TO:	Interested Parties
FROM:	Jon Cowan, Matt Bennett, and Aliza Astrow
RE:	Shield PAC After-Action Report

Shield PAC was founded in 2021 in response to a very particular threat: the Republican pledge to use the ideas and rhetoric of the far left to paint moderate, at-risk Democrats as radicals ("woke socialists") on culture war issues like crime and immigration. The GOP used it effectively in 2020 and were doubling down with this as a centerpiece for the midterms and the next presidential. Our research showed these false attacks could be potent. But we also found their impact could be mitigated if the charges were met head-on. Aware that no one else would do it, we set out to shield as many Members from this assault as our resources would allow in 2022. **The results astonished even us: we went 8 for 9 in the races we entered and have evidence our intervention was vital to those wins.**

Our Mission: Protection Against Culture War Attacks

In 2020, Republicans picked up more than a dozen House seats on the same ballot that Biden won. This was weird, and Third Way led a major postmortem to find out why it happened. We interviewed 150 candidates and their teams, and we revealed that a main reason for those House losses was the GOP's success in tying Democrats to toxic far-left ideas like "Defund the Police." Such a charge was lethal in the majority-making suburbs with voters of all races.

We also found that the main Democratic PACs devoted 95% of their 2020 spending to attack ads and did very little to defend incumbents from this culture war assault. Pundits and insiders also were proclaiming the midterms would be decided solely by inflation and abortion. Some Party leaders even went on television to mock the idea that crime could be a potent issue for Republicans in 2022. We knew that was wrong, and we set out to challenge the status quo.

To do that, we set up Shield PAC. After discovering in early national research that female candidates are more easily mischaracterized as too far left, we narrowed our efforts to focus on protecting a set of moderate Democratic incumbent women who flipped their seats in 2018 and who have come to represent the best of what the Party stands for.

Shield PAC's goal was not to save the House in what was anticipated to be a brutal red wave year. We were a small, lean operation. **Our mission was to ensure that GOP culture war attacks on crime and immigration did not attach to our candidates.** And by doing so, we set out to show Democrats a better way to protect themselves against the culture war attacks that are certain to be a defining feature of Trump or a Trump-style 2024 GOP nominee.

In the final days of the 2022 campaign, we knew our theory was on target. Crime emerged as a leading line of Republican attack. In the 36 House races rated "toss-ups" by Cook Political Report, the GOP spent $68.5 million on crime and immigration-related ads. This dwarfed Democratic spending on these issues, as Democrats largely funded attack ads focused on things like abortion rights. But in nine of those House races, we were in the fight. And it mattered.

Our Strategy: Highly Targeted Voter Contact

Shield PAC was active in nine congressional races: VA-07 (Abigail Spanberger), VA-02 (Elaine Luria), MI-07 (Elissa Slotkin), PA-07 (Chrissy Houlahan), NJ-11 (Mikie Sherill), KS-03 (Sharice Davids), MN-02 (Angie Craig), WA-08 (Kim Schrier), and NV-03 (Susie Lee). We spent roughly $700,000 per district on message research, voter ID, and voter contact. We ran a focused, lean operation (none of us took a dime from Shield PAC), and we did not chase shiny objects: we never produced an attack ad; we did not shift our focus to abortion when that got hot; we engaged in no base mobilization.

Our task was simple, clear, and unique: identify and prevent a small group of persuadable voters from believing false Republican attacks about these candidates. All our work was predicated on a strategy of highly targeted, narrowcast persuasion. We used four mechanisms to do it:

1. District-Level Targeting

We started with baseline survey research in each of our districts to identify our targets: who they are, where they reside, and what they believe. We were uninterested in base voters, whose minds were made up, or in non-voters, who would not turn out. We wanted only those voters who might be convinced by false GOP ads that our candidate was something she was not on these issues. In most districts, our target group comprised just 40,000-60,000 genuine swing voters.

