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## **Democracy Corps Focus Group Report** *Lessons Learned from the Congressional Battleground*

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With November approaching and Congressional campaigns moving into full gear, Democracy Corps conducted ten focus groups of undecided voters in highly competitive Republican-held house districts to understand the impact of television advertising that has already been on the air.<sup>1</sup>

The political environment clearly favors Democrats, but well-financed Republican incumbents have gone on the attack with television advertising to discredit their Democratic challengers. These Democracy Corps focus groups indicate that certain Republican attacks are quite effective, particularly when they are not countered with a forceful Democratic response. But the groups also demonstrate enormous opportunities for Democratic when they tap into the public's anger toward Congress and the dissatisfaction with the direction President Bush and the Republicans have taken the country.

This report provides observations and analysis from the ten focus groups in the Congressional battleground, offering guidance for other campaigns seeking change across the nation.

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<sup>1</sup> Democracy Corps' focus groups took place in the following Congressional districts: August 2<sup>nd</sup> in CT5 (Nancy Johnson vs. Chris Murphy); August 7<sup>th</sup> in OH 15 (Deborah Pryce vs. Mary Jo Kilroy); August 8<sup>th</sup> in PA6 (Jim Gerlach vs. Lois Murphy); August 22<sup>nd</sup> in IN2 (Chris Chocola vs. Jim Donnelly); August 23<sup>rd</sup> in NM1 (Heather Wilson vs. Patricia Madrid). Participants were undecided in their congressional vote, a mix of '04 Bush and Kerry voters, and Independents or weak Democrats/Republicans.

## Key Findings

Despite nuanced differences in each Congressional district, there were remarkable consistencies throughout the country. In fact, the underlying attitudes toward President Bush, Congress, incumbents and challengers were common regardless of demographic, and it is clear that the '06 battleground shares a fundamental structure, highlighted by a dissatisfied electorate that desperately wants a new direction for America.

### *1) Gas prices and Iraq Drive Negative Mood*

The negative mood that exudes from every public poll was on full display in these battleground districts. With rare exceptions, voters overwhelmingly expressed their dissatisfaction on multiple fronts regarding where the country is heading. This is driven by many factors, and the most dominant reasons are gas prices and the Iraq war. Voters spoke passionately about both issues which weighed heavily on their minds and hearts.

With incomes stagnant and most voters feeling financially squeezed, high gas prices aroused anger and concern across the country independent of individuals' income. Some cited the fact that when the cost of gas increases, it drives up the cost of everything else and they feel it all the way to the grocery store. Others simply felt overwhelmed by the cost of filling up a tank for the family van, and are furious about price gouging. The issue of gas prices is at the core of voters' financial worry, and it contributes to a political mood in which voters believe nothing is being done because of the tight bonds between big oil and Bush, as well as a Congress that caters to its supporters at the expense of the public. As we will see in the ad testing, the gas price narrative is a fundamental component in voters' desire for change, and forcibly moves them.

*I mean, basically what's happening is price gouging. If you think about it, when an oil producer can react to a world event that has no bearing on their production or their transport or their getting the thing out of the ground...I think we'll just raise it up to \$90 a barrel, then that's price gouging and I think that our president and/or Congress could do something about that. (IN-2, women)*

*Well, they expect the economy to rejuvenate, but then when you've got to spend \$50 two or three times a week to fill up your vehicle, where am I going to spend my money? I've got to put it in my gas tank. (PA-6, men)*

*Even the gas prices, they always hit you close to home when you think about how things are going. It's a struggle to get ahead. You just want to keep pushing forward. (CT-5, women)*

*With the fuel prices, your discretionary income is down to nothing. What you would have used for your entertainment factor, it's going into your gasoline tank. (PA-6, men)*

*It does cost me \$55 to put gas in the Town and Country. That's a problem for me. It is the immediacy of the issue. That's something that I deal with every week. (PA-6, women)*

*They need to police these gas stations because there is price gauging. (OH-15, men)*

*I think the oil is going in the wrong direction. Brazil already has a cure and they don't have to depend on any other country because they use Ethanol 85 and they also have the regular gas at their gas stations where people have a choice which type they want to use and they take the cheapest. Why are we so far behind South America? We're supposed to be ahead of everybody in the world and we're not. Nobody is doing anything about it. (NM-1, seniors)*

