



A Guide for Advocates

What Americans Think and How to Talk to Them About It

Welcome to NAVIGATOR — a project designed to better understand the American public's views on issues of the day and help advocates, elected officials, and other interested parties understand the language and messaging needed to make and win key policy arguments. This inaugural edition features findings from a national online survey of 1,009 registered voters conducted April 3-5, 2018 and qualitative findings from an online discussion board of 25 voters who are not strong partisans, conducted March 22-23, 2018.

Topic #1: Americans believe the economy is improving but have real concerns about the nation's economic future, underscored by real and *personal* financial concerns.

The American people respond best to relatable language on people's economic futures and how the wealthy are getting wealthier.

Topic #2: Americans believe corruption is endemic among politicians in Washington, but there are some real differences they see between the parties in Congress and key ways Americans want to hear about the corruption issue.

What are Americans most concerned about when it comes to corruption? Donors. Donors. Donors. Overwhelmingly, Americans believe that politicians, especially Republican politicians, only serve the interests of wealthy campaign donors.

Topic #3: Many think President Trump is a different kind of President. Do Americans think it's good to "shake up Washington," or bad to be "constantly breaking norms"?

Trump is very different from past presidents, but that's not necessarily a good thing, and Americans are deeply concerned about his abuse of power.

In light of an improving economy, what is the best way to engage with people's deeper economic and personal financial concerns?

While recent polling shows most Americans are feeling good about the national economy and their own personal finances, that does not mean people don't have real concerns. This project shows that Americans are less concerned about their finances today than they are about their financial tomorrow.

They believe the already-rich are getting most of the benefits, and it's putting other Americans' futures at risk. If advocates, policymakers, elected officials, and others want to connect with the American people at their economic pain points, they need to be forward-looking in their language, addressing the real concerns of working families – such as having retirement security or being able to afford health care and unexpected medical costs – and drawing a link to the feeling that those at the top are getting all the gains while everyone else falls behind.

The Most Relatable Economic Language Focuses on Future Concerns and the Gains at the "The Top"

Two insights identified in this research encapsulate where Americans are, and are key to making economic arguments that most Americans agree with:

Americans think those at the top are getting most of the benefits

This argument beats the conservative argument selling a booming economy and is more broadly relatable than focusing on personal financial struggles.

Beating the **conservative argument**: Which statement do you agree with more?

Things are generally going well economically – the national economy is booming, the stock market is hitting record highs, and businesses are creating new jobs all the time.

The economy may be growing but wealthy people at the top are getting so much more of the benefit than middle class and working people.

33

67

Making a more **relatable argument**: Which statement do you agree with more?

The economy might be better in the country as a whole, but in my community, many people are still struggling to pay their bills and keep up a decent standard of living.

The economy may be growing but wealthy people at the top are getting all the benefit, while the middle class and working people are falling further behind.

37

63

Americans have national and personal worries about the future

This research finds more Americans are worried and uncertain (61%) than are confident and optimistic (39%) about the *future* of the economy. Similarly, Americans are more worried about their own future than they are about making ends meet today.

When you are thinking about you and your family's financial situation, what do you worry about more?

Your financial concerns right now, like how you are going to pay your bills and make ends meet.

Your financial concerns in the future, like how you will be able to save enough for the future.

Neither concerns me

25

51

25

How to Talk about Future Concerns

Affording things like health care, retirement and a good quality of life dominates Americans' worries more than paying monthly bills.

Speaking to personal, future-focused financial challenges also provides a strategy for bridging some of the politically-polarized attitudes dividing Democrats and Republicans when talking about "the economy" in general. Given the perception that the benefits of a growing economy are going to the wealthy, it is not surprising most Americans also want a shot at having enough money for retirement and improving their own quality of life.

The same goes for health care: while polling shows Americans are deeply divided over the issue when it is framed as a political football, being able to afford health care and pay for unexpected medical costs are common concerns regardless of political affiliation.

"Right now, I see [my financial situation] holding steady. However, I feel like I am one ER trip away from being broke. We do have some savings and a 401k and a house, but it often doesn't feel like it would be enough."

— Male, South, 33 years old

Thinking more about you and your family's financial situation, which of the following do you worry about most when you think about you and your family's future?

■ Total ■ Democrats ■ Independents ■ Republicans

Having enough money for retirement



Being able to afford health care



Having enough money to improve your life and quality of living



Being able to pay medical costs in the event of a serious illness or accident



Falling into debt



Losing savings and investments in the stock market



Being able to take care of loved ones as they get older



Being able to afford to live in a community you like



Having enough money to pay for your own or your children's college some day



Americans believe corruption is endemic in Washington, but there are some real differences in how Americans perceive the two parties.

