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Taking on Trump: Separating the Signal from the Noise



Third Way,

There are two main battlefields on which to fight President Trump: the courts and the court of public opinion. Trump's opponents are litigating aggressively—as well they should—but political leaders are still debating the most effective way to shift public opinion against Trump 2.0.

To win the battle of public perception, we believe it is essential that Trump opponents separate **the signal** (things that matter and can move swing voters) from **the noise** (things that matter, especially to those who work in and around government, but lack political salience with most everyone else). Shuttering USAID, using government power to attack political opponents, firing indiscriminately, degrading the civil service, releasing J6ers, or blaming Ukraine for the Russian invasion all are a combination of unwise, unethical, illegal, or unconstitutional. But none resonate much with key voters. Moreover, anything that seems performative will be tuned out or backfire. It is a painful irony

that while our very democracy is at stake, a focus on “democracy” (and the trashing of democratic norms) simply won’t save it.

To that end, we are creating the “Signal Project” to identify the Trump Administration’s actions that are most relevant to key voters and how best to frame those issues. This work—including in-depth public opinion research and a series of memos—will run for the next 18 months. Our aim: help Trump opponents mount their most compelling and coherent case against him.

In this first Signal memo, we offer one immediately useable and potentially potent part of the narrative, as well as nine examples of major Trump (and Musk) choices that could bolt solidly onto that frame. To be clear, we haven’t yet tested this or other options with our own research, but public polling suggests these ideas begin to point in the right direction.

The Initial Frame: “Risking Americans’ Safety and Security”

In 2024, many voters were demanding change. So, being seen as defending the status quo or existing government structures—even when Trump’s assault on them is illegal—won’t weaken MAGA forces and may even empower them. Americans do not believe agencies are sacrosanct and attempts to cut the workforce or eliminate departments are not all unpopular on their face.

That means his opponents’ default mindset should be “Change, but not THIS change.” And we should argue that many of the Trump/Musk changes are jeopardizing America and Americans, both physically and economically.

Trump campaigned on the promise of restoring order where voters sensed turmoil. But in these first fifty days, he has done precisely the opposite, so the story we can tell is simple: *Instead of stability, Trump and Musk have brought chaos. And that chaos matters, because it is jeopardizing the safety of you, your family, and your community.*

The Evidence

Just a small sampling of Trump actions makes clear how they can be used to advance this frame:

Raising Prices: They are stoking inflation and increasing prices on housing, groceries, clothes, cars, gas, and the other things we need to live. Trump’s new tariffs are effectively creating a new national sales tax, costing the average household \$830 per year.

Compromising Food Safety: They cut off funding to the team at FDA that ensures formula is not poisonous to infants and that e. Coli is not found in applesauce or hamburger meat.

Endangering Nuclear Security: They fired the specialists that keeps weapons-grade plutonium and tritium from leaking or exploding.

Defunding Disease Prevention: They canned the doctors and scientists who stop Ebola and bird flu from decimating the population. Elon Musk laughed about this funding cancellation, but it puts Americans in danger of viruses and diseases that are immune to Musk's jokes.

Making Air Travel Treacherous: They fired hundreds of air safety workers amid accidents and near-misses, with air safety offices more overworked and understaffed. (Amid the crisis, Musk shifted a huge FAA contract from another company to one of his own, steering billions of dollars into his pocket.)

Hurting Veterans: They fired veterans on the Crisis Line who answer 60,000 calls per month from fellow veterans experiencing suicidal thoughts, facing homelessness, or needing other help.

Exposing Personal Information: Musk has rummaged through American's social security numbers, financial, and medical data, which his team is "mishandling" and "compromising" in ways that leave the public vulnerable to cyberattacks.

Slashing Social Security and Medicare: They are shutting down Social Security offices and cutting Medicare's telehealth services. Trump has even said he's open to cutting earned benefits that seniors have paid for so he can finance tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans. These cuts will disrupt hospitals, compromise the delivery of payments and claims, and create even worse wait times for recipients with disabilities.

Gutting Medicaid, ACA, and SNAP: They are destroying crucial lifelines for Americans struggling to make ends meet with nearly a trillion dollars in cuts to Medicaid, food assistance, and the ACA healthcare tax credits.

Conclusion

Trump is still in the traditional honeymoon period for new presidents. And as new polling from Blueprint makes clear, some of what he's doing is popular. But their research and others' also show clearly that Trump is vulnerable. His opponents must zero-in on those liabilities and help accelerate the shift in public opinion against him.

To be sure, some are making such a focused and disciplined case already. But that is not nearly close enough to universal. If the mass of his opponents can separate the signal from the noise and focus solely on what matters to voters in ways that are simple and sticky, we can bring real pressure on Trump, Musk, and their allies to slow the devastation that they are sowing.