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RE: Getting the Public to Listen

Introduction

The 2006 election pointed to the public's deep dissatisfaction with the status quo in Washington and with government and represented a rejection of a political leadership that had failed its people. While Iraq was certainly a driving issue, the general disconnect between the federal government and the people it serves formed the backdrop for a major change election.

The deep discontent we have observed for the past few years has only hardened and shows no signs of lessening in spite of the Democratic victory in November. Voters are sad, scared and angry as they face what they believe is a future that is less certain than at any point in their lifetimes. The disconnect with Washington, Congress and the federal government is as wide as ever, resulting in a nearly complete lack of confidence in the federal government to do anything right.

Republicans are clearly responsible for much of this disillusionment with government, but it would be delusional and dangerous to assume the public will hold only them accountable and give Democrats a pass. Iraq, Katrina and the other visible failures of the Bush administration are a big part, but only part of the story. There is much more to it that is centered on a broader view that government, Republicans and Democrats have all failed people while they struggle in their everyday lives.

After observing these impressions in numerous focus groups, we conducted a national survey¹ to better understand the intensity and dimensions of this distrust in government and its leadership. The findings are stunning in the depth and breadth of this distrust.

The core of the problem is a fundamental belief that government, and the politicians who lead it, refuse to be held accountable for the way they conduct business – how they spend money, whom they listen to when setting their priorities, and how they conduct themselves. The severity of this problem cannot be overstated, and the belief that government and its leaders are simply not accountable and do not take responsibility colors the public’s willingness to support government efforts on issues. When initiatives and proposals are introduced in focus groups, even the most popular ones are greeted with laughter and the inevitable question, “but will they actually do it?”

Americans now view government as more of a barrier than a helping hand, and its failure to be accountable in a way that produces results is central to these doubts. Voters perceive government as slow, cumbersome and unable to move at a fast pace and keep up with the rest of the world. Accountability, comprised of three key dimensions, sits at the core of the problem. First, the public has virtually no confidence in Washington to spend money in a way that gets results. Perhaps the most stunning finding in the survey is that just 13 percent believe the federal government would spend additional money well while 83 percent say it would be wasted.

The second dimension, and a very important one, is the notion that the people who run government operate by a different set of rules and, frankly, do not take responsibility for their actions or for what they say. Simply put, people are sick and tired of politicians who not only operate by a different set of rules, but also who refuse to talk straight, take responsibility and admit a mistake when something goes wrong. Third, people believe that Washington listens to the wealthy and powerful, and not to them in determining the priorities and focus of government.

The central question is this: do Democrats want people to listen to them? In the current environment, people are not listening and are tuning out much of what is happening because it does not reflect real change. Washington is irrelevant and, worse, represents an obstacle to success, and as a result, people are not likely to listen when Democrats advance their agenda to help families with jobs, health care and for a new energy policy. At least until Democrats prove that they mean it.

Democrats have a big opportunity to advance an agenda here, but only if they are bold advocates for change and accountability. In order to be heard, Democrats must stand for real change in the way government works, spends money, and the rules they follow. Democrats must be willing to stand up and take the failures of government on – not its size, or the scope of its activities – but its failure to be accountable and deliver the results for people they expect for their hard work and tax dollars. People do not want less government, and they do not want more

¹ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner conducted a national survey of 1,014 likely voters February 14-19. The results are subject to a margin of error of ± 3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

government – they want a government that delivers results. If Democrats do not embrace change, and lead on changing Congress and the government, voters are not likely to listen to Democrats when they advance their priorities aimed at helping families.

Finally, it is worth noting that these challenges are substantial and have grown deep roots over time. These concerns did not emerge yesterday, but have intensified over the past few years. The 100 Hours effort was a great start, but a sustained and consistent effort will be required to alter these impressions in any significant way.

Sour View of Washington and Government

Voters are deeply pessimistic about the country and the future, perhaps as uncertain at any time in the past few generations. Fewer than one-fourth of voters think the country is headed in the right direction, but that does not even begin to capture the depth of the discontent. When we measure impressions about the country at the beginning of focus groups, the dominant themes are “sad,” “angry,” “uneasy,” “worried.”

Bush and Republicans are in dismal shape and, to a large degree, are virtually irrelevant right now. The decline in their standing really began in the summer of 2005, worsened after Katrina and then again last spring, but has now stabilized at a very low point. Unfavorable views of Republicans outnumber favorable views 45 – 34 percent. It is noteworthy that Republicans are now viewed more negatively than Democrats were at their nadir in late 1994.

