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**TO:** Interested Parties

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**RE:** SEIU Battleground Poll: Addressing Base Democrats' and Independents' Concerns Regarding Congress

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### **Methodology**

On behalf of the Service Employees International Union, the Benenson Strategy Group conducted 1,218 interviews with Registered Democrats and Independents in Colorado, New Hampshire and Nevada from February 14 to 20 and February 25, 2010.

In order to better understand true swing voters' perceptions of Congress, Registered Independents who indicated they almost always vote for Democrats were considered Democrats throughout the analysis and within this memo. Likewise, Registered Independents who almost always vote for Republicans were considered Republicans and as a result screened out of our poll.

### **Key Findings**

- Democrats have lost a significant degree of the equity they carried as the party of change in 2008, putting election prospects at considerable risk for the coming midterms.
- In key swing states, both Democrats and Independents are broadly dissatisfied with the way Washington and Congress are doing business.
  - ✓ Among both groups, dissatisfaction is not focused on the broad outlines and goals of the Democratic agenda. Instead, it centers squarely on perceptions of a breakdown in the legislative process, exemplified by deal-cutting and special deals for the constituents of key swing Senators.
- In this light, swing Independents and the Democratic base are still looking for the change in Washington that they voted for when electing a Democratic Congress in 2006 and expanding it in 2008.
- Looking ahead to the midterm elections, Democrats' priority should be demonstrating in ways large and small that they are delivering on that change.

- This is particularly critical because while Democrats maintain a narrow advantage on certain aspects of this agenda, there is little doubt that Democrats have lost their considerable advantage over the past year.
  - ✓ As it stands, either Party has the opportunity to pick up the mantle of change and win the votes of swing Independents.
  
- One key element to this will be demonstrating that individual Democrats, unlike Republicans, are placing what's best for the country ahead of narrow individual interests.
  - ✓ When asked their top concerns about Congress, the sense that Members were prioritizing individual interest over the public interest was the most broadly and intensely felt concern.
  - ✓ Concerns about Democrats pushing "too liberal an agenda" were far behind on Independents' list of concerns.
  - ✓ Indeed, these were less strongly held than concerns about Republican obstructionism, suggesting strongly that Independents do not want the Democratic agenda halted; rather, they want it advanced in way that gives them greater confidence in the integrity of the process.
  
- Health care reform provides an important example.
  - ✓ Independents' concerns about health care reform are not about specific provisions in the bills passed by the Senate or House, but instead reflect concerns about reforms' stagnation and the backroom deal-cutting, particularly those that benefit the constituents of key swing senators or special interests, such as the pharmaceutical industry.
  
- What's critical is that Democrats do not mistake Independents' dissatisfaction with the way Democrats are running Congress with a rightward ideological shift.
  - ✓ While Democrats have lost favor with the public, they continue to have important advantages over Republicans in Congress.
  - ✓ Among Independents, Republicans continue to have lower approval ratings than Democrats and a high level of concern that Republicans are obstructing progress in order to benefit special interests.
  - ✓ Moreover, bipartisanship for its own sake is not the most important value to Independents. Rather, these voters want to see progress on the issues that concern them most while being assured that Congress is putting America's common interest ahead of special interests.
  
- Democrats can seize back the agenda and exploit Republican weaknesses by pushing an agenda that plays to their strengths while addressing voters' top priorities.
  - ✓ Among voters' top priorities are issues on which Democrats have a strong advantage over Republicans in terms of trust, specifically:
    - Reforming Wall Street to ensure the abuses that created the financial crisis will not be repeated.
    - Bringing change to the way Congress does business by cracking down on the influence of special interests.
    - Passing health care reforms that provide real security for middle class voters.

