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To: Friends of Democracy Corps
From: Stanley Greenberg and Erica Seifert

Winning on a Losing Economy

Report on a web survey experiment testing economic message frameworks

The economy is in trouble and voters have lost trust in the Democrats and the president on handling the economy and on addressing spending and the deficits. That leaves the President just barely ahead of Romney and Congressional Democrats just barely behind the Republicans. But this special web survey and experimental exercise produces a powerful economic message framework for the President and also one for Democrats. These messages significantly shift which party voters can trust to address the economy and spending, which party is on your side and will bring the right kind of change, and shifts perceptions of the President on key attributes. The right framework shifts the vote for Congress and even more important, the vote for president in favor of the Democrats.¹ Progressives are not powerless in the face of this troubled economy.

This is the last research phase of this year's Economy Project that has concluded progressives must address the real economy rather than the recovery from the crisis; they must focus on future plans and policy choices, rather than try to get voters to reward them for past performance. The research pointed to four key elements of the real economy that must become part of a Democratic economic framework, including –

1. The struggle of the middle class for survival
2. The lost focus on creating American jobs
3. The weight of public and private debt
4. The nexus of Washington and Wall Street that keeps government from acting on behalf of the middle class

The frameworks tested here incorporated that learning, which will enable them to dominate the conservatives and Republicans for the first time in this work.

¹ Based on an experimental web survey of 2000 likely 2012 voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps July 8-11, 2011. Unless otherwise noted, margin of error= +/- 2.2 percentage points at 95% C.I.



To test presidential and Democratic messages against the Republican framework, we constructed this web survey with respondents organized into five experimental groups, with 400 interviews each. Each group heard the same Republican message framework (with two distinct messages in fixed order, closing with the Republican take on the policy choice ahead). Each group heard one of five Democratic economic message frameworks (with two distinct messages in fixed order, closing with the Democratic take on policy choice ahead). The Democratic policy choice was the same in each of the experimental groups.

After seeing these blocs of messages, respondents in each experimental group was asked which party was better on the economy and related issues. They were asked about Obama's qualities as president. And they were asked about voting for Congress and for president.³

What this experiment shows is the opportunity of Democrats to fundamentally shift this starting point with the right economic frameworks.

Presidential Economic Framework: End blame game, 1st term, getting back from economic crisis; 2nd term, changing real economy

All of the earlier phases of the Economy Project show that Americans feel smashed by this economy; it is not surprising that this experiment underscores the futility of starting with the case for economic progress. But this research provides an alternative that interprets and contains the past, while providing a message centered on the future.

All these elements gained some traction in the earlier research but come together here.

- It rejects the battle over who is to blame for the economic crisis as old politics (half the country blames Obama and half Bush, but that will not create any jobs).
- At no point does it say we are making progress or moving in the right direction, but instead says we have immense economic problems that will take years to solve. It makes the turn to the future.
- It makes the crisis and recovery the work of the first term and it makes the task of changing the economy the work of the second. The message describes the crisis Obama faced coming to office and acknowledges he had to do unpopular things. It confines the crisis to the first term – 4 years to get back to a place where people can breathe.
- The work now and for the next four years is centered on the real economy and changing it—new American jobs, raising incomes, cutting spending and the deficit and getting the wealthy to contribute. By putting the crisis into the first term, Obama is freed to acknowledge the pain of the real economy and make it his passion.
- The economic message framework concludes with a sharp policy contrast – the same choice that will appear in each Democratic message.

³ Each group of 400 interviews was controlled for likely voter demographics, party identification, and certain thermometer ratings to make sure each experimental bloc of interviews was comparable politically and demographically to ensure that differences at the conclusion of the experiment were produced by the message exercise.

