

National Economy Research – Key Findings

The Center for American Progress, in conjunction with GBA Strategies, conducted extensive qualitative and quantitative research¹ over the past three months to understand voters' attitudes toward the array of government assistance programs that help ensure access to basic living standards for millions of Americans struggling to make ends meet. Key findings from this research include:

- **Voters don't expect Trump, GOP to march in lockstep.** Many voters expressed the belief that Trump has little in common with congressional Republicans. They see him as an anti-politician whose candidacy was a rebuke to the establishment in both parties. As a result, there is little concern about runaway partisanship or a lack of checks and balances on the GOP agenda. Messages that encourage Trump to stand up to his party are seen as unnecessary because there is an existing expectation that he is already inclined to do so. Messages that reinforce Trump's ties to the Congressional GOP perform better. 41 percent of voters rate Donald Trump's performance as excellent or good, compared to 31 percent for Congressional Republicans, and 34 percent for Congressional Democrats.
- **Most voters still identify as middle class, but working class is close behind.** Most voters across race, age, and income lines in our research defined themselves as middle class, but the picture of middle class life that they painted was hardly an idyllic one. In their minds, middle class has transformed from a life of comfort and advancement to one of barely getting by, with increasing economic and quality of life compromises. There was broad agreement that what used to be a significant difference in quality of life and economic security between the middle class and the poor has shrunk dramatically. The difference between the two is more circumstantial (a medical crisis or lost job causing harm) than about personal differences in work ethic and education. But most voters do not view messages or programs targeted to the poor as speaking to or about them. Messages must therefore explicitly speak to them on a more personal level – 'families like mine' or 'you and your family' – to move their understanding from charity for others to personal advocacy.
- **'Social safety net' is an unfamiliar term for many voters.** Very few voters in the focus groups were familiar with the term, and even among the college-educated voters in the qual board, only about half were familiar with it. Those who knew the term correctly identified its purpose and many of the key programs it includes, but it's clear that this is not language that resonates with most voters.

Effective Messaging:

- **Most objectionable cuts focused on high-profile programs.** The specific budget proposals that drew the widest and most intense opposition were those targeted at identifiable constituencies (especially when contrasted with tax cuts for the wealthy) – Medicaid, tax cuts for the rich, those supporting individuals with severe disabilities, and Meals on Wheels. The other cuts involve bigger programs that impact far more people, but these examples stood out more to our participants because they were so clearly motivated by ideology without any compassion or balance.

Once voters learn about the likely tradeoffs that would be required to fund Trump's budget, more than half of those who originally supported the idea switch to opposing the plan. Four specific details emerge as the most effective in framing the Trump budget:

- Cut funding for Medicaid, which provides health coverage mainly for seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income families (**66 percent initially supporting Trump budget move to oppose**)
- Give the vast majority of tax cuts in the plan to the wealthy and corporations, not the middle class (**66 percent initially supporting Trump budget move to oppose**)
- Cut Social Security disability programs, which help people with disabilities replace lost wages when they fall on hard times (**62 percent initially supporting Trump budget move to oppose**)
- Cut funding for Meals on Wheels and other programs that serve older Americans on fixed incomes (**62 percent initially supporting Trump budget move to oppose**)

Less than 1-in-4 voters (21 percent) believe Trump's tax and spending proposals would benefit them and their family once they learn about the cost of his ideas.

- **A values-based message focused on basic living standards—things like health care, housing, and nutrition—defeats Ryan’s dependency message.** Previous polling has shown, and our own qualitative research confirmed, that Paul Ryan’s message about welfare trapping people in poverty and leading to dependency resonates with some voters because it appeals directly to their concerns about endemic waste and abuse. But an affirmative message asserting the government’s role in ensuring access to basic living standards defeats the Ryan message by a margin of almost 2-to-1, with broad majorities across the electorate siding with the defense of basic living standards for those struggling to make ends meet.

BASIC LIVING STANDARDS VS. RYAN DEPENDENCY NARRATIVE (Which statement comes closer to your view?)					
	Total	White Non-Coll	White Coll	African American	Hispanic
<i>The government should ensure that all families have access to basic living standards like health care, nutrition, and housing if their wages are too low or they can't make ends meet.</i>	64	63	60	84	65
<i>Welfare programs trap people in poverty by leaving them dependent on the government and penalizing work.</i>	33	35	36	16	31

- **The strongest opposition message includes a bold, proactive vision for reform and economic investment.** The most effective opposition message against the Trump budget framework, as well as the more specific proposals of the Ryan budget—including popular provisions such as drug testing, job requirements, and flexible funding streams—combines an indictment of the cuts contained in those proposals with a positive vision that implicitly acknowledges voters’ frustrations with the status quo and proposes new investments in the areas they feel will make the biggest difference for themselves and other families struggling to make ends meet: education, wages, and job creation.

Instead of cutting people's access to basic living standards like [Trump's/the Republican] plan does, we should enact stronger policies to create jobs, raise wages, invest in education, and give people a chance at a better future. Rather than taking away opportunities, we need strong new investments in our families, our workers, and our infrastructure.

-- 42 percent very convincing, 71 percent total convincing

A second message that goes after Trump for supporting budget proposals that directly violate his many campaign promises scores lower than the message above but is strongest among the white non-college voters who represent his strongest base of support.

President Trump promised in his campaign that he would protect Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, and not put working people in harm's way. Yet [Trump's/the Republican] budget plan threatens these very programs and cuts basic living standards for these people, while doing nothing to help with jobs or wages. President Trump should honor his pledge and reject a plan that punishes working families.

-- 33 percent very convincing, 61 percent total convincing

- **Voters overwhelmingly support far-reaching policy proposals to boost jobs and wages and increase economic security for families.** As the broad appeal of the ‘oppose and propose’ message above demonstrates, progressives are most successful in opposing Trump and the Republicans when they offer positive proposals for addressing waste and reducing the long-term need for government assistance. The most popular proposals tested in this research are very focused on jobs and bolstering some of the economic foundations of the middle class that have been lost in recent years (87 percent total support). Family-friendly policies including paid family and medical leave and paid sick days were close behind (80 percent total support).

ⁱ GBA Strategies conducted focus groups in Southfield, MI (white non-college women and African Americans) and Denver, CO (white non-college men and Hispanics) in January; an online ‘qual board’ discussion among more than two dozen college-educated voters across the country (half Trump and half Clinton voters) in February; and a national survey of 1,200 registered voters on April 8-13, 2017.