- At the same time, Democrats should continue to push forward on voters' top priority: creating jobs, particularly through support of small business.
- Regardless of the issue, Democrats need to tie progress back to the concept of change and steer away from examples where deals are cut for short-term political expediency at the expense of the national good.
- There is no question that Democrats will face a difficult environment in 2010, however the fact that Independents in these states have not turned against Democrats ideologically and place equal blame on Republicans for Washington's shortcomings suggests that the outlook for 2010 is still fluid and could turn if voters begin to see a change in the way Congress is run that leads to real results.

### **Detailed Findings**

- Democrats and Independents each hold Democrats and Republicans in Congress in low esteem.
  - ✓ Among Independents, only 33% approve of the job Democrats are doing in Congress, while 64% disapprove.
  - ✓ Meanwhile, only 26% approve of the job Republicans are doing, while 71% disapprove.
- Democrats, too, show strong signs of dissatisfaction. While one should expect low levels of outright disapproval, among the 71% who say they approve of the job of Congressional Democrats, only 12% strongly approve.
- While between Democrats and Independents there are clear differences in their views of Democrats in Congress, they share a common source of dissatisfaction with Congress.
- When read a series of statements and asked how much each bothers them about Congress, both Democrats and Independents showed an impatience with "members of both parties ... putting their own individual interest ahead of what's best for the country."
  - ✓ 76% of Independents said it bothered them a great deal, as did 60% of Democrats.
  - ✓ Democrats are more likely to say this applies to Republicans than Democrats, as one would expect. However, Independents are about equally likely to apply it to either party.
    - 54% say they are bothered a great deal by Republicans putting their political interest ahead of what's best for the country, while 52% say they are bothered a great deal by Democrats doing so.

- Among Independents, the next greatest aggravation is the deficit, with 54% saying they are bothered by Democrats “spending irresponsibly and driving up the deficit.”
  - ✓ However, aside from the deficit, there appears to be relatively low levels of issue-specific discontent with Democrats in Congress.
    - Only 43% say they are bothered by “Democrats...focusing on the wrong issues [instead of] finding ways to create jobs.”
    - Only 41% say they are bothered by “Democrats ...pushing liberal legislation, such as health care reform.”
    - Only 38% say they are bothered by Democrats “increasing taxes on middle-class Americans.”
  - ✓ A greater dissatisfaction with Democrats has been procedural:
    - 45% say they are bothered by “Democrats... letting squabbles within their party keep them from passing legislation we need to get the economy back on the right track.”
  
- Moreover, Independents show equal or slightly greater levels of grievance with Republicans’ obstructionist tactics and ties to special interests.
  - ✓ 49% say that they are bothered a great deal by “Republicans... doing what they’ve always done - protect the interests of corporations like insurance companies, banks and oil companies at the expense of average Americans.”
  
- Among Democrats, whose greatest grievances focus on Republican behavior, there is only one complaint regarding Democrats that a majority holds.
  - ✓ 52% are bothered that Democrats “are being weak and letting Republicans and special interests water down legislation so much that they won’t make a real difference on the lives of Americans.”
  
- In this light, merely providing the appearance of bipartisanship cannot be considered an answer to Democrats’ problems.
  - ✓ Independents appear not to be looking for simply greater input from Republicans or a shift away from the Democratic agenda.
  - ✓ Instead, Independent voters are looking for a change in approach—one that places the national interest ahead of short-term political gain.
  - ✓ Democrats can accomplish this on their own and position Republican obstructionism as the embodiment of what voters find most distasteful about Congress: the prioritization of political gain over the nation’s good.

