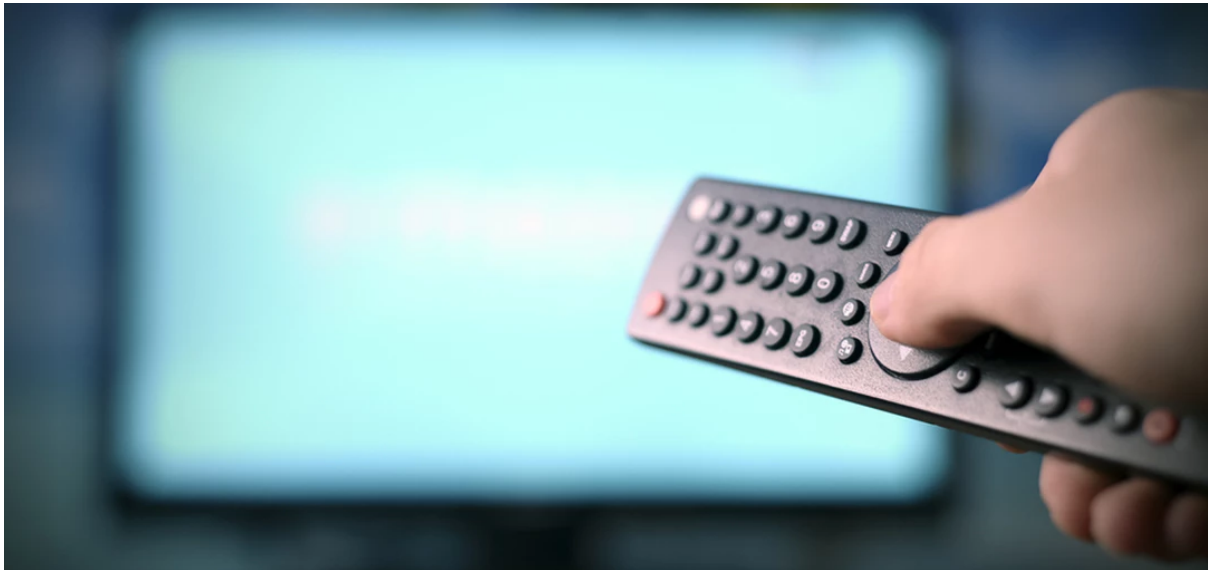


# 476,405 Democratic House Ads Later...



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The Democratic wins in 2018 illuminate a path to victory in 2020. So what should 2020 candidates learn from the messages that worked in these midterms? In order to answer that question, we watched and analyzed the nearly 1,000 unique ads that were run over 475,000 times during this past general election season in the most competitive House districts in the country. What we found was that Democrats were stunningly disciplined in their communications to voters: running on mainstream, pocketbook issues (not left-wing populism), and refusing to get distracted by Trump-driven chaos in the news.

Democratic health care ads led the cycle, but the spots focused mostly on a defense of the ACA and so rarely on single-payer and Medicare for All that it was as if those policies were deliberately ignored. Likewise, ads on the economy mostly criticized the Trump tax cuts and defended such Democratic priorities as Social Security and job creation.

## Methodology

In the 2018 midterm elections, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) maintained a list of 92

endorsed candidates who were running in House districts that lacked a Democratic incumbent. This was their “Red to Blue” list, which included six candidates trying to hold a competitive open Democratic district and 86 candidates trying to flip a district from Republicans.

Third Way staff watched, tracked, and logged all Democratic ads in these 92 DCCC Red to Blue races—including ads run by the campaigns directly and those produced by supporting groups (like the DCCC, House Majority PAC, League of Conservation Voters, Planned Parenthood, and others). The ads were obtained through the Atlas Project, which in partnership with Kanter Media and the Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG) produces a toolkit that allows users to watch ads in specific races and provides spot counts on those ads (the number of times an ad runs on television). According to that data, there were 967 unique ads run in the Red to Blue races by Democrats or those supporting them in the 67 day period between September 1 and Election Day, with a spot count total of 476,405 (meaning an average ad was run about 493 times).

When tracking, we used spot counts as multipliers rather than treating every ad as equal. Therefore an ad that was run 1,000 times was weighted at 1,000x compared to an ad that only ran once.

We created overarching issue categories and then divided them into subcategories. For example, there was an overarching health care category into which all ads that dealt with health care were placed. From there, we separated these ads by their sub-issues, such as pre-existing conditions or Medicare.

Because virtually every ad dealt with multiple issues, the percentages below should not be interpreted as being in contest with each other, but rather they offer a reflection of what percentage of ads dealt with a certain topic.