The Iraq war is also a central piece to what drives the negative mood in the country, as participants had a long list of grievances about Iraq – ranging from the lack of preparedness and no strategy to the pain of losing our soldiers and the consequences of spending too much overseas when we have major problems at home. Prescriptions for what we should do in Iraq vary, and the groups were mixed over when American troops should withdraw. These divisions predictably broke down along partisan lines, with Republican leaners more concerned over the effect of an immediate withdrawal and Democratic leaners more concerned about being stuck in Iraq with no plan for leaving. But regardless of where people stood on how to move forward in Iraq, there was an overwhelming consensus that the mission had become a mess, and responsibility lay in the hands of President Bush and his administration.

*The way I see it the war was predicated upon a lie. Saddam Hussein did not have anything to do with 9/11. There wasn't weapons of mass destruction. The intelligence that was supplied, it's been proven that it was false. It's not so much a government as it is the leaders of the government who are manipulating us and sending our soldiers off to die. (OH-15, men)*

*The reason we didn't go into Baghdad during the first Persian Gulf War is because Bush one didn't want to commit troops for ten years to stabilize the country. And this Bush didn't even have the foresight for that. He was just like, we'll just go in and then we'll figure it out. Like he said, there's no game plan. (PA-6, men)*

*I wore my POW bracelet for thirty years before I finally took it off. I wore it for a real long time, so I do understand. And I have two flags at home from two members of my family who died in war. I do understand, but I don't think that this was well thought out. I don't think it's well thought out as to how we are going to get out of there. (OH-15, women)*

*He's (Bush) staying in there and those men are getting killed every day and it's going to erupt into a civil war and they're going to, it's just going to get worse. I don't see how it can possibly get better. And I don't think we can achieve what he wants to achieve. I don't think it's feasible. I don't think it would ever happen. (IN-2, women)*

*Well, I think the foreign policy right now is so inconsistent it's pathetic. You have first of all, we're just in Iraq and we're there to stay and we're just going to make this a free country. But yet, the things that are going on in North Korea, we're just ignoring that. It's just not happening, you know, it's just whatever. (IN-2, women)*

*Whether that was the right action or not, I think history will probably come out on the side that it wasn't really smart to go in with no exit strategy, no plan for pacifying the country or keeping the armed forces over there from becoming the rebels that we're killing and are killing us everyday. (IN-2, seniors)*

*I think we were very short-sighted going into that part of the world without fully realizing how they feel about us. It's just to me, night and day different. I'm not saying that there isn't a westernized element over there, but I think without trying to understand why they hate us so much, as opposed to going in there and causing more problems to fuel that hatred, that's really my take on it. (CT-5, women)*

In addition to gas prices and Iraq, participants had a litany of complaints about where the country is headed. Their dissatisfaction centered on economic concerns such as health care and good jobs going overseas. People are undoubtedly feeling the pinch from ongoing increases in health care costs which force hard decisions in a family's budget and enhance financial anxieties..

*I'll be honest, I can't afford a lot of it. Every time I go they want \$45 to \$100. I can't afford to fix myself. (OH-15, women)*

*I just think the healthcare system is getting out of whack. I heard you guys talking earlier about your vet. It's cheaper to go to the vet and if I could have the option, I'd go to the vet. It's ridiculous. (PA-6, women)*

Among non-college educated participants in areas that have been particularly hit hard by changes in the economy, American jobs was a high priority as people were pained by the fact that young people had to leave the community in order to find good jobs. These participants emphasized their belief that times have changed and globalization is permanent, but after watching good jobs leave their community, they wanted to see fairness and safeguards as part of free trade.

*I think the issue is in our wages. South Bend, Indiana, overall, does not have enough good paying jobs. When our children graduate from college, they're really not making what they're up to be and what about a high school graduate that just walks out of school and isn't able to go to college, isn't mentally able, where do they go? Give them an 8 dollar an hour job or a 6 dollar job at McDonald's? We need more industry. We need better paying jobs. (IN-2, seniors)*

*Globalization, it seems to me, has changed things in that manufacturing jobs that used to be in the country are now being taken over by third world countries...And I agree, I believe in free trade but it also has to be fair because I think all nations will advance with free trade. (IN-2, seniors)*

*And that's the hard part for me, like you're saying with the education, why should I send my daughter to college? Tell me why I should do that. Because, can you guarantee me*

*when she gets out after I spent \$100,000 on her education, she's going to have a job? And you can't.* (IN-2, women)

## **2) Disgust with Congress at Center of Change**

The most striking dynamic that we have seen in these focus groups, and numerous others over the past year, has been the remarkable consistency in voters' disgust with Congress. It does not matter where we talk to voters or what is their demographic background – Congress is broadly seen as “for themselves,” “fat cats,” and “crooks.”

