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POLLING IN SWING CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICTS AND PROGRESSIVE POLICIES APPEAL

December 2020

Introduction

While Joe Biden won the presidency, down-ballot Democrats in Senate, House, and state legislature races suffered significant setbacks. Despite the ambitious number of Congressional seats Democrats put into play, they ultimately failed to expand their House majority and lost many of the first-term Democrats ushered in by 2018's "Blue Wave." Democrats also lost races in an expanded Senate map that included Alaska, Iowa, Maine, Montana, North Carolina, and Texas. Control of the Senate -- and with it much of Biden's legislative agenda -- will be determined by two runoff elections in Georgia. These defeats led to immediate questions of what had gone wrong.

On a call with House Democrats, Congresswoman Abigail Spanberger made her diagnosis of these losses and ignited long-simmering tensions between centrist and progressive factions of the Democratic Party. Spanberger, a moderate who won her re-election by 8,270 votes, blamed the left flank of her party for their lackluster showing down-ballot, saying "We need to not ever use the word 'socialist' or 'socialism' ever again.... We lost good members because of that."

Shortly after this exchange, Data for Progress launched a survey of 1,375 likely voters in 13 congressional districts that Democrats either lost or narrowly held in 2020: FL-27, SC-1, NM-2, IA - 1, OK-5, MN-7, FL-26, NY-11, IL-17, VA-7, CA-39, CA-21 and PA-17. These districts were selected because many of them, though not all, were won during the "Blue Wave" election in 2018 and then narrowly lost in 2020. Responses across all of these districts were then pooled and weighted to be reflective of the 2020 election outcome. The aim of this survey was to determine what may have gone wrong for down-ballot Democrats and to ascertain what progressive policies may be winning issues in these districts.

DISTRICT	(FORMER-) DEMOCRATIC REP.	DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE	REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE	DEMOCRATIC MARGIN
CA-21	TJ Cox	49.6%	50.5%	-0.9%
CA-39	Gil Cisneros	49.4%	50.6%	-1.2%
FL-26	Debbie Mucarsel-Powell	48.3%	51.7%	-3.4%
FL-27	Donna Shalala	41.4%	48.6%	-7.2%
IA-1	Abby Finkenauer	48.7%	51.3%	-2.6%
IL-17	Cheri Bustos	51.9%	48.1%	3.8%
MN-7	Collin Peterson	39.9%	53.4%	-13.5%
NM-2	Xochitl Torres Small	46.3%	53.7%	-7.4%
NY-11	Max Rose	42.1%	57.9%	-15.8%
OK-5	Kendra Horn	47.9%	52.1%	-4.2%
PA-17	Conor Lamb	51.1%	48.9%	2.2%
SC-1	Joe Cunningham	49.4%	50.6%	-1.2%
VA-7	Abigail Spanberger	50.9%	49.1%	1.8%

