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To: Friends of Democracy Corps
From: Stanley Greenberg, James Carville and Andrew Baumann

Democrats Continue Surprise Lead in Republican-held Congressional Seats

A new survey of the fifty most contested Republican districts

The new Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner survey of the most competitive Republican-held battleground districts finds Democrats maintaining their surprise lead as the mood of the nation continues to sour. Democratic candidates are now ahead by 3 points in the 40 most vulnerable Republican seats, virtually unchanged from a week ago.¹

While Democrats have expanded their advantage in the eighteen open seats included in this 40-district battleground, Republican incumbents have seen a slight improvement in their standing, perhaps because of their near universal opposition to the Wall Street bailout. Their approval ratings have ticked up along with scores on several important attributes. As a result, these incumbents have pulled even with their Democratic challengers. Despite this modest improvement, these long-time Republican incumbents remain in serious jeopardy, sporting still-dismal approval ratings and only managing a draw against lesser-known challengers in a Republican battleground.

The Democrats' edge does not extend far beyond this 40-seat battleground. In the next ten most competitive Republican seats, Republicans still maintain a substantial advantage, largely driven by the greater Republican tilt, better positioned incumbents and weaker challengers. If the political environment continues to erode for the GOP this may change, but for now these Republicans in this outer tier do not appear to be in grave danger.

This memo is based on a survey of 1600 likely voters in the 50 most competitive Republican-held Congressional districts.² It was conducted September 29 – October 2, 2008.

¹ Democracy Corps survey of 1794 likely voters conducted in the 40 most competitive Republican-held congressional districts and the 10 most competitive Democratic-held districts, September 18-23, 2008.

² These districts were broken into three tiers. The first two contain 20 districts each and the last contains 10. For the full list of districts in each tier please see the accompanying document.



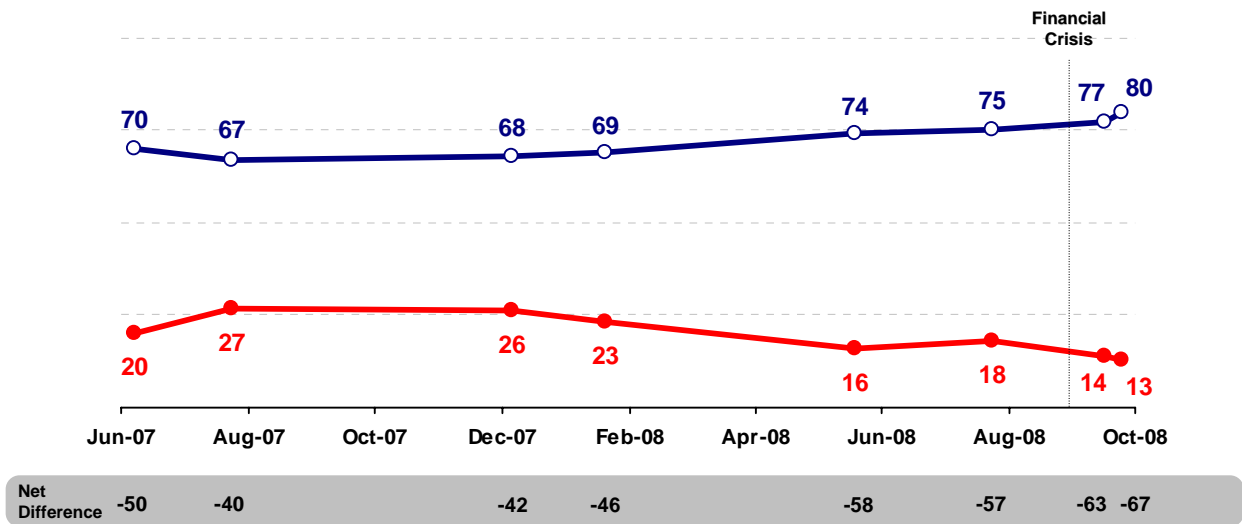
Democrats Maintain Lead with Help from Toxic Environment for GOP

With the financial crisis deepening, the mood across the country and in the Republican-held congressional battleground continues to grow more sour. A full 80 percent of voters in the 40 most competitive Republican-held seats now say the country is seriously off on the wrong track, a record high in the congressional battleground.

