

To: Interested Parties

From: Joe Dinkin, Working Families Party
Jonathan Chavez, Justice Research Group

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Re: Toss-Up District Voters Want Change — and They Are Looking Beyond the Political Establishment

Background

Working Families Party commissioned a survey of registered voters in 18 congressional districts rated Toss Ups by the Cook Political Report, with an additional oversample of Michigan voters, to understand what kind of candidates voters want in the 2026 midterms. The survey tested appetite for political change, reactions to establishment and outsider candidate profiles, and the characteristics most likely to move voters toward or away from a candidate.

The results show an electorate that is not merely dissatisfied with current conditions, but deeply skeptical of the political system itself. Voters believe elected officials serve wealthy interests, prefer leaders who will challenge the establishment, and consistently reward candidates who demonstrate independence from party leadership. Most importantly, this appetite for change reaches well beyond the progressive base: independents and moderates are open to candidates who present themselves as outsiders willing to confront entrenched power.

BOTTOM LINE: In competitive districts, the political center is not the status quo. Voters — especially independents — are rewarding candidates who promise to change the system, not simply manage it.

Key Findings

1. The political environment is fundamentally anti-establishment.

Nearly two-thirds of voters (64%) say the country is on the wrong track.¹ Even more striking, 80% agree that elected officials care more about wealthy donors and powerful interests than people like them.² The sentiment is even stronger among independents, 88% of whom agree with that critique.

This frustration translates directly into candidate preference. By 58% to 36%, voters choose “Government needs leaders who will challenge the political establishment and fight for major change, even when powerful people object” over “Government works best when experienced leaders make steady, achievable improvements.” By 63% to 37%, they choose “I prefer a candidate who stands firm on their priorities, even if it angers party leaders” over “I prefer a candidate who works with leaders of their party, even if that means compromising on some priorities.” Independents choose the change-oriented statement by 62% to 32% on both measures; moderates also lean toward change, 54% to 40% and 53% to 38%, respectively.

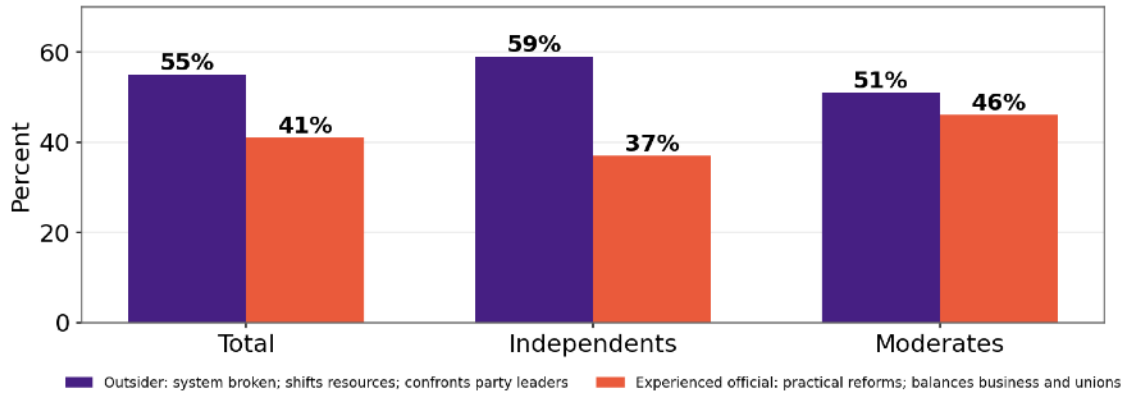
2. The change candidate wins — including among the voters most likely to decide close races.

The comparison between the two candidate descriptions offers the clearest evidence that this is more than generalized frustration. Voters read about an “experienced elected official with a long record of voting for practical reforms,” who “works with business and unions to find a balance between their interests” and is funded by businesses, established organizations, and party donors. They also read about “a political outsider who says the system is broken,” calls for changes that would shift resources from corporations and billionaires to working-class people, would confront party leaders, and is powered mainly by small donors and volunteers.

The political outsider who says the system is broken wins by 14 points overall, 55% to 41%. The advantage grows to 22 points among independents (59% to 37%). Moderates are closer, but the political outsider still edges the experienced elected official, 51% to 46%.

¹ All things considered, do you think that things in the country are generally headed in the right direction or are they off on the wrong track?

² Here are some statements about politics and political candidates. After each one, please use a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 means you STRONGLY AGREE, 5 means you neither agree nor disagree, and 0 means you STRONGLY DISAGREE. You may use any number from 0 to 10. : Elected officials care more about wealthy donors and powerful interests than about people like me.

