To: Congressional Democrats

From: Public Campaign Action Fund, Lake Research Partners

Re: Supermajority support for placing elections in hands of the people

Date: January 9, 2013

A recent nationwide survey of likely voters\(^1\) shows that Americans are increasingly fed up with the influence of big money in politics, and a majority across party lines would support proposed legislation to fund congressional campaigns with small contributions and limited public funds.

**Big Money Backlash**

After hearing a basic description\(^2\), two-thirds of likely 2014 voters support a proposal to fund campaigns with small contributions and limited public funds (65% total support, 44% strong support) with only 16% opposed and 19% undecided.

Support is especially high among Democrats at 77% total support (49% strong support), but is also solid among Independents (62% total support), and Republicans (55% total support). Support does not waver significantly across regions (66% in the Northeast, 63% in the Midwest, 61% in the South, 72% in the West). And while the proposal attracts majority support among every demographic and political group, it is especially well-received by Latinos (73% total support) and unmarried women (68%). This issue can mobilize Democratic voters as well as swing voters.

\(^1\) Lake Research Partners designed and administered a telephone survey of 804 likely 2014 voters nationwide. The survey fielded December 14-17, 2013. The margin of error is +/- 3.3% (+/- 4.9 for message questions).

\(^2\) Text of Proposal: “Under this plan, candidates for Congress could run for office without needing to raise large campaign contributions. Instead, they would collect a large number of small contributions from individuals in their home state, and these contributions would be matched on a six-to-one basis by a public fund. Contributors would get a refundable tax credit of twenty-five dollars. Each candidate’s public funding would be capped at a certain amount, and there would be strict enforcement of campaign finance laws including disclosure of all donations. [The money for the public fund would be raised by closing tax loopholes for big corporations.]” *The bracketed sentence was included in the description for half of the sample. This memo shows combined results for both descriptions.*
In today’s contentious political climate, the one group less popular than members of Congress (23% favorable vs. 67% unfavorable) are the “Big Money Campaign Donors” that help decide elections (12% favorable vs. 72% unfavorable – 51% “very” unfavorable). Given the level of animosity toward big money political insiders, it is not surprising that most voters (61%) believe we need to make “major changes” to the way campaigns are financed in this country. This marks a significant increase compared to just three years ago, when 51% expressed that view.³

![Chart showing changes to how we finance campaigns](image)

While members of Congress collectively receive a solidly negative rating, voters are split on their member of Congress (45% favorable vs. 40% unfavorable). The issue of election reform can help members speak to changing Washington and the big moneyed interests that benefit from the status quo – and in turn help them distinguish themselves from the overall institution in Washington.

Congressional Democrats are well positioned to spearhead the legislation, with a 13-point advantage over Republicans (34% vs. 21%) on which party would do a better job of reducing the influence of big moneyed interests in Washington. It is important to note, however, that 45% of voters say neither party commands the issue, opening a big growth upside by reaching voters proactively.

Democrats may also face greater pressure from constituents to support the legislation. While many voters across parties would use this issue as a voting issue, Democratic voters are even more likely to reward or punish their representatives based on where they stand. By a margin of 52% to 8%, Democratic voters say they would be more likely to vote for their representative in Congress if he or she supported the proposal, and by 39% to 15%, they would be less likely to vote for their representative if he or she opposed it.

³ Based on findings from a Lake Research Partners survey from June 26-30, 2010. The survey, using a random digit dial (RDD) sample, reached a total of 1,500 likely voters nationwide. The margin of error was +/- 2.5%.

Lake Research Partners
Of, By, and For the People

Strong messaging for this proposal – centered on themes of accountability, fairness, and tilting the balance of power away from wealthy special interest donors and toward ordinary Americans – beats a strong opposition message by substantial margins. These are powerful values working for Democrats.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Strongest Messages</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Of, By, and For the People</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>We need a government of, by, and for the people – not government bought and paid for by wealthy donors. If they want to invest in our government, let them pay their fair share of taxes, rather than paying for politicians who will write them special tax breaks. This proposal puts our government back in the hands of ordinary Americans.</td>
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<td>53% very convincing, 80% total convincing</td>
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<th>Warped Priorities</th>
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<td>From creating jobs to the budget, big money in politics warps Congress’ priorities and erodes trust in democracy. Special interests throw their money at campaigns and hire lobbyists to bend policy in their direction. We must break the dependence on big money special interests so that Congress is focused on the people’s priorities.</td>
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<td>49% very convincing, 78% total convincing</td>
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The phrase “Of, By, and For the People” proves to be a compelling tagline and is among the strongest names for the proposed legislation, with an average favorability rating of 80 (on a scale from 0-100). “Holding Congress Accountable” also gains high marks, with an average favorability score of 78. Among Democrats the ratings are 82 and 78, respectively, and 78 and 80 among Independents – again showing the power of these values with our base as well as swing voters.

Members should not shy away from talking about specifics; learning the details of the provisions in the proposal serves to bolster support for the legislation overall. The most attractive provisions are the Freedom From Influence Fund for candidates who take no large contributions and raise small donations from people in their home state (70% would more likely to support the proposal with this provision); the $25 My Voice Tax Credit for everyday Americans when they make small donations to candidates (66% more likely); and prohibiting candidates from accepting PAC contributions greater than $150 (63% more likely).
Support for Policy Holds Up Under Attack

It will be important to neutralize cynicism that the proposal won’t work and to challenge attacks that it amounts to welfare for politicians.

### Strongest Opposition Messages

**Won’t Work**

*This proposal will create new regulations and bureaucracy, and will cost taxpayers billions. It’s riddled with loopholes that will allow some candidates to spend millions while others are limited, and wealthy special interests will still be able to spend unlimited amounts on those nasty political attack ads. It may be well-intentioned but it won’t clean up elections*

41% serious doubts, 69% total doubts

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**Costs**

*This proposal is just welfare for politicians. It means they will use billions of our taxpayer dollars to fund their campaigns instead of other important issues. Tax money will go to bumper stickers, yard signs, and even negative attack ads, and the proposal would require a costly bureaucracy to police our speech. This is not a good use of our tax dollars.*

42% serious doubts, 62% total doubts

That said, support for the proposed legislation holds even after the most potent attacks from the other side, remaining steady with 67% in favor, 17% opposed and 16% undecided. Total support among Democrats holds at 78% and at 61% among Independents.

### Proposal to Fund Campaigns with Small Contributions and Limited Public Funds

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<th>Before Competing Arguments</th>
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<td>Favor</td>
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44 Favor, 16 Oppose, 19 Undecided/DK before competing arguments. 44 Favor, 12 Oppose, 16 Undecided/DK after competing arguments.

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For more information about this research, please contact Celinda Lake by e-mail (clake@lakeresearch.com) or by phone (202-776-9066).