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Date: February 10, 2006

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ALERT: PRESCRIPTION DRUG PLAN **Prospect of a Voter Revolt**

When President Bush signed the Medicare prescription drug plan into law at a ceremony in December of 2003, thousands of supporters and dozens of Republican congressmen cheered as the President stated that the new legislation was “the greatest advance in health care coverage for America’s seniors since the founding of Medicare.” The fanfare surrounding the bill signing was a clear indication that the President and his Republican allies believed the bill would serve as a major electoral asset to the party by helping to win over older voters and neutralize the long-held Democratic advantage on health care.

Just over two years later, Republicans’ initial hopes for the program now seem hopelessly naïve, as opposition to the prescription drug plan makes it a greater asset for Democrats in 2006 than for Republicans. Although the plan is already unpopular, Democrats now have the opportunity to raise opposition to the drug benefit to new heights and use the plan as a powerful symbol of Republican corruption and irresponsibility. Coupled with attacks over budget cuts to Medicare, an assault on the prescription drug program could cause serious damage to the GOP, especially among seniors.

As voters have learned more about the prescription drug plan over the past two months, opposition has steadily increased, with now just a quarter of the electorate viewing the plan positively, while the percentage perceiving it negatively is almost double (46 percent).¹ Among older voters, there is now a surging and intense opposition:

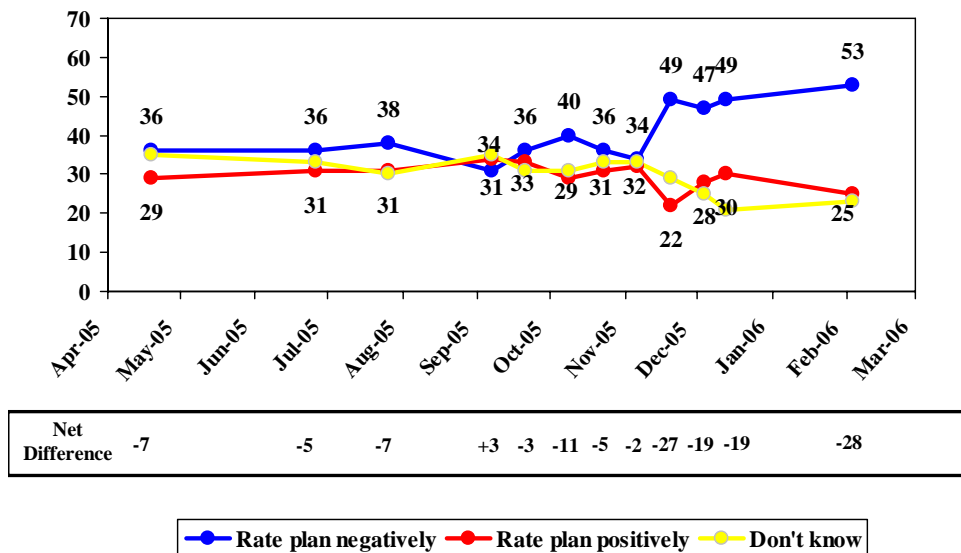
¹ Based on combined results of three Democracy Corps surveys conducted January 4 - February 2, 2006. Total sample consists of 3,008 likely voters.

- Among pre-retirees (50-64 years old), opposition to the plan has risen sharply from 38 percent this fall to 51 percent now, with less than a quarter holding a favorable impression of it.
- Among seniors (65 years and older) – the voters that the program was designed to help – the hostility is just as strong, with these voters rejecting it by a 28-point margin.
- Even more notable than the overall opposition is its intensity. Among both seniors and voters over 50, a third view the plan *very* negatively, more than three times the number of voters who view it very positively.

In congressional swing districts, the news for Republicans is not any better. The plan is viewed negatively by an 18-point margin and strong opponents outnumber strong supporters by more than a three-to-one margin.

Reception of the plan has been so poor that the President, previously the plan’s major proponent, did not even mention it in his State of the Union Address. One can hardly fault him for this however, as the program that he and Republicans had hoped would be instrumental in winning over swing voters is now rejected soundly by a majority of independents and Democrats alike. Even Republican voters are not sold on the plan, as they are evenly divided in their views of it.

Support for prescription drug plan among Seniors



“As you know, there is now a new prescription drug benefit under Medicare for seniors. How do you rate the program - mostly positively or mostly negatively? (FOLLOW UP) Is that very (positively/negatively) or somewhat (positively/negatively)?”

Without the benefit of solid Republican support, there is not one demographic group across the electorate that currently supports the plan. Support is highest among white, non-college women under 50, but even among these voters, negative views outnumber positives by a 5-point margin (36 to 31 percent). Additionally, Republican hopes that voters over 50 might view the program more favorably once more people became enrolled in it have dissolved. The percentage of these voters disapproving of the plan has risen from 40 to 52 percent over the past two months, with opposition among seniors rising by the same margin. While women over 50 are slightly more critical of the plan than men, majorities of both genders view the plan negatively.

Clearly the prescription drug plan is unpopular, but Democrats have yet to capitalize on the opportunity the program provides them. The Democrats have the potential to create a tidal wave of opposition to this plan by creating new opponents out of the 28 percent voters still undecided on it and by tapping into the resentment among those who are already critical of the Bush plan.

The possibility of an eventual voter revolt against the drug program is heightened by the fact that it remains largely undefined to most voters, with over a quarter indicating that they do not even know enough about the drug benefit to rate it. Most who do rate the plan negatively know that it is confusing and are skeptical of its benefits, but are likely largely unaware that it significantly helps insurance and drug companies at the expense of seniors and is estimated to cost taxpayers nearly 700 billion dollars over the next ten years.

If Democrats can communicate these messages effectively to the public, there is evidence to suggest that they can create an uproar over the prescription drug plan. When Democracy Corps tested a variety of messages about corruption in Washington, few statements created more voter anger than those describing how the prescription drug bill was heavily influenced by drug companies, creating billions in profits for these companies and barring the government from negotiating lower drug prices for seniors. Two-thirds of all voters (and two-thirds of seniors, said that these messages made them extremely or very upset.²

The more voters know about the corporate influence on this plan, its confusing nature, and its tremendous cost, the stronger the opposition to it will be. With Republicans now cutting Medicare funding to help pay for a program as unpopular as the prescription drug plan, Democrats have a major opportunity to engage them on this issue. By challenging the prescription drug plan, Democrats can succeed in not only increasing voter frustration with Republican policies but can also provide voters with a clear symbol of the consequences of Republican corruption.

² Democracy Corps survey of 1,005 likely voters, conducted January 22-25, 2006.