*You scratch my back and I'll scratch your back. I don't care about my people.* (NM-1, seniors)

*Give themselves raises every year and let everybody else support them.* (IN-2, women)

*How many companies that people work for, the people can vote for their own pay raise?* (NM-1, seniors)

*I don't understand why congressmen or senators need \$150,000 or \$200,000 a year to serve our country. I'm a little lost there.* (OH-15, men)

*Regardless of who we would vote into it, they are all going to fall into it at some point.* (CT-5, women)

While their frustrations with Congress vary, the primary focus is invariably on Members of Congress pursuing their own personal interests at the expense of the public good. This is about self-enrichment through pay raises and cozy relationships with lobbyists, about giving themselves a benefit and retirement plan that ordinary voters could dream only of, and about individuals whose abuse of public trust has left them totally removed from the struggles facing average families.

*They don't do the job for the people, but they do it for themselves or the interest groups.* (PA-6, Man)

*They got an 18,000 dollar raise and they don't want to raise the minimum wage a buck? You know, it doesn't make any sense.* (IN-2, Seniors)

It is important to note that the vast majority of voters ascribe these qualities to Congress as a whole, but not to their respective representatives who they generally view in a favorable light. Participants initially gave their own Members of Congress the benefit of the doubt, but advertising that bridges this divide taps into their visceral attitudes toward Congress and makes voters believe that change will require throwing out the incumbent. For those who chose a Democrat in their vote at the end of the discussion, they most often cited a desire for change, ties to President Bush and big oil companies, and other examples of Washington excess. These

conclusions reflected the themes presented in some of the DCCC advertising, which tested very strongly and are discussed in more detail later in this report.

### ***3) President Bush Hangs over the Political Landscape***

While disdain for Congress is central to the mid-term environment, negative attitudes toward President Bush loom over the entire landscape. For these swing voters, the problems in Iraq, the economy, and the influence of big oil and corporate lobbyists in Washington are all deeply tied to Bush. That is, important things at home and abroad cannot get done because of the President's policies and abilities. Unlike 2002, President Bush is certainly not an asset for Republicans in 2006. And in most places where his personal and professional failings dovetail with those of Congress, he is a major liability.

*I often wonder if he practices what he preaches. If he's saying we need to find different forms of energy and other sources, and his vice president is well into the corporations that he's into, then how can he say one thing to one group and really put it into practice with the other? (CT-5, women)*

*He's a pawn being controlled by big money and big industry. (PA-6, men)*

*Why is he only for big companies? I don't think he has sympathy for the average person. I don't think he even cares about the average person. (NM-1, seniors)*

Attitudes toward Bush are very firm as we have seen little change in how voters perceive Bush over the last year. He is viewed as a principled family man with good Christian values who is trying to do his best for the country, but this positive sentiment takes a backseat to the forceful and passionate critiques of his job performance. The intensity of the antipathy toward Bush varied by Congressional district, but his failures as President were regularly cited with anger, derision, and concern over America's role in the world.

*He sure enough hasn't balanced his own checkbook ever. You cannot overspend and cut taxes. It's great to cut taxes and give everyone a tax relief, but when you are spending at some point in time, our children or our grandchildren are going to have to pay for this. And there is no way you can spend a billion dollars a day and cut taxes and not cut something else down the road. (PA-6, men)*

*His judgment is in doubt. Yelling, "Yo Blair!" to Prime Minister Blair. It was caught on tape. He was massaging the Chancellor's back on tape. I didn't think the German's liked to be touched. What would obsess him to do that to another leader? His judgment is just poor. (PA-6, women)*