Data courtesy of the New York Times

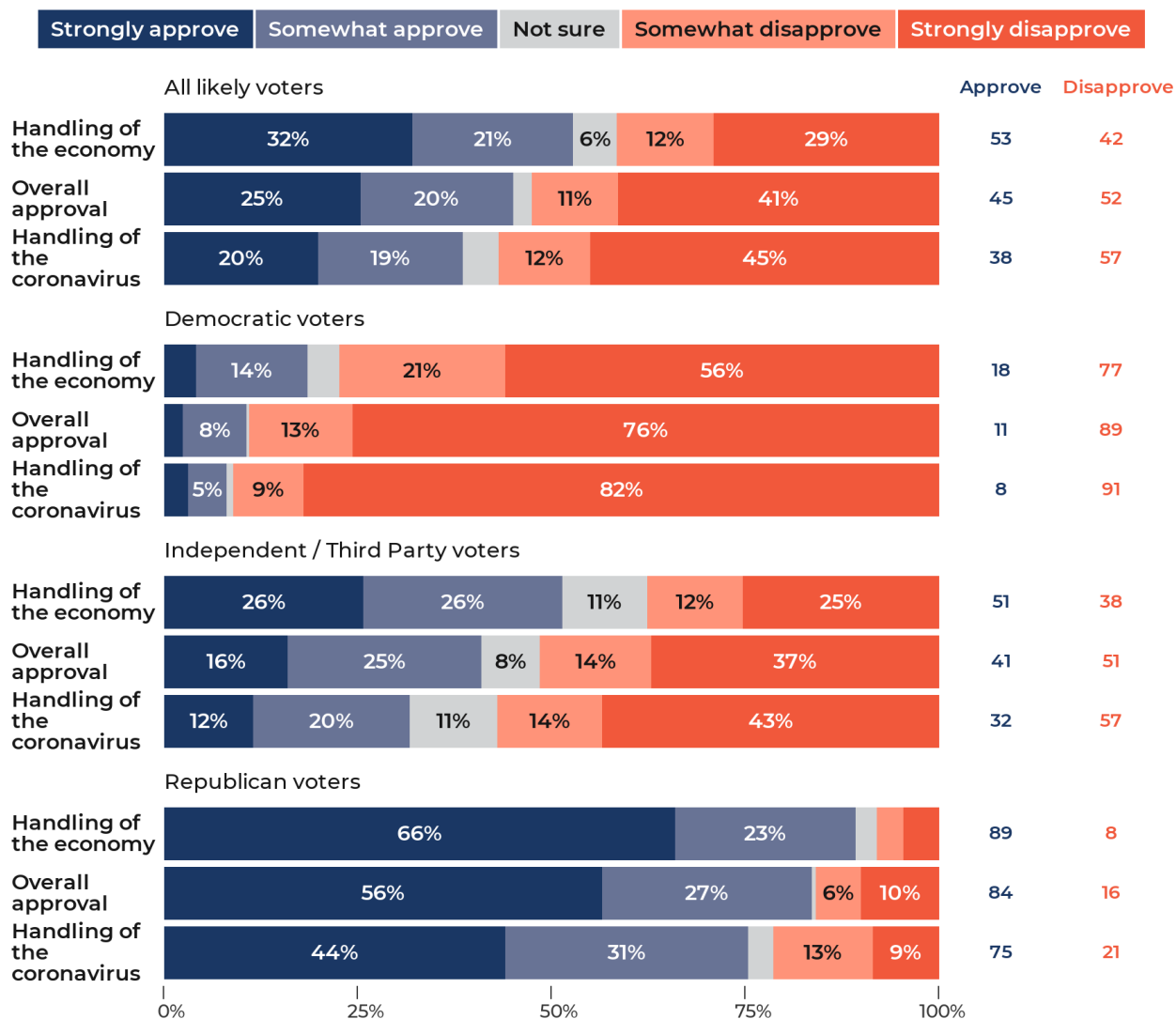
The Political Environment

Despite months of national economic turmoil caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, President Trump enjoys approval from a majority of swing district voters (53 percent) on his handling of the economy, though 57 percent of swing district voters disapprove of his handling of the pandemic itself. Overall, Trump's job approval rating among swing district voters sits at, on net, minus seven points (45 percent approve, 52 percent disapprove). These results give us a window into how the presidential race may have been determined, and seem to suggest that the election came down to a referendum on Trump's erratic response to the pandemic. While voters were ready to blame Trump for what can only be described as a failed response to the coronavirus pandemic, voters — particularly in House races nationwide — also appeared unwilling to extend this criticism to the Republican Party writ large.

Evidence of national partisanship was similarly found in survey responses of swing district House voters: Unsurprisingly, swing district voters who self-identify as Democrats most strongly disapprove of Trump's handling of the coronavirus pandemic (91 percent), his overall job performance (89 percent), and his handling of the economy (77 percent). Among swing district voters who self-identify as independents, a majority approve of Trump's handling of the economy (51 percent). However, Trump's handling of the coronavirus lost him this key voting group: A majority of swing district Independents disapprove of Trump's overall job performance (51 percent) and his handling of the coronavirus pandemic (57 percent). Meanwhile, swing district voters who self-identify as Republicans continue to express high levels of support for Trump, with an overwhelming majority approving of Trump's handling of the economy (89 percent), his overall job performance (84 percent), and his handling of the coronavirus pandemic (75 percent).