## Health Care

- Health care provides an important illustration of this dynamic.
- Independent voters are decidedly not looking for a retreat from the issue.
- Democratic and Independent voters in these states continue to believe that health care is a serious issue that needs to be addressed by Congress.
  - ✓ 88% of Democrats and 69% of Independents said that health care is “an urgent problem that requires immediate action” or “serious problem that should be dealt with as soon as possible.”
- As is the case with their views of Washington as a whole, though, voters believe that individual interests are being put ahead of the national interest.
- When asked what bothered them about the health care bills being debated in Congress, two main concerns emerged.
  - ✓ Independents were deeply concerned with Democrats “cutting too many deals with special interest groups such as pharmaceutical companies,” which bothered 63% of Independents “a great deal.”
  - ✓ And they were concerned with Republicans blocking change for political reasons.
    - 53% said they were bothered “a great deal” that “Republicans will never vote for real change in the health care system because they’re more concerned about blocking Democrats from accomplishing anything than they are about helping Americans.”
    - 49% said they were bothered “a great deal” that “Republicans will never vote for real change in the health care system because they are in the pocket of big drug and insurance companies.”
- These concerns were considerably stronger than fears about the reforms themselves.
  - ✓ Only 44% of Independents said that they were bothered “a great deal” by a statement asserting “the bill costs too much money and would drive up the deficit.”
  - ✓ Only 47% of Independents were bothered “a great deal” by a statement asserting “the bill would give the government too much control over health care decisions and take choice away from patients and doctors.”
- However, there is no question that there is a significant slice of Independents concerned about the content of the bill.
  - ✓ Even so, there appears to be the opportunity for gains in the wake of health care reform provided that Democrats can make the case that the bill is free of the special interest deals that voters dislike.
  - ✓ Moreover, health care reform should be shown as an example of how Democrats are bringing change to Washington by reducing the ability of special interests—i.e., insurance companies—to obstruct legislation that can reduce the cost of care for middle class Americans.
- Further gains will be felt among the Democratic base.

- Democrats, who focus their blame regarding the health care debate on Republicans, do show a focused degree of discontent with members of Congress for not being strong enough to push a bill through.
  - ✓ 49% were bothered that “Democrats in Congress didn’t show the strong leadership necessary to push a bill through Congress.”
  - ✓ Notably, this sentiment is directed more at Congressional leaders than at President Obama: only 22% of Democrats say that the President “didn’t show the strong leadership necessary to push a bill through Congress.”
- As a result, it appears likely that health care reform can reassure Democrats that their representatives have the strength to make a Democratic agenda real.

Perspectives on Key Issues

- Looking ahead to these voters’ sense of the nation’s priorities, there is further evidence that Democrats have not suffered from an ideological shift or been influenced by a resurgent Republican brand.
  - ✓ Among Independent voters’ six most important issue priorities, Democrats have significant margins of trust over Republicans on three, Republicans are trusted more on one issue and the parties are at parity on two issues.
- This provides Democrats with the ability to craft an agenda that meets voters’ priorities and exploits Republican weaknesses on the issue of changing Washington.
- When we asked a series of issues to determine voters’ sense of urgency, seven issues were considered an urgent or serious problem by three-quarters of Independent voters or more.
  1. Finding ways to kick-start our economy and putting Americans back to work by creating good jobs.....91% serious
  2. Reducing our national deficit and debt.....80%
  3. Investing in small business so they can grow and create jobs .....78%
  4. Making strict new rules for lobbying to make Congress more transparent.....78%
  5. Strengthening Social Security so it can continue to provide stability for future generations of retirees.....78%
  6. Reforming the way Wall Street does business to stop the abuses that led to the financial crisis.....76%

- After this battery was read, voters were asked which party they trusted more on each issue.
  - ✓ Among Independents, Democrats had an advantage of trust on:

	Trust Dems More/ Trust GOP More
▪ Reforming the way Wall Street does business:	48%/17%
▪ Making strict new rules for lobbying	38%/13%
▪ Strengthening Social Security	46%/31%