While some would like to view the problem as the responsibility of the Bush Administration, that would be a dangerous assumption. Frankly, voters see little, if anything good coming out of Washington from either party, and to view Democrats’ standing in relation to the dismal ratings for Bush and Republicans is deceiving and does not face the real challenge. Democrats cannot achieve long-term success and they jeopardize Democrats’ current Congressional majority by defining competence down.

The Democrats’ initial uptick in January has stalled, and voters are not particularly bullish about a Congress that is now under Democrats’ control. While voters’ favorability towards Democrats improved after they took back control of Congress, voters still viewed Democrats significantly less favorably this year than they viewed Republicans after their 1994 takeover. Forty-three percent view Democrats favorably compared to 34 percent unfavorably.

Just one-third now give Congress a positive approval rating, most telling, voters are less hopeful about Congress than last month. Forty-six percent are hopeful about what Congress is doing, a 10-point decline from late January, and 48 percent are doubtful, a 7-point increase.

The standing of the Democratic Party, the Democratic Congress, and approval of Congress’ performance have all declined a few points over the last month. Importantly, these drops tend to come from Independents and Democrats as much or more than among Republicans.

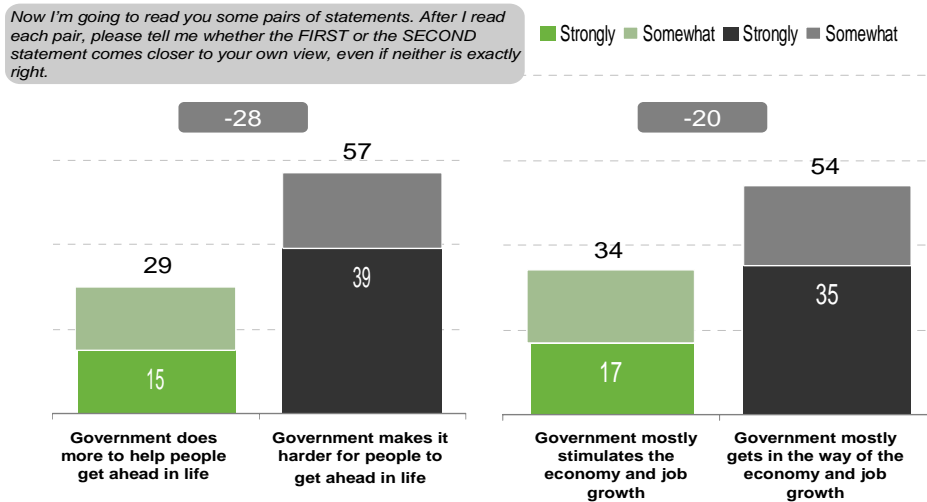
Government now Perceived as a Barrier to Success

Along with the lack of confidence in government, voters broadly believe that government is more of a barrier than a helping hand for people. As the chart below demonstrates, voters overwhelmingly believe that government makes it harder for people to get ahead in life rather than help people.

The failures of the Bush administration are clearly at work here, but concerns about government are not limited to their mishaps. Democrats, Independents and Republicans all believe government is a barrier to success by double digit margins.

Similarly, voters tend to believe government stands in the way of the economy and job growth, rather than acting as an engine of growth and jobs.

Voters See Government As Impediment



The electorate wants government to play a major role on a range of issues, but lacks the confidence that it will do what is needed to get results. Of ten issues tested, government receives a positive job approval rating of over 50 percent on only one issue, national security, and its ratings for nearly every issue range between the high 20s and high 30s.

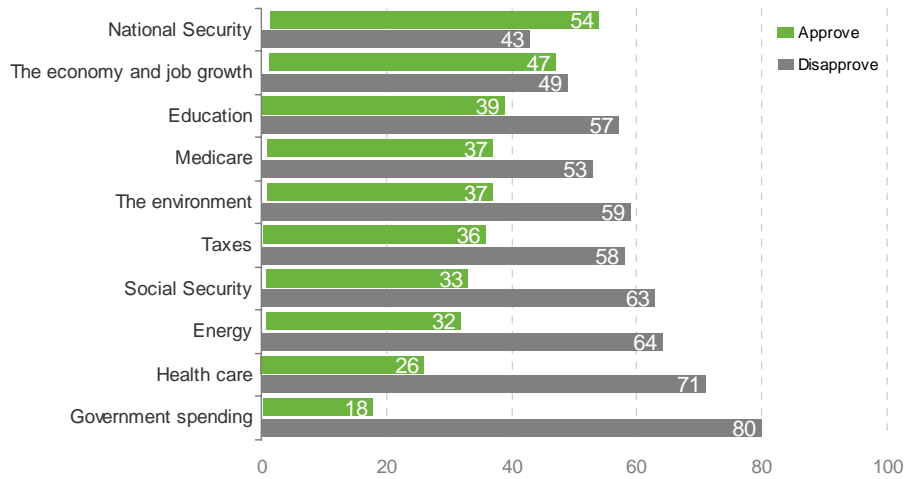
Yet, at the same time, voters call for more involvement from government on these same issues on which they give government little credit for doing the job to this point. Huge majorities are looking for more government involvement on a range of issues, including three-fourths on health care, energy and the environment.