Americans believe that Congress is corrupt. They believe elected officials work to serve their donors instead of their constituents. However, the concerns aren't equal between the two parties in Congress. Americans believe this donor-influenced policy making is more widespread among Republican elected officials than Democrats. That said, Democrats are not impervious to being linked to corruption, and when Democrats are compared to Trump (as opposed to Republicans in Congress), the two sides are viewed more equally. For advocates and policy makers who want to engage with the concerns of constituents, it's important to speak credibly to the corrupting influence of campaign donors on the agenda in Washington.

While both parties may be seen as susceptible to outside influence, our qualitative research found the negative influences within the Republican Party – namely their wealthy campaign donors – are more clearly identified in the minds of Americans while the influences on Democrats are more amorphous, less formed, and less concerning.

“I think the super rich control some of the Republicans in Congress, so they pass measures that always benefit them.”

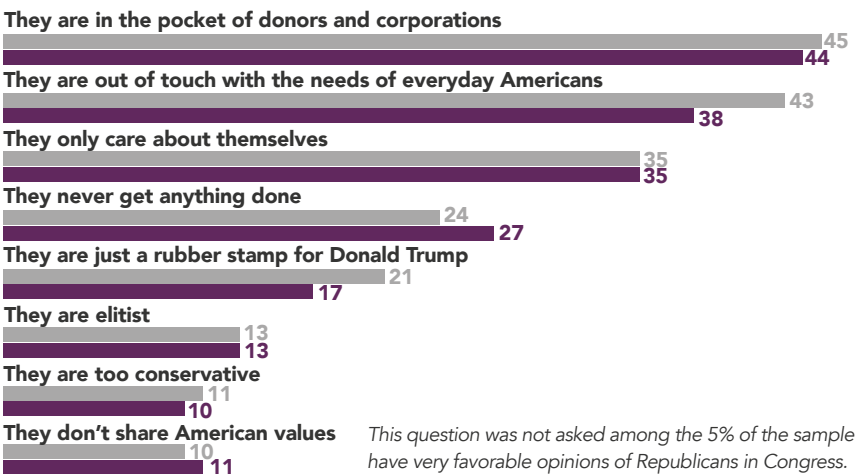
— Male, Midwest, 65 years old

Donors. Donors. Donors.

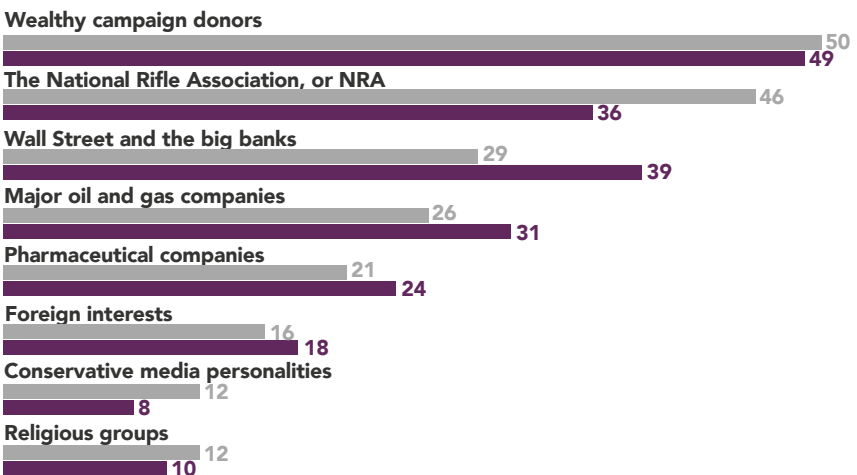
It's the influence of “wealthy campaign donors” – followed by specific examples of groups that give donations, like the NRA, Wall Street or Big Oil – that concerns Americans the most. “Wealthy campaign donors” is the broadest, most encompassing term that underscores the public's biggest concern with Congress: that they are in the pocket of donors and corporations and out of touch with everyday Americans.

Which of these words or phrases best describe your concerns about the Republicans in Congress today?

■ Total ■ Independents



Which of the following groups concerns you MOST in terms of having too much influence over Republicans Congress?



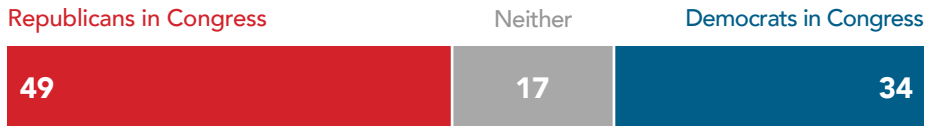
Enrichment Over Influence

While most Americans don't really trust either party to reduce corruption in Washington D.C., they are more likely to suspect Republicans are using government to enrich themselves and/or their campaign donors. These worries about enrichment transcend Americans' socio-economic group. Republicans lose the argument among both white college-educated Americans as well as whites without a college degree, suggesting this message has salience in many parts of the country. This is important to keep in mind for advocates looking to communicate about the Republican legislative agenda while Republicans have control of government in Washington.