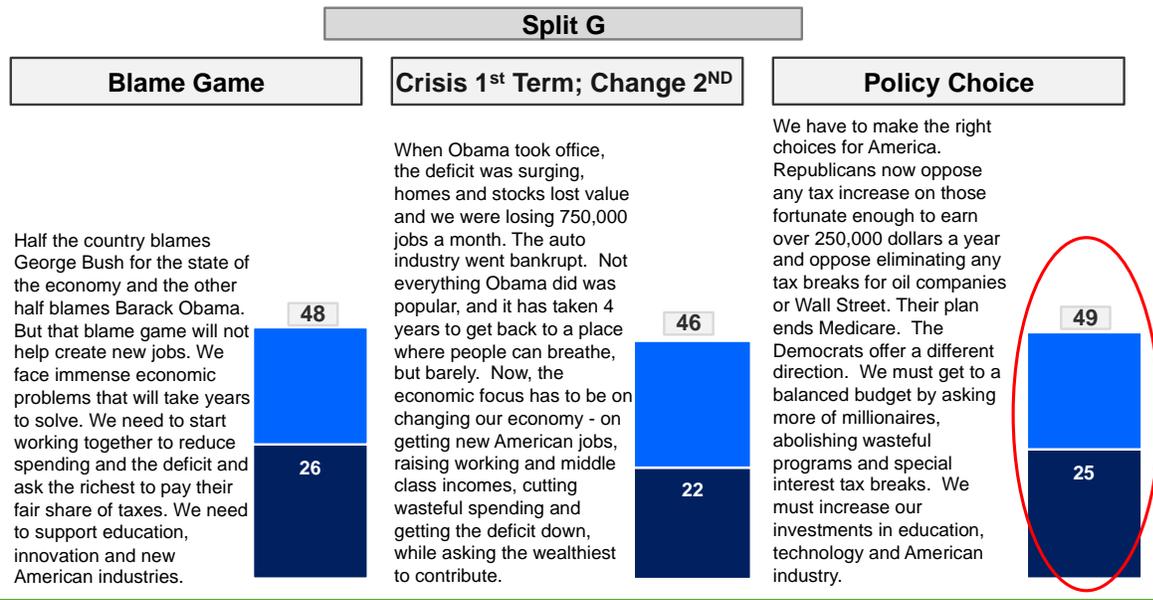


In the last phase focus groups, voters readily conceded that the President inherited a mess, and this research shows voters are quite responsive to an educative president who puts that history in context, as one explains the work of the first term. Without saying things are going well, voters are prepared to hear that it got us back to a point where we can breathe.

But containing that as the work for the first term allows the president to make changing the real economy the work of the 2nd. That shows that he gets what is really going on in the country. This framework is very effective for the president and is a plausible framework for many progressives.

No blame game on economy; crisis first term and economic change in 2nd – gets very high marks

Please imagine that a Democratic leader in Congress made the following statements about the economy. After reading each statement, are you much more likely to support this Democratic leader, somewhat more likely, just a little more likely, no more likely or less likely to support them?