Voters are telling us they are dissatisfied with government's inability to deliver results on range of issues, but do not want government to pull back from these issues. Rather, they believe

government must change and do a better job of delivering results on these important issues. In other words, help them succeed rather than make it harder for them to get ahead.

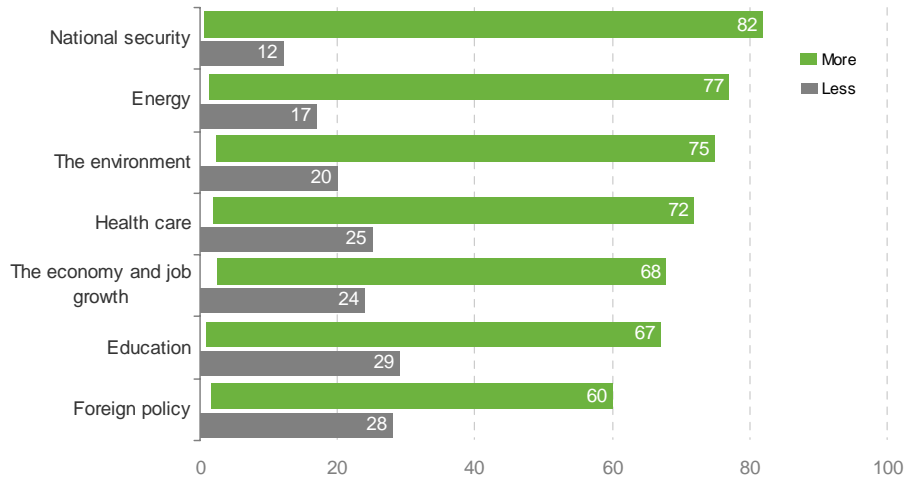
Voters disapprove of government performance on nearly every issue

Now let me ask you about a number of issues and how the government is handling each issue. For each one, please tell me whether you approve or disapprove of the way the government is handling the issue.



Despite disapproval levels, solid majorities want more involvement

Now let me ask you about a number of issues and the government's role in dealing with this issue. For each one, please tell me whether it's an area where there should be more governmental involvement or an area the government should be less involved in.



Lack of Accountability Stands in the Way

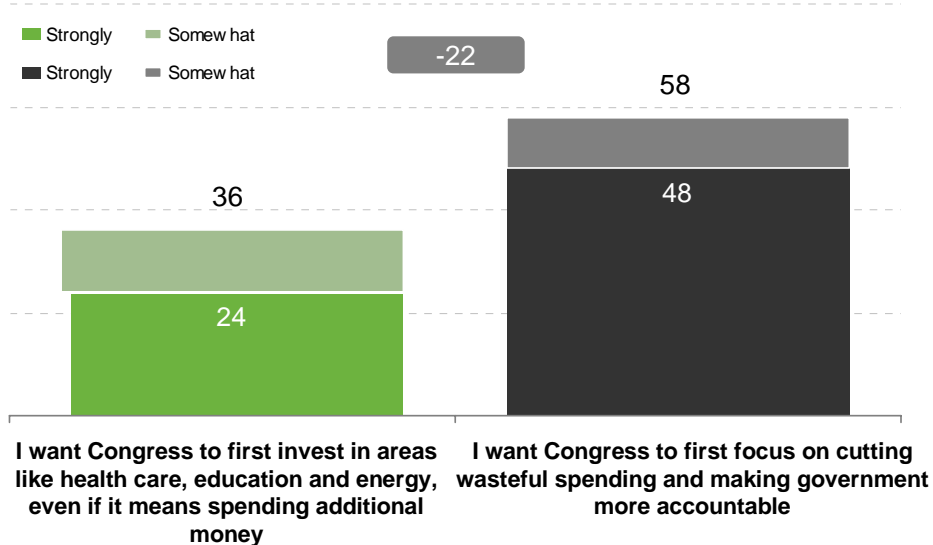
Accountability, or the lack, stands in the way and is the core doubt people have about Congress, Washington and the federal government. Accountability takes a number of forms, which are discussed later in this memo.

