

From: Bryan Bennett, Lead Pollster, Navigator Research

To: Interested Parties

Re: How Progressives Should Communicate About a Potential Government Shutdown

Date: September 26, 2023

As House Republicans bring the country to the brink of another government shutdown, surveys and focus groups from [Navigator Research](#) over the past several months reveal a clear roadmap for how progressives need to communicate in this moment. Legislative fights over government spending have manifested in moments like the current potential shutdown or earlier this year over a potential default on our debt, but it is important to remember these are flashpoints where Democrats and progressives can and should be emboldened to argue against spending cuts that could hurt tens of millions of middle-class and working-class Americans.

The public is largely disinterested in process fights and legislative minutia, and when they are subject to being focused on procedural ins-and-outs, most tune out and simply blame both parties for “failing to compromise.” Yet, there is consistency in the values that Americans want when it comes to their expectations of government and spending priorities, and it is essential for Democrats and progressives to meet Americans—constantly and consistently—in these moments where they are.

This memo outlines three guiding, data-driven principles that Democrats and progressives should keep in mind when communicating not just about the looming government shutdown and appropriations bills, but future legislative fights like extending the Trump tax cuts or any other false choice posed by Republicans between funding important public programs and cutting government spending.

Three Guiding Principles for Communicating About a Government Shutdown:

1. The public wants more—not less—public investment in programs like Social Security, Medicare, education, veterans’ benefits, and many more.
2. Arguments that put the impacts on people front-and-center will always be more effective than arguments about process.
3. Americans have a clear preference for raising taxes on the wealthiest Americans and big corporations over spending cuts.

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First, the public wants more—not less—public investment in programs like Social Security, Medicare, education, veterans’ benefits, and many more. In our early September research, at least three in four Americans opposed a variety of proposed cuts by Republicans in order to pass government spending bills for the next fiscal year, including cuts to Social Security (net -63; 14 percent support – 77 percent oppose), nutrition assistance (net -61; 15 percent support – 76 percent oppose), investments in life-saving medical research (net -61; 14 percent support – 75 percent oppose), funding for safe and clean drinking water (net -59; 16 percent support – 75 percent oppose), and cuts to K-12 education (net -58; 17 percent support – 75 percent oppose). Similarly, amid the debate over whether to raise the debt ceiling, a Navigator survey in [early June](#) found that majorities of Americans believe the government currently spends too little on virtually every program tested, including veterans’ benefits (70 percent too little), helping people afford the basics (68 percent), retirement programs like Social Security and Medicare (64 percent), reducing child poverty (64 percent), K-12 public education (58 percent), and health care, including Medicaid and Obamacare (52 percent).

Recent focus groups conducted in mid-September among independents and soft Democrats in Michigan (Detroit), Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh), and Nebraska (Omaha) on a potential government shutdown mirrored these findings. Many of the specific cuts being proposed by Republicans in Congress riled up fear and frustration, with one Michigan woman encapsulating the general sentiment as: *“It’s shocking. These, of all the areas that you can cut, this is the area that you would choose to cut? It’s shocking, and it’s ignorant because a lot of these social safety nets actually cost a lot less money than the alternative. If we don’t feed children, they’re going to enter the system. The system is expensive, and it’s broken. If we don’t house families and they’re homeless, it costs a lot more money to get people out of homelessness than it does to just help keep them in homes. I can’t even believe that they would be able to campaign on these talking points, cutting money for people. It’s shocking.”*

Most Concerning GOP Cuts: Social Security, Nutrition Assistance, Education, Clean Water, and Medical Research Funding

Below is a list of some cuts Republicans have proposed in order to avoid a government shutdown. Please indicate whether you support or oppose each one.

