

To: Congressional Progressive Caucus PAC  
Fr: Celinda Lake, David Mermin, & Emily Garner, Lake Research Partners  
Re: Focus Group Findings on 2020 and 2022 Elections for Congress  
Date: May 27, 2021

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This memo summarizes key strategic takeaways and messaging recommendations from recent focus groups by Lake Research Partners among **swing voters** and **Democratic surge voters** in competitive congressional districts.<sup>1</sup>

#### KEY FINDINGS:

- **Most voters have trouble describing a clear positive vision of what the Democratic Party stands for.** Most new voters, both **surge** and **swing**, voted against Trump and Republicans rather than for Democrats.
  - Voters are not hearing enough about what Democrats have accomplished, what they are fighting to accomplish, and how they are standing up for voters' values and priorities.
  - Without Trump on the ballot as a clear villain or stronger definition as a party, Democrats are at risk of losing some of these new voters in 2022.
- Voters are expecting Democrats to get things done. Democrats won these **surge** and **swing** voters in 2020, but among both groups, their judgement is still out. **If Democrats fail to deliver real results for regular people, these new voters can be lost again.**
  - **Democratic surge voters** are looking for major policy outcomes and delivery on promises, not "more talk with no action." Many voted down-ballot to empower Democrats to pass legislation without Republican obstruction.
  - **Swing voters** also expect Democrats to be using their power to get things done but want to see more cooperation across party lines.
- **Both surge and swing voters are very focused on equity.** This is a shift in orientation for **swing voters** from what we have seen in the past and presents new opportunities for progressives.
- **Swing voters paid only a little attention to Republican attacks on socialism or defunding the police,** which they viewed as divisive fear-mongering. Democrats can and should reframe these issues.
  - Finding ways to talk about these issues that work for **swing voters** is essential, as they do care deeply about equity. Simply avoiding potentially divisive topics will hurt Democrats.
- **Both Democratic surge voters and swing voters have many progressive issue priorities,** though **swing voters** do not call them that.
  - **Swing voters'** top issues are the environment and climate change, corruption in government, and kitchen table economics, followed by social justice, affordable health care, immigration, and the economy. Women are especially focused on education and health care.
  - **Surge voters'** top motivating issues include the environment and climate change, social justice, COVID-19, immigration, and economic opportunity and inequality.
  - **Surge** and **swing** voters share many more common interests on issues right now than conventional wisdom often suggests.

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<sup>1</sup> Lake Research Partners conducted and moderated 3 focus groups among white swing voters, 2 focus groups among Democratic surge voters, and 1 focus group among white Republican surge voters in these swing districts: CA-45, CA-49, NJ-03, OR-04, PA-08, CA-21, CA-39, IA-01, IN-05, MI-03, NM-02, TX-23, VA-05.

- **Democratic surge voters** and **swing voters** are looking for different types of candidates, but independence from partisanship and special interests appeals to both. **The focus should be on getting things done for regular people.**
  - **Democratic surge voters'** ideal candidate is someone “real” – young, diverse, from a lower socioeconomic background, and relatable to them, but with experience on the issues they are running on. They want to see real passion for progressive priorities.
  - **Swing voters** are looking for candidates who are less partisan, independently-minded, and can work across the aisle to get things done. They don't want to see anything they perceive as too partisan or extreme – words that these voters largely associate with politicians using divisive language, rather than with progressive policies.
  - Bold, populist anti-corporate ideas are extremely important and can help candidates bridge the gaps between these groups.

#### MESSAGING RECOMMENDATIONS – **DEMOCRATIC SURGE VOTERS:**

- The bottom line is that **progressive Democrats have winning language here in terms of mobilizing surge voters.**
- The most convincing messages among **Democratic surge voters:**
  - *Racial Justice*, which prioritizes other approaches to policing including community safety, crisis counselors, and mental health and substance abuse treatment.
  - *Healthcare*, which makes the case for transitioning to Medicare for All to ensure that everyone has access to high-quality affordable health care.
  - *Gridlock*, which describes how Republicans in Congress have repeatedly failed to offer solutions while attempting to block legislation, while Democrats are fighting to get things done for regular people.
  - *Voting Rights*, which describes how Democrats are prioritizing fighting voter suppression and expanding access to the ballot box.
  - These are reflective both of surge voters' top priorities and successful framing.
- Most messages for **Democratic surge voters** are very effective. **Surge voters are open to contrast messaging, and the framing employed here is generally successful, though there are some traps to avoid.**
  - While **surge voters** agree with many criticisms of Republicans presented in the contrast messages, it is still important not to appear too divisive, critical, or negative. These voters want messaging that feels positive and solutions-oriented.
  - Some of these **surge voters** are sensitive to the fact that the Democratic coalition needs to include **swing voters** to win elections. They are concerned by messages they perceive to be attacking and potentially pushing away **swing voters**, even when they fundamentally agree with the premise.
  - Specifics are important. **Democratic surge voters** want to know what exactly is going to change and how. They are not mobilized by language that is too abstract.

#### MESSAGING RECOMMENDATIONS – **SWING VOTERS:**

- The most convincing messages among **swing voters:**
  - For **swing men** it is *Economy – Rights*, which lays out the Democrats' plan to achieve an economy where all working people are respected and earn a fair wage for their work.

- Among Red and Blue District **swing women** respectively it is the messages on *Climate Change*, outlining how forward-looking, justice-oriented climate policy can save lives and create jobs, and *Health Care*, communicating the vision of providing everyone in America with high-quality, affordable health care.
- **Swing voters react negatively to language they perceive as partisan or divisive.** We know contrast messaging is a critical piece of communication, and it is often unconsciously effective, however it must be executed carefully, especially in this era.
  - **Swing voters** increasingly see both parties as intentionally divisive for their own gain. It is critical to avoid playing into this framework in their minds, in order to retain credibility.
- To strengthen contrast messages, open messages with the shared goals and values that Democrats are fighting for before describing the problem with clear evidence, then describe a solution and the action needed to reach it. **The recommended messaging framework: value, problem, solution, action.**
  - It is important for solutions to be positive, specific, and believable.
  - Efficacy is still an issue – these **swing voters** want to be reassured Democrats can get things done.
- **A generic Republican opposition message attacking Democrats on COVID, socialism, raising taxes, open borders, and Defund the Police did not resonate among swing voters.** While these voters do have some criticisms of Democrats' COVID response and taxation, they found the message exaggerated and off-putting.

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