Two findings highlight the depth of voters' doubts about Congress being accountable and spending money wisely and in a way that produces results. First, an astonishing 83 percent believe that if the federal government received additional money, it would more likely waste the money than spend it well. Just 13 percent, one in seven voters, believe the government would spend the money well. That is a resounding vote of no confidence in government. State governments fare better, but a majority remains skeptical about their ability to spend additional money well.

A second indication of doubts about accountability is the electorate's rejection of the notion of adding funding for some of the most popular domestic issues – health care, education, energy – when contrasted the choice of instituting accountability and cutting spending. By a margin of more than 20 points, voters believe government should first cut spending and make government accountable before we invest more in some of these very important domestic issues.

Voters want accountability first

Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements. After I read each pair, please tell me whether the FIRST or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right.



The Accountability Problem: Money, Politicians, Special Interests

As we said above, the lack of accountability takes more than one form, and the nature of voters' concerns about government's failure to be accountable boils down to three issues:

- *Spending tax dollars without any accountability, or results.* First and foremost, voters believe that the government wastes money, is fiscally irresponsible and lacks accountability. They simply do not trust government with money, even if that money is to be invested in an issue they support. Three-quarters of voters, 75 percent, believe government's lack of accountability in how it spends money is a serious problem. On an open-ended question asking voters to define government accountability, more cited spending, taxes or another financial measure than any other area. Accountability means many things to voters, but fiscal accountability is the most important element. In voters' own words:

"They have to account for spending money"

"Ending the bureaucracy, making sure the money is well spent"

"Having less waste more efficiency and more transparency to how [the government] spends my money"

- *Politicians' self-interest, lack of authenticity, playing by a different set of rules.* The second critical dimension centers on politicians who are viewed as living by a different set of rules, taking care of themselves first, and not standing up and speaking straight with people. Voters are tired of elected officials who seem to put their own interests first, not only in terms of perks and benefits, but their unwillingness to speak the truth and stand up when they make a mistake. The notion that government officials put their own interests ahead of what is best for the people is a serious problem for 66 percent, and a significant bloc of voters cites lack of authenticity, lack of honesty as a core problem.

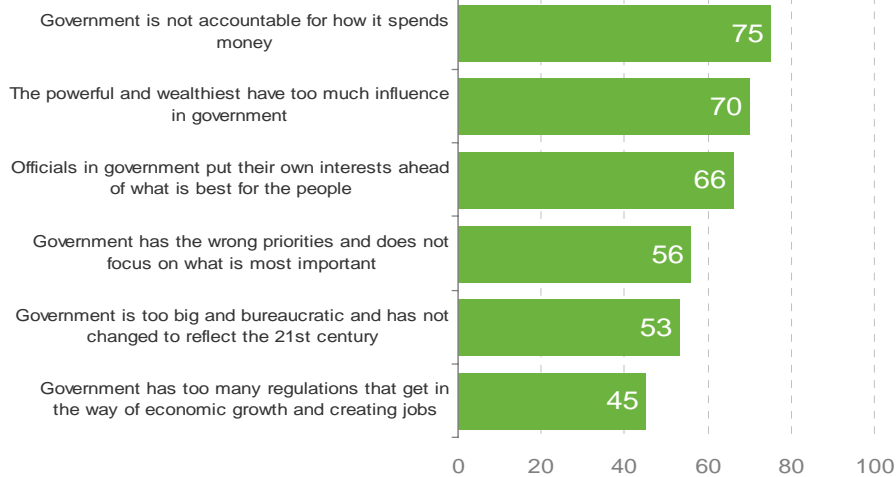
"They should be held accountable for what they say they're going to do"

"The decisions they make they need to follow through with, if it's the wrong decision they need to own up to it"

- *Special interest, corporate influence and the wealthy.* Third, voters point to the influence of special interests, corporate interests and the wealthy distorting government's priorities. Seventy percent cite the powerful and wealthiest having too much influence in government as a serious problem.

Voters See Serious Problems in Government

Now I'd like to read you some things that people have said are problems in the government. After I read each one, please tell me whether you think it is a very serious problem, a serious problem, somewhat of a problem, or not a problem in government

