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## Turning the Tide

*Reformers at Risk* can win by giving a cynical public hope in the fight against Washington corruption

Focus Group Findings

**To:** Interested Parties

**From:** Al Quinlan and Aida Bibart on behalf of ECU

Money in politics is 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 have been able to effect together in Washington.<sup>1</sup>

We explored the concept in detail in focus groups in two Frontline districts in late September and again heard voters lament the toxic influence of big money in politics. Most importantly, these discussions provided a new direction for the next stage in this debate that counters voters' skepticism that change can happen. We learned there is a powerful frame that goes beyond individual candidates to a broader movement that is fueled by small donors and a growing field of candidates who are making change.

The No Corporate PAC Money pledge is a good validator—voters connect the dots between not taking money from corporate PACs and not being beholden to corporate special interests—and they find it admirable. Now the public wants to see how Members are building on their pledge in office.

Reformer candidates made it to Washington, expectations are high, and the bar has been raised as voters look to these 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. Equally important is convincing voters that change can happen through a growing movement of reformers and small donors who can challenge the influence of dark corporate money. Legislation like H.R. 1 is a start and serves as a central proof point.

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. These are the most tangible examples of corporate money winning and regular people losing. This is something we learned in previous research, but these groups confirm the intensity of voters' feelings about the corrupting influence of money in politics.

<sup>1</sup> This memo summarizes the results of 4 focus groups in Des Moines & Pittsburgh among white swing voters on Sept. 11 and 16, 2019. The districts have an average PVI of **R+2** and President Trump won by an average of **3.05%**.

Efforts to take on corruption face two hurdles that are very real because of cynicism among swing voters. First is the widely held skepticism that that big corporate money can be defeated, which stands in the way of Members making the case they can actually do something to change the system. We should be clear: voters’ skepticism is deep and as the role of dark money grows every cycle, the notion that nothing can change continues to harden. The second challenge is rebutting the charge of hypocrisy when an incumbent has taken PAC money from other non-corporate institutions, which voters do not easily distinguish.

Combatting this skepticism requires a natural evolution that takes incumbents beyond the initial frame as a solitary change agent to someone who is part of a new army that is making real change happen.

Importantly, as participants discussed this issue further, particularly when we focused them more on the growing number of elected officials and candidates taking a stand against corporate special interests and passing legislation in the House, it gained traction and intensity—it gave cynical voters hope.

By the end of the discussion voters had intense feelings about the corrupting influence of money, and when we lead them to a solution with key messages, are hopeful about change being possible.

## Recommendations

- Always connect money in politics to everyday impacts on people’s lives. Health care and prescription drugs provide the strongest examples.
- 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 are gaining in Washington.
- Talk about how your campaign relies on thousands of small, individual donors, and let voters know candidates can compete financially with the special interests because of this broad support from regular people.
- Look for ways to show this movement visually, displaying the large (and growing) group of people in paid communications and finding earned media opportunities with other new Members.
- Project actions that go beyond the No Corporate PAC pledge to include a tangible success of H.R. 1 to get corruption out of both parties in Congress and how that will help people with prescription drug, health care, and other “kitchen table” costs.
- Define the choice as corporate money vs. individuals. Do not get tied up trying to convey the nuances of campaign finance or PAC definitions.
- Focus on reducing corruption and increasing transparency. Voters directly connect corporate PAC money to votes in Congress and easily understand this influence as corrupt.
- Mitch McConnell is surprisingly well-defined and increasingly disliked among swing voters. Tie Republican incumbents to McConnell’s corporate fealty rather than ideology, especially with these voters.

➤ *See page 5 for full description of message frame*

## Language Guidance

- **“Government reform”** does not define the issue. This is an extremely broad term that can mean anything from balancing the budget to establishing term limits. Using it to describe what a candidate is trying to do (on anything, but specifically money) conveys many different things. Few participants connect it to corruption or found it meaningful. We suggest not using this term.
- **“Money in politics”** does define the issue. This phrase captures the meaning of campaign finance reform using language that voters understand, not political buzz words.
- **“Dark money”** is now understood. The heavy usage of this term over the past few years has made an impact. Unlike before, it now paints a clear picture of what we are against—dirty money, corrupt corporate money, the big money that cannot be traced. The term works for us now.
- **“Corruption”** works as part of our frame. This is also now beginning to work better for us and connects to the bad actions by politicians we are highlighting. We heard no pushback to this characterization of the problem.
- **“Special interests”** As we learned from previous research, this term captures more than just the 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.
- **“Small donors”** convey strong character traits. We know corporate PACs are viewed negatively, but we were struck by the rich discussion prompted by “small donors” in the early associations. Voters associate important qualities with “small donors” and candidates who have a lot of small donors. This kind of support is “earned more than given,” and shows the candidate is in touch with regular people. Essentially, small donors are a counterweight to the big corporate money in campaigns.

