

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Global Strategy Group
DATE: July 17, 2019
RE: **NEW SURVEY FINDINGS: Corruption and money in politics are key issues for battleground voters**

New research in presidential battleground states shows that battleground voters prioritize corruption and money in politics as key issues in 2020. More voters say cracking down on political corruption is a “top” or “major” priority for them than any other issue besides health care. However, a plurality of voters don’t know which party to trust on the issue of corruption. This dynamic provides a clear opportunity for Democratic candidates to shape and win the debate, while also demonstrating the danger of ceding the issue to President Trump.

Further, battleground voters overwhelmingly support policies to combat political corruption and reduce the influence of money in politics. Committing to enacting these policies and making these issues a focus of their campaigns will be critical for Democrats to win over persuadable voters in 2020.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Trump is underwater in battleground states, but still has residual appeal in the “pivot counties” that shifted to him in 2016.** Most battleground voters feel unfavorably toward Trump (44% favorable/55% unfavorable), including 45% who are “very” unfavorable. In a head-to-head presidential ballot test, an unnamed Democratic candidate for president defeats him by a margin of 50% to 43%.

Trump is especially weak among independent voters, who rate him negatively by a nearly two-to-one margin (33% favorable/65% unfavorable) and prefer a Democratic candidate over him by 15 points (44%-29%). In pivot counties that Trump carried in 2016 after Obama won them in 2008 and 2012, however, voters split more evenly both in their opinions of Trump (48% favorable/52% unfavorable) and on a presidential ballot test (48% Democrat/46% Trump).

- **Battleground voters care deeply about issues of money in politics and political corruption.** When asked to prioritize a list of issues in the 2020 election, more voters name political corruption as a “top” or “major” priority for them (83%) than any other issue besides health care (also 83%). Additionally, roughly two-thirds of battleground voters (67%) rate “limiting the influence of money in politics” as a “top” or “major” issue.
- **Voters don’t know who to trust on issues of corruption and money in politics, providing Democrats with clear opportunity to shape and win the debate.** Unlike for other major issues such as health care and immigration, voters split roughly even when asked who they trust more between Trump and the Democratic candidates on who can best crack down on political corruption (31% Trump/30% Democrats) and limit the influence of money in politics (26% Trump/27% Democrats). A plurality of voters say they do not know or are undecided, leaving the issue up for grabs in the 2020 election.

- **Battleground voters believe that combatting corruption and money in politics needs to be the top priority in Washington because it is impeding progress on every other issue.** When forced to choose, a majority of battleground voters (54%) agree more with the statement that:

“Cracking down on corruption and getting big money out of politics should be the top priority in Washington because it affects everything, including the cost of health care, and nothing will change until politicians stop being influenced by special interest money”

than the statement that:

“Cracking down on corruption and getting big money out of politics is important but more important issues need to be addressed first, like the cost of health care and the economy” (46%).

When presented with these statements, independent voters (58%) and voters in “pivot counties” (60%) are especially likely to agree that cracking down on corruption and big money in politics needs to be the top priority.

- **By committing to political reforms, Democratic candidates can engender trust on a wide range of issues.** After hearing that the Democratic candidates for president are committed to passing major new anti-corruption reforms in their first week in office, voters are more likely to trust Democratic candidates over Trump on a variety of issues.

In addition to increasing Democratic candidates’ margins against Trump on the issue of cracking down on political corruption (from a one-point advantage for Trump to a 10-point advantage for Democrats), this commitment to reform increases Democrats’ margins on disparate issues such as making health care affordable (Democrats +11 to Democrats +13) and reducing taxes on the middle class (Democrats +2 to Democrats +4). It is also highly effective at moving independent voters, as it leads to a particularly large increase in Democrats’ margin with independents on the issue of preventing gun violence (Democrats +7 to Democrats +18) and decreases in Trump’s margins on the issues of immigration (Trump +14 to Trump +7) and national security (Trump +15 to Trump +9).

- **Many battleground voters are still holding on to the notion that Trump “can’t be bought” by special interests, but Democrats have an opportunity to change that perception.** Battleground voters are only slightly more likely to agree with the statement that *“Donald Trump is being influenced by special interests and lobbyists, just like other politicians in Washington”* (45%) than the statement that *“Donald Trump has shown that he is truly independent and can’t be bought by special interests or lobbyists”* (42%). Key voting groups including independents (45% being influenced/38% can’t be bought) and pivot county voters (44%/44%) are also split on this important point.

Following Democratic messaging on corruption and money in politics, battleground voters move 8 points on net toward the Democratic side of this debate (50% Trump is being influenced/39% Trump can’t be bought) while independent voters move 13 points on net (50% being influenced/30% can’t be bought) and pivot county voters move 3 points on net (47% being influenced/44% can’t be bought).

- **Democrats should include a special interest angle as part of their issue messaging against Trump, as it boosts the effectiveness of their core arguments.** In split-sample messaging tests on a variety of issues, voters have greater doubts about Trump’s issue positions relative to Democrats’ when messaging against him includes language about political contributions.

For example, voters are six points more concerned that Trump “opposes even common sense gun safety laws like background checks on all gun purchases” (53%) than that Democrats “want to roll back the Second Amendment and put more restrictions on law-abiding gun owners” (47%). This six-point head-to-head advantage increases to a 12-point margin (56%-44%) when our framing of Trump’s position states that he “has received over \$11 million dollars in support from the corporate gun lobby and has protected gun companies’ profits at every turn, including opposing common sense gun safety laws like background checks on all gun purchases.”

Split-sample tests show a similar effect on every other head-to-head message comparison tested, with language about special interests also increasing Democrats’ margins on comparisons about health care (from +2 to +8), taxes (from +6 to +8), and drug prices (from +2 to +18).

ABOUT THIS POLL: Global Strategy Group conducted an online survey of 1,212 likely 2020 general election voters across 12 presidential battleground states (AZ, CO, FL, GA, IA, MI, NC, NH, NV, OH, PA, and WI) from April 26th to May 8st, 2019, plus additional oversample interviews to obtain 460 total interviews in pivot counties (counties that voted for Obama in 2008, Obama in 2012, and Trump in 2016) in these states. Care has been taken to ensure the geographic and demographic divisions of the expected electorate are properly represented based on historical turnout.