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# *Contrast, don't just criticize:* how our latest test could help Democrats win voters

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## Executive Summary

The 2026 midterm election cycle is on track to be the most expensive in U.S. history, with Democrats and Republicans already set to spend over **\$10 billion on political advertising**. With continued rising inflation, an unpopular war with Iran, and historically low approval ratings for the Trump administration, Democratic campaigns see an opportunity to sway voters against Republicans across the country.

So, how can Democrats shift more voters into their column? The finding from our latest experiment: **contrast, don't just criticize**.

Our latest test demonstrated that messaging that highlighted Republican failures but quickly pivoted to Democratic accomplishments had a significant impact on persuading people to vote for Democrats. The most effective message, contrasting Democratic and Republican approaches to healthcare, **shifted voters 7.5 points towards Democratic candidates**.

This research offers new evidence on what's persuading Americans to vote for Democrats and increasing Democratic Party favorability in the current political climate. As we draw closer to November, we are conducting dozens of tests on behalf of our partners to meet voters with the right message, in the right moment.

In this report: Explore how our testing worked, discover high-performing message examples, and see how message tests like these can inform a winning strategy for Democrats in November.

## What we tested

*Our hypothesis: progressive campaigns were winning the favorability battle but losing the persuasion war. Negative messaging was driving up Republican unfavorability, but not converting that sentiment into votes. Positive messaging was building Democratic goodwill, but not moving choice on the ballot. We designed this test to find out whether contrast messaging could bridge that gap.*

We recruited **6,000 U.S. adults and randomly assigned them to one of seven groups**. Six groups each read a single political message. One group read non-political content as a placebo baseline. For each framing — positive, negative, and contrast — we developed two messages, one on affordability and one on healthcare, for a total of six treatment messages.

We measured three outcomes: **vote choice on the 2026 generic congressional ballot, Democratic Party favorability, and Republican Party unfavorability**. Vote choice is the most direct measure of campaign impact — it reflects whether a message actually moves someone toward voting for a candidate, not just how they feel about a party. Favorability matters, but it doesn't win elections.

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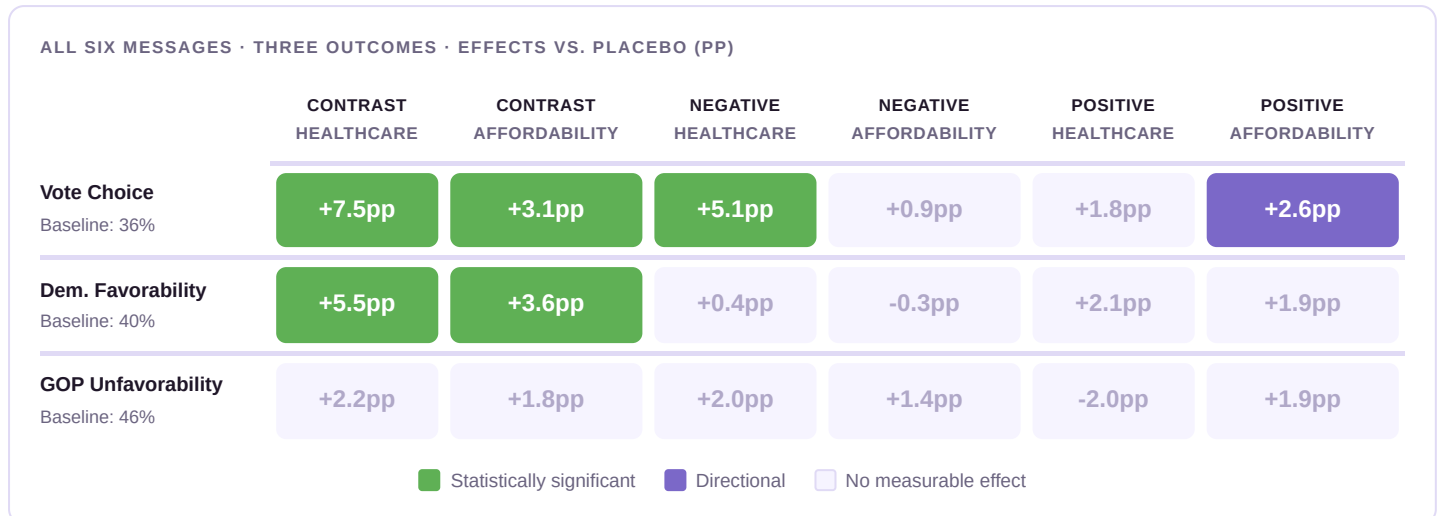
THE SIX MESSAGES TESTED