Cuts to...	Support	Not sure	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Overall	Total Oppose			Blame Both*
						Dem	Ind	Rep	
...the Social Security Administration, which could double wait times for those applying for disability benefits	14	9	22	54	77	88	74	66	77
...nutrition assistance for children & vulnerable families, taking food out of the mouths of women & children	15	9	20	56	76	90	73	61	80
...K-12 education, impacting 26 million students and forcing cuts of over 200,000 teachers, aides, and other school professionals	17	8	18	57	75	88	75	62	80
...funding to provide safe and clean drinking water and to protect children from lead poisoning	16	9	19	56	75	87	74	62	79
...investments in life-saving medical research for children, cancer patients, and maternal health	14	11	23	51	75	87	70	63	79
...housing assistance programs for low-income families, opening the door to evictions during the holiday season	20	8	23	49	72	88	71	56	78
...funding for local and federal law enforcement, including the FBI, and programs to protect children from violence and find missing children	20	10	22	48	70	80	63	61	72
...loan support for over 100,000 farmers impacted by the pandemic and cuts to funding for rural broadband, housing, and economic development	18	12	25	44	70	83	64	57	73
...job training programs for seniors, young people, and adults struggling to find employment	23	10	27	40	67	80	68	53	68
...development grants for preschools that help low-income children have a better start in school	23	10	25	42	67	82	67	51	67
...the federal work study program, which allows low-income students to work their way through college	25	10	26	40	65	82	61	49	67
...election security grants & voter registration programs, making elections less safe & making it harder to vote	22	14	21	43	64	81	56	47	63
...the investigations needed to go after wealthy tax cheats and big corporations who are not paying their fair share in taxes	29	10	17	45	62	78	57	45	58
...grants for family planning clinics, restricting access to abortion medication and reproductive health care	30	9	17	43	60	83	60	36	62
...investments from the Inflation Reduction Act to combat the climate crisis like grants to rural businesses and other programs, hurting the environment and raising energy costs for working families	27	14	19	40	59	78	57	39	59

*"Blame both" indicate respondents who would blame both Democrats and Republicans equally for a potential government shutdown on a separate question. Nationwide survey of 1,000 registered voters conducted September 7-September 11, 2023. For more info, visit navigatorresearch.org.

Most Think Government Spends Too Little on Veterans, Affording the Basics, Tax Cuts for Working Americans, SS/Medicare

More than two in three say the U.S. government spends too little on benefits for veterans (70% too little) and helping people afford the basics (68%). By contrast, most say the government spends too much on tax cuts for large corporations (net +32 too much).

Below is a list of items. When you think about how much money the U.S. government spends on the following things, would you say the government spends too much money, too little money, or the right amount of money on each one?

	** Split sample				Overall	Net Too Much				Econ. Pers.*
	Too much	Right amount	DK	Too little		Dem	Ind	Rep		
Benefits for veterans	5	15	10	70	-65	-62	-65	-70	-74	
*Helping people afford the basics	12	13	7	68	-56	-66	-57	-44	-67	
Tax cuts for middle and working class families	11	13	11	65	-54	-55	-43	-55	-62	
Retirement programs, like Social Security and Medicare	8	19	9	64	-56	-60	-56	-52	-69	
Reducing child poverty	9	16	11	64	-55	-66	-61	-41	-62	
Helping poor people	14	17	8	61	-47	-65	-56	-24	-59	
K-12 public education	10	20	12	58	-48	-61	-49	-33	-57	
Helping small businesses	8	20	15	57	-49	-49	-49	-48	-54	
Health care, including Medicaid and Obamacare	17	20	11	52	-35	-55	-40	-12	-42	
Border security	22	17	11	50	-28	+5	-25	-66	-34	
Supporting domestic manufacturing	12	21	19	48	-36	-34	-28	-43	-38	
Cleaning up the environment and combating pollution	23	18	12	47	-24	-58	-35	+18	-22	
**Providing a social safety net for people in need with programs like SNAP...†	23	22	11	44	-21	-43	-24	+6	-26	
Science, technology, and research	19	30	16	35	-16	-31	-13	-1	-6	
National defense	33	24	12	31	+2	+28	+4	-26	+3	
Tax cuts for large corporations	51	15	15	19	+32	+39	+30	+26	+38	

*"Economic persuadables" disapprove of Biden's handling of the economy but support the Inflation Reduction Act on separate questions. †Full response text read: "Providing a social safety net for people in need with programs like SNAP, formerly known as food stamps." Nationwide survey of 1,001 registered voters conducted June 2-June 5, 2023. For more info, visit navigatorresearch.org.

A Series of Specific Cuts—Like Education—Incite Deep Anger and Frustration

"It's shocking. **These, of all the areas that you can cut, this is the area that you would choose to cut? It's shocking, and it's ignorant** because a lot of these social safety nets actually cost a lot less money than the alternative. If we don't feed children, they're going to enter the system. The system is expensive, and it's broken. If we don't house families and they're homeless, it costs a lot more money to get people out of homelessness than it does to just help keep them in homes. I can't even believe that they would be able to campaign on these talking points, cutting money for people. It's shocking." – MI woman

"It feels like we're living in a dystopian hellscape, and if the choice is cut those things, which should be the things that the country stands on and says with their whole chest that they want to do for their citizens, so **if those are the things that they want to cut, yeah, shut it all down. Flip it over. Start it over. Well, we're done. We're cooked. We're good for it because where do we have to go from there? No humanity.**" – MI woman