The problem of *enrichment* – where politicians use their position to make money for themselves or their donors – bothers Americans more than *influence* – where lobbyists and donors have control over politicians' policy decisions.

For each, please tell me which political party is more likely to take action:

Which is more likely to use government to personally enrich themselves?



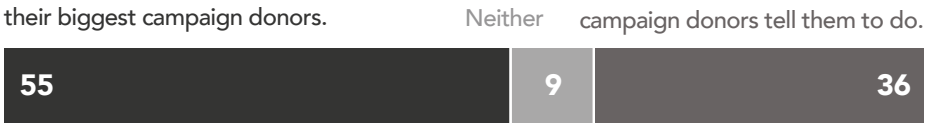
Which is more likely to use government to personally enrich their biggest campaign donors?



It concerns me more that...

Politicians use government to personally enrich themselves and enrich their biggest campaign donors.

Politicians make important decisions about big issues facing the country just because that's what lobbyists and their biggest campaign donors tell them to do.



Americans Believe Republicans Passed the Tax Plan to Help Their Donors

The idea that Republicans mainly do what's right for their donors – rather than what's right for the country – resonates when getting down to specifics, like the Republican tax plan.

Nearly every Republican voted in favor of the tax plan recently passed by Congress. Which of the following do you think is a bigger reason Republicans in Congress voted for the tax plan?

■ Total ■ Independents

They wanted to help wealthy individuals and corporations who regularly support Republican campaigns.



They believe cutting taxes will help the economy.



Everyone talks about Trump’s presidency being unprecedented – or norm-breaking. Do Americans care? If so, why?

There is no doubt that President Trump is different than past presidents in his demeanor, actions, and approach. While some of his supporters have argued that it’s a good thing, because he is challenging the status quo in Washington, our research finds that far more Americans see it negatively. Americans find Trump’s unconventional nature most concerning when the behavior is viewed as abusing power and ignoring standards that protect against conflicts of interest.

Whether you like him or not, nearly everyone agrees that Donald Trump is a different kind of president who often acts in ways that no other president has before him. Does this characteristic of Donald Trump make you more or less favorable towards him?

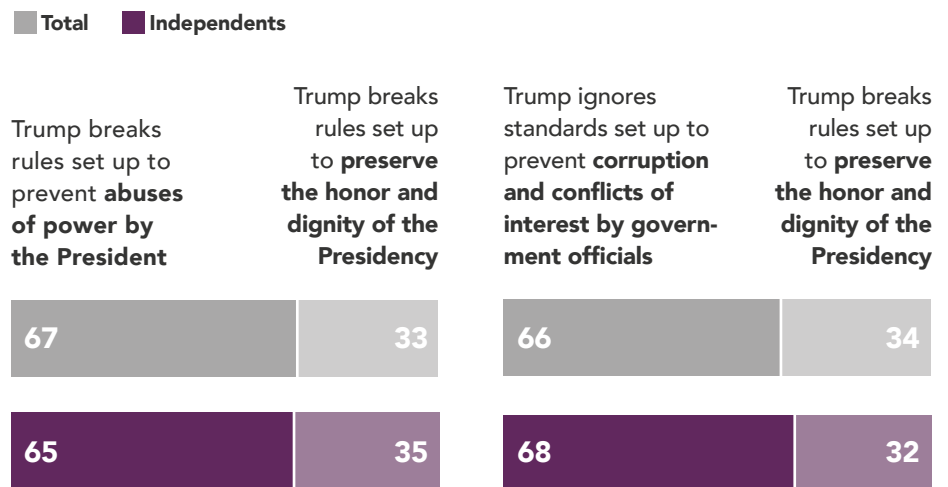


Change We Can’t Believe

According to the survey, more dislike Trump’s tendency to break norms than like it. There are a sizeable minority who say this makes them *much more* favorable to the President, but twice as many say it makes them *much less* favorable.

Americans’ concerns about Trump’s norm-breaking are clearly centered around the notions of **abuse of power** and **corruption** or **conflicts of interest**.

Which concerns you more?



This question was not asked among the 17% of our sample who strongly approve of Donald Trump.

Reckless, Not Lazy. Abuse of Power, Not Arrogance.