Each was built using evidence from Grow Progress's existing testing library and was designed to be the strongest possible version of its tone — so any differences in outcomes reflect the tone itself, not the quality of the argument. Contrast messages are highlighted, as they were the top performers.

TONE	AFFORDABILITY	HEALTHCARE
<p><b>CONTRAST</b> ★ TOP RESULTS</p>	<p>Most people just want to pay their bills without falling further behind. That's not a lot to ask. But Republicans' tariffs are costing families an extra \$1,700 a year, and they closed the consumer protection agency that used to help when a bank or credit card company ripped you off. Democrats went the other way. They put thousands of dollars per child back into families' bank accounts. They passed tax credits so you're not paying full price to fix your heating or put solar on your roof. They capped insulin at \$35 and brought down prescription drug prices for seniors. One side is raising your costs. The other is cutting them.</p>	<p>If you or someone you love depends on Medicaid, and that includes millions of kids, most nursing home residents, and working adults without employer insurance, Republicans just made the biggest cuts to that program in its history to help pay for tax cuts for the wealthy. Doctors are already turning patients away. People are showing up at the pharmacy to find out their medications aren't covered anymore. Democrats are fighting to reverse those cuts. They capped what patients pay for insulin. They expanded coverage for new moms to a full year. They expanded mental health care for millions. Republicans are tearing the safety net apart. Democrats are trying to hold it together.</p>
<p><b>NEGATIVE</b></p>	<p>Republicans promised to bring down the cost of living. Instead, their tariffs are costing the average household an extra \$1,700 a year. Fresh produce is up sharply. The CEO of Walmart says his customers are showing "stress behaviors," buying less, trading down, skipping what they can't afford. When the Supreme Court struck down the tariffs as illegal, Republicans imposed new ones within hours under a different law. They've also dismantled the watchdog agency that used to get your money back when companies cheated you. They said they'd make things better. They've made them worse, and they're not done.</p>	<p>Republicans passed a budget that makes the biggest cut to Medicaid in the program's history. Millions of people are expected to lose their health coverage, and it's not something that might happen someday. It's already happening. Doctors in several states are turning away Medicaid patients. Rural clinics that were barely getting by are bracing to close. People have gone to the pharmacy and been told their medications aren't covered anymore. The head of the National Rural Health Association says flatly: these cuts will lead to hospital closures. For families in small towns, that could mean an hour's drive just to see a doctor. Republicans aren't making Medicaid more efficient. They're making it harder to keep.</p>
<p><b>POSITIVE</b></p>	<p>Democrats in Congress have been quietly lowering costs at every level, from the expenses of raising a family to the big bills that eat your paycheck. They expanded tax credits that put thousands of dollars per child directly into families' bank accounts. That money went to groceries, rent, school supplies. It cut child poverty nearly in half. They passed credits that help families save thousands on home energy costs, so if your heating system breaks down or you want to put solar on your roof, you're not paying full price. They capped insulin at \$35 and brought down prescription drug prices for seniors. AARP found seniors are already paying about half as much for covered drugs. Democrats got all of this done without much fanfare. All of it is at risk if it's not defended.</p>	<p>The American Hospital Association calls Medicaid the largest source of health coverage in the country, but most people don't realize they probably know someone who depends on it. It covers nearly half of all births. If your parent or grandparent is in a nursing home, Medicaid is most likely paying for their care. It covers tens of millions of kids. In most states, it's the main way working adults who don't get insurance through their jobs see a doctor at all. Democrats built this system and keep fighting to make it stronger. They capped what patients pay for insulin. They made sure new moms have coverage for a full year. They made it possible for millions more people to get mental health care. It took decades to build. Democrats are the reason it exists.</p>

# 1. Contrast messaging on healthcare and affordability effectively persuaded voters

The central finding of this experiment: **the two contrast messages persuaded voters by an average of about 5 percentage points toward the Democratic candidate.** They also improved Democratic Party favorability by about 4.5 points. Both effects were statistically significant, and no other tone produced significant movement on both of these outcomes.



