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To: Interested Parties

From: Lake Research Partners

Re: Social Security Cuts In the Deficit Debate

Date: July 21, 2011

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### **Executive Summary**

- Voters continue to name jobs and the economy as the most important issue facing the country. The economy far outweighs the deficit as the major concern for voters. Though current news focuses on the debt ceiling, voters' concern on the debate stems from their belief that a failure to act will have negative consequences for the economy.
- They support reducing the deficit, but strongly oppose cutting Social Security as part of a deficit reduction package. Instead, they want the deficit addressed through a combination of tax increases and spending cuts. When forced to choose, they believe preserving Social Security benefits is much more important than reducing the deficit.
- Voters oppose changes to Social Security that would reduce benefits – including changes to the COLA formula that reduce the amount beneficiaries receive, or raising the retirement age to 69.
- Elected officials who put Social Security cuts on the table in the debate over the deficit may face punishment from voters back home. Such cuts could jeopardize Democrats' position with key voter groups that decided the election for Republicans in 2010 – women and seniors.

**Jobs and the Economy Remain Priority #1**

**Voters continue to name jobs and the economy as the most important issue facing the country. The economy far outweighs the deficit as the major concern for voters. Though current news focuses on the debt ceiling, voters' concern on the debate stems from their belief that a failure to act will have negative consequences for the economy.**

- In several recent national public polls the economy and jobs is the most important issue for people, far surpassing the budget deficit and government spending.
  - When asked to name the most important issue facing the country, a 53 percent majority of Americans say the economy and jobs, followed by 7 percent who say the budget deficit or the National debt.<sup>1</sup>
  - When asked to choose from a list of issues, a 42 percent plurality of Americans say unemployment and jobs is the most important issue facing the country right now.<sup>2</sup> Government spending (17 percent) and the federal deficit (13 percent) are the second and third most important issues respectively.
- Americans connect the economy with the debate over the debt ceiling, believing that failure to raise the limit will cause serious harm to the broader economy and their own personal financial situation.
  - Over 80 percent of Americans say that if the debt limit is not raised by Congress, it would cause serious harm to the US economy, while just 16 percent say it would not cause serious harm.
  - Sixty (60) percent of Americans say their personal financial situation would be seriously harmed if Congress does not raise the debt limit.<sup>3</sup>

**Reduce the Deficit, But Don't Cut Social Security To Do So**

**Voters support reducing the deficit, but strongly oppose cutting Social Security as part of a deficit reduction package. Instead, they want the deficit addressed through a combination of tax increases and spending cuts. When forced to choose they believe preserving Social Security benefits is much more important than reducing the deficit.**

- Recent polls consistently show voters desire a combination of spending cuts and tax increases to address the deficit.
  - A 66 percent majority of Americans want an agreement on the budget and debt ceiling to include a combination of tax increases and spending cuts.<sup>4</sup>
  - A 62 percent majority of Americans think a combination of cutting federal spending and increasing taxes is the best approach to reduce the federal budget deficit.<sup>5</sup>
- When forced to choose between preserving Social Security and Medicare or taking steps to reduce the budget deficit, Americans want to preserve entitlement program benefit levels.

- A 60 percent majority say keeping Social Security and Medicare benefits as they are is more important than taking steps to reduce the budget deficit – 32 percent say it is more important to reduce the budget deficit.<sup>6</sup> This dynamic holds across party lines:
  - Democrats: 72 percent say maintaining benefits is more important, 21 percent say deficit reduction.
  - Independents: 53 percent say maintaining benefits, 38 percent say deficit reduction.
  - Republicans: 50 percent say maintaining benefits, 42 percent say deficit reduction.
- In addition, polling in six key swing states (CO, FL, MO, MN, MT, VA) shows 74 percent of voters oppose cutting Social Security benefits in order to reduce the federal deficit, including two-thirds (67 percent) who are *strongly* opposed. Strong opposition crosses party lines:<sup>7</sup>
  - Democrats: 86 percent oppose, 80 percent strongly
  - Independents: 74 percent oppose, 67 percent strongly
  - Republicans: 64 percent oppose, 56 percent strongly
- This dynamic plays out again in the debate over a constitutional amendment for a balanced budget: Voters favor the amendment, but not with required cuts to Social Security or Medicare. Support nearly completely reverses when faced with cuts.
  - 72 percent of Americans favor a balanced budget amendment that would force the federal government to balance the budget.<sup>8</sup>
  - Support erodes dramatically when cuts to entitlement benefits come into play as 63 percent of voters oppose a balanced budget amendment to the U.S. Constitution if it means spending cuts to entitlement programs, such as Medicare and Social Security.<sup>9</sup>

#### **A Cut is a Cut is a Cut: Any Way It's Packaged, Voters Oppose Benefit Cuts**

**Voters oppose changes to Social Security that would reduce benefits – including changing the COLA formula, or raising the retirement age to 69.**

