

To: Interested Parties

From: GBA Strategies

Date: February 21, 2018

Recent Tax Bill Polling

Recent conventional wisdom seems to suggest Republicans have the upper-hand in the debate on taxes. In our recent survey, we challenged this perception with an experiment gauging the added value of a balanced debate on taxes versus having one side (either for or against) go unchallenged. We found a conversation about taxes is a fight progressives can win, especially if the message is precise in its focus. But failure to engage worsens losses. Further, voters currently focused on the tax debate are disproportionately Democratic, perhaps also counter to conventional wisdom. This means engaging on taxes is essential given the current political landscape: despite broader climate advantages for Democrats, voters are somewhat optimistic about the economy and the tax plan's economic impact, but are responsive to progressive arguments about the law's negative consequences.

This memo highlights key findings from a national survey of 2,000 registered voters conducted on behalf of Not One Penny¹.

Key Findings

- **There is division and some optimism on the tax bill.** Despite Democrats' broader advantages in the political climate, there is division and some optimism about the tax plan and its impact. Voters only narrowly oppose the tax bill (40 percent support, 44 percent oppose), and in fact a plurality (34 percent) believe it has already improved the economy (22 percent worse). Even more expect the plan to improve the economy in the next year, although by a smaller margin.

Voters are more ambivalent about the plan's effect for them personally; about half say the tax bill has had no effect so far on their own finances, and a quarter don't believe the tax bill will affect their finances in the next year. Here too, more say the plan will help them than hurt them personally, though half of all voters think it will have no effect or are unsure.

¹ GBA Strategies conducted a survey of 2,000 registered voters nationwide. The survey was conducted February 9-17, 2018 via an online panel matched to a voter file. The sample is subject to a +/- 2.2 percentage point margin of error.

How has/how will the tax plan passed by Congress affect...?				
	US Economy/ so far	US Economy /next year	Pers finances/ so far	Pers finances /next year
Improve	34	38	21	28
Make worse	22	34	11	22
No effect	21	9	49	27
Don't know	23	19	19	23

- Right now, Democrats are somewhat more focused on taxes.** Voters are engaged on the tax bill, but those particularly engaged are slightly more likely to be Democrats. Almost four in ten (38 percent) report seeing, reading, or hearing “a lot” about the tax plan, and slightly more (43 percent) say it will be a “major factor” in their vote for Congress in 2018. The party difference here is perhaps counter-intuitive, and we’ll see below it moves further as we provide messaging. More Democrats (43 percent) have heard a lot about the plan, compared to 35 percent of Republicans, and almost half (48 percent of Democrats) say it will be a major factor in their vote, compared to 41 percent of Republicans.
- Progressives can win the argument on taxes if they engage the debate, but it will be costly if they shy away.** Through our split sample experiment, followed by a revote of three different questions, we are able to gauge the impact of different kinds of conversations about taxes. The results are clear: engaging on taxes moves voters and is a fight that is imperative for progressives to engage in. A standalone anti-plan message (split D below) shifts support for the plan substantially, from a 4-point margin for plan opponents to a 26-point margin (a 22-point shift). A standalone pro-plan message (split A below) moves fewer voters, from 4-point margin for opponents to an 11-point margin for supporters (a 15-point shift). Balanced pairings of both pro- and anti-plan messaging (splits B and C below) produce either slight movement or no movement at all.

Given the messages were more descriptive of the plan and so not explicitly partisan or campaign-focused, we see the most sizeable movement in a revote on the plan itself. Yet the modest movement on other dimensions is nonetheless important. A standalone anti-plan message yields more voters who say taxes will be a “major factor” in their 2018 vote and lifts Democrats’ advantage in the generic ballot.

Recall those who initially say taxes will be a major factor in their 2018 vote are disproportionately Democratic. After messaging, moderate and conservative Democrats, voters of color, and Democratic women become even more likely to say that the tax bill will be a major factor, while very conservative voters and white men without a college degree become less likely to say it will be a major factor.

	Split A	Split B	Split C	Split D	Total
Message 1	Pro-Plan	Pro-Plan	Pro-Plan	None	
Message 2	None	Anti-Plan (middle class)	Anti-Plan (economic impact)	Anti-Plan (combined)	
Shift in tax plan support	-15	+3	0	+22	+2
Shift in Dem margin in generic	0	+1	-1	+3	+1
Shift in “major factor” in ‘18 vote	-3	-1	-2	+3	-1

- Messaging focused on how the tax bill hurts the middle class and helps the wealthy works better than one with a wider economic lens.** Our experiment compared two anti-plan messages: one more focused on the plan’s negative impact on the middle class to give outsized tax benefits to the wealthy, and one broadly describing a variety of negative economic impacts, such as cutting health care and education in order to pay for the plan, increasing the national debt, and encouraging corporations to outsource jobs. The focused, middle class-centric message works better, shifting opposition to the tax plan by 3 points.

Messages on how the tax bill hurts the middle class also tend to work best in a final battery of anti-messaging. Among voters who move toward opposing the bill in a final vote, the most compelling messages are Medicare and Medicaid becoming prime targets for cuts, the plan actually raising taxes on the middle class when it’s fully phased in, and 83 percent of the tax breaks going to the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans.

Some messaging focused on other plan ramifications also have potency, notably on shifting jobs and profits overseas, and on wealthy donors being rewarded. Messaging that works somewhat less well focuses on many cuts being temporary, the debt, being a “reckless giveaway” to corporations, and the failure of “trickle-down economics.” (We should caution this survey did not provide a balanced list of both pro- and anti-plan messaging, but instead was designed to see the added impact of anti-plan messaging after the split sample experiment.)

Below are more statements about the tax plan. This time, choose whether this description raises very serious doubts, serious doubts, minor doubts or no real doubts in your own mind about the tax plan.		
	Total serious doubts (Shifters)	Total serious doubts (All)
Because this plan adds so much to the deficit, Medicare and Medicaid will become prime targets for deficit reduction. We'll end up cutting health care for children and the elderly in order to pay for tax cuts for the richest 1 percent.	82	61
This plan will actually raise taxes on the middle class. Over the next few years, when the plan is fully phased in, taxes will be raised on more than half of American households.	79	59
The wealthy keep getting wealthier while the middle class falls further behind. But in a few years, 83 percent of the tax breaks from this plan will go to the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans.	78	59
This plan is so focused on corporations and the wealthy that it even encourages and rewards companies that move jobs and profits overseas.	77	58
This plan rewards wealthy political donors with massive tax breaks. And in turn these donors have rewarded politicians who backed the plan by giving them even more campaign contributions	75	60

After a full list of additional anti-plan messaging, voters continue to move away from support for the plan. And those who initially heard only pro-plan messaging “catch up” with those hearing balanced framing; they move from +11 support to +16 oppose, a 27-point shift. This suggests it’s not too late for progressives to fully engage on taxes.

The voters particularly likely to move toward plan opposition are key Democratic constituencies: independents, non-2016 voters, African-Americans, and both Democratic and Republican women.

Conclusions & Recommendations

- Having a conversation on taxes helps. Progressives can win the tax debate.
- We need not fear discussion. Those currently more engaged are more Democratic.
- Moving people on the tax plan can lead to other ancillary benefits such as increasing the issue’s saliency.
- Being precise matters. In most cases top anti-plan messaging means staying more focused on the impact on the middle class, and less on macroeconomic and business trends.
- We can develop messaging connecting personally to key Democratic audiences such as women across party lines and communities of color.