## **What Did Democrats Run On?**

Ahead of the 2018 midterms, House Democrats came together around a unifying message that could bring all wings of their big tent party together, with a slogan of “For the People.”

This message focused on affordable health care that protected people with pre-existing conditions, expanding economic opportunity, and fighting corruption in Washington.

A typical Democratic ad this cycle accusing Republicans of taking special interest money and giving those special interests huge tax breaks at the expense of eliminating health care for those with pre-existing conditions and eliminating social security and Medicare.



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This message was sent in nearly all districts with all types of candidates. The data below breaks down how much Democratic candidates and groups converged on this shared narrative, while also allowing for local political issues to shine.

## Health Care was King

Health care proved to be far and away the most popular issue in Democratic ads. A whopping 59% of Democratic ad airings dealt with the issue of health care, making it the only issue category to top 50%. The message on health care was two-fold: making health care affordable and protecting coverage for everyone. Democrats appeared to especially target older voters with these messages, as Medicare and opposing the

so-called ‘age tax’ (the provision in the GOP health care bill that would have allowed insurers to charge older Americans 5 times more than younger ones) featured prominently, while coverage for young adults was basically absent from paid ads on health care.

HOUSE FL26 MUCARSEL POWELL DCCC NOONE S...



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In swing districts, Democrats heavily leaned into protecting and expanding the Affordable Care Act—*not* promoting single-payer health care. In fact, more Democratic ads were run that explicitly *opposed* single-payer than supported it.

HOUSE NY19 DELGADO BORN AND RAISED



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Change That | Lizzie Pannill Fletcher for Congress



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Only two Democratic ads supported single-payer. These were run by Dana Balter in NY24 and by the PCCC on behalf of Kara Eastman in NE02. Both of these candidates lost their races.

HOUSE NE02 CHANGECAMPAIGN JEFF SCHLICH...



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Twisting



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Below is the data for every sub-issue that represented more than 5% of health care ads or was a major part of the Democratic debate on health care.

| Sub-Issue                                       | Occurrence |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Affordable health care / lower premiums         | 44%        |
| Protecting coverage for pre-existing conditions | 31%        |
| Protecting Medicare                             | 28%        |
| Opposing age tax                                | 20%        |
| Lower drug prices                               | 11%        |

Other sub-issues which came in at less than 5% were (in order of frequency): physical access to health care providers, generic opposition to the GOP health care bill, opposing single-payer health care, and (as detailed above) supporting single-payer.

## Democrats Offered Economic Opportunity

During these midterm elections, Democrats had to convince voters to give them control of the House at a time when the Republicans control all levers of power in the federal government and the country is nearing full employment. However, Republican actions made this an easier task, especially at a time when people are increasing feeling it is difficult for themselves to earn a good life. Despite the good topline national economic numbers, Democrats talked about economic issues in 37% of their ads. The most common economic ad was Democrats promising to protect Social Security at the hands of potential Republican cuts.

### IA-03 - "Sausage"



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Nearly as common were Democratic ads hammering Republicans on their 2017 tax bill for benefitting the wealthy and big corporations over the middle-and-working class. Sometimes ads would note the same Republican tax rewrite also exploded the federal debt.

### KS-03 Working Families



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Other common themes in economic-related ads included promises to focus on job creation, saving jobs, and job skills training. These kinds of messages helped propel candidates like Abigail Spanberger in an economically changing district.

## Training



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Notably, not a single Democratic ad in these districts mentioned far left ideas like a federal jobs guarantee or a universal basic income.

Below is the data for every sub-issue that appeared in more than 5% of ads around the economy.

| Sub-Issue                                     | Occurrence |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------|
| Protecting Social Security                    | 43%        |
| Middle class tax cuts & opposing GOP tax bill | 40%        |
| Federal deficits / debt                       | 11%        |
| Job creation / protection                     | 8%         |
| Job skills training                           | 6%         |

Other sub-issues which came in at less than 5% were (in order of frequency): supporting equal pay, infrastructure spending, opposing tariffs, job benefits, utilities prices, raising minimum wage / fair wages, outsourcing, housing costs, and bank reform.

## Anti-Corruption Played a Supporting Role

While Democrats had strong health care and economic messages, promising to fight corruption and special interest

influence also played a key role in helping broaden their appeal to voters.

Democrats attacked Republicans for giving huge tax breaks to the wealthy and big corporations in exchange for campaign contributions, and they promised to better represent their constituents rather than continuing this transactional relationship. Candidates like Josh Harder in CA10, Jason Crow in CO06, Angie Craig in MN02, and Andy Kim in NJ03 all cut ads promising not to accept corporate PAC money or special interest money that could cause them to forget who they were truly serving.