Rising disgust with status quo in Republican districts

Generally speaking, do you think things in the country are going in the right direction, or do you feel things have gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track?

Wrong track
Right direction



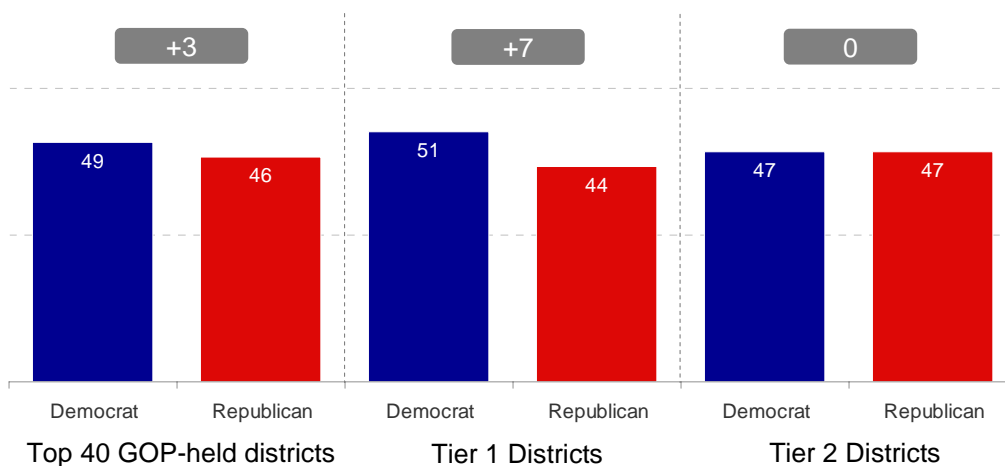
*Note: Time series data only of 40 GOP-held districts in tiers 1 and 2.

The intense negative focus on the economy has helped Barack Obama gain ground across the country and this is also true in this battleground, where he now evenly splits an electorate that voted for Bush by a 10-point margin in 2004. Facing this headwind, Republican congressional candidates remain in serious trouble, trailing by 3 points, virtually unchanged from last week's 4-point deficit. In the most competitive tier of Republican seats Democrats now have a substantial 7-point advantage, while they are holding their own and managing to stay even with the Republican candidates in the second tier.



Democratic candidates hold edge in top 40 GOP districts

Thinking about the election for Congress in November, if the election for U.S. Congress were held today, would you be voting for the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate*?

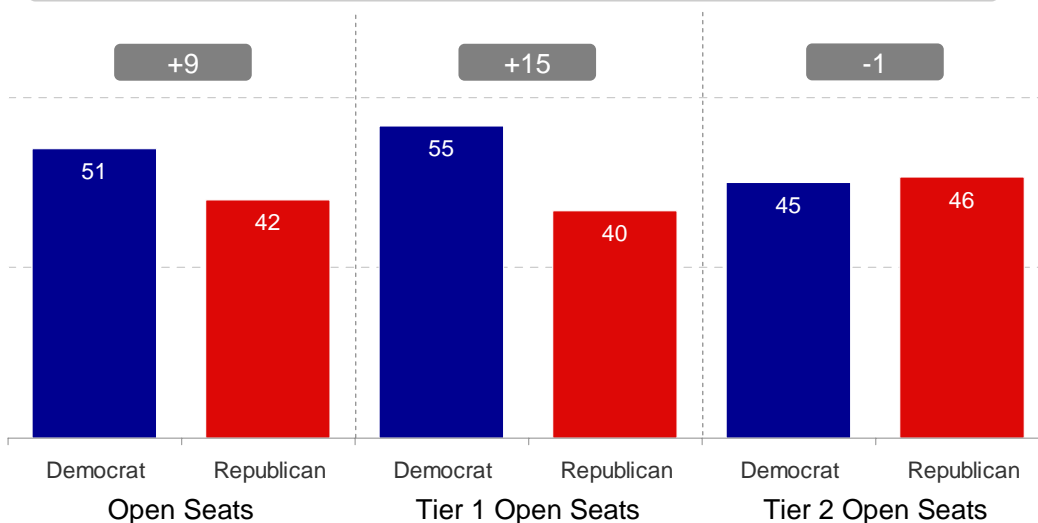


*Note: For each district, the candidates' names were inserted, preceded by their party identification. In the LA-4, where the candidates are not yet official, generic candidates ("the Democratic candidate" and "the Republican candidate") were inserted.