Negative messaging, however, showed clear limits — especially on affordability, where it was the **least effective of all six messages tested.** The negative affordability message is built from strong arguments: Republican tariffs costing the average household \$1,700 a year, a quote from the CEO of Walmart, and the unpopular dismantling of the consumer protection agency. Nonetheless, the message was not enough to change how people said they'd actually vote. On healthcare, purely negative messaging changed voting intentions, but did not improve Democratic Party favorability.

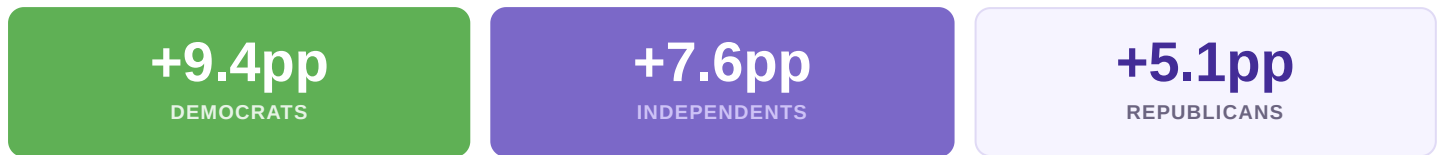
Also contrary to our hypothesis, **neither positive message reached statistical significance** on vote choice or Democratic Party favorability in the general population sample. Positive affordability persuaded voters towards the Democrats by 2.6 points and positive healthcare by 1.8 points — directionally encouraging, but not significant. One exception: among Independent and third-party voters specifically, both positive messages significantly moved Democratic Party favorability, indicating a wider general audience that may be persuadable. However, contrast messaging still outperformed positive messaging among the same subgroups.

Our takeaway: It's not enough to list Republican failures — many of which voters also associate with the Democratic Party. To win over votes, campaigns need to show the contrast: what Democrats are actively doing differently. In our test, the winning contrast messages paired Republican harm with specific Democratic action — **capping insulin at \$35, putting thousands of dollars per child back into family bank accounts, fighting to reverse Medicaid cuts, and extending coverage for new mothers.** That combination, not the attack alone, we believe is what moved the needle.

## 2. Healthcare messaging outperformed affordability across the full partisan spectrum

Both healthcare messages performed exceptionally well. **The contrast healthcare message shifted voters towards Democrats by 7.5 points and increased Democratic Party favorability by 5.5 points**, the strongest result in the entire test. The negative healthcare message moved voters by 5.1 points, the second strongest result overall. Contrast affordability messaging also performed well, but the healthcare messages produced larger effects than affordability on nearly every comparison.

The magnitude of the healthcare results is worth highlighting. **Contrast healthcare was the only message in the entire test that significantly changed voter intentions among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans simultaneously** resonating across the political spectrum.



*Contrast Healthcare — vote choice effect by partisan group. The only message to significantly move all three groups simultaneously.*

