

MEMO Published September 14, 2026 · 4 minute read

Democrats Should Reclaim Accountability on Spending

Zach Moller & Gabe Horwitz



Affordability dominates today's political debate. But Third Way's [recent poll](#) with Impact Research shows another issue Democrats should treat as central to rebuilding trust: accountability.

Voters are not asking government to do less. But they are asking it to do better. They want proof that public dollars are being spent wisely, programs are delivering results, and those responsible for real waste, fraud, or abuse face consequences. Engaging on these issues comes with real rewards: 78% of voters say they would be more likely to vote for a member of Congress who supports the tested anti-waste policies, including 75% of persuadable voters.

The lesson is clear: **Democrats should not defend the status quo or cede accountability to Republicans. They should make accountability central to their agenda.** Below, we summarize some quick takeaways from our poll.

Trump Is Vulnerable, But Democrats Do Not Automatically Win

- **Trump gets weak marks.** Voters rate him negatively on stopping corruption in government (38% positive to 59% negative) and on stopping waste, fraud, and abuse (40% positive to 57% negative). His numbers are worse with persuadables and independents.
- **But Trump's baggage does not automatically become a Democratic advantage.** Voters still narrowly trust Republicans more than Democrats on reducing waste, fraud, and abuse. Republicans essentially match Trump's numbers; Democrats only narrowly win voters who view Trump negatively on this question.
- **Democratic Opportunity:** Democrats lose if they say, "Trump cuts, Democrats spend." A stronger contrast is: Trump breaks government, Democrats make government work. Democrats are very slightly ahead of Republicans on making government work better, 35% to 34%.

Democrats Have a Trust and Care Gap to Close

- **Waste, fraud, and abuse are part of Democrats' broader credibility problem when it comes to governing.** Only 44% of voters say Democrats in Congress care a lot or somewhat about reducing waste, fraud, and abuse, while 54% say they care only a little or not at all. Among persuadable voters, the warning is even sharper: 64% say Democrats care only a little or not at all.
- **Democratic Opportunity:** Support for public programs isn't the same as trust in how they're run. Loyal Democrats may give the party the benefit of the doubt; persuadable

voters won't. Accountability proves Democrats are serious about governing to a broader coalition of voters.

Democratic Voters Want Lawmakers to Engage

- **Democratic voters are clear.** By a 74% to 16% margin, Democrats say their party should address waste, fraud, and abuse because doing so means more tax dollars actually help people. This view is shared across the Democratic coalition: 74% of strong Democrats and 74% of not-so-strong Democrats say Democrats should take the issue on.
- **Democratic Opportunity:** Democrats do not need to choose between defending public programs and demanding accountability. Their own voters are saying the best way to protect government's ability to help people is to make sure it works.

Accountability Is Not Austerity

- **Holding contractors, officials, and politicians responsible is a top-performing message.** Eighty-one percent of voters were more likely to support a candidate who said: "Waste and fraud keep happening because the people writing the rules benefit from it. Contractors overbill by millions and get another contract, officials misuse government funds and keep their jobs. We need to add accountability so anyone who defrauds taxpayers goes to jail, any contractor that cheats gets banned, and any official who abuses their position gets fired and prosecuted."
- **Accountability can be addressed in other ways too.** Voters strongly supported requiring agencies to recover and publicly report overpayments (89%); strengthening whistleblower protections (88%); banning fraud-convicted officials from federal jobs and stripping taxpayer-funded benefits (88%); requiring agencies to pass independent audits or return 1% of their budgets to the Treasury (85%); and banning taxpayer-funded contractors and lobbyists from contributing to political campaigns (82%).
- **Democratic Opportunity:** Accountability is not an argument against government. It is how Democrats make government worthy of public trust.