Americans react badly to a lot of the things Donald Trump does, though it's things he says that Americans are most likely to see as beyond the pale, including his controversial (and, to many observers, racially-charged) remarks about Caribbean and African countries, his apparent absolution of white supremacists, and his use of Twitter in general – which often involves attacking people.

These incidents may also speak to qualities about Trump that bother people the most – that he is *reckless*, *incompetent*, or *childish*. Concern about recklessness may help explain why so many Americans find it unacceptable that Trump does not read his intelligence and national security briefings. Laziness (think Trump on the golf course), on the other hand, does not resonate, as just 3% say *lazy* speaks to their concerns about Trump.

In addition to the brazen or offensive statements that Trump makes, Trump's promotion of and profit from his own businesses while in office does concern large numbers of both Democrats and Independents, as does his abuse of power. The challenge for those trying to connect with Americans may be driving up public awareness of specific examples of corruption and abuse of power, which often take a backseat in the public's eye to what comes out of his mouth.

Now you will see a list of things Trump has done as candidate or President. Indicate which comes closest to your personal view about each one:

- Completely unacceptable
- Concerning but no worse than what other politicians do
- Don't know
- Makes me like him more

Referring to countries in Africa and the Caribbean as "shitholes"



Excusing the behavior of white supremacists



Using Twitter the way he does



Not reading intelligence and national security briefings



Visiting, promoting and spending taxpayer money at his businesses while President



Making over 2,400 false or misleading statements in his first 14 months



Profiting from his businesses while President



Firing the FBI Director because of his handling of an investigation into Russia and the presidential campaign



Publicly criticizing the U.S. intelligence community, including the FBI and CIA



Referring to the news media as "the enemy of the people"



Keeping ownership of his businesses while President



Bonus Points

An emerging negative influencer: The NRA

- The NRA is underwater nationwide: 52% of Americans have an unfavorable opinion of the pro-gun organization with just 39% favorable, according to the survey.
- The NRA is second in the list of groups whose influence on the GOP concerns Americans the most – ahead of Wall Street or Big Oil.

Corruption and #MeToo – a powerful combination

- Sexual harassment settlements are a serious problem for Americans, and pairing harassment with underlying corruption is a powerful argument to make.
- “Members of Congress using public money to settle workplace disputes, including sexual harassment” came near the top of a list of possible concerns about “members of Congress misusing their positions of power” (behind only “Members of Congress giving tax breaks to their biggest campaign donors”).

Four months later, the tax plan is *not* a win

- The Republican tax plan is narrowly in the red, with 39% of Americans in favor and 43% opposed, according to the survey.

Life in Donald Trump’s White House

- Respondents were asked to find an image that represents what they think life is like inside the White House. Some examples:

“I chose anxious panic because so many aides and others report feeling very stress[ed] and disorganized.”

— Female, Midwest, 36 years old



“I searched ‘Donald Trump’s White House.’ I chose this image because I think that the current situation is a circus and Donald Trump is the Ringmaster.”

— Female, West, 50 years old



“Key words: hear no evil. At times, it seems everyone wants to keep quiet so as not to incur [Donald Trump’s] anger.”

— Male, South, 47 years old



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About Navigator

In a world where the news cycle is the length of a tweet, the messaging challenge progressives face today is more acute than ever. Our leaders often lack the real-time public-sentiment analysis to shape the best approaches to talking about the issues that matter the most. Navigator is designed to act as a consistent, flexible, responsive tool to inform policy debates. By conducting research and reliable guidance to inform allies, elected leaders, and the press, Navigator helps top leaders in Washington and grassroots leaders around the country shape the debate on the issues that matter most. Navigator is a project led by pollsters from Global Strategy Group and GBA Strategies along with an advisory committee of progressive leaders, including: Andrea Purse, The Hub Project; Arkadi Gerney, The Hub Project; Christina Reynolds, EMILY's List; Delvone Michael, Working Families; Felicia Wong, Roosevelt Institute; Mike Podhorzer, AFL-CIO; Jesse Ferguson, progressive strategist; Navin Nayak, Center for American Progress Action Fund; Nick Gourevitch, Global Strategy Group; Ron Klain, Revolution; and Stephanie Valencia, Latino Victory Project. To learn more about Navigator:

<http://navigatorresearch.org/>

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About the Study

Global Strategy Group conducted a public opinion survey among 1,009 registered voters between April 3 and 5, 2018. The survey was conducted online recruiting respondents from multiple opt-in online panel vendors. Respondents were verified against a voter file and special care was taken to ensure that the demographic composition of our sample matched that of national registered voter population across a variety of demographic variables. The quotes and qualitative findings referenced in this document are from an online discussion board conducted by GBA Strategies between March 22 and 23, 2018, of 25 voters who are not strong partisans.