

POLLING & STRATEGY MEMO: Q1 2025 MESSAGING

TO: Allied officials, organizations, communicators and staff
FROM: **Ethan Smith**, Founder [Upswing Research](#); and **Joe Radosevich**, VP for Campaigns at CAP Action on behalf of the survey partners.
MEMO: **Making the Consequences of Republican Corruption Stick**
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Executive Summary: Data from a [battleground survey](#) of voters in competitive House districts and 2026 Senate states conducted on behalf of Accountable.US, Campaign Legal Center Action, Center for American Progress Action Fund, Court Accountability Action, End Citizens United and Public Citizen provides communicators with insight into how progressive officials and organizations can respond to the incoming administration and congressional majorities, in the months ahead.

Corrupt policy will be Republican officials' weakness, while Trump is currently their strength. One principle should guide messaging in response to the administration's early actions and nominees, especially those impacting the budget and regulations: **be the outsider defending the American people, not the insider defending established practices, by focusing on specific failures and the consequences of corruption and cronyism.**

Beyond messaging, it is critical for officials and organizations to reassess how to identify salient topics, the style of our communication, and the mediums we use to be heard in today's information landscape.

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1. [Key findings](#) from Upswing Research. Links to full [toplines](#), [banners](#), and [presentation](#)
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Key Findings

Respondents are pessimistic about where things are headed and hold dim views of government. Despite control changing hands in the White House and the Senate, respondents across the partisan and demographic spectrum are deeply discouraged about where things in this country are headed, with 78% of respondents saying the country is “seriously off on the wrong track.” Americans believe government isn't working for them and needs reform.

Americans are demanding reform, critical groups believe the federal government is fundamentally broken. We know Americans believe the federal government requires dramatic reform—in this survey we went further to see who was most fed up and may find parts of the new administration's message appealing. A third of respondents said the government is fundamentally broken and requires starting over, a startlingly high number. While self-described Republicans are more likely to hold this view, other groups do as well, including Americans who are under 50 years old (36%), Black (39%), and Hispanic (40%). The demographics least likely to hold this view are Democrats (24%) and people who are more established and less economically anxious – seniors (27%) and the college-educated (27%). This illustrates both a deep challenge for progressives and Americans' strong desire for reform.

Trump still shows signs of Teflon Don, but other figures and organizations in his orbit are weaker, ending with Project 2025. President-elect Trump sees the highest ratings of his public life and he's the most popular public figure we tested. He's still in the transition honeymoon stage, but he is more Teflon Don than he has ever been. Notably, despite a career high, he still has sharply divided ratings: 47%-51% favorable ratings and 52%-48% job approval. Elon Musk (41%-51% unfavorable), DOGE (29%-36%), DOGE co-head Vivek Ramaswamy (27%-30%), Clarence Thomas (25%-40%), Speaker Mike Johnson (21%-37%) and Project 2025 (12%-52%) all track decidedly below Trump.

Americans expect corruption from Republican officials, and do not trust either party to root it out. This weakness will not disqualify the new administration on its own. Respondents are split 50%-50% on whether "taking on corruption" better describes Democratic officials or Republican officials. At the same time, a majority said Republicans in government are more likely to use it for "personal financial gain" by 7 points (53%-47%). This tension is part of why corruption is one of the new administration's critical weaknesses—if there is a sustained focus on the issue. Tellingly, a majority of respondents (54%) said Musk and Ramaswamy will use DOGE to benefit themselves and line their pockets rather than use it in a way that benefits the American people.

Despite real frustration with government effectiveness, respondents largely reject the Trump Administration argument against civil servants. Views of federal regulatory agencies are underwater (30%-44%) and a majority say waste and inefficiency deserves a great deal or significant blame for the government not working for regular people (69%). Waste earned more blame than common villains like special interest groups (52%) and billionaires (44%). While the federal bureaucracy has weak standing, civil servants are viewed much more favorably (54%-25%) and earn the *lowest* share of blame for the government not working for regular people. Majorities trust civil servants over Musk and Ramaswamy to ensure the government works for the public (57%), and said engineers, economists and scientists in government "shouldn't be overruled by politicians" (64%) instead of making them "more accountable to elected officials" (36%).