While President Trump's Approval Rating Remains Above Water In Swing Districts, A Majority Of Voters Disapprove Of His Handling Of The Coronavirus Pandemic

Do you approve or disapprove of the job that President Trump is doing (as President / handling the economy / handling the economy)?



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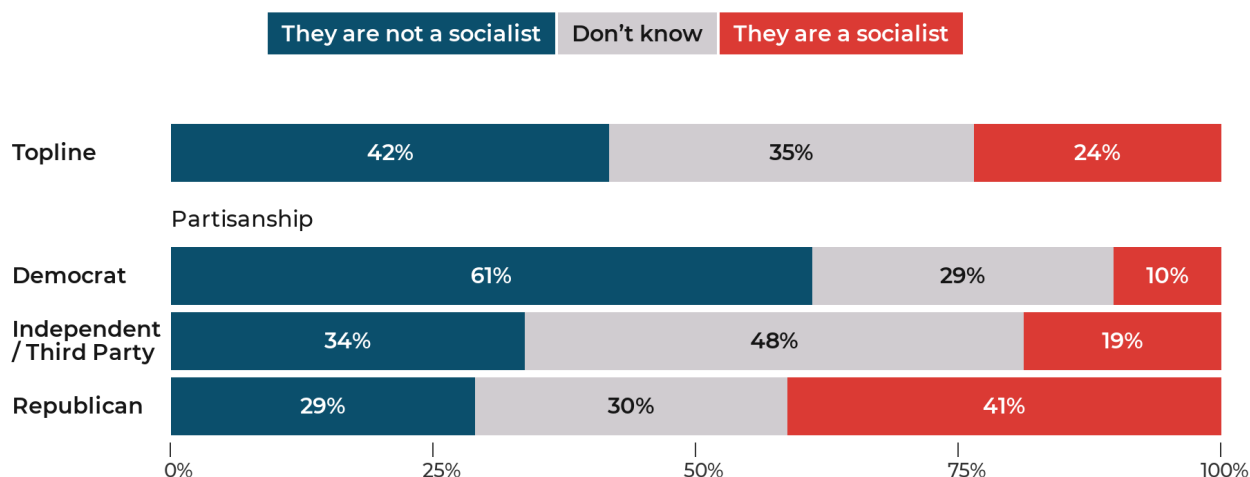
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A key part of Spanberger’s critique was that the use of the word “socialism” by some Democrats weakened the position of swing district representatives. One cause of concern brought forward by Congresswoman Spanberger was that she was tarred as a “socialist” in campaign attack ads, a refrain that was also frequently used against other vulnerable, swing district Democratic congressional candidates. It should be emphasized that *none* of the Democratic candidates running in the districts Data for Progress surveyed identified as socialists. As such, a plurality of swing district voters (42 percent) correctly identified that the Democratic congressional candidate in their district was **not** a socialist. Nonetheless, there is significant ambiguity around this talking point, as over a third (35 percent) of swing district voters did not know whether the Democratic congressional candidate in their district was a socialist.

The salience of this attack falls along partisan divides. A majority of swing district Democrats (61 percent) knew their congressional candidate was not a socialist. However, a plurality of swing district Republicans (41 percent) thought the Democratic congressional candidate was a socialist. While over a third (34 percent) of independent voters knew that the Democratic congressional candidate in their district was not a socialist, a plurality (48 percent) of these voters were unsure about whether the socialist label applied to the Democrat running.

Most Swing District Voters Did Not Think Their District's Democratic Candidate Was a Socialist

Did you think that the Democratic congressional candidate in your district was a socialist?