- On the economy, Independent voters viewed the two parties relatively equally.
  - Finding ways to kick-start our economy 35%/36%
  - Investing in small businesses 35%/40%
- Only on the deficit did Republicans hold a clear margin of trust, with 42% trusting Republicans more and 25% trusting Democrats more.
- This provides Democrats with a strong range of issues from which to cobble together an agenda that meets voters' hopes for change—through Wall Street and Congressional reform—and addresses concerns about jobs.
- While the deficit is seen as a critical issue and one in which Democrats have lost significant ground relative to Republicans over the past year, there are other signs that Independent voters do not believe that we should be reducing the deficit at all costs.
- When asked which of the following two statements voters agreed with more:
  - ✓ **54% of Independents agreed** that "*We need to make smart investments today to create jobs* in our communities. By putting millions back to work, modernizing our schools and rebuilding our roads, bridges and public transportation systems we'll lay the groundwork to make our economy stronger in the long run. That's how we'll grow our economy, bring down the deficit and leave a better more secure future for our children.
  - ✓ **Only 35% of Independents agreed** that "*our deficit has grown out of control and we need deep, across the board cuts* in government spending to reduce it immediately. Trillion dollar debts are creating uncertainty among investors and will put a burden on our children for generations to come. To get our economy back on track, we need to reduce the deficit as soon as possible."
- In this light, the issue terrain for voters appears to favor Democrats slightly, even though it is clear that the party has lost significant ground compared to 2006 and 2008.
- Democrats should not mistake a distaste with Washington's way of doing business with a rightward ideological shift.
- Democrats' vulnerability on the deficit appears not to be fatal so long as action can be credibly defined as "smart investments" rather than more of the same "wasteful spending."

- Overall, however, Democrats should not pass up the opportunity to exploit the lingering concerns about Republicans' attachment to special interests.
  - ✓ Democrats' advantage on Wall Street and Congressional reform should be seized as an avenue toward not only rebuilding Democrats' equity as the party of change, but reminding voters why they turned away from Republicans in the first place.

### 2010 Elections

- Heading into the midterm elections, there is a pervasive sense among these voters that their vote will be more important than in years past.
  - ✓ 59% of Democrats and 64% of Independents say that this year's midterm Congressional elections will be "more important than most midterm Congressional elections" while only 1% of both Democrats and Independents say they will be less important.
- But in line with their perspectives on Congress' actions over the past year and their propensity to cast blame both at Democrats and Republicans, there are no signs of an ideological shift to the right.
- Independents are split when it comes to who they intend to vote for in the coming Congressional elections.
  - ✓ Among Independents, in a generic horserace:
    - 32% say that they are more likely to vote for the Democrat.
    - 33% say they are more likely to vote for the Republican.
    - 34% say that they are unsure.
  - ✓ In line with that even split, when asked which candidate is more likely to bring "the kind of change we need to Washington," 29% of Independents said the Republican candidate, 29% said the Democratic candidate, and 42% said neither or that they didn't know.
- And when read a series of statements asserting *why* these elections could be considered more important than in years past, Independent voters did not express a desire to vote for an ideological shift or a check against Democratic ideas. Rather, they are looking primarily for a change in the way Congress does business.
- Independent voters were split on what ideological message they wanted to send with their vote.
  - ✓ Only 52% said it was a convincing reason to believe that this year's election was more important that "it will send a message to President Obama that [they're] unhappy with what he's doing."
  - ✓ Meanwhile 51% said that "will give voters a chance to elect representatives who will put an end to Republicans' consistent obstruction of President Obama's agenda."
  - ✓ 57% said that it would "give voters a chance to elect representatives who will stand up to the Democratic agenda of big government, big spending, and more taxes."

- It's telling that even Democrats reflect a stronger desire to change Congress and Washington than to bolster Democratic majorities.
  - ✓ 72% agree that their vote is important because it "will send a message that you're unhappy with the way Congress is being run."
  - ✓ Meanwhile, 69% agree that "it will give voters a chance to elect representatives who will put an end to Republicans' consistent obstruction of President Obama's agenda."
  
- This should be cautionary to Democratic candidates hoping to take advantage of their base voters' anger at Republicans or affinity with Democratic ideas.
  - ✓ Democrats, too, want to see a change in the way Congress and Washington is run, and their passion for returning a Democratic majority to Washington could hinge on whether or not they see the Democratic senators and representatives delivering that change.