

FAIR ELECTIONS NOW: Elections of, by, and for the people

To: Campaign Staff, Coalition Allies, and State Directors
From: David Donnelly, Campaign for Fair Elections
Date: July 6, 2010
RE: Messaging on Fair Elections

We have undertaken a two and a half month public opinion research project with Lake Research Partners, McKinnon Media, and Westen Strategies to assess public attitudes about the role of money in politics, support for comprehensive solutions like Fair Elections-style campaign reform, and responsiveness to positive and negative statements about the way money flows into elections and the policy-making process.

The results below are based on three building block pieces of research: 1) four focus groups held in Charlotte (May 11) and Denver (May 12) with swing voters, 2) a national online dial-test survey of 900 likely voters conducted from June 4-10, and 3) a national telephone survey of 1,500 likely voters conducted June 26-30.

This memo provides guidance for applying what we have learned to your public speaking, websites, talking points, materials, press releases, and other communication you have with the public. The first section will provide several strategic findings of the research. The second section will share actual language and themes that tested well in advancing our work to make government more accountable to everyday Americans.

FINDINGS

Finding #1. Public support for Fair Elections-style campaign finance reform is strong and a majority of every subsection of Americans, regardless of demographic and political identities, supports the measure.

In the national telephone survey just completed, 63% of respondents support Fair Elections with just 23% opposed. Voters in “red” states supported the proposed measure by 62% to 25% and voters in “blue” states supported it 64% to 20%. Democrats provided a wide margin of 74% to 12% support, with independents at 60% to 25% and Republicans at 53% to 33%.

Finding #2. Opposition arguments about comprehensive reform are strong on their own, but are meek when stacked against our best messages.

We tested a summary argument including “welfare for politicians” and wasting money on politics rather than on “education, jobs, or public safety” in both the online and telephone surveys. Our arguments consistently beat the opposition message in the online

dial-tests by more than 20% and as high as 42%. In the telephone survey, with a slightly different structure that was tougher on our side, we still won by between 10% and 20% over the negative arguments.

What this means is that we must consistently come back to our message when attacked by the opposition or when these arguments are made.

Finding #3. Statements that start with positive, aspirational language are stronger overall.

The public already is well-sensitized to the problem of money in politics, but they need to have hope that it can be addressed. Starting messages with hopeful or forward-thinking statements, or ones that tap into deep-seated patriotic ideals, improve the public's receptivity to supporting comprehensive reform.

Finding #4. It's important to connect money in politics to the issues Americans see in their daily lives with language that we use around the kitchen table.

Many reformers can cite chapter and verse about the policies needed to improve our democracy. But what the public needs to hear in language that is accessible to all of us, is the difference fixing our democracy will make when people are out of work, when Wall Street ruined the economy, and BP destroyed the Gulf Coast.

Finding #5. The popular anger at business-as-usual in Washington will motivate the public to support Fair Elections-style reform.

People are angry at the way Washington works not simply because Congress seems out of touch. They're angry because Congress doesn't seem to be listening at all to their concerns. Congress appears to be more responsive to the needs of big donors and their lobbyists rather than the needs of everyday Americans. But Americans continue to be skeptical that you can change Washington overnight. In short, Americans may want to control what happens in Washington, but they'll settle for knowing that at least their voices can be heard by their elected officials.

MESSAGES THAT WORK

Taglines

Several taglines tested well in both online and telephone surveys. These are the ones we will use:

- Fair Elections Now (name of the bill)
- Elections of, by, and for the people (or Government of, by, and for the people)
- Make Congress accountable to us

Short Messages

The following short messages tested well throughout the research:

- It's time we return to government of, by, and for the people, not government of, bought, and paid for by special interests.
- As long as politicians are accountable to the corporations and lobbyists who finance their campaigns, they're never going to be accountable to the people that elected them. It's time ordinary Americans had their voices heard. Our elected officials should be concerned with solving our problems and concerns, not those of special interests who can afford to pay for special treatment.
- It's time we had a government that worked for working Americans, not for big corporations and their lobbyists. How many disasters does it take to decide it's time to fix our broken government?
- The problem with our political system isn't so much that individual members of Congress are corrupt but that the system is corrupt. Sure, there are bad apples in the barrel, but the real problem is that the barrel is rotten. No matter how honest you are, when your ability to get elected depends on collecting millions of dollars from special interests, there's no way you can be objective.
- It's time we take the "for sale" sign off the Capitol lawn. We can't afford the price we're paying for corporate-sponsored government.
- The only interests our elected officials should be paying attention to are the problems of everyday Americans, not the special interests who pay for their campaigns. But everywhere you look in Washington there's a lobbyist with an open checkbook.
- We should replace corporate-funded elections with Fair Elections. We need to put elections back in the hands of ordinary Americans. Politicians should work for us, not their corporate sponsors.

Full Messages

Below are four full-length messages in a form that can easily be adapted for speeches, op-eds, letters to the editor, and materials.

- **Of, By, and For [80% total convincing, 48% very convincing]**

It's time we return to government of, by, and for the people, not government of, bought, and paid for by special interests. If big businesses want to invest in our government, let them pay their fair share of taxes rather than paying for politicians who'll write them special tax breaks. Right now, the biggest corporations in America pay a smaller percent of income tax than the average working family, and they even get special bonuses for outsourcing American jobs. Since the crisis on Wall Street less than two years ago, the

banks have spent nearly a million dollars a day lobbying in Washington—while taxpayers have been bailing them out. The job of Wall Street bankers is to get a good return on their investment, and unfortunately, they've taken those skills to Washington. It's time we replaced corporate-funded elections with Fair Elections. We need to put elections back in the hands of ordinary Americans. Our leaders should work for us, not their corporate sponsors.

- **Rotten Barrel [79% total convincing, 47% very convincing]**

The problem with our political system isn't so much that individual members of Congress are corrupt but that the system is corrupt. Sure, there are bad apples in the barrel, but the real problem is that the barrel is rotten. No matter how honest you are, when your ability to get elected depends on collecting millions of dollars from special interests, there's no way you can be objective. And having to spend so much time fund-raising just discourages good people from running and prevents those who do get elected from doing what we sent them there to do: solve the problems of everyday Americans. It's time our elected officials started listening to the voices of everyday Americans, not their corporate sponsors. We need to clean up our elections, and do it now.

- **Accountable [77% total convincing, 48% very convincing]**

As long as politicians are accountable to the corporations and lobbyists who finance their campaigns, they're never going to be accountable to the people who elected them. It's time ordinary Americans had their voices heard. Our elected officials should be concerned with solving OUR problems and addressing OUR concerns, not those of special interests who can afford to pay for special treatment. It's time we take our government back, with elections that are fair to ordinary Americans, where candidates for Congress only get funding if they share the values and concerns of the people back home. And let big corporations pay their fair share for what we all deserve—fair, clean elections that put American voters back in the driver's seat— instead of paying for high-priced lobbyists. It's time we take the “for sale” sign off our government, so that it works for working and middle class Americans.

- **Working Americans [75% total convincing, 43% very convincing]**

It's time we had a government that worked for working Americans, not for big corporations and their lobbyists. How many disasters does it take to decide it's time to fix our broken government? We now know that the agency responsible for monitoring offshore oil drilling was owned and operated by the oil companies. BP was even allowed to fill out safety inspection reports on the rig that blew up in the Gulf in pencil so regulators could just trace over them in pen. We know that Wall Street regulators looked the other way when they saw the rampant fraud and recklessness that cost so many people their homes and jobs. There's one common denominator—money—and there's one common solution: end legalized bribery dressed up as campaign contributions from big business. Let the people of a state decide who they want to run for Congress with small contributions, and let some of those big corporations that have been paying for politicians pay instead for fair elections and government that works for a change.