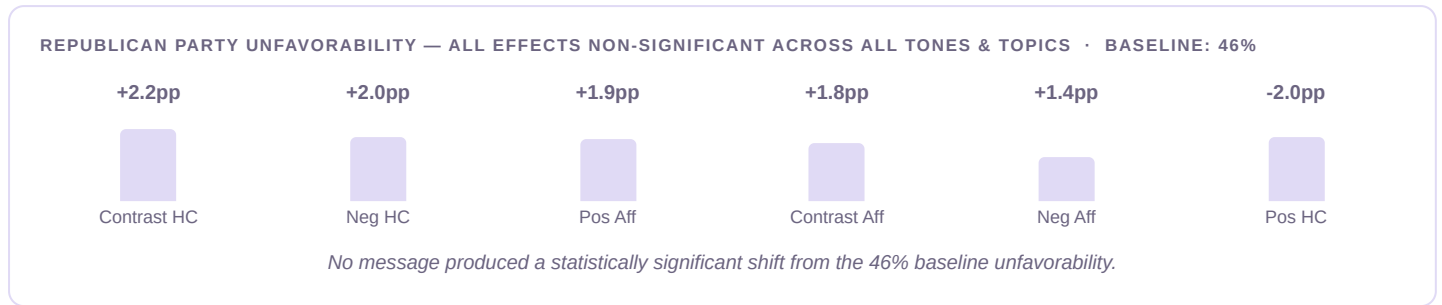
We can't say definitively why, as this test was not designed to isolate the mechanism. However, both healthcare messages mention recent Republican cuts to Medicaid, grounding the message in concrete and personal stakes — **coverage for newborns, nursing home residents, and working adults without employer insurance, and doctors already turning patients away.** That framing appears to give voters something immediate and tangible to react to.

The subgroup data adds one additional nuance worth noting for campaigns. Among respondents who voted for Trump in 2024, negative healthcare was actually the strongest performer — outperforming even contrast healthcare with that audience. The likely explanation: Trump voters are not inclined to credit Democrats with accomplishments, and the pivot to Democratic action in the contrast message may weaken its effect with this group. **For campaigns specifically targeting soft Trump supporters on healthcare, purely negative framing may be the more effective tool.**

Our takeaway: Affordability remains an important issue for Democratic campaigns heading into 2026. But this test suggests that **healthcare may offer Democrats their strongest opportunity to draw a clear contrast with Republicans and win over votes across the partisan spectrum.**

### 3. Republican Party unfavorability may have hit its ceiling

Contrary to our hypothesis and the results of our broader library of client tests, **no message in the entire test successfully increased Republican Party unfavorability.**



Our takeaway: This suggests that in the current political environment, opinions of the Republican Party may already be sufficiently entrenched that a single message cannot push them further. For campaigns allocating significant spend to drive Republican Party unfavorability, this is worth taking seriously. **The more productive investment appears to be in messages that give voters a reason to choose Democrats** — not just an additional reason to dislike Republicans.



## What these outcomes mean for your campaign

This experiment was designed around a simple question: which type of message actually wins votes, not just impressions of the parties? The answer is contrast messaging — and the margin matters. No other tone in this test consistently shifted voters towards Democrats and increased their favorability simultaneously. **The contrast healthcare message was the single strongest performer in the entire test**, moving voters across party lines in a way no other message did. Negative messaging produced inconsistent results on winning voters and did nothing to build the Democratic brand. Positive messaging, at least as a standalone vehicle, didn't move the general population.

**The findings in this report are a starting point, not a finish line.** What persuades voters for one campaign, on one issue, with one message, may not be what persuades voters for others. The only way to know what works best is to put it to the test.

Grow Progress's testing library and background data give campaigns a head start, drawing on what's worked across hundreds of races and audiences. But the real value is in what a test built for your organization reveals: the specific tone, issue, and audience combination that maximizes persuasion impact.

**Below you can see what this kind of precision looks like in practice:**

**MESSAGE TESTING MULTIPLIES IMPACT**

<p><b>OVERALL PERFORMANCE</b></p> <p><b>+3.5pp</b></p> <p>Average message effect across all six messages tested.</p> <p>If you showed 100 people a random message from this test, you could persuade roughly <b>4</b>.</p>	<p><b>BEST MESSAGE</b></p> <p><b>+7.4pp</b></p> <p>Contrast Healthcare was <b>+2.1x</b> more effective than the average message.</p> <p>Showing this message to 100 people could persuade roughly <b>7</b>.</p>	<p><b>TOP SUBGROUP</b></p> <p><b>+10.1pp</b></p> <p>Contrast Healthcare among <b>women</b> was <b>+2.9x</b> more effective than the average message.</p> <p>Targeting the right subgroup with the right message could persuade roughly <b>10 in 100</b>.</p>
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**Delivering the top message to the top subgroup: your \$1,000 buys approximately \$2,877 worth of persuasion impact.**

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