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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner  
From: Stan Greenberg, James Carville, Peyton M. Craighill and Bryan Bennett

## **Democrats Should Want this Tax Cut Debate**

*Survey shows Democrats make gains after debate on extending Bush tax cuts*

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This will be a tough election, but fortunately, the unfolding tax issue can work strongly to help Democrats and define the choice in the election. This is a case where Democrats are strongly aligned with public thinking and priorities. Only 38 percent favor extending the Bush tax cuts for those over \$250,000 – the official position of Republican leaders and candidates. Clearly messaging around this choice – with Democrats voting for middle class tax cuts, while starting to address the deficit and protecting Social Security, contrasted with Republican candidates who still believe trickle-down economics and worsening the deficit – works for progressives.

With Democrats down by 7 points in the congressional test ballot, they have reason to welcome this potential shift in the dynamic. Democrats hold the high ground on these issues – and this one noticeably moves the congressional vote to the Democrats after a debate. Democrats should embrace a tax debate. Frankly, they do not have many issues where:

1. There is a 17-point margin in favor of the Democratic position, 55 to 38 percent.
2. The strong messages gives a disproportionate lift to the Democratic candidates – scored 13 points better than named Democratic candidates while Republican messages performed half as well.
3. There is an opportunity to show seriousness on the deficit, while undermining Republicans on the issue.
4. The choice re-enforces Democrats' core values and strongest framework for the election (for the middle class versus Wall Street).



The payoff from this debate comes in a 2-point narrowing of the Republican lead in the congressional vote after hearing the debate. And for the most powerful Democratic messages, it narrows the vote by 5 points, to 45 to 47 percent.

This latest poll of likely voters by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps finds majority support for a variety of tax cut measures to protect the middle class.<sup>1</sup> Some of the key findings include:

- Over half – 55 percent – support increasing taxes by letting some or all of the Bush-era tax cuts expire. Specifically, 42 percent say the cuts should remain in place for the middle class, but expire for those making more than \$250,000. Just 38 percent say all the tax cuts should remain in place. This is not a purely base issue – by a 17-point margin, independents favor raising taxes on the wealthy.
- This message is even more popular when it is contextualized by broader economic messages. By a 10-point margin, voters are persuaded and reassured by the idea of raising taxes on the wealthiest so that revenue can be used for deficit reduction and investment in jobs.
- Majorities clearly side with extending the cuts for the middle class, at least for some time. Voters favor extending the tax cuts for the middle class for two years, as some have proposed, while a similar majority favors extending these cuts permanently. The proposals receive intense popular support from Democrats, with all proposals advocating expiration of tax cuts getting more than six-in-ten support.

### **Winning the Argument on Taxes**

Initially, Democrats trail by 7 points in the named congressional ballot, which is stable, but troubling so close to the November election. In a wave election, it is usually hard to shift the race this late, yet this poll shows that the tax debate offers that potential.

We tested eight messages – four Democratic and four Republican. The messages performed comparably – but two of the Democratic messages had a clear impact on the vote choice – enough to move the results in November.

These messages have more pull than the best Republican ones, which perform 5 points better than the vote margin for a named Republican candidate in our congressional ballot test. By

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<sup>1</sup> This memo is based on a poll conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps. The poll was conducted August 30-September 2, 2010 among 2008 voters nationwide. All data reflects results from 845 likely 2010 voters (895 unweighted, margin of error 3.2 percentage points) unless otherwise noted.



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contrast, the two strongest progressive arguments perform at least 10 points better than Democrats perform on the named congressional vote.

Voters are receptive to a progressive position on the economy and are willing to support a tax increase for the wealthy. These messages also help consolidate Democrats, who are eager to mobilize on behalf of strong progressive candidates. Equally important – these messages move independents. The tax frame signals Democrats’ fiscal responsibility on the deficit and creates a clearly defined choice between Republicans (who are for the wealthy, big corporations, and Wall Street) and Democrats (who are unwilling to sacrifice the already suffering middle class for the benefit of the wealthiest.)

The progressive tax frames work best among groups that Democrats should already be targeting. The Rising American Electorate, including unmarried women, minorities, and voters under the age of 30, are particularly receptive to progressive tax messages. Two-thirds of the RAE find the “economic boost” message most appealing. About six-in-ten of the RAE felt the same about investment and deficit language. The “economic boost” message also wins majority support among ideological moderates (67 percent). Democrats can gain traction among base voters with these messages, and possibly grow support among those who have not yet determined their votes.

### **Impact on the Vote**

These messages have a clear impact on vote choice. We re-asked the congressional ballot and found that those who only heard the top two Democratic messages moved toward Democrats, reducing the initial 7-point deficit to just a 2-point gap, at 45 to 47 percent. Meanwhile, those who heard the less strong Democratic arguments did not shift their vote choice, as Republicans maintained a 6-point lead.

Progressives should welcome the debate over extending middle class tax cuts while letting taxes increase for the wealthy as Congress re-convenes. It reflects good policy during these tumultuous economic times, and could prove to be good politics for those facing an uphill battle this November.