HOUSE CO06 CROW FAMILIES IN THIS COMMUNI...



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These anti-corruption themes were seen in 26% of all Democratic ads. This number also includes ads attacking Republican candidates for taking special interest money and misuse of public funds for their own personal benefit.

## **Local Issues Still Matter**

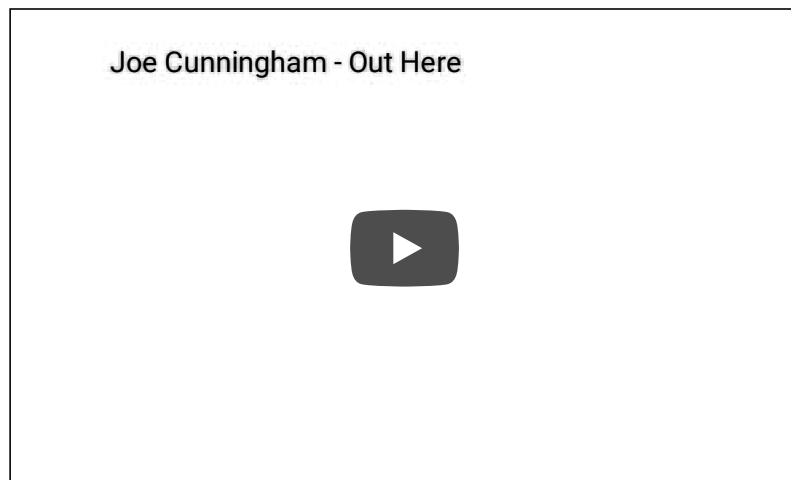
In addition to the 3 major issues highlighted above that permeated across the Red to Blue districts, other important issues appeared in less than 10% of all Democratic ads and but concentrated in districts in which constituents have a particular interest in the matter.

### **Environment**

The most common additional issue was the environment, which appeared in 6% of all Democratic ads, usually with

Democrats promising to support clean environmental and energy solutions (clean water initiatives were most prevalent). Many of these came from outside groups and were used to accuse Republicans of accepting special interest money only to allow these special interests to cause environmental harm in local areas.

Opposing offshore drilling also played a starring role in at least one Democratic campaign. In fact, it may have singlehandedly allowed Joe Cunningham to pull off a huge upset in the Republican leaning SC01. After his Republican opponent endorsed offshore drilling in an attempt to link herself to Trump, Cunningham cut ads including one of him swimming in the coastal Carolina waters promising to oppose drilling in Charleston's beaches.



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By contrast, the only Democratic candidate to spend money pushing back against environmental and clean energy regulations was Richard Ojeda in WV03, who ran ads in support of the coal industry. Ojeda lost his election.

## HOUSE WV03 OJEDA COAL MINING FAMILY



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Below is the data for every sub-issue that appeared in more than 5% of ads about the environment.

| Sub-Issue                            | Occurrence |
|--------------------------------------|------------|
| Supporting clean water               | 44%        |
| Opposing offshore drilling           | 18%        |
| Supporting public lands              | 8%         |
| Proper nuclear waste disposal        | 7%         |
| Standing up against coal industry    | 7%         |
| Supporting solar energy              | 7%         |
| Generic support of clean environment | 6%         |

Other sub-issues which came in at less than 5% were (in order of frequency): generic support of clean energy, supporting the coal industry, and opposing pipelines.

## National Security

National security issues were featured in 4% of all Democratic ads. The overwhelming majority of these were in support of veterans benefits in districts with large veteran populations such as Ann Kirkpatrick in AZ02 and Elaine Luria in VA02.

## HOUSE VA02 VOTEVETS STEPPING UP AGAIN



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A few Democrats such as Angie Craig in MN02 and Anthony Brindisi in NY22 also talked about cybersecurity issues and the need for more government enforcement in that area.

## HOUSE MN02 DCCC FIT RIGHT IN



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Below is the data for every sub-issue that appeared in more than 5% of national security ads.

| Sub-Issue                                 | Occurrence |
|-------------------------------------------|------------|
| Veterans benefits                         | 69%        |
| Supporting military and military spending | 18%        |
| Cybersecurity                             | 10%        |

Only one other sub-issues came in at less than 5%:  
supporting strong diplomacy.

## Education

Education was fairly common topic for some Democrats based on their local political context, and it came up in 4% of Democratic ads. Most was focused on higher education—specifically making college affordable. Other frequent topics included dealing with the student loan/debt problem and supporting free community college. Not a single Democrat in these battleground districts ran an ad touting free four-year college.

Ads that referenced K-12 education were either generic in support or specifically supporting increasing or protecting investment in K-12 schools.

