

May 1, 2025

To: End Citizens United

Fr: Impact Research

Re: Focus Group Findings on Corruption in Washington

Four focus groups among soft partisans and swing voters across congressional battleground districts found that corruption in Washington is a major concern for voters and is unifying across partisanship. However, voters remain cynical that politicians will do anything concrete to tackle the corruption in Washington. And therefore, they view both parties as corrupt, all politicians as focused on their own self-interest (particularly self-enrichment) and don't expect them to get the corruption out of Washington since they are the ones benefitting.

This cynicism presents an opportunity for Democrats who take on this issue. Taking on corruption allows Democrats to talk about how to change a system that voters feel is not working for them, and there are specific messages and solutions that participants support as ways of reducing corruption in Washington. Candidates who elevate corruption messaging stand to make gains particularly with swing voters who are down on both parties.

The groups also revealed that there are ways of communicating effectively on the issue, as well as ineffectively. More research is needed (and is in process) to further explore the messaging, but these focus groups were affirming in the strength of this issue.

The following are recommendations based on the qualitative findings.

Strategic Recommendations

1. **Keep the focus on Congress, more than Trump or Elon.** For these swing participants, their views on Trump and Elon are complicated and still forming. Trump retains some inoculation on corruption issues. His longstanding "drain the swamp" rhetoric combined with the way he's messaging DOGE through the framework of ridding waste and corruption gives him some credibility. Likewise, while participants had real concerns about Elon's role, they were ill-formed, and they saw some positives from his cuts. They are not positive towards either person, but candidates should note that only utilizing corruption framing against Trump and Musk will present some barriers.

However, members of Congress are ripe targets for corruption messaging – voters view all (nameless) politicians as corrupt, focused on self-enrichment and gaining power. They attach a lot of the problems facing the country to these ills, and while they are not necessarily able to articulate specific examples of corruption, they are certain that corruption is rampant in Washington.

<p>The findings and recommendations in this memo are based on four focus groups conducted on April 2nd and 3rd, 2025 among swing voters and soft partisans across congressional battleground districts. The composition of the focus groups were among white non-college educated women, white college educated men, Black men, and Hispanic men.</p>

- *Recognize that both parties are viewed as equally corrupt.* Participants view Washington's culture as the corrupting influence – it is a disease that infects both parties equally. Even as Republicans have taken control of Washington participants are no more likely to fault them for it than Democrats who they see as weak, ineffective, and self-interested. This means that to win the argument about who is going to take on corruption and a system that isn't working for them, candidates must lean in and present a strong argument on these issues.
- *When talking about Elon Musk, make sure to always center it around his self-dealing.* Participants were concerned with the amount of contracts his businesses have received and his potential use of our personal private data to line his own pockets.
- *A top concern that participants identified was Republican Members of Congress working to give tax breaks to billionaires and corporations while threatening Social Security and Medicare.*

2. **Focus on self-enrichment and the influence of special interests and lobbyists as the leading examples of corruption in Washington.** More so than past cycles, these participants were fluent in ways that members of Congress use the office for personal gain – they cite examples of members who go into office “with no money” and come out “millionaires.” They are aware that members make less than \$200k and assume their net worths increase due to self-dealing. Relatedly, they see lobbyist influence on behalf of special interest as corrupting – buying off politicians to get their own deals.

They see this as connected to their own problems – when elected leaders are focused on lining their own pockets, they make decisions based on that, not what is best for people. They want to see action to address this.

“Some of these politicians are being paid off by lobbyists, big corporations... and they're padding their pockets. They're not working for us constituents, they're actually worried about padding their pockets. I've seen it firsthand.” - Non-college white woman

“[Corruption] is definitely not always illegal. Lobbying is legal, and that's basically a form of legal bribery.” - College grad white man

3. **Use the stock trading ban and members of Congress serving on for-profit boards as focal points in addressing corruption and self-enrichment.** Awareness that politicians trade stocks with inside information is well known, and participants believe it is wrong. They say that insider trading is illegal, and members of Congress should be held to the same standard. They were also concerned about members of Congress serving on for-profit boards, which they believed was a clear conflict of interest and source of distrust that lawmakers are working for voters. They strongly support legislation that would ban members of Congress from trading stocks and serving on for-profit boards.

- *The most powerful reform proposals to voters were banning members of Congress from trading stocks and serving on for-profit boards and banning Supreme Court justices from accepting gifts from individuals or entities with business in front of the court.*

4. **Define how corruption hurts them – in their pocketbooks.** Cost is the dominant concern among participants. We need to personalize this issue by showing how when politicians only care about themselves, they do things that hurt regular people.

“The price of living is skyrocketing, and it has a trickle-down effect. It doesn’t affect the guy that’s making a \$150k, \$200k a year. It’s affecting me... And my people don’t have a group. They don’t have a lobbyist that pays the president to say, hey man, support this group. I’m just a regular dude trying to live in the world.” - Non-college Black man

Our strongest message highlighted how politicians who are looking out for themselves have failed to do anything on costs but have taken multiple actions to make themselves or their donors richer.

After 10 weeks with total power in Washington, Republicans in Congress have not even introduced a single bill that would lower costs for working families. But they have introduced a bill that would be the largest billionaire tax cut in history, stripped away regulations that will allow their corporate donors to increase profits, and threatened to take away healthcare protections that would let insurance companies jack up prices on regular people.

5. **Democracy-framing is currently ill-defined, whereas corruption framing cuts through.** In past cycles, “threats to democracy” was a motivator for the base and persuasive to swing voters. While all participants agreed that our democracy is under threat, there was much less clarity about what that means than in the past. Participants struggled to define what a threat to democracy is, and the discussion was “choose your own adventure” answer where people projected their own issue priorities onto it.

Conversely, corruption is both a salient issue and universally defined as politicians looking out for their own interests and against the interest of the people. We should push hard on taking on corruption and should be mindful that just talking about democracy broadly without specific definition does not have the same intuitive meaning for voters.

6. **Attack Republicans for favoring billionaires at the expense of regular people.** Participants were not concerned about the presence of billionaires in the Administration overall (some believe they have proven to be immensely successful and may have good ideas, others are just unaware). Most participants are not offended by billionaires, and it is more effective to talk about special interests or powerful entities when defining villains (beyond the politicians who are very good villains as well). When invoking the ultra-wealthy, it should always be in service of demonstrating who politicians are looking out for (themselves or their billionaire donors)— not to attack them for existing for being successful.

“If those people know how to make money and they know how to manage their money, and that’s why they’re in the position they are, are they going to be in a better position to make informed decisions and inform the president about how to manage money so that we can be in a better position as a country? I mean... we started out talking about that’s the biggest thing that’s a problem for everybody is costs.” - Non-college white woman