

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Guy Cecil, Chairman of Priorities USA
DATE: November 4, 2021
RE: Democrats Face Difficult but Surmountable Challenges Ahead of the Midterms

Tuesday's elections are a warning for all Democrats. With midterm elections just a year away, we face a difficult set of challenges, some of our own making.

- Our congressional majorities depend on winning Senate and House seats that are much more competitive than New Jersey and Virginia, giving us little room for error. The same is true for key governors' races and state legislative seats.
- While DC Democrats have spent weeks fighting each other, Republicans were focused on mobilizing their base, generating record turnout and demonstrating an enthusiasm gap that we must close.
- Republicans were successful at peeling away voters from the Biden coalition using deceptive, divisive tactics, calling into question how we rebuild that coalition in 2022.
- Key polling indicators like presidential favorability, direction of the country, and who is better on handling the economy and covid recovery have been moving in the wrong direction.
- History is full of significant midterm election losses for the party in power.

On top of all of this, voters are frustrated, skeptical, and tired – of covid, of economic hardship, of school closings, of higher prices and stagnant wages, of unaffordable prescription drugs and health care and more. This is not merely about ideology or which two candidates are on the ballot. **Without results (and effectively communicating those results), voters will punish the party in power.**

New polling from Priorities USA in key 2022 battleground states paints a similarly challenging picture. Voter enthusiasm is relatively low among key voters, swing voters that supported Democrats in the last two elections are open to voting Republican, and Democratic infighting is cannibalizing any headlines about the progress we are making. This creates huge opportunities for Republicans to focus on issues that drive their turnout and peel away swing voters.

There are now two roads ahead of us.

Down one is an endless circular firing squad, a lengthy and public fight over the Build Back Better bill, finger pointing between “progressives” and “centrists,” arguments over whether to focus on turnout or swing voters, and ultimately, losing.

The other road doesn't guarantee success, but it gives us a fighting shot to win next year. This week's results and new polling from Priorities USA in key battleground states lays out the beginning of a path to victory.

An analysis of our polling offers four key lessons that will guide our efforts:

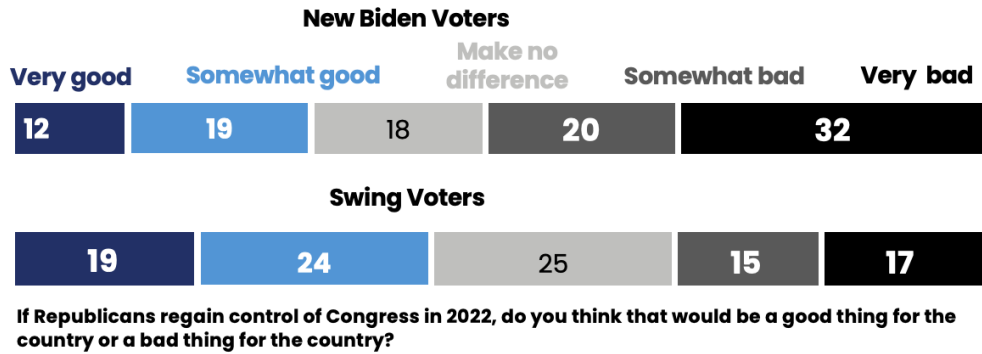
- Democrats must prioritize infrequent and new voters who turned out for President Biden. These programs must include early persuasion campaigns targeting those with little partisan connection or long-term political interest. Without Donald Trump in office or on the ballot, we will need an aggressive multi-pronged approach to win them over again.
- In most competitive races, turnout alone is not enough. We need to appeal to those swing voters who supported Democrats in 2018 and 2020.
- The best defense is a good offense. The Democratic agenda is popular with swing voters and new Biden voters and every Republican in Congress opposes it. **We need to relentlessly focus on building the middle class, supporting families, and protecting democracy.**
- If the headlines focus on Democratic infighting and issues driven by the Republican Party, we will lose. Democrats need to deliver on their promises and drive a contrasting campaign on it. Our argument can't be limited to backwards-looking attacks on Donald Trump.

Democrats must prioritize infrequent and new voters who turned out for President Biden.

New and infrequent Biden voters aren't reliable Democrats yet and we need to consolidate their support with persuasion messages.

Infrequent or first-time 2020 voters who chose Joe Biden will play a decisive role in the 2022 midterms. These voters are less interested in politics, less enthusiastic about voting and less polarized than Democratic "base voters." Just because these voters *look like* the existing Democratic coalition doesn't mean they vote like them.