"**A lot of people depend on different programs for them to be able to get access to food.** If it's through EBT, or a Bridge Card, some people really just don't have the expenses or the financial stability to be able to provide food for their kids and what they have, whoever's living in their environment or their space. **To cut that, that would be very heartbreaking.**" – MI man

"I just think these are human rights that we're not even taking care of. It's not even like a privilege or anything of that sort. People need water; water's a natural resource. **I just don't understand how we got to this desperate level in our country. It's very sad to me.**" – PA woman

"A lot of Republicans call themselves Christians. I'm a Christian, and **it makes no sense that they want to cut these programs to where we reach out to the poor.**" – NE man

"I would never compromise human rights." – PA man

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Four focus groups were conducted with weak Democrats in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Detroit, Michigan, and independent and Democratic-leaning independent women and men in Omaha, Nebraska. For more info, visit navigatorresearch.org.

Second, arguments that put the impacts on people front-and-center will always be more effective than arguments about process. In our [early September survey](#), the strongest messaging pushback to Republicans' argument that we need to shut the government down because government spending is out of control was an argument that "*Democrats want to increase, not decrease, public investment in veterans' benefits, health care, child care, and education,*" which bested the conservative argument by an 18-point margin (59 percent progressive argument – 41 percent conservative argument), including by a 22-point margin among independents (61 percent progressive argument – 39 percent conservative argument).

But in that same survey, the argument that "*Republicans... [are] going back on their bipartisan spending agreements from earlier this year just to score political points at Americans' expense*" just narrowly won over a conservative argument that government spending is out of control (net +8, 54 percent progressive argument – 46 percent conservative argument, including a 50-50 tie among independents). Similarly, a Navigator survey from [February of this year](#) found Americans were supportive of raising the debt ceiling by a two-to-one margin when given the context that "*it could delay Social Security and Medicare payments and veterans' benefits*" (net +29; 60 percent support – 31 percent oppose), compared to a much narrower 11-point margin when just arguing that "*this limit has been raised almost 80 times in the last 60 years*" (net +11; 50 percent support – 39 percent oppose).

When GOP Argues On Spending/Shutdown, Strongest Response Is Cutting Investments, Raising Costs, & Delaying Social Security

Among independents and Americans who would blame both parties equally for a shutdown*, a message that Democrats oppose spending cuts because they want to increase public investments (net +22 and net +30 more convincing) and one that hits Republicans for spending cuts that will "make working families pay even more" (net +16 and net +28) are strongest.

Which statement do you agree with more?

Statement 1: Republicans who say that government spending is out of control. If Congress can't come to an agreement to cut spending, we need to shut the government down.

Statement 2: Democrats who oppose Republicans' proposed spending cuts because Democrats want to increase, not decrease, public investment in veterans' benefits, healthcare, child care, and education.

Statement 1: 41%
Statement 2: 59%
Net Statement 2 Overall: +18
Independents: +22
*Blame Both: +30

Statement 3: Democrats who say Republicans' proposed spending cuts will make working families pay even more for the things they need at a time where the cost of living is already too high.

Statement 1: 41%
Statement 3: 59%
Net Statement 3 Overall: +18
Independents: +16
*Blame Both: +28

Statement 4: Democrats who say Republicans' proposed spending cuts to Social Security could double wait times for those applying for disability benefits, hurting seniors in particular.

Statement 1: 42%
Statement 4: 58%
Net Statement 4 Overall: +16
Independents: +8
*Blame Both: +22

**"Blame both" indicate respondents who would blame both Democrats and Republicans equally for a potential government shutdown on a separate question. Nationwide survey of 1,000 registered voters conducted September 7-September 11, 2023. For more info, visit navigatorresearch.org.

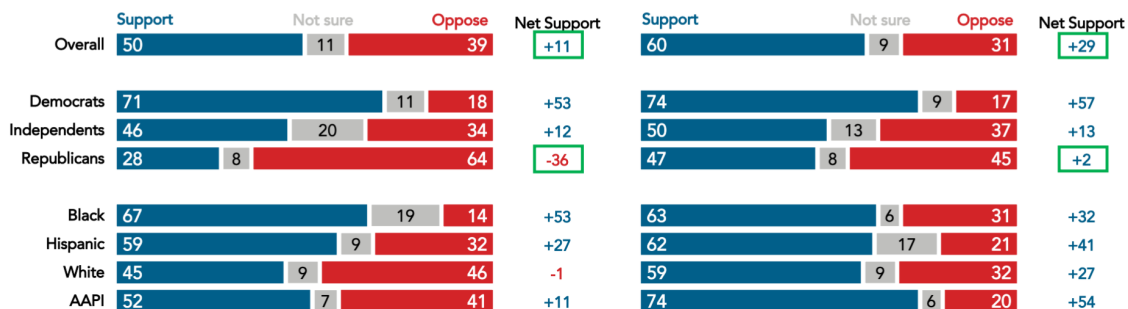
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Highlighting the Consequences of a Default Drives Up Support, While Highlighting History on Debt Limit Reduces It

Communicating on the consequences of default around Social Security, Medicare, and veterans' benefits increases support from net +20 to net +29, while talking about the number of times it has been raised actually decreases support from net +20 to net +11.

