

Message Testing on the Budget and Congress

June 2026

About This Project

What We Did

Together with Blue Rose Research, the Combined Defense Project (CDP) and Environmental Polling Consortium (EPC) fielded a message test among **6,066 voters nationwide from June 1-2, 2026**.

Respondents saw one of 10 messages about the Trump administration refusing to release funding passed by Congress (or a placebo message) and then answered the following four questions:

Concern About Trump's Refusal	How concerning is it to you that President Trump is refusing to use funding that has already been approved by Congress?
Importance of Congress's Constitutional Authority	How important is it to you that your Representative in Congress stands up for Congress's constitutional authority to decide how taxpayer dollars are spent?
Support for Criminal Responsibility	Would you support or oppose a new law that holds Administration officials criminally responsible if they refuse to use money that Congress has approved for programs that serve the American public?
Support for Potential Shutdown Over Budget	If the Administration refuses to use funding for programs that Congress has approved, should Congress demand that those funds are used, even if that means the government shuts down?

Messages Tested

As you may know, President Trump is refusing to use funding that Congress has already approved.

[Power of the Purse] The Constitution gives Congress, not the President, the power of the purse. Your Congressperson decides how your tax dollars are spent. When Trump blocks funding that Congress has already passed, he is breaking the Constitution.

[Power of the Purse - Nonpartisan] The Constitution gives Congress, not the President, the power of the purse. That has held under Republicans and Democrats for over two hundred years. When any administration blocks funding that Congress has already passed, that constitutional balance breaks.

[Predictable Funding, Working Communities] Both parties in Congress understand the importance of predictable funding for communities on services they rely on. Needlessly withholding these funds creates chaos. Households and communities pay the price.

[Responsibility] One of the most important jobs that your Representative has in Congress is setting a federal budget and making sure it is used wisely. Your Representative has given up this role instead of fighting to make sure that programs and services in your particular community get the funding that they need.

Messages Tested, Cont'd

[Slush Fund / Corruption] Trump is instead moving billions of your tax dollars into accounts only he controls, with no oversight and no rules. That opens the door to corruption and gives Trump a slush fund to reward friends and punish enemies with money that is owed to your community.

[Stealing & Theft] Trump is stealing taxpayer money that your community depends on. Schools, hospitals, fire departments, and public health programs are losing billions because Trump refuses to use funding that Congress already approved.

[Guardrails] Congress passed bipartisan laws to keep any president, from either party, from running off with your tax dollars. Those guardrails have held for fifty years under Republicans and Democrats alike. Trump is tearing them out so one man can decide what gets funded and what gets cut.

[President is Not a King] The President is not a king. Laws are not suggestions. When Trump withholds money that Congress already approved, he is breaking the law and acting like a king.

[Ballroom + Children's Health] Trump demanded \$1B for a new ballroom while freezing the funding that Congress passed for children's health care. A billion dollar ballroom for him, while families and children go without healthcare.

[Ballroom + Clean Water/Air] Trump demanded \$1B for a new ballroom while refusing to use the money that Congress passed to protect clean air and water. A billion dollar ballroom for him. Polluted air and unsafe water for your community.

Results

Even without messaging, nearly all voters agree that Congress should stand up for its constitutional authority on the budget

Baseline Metrics (Placebo / Without Exposure to Messaging)
95% say that it's important that their Representative in Congress stands up for Congress's constitutional authority to decide how taxpayer dollars are spent
78% support a new law that holds Administration officials criminally responsible if they refuse to use money that Congress has approved for programs that serve the American public
73% find it concerning that President Trump is refusing to use funding that has already been approved by Congress
57% say that Congress should demand that the Administration uses funding for programs that Congress has approved, even if that means the government shuts down

We saw little movement from the messages on most metrics, as baseline attitudes are already so lopsided in our favor

Average treatment effects (ATEs)	Baseline = 95%	Baseline = 78%	Baseline = 73%
	Importance of Congress Standing Up for Constitutional Authority	Support for Criminal Responsibility for Refusing to Release Funds	Concern that Trump is Refusing to Release Funds
Message			
Power of the Purse	0.3%	1.3%	-1.7%
Power of the Purse - Nonpartisan	0.4%	1.5%	-1.7%
Predictable Funding, Working Communities	0.4%	1.5%	-1.6%
Slush Fund / Corruption	0.4%	1.5%	-1.6%
Stealing & Theft	0.4%	1.4%	-1.6%
Guardrails	0.4%	1.4%	-1.6%
The President is not a King	0.4%	1.6%	-1.5%
Responsibility	0.4%	1.5%	-1.6%
Ballroom + Children's Health	0.3%	1.5%	-1.5%
Ballroom + Clean Water/Air	0.5%	1.7%	-1.4%

Messages, especially the “Power of the Purse” frames, produced more movement on our question about a potential shutdown

Average treatment effects (ATEs)

Baseline Agreement = 57%

If the Administration refuses to use funding for programs that Congress has approved, should Congress demand that those funds are used, even if that means the government shuts down?

Message

Power of the Purse	5.3%
Power of the Purse - Nonpartisan	5.1%
Predictable Funding, Working Communities	4.7%
Slush Fund / Corruption	4.7%
Stealing & Theft	4.5%
Guardrails	4.2%
The President is not a King	4.1%
Responsibility	4.0%
Ballroom + Children's Health	3.7%
Ballroom + Clean Water/Air	3.3%

Conclusions

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- **Voters are already with us in recognizing that the administration refusing to release funding is a problem, and that Congress needs to stand up for its constitutional authority.** Baseline attitudes on these metrics are already lopsided in our favor (e.g., 95% of voters say that it's important that their Representative stands up for Congress's constitutional authority to decide how taxpayer dollars are spent). Voters therefore don't need much additional convincing that this is a problem once they hear about it.
- **Leaning into Congress's constitutional authority strengthens our message.** Our top-testing messages, and the attitudinal question on which we saw the most agreement, both reference the fact that Congress has constitutional authority to decide how taxpayer dollars are spent.
- **Arguments that call out Trump more aggressively for refusing to release funds aren't more effective at persuading voters.** This is also true of Democratic-leaning voters, who were not more moved by base-oriented messaging than by the "Power of the Purse" message. More partisan / anti-Trump messaging also risks backlash from Republican-leaning voters, many of whom are breaking with their party in saying that it's a problem that the administration is refusing to release funds.

Top-Testing Message Frames

[Power of the Purse] The Constitution gives Congress, not the President, the power of the purse. Your Congressperson decides how your tax dollars are spent. When Trump blocks funding that Congress has already passed, he is breaking the Constitution.

[Power of the Purse - Nonpartisan] The Constitution gives Congress, not the President, the power of the purse. That has held under Republicans and Democrats for over two hundred years. When any administration blocks funding that Congress has already passed, that constitutional balance breaks.

Questions?