Billionaires are unpopular, but that label doesn't work unless it's tied to action. We find throughout the survey that billionaires and CEOs do not enjoy public support. Still, they are not as likely to be blamed for government dysfunction, nor is their wealth a compelling message against the Trump Administration—until we label them as billionaire donors. Showing that they are participants in this process to help themselves, either by donating or joining the Administration, heightens voters' ire. For instance, only 44% of voters say billionaires deserve a great deal or significant blame for the government not working for regular people, but 55% of voters say wealthy donors deserve blame. Additionally, the message that identifies Trump's cabinet as being full of billionaires was the weakest testing message, messages that showed how those billionaires may create conflicts of interest by helping themselves were stronger.

Republican officials enjoy a stronger brand than Democratic officials at the moment, but it still sports familiar weaknesses. Generally speaking, Republicans in power enjoy a stronger brand than Democratic officials. Majorities say Republicans are more likely to tell it like it is (61%), do what's necessary even when it's unpopular (55%), believe in the American Dream (56%), and a whopping 70% say Republicans want to shake things up in DC. Voters also offer that Republicans are strong, patriotic, and hopeful, while Democrats are fair but weak. Republicans, though, are

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still dragged down by the perception that they are corrupting government to serve wealthy special interests. A majority (53%) say they use government for political and financial gain, live by a different set of rules (54%), and serve the wealthy (66%). While they are speaking more to the working class and have made strides picking up working-class support in recent cycles, voters still do not see Republicans as serving them.

Strategic Recommendations

Do not defend “the Government” at all costs—defend the American people. Trump and congressional Republicans want to bait progressives into defending the status quo by attacking the government. Instead, we should be the impatient voices demanding better from the administration and the government on behalf of Americans. If we fail, elected officials on the left risk not being taken seriously by constituents who doubt the federal government can meet their needs and believe government requires major change.

Corruption has the potential to be a critical weakness for Congressional Republicans and the administration if Democratic officials show they are rooting it out. Respondents believe Republican officials and the people around Trump (including donors and Elon Musk) will use their power to benefit themselves instead of to help the American people. This should be damaging enough, but our reality is more cynical. Americans expect self-dealing from politicians, and while Republicans are seen as more likely to use the government for their own benefit, neither party has an advantage on who is more likely to tackle corruption. To exploit this weakness and turn it into a potent argument, officials must demand accountability and show they are working to root out corruption.

→ Showing how corruption harms Americans is essential. This is one of the most important recommendations. Simply describing the corruption and self-dealing inside the new administration only goes so far. We have to show how Republican corruption is harming Americans – cuts to specific and vital programs, weakened regulations, and favors for special interests at our expense are all harms we can highlight. Focusing on the specific consequences of corruption is immediately concerning and will be an important part of holding officials accountable in the long term. This approach links existing perceptions of Republican officials with the strongest argument against the administration: they’re in it for themselves, and specific cuts will harm Americans.

Target the people around Trump; continue to highlight how Musk’s actions benefit him. Musk may be an important target considering the potential his outsized influence will continue into the administration. We should be highlighting potential conflicts of interest and how he is using the government to benefit himself, especially vis-à-vis the billions in government contracts he has. Regardless of Musk’s long term importance (we do not know how long Musk will last inside Trump’s circle), it appears more valuable at this point in time to focus energy on other actors as opposed to President-elect Trump himself.

Paint DOGE as the corrupt plan to gut specific services, while demanding real improvements in government. There are real and complicated dynamics to manage *if* we have a debate over government effectiveness. Americans are disgusted by the pace and capacity of the government we have, but support the goal of a strong government to protect the public. They overwhelmingly

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believe Republican officials “want to shake things up in Washington” (70%-30%), but also trust civil servants over Elon Musk (57%-43%) and believe Musk will use DOGE to benefit himself and not the American people (54%-46%). The most effective attacks on DOGE will connect the administration’s self-dealing with harmful consequences such as people having their health insurance premiums increase and providing less support to help poor Americans buy groceries. However, when responding to DOGE we must be pro-reform and never defend broken institutions or practices. We should name the corruption, show how it undermines what we expect from government, and demand better results for Americans.