Democrats are getting a big boost from the many open seats that Republicans are being forced to defend this cycle. Almost half (18) of the 40 districts in this battleground are open seats and the Democratic candidates have a 9-point advantage in these seats. In the 11 open seats in our top tier of Republican targets, this lead is even more pronounced at 15 points.

Democrats hold large lead in top GOP-held open districts

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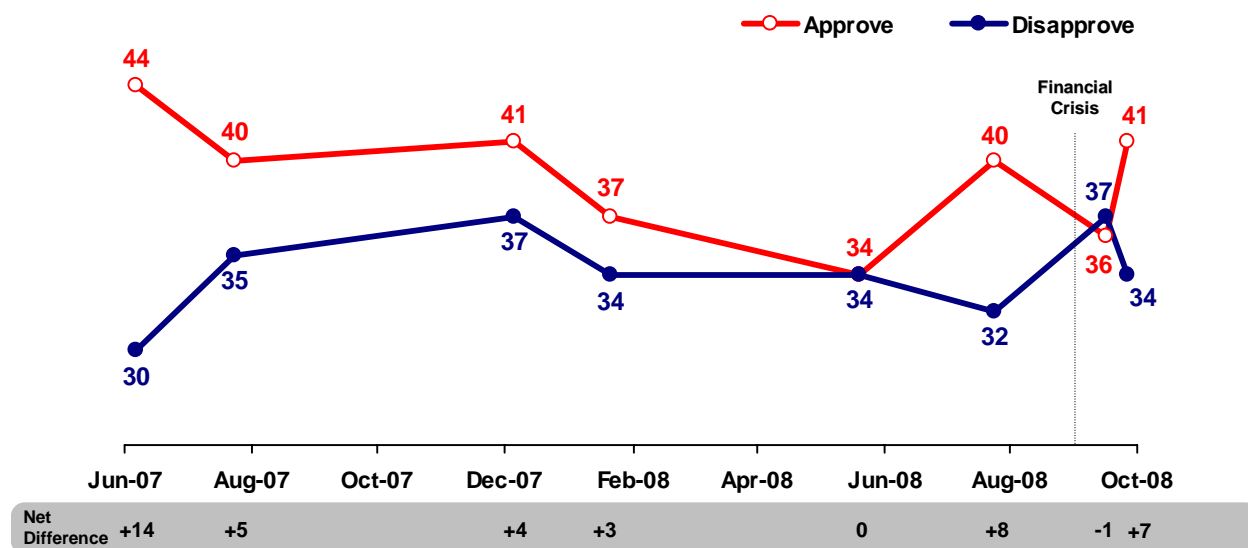


Despite Modest Improvements, Republican Incumbents Still in Serious Trouble

Conversely, Democrats running against Republican incumbents in this 40-district battleground have lost a bit of ground, now trailing by 1 point after leading by 3 points last week. This is especially true in the 2nd tier of seats where an 11-point lead has eroded to a dead heat. This shift is largely driven by an improvement in the standing of Republican incumbents who are running for reelection. Their job approval has moved back up from just 36 percent to 41 percent, with the largest gains coming, again, in the 2nd tier, though such a modest score and only running even still leaves most in jeopardy.

Improvement in standing of GOP incumbents seeking reelection

Do you approve or disapprove of the way (HOUSE INCUMBENT)* is handling his/her job as a member of the U.S. Congress?



*Note: Actual names of incumbents were inserted without partisan label.

*Note: Time series data only of 40 GOP-held districts in tiers 1 and 2 in which the incumbent is seeking reelection.

These Republican incumbents have made gains nearly across the board on a variety of attributes, including those that our regression modeling has identified as the most important drivers of the vote. The percentage of voters who say that the incumbent does not “fight for people here” has dropped 5 points in the last week, from 38 to 33 percent. Similarly, a 46 percent plurality now agrees that the Republican incumbent is “on your side,” up from 39 percent a week ago, though again, not many incumbents will take much cheer from only 46 percent saying they are on their side in these Republican districts.