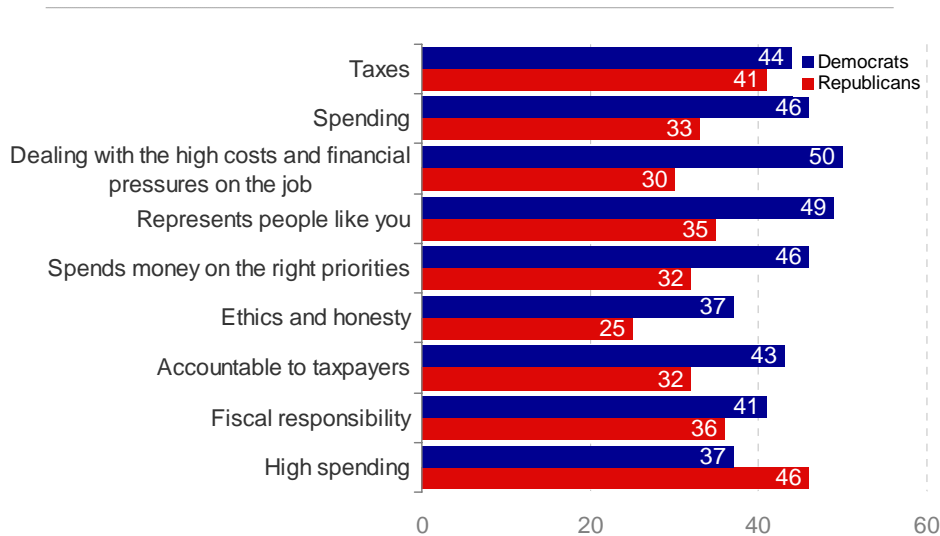


Again, this is not a question of ideology, of big government vs. small government. Voters are divided on the question of whether America is *most successful when our government helps create conditions so that many prosper, not the few* (48 percent) vs. America being *most successful when we have a limited government that keeps taxes low so that businesses and individuals can prosper* (46 percent). The problem is voters do not now believe that government helps to create conditions so that they can prosper, but they wish government did so. It's about a government that is accountable and efficient, a government that produces results.

A Big Opportunity for Democrats

Democrats have a big opportunity to create a governing majority, but it requires becoming a strong advocate for change. The depth of the Republican Party's problems is startling, and as the table below shows, Democrats have more standing on many important measures.

Party Trust on Issues and Image



But, as we said earlier in this memo, the advantages over Republicans are deceptive, and incredibly thin and undefined. In fact, fewer than 50 percent choose Democrats on any of these issues. Voters generally believe neither party is particularly responsive to them or willing to bring about the change needed to make government produce the results it should. For Democrats to move forward so they can be heard by an electorate that becomes more skeptical and cynical every day, they should:

1. **Resist the temptation to remain the protector and defender of the federal government and instead seize the mantle of change and accountability.** Again, this is not about small or big, but rather making government perform and produce results that improve people's lives.
2. **Maintain authenticity, talk straight and assume responsibility for what you say you will do.** This one sounds very fundamental, but the depth of disgust for politicians who use double-speak is stunning. Don't hide from your mistakes; own up to them rather than have them come out and make you look like double-dealing politicians. A huge number of voters described accountability in government as "politicians taking responsibility for their actions/words."
3. **Establish accountability as a core element in everything you propose, along with advancing a set of specific measures.** Voters will not hear what Democrats want to do about health care, or education, or energy if they do not demonstrate that their proposals are based on tough accountability to ensure results. This notion should be woven into your agenda at every opportunity, and does not in any way counter your mission to advance those issues. Instead it will make Democrats more likely to be accepted by the public.

4. **Advance a strong fiscal accountability agenda that cuts waste and makes government more efficient and results-oriented.** The following are some proposals that elicited strong responses in this survey.
 - *Audit every federal department and agency to make sure their funding is going to meaningful projects, instead of the bureaucracy. (Overall strongest proposal, particularly strong with Democrats and rural voters.)*
 - *Eliminate no-bid contracts when companies get government contracts by requiring all government contracts to be awarded through a competitive bidding process. (#1 proposal among Independent voters.)*
 - *Create an Iraq Inspector General to oversee U.S. spending in Iraq, institute tough accountability measures to make sure money isn't being wasted. (Second strongest proposal among Democrats.)*
 - *Reduce energy costs by requiring all federal buildings to meet modern energy efficiency regulations such as using energy efficient light bulbs and appliances.*

5. **Go further on anti-corruption, ethics and lobbying reform.** The ethics reform that House Democrats passed in the first 100 hours was a good start, but Democrats must go much further to restore public confidence in government and in our elected leaders. The following are proposals that voters found compelling on ethics:
 - *Institute a strong whistle-blower law to protect government employees from retribution if they report waste or corruption.*
 - *Create a permanent, independent commission outside of Congress to investigate and enforce ethics rules for members of Congress and their staff, instead of allowing Congress to police itself. Give this commission complete prosecutorial power.*

Conclusion

In sum, Democrats have a big opportunity to seize the mantle of change and advance a bold agenda, but they must do so with a seriousness of purpose in tackling government's inefficiency and lack of accountability.