Below is the data for every sub-issue that was in more than 5% of education ads.

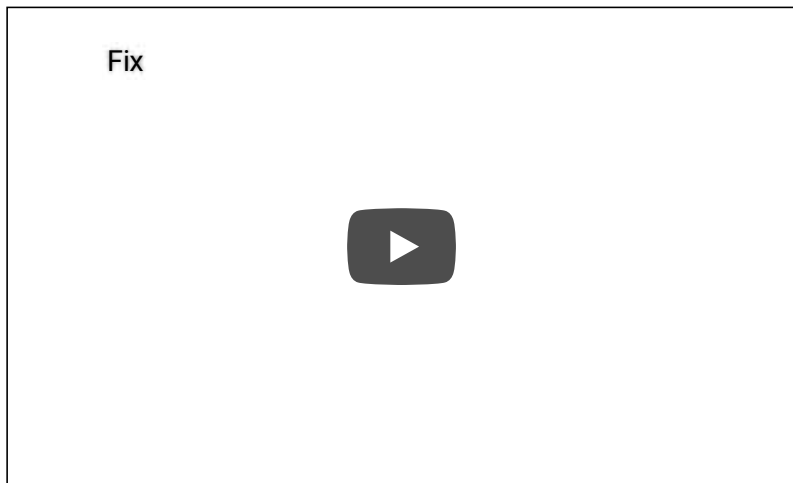
| Sub-Issue                                 | Occurrence |
|-------------------------------------------|------------|
| Affordable college                        | 42%        |
| Protecting/increasing K-12 school funding | 36%        |
| Generic support of K-12                   | 20%        |
| Addressing student loans/debt             | 14%        |
| Free community college                    | 6%         |

## Immigration

While immigration made up a sizable portion of Republican attacks on Democrats this cycle, it only appeared in 3% of Democratic ads. However, where it was discussed, Democrats did talk about the issue in a smart and nuanced way.

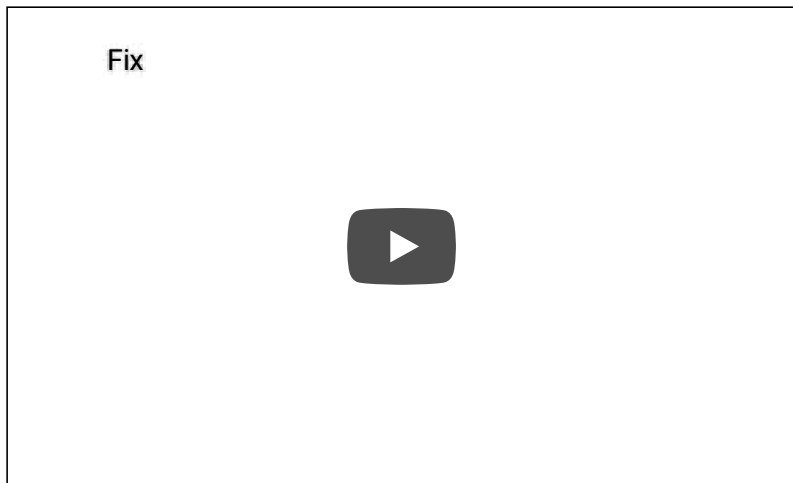
Democrats like Xochitl Torres Small in NM02 ran great ads focused on supporting strong border security while also reforming our broken immigration system. By talking about the need to keep communities and our country safe *and* support immigrant communities, Democrats were able to cut through Republican scare tactics and present real solutions

on an issue where Republicans have clearly shown their preference for playing politics.



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Not a single Democrat in a swing district ran an ad in favor of abolishing ICE. A few, including Abigail Spanberger in VA07, actually spent money in ads to push back against the idea of abolishing ICE.



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Below is the data for every sub-issue that appeared in more than 5% of immigration ads.

| Sub-Issue                         | Occurrence |
|-----------------------------------|------------|
| Supporting strong border security | 48%        |
| Supporting immigration reform     | 30%        |
| Opposing separation of families   | 26%        |

|                                  |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Supporting a path to citizenship | 16% |
| Supporting DACA                  | 12% |
| Opposing federal raids           | 9%  |

Other sub-issues which came in at less than 5% were (in order of frequency): opposing abolishing ICE and generic opposition to GOP immigration bills.

## Conclusion

Democrats won in 2018 on a simple message of protecting and expanding affordable health care, expanding economic opportunity, and serving their constituents rather than special interests. And in some cases, they let local interests carry them over the finish line.

As new Democratic Members arrive next year, they will be focused not on pursuing a far-left agenda, but on delivering on those promises to their constituents.

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