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Progressive Policies on Coronavirus Relief, Minimum Wage Increases, and Marijuana Legislation Are Popular

CORONAVIRUS RELIEF

Back in May 2020, Democrats passed the HEROES Act, a \$3 trillion dollar relief package that would provide an array of economic relief measures including aid to cash-strapped state and local governments, renewal of the expanded unemployment insurance program, and another round of stimulus checks. In October, Democrats passed a new slimmed-down version of the HEROES Act just weeks before the election. Notably, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican, never brought this bill to a vote. As of this memo's publication, the fight for a next coronavirus-relief package remains ongoing and is now likely to take center stage in the next session of Congress.

When thinking about congressional action on COVID-19, we asked swing district voters whether they wanted their member of Congress to fight for a bill large enough to meet the needs of the moment or to seek bipartisan compromise and pass a smaller bill that provides relief to big corporations, a key sticking point for Senate Republicans. We find that a majority (63 percent) of these voters want their incoming congressional representative to fight for a coronavirus relief bill that is large enough to meet the moment and prioritizes working families and small businesses. Support for a large coronavirus relief bill is bipartisan: A majority of swing district Democrats (78 percent), independents (56 percent), and Republicans (52 percent) all support a relief package that prioritizes delivering much-needed aid to working families and small businesses rather than corporations.

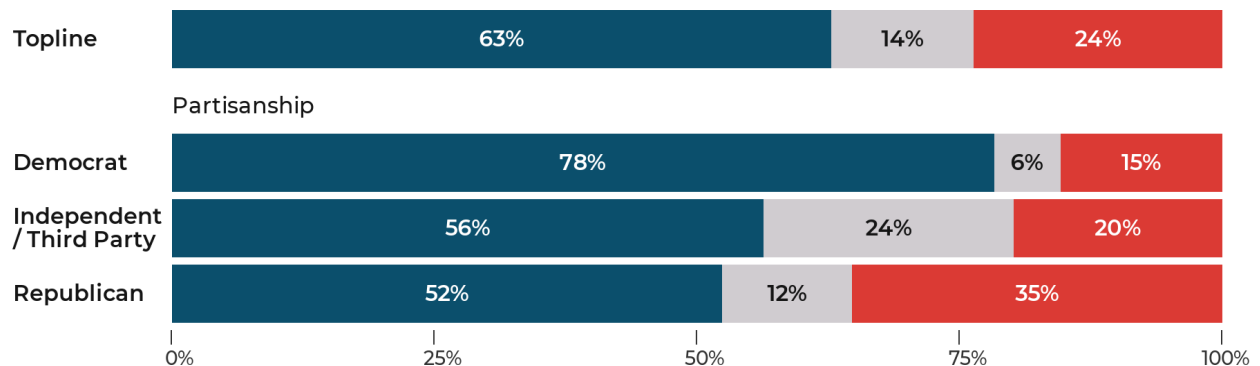
A Majority of Swing District Voters Want A Representative Who Will Fight for a Large Coronavirus Relief Bill

When thinking about how you want your congressional representative to act, what statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

Someone who will fight to pass a coronavirus relief bill that's large enough to meet the moment and will make sure we prioritize small businesses and working families, not corporations

Don't know

Someone who will focus on seeking compromise and bipartisanship, working with Republicans to pass a coronavirus relief bill, even if the resulting package is smaller and provides more aid for big corporations



