
MEMORANDUM

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TO: Interested Parties

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RE: Public Polling Shows Democrats Can Effectively Counter Elon Musk and DOGE

Recent polling has made it clear: **voters do not trust Elon Musk or DOGE to represent the interests of working families.**

However, if Democrats simply defend the status quo, they will lose this fight – instead, opponents of DOGE's draconian measures must offer an alternative critique that holds billionaires and large corporations responsible. **Democrats must connect Elon Musk to DOGE and expose DOGE's real agenda - taking away critical programs to fund tax breaks for Musk and other billionaires.**

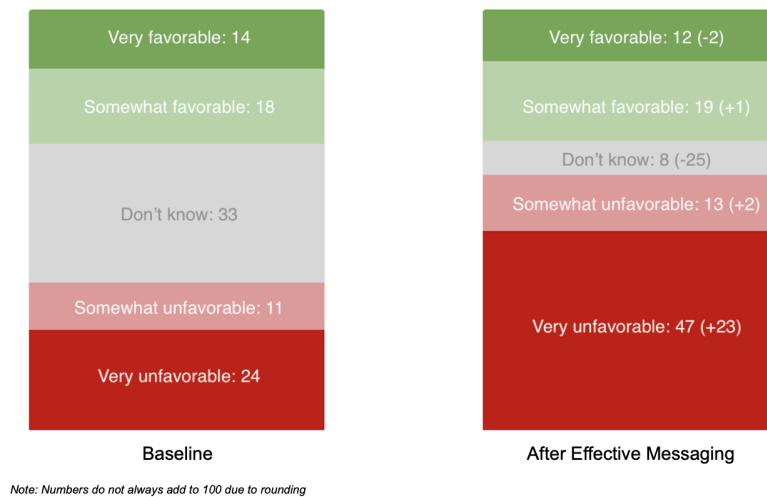
DOGE's purported mission to cut waste, even to the tune of \$2 trillion, resonates with voters. However, Republicans are transparent that they will codify DOGE spending cuts to vital programs to pay for tax cuts for billionaires.¹ Democrats can use this message and Musk's unpopularity to effectively counter DOGE.

Winning themes across polling and message testing

- Democrats should **emphasize the outsized influence of billionaires and corporations on the government and center the working class as the protagonist**, rather than defending the establishment.
 - The public views the government as inefficient, but still wants it to "do more," strongly supporting programs like Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, Veteran's healthcare, and SNAP. **Defend specific programs, not "the government" writ large.**
- Attacking DOGE for defunding vital government programs to pay for tax giveaways to the wealthy and large corporations can be persuasive, but policymakers must **specifically name who will be harmed by the cuts and how.**
- Elon Musk is unpopular, and tying him to DOGE brings its favorability down. Emphasizing how **Musk will use DOGE to enrich himself and benefit his companies** is particularly effective.

¹ Stef W. Kight and Hans Nichols, "Thune and Johnson Vow to Take Doge Spending Cuts to the next Level," Axios, February 11, 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/02/11/elon-musk-doge-spending-cuts-johnson-thune>.

Voters were initially divided on DOGE, but these messages **drove down its net favorability 26 points.**



Populism beats DOGE's critique of government

A solid majority of voters agree more with a populist diagnosis than DOGE's. When asked to pick the bigger problem with government today:

- **59%, including 68% of Independents, say it:** "prioritizes the interests of billionaires, big corporations, and lobbyists instead of looking out for the average American."
- **41% say it:** "is too big and wastes too much taxpayer money, with too much red tape, rules, and regulations."

An argument that **names threats to specific programs** and **links DOGE to the tax fight** outperforms Musk's argument 57% to 43%. The following performed especially well with Black, Hispanic, and 18-34 year-old respondents:

*"We need a government that puts as much effort into serving the working class as it does helping rich people get richer. The problem with government efficiency isn't with Social Security and Medicare, it starts with a tax code that lets billionaires pay lower tax rates than teachers and firefighters. **DOGE's goal is just more of the same: slash funding for things like education and infrastructure while Congress hands out trillions more in tax breaks for big corporations and the wealthy.**"*

Elon Musk brings down DOGE's favorability

Elon Musk is unpopular (-15) before any information or persuasion, in particular with Independents (-31). After our messaging, 74% of Independents viewed Musk unfavorably. **Voters' top two concerns about DOGE are Musk's leadership and his self-enrichment:**

- *Musk supports passing large new tax breaks for wealthy individuals and corporations, which would provide a financial windfall for him and his companies.*
- *There are no rules to prevent conflicts of interest by Musk.*

Among the criticisms of Musk tested, those that generate the most concern among voters are:

- *Among persuadable voters:* **He will represent the interests of the ultra-wealthy like him instead of American working families.**
- *Among Independents and Republicans:* He has **no background or experience in government.**
- *Among Democrats:* **He has expressed extreme views**, even going as far as supporting white nationalists here in the U.S., as well as far-right parties in Germany and other countries.

Specify programs, not large numbers

DOGE's goal of cutting \$2 trillion from the federal budget resonates with voters. However, **naming specific programs** that will lose funding if that goal is achieved and **how that impacts people** undermines support. Additionally, using **"defunding" instead of "cutting"** intensifies voters' opposition to their attacks.

Top programs voters do not want cut in order to reach DOGE's \$2 trillion goal:

- Social Security (89% unacceptable, 72% *totally* unacceptable)
- Veterans' healthcare (90% unacceptable, 70% *totally* unacceptable), Medicare (88% unacceptable, 69% *totally* unacceptable), and Medicaid (82% unacceptable, 60% *totally* unacceptable)
- Natural disaster readiness and response (84% unacceptable, 55% *totally* unacceptable)
- SNAP (76% unacceptable, 53% *totally* unacceptable)

Talking points

- ❖ Elon Musk's goal for DOGE is right out of the same old Republican playbook: defund vital programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid while Republicans in Congress hand out trillions more in tax breaks for big corporations and the wealthy. **Musk is trying to pay for his own tax cut with your health care.**
- ❖ Elon Musk's DOGE is barking up the wrong tree. The problem with the federal government is that it prioritizes the interests of billionaires, big corporations, and special interest lobbyists instead of looking out for working Americans. **We should be working to ensure the government works for the American people, not just billionaires like Musk.**
- ❖ **Elon Musk represents the interests of the ultra-wealthy like him**, not working class families. Musk already takes in billions in federal contracts, and will use the private information he gathers from DOGE to enrich himself and benefit his companies.

Hart Research conducted this survey for Groundwork Collaborative and Public Citizen between January 24th and 30th with a representative national cross section of 1,735 voters. This poll fielded before the most recent news of Musk gaining access to the federal government's payment systems and his illegal efforts to shut down USAID and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, so these numbers are likely conservative estimates.