(Split sample) As you may know, the debt ceiling is a limit to the amount of money the U.S. government can borrow to pay its bills. **This limit has been raised almost 80 times in the last 60 years.** Again, do you support or oppose raising the debt ceiling?

(Split sample) As you may know, the debt ceiling is a limit to the amount of money the U.S. government can borrow to pay its bills. **If the debt ceiling is not raised, it could delay Social Security and Medicare payments and veterans' benefits.** Again, do you support or oppose raising the debt ceiling?



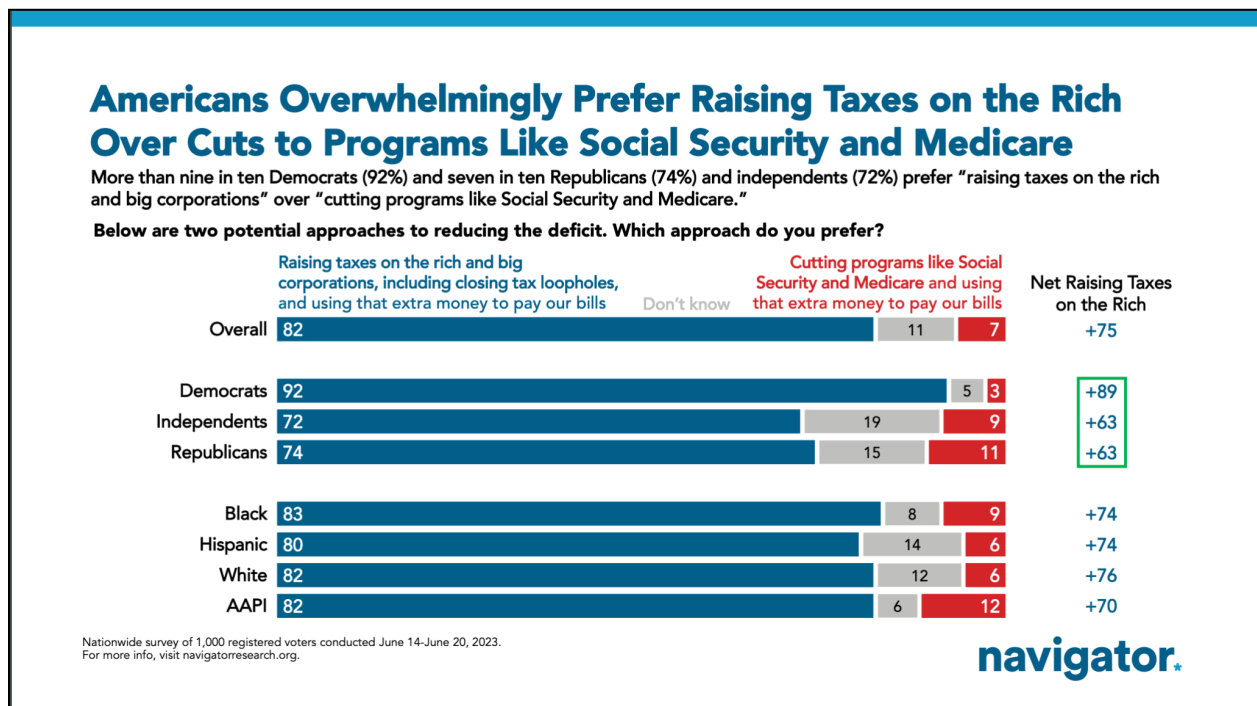
Nationwide survey of 1,000 registered voters conducted February 23-February 27, 2023. For more info, visit navigatorresearch.org.

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Third, Americans have a clear preference for raising taxes on the wealthiest Americans and big corporations over spending cuts. By a 75-point margin in a [June Navigator national survey](#), the public overall said that they were more supportive of "raising taxes on the rich and big corporations, including closing tax loopholes, and using that extra money to pay our bills" (82 percent) over just 7 percent who said they preferred "cutting programs like Social Security and

Medicare and using that extra money to pay our bills.” Moreover, in competitive House districts, [a July battleground survey](#) found that by a 49-point margin, voters favor raising taxes on billionaires and big corporations (73 percent support – 24 percent oppose).