## How Reformers Stay Reformers

Last cycle, 44 candidates pledged to reject corporate PAC money and won their elections. Voters find this pledge admirable, but Members must build on their pledge this time around to hold on to cynical voters. Unsurprisingly, voters are looking for actions from those in office. To build trust with these voters, we must build on the pledge to what candidates are actively doing to fix the system.

Do what you say you want to do. Vote the way you say you will in your campaign. That’s how I can trust you. – Man, Des Moines

I look at their past record versus what they say. – Man, Pittsburgh

All they have to do is just do what they say they’re going to do. That’s how they earn trust. I don’t give my trust based on hearing them speak for the first time. – Woman, Des Moines

I never believe their words. Deeds are the only important things. – Man, Pittsburgh

Our biggest hurdle within this key group is credibility. Voters believe the influence of big money in politics is a serious problem, but they are also cynical, and they see the issue as being so widespread and deeply ingrained in our political process that attempts to fix it will almost certainly be futile. Washington is full of powerful corporate forces that eventually corrupt even the most well-intentioned candidates who go there to make a difference.

Left unchecked, their cynicism leads them to discount candidates who take the pledge and promise sweeping, systemic reforms. They know one person simply cannot do it alone.

Unless you have enough people that think the same way as you and are willing to make those changes, you’re not going to get anything done. – Man, Des Moines

I want this to be possible but do I believe I’ll see this happen in my lifetime? I don’t know. It would take a lot of people like her to make changes like this. – Woman, Des Moines

I would question whether it’s possible right now, with the amount of money that companies dump into politics, if you’re going to be able to get enough backing to get anything done. – Man, Pittsburgh

I don’t think one person could do anything or make a dent with how large [the problem of corruption] is. – Woman, Pittsburgh

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 taking on political corruption 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 conveys to voters that change is possible:**

1. **A growing movement that has momentum.** 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, now Members must show progress in order to push back on the skepticism cynical voters feel about change being 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 problem of corrupt money in politics is so big 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 changed, as a participant noted, “there is power in numbers.”

2. **Small donors as a counter to corporate money.** We were struck by the reaction to the term “small donors” in the groups, as voters ascribed important qualities to these donors and the candidates they support. Voters talked of how small donor support is “earned” and candidates “have to work for it,” in contrast to corporate money; it 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. Voters understand a candidate must raise money to compete, and they are skeptical that a candidate can compete without taking corporate money. Showing that a candidate is backed by an army of small dollar donors counters this skepticism and reduces confusion over how that candidate can compete and win. Highlighting support from small donors also leads voters to believe candidates are actually refusing corporate PAC money and trying to make change in Washington.

3. **Concrete actions bolster campaign promises.** The pledge is a powerful proof point, but trust with cynical voters is built on repeated actions to curtail the influence of money in politics. Voters respond well to the record—the various elements of H.R. 1 and other anti-corruption efforts—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 built a majority in the House to 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 health care and hold corporations accountable to consumers also demonstrate that candidates are following through on their promises to take on the corporate special interests. 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 shift the frame for candidates from their previous identities as singular change agents. While we do not suggest walking away from each candidate’s unique narrative, 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.

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

No Corporate PAC Money Message

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.

They are refusing to accept donations from corporate PACs connected to companies like pharmaceutical companies, telecom companies, and health insurers, and are taking on these corporate interests in Congress.

The type of people doing this is also important. Participants see them as “young and new” and assert “there is power in numbers.” We suggest looking for ways to visually display the large (and growing) group of people who are behind this movement.

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

DO’S	DON’TS
<p>Focus on reducing <b>corruption</b> and increasing <b>transparency</b>. Voters directly connect corporate PAC money to votes in Congress and easily characterize this influence as corrupt.</p>	<p>Use the term <b>government reform</b>. 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 <b>small, individual donors</b>, and let voters know you can compete financially with the special interests because of the broad support you have.</p>	<p>Refer to <b>special interests</b> 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 <b>hope</b> that change is possible by highlighting the <b>growing movement</b> of candidates who are refusing Corporate PAC money and showing the <b>power</b> you’re gaining in Washington.</p>	<p>Emphasize the <b>unique</b> nature of the No Corporate PAC pledge <b>without showing your legislative accomplishments</b>. 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 <b>money in politics</b> 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 <b>dark money</b> 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><b>Build on the No Corporate PAC pledge</b> 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>	