



October 3, 2019

End Citizens United

Message Guidance for Reformers at Risk

To: Interested Parties

From: GQR

Money in politics serves as a strong electoral message for Democrats running in tough districts, particularly for incumbents who won as agents of change. The level of discontent with the influence of corporate money in politics continues to rise, and is seen as a major roadblock to progress on a range of important priorities. The electorate remains cynical, and Members are well-positioned to overcome that cynicism with credible demonstrations of the change they've been able to force together in Washington.

We explored the concept in detail in focus groups in Frontline districts in Des Moines and outside Pittsburgh¹ over the past few weeks, and the findings confirm many of our previous findings. But most importantly, these discussions provide a clear path for the next stage in this debate in which countering voters' skepticism that change can happen is our priority. The No Corporate PAC money pledge is a powerful validator, and now voters look for action and concrete results. What we learned is there is a powerful frame that goes beyond individual candidates to a broader movement, fueled by small donors and a growing field of candidates who are making change.

Obviously, you should explore these concepts in your own race to find the best fit for your profile and the contrast you wish to develop with your opponent. The following are some key findings from the focus groups conducted among swing voters including Trump, Clinton and third party voters:

- **The connection between political corruption and its impact on kitchen table issues continues to build.** Voters easily conclude that corporate money produces bad outcomes for them. They directly connect it to the cost of prescription drugs and health insurance in particular. These are the most tangible examples of corporate money winning and regular people losing.
- **Voters find the No Corporate PAC pledge admirable, and are hungry for more action to stop the influence of big money in politics.** Voters connect the dots between not taking money from corporate PACs and not being beholden to corporate special interests. Now that these candidates are in Washington, the bar has been raised, and voters look to candidates to show that they mean it. Trust is built on action, and voters need hard evidence that candidates are doing what they said they would do. Legislation like H.R. 1 serves as a central proof point.

¹ **IA-03** has a PVI of R+1 and Trump won the district by 3.5%. **PA-17** has a PVI of R+3 and Trump won by 2.6%.

- **Our biggest hurdle is credibility with a cynical electorate.** Of course, voters believe the influence of big money in politics is a serious problem, but they see the issue as being so widespread and deeply ingrained in our political process that any attempts to fix it seem futile. They assume Washington is full of powerful corporate forces that eventually corrupt even the most well-intentioned candidates who go there to make a difference. It is hard for them to believe a reformer can make a difference, but they are eager for change and hope it can be possible.
- **Mitch McConnell is becoming more defined in a negative way.** McConnell is deeply disliked by those who know him, including swing Trump voters in our groups. Not only do voters associate him with big corporate money and corruption, but he is rapidly becoming a symbol of authoritarian obstructionism.

The biggest hurdle is establishing credibility that change is possible against what are viewed as powerful forces fueled by limitless corporate money. During the early stages of the groups, voters lamented these challenges and viewed the issue as so deeply ingrained in the political process that change seemed futile. Left unchecked, their cynicism leads them to discount candidates who take the pledge and promise the moon. They know one person simply cannot do it alone.

But the discussions changed when we introduced information outlining the growing nature of the movement against corporate money, symbolized by expanding small donor bases, larger numbers of candidates supporting the effort and a resulting legislative success. When voters began to think of it less as one unique member of Congress and more as a growing number who have taken the pledge and have passed landmark legislation, their tone changed and it became something possible. As one woman said, “this is where politics is going so you better get on.” Demonstrating the growing power of reformers effectively blunted voters’ cynicism and provided real hope.

This message frame has three key elements that conveyed to voters that this is possible:

1. **Make it a growing movement that has momentum, to show you have power to do it.** Last cycle, many candidates used this issue to differentiate themselves from typical politicians as a singular figure taking on the system. While that was successful, the bar is higher now, and pushing back on the skepticism that anything will change is important — and possible.

The pledge conveys positive things about the character and priorities of the candidates who take it. Voters now want to know if Members of Congress can get it done, and can be convinced by the notion of a growing movement. The corrupting influence of money in politics is so big a problem as to seem completely intractable. In voters’ minds, one person alone cannot make a difference, but after hearing of the growing numbers of members and their small donors, that view changed; as a participant noted, “there is power in numbers.”