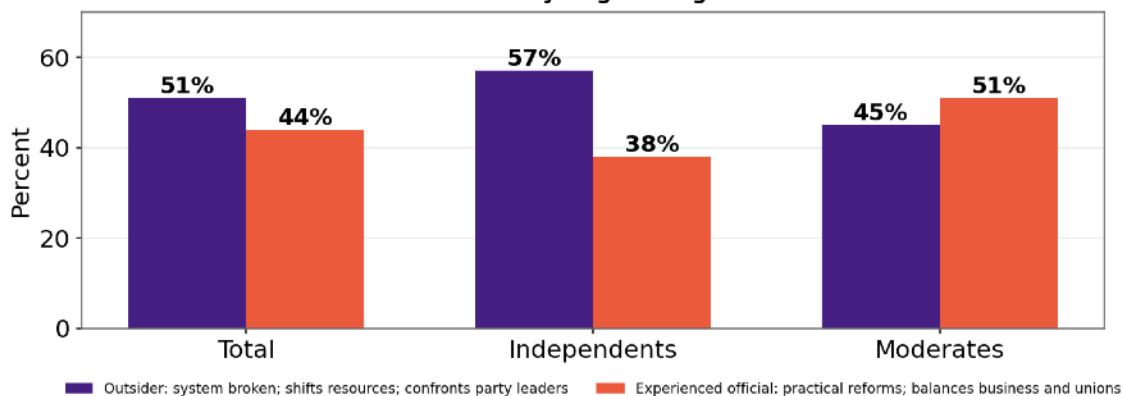
The political outsider who says the system is broken leads overall and among key audiences

Audience	Change candidate	Establishment candidate	Change margin
Total	55%	41%	+14
Independents	59%	37%	+22
Moderates	51%	46%	+5

This distinction matters because campaigns often treat ideological moderation as a preference for incrementalism. The data suggest otherwise. Moderates may be cautious on specific policy questions, but they are not uniformly attached to establishment candidates. Independents are much clearer: they strongly prefer the candidate who conveys disruption, independence, and opposition to concentrated power.

3. Saying the political outsider “is too liberal, outside the mainstream, and less likely to get things done” does not eliminate the outsider’s advantage.

After voters hear that opponents say the political outsider “is too liberal, outside the mainstream, and less likely to get things done,” the race tightens — but the outsider still leads overall, 51% to 44%. The political outsider also continues to lead among independents, 57% to 38%. Moderates move toward the experienced elected official, but remain closely divided, 45% outsider to 51% experienced official.

Preference after opponents say the outsider is “too liberal, outside the mainstream, and less likely to get things done”

The attack’s limited effect reflects how voters understand the phrase “outside the mainstream.” Only 26% say it usually means a candidate is too extreme or unrealistic. By contrast, 31% say it can mean a candidate is independent of the political establishment and willing to consider needed change, while 38% say it depends on the candidate.

Independents are even less likely to accept the phrase at face value: just 21% associate “outside the mainstream” with ideas that are too extreme or unrealistic, compared with 34% who say it can mean a candidate is independent of the political establishment and willing to consider needed change, and 41% who say it depends on the candidate.

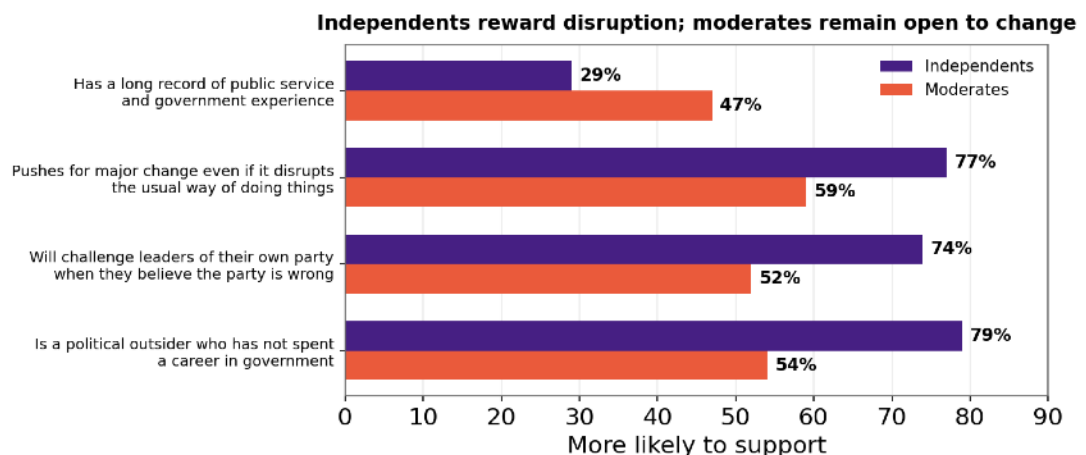
Audience	Too extreme	Independent of establishment	Depends on candidate
Total	26%	31%	38%
Independents	21%	34%	41%
Moderates	28%	25%	43%

The strategic implication is not that saying the candidate “is too liberal, outside the mainstream, and less likely to get things done” is harmless; the political outsider loses four points overall and six points among moderates. But that wording does not function as an automatic disqualifier. For many voters, being outside the political mainstream can reinforce the candidate’s independence from a system they already distrust.