*He gives good backrubs to German Chancellors. (CT-5, men)*

*He jumped into Iraq and now he wants to jump over to North Korea. We'll be going, when is this going to end? When the hell are we going to jump into that? (OH-15, men)*

#### ***4) Well-known Incumbents vs. Unknown Challengers***

In each of the five Congressional districts, the incumbents were generally well-known and well-liked, but not for any particular reason or accomplishment. There is a common sense that the Members are looking out for constituents in the district, but when asked for examples, participants were hard-pressed to come up with any specifics. Some Members received better reviews than others, but no participants would go out of their way to defend their Members when doubts were raised about them in the advertising. In fact, absent strong reasons to defend the Member, each incumbent was very susceptible to attacks that linked them to what voters do not like about Congress and Washington. Voters are seeking change, and most of these participants expressed readiness to fire their Member of Congress when given compelling evidence and reassured on the alternative.

The Democratic challengers in these races were largely unknown entities. Even in districts such as IN-2 and NM-1 where a lot of advertising has already aired and clearly penetrated or in PA-6 where the challenger is running for a second time, participants knew very little about the candidates, and opinions – good or bad – were unformed. In this context, credible attacks on the challengers that played off concerns voters have about Democrats raising taxes were very effective. Unless there was a response by the Democrat that directly countered the attack, the allegation stuck and largely defined that particular Democrat. In many cases, participants said that their concerns resulting from the tax attack would hold them back from supporting the Democrat.

#### ***5) Voters are Paying Attention***

It was striking to hear how closely people are paying attention to political news and developments. Prior to viewing the ads in the focus groups, participants were citing the various advertising they had already seen. Most of their advertising recall and observations were not about the substance, but rather the negative tone of the campaigns which reinforced their dislike and skepticism toward all things political. Even when they recalled the specific arguments made in the ads, they felt a need to learn much more about the candidates so they could make an informed decision over “who was telling the truth and who was lying.”

*To be honest with you, when I start hearing those things I erase them. But it gives you a very negative taste in your mouth, even if the candidate is not the one that is supporting that. And it's just groups that are trying to support him or her, it makes you wonder about their ethics for other things. (CT-5, women)*

*That's what I hate. You watch TV and you say, well this guy sounds really good. Then the next commercial an hour later, this other guy is running him down. So you don't know who to believe. I don't know the guy. I don't pay no attention. (OH-15, men)*

In places where large ad buys had not yet been placed, participants had very little to say about the race itself, commenting that they need to learn more about the election. But even

though these participants had heard little from the candidates in their districts, some surprising items from the national news had broken through. Most notably, several participants spoke unprompted about the pay raise Congress recently gave itself. Others also noted the minimum wage debate. This marks one of the rare occurrences in which a Democratic-initiated debate had really penetrated, and reflects voters' eagerness for voices that take on the self-serving modus operandi of Congress.

The participants expressed a great deal of interest in the election (note that in order to participate in the discussion, people had to pass a likely voter screen). When asked about their motivation to vote in November, most people simply said it is their responsibility as Americans living in a free country which is why they always vote. In this regard, the '06 election is no different for them. But there was also a sense among some of the Democratic leaning participants that they were more motivated to vote this year because they wanted change and were hopeful their vote would achieve it. This was not a prevailing sentiment, but worth noting given the importance of turnout in this mid-term election.

*I would say more[motivated] because of the war. I think the outcome of this war is going to have tremendous effects on western civilization, on our country, on our country's role internationally. It's very high stakes. (CT-5, Man)*

### **Takeaways from the Advertising**

We showed participants numerous television ads running in the various Congressional districts, including ads sponsored by Republican and Democratic candidates, MoveOn.Org, the US Chamber of Commerce, and the DCCC. The ad testing revealed where Republican attacks raise real doubts about the Democrat, and also which attacks lack serious resonance. Above all, the exercise showed how Democrats can use this political environment to their advantage and beat back the attack by employing the right substance and tone in this election's skeptical and anti-Washington atmosphere.

#### ***Takeway 1: Substance and Tone Critical to Impact of Negative Ads***

Voters decry the negative advertising that they see dominating the campaigns. It feeds their skepticism toward politicians and the process, which turns well-intentioned people into self-serving Members of Congress. But despite the bad taste that these ads cumulatively leave with voters, it is very clear that when properly executed, the ads lead voters to powerful conclusions about the candidates. The key distinction between the ads that worked and those that did not was whether they informed voters about something that is important to them or whether the ad was simply perceived as a personal attack. The most effective Democratic attacks were those that played off voters' disdain for Congress and what they already believed about Republicans' coziness with corporate interests, while the most effective Republican attacks were those that played off voters' deep concerns about Democrats raising taxes.