- The American public does not want Congress to change the COLA in the context of the deficit debate, and in fact the public believes that the COLA should have been raised because seniors have suffered from inflation on health care and food costs.
  - A 57 percent majority of voters in six swing states opposes changing the COLA formula in a way that reduces the amount beneficiaries receive, with strong opposition across party lines.<sup>10</sup>
    - Democrats: 65 percent oppose
    - Independents: 56 percent oppose
    - Republicans: 50 percent oppose
    - Tea Party Supporters: 51 percent oppose

- Similarly, voters voice strong opposition to raising the retirement age for Social Security beneficiaries to 69. In fact, the younger voters are, the more they are opposed to raising the retirement age.
  - A 59 percent majority of voters in six swing states oppose raising the retirement age to 69, including 66 percent of Democrats, 60 percent of independents, and 51 percent of Republicans.<sup>11</sup>
  - An overwhelming 70 percent majority of voters under 30 oppose raising the retirement age to 69, as do 62 percent of voters between 30-39, 61 percent of voters between 40-49, 62 percent of voters between 50-64, and 45 percent of voters over 65.

### **Voters Will Punish Those Who Cut Benefits To Reduce The Deficit**

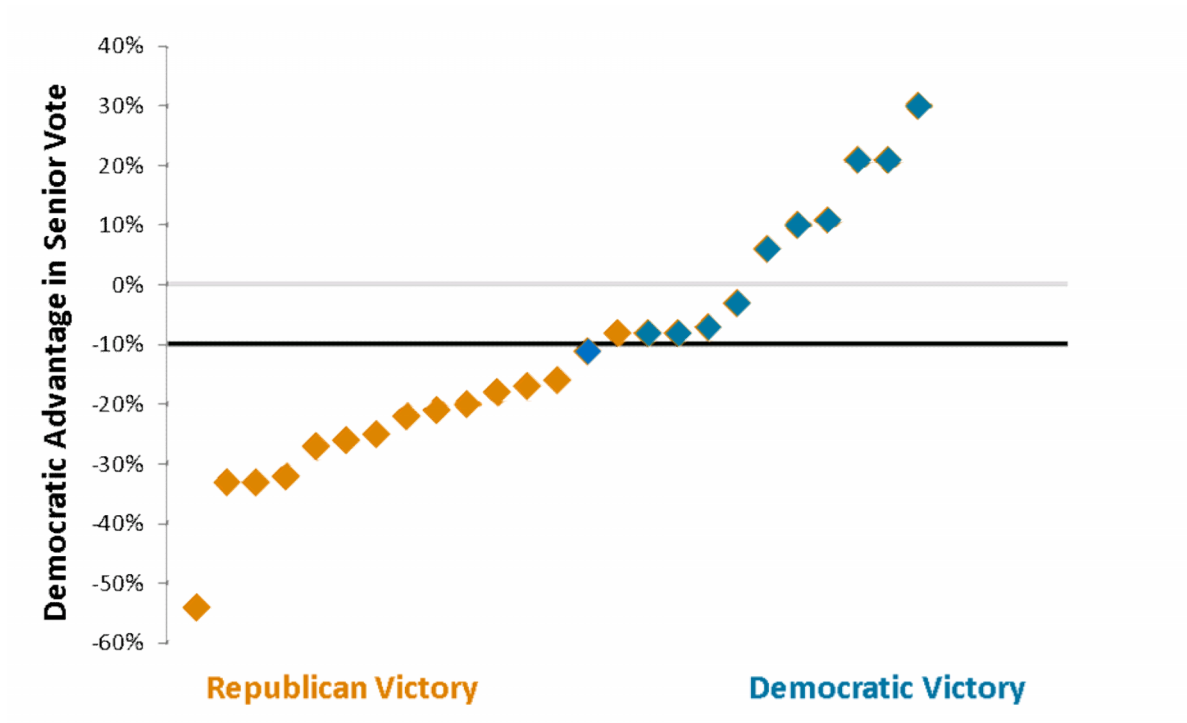
**Elected officials who put Social Security cuts on the table in the debate over the deficit may face punishment from voters back home. Such cuts could jeopardize Democrats' position with key voter groups that decided the election for Republicans in 2010 – women and seniors.**