2. **Highlight small donors as a counter to corporate money to create credibility.** We were struck by the reaction to the term “small donors” in the groups, as voters associated important qualities with them and candidates who they support. Voters talked of how “it is earned” and “you have to work for it” when discussing small donors, in contrast to corporate money, which they view as transactional. Small donor support signals to voters that the candidate is connected to regular people and is working hard to earn their support.

Small donors are a counterweight to the big corporate money in campaigns, and the notion of a candidate who has a lot of small donor support counters the skepticism that a candidate not taking corporate money can compete. Voters understand a candidate must raise money to compete and knowing a candidate is backed by an army of small dollar donors reduces confusion over how that candidate can win. Highlighting your support from small donors leads voters to believe you actually are refusing Corporate PAC money and trying to make change in Washington.

3. **Emphasize concrete actions in both your record and in the future.** The pledge is a powerful proof point, but trust with cynical voters is built on repeated action to curtail the influence of money in politics. Voters respond well to the record — H.R. 1 — and a commitment to further action, as tested in the groups. It was not until this point that voters began to get past their skepticism that change is possible. The fact that a growing number of No Corporate PAC members helped the House pass the biggest anti-corruption bill in history struck people as an indication that change is possible.

Other bills to lower the cost of prescription drugs and hold corporations accountable to consumers also demonstrate candidates following through on their promises to take on the corporate special interests and work for everyday people. These actions say to voters that the tide is turning and that this can happen.

These discussions were extremely instructive and, to be honest, took us in a different direction than we anticipated and led us to alter the frame for candidates from their previous identities as singular change agents. While we do not suggest walking away from your unique narratives, this research points to shaping the discussion in terms of a growing movement with momentum that is producing tangible change on the influence of money in politics. At the same time, it puts people on our side in a very tangible way.

The statement on the following page is the text that we introduced into the focus groups based on concepts that were raised organically by voters and that received a very positive response due to a new sense that change is possible.

In 2018, 44 candidates pledged to reject corporate PAC money and won their elections. As Members of Congress, they have all renewed this pledge and are continuing to reject corporate PAC money, and dozens more candidates for the House and Senate are also joining them in taking the pledge.

These candidates are getting support from thousands of small dollar donors in their states who give less than \$200, and they are raising as much or more money than their opponents who are taking corporate PAC money.

Together, these Members helped write and pass a historic anti-political corruption bill in the House to increase transparency, strengthen ethics laws, keep foreign money out of our elections and end the influence of corporate special interests in our government.

These Members are refusing to accept donations from corporate PACs connected to companies such as pharmaceutical companies, telecom companies, and health insurers — and are taking on these corporate interests in Congress.

They have authored bills to allow Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices for seniors, make prices transparent so patients know how much their prescriptions cost before leaving the doctor's office, and make it easier to bring generic drugs to the market. And they are pushing to make cable companies more transparent in their prices and options.

The do’s and don’ts of talking about money in politics

DO’S	DON’TS
<p>Focus on reducing corruption and increasing transparency. Voters directly connect corporate PAC money to votes in Congress and easily characterize this influence as corrupt.</p>	<p>Use the term government reform. This is an extremely broad term that can mean anything from balancing the budget to establishing term limits. Few participants connect it to corruption and transparency.</p>
<p>Talk about how your campaign relies on thousands of small, individual donors, and let voters know you can compete financially with the special interests because of the broad support you have.</p>	<p>Refer to special interests alone. This term captures more than just corporate bad guys, but any group that has a vested interest in an issue. We succeed when “corporate” is in the frame, but “special interests” on its own does not accurately convey our message.</p>
<p>Give a cynical electorate hope that change is possible by highlighting the growing movement of candidates who are refusing Corporate PAC money and showing the power you’re gaining in Washington.</p>	<p>Emphasize the unique nature of the No Corporate PAC pledge without showing your legislative accomplishments. Voters like the pledge, but they think the problem of money in politics is too big for one person to make a difference.</p>
<p>Use the term money in politics when referring to campaign finance reform. This phrase captures the meaning of campaign finance reform using language that voters understand, not political buzz words.</p>	
<p>Talk about getting dark money out of politics. The heavy usage of this term over the past few years has made an impact. It now paints a clear picture of what we are against—dirty money, corrupt corporate money, the big money that cannot be traced.</p>	
<p>Build on the No Corporate PAC pledge by highlighting the tangible successes of H.R. 1, which would get corruption out of Congress and allow you to tackle the cost of prescription drugs, health care, and other kitchen table issues.</p>	