In the June national survey, at least three in five Americans found that cuts proposed by Republicans in Congress to cut programs like Medicaid, K-12 education funding and food stamps, programs for working families, and investments in clean energy were all concerning; however, every single cut tested became significantly more concerning when paired with arguments that those cuts would be used to give more tax breaks to the wealthy and corporations in the oil, insurance, and drug industries.

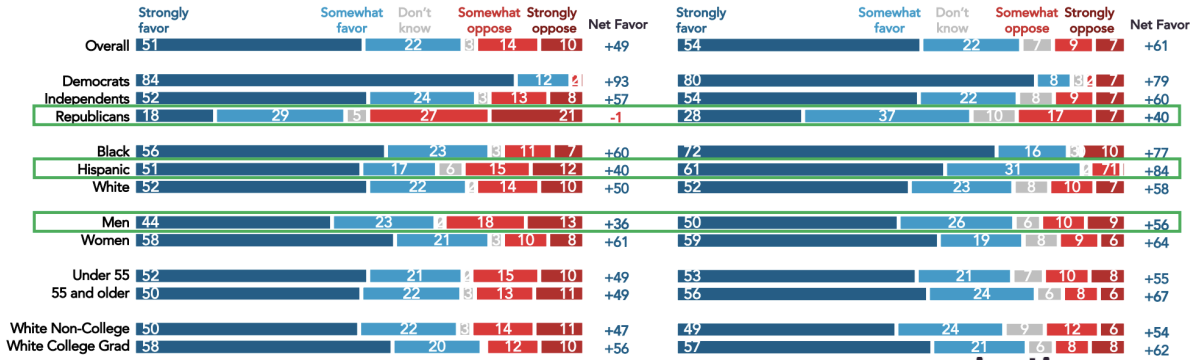


Majorities Strongly Favor Both Raising Taxes On Billionaires and Big Corporations & Closing Tax Loopholes They Utilize

Republicans, Hispanic voters, and men are more in favor of closing tax loopholes than raising taxes on billionaires and big corporations.

[SPLIT SAMPLE:] Do you favor or oppose raising taxes on billionaires and big corporations?

[SPLIT SAMPLE:] Do you favor or oppose closing tax loopholes for billionaires and big corporations?



Nationwide survey of 1,500 likely 2024 general election voters across 61 battleground districts conducted July 6-July 12, 2023. For more info, visit navigatorresearch.org/battleground.

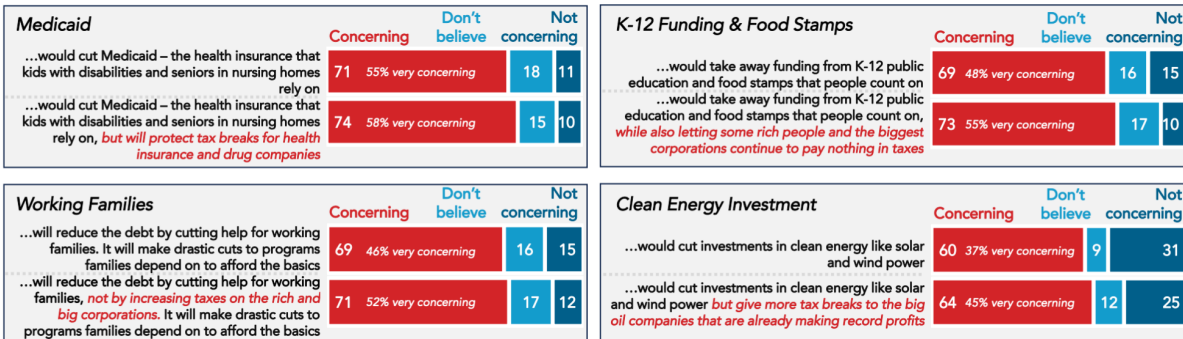
navigating the ***battleground**

Proposed GOP Spending Cuts Are Concerning, and Made Even More So By Inclusion of Tax Breaks for the Rich As Well

Majorities of Americans find a range of proposed cuts from Republicans in Congress' new budget and tax plan deeply concerning. Pairing these cuts with tax breaks for corporations and the rich makes each one even more concerning to Americans.

As you may know, some Republicans in Congress recently proposed a new budget and tax plan. Below is a list of statements regarding this new plan. Please indicate how concerning you find each statement – if you do not find the statement concerning or do not believe the statement, please indicate that as well.

Republicans in Congress' plan...



Nationwide survey of 1,000 registered voters conducted June 14-June 20, 2023. For more info, visit navigatorresearch.org.

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