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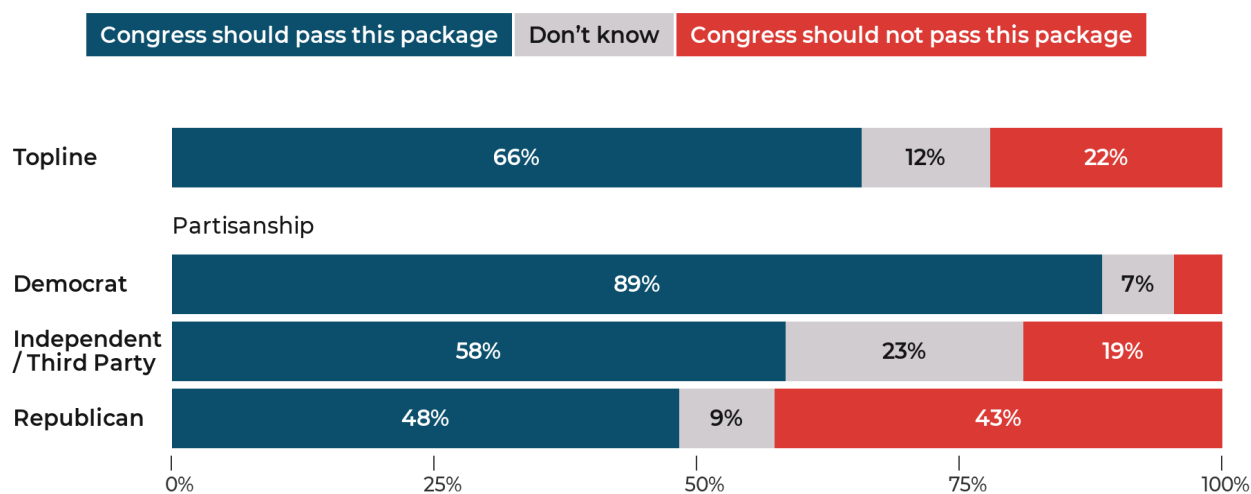
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Data for Progress also tested support for a \$3 trillion coronavirus relief package, the size of the original HEROES Act, that would invest in clean energy infrastructure and jobs, renew and extend the expanded unemployment program, and send another round of stimulus checks. We find that swing district voters are overwhelmingly supportive of this proposal. Overall, these voters support a \$3 trillion coronavirus relief bill by a 44-point margin (66 percent support, 22 percent oppose). Support for a \$3 trillion coronavirus relief package is bipartisan: Democrats back this proposal by an 85-point margin, independents by a 39-point margin, and Republicans by a 5-point margin.

A Majority of Swing District Voters Support Passing A \$3 Trillion Coronavirus Relief Bill

Some lawmakers in Congress are proposing a \$3 trillion economic stimulus package that would create clean energy jobs, rebuild the nation's infrastructure, extend increased unemployment insurance, and send stimulus checks to most Americans.

When thinking about this relief package, what comes closer to your view?



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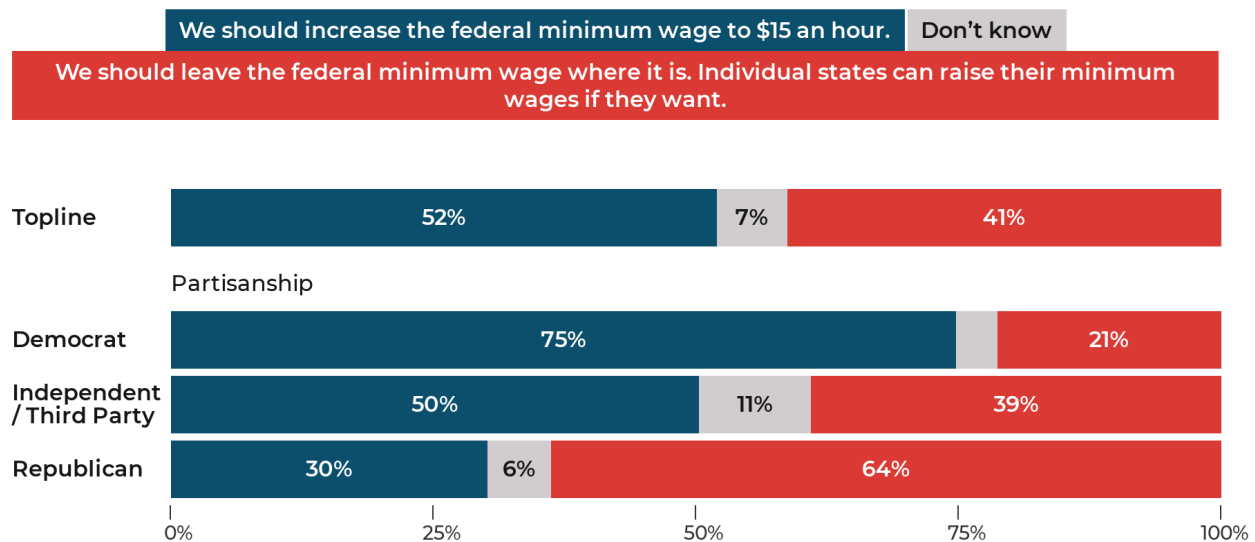
\$15 An Hour Minimum Wage

Raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, which over 60 percent of Florida voters supported and passed as a ballot measure this election, is also popular among swing district voters. Here, rather than simply measuring whether voters support or oppose a minimum wage hike, we tested it against a moderate alternative.

This result demonstrates that not only do a majority of swing district voters (52 percent) support raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour — they actually prefer this to a more moderate approach. An overwhelming majority of swing district Democrats (75 percent) and a plurality of swing district independents (50 percent) support raising the federal minimum wage. While a majority of Republicans (64 percent) prefer allowing the states to decide their minimum wage, the strong levels of support for a \$15 an hour federal minimum wage among independent voters suggests this issue has bipartisan appeal, even in swing districts.

A Majority of Swing District Voters Support Raising the Federal Minimum Wage to \$15 an Hour

The current federal minimum wage is \$7.25. When thinking about this, what statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?



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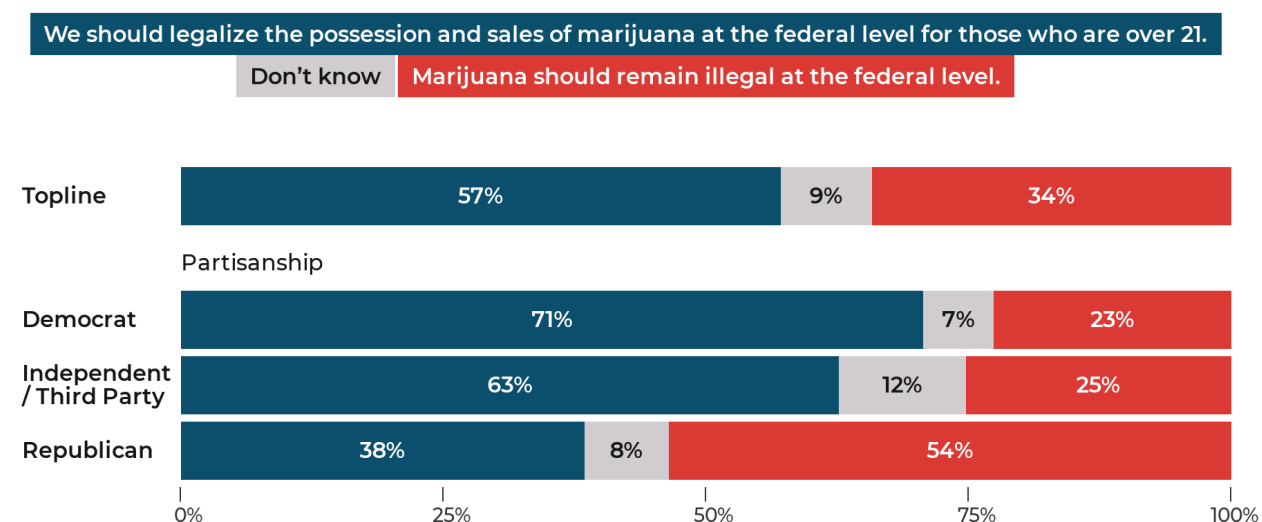
Marijuana Reform