4. Independents reward disruption; moderates are more selective, but still open to change.

The poll included a candidate-attribute battery, which sharpens the distinction between these two persuadable audiences. Independents respond strongly to disruption: 79% say they are more likely to support a political outsider, 74% say the same of a candidate who challenges leaders of their own party, and 77% reward a candidate who pushes for major change even when it disrupts the usual way of doing things.

Moderates are less enthusiastic about the outsider label itself, but change-oriented characteristics remain net positive. Fifty-four percent are more likely to support a political outsider, 52% a candidate who challenges party leadership, and 59% a candidate who pushes for major change. By comparison, 47% say a long record of government experience makes them more likely to support a candidate — a positive result, but not a dominant credential.



5. The most persuasive version of change combines anti-establishment energy with concrete working-class priorities.

The survey does not show that every progressive policy or organizational cue is equally effective. Instead, it points to a broader candidate posture: challenge concentrated power, demonstrate independence from party leadership, and connect change to material improvements in people’s lives.

Several findings illustrate that balance:

- A political outsider is a strong positive overall (68% more likely) and especially among independents (79%).
- Challenging leaders of one’s own party is similarly powerful (67% overall; 74% among independents).
- Pushing for major change is popular overall (64%) and especially strong among independents (77%).
- Working Families Party endorsement is net positive overall (44% more likely versus 27% less likely) and among moderates (48% versus 24%).
- By contrast, a long government record is essentially neutral overall (42% more likely versus 40% less likely) and clearly negative among independents (29% more likely versus 54% less likely).
- Endorsements from experienced elected officials and established organizations are also negative among independents (28% more likely versus 49% less likely).

There are also clear limits. Labels and positions that activate familiar ideological opposition can overwhelm the broader appetite for change. The electorate is not asking for maximal ideological signaling; it is asking for candidates who appear willing to fight a political and economic system they believe favors the powerful.

Thinking about each of the following candidate characteristics and policy positions, would it make you more likely or less likely to consider supporting a candidate, or would it make no difference?

	Net: More Likely	Net: Less Likely	No Diff.
Is a political outsider who has not spent a career in government.	68%	23%	9%
Will challenge leaders of their own party when they believe the party is wrong.	67%	25%	8%
Pushes for major change even if it disrupts the usual way of doing things.	64%	26%	10%
Partners with business leaders to address costs and create jobs.	59%	31%	10%
Supports an end to U.S.-led wars overseas and redirects resources domestically.	56%	31%	13%
Avoids broad new programs that could require higher taxes or deficits.	54%	38%	8%
Makes it easier for workers to form unions and bargain for higher pay.	53%	38%	9%
Raises taxes on wealthy people and large corporations to pay for public services.	51%	37%	12%
Works across party lines and builds broad coalitions.	50%	39%	11%
Focuses on practical improvements that can be passed and implemented now.	48%	35%	17%
Supports Medicare for All.	47%	43%	10%
Breaks up or tightly regulates corporations with too much market power.	47%	35%	18%
Cuts regulations and business taxes to encourage investment and jobs.	44%	35%	21%
Has been endorsed by the Working Families Party.	44%	27%	29%
Has a long record of public service and government experience.	42%	40%	18%
Supports health reform that builds on the current system without forcing private-insurance changes.	41%	38%	21%
Has endorsements from experienced elected officials and established organizations.	39%	37%	24%
Strongly supports Israel, including continued U.S. military aid.	34%	60%	6%
Has supported defunding the police and shifting funding to community services.	28%	58%	14%

Conclusion

The defining opportunity in competitive districts is not a conventional move toward the political establishment. It is a move toward change. Voters believe the country is on the wrong track, overwhelmingly think elected officials favor

wealthy donors, and consistently prefer leaders who will challenge the establishment and stand up to party leadership.

Independents are the clearest expression of this mood. They strongly favor the political outsider who says the system is broken, remain with that candidate after opponents say the candidate “is too liberal, outside the mainstream, and less likely to get things done,” and reward outsider status, disruption, and independence from party leaders. Moderates are more cautious, but they are not reflexively establishment-oriented: majorities remain open to political outsiders and candidates who push for major change.

The strongest candidate in this environment is therefore not simply the most progressive or the most moderate. It is the candidate who can credibly demonstrate that they are independent of entrenched power, willing to challenge their own party, and focused on delivering meaningful improvements for working people.

Methodology: Text-to-web survey of N=1,203 registered voters, including voters in 18 Cook Political Report Toss Up districts and an oversample of Michigan voters. Fielded July 26–27, 2026. Overall margin of error: ± 2.83 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Subgroup results have larger margins of error and should be interpreted directionally.