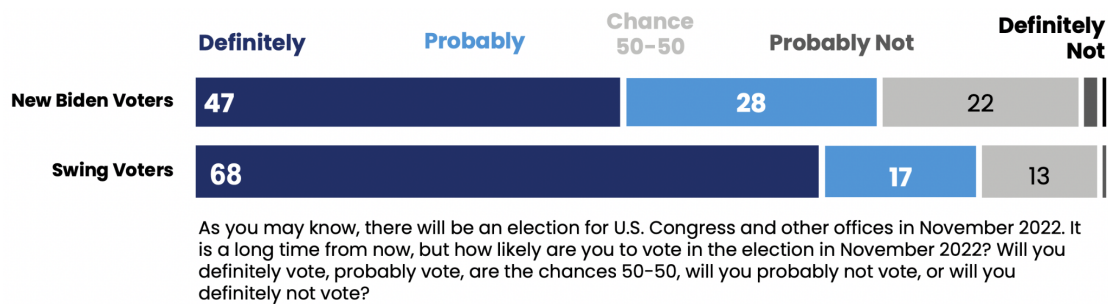
Our polling dove deep into what these infrequent and first-time Biden voters are thinking about politics and elections. While they lean heavily Democratic, with 83% definitely voting for or leaning toward Democrats in the midterms, two in five of those represented by a Democrat in the Senate have a neutral or no opinion of the incumbent, and **31% think it would be a good thing if Republicans took over Congress.** Yes, these voters lean toward Democrats but **their support is shallow.** They are not ideological or partisan, so Democrats need to proactively win them over in 2022.



Because these voters are less partisan, they are more receptive to messaging. **After being exposed to a wide variety of pro-Democratic and anti-Republican messaging, those thinking it would be good if Republicans controlled Congress dropped by a third.** That’s why it is vital that our messaging includes a heavy emphasis on the contrast between Democratic priorities and Republican extremism.

Democrats must consolidate support that translates into votes.

While our work to consolidate infrequent and new voters is critical, that support will only count if they actually turn out to vote. Right now, less than half of new voters who supported Biden say they will definitely vote next year. That’s compared to 85% of swing voters who say they probably or definitely will vote. And only 28% of new or infrequent Biden voters rated their enthusiasm to vote at or above a 9 out of 10.



The 2020 election was about the pandemic, health care, jobs, wages and at its core, the election was about Donald Trump. And because Trump is no longer front and center, many new and infrequent Biden voters are less tuned into the news. In focus groups conducted by Priorities in August, voters consistently cited their desire to tune out politics after the exhaustion of the Trump years. **This disengagement, and a fractured media landscape, hampers Democrats’ ability to get our message out.**

First-time and infrequent Biden voters are tuning out political messages in their daily lives **even if they agree with the policies Democrats are promoting.** In order to effectively engage these voters, Democrats need to break through a complex information environment to reach them

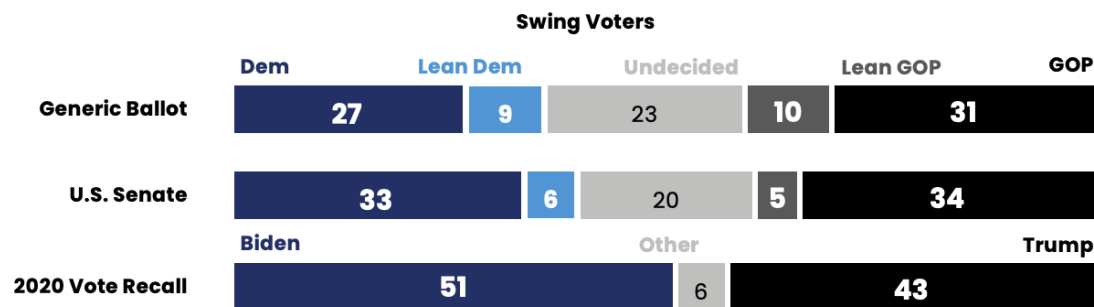
where they're spending their time to ensure that persuasive messages about policy break through.

Additionally, many of these voters face roadblocks to the ballot from GOP voter suppression laws. To turn out infrequent voters we need to combine issue messaging with traditional mobilization strategies like social pressure, 'make a plan' and voter education ads that help voters navigate legal barriers to the polls.

In most competitive races, turnout is not enough. We need to reach swing voters who supported Democrats in 2018 and 2020.

Consolidating and turning out Democratic voters is required but not sufficient to win in 2022. The small but significant number of swing voters are a must-win category for Democrats. Swing voters are more politically engaged and more likely to vote but less likely to support Democrats consistently.

In the six states most likely to determine control of the Senate – Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin – Joe Biden won by just over 200,000 out of nearly 21 million total votes cast and swing voters were critical to that margin. In our sample of these states, along with Florida and North Carolina, Biden won swing voters by eight points in 2020. **In order for Democratic candidates to be successful in these contests, they need to match or exceed Joe Biden's appeal among swing voters.** However, Democrats are now losing on the generic ballot 36% to 41% in our survey, with Democratic Senate candidates faring only slightly better: tied with their GOP opponent at 39%.



Swing voters are more skeptical of Democrats' ability to deliver on their promises and more open to the idea of a Republican "check" on President Biden's power. Our analysis shows that we can move these sentiments with the right messaging and, importantly, that this messaging also solidifies support for Democrats among infrequent Biden voters. **We don't have to choose to appeal to one group or another** but swing voters will make up a significant portion of our persuasion audience and Democratic spending and targeting needs to reflect that.

The best defense is a good offense. Republican attacks won't stick if Democrats have a strong message that controls the narrative.