In the 2020 election, voters in Arizona, New Jersey, Montana, and South Dakota all voted to legalize marijuana for adult recreational use. With marijuana legalization becoming more popular across the country — even in traditionally Republican states like South Dakota — it is no surprise that a majority of swing district voters (57 percent) also support legalizing marijuana for adult use. An overwhelming majority of both swing district Democrats (71 percent) and independents (63 percent) support legalizing marijuana. Given this high level of support from independent swing district voters, marijuana legalization — a major progressive proposal — appears to additionally be a popular *persuasion* policy for independent voters. While a majority of Republicans (64 percent) oppose marijuana legalization, slightly more than a third (38 percent) support it. This significant and growing support for marijuana legalization across party lines demonstrates clear potential for the Democratic Party to capitalize on the popularity of marijuana legalization as a key part of their policy agenda.

The qualitative characteristics of all three of these policies — a large-scale coronavirus economic relief package, raising the minimum wage, and legalizing marijuana — are straightforward proposals and have the potential to bring tangible, material benefits to people's lives. Three trillion dollars in coronavirus relief may mean another \$1,200— or more for those with dependents — in voters' bank accounts. For those receiving expanded unemployment benefits, the extra \$600 a week means that one would actually be making *more* on unemployment than as a worker making the current federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour. Raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour would improve the quality of life for countless Americans — many of whom

A Majority of Swing District Voters Support Legalizing Marijuana

While 15 states and the District of Columbia have legalized recreational marijuana, it remains illegal at the federal level. When thinking about this, what comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?



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are essential workers. Additionally, the legalization of marijuana has proven to supplement state budgets, which are currently facing historic cuts to essential services due to the economic impact of coronavirus. In Illinois, revenue generated from marijuana sales actually prevented, at least temporarily, the need for austerity in this time of financial crisis. As Democrats try to figure out what went wrong down-ballot, they should keep these popular and progressive policies in mind.

Perceptions of the Democratic Party

Data for Progress also asked swing district voters whether they find President-Elect Biden's messaging around his \$2 trillion clean energy investment and job creation plan more persuasive than Republican talking points against the proposal. Overwhelmingly, swing district voters find the messaging from the President-Elect, not Republicans, more persuasive. A majority of voters (61 percent) find Biden's job creation and economic prosperity message more persuasive, while only 22 percent find messaging around Biden passing a radical job-killing Green New Deal more persuasive. A majority of swing district Democrats (86 percent) and independents (56 percent) find Biden's messaging more persuasive. Meanwhile, Republicans are nearly divided, with 38 percent finding Biden's messaging more persuasive and a slight plurality (41 percent) finding messaging around killing jobs and raising electricity bills more persuasive.

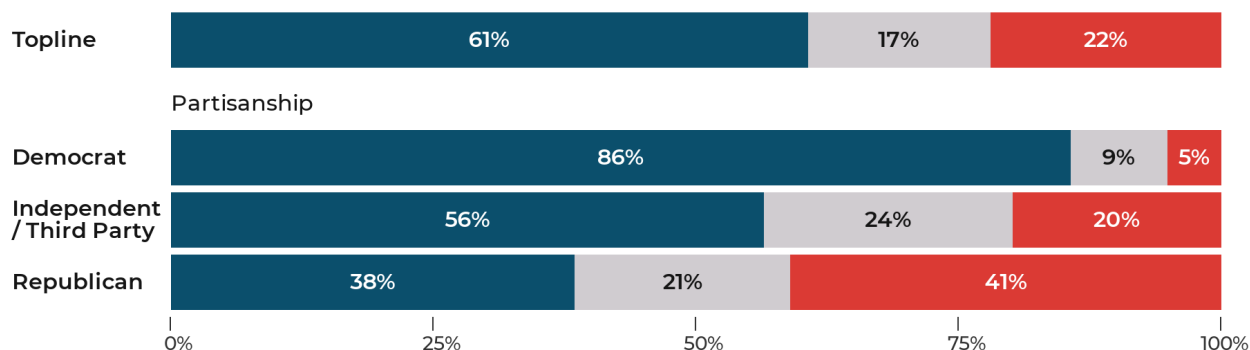
A Majority of Swing District Voters Are Not Convinced by Republican Messaging on the Green New Deal

Which statement do you find more persuasive?