The two strongest testing spots were the DCCC's attacks on Republican incumbents who 1) took money from the oil and gas industry, but voted against price gouging at the pump; and 2)

gave Congress a pay raise while opposing a \$1,500 pay raise for American troops. Given the anger surrounding rising oil prices while gas companies post massive profits and given the core belief that Congress is consumed with serving itself during wartime, it is no surprise that these spots were so effective.

*I know guys personally in the Reserves who have got well paying jobs and had to go over there and now their families are struggling. And for them to come right out and say, hey you voted down a raise for them and voted himself a pay raise... immediately hit me, what a jerk. (PA-6, men)*

*Why would they even want to be involved in American government? (IN-2, women)*

*I think anybody who is taking contributions from oil companies, I'm not for. It's as simple as that. (OH-15, men)*

*Voting records is one thing and tax breaks for big oil and all that, but when you see the personal interest in oil and all that. He's for himself not for his constituents. (PA-6, men)*

*Don't give them more money. And I'm sorry don't pad your pockets on my gas tank (PA-6, women).*

Republican ads against Democrats who had raised taxes or supported raising taxes were also very effective, but not with the same intensity as those that packed the emotional power of the war and gas prices. Both the Republican tax ads and the DCCC ads struck the right tone with participants who felt they were getting pertinent information and were angry about what the Democrat or Republican had done.

This contrasts sharply with other ads (by both parties) that simply came across as the typical political sniping they already see as the core problem in Washington. Chris Chocola's attack on Joe Donnelly for being late on his property taxes is a good example of an ineffective effort. Participants rejected Chocola's attack and even searched for ways to defend Donnelly's actions, stating, "what difference does it make? He's got to pay a penalty if he doesn't pay his property taxes just like we have to" and "property tax statements have been late in the past few years and we all know that." However, when Chocola went after Donnelly for raising taxes, these same voters became quite wary of Donnelly, stating they were "just tired of being taxed for everything" and "I personally cannot pay any higher taxes on my income."

Negative ads can certainly be very hard-hitting – such as MoveOn's red-handed spots which left strong impressions that stuck with voters – but they must focus on the existing concerns voters bring to the table, be relevant in their lives, and avoid the petty tone that epitomizes today's Congress.

### ***Takeaway 2: Attacks Inflict Damage Unless Directly Addressed***

Whether it was a tax attack against a Democrat or an attack against a Republican on oil and Congressional pay raises, participants drew damaging conclusions unless the attack met with

a strong response. To reassure voters, candidates must address the attack head-on. This means refuting the actual attack levied instead of critiquing the “negativity” of the opponent, or highlighting the people who are doing their “dirty work,” or countering with a similar attack on the opponent. Responses that failed to directly answer the concern raised in the attack left voters believing the veracity of the attack, and caused them to hold back from supporting the Democrat.

These focus groups also indicated that the most effective execution for a response ad is a candidate speaking directly to camera. This impacted participants in two important ways: 1) they felt like they got to know the candidate who, until now, they know very little; and 2) the defense was more credible when coming from the individual who is showing some fight instead hiding behind a third party voiceover. Obviously, this requires a candidate with good camera presence, but if the candidate can pass a reasonable threshold, responding directly to camera clearly makes a difference.

### ***Takeaway 3: A Path for Democrats on Taxes***

When Democrats fail to respond to the tax attack, it defines them. Democracy Corps polling demonstrates this is the top concern voters have with electing a Democratic Congress, and even when Democrats’ ads respond forcefully, it is hard for them to overcome the doubts raised in the attack. The best outcome for Democrats that we witnessed in the focus groups’ back and forth on taxes was voters’ concluding that both sides made strong points and it was hard to know who to believe.

Following the tax debate, as seen through the television ads, we tested another Democratic message that offers a middle class tax cut and contrasts with the failed economic policies of Bush and the Republican incumbent.