In an analysis of 25 different messages, both pro-Democratic and anti-Republican, Priorities found that many issues that were persuasive to swing voters also resonated with infrequent and new Biden voters. Democrats have a number of positive messages to run on, and can raise the salience of these issues even further by consistently contrasting these messages with Republican opposition. Policies like expanding Medicare, lowering drug prices, investing in infrastructure and taxing the wealthy were salient with both groups. We have enough popular messages to run on that we should spend less time testing which message persuades which voters, and more time developing creative ways to communicate them in a media environment where it's extremely tough to break through. **The Democratic message is overwhelmingly popular with different groups of voters: we need to communicate it effectively.**

Label	Message Text	NBV Rank	Swing Rank
Taxes	Democrats are working to make the wealthiest earners pay their fair share in taxes by repealing Trump's tax cuts for the top 1%, closing tax loopholes that let big corporations avoid paying any income taxes, and cracking down on wealthy tax cheats.	1	1
Dems ARP	Democrats delivered relief to the American people as we got through the COVID-19 pandemic, delivering more than 170 million stimulus checks worth up to \$1,400 per person.	2	4
GOP ARP	Every single Republican in Congress voted against helping American families with the American Rescue Plan, which sent \$1,400 stimulus checks to Americans, expanded the Child Tax Credit, and increased funding for vaccinations.	3	9
Dem Medicare	Democrats are working to expand Medicare coverage to cover hearing, dental, and vision care and fighting to give Medicare the power to negotiate with pharmaceutical companies for lower prices.	4	2
Dem Infrastructure	Democrats and President Biden passed a bipartisan infrastructure bill that will provide \$110 billion to repair roads and bridges, \$25 billion to modernize airports, and create 650,000 jobs.	10	3

Priorities tested 25 messages – 13 pro-Democratic and 12 anti-Republican – among both groups of voters. The messages that ranked highest for new Biden voters also ranked highly for swing voters.

We're not blind to the fact that elections are dynamic, two-sided contests. Democratic messaging doesn't occur in a vacuum and Republicans and their media machine are going to try to make the election about divisive issues that distract from their unpopular stances on core economic issues. **When Democrats get attacked, we should respond forcefully, call out the lie, and draw a strong contrast between Democrats and Republicans on the issues that matter most.**

Republicans driving narratives like "critical race theory" and "parental control of schools" will require Democrats to call out the lie and drive the conversation to the disastrous Republican record on schools or a contrasting message on education. However, it is even more important that we drive a strong overall message on building the middle class and supporting families and how disastrous Republican policies would be for the country. Inconsistent messaging and dysfunction in Washington has hampered Democrats ability to promote our agenda and turned the focus away from core issues. This allowed Republican framing to dominate headlines. Again, we are the party in power and will be held accountable

Democrats are spending too much time fighting with each other, hurting our ability to communicate contrasts with Republicans.

We need to be clear: when the fight is Democrats vs. Democrats, we aren't communicating a positive message. When the entire public fight is over exactly how much we are going to spend, we aren't communicating a positive message. In the electoral environment we're facing, missteps that detract from our message of progress spell midterm losses across the board. When we take the fight to Republicans, we have a chance to win. Voters are worried about what Washington will do to help them and Democrats are handing the Republicans a gift every time the headlines are focused on infighting instead of the issues we're delivering on.

It's not a coincidence that among both swing voters and new Biden voters, the most convincing issue was the Democratic effort to repeal the Trump-Republican tax cuts and make the wealthy and corporations pay their fair share. When voters are presented with a strong contrast between the Democratic agenda that works for them and the Trump-Republican agenda that works only for the wealthy few, they want to put Democrats in charge. The other top testing messages paint a similar picture: Democrats need to offer real solutions to problems voters see in their daily lives and use those messages as the basis for contrast with Republicans who are actively whipping their members of Congress against policies like lowering drug prices.

While an economic message that puts working people first – and Republican opposition to anything that doesn't benefit the wealthy – should be forefront in our messaging, we should also acknowledge that Trump and his influence over his party isn't going away. In addition to Donald Trump's unpopular positions on issues like civil rights, health care and taxes we know that voters are also concerned about the threat he poses to democracy. **Of the 25 messages we tested, a message on the Big Lie and January 6th tested ranked 5th in importance among swing voters and 6th among new and infrequent Biden voters.** Instead of casting Trump as a vague, ever-present boogeyman, Democrats should emphasize the fact that the post-2020 Republican Party embodies the worst of Donald Trump in both values and substance.

Even facing steep obstacles, Democrats have a path to victory.

The election results and data from our new poll clearly lay out the challenges ahead, but they also present a real path to improve our standing with the voters we need to win. Our analysis clearly demonstrates we can move voters with strong, contrasting messages. In fact, Democrats were down five points relative to Republicans initially with swing voters, but up three after messaging, an eight point net swing. Moreover, support also solidified among new and infrequent Biden voters, and the share that were not enthusiastic about voting in 2022 dropped by a fifth, from 47% to 36%.

It's time to focus on what is next. Congressional Democrats must immediately pass the infrastructure and Build Back Better bills. We must do everything we can to persuade, consolidate, and mobilize those who turned out to vote Democratic in 2020. And we must draw a sharp contrast between Democratic progress and Republican extremism.