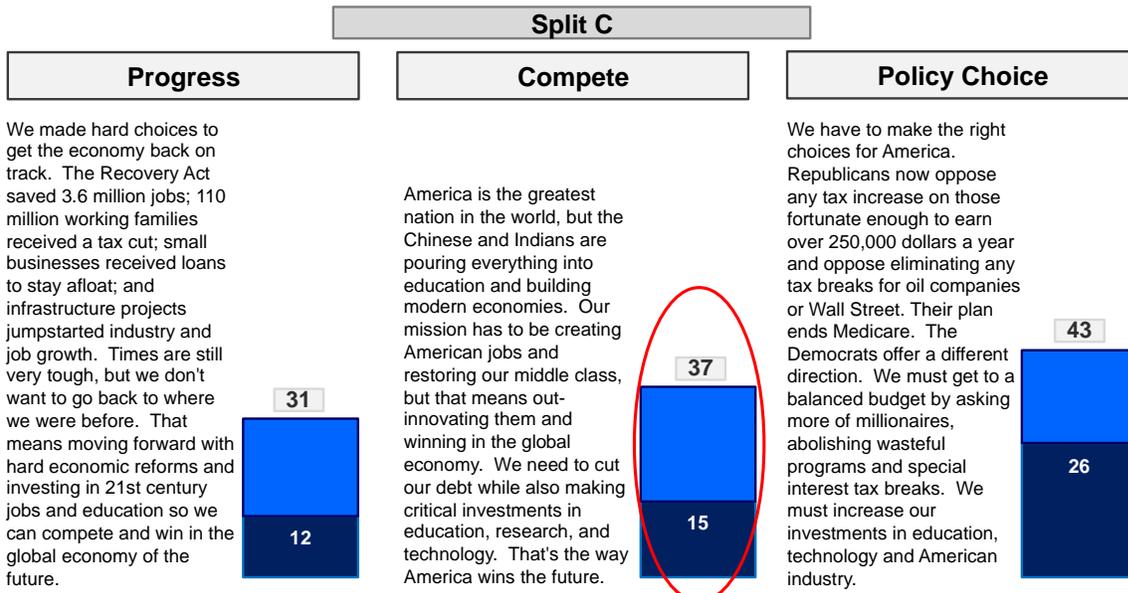


By contrast, the current economic framework advanced by the president that makes the case for recovery and progress and the need for America to compete globally does not fare so well.



Progress-America compete gets low marks

Please imagine that a Democratic leader in Congress made the following statements about the economy. After reading each statement, are you much more likely to support this Democratic leader, somewhat more likely, just a little more likely, no more likely or less likely to support them?



The table below shows the dramatic differences for the respondents that see these two distinct economic frameworks. The Progress-Compete messages leave the Democrats 10 points down on the economy and 6 points behind in the race for Congress, but the 1st-term/2nd term message gets both of those up to parity.

Message comparison: Progress-Compete vs. Blame Game/ Crisis 1 st term, Change 2 nd		
	Progress Compete	Blame game Crisis 1 st /Change 2 nd
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE		
Obama v. Romney	40 to 37 percent	41 to 35 percent
Presidential vote margin	+3	+6
OBAMA TRAITS		
Hopeful vision	+3	+8
Strong leader	-9	-1
On your side	-5	-2
Trust to make right choices	-14	-6



	Progress	Blame game
	Compete	Crisis 1 st /Change 2 nd
CONGRESSIONAL VOTE		
Democrat v. Republican	40 to 46 percent	42 to 41 percent
Congressional vote margin	-6	+1
DEMOCRATS BETTER ON:		
Economy	-10	0
Right approach to spending/deficit	-15	-9
On your side	+1	+8
Shares your values	-6	+2

The Democrats' Best Economic Framework: Change Washington for the middle class

It is not at all surprising that the strongest economic framework puts the middle class at the center. For Americans, the middle class is at the heart of the main critique of what has happened and the main aspiration for the future and America.

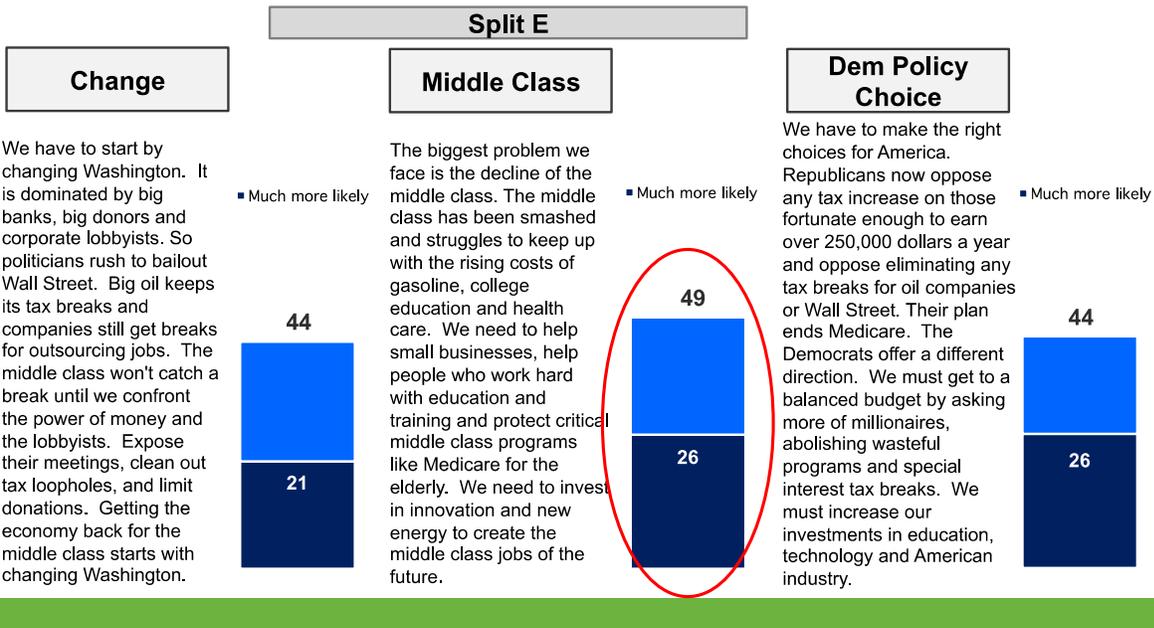
This framework became ascendant, however, only after hearing that Democrats were determined to change Washington – the nexus of lobbyists and money that means government catered to the irresponsible, not those who played by the rules. Our earlier work showed that unreconstructed government is out of touch with the real world of voters and not able to bring economic change. Reforming government is essential to making the economy work for the middle class again.