Joe Biden plans to invest \$2 trillion over the next four years to create millions of good-paying jobs in new clean energy infrastructure projects that will transform our economy and leave the world a better place for our children.

Don't know

Joe Biden and AOC want to pass a radical Green New Deal that will kill good-paying jobs in the oil and fracking industries and raise taxes and electricity bills for hard-working Americans.



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Finally, we asked whether or not swing district voters would be willing to vote for a self-identified socialist if this candidate pledged to fight for a number of progressive proposals, including raising the minimum wage, passing coronavirus relief, taking on big drug companies, protecting Medicare and Social Security for seniors, and keeping the nation's air and water clean. Ultimately, a plurality of swing district voters (47 percent) say they would support this candidate, including a majority of Democrats (74 percent) and a plurality of independents (44 percent). Unsurprisingly, a majority of swing district Republicans (65 percent) say they would not support this candidate.

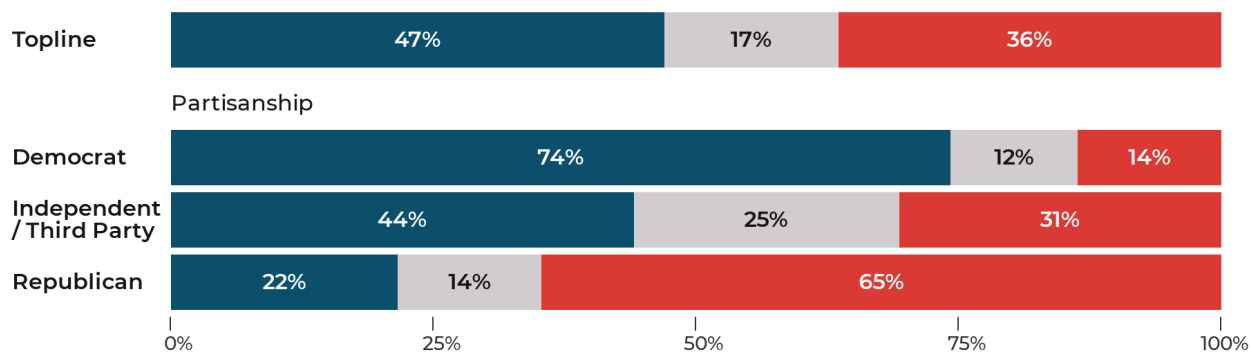
A Plurality Of Swing District Voters Say That Even if They Don't Agree on Every Issue, They Would Vote for a Socialist

What statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

Even if I don't agree with them on every issue, I'd vote for politicians who are called a "socialist" because they'd fight for working families by passing more coronavirus relief, increasing the minimum wage, taking on big drug companies, protecting Medicare and Social Security for our seniors, and keeping our air and water clean.

Don't know

Under no circumstances would I vote for a socialist, even if it means supporting a candidate who doesn't want to support more coronavirus relief and thinks we need to scale back Medicare and Social Security. Electing socialists is dangerous and puts this country on a path towards becoming Venezuela.



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Conclusion

Progressives must be honest with themselves: the kind of policy agenda that someone can run on to win in a safe Democratic district is likely different than what someone in a swing district ought to run on. Still, as this polling shows, progressive policies like raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour, legalizing marijuana, and fighting for an expansive coronavirus relief package *are* popular among swing district voters. Overall, our polling suggests that there is a clear model for the types of progressive policies that can win in swing districts: policies that directly and tangibly benefit the lives of voters.

Acknowledgements

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Methodology

From November 9 to November 14, 2020, Data for Progress conducted a survey of 1,375 likely voters using web-panel respondents in the following Congressional districts: FL-27, SC-1, NM-2, IA - 1, OK-5, MN-7, FL-26, NY-11, IL-17, VA-7, CA-39, CA-21 and PA-17. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, and voting history. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is ± 2.6 percentage points.