Develop a strategy for Black and Hispanic Americans; they are persuaded by Trump’s burn it all down message. Black and Hispanic Americans, as well as younger people of all races, are much more skeptical of government. They’re more likely to say we need to tear it all down and start over. We have to start catering a message to them that shows how we can make government work for them, not just how Trump’s policies are benefiting the rich. They are currently the biggest groups giving President-elect Trump the benefit of the doubt above their partisanship.

Beyond messaging, it is critical for officials and organizations to reassess how we identify topics of conversation, the style of our communication, and the mediums we use in order to be heard. Traditional heuristics and ideological labels are often ineffective, especially at showing distance from the status quo. We should experiment with surprising imagery and language so the style of our message doesn’t mask its true content – even radical ideas will appear mundane when delivered through traditional means. We have less influence than ever over the information people receive. We must be opportunistic about listening for and joining relevant conversations that are already happening. Republicans didn’t hone in on inflation until July of 2021. They listened and eventually took Americans’ top concern and simply connected it to one of Democrats’ longest running brand traits. When the moment comes, we can attach Americans’ concerns to one of Republican public officials’ biggest brand traits: serving the wealthy and self-dealing.

Developing TPs

This is a framework for how to develop talking points and remarks.

1. Start with stating the value you and Americans share,
 2. Validate voters existing concerns and suspicions about the administration
 3. Illustrate the very specific consequences of the proposal you are discussing,
 4. Then question if the administration is focused on Americans, or on themselves:
1. **SHARED VALUE:** Americans want **[our government]** to do its job and look out for us.
 - **[The Secretary of Health and Human Services]** is supposed to keep Americans healthy. To make sure we can afford medicine and that our food is safe to eat.
 - **[Labor / DOJ]** is here to protect us from companies that bend and break the law.
 - **[EPA]** is how we make sure our water is safe to drink and polluters don't threaten our kids' health.
 2. **REALITY & VILLAIN:** Now **[CMS / a specific agency]** **[fails the public by harmful consequence / validate public skepticism]** because **[political guys like Russ Vought / type of villain and actor inside Admin (e.g. corporate lobbyist)]** suck up to the big money and the insiders.
 3. **SPECIFIC CONSEQUENCES** of the rule, regulation or proposed budget shown through **the people harmed, not in the amount of money or broad impacts.** *[Republican aligned actor]* is abusing the government to rip Americans off, and benefit **[themselves / their backers]**.
 4. **QUESTION:** Why aren't Republicans working to stop **[the rapid increase in health insurance costs when insurance companies are making record profits? / intractable and salient problem... "how will the administration deliver on X, such as housing"]**

Will they work for the American people, such as **[highlight a policy where we agree and Republicans are divided]**... or will they continue to work for MAGA Republican insiders, by pushing **[specific consequences / unpopular Project 2025 concept]**?

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Do & Do Not

DO	DO NOT
<p>Defend the American people; show our shared desire for the government to do a better job protecting and serving Americans.</p> <p><i>This means relying on commonly held heuristics, such as deserving behavior.</i></p>	<p>Do Not: Defend our institutions, especially their established practices. Americans want profound change in the federal government.</p> <p><i>This also means not relying on establishment heuristics such as ideology and precedent.</i></p>
<p>Focus on corruption, specific harms, cuts to services, and targets beyond Trump</p>	<p>Do Not: Focus on Trump, the wealth or bravado of his team, or ideological labels.</p>
<p>Predict consequences of corruption; show how Americans will suffer when officials use the government for their own personal gain.</p>	<p>Do Not: Predict only that billionaires or big donors will enrich themselves. While people believe this, it does not raise major concerns. We must show how Americans will be harmed.</p>
<p>Be specific to improve favorability; this is true for services as well as actors.</p> <p><u>For actors</u>, this could mean naming specific types of jobs. For example, adding “scientists”, “engineers” or “prosecutors” to “civil servants” improves favorability by +18.</p>	<p>Do Not: Talk in general terms, especially about “federal agencies” (-8)</p> <p><u>For services</u>, do not stop at “painful cuts”. Name the program and people impacted, such as “21,948 Georgia kids who would lose daycare and pre K” by eliminating Head Start</p>