So this economic message framework begins with changing Washington. That is followed by a narrative around the middle class, underscoring the real mission of this framework. And it concludes with the policy choices ahead facing the country.



Change Washington to put middle class first – gets high marks

Please imagine that a Democratic leader in Congress made the following statements about the economy. After reading each statement, are you much more likely to support this Democratic leader, somewhat more likely, just a little more likely, no more likely or less likely to support them?



After seeing this framework, the participants had but one takeaway – ‘Middle class’ – giving a level of focus that previously only Republicans achieved.

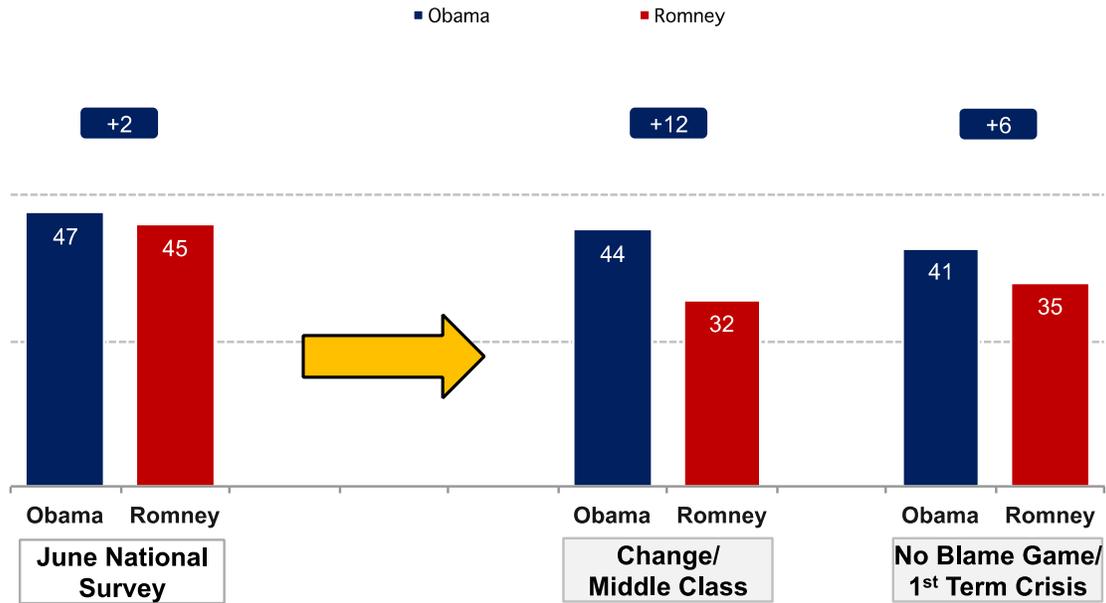
The change Washington to help the middle class framework produces the biggest margin in the presidential race (a 14-point shift from the June national margin) and a comparable 4-point shift in the congressional margin.

Voters who heard these two top frameworks – the presidential no blame game; 1st term crisis/2nd term change and the Democratic change Washington for the middle class – were the most likely to say that the Democrats would improve the economy, build up the middle class, bring the right kind of change, and be on your side – the latter are the two most impactful in the regression model. Getting into the right economic framework has the ability to shift the probabilities in these toss-up and volatile elections.



Within top economic frameworks: biggest potential shift in presidential contest

I know it's a long way off, but thinking about the presidential election in 2012, if the election for president were held today and the candidates were Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Mitt Romney, for whom would you vote?



Note: June data is from the Democracy Corps National poll, June 18-21, 2011.