*Democrats say, Americans are struggling to keep up with the skyrocketing costs of gas, health care, and education. President Bush and [GOP Incumbent]’s economic policies have produced record deficits while giving away billions in tax cuts to their corporate backers and shifting the tax burden even further onto the middle class. We should repeal tax giveaways to companies that send jobs overseas and millionaires who don’t need relief, and instead pass fiscally responsible middle class tax cuts: making college tuition tax deductible, tax credits for first-time homebuyers, and tax breaks for caregiving expenses on behalf of an aging parent.*

Across all the focus groups, this message elicited a more intense and more broadly positive reaction than any of the ads. Participants found the middle class language to be very compelling and saw the specific tax cut proposals as steps that would help them in their own lives, as well as evidence that the Democrat understood the challenges facing them. By putting credible middle class tax cuts on the table, this message demonstrated what the candidate believes about taxes, offered an achievable goal, and proved to be the strongest Democratic

reassurance on taxes. For those facing economic pressures – often the most tax-sensitive participants – identifying with Americans’ struggle to keep up with rising costs also resonated strongly.

*Making college tuition tax-deductible. That makes sense. Tax credit for first-time home buyers, I mean that’s, the economy, tax breaks for care giving expenses on behalf of an aging parent. I mean, that comes up, and not only that, but there should also be, there’s other tax breaks that could be given. Okay, tax breaks for buying energy-efficient appliances for your home or furnaces or cars. I mean, any of that stuff that helps lower your costs and make things more efficient. (IN-2, women)*

*Every single specific they talked about just gave you a chance to say, I like that, it resonates with me. I’m going to vote for that because it’s saying what you are going to do, it’s saying how you are going to do it. (CT-5, men)*

*I think the first sentence is pretty powerful. If a Democrat was to say that, I’d go yeah, they are right. Those are the things that mean something to me. Gas, healthcare and education, that’s a strong statement. (CT-5, women)*  
*They would be good. I mean, I have a father that’s kind of in bad shape and I have a kid in college. These are for me. (OH-15, men)*

*And not only stimulate the economy, but these are things that I could see directly. I can see my tax return being bigger because I’m writing off my college tuition. I could see these things more direct. (PA-6, men)*

#### ***Takeaway 4: Voters are Hungry for Positive Vision and Accomplishments***

With serious problems facing America at home and abroad, these undecided voters repeatedly demanded that candidates tell them what they believe in and what they will do in Congress. For challengers, this meant introducing themselves and their past record, while offering a vision for what that they wanted to achieve. While voters feel that they are getting bombarded with negative ads and partisan bickering in Washington, positive messages backed up with a record of accomplishment were very well-received.

Of course, voters do need to hear a strong critique of the incumbent if they are to fire them, but challengers are running in an environment where voters do not know what Democrats stand for, and they need to be convinced that electing the challenger will bring change. Positive advertising by candidates speaking to camera and incorporates the themes highlighted earlier – such as taking on oil companies that price gouge or calling for a freeze in Congressional pay raises in order to provide better compensation to our troops – can have a dramatic impact on the race.

It is important to note the impact of the massive media buy that the US Chamber of Commerce has sponsored. At a time when voters are looking for politicians to do something, the Chamber ads supporting incumbents for their work on the prescription drug bill was warmly received by most participants. Even though many participants had expressed their distaste for the

new law earlier in the discussion, they found the Chamber of Commerce to be a credible validator and they were very pleased to see something get done in Washington that would help the elderly. And among seniors, the ad was very powerful and personal, despite the reservations many of them have about the law.

*Medication is important for seniors, not choosing between food and medication or taxes in order to have a home (IN-2, seniors)*

*I'm a senior and I'm interested to see what my Congressperson is going to do for me as a senior. (IN-2, seniors)*

*I really think that Wilson is trying to help the seniors. I think it was a positive aspect of what she's trying to do. (NM-1, seniors)*

### **Final Note**

The political climate strongly favors Democrats, who can make real gains two months from now. Voters see an unpopular President continuing to make a failed case for the accomplishments of his administration, while the country lives a completely different experience. And they see a Congress that serves itself instead of the voters who put them there. The challenge for Democrats is to reassure on the doubts raised by aggressive Republican advertising, emerge as credible agents of change, and link Republican incumbents to what voters loathe about Congress.