- Voters in six swing states across party lines say they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who cut Social Security benefits to reduce the deficit.<sup>12</sup>
  - Democrats: 79 percent are less likely to vote for a candidate who supported Social Security cuts to reduce the deficit.
  - Independents: 63 percent less likely
  - Republicans: 53 percent less likely
- Democrats cannot afford to lose support among women and seniors. Both groups would punish a candidate who cut Social Security benefits to reduce the deficit.
  - Seniors split in 2008 with 49 percent supporting Democrats and 48 percent supporting Republicans. In 2010, support for Democrats among seniors eroded to 38 percent, with 59 percent supporting Republicans.<sup>13</sup>
    - Of the 25 Senate races in 2010 where data is available, 11 were won by Democrats. When the Democrat lost the senior vote by 11 percent or more, they lost the race (except for Delaware). When the Democrat lost the senior vote by 8 percent or less, they won (except for Wisconsin). (See Attachment)
  - In 2008, women supported Democrats by 56 percent to 43 percent for Republicans. In 2010, Democrats lost women for the first time with 49 percent supporting Republicans and 48 percent supporting Democrats.<sup>14</sup>
  - An overwhelming 78 percent majority of voters over 65, and a 72 percent majority of women in the six swing states say they are less likely to vote for a candidate who supported Social Security cuts to reduce the deficit.<sup>15</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> CBS News/New York Times. June 24-28, 2011. 979 adults nationwide, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/06/29/politics/main20075556.shtml>
- <sup>2</sup> Bloomberg. June 17-20, 2011. 1,000 adults nationwide, landline and cell phone. <http://www.pollingreport.com/prioriti.htm>
- <sup>3</sup> Washington Post/ABC News. July 14-17, 2011. 1001 adults nationwide, landline and cell phone. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postabcpoll\\_071711.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postabcpoll_071711.html)
- <sup>4</sup> CBS News. July 15-17, 2011. 810 adults nationwide. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/07/18/politics/main20080496.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody>
- <sup>5</sup> Washington Post/ABC News. July 14-17, 2011.
- <sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. June 15-19, 2011. 1,502 adults nationwide, landline and cell phone. <http://people-press.org/files/legacy-questionnaires/Entitlements%20Topline%20for%20Release.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> Lake Research Partners. March 3-10, 2011. Colorado: 502 likely voters; Florida: 503 likely voters; Minnesota: 584 likely voters; Missouri: 502 likely voters; Montana: 422 likely voters; and Virginia: 603 likely voters. [http://socialsecurity-works.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/report.SOCIAL-SECURITY-WORKS.-Combined-6-State-Media-Version.fREV\\_060711.pdf](http://socialsecurity-works.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/report.SOCIAL-SECURITY-WORKS.-Combined-6-State-Media-Version.fREV_060711.pdf)
- <sup>8</sup> Fox News. June 26-28, 2011. 912 registered voters nationwide, landline and cell phone. <http://www.foxnews.com/projects/pdf/FoxNewsPoll.pdf>
- <sup>9</sup> Fox News. June 26-28, 2011.
- <sup>10</sup> Lake Research Partners. March 3-10, 2011.
- <sup>11</sup> Lake Research Partners. March 3-10, 2011.
- <sup>12</sup> Lake Research Partners. March 3-10, 2011.
- <sup>13</sup> CNN National election pool exit polls.
- <sup>14</sup> CNN National election pool exit polls. <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2010/results/polls/#USH00p1>  
<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls.main/>
- <sup>15</sup> Lake Research Partners. March 3-10, 2011.

## Support among voters over 65 was critical for Democrats in 2010.

Where a Democrat lost the senior vote by 11% or *more*, they lost the Senate race (except in Delaware). Where a Democrat lost the senior vote by 8% or *less*, or they won the senior vote, the Democrat won (except in Wisconsin).



Source: National Exit Polls

## Breakdown of the senior (65+) vote in the 2010 Senate Elections

State	Democrat	Republican	Democratic advantage in Senior Vote	Winner
South Carolina	19%	73%	-54%	Republican
Florida	17%	50%	-33%	Republican
New Hampshire	33%	66%	-33%	Republican
Louisiana	32%	64%	-32%	Republican
Arkansas	35%	62%	-27%	Republican
Ohio	35%	61%	-26%	Republican
Iowa	37%	62%	-25%	Republican
Illinois	37%	59%	-22%	Republican
Arizona	36%	57%	-21%	Republican
Indiana	37%	57%	-20%	Republican
Pennsylvania	41%	59%	-18%	Republican
Missouri	39%	56%	-17%	Republican
Kentucky	42%	58%	-16%	Republican
Delaware	44%	55%	-11%	Democrat
California	43%	51%	-8%	Democrat
Connecticut	45%	53%	-8%	Democrat
Wisconsin	46%	54%	-8%	Republican
Nevada	45%	52%	-7%	Democrat
Colorado	43%	46%	-3%	Democrat
Oregon	52%	46%	6%	Democrat
Washington	55%	45%	10%	Democrat
West Virginia	55%	44%	11%	Democrat
New York (Gillibrand)	60%	39%	21%	Democrat
Vermont	59%	38%	21%	Democrat
New York (Schumer)	64%	34%	30%	Democrat

Data not available for: Alabama, Alaska, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Maryland, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah

Source: National Exit Polls