Most of these incumbents initially voted against the Wall Street bailout, which was less popular in these incumbent districts than in the open seat races.³ So it is possible that these incumbents have marginally improved their standing by opposing the bailout. This possibility is supported by the fact that in the incumbent districts Democrats are only even on who would do a better job with the economy and trail by 2 points on who would best handle the financial crisis (whereas they lead by 5 and 4 points on those issues respectively in the open seats).

None of this suggests that the Republican incumbents in these 40 districts are not in trouble. Despite the improvements, these numbers leave most Republican candidates at risk in the top two tiers of 40 seats. And the fact that barely half of voters agree that these Republicans “fight for people here” and that less than half agree that they are “effective in Congress” or “on your side” are grim findings for such long-term incumbent members of Congress. Moreover, a majority of voters in these districts still reject the notion that these incumbents can help “bring the right kind of change” and a strong plurality agree that they “follow Bush’s direction too much.”

Battleground Does Not Extend Indefinitely

While Republican candidates, including incumbents, are in deep trouble across the top two tiers of seats, this danger does not extend much further than the 40 districts contained in those two tiers. Despite a more negative political environment for Republicans (higher numbers saying the country is on the wrong track and lower approval ratings for President Bush), Republican candidates in the third tier lead by 16 points.

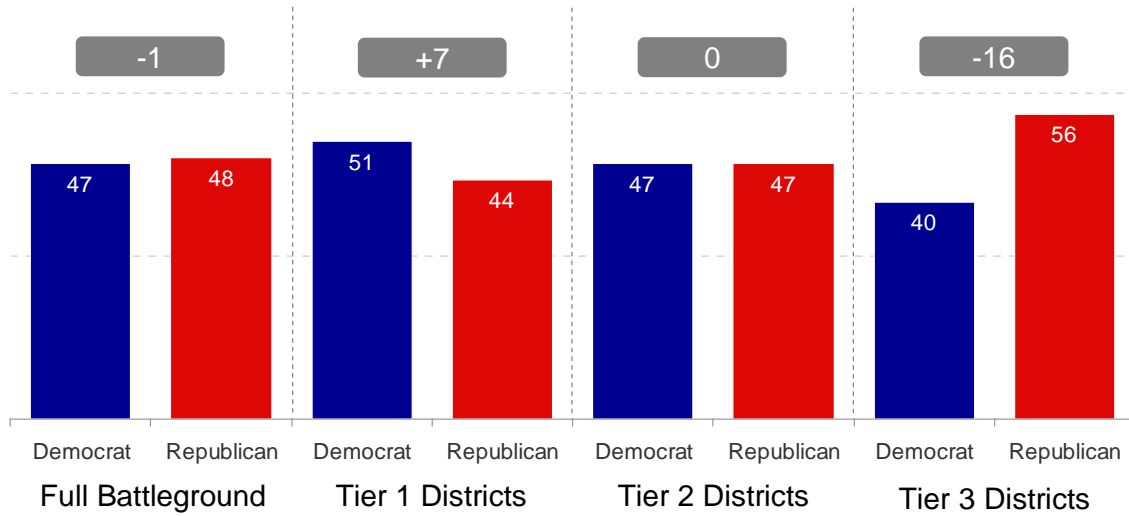
Democratic candidates in this tier are strongly underperforming both party identification and Barack Obama. This is mostly driven by the weakness of the Democratic challengers and relative strength of the incumbents. The Democratic candidates are not well known (just 49 percent name identification) and not particularly popular; they have a mean score of 44 degrees on our favorability thermometer (out of a possible 100), 4 degrees lower than their counterparts in the top two tiers. Meanwhile, the Republican candidates in this tier have a 75 percent name ID and a mean thermometer rating of 53 degrees, much higher than their counterparts in the top two tiers. Despite their party’s troubles, these candidates are still relatively well-liked and do not appear to be in grave danger at this point. We will continue monitoring their status to see if the changing campaign dynamic in the final months brings this tier into the endangered battleground.

³ This survey was in the field the four nights immediately after the initial House vote on the bailout on Monday, September 29, but finished before the second vote on Friday, October 3.



Democrats not as competitive in 3rd tier

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