.
- **Trump's team has drawn attention and voters want more oversight.** Trump's cabinet of high-profile personalities with questionable ethics have not worn well with voters. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, for example, has name recognition among 64 percent of voters and an extremely poor favorability ratio of 18 – 46 percent favorable/unfavorable. Similarly, recently exiled EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt has a name ID of 53 percent and an even worse favorability ratio of 13 – 41 percent. Even as both DeVos and Pruitt have drawn a lot of negative attention, these levels of name recognition are quite high given that officials who occupy these positions are usually unknown among voters outside D.C.

Given what they have seen so far, it's not surprising that nearly half of voters (49 percent) say the Trump administration is *more corrupt* than previous administrations, compared to only 26 percent who say it is less corrupt and 25 percent who say it is about the same. A majority of 56 percent say that Congressional Republicans are not doing enough oversight of the Trump administration, including 57 percent of Independents.

- **Republicans are seen as the party of corruption.** By an 8-point margin, most voters say that Republicans are more corrupt than Democrats, 54 – 46 percent. This gap (larger than the Democratic lead on the generic congressional ballot) is driven in major part by the 60 percent of Independents who find more fault with the Republican Party, and the 27 percent of moderate Republican voters who agree with them.
- **In a match-up between Republican and Democratic narratives, a Democratic anti-corruption frame performs as well overall as a putting families first frame centered on healthcare and the economy.** In both narrative match-ups, Democrats hold the upper hand by 8 points, 54 – 46 percent, which is a 4-point gain over the generic congressional ballot. However, the two message frames arrive there by different means. The putting families first healthcare and jobs focused frame is relatively stronger with non-white voters, white college-educated voters, and voters who went for Clinton in 2016. The anti-corruption frame is stronger with white non-college voters and those who voted for Trump—and may help make inroads with these kinds of voters in districts where Democratic candidates need more crossover support. (See page 3 for message frames.)
- **Taxpayer-funded perks draw ire.** By a margin of 55 – 45 percent, voters say that they are more bothered when government officials “spend taxpayer money on perks for themselves” than when they “make policies that help their big campaign donors.” Voters are obviously bothered by both, but this gap highlights how examples of self-dealing and wasteful spending of the sort that Scott Pruitt stands accused of can generate more visceral reactions among voters, particularly among white non-college voters (59 – 41 percent) and undecided Congressional voters (63 – 37).

Recommendations

- **It's not either/or.** Talking about corruption does not have to come at the expense of talking about healthcare, the economy, and issues that affect the middle class—and it shouldn't. But highlighting corruption can be an effective issue to sharpen the critique against Congressional Republicans, create a contrast on good government against opponents, and build the case for change in Congress.
- **For challengers, there are opportunities to demonstrate change by refusing to take certain perks and distancing themselves from lobbyists and corporate donors.** The following actions a congressional candidate might take generate the most positive reaction among voters:
 - ✓ Refusing to use taxpayer money for first class airfare
 - ✓ Rejecting special perks for members of Congress, like bringing a spouse on taxpayer-funded trips overseas
 - ✓ Pushing for Congress to be in session 5 days a week, so everyone works 40-hour weeks
 - ✓ Refusing to accept campaign contributions from lobbyists
 - ✓ Refusing to go on foreign trips sponsored by corporations and lobbyists
 - ✓ Refusing to accept campaign contributions from drug companies, Wall Street, or corporate PACs

- ✓ Disclosing how any Congressional vote may personally benefit themselves or their immediate family
- **The following examples of administration and Congressional corruption generate the most concerns among voters:**
 - Politicians in Congress set a schedule where they are in session only 3 days per week, so they can spend most of their time meeting with special interests to raise money for their campaigns.
 - EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt spent more than \$100,000 of taxpayer money on first-class and charter flights, personalized fountain pens, and clothing, and gave out \$96,000 in raises to friends he put on his staff.
 - Republicans in Congress took millions from drug companies and voted to give them and their investors a \$50 billion tax windfall but did nothing to prevent them from continuing to raise the price of prescription drugs.
 - Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin used a military aircraft to travel to Kentucky with his wife to watch the solar eclipse, costing taxpayers \$33,000.
 - 53 Republicans in Congress will get an average tax cut of over \$200 thousand each from a single loophole they added to the tax bill at the last minute.
 - Trump promised to hold Wall Street accountable but after they gave over \$14 million to his inauguration alone, his administration abandoned a rule that prevented financial advisers from cheating their clients. Americans could lose \$17 billion each year in retirement savings.
 - Republicans voted to take away healthcare from 30 million Americans but the bill they passed protected their own health care coverage.

Message Frames

(REPUBLICAN FRAME) The Republican candidate says that the stock market is up, and unemployment is the lowest it's been in 18 years. The tax cuts have put people's hard-earned money back into their pockets, cutting regulations has helped businesses grow, and our economy is expanding. Democrats are attacking Republicans and the Trump Administration because they have no solutions and would rather play politics and engage in partisan witch hunts than work together with Republicans to fix our healthcare system, protect our borders, support small businesses, and cut wasteful spending. We need to continue the progress, not return to higher taxes and more wasteful government spending.

(DEMOCRATIC FRAME – HEALTHCARE & ECONOMY) The Democratic candidate says we need leaders who will put families first. Healthcare costs too much for too many people and we need to crack down on drug companies to lower prescription drug prices. We need an economy that works for everyone, not just the powerful, which means incentives for business to create jobs and invest in career training and vocational education to connect people with good jobs. The Republicans in Congress side with corporate special interests like the big drug companies and insurance companies. We need change, so we can put families first.

(DEMOCRATIC FRAME – ANTI-CORRUPTION / TRUMP) The Democratic candidate says that politicians in Washington are just looking out for themselves and their donors instead of serving the people they represent. Under President Trump, this kind of corruption has only gotten worse. Members of his administration are using their positions in Washington to make themselves richer and are abusing taxpayer dollars for their own personal gain. Hard-working Americans pay the price for this kind of corruption because all of the problems they are facing—from higher drug costs to lower wages—are ignored by Congress. We need a change in Congress so there's some accountability on President Trump.

ⁱ Republican-held congressional battleground districts: AR-02, AZ-02, CA-10, CA-21, CA-25, CA-39, CA-45, CA-48, CA-49, CO-06, FL-18, FL-26, GA-06, IA-01, IA-03, IL-06, IL-12, KS-02, KS-03, KY-06, ME-02, MI-08, MI-11, MN-02, MN-03, NC-09, NC-13, NE-02, NJ-02, NJ-03, NJ-07, NJ-11, NM-02, NY-11, NY-19, NY-22, OH-01, PA-01, PA-07, PA-17, TX-23, UT-04, VA-02, VA-07, VA-10, WA-05, WA-08, WV-03