2. Digital Ads

Like our voter targeting, our digital ads were designed by our consultants, the Strategy Group, for maximum precision and impact. We went into zip codes with the highest densities of targets. We used only connected TV (like ROKU) and YouTube. And we bought non-skippable ads, so our targets viewed the full videos. This strategy has been proven to drive message retention, move opinion, and ultimately move votes. Our narrow group of vote targets viewed Shield's digital ads (which are available at this link) more than 66 million times. We generated a total of 43,010,424 impressions on connected TV and 23,962,105 impressions on YouTube.

3. Direct Mail

Direct mail is another precision advertising tool. In our case, we used mail to bolster the messages we were delivering to the same audience with our digital spots. Our mail reinforced with tested messages, trusted validators, and tough-on-crime imagery that our candidates are not the caricature of a typical Democrat the GOP was making them out to be. We sent mail to 488,791 households (some included multiple target voters), with most of our campaigns receiving seven pieces of mail, which, when coupled with our digital communication, is a very intense and dense narrowcast communication program and the close of a campaign.

4. Micro-Influencers

After seeing evidence of its impact in recent cycles, we also used a campaign of "micro-influencers" – trusted messengers with substantial local reach on social media. A company called People First vetted 20-30 influencers in each of the targeted districts and gave them short, factual briefs. The influencers then created their own content to produce in their own voice and in ways that resonate with their followers. That campaign generated 168 unique posts with an average engagement rate of 6%, more than three times the industry average. People First estimates that this content had a value of $43 million in earned media value.

Our average investment of $700,000 per district may seem small by today's campaign standards, but only because most such spending is on broadcast/cable television. TV ads are enormously expensive (super PACs pay rates far higher than the campaigns themselves). And they're less precise: a House ad in, say, the Washington, DC media market reaches both voters and non-voters spread across many other districts.

By contrast, our spending was highly targeted, and we used only precise narrowcast advertising. Consequently, the impact of our campaign far exceeded the average for a spend of that size.

Our Impact: Evidence That It Worked

We were thrilled that in eight of our nine races, our candidates were reelected. Yet success, as the saying goes, has a thousand parents, so the victories themselves don't tell the whole story. So, we dug deeper, asking whether ads like ours help shield candidates from the impact of the GOP social issue attacks.

One respected expert validated our approach in his own separate analysis. Strategist David Shor ran a study that found the most effective ad Democrats could run was one in which candidates explicitly stated that they do not support Defund the Police. In Shor's study, such ads were 1.8 times more effective than the average advertisement. While some of our candidate targets also directly took on the defund argument, others, whether for budgetary reasons or otherwise, did not. Either way, we were in those races making that case.

So, what about Shield ads? Did those *specific* ads work? To assess that question, we had Global Strategy Group conduct a set of post-election polls in four target districts to check voter recall and to compare voter attitudes about the candidates to the baseline polls we did before our ads began. In short, our ads worked. Here are three points of evidence:

1. Recollection of Shield PAC Information

The most obvious metric for a persuasion campaign is whether voters recalled what we told them about our candidates. The data show our advertising left a real impression. In VA-07, for example, voters contacted by Shield PAC were three points more likely to recall hearing positive information about Spanberger (55%) than the overall electorate (52%). In a race decided by just over four points, a three-point impact is huge.

And our contacted voters specifically recalled the core themes from Shield PAC's communications: that Spanberger is a fierce supporter of and advocate for law enforcement. The overall electorate, on the other hand, were more likely to site a less effective, broader message about bipartisanship, making clear that our communications effectively broke through the noise and resonated among those who received Shield's communications.

The following word clouds depict the positive messages that voters in the contacted universe repeated about Spanberger, compared to the messages that voters in the overall sample repeated. As you'll see, our main theme of "law enforcement" was the thing offered most often by those who got our material:

Overall	Contacted

2. Views on Candidate Attributes

Next, we wanted to know if the voters we contacted had changed their views about our candidates on some core attributes: crime, association with the Democratic Party, and the extent they were seen as "very liberal." Recall that such voters had been subject to a barrage of GOP ads insisting that our candidates were typical far-left Democrats who were weak on crime. So, "victory" for us was those voters *not* changing their views for the worse on such traits. Holding the line so that the GOP attacks did not drive up their negatives was essential to helping our candidates win. And it would help them win on their own chosen messages, not lose by being defined as a radical lefty by Republicans.

Here too, the data is clear that our advertising worked. In VA-07, in the initial poll we did in the spring, 37% of voters believed that Spanberger was "soft on crime." But after Shield PAC's advertising, that number *dropped* to 32%. Additionally, in our original poll, 33% rejected the idea that Spanberger was "soft on crime"; after our advertising, that number shot up to 50%.

In KS-03 and WA-08, Shield PAC helped hold the line on the share of voters who perceive Davids and Schrier as "very liberal." In the initial survey, 33% labeled Davids and Schrier "very liberal." After millions of dollars of right-wing ads describing the candidates as left-wing radicals, that percentage was exactly the same in our post-election survey. The GOP attacks failed, and our communications were part of holding the line.

Finally, our advertising helped convince voters that our candidates are willing to stand up to their own party to do what's right, an essential trait in a swing district. Slotkin maintained her standing among voters on this trait, with 55% saying this describes her well in our spring poll and 56% saying the same in our post-election poll. For Davids, the effect was even more pronounced: the Shield advertisements helped increase the share of voters saying she would stand up to her party, with 53% saying this describes her well in our initial poll and 58% saying the same in our post-election research.

3. Overall Favorability

With Shield PAC's help, incumbents were able to maintain or even improve their overall standing. In our spring research in VA-07, voters had split opinions on Spanberger (37% favorable/32% unfavorable). After Shield's ads, her net favorability remained basically constant (42% favorable/38% unfavorable).

In KS-03, Shield PAC helped with Davids' favorability. Her approval numbers were decent at the outset (52% favorable/39% unfavorable), but GOP attacks were intended to erode those positive ratings. With help from our advertising, Davids not only kept her approval rating steady, but her

unfavorable numbers also went down by 5 points (52% favorable/34% unfavorable). This chart sums up the impact we saw on the two candidates' favorability:

Net Favorable (favorable – unfavorable)	VA-07	KS-03
Benchmark	+5	+13
Post-Election	+4	+18
Net Shift	-1	+5
Net Job Approval (positive – negative)	VA-07	KS-03
Benchmark	+1	+13
Post-Election	+1	+19
Net Shift	0	+6

Finally, Global Strategy Group ran an in-depth statistical analysis to understand the impact receiving Shield PAC communications had on voters' likelihood to support the Democrat. Using our four post-election district polls, they found a statistically significant positive impact that receiving Shield PAC communications had on voting for the Democratic incumbent. In short, that means that exposure to Shield PAC's ads (digital and/or mail) made voters more likely to vote for the Democratic incumbent in their district.

Another way of assessing our impact is to look at the races in which we did not participate. As the _New York Times_ recently noted, crime was the issue that drove a "seismic tilt toward the GOP" in House races in New York state. As we noted in an update email last month, the New York electoral terrain was more favorable than in the districts we were targeting, so the New York outcomes should have been similar to or better than ours. But they were worse because Shield PAC candidates were strategically protected with swing voters from the full brunt of the GOP crime ads and the NY candidates were not. **Our shield worked.**

Conclusion

Shield PAC set out to fill a gap in the political marketplace. We created a strategic, targeted campaign to protect a group of high-performing but vulnerable Democratic incumbents from culture war attacks. And it worked.

To be sure, the candidates themselves and some allied groups also were running positive ads, including some on crime, and those had a substantial impact. But the evidence is clear that Shield PAC's work moved the needle and helped save these seats.

We know that Republican attacks on hot-button culture war issues are not going away. The Republican policy agenda is slim, and what they do have is politically unpopular. Dividing Americans using culture war issues and portraying Democrats as out-of-touch cultural elitists remains their most consistent and reliable attack angle. We are certain to see it again in 2024.

Before now, Democrats often left it to voters to separate the truth from the lies in these attacks. That strategy is dangerously shortsighted. While we are still reviewing Shield PAC work for the coming cycle, we know for sure that our approach is the right one, and we will fight to ensure Democrats deploy our strategy when spurious Republican attacks emerge once again.