



MEMORANDUM

TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Alixandria Lapp, Executive Director, House Majority PAC

DATE: April 5, 2016

RE: Trump/Cruz Calamity for California's Congressional Republicans

Democrats are poised to pick up House seats in every corner of the country this November, and continued success in California will be a critical component of working towards an eventual Democratic House majority. With just over two months until California's June 7th top-two primary and a little over seven months until the general election, two things are already clear:

1. Democrats begin with the benefit of strong Democratic incumbents and challengers, out-of-touch Republican candidates, and presidential year turnout.
2. The candidacies of Donald Trump and Ted Cruz have turned prospects for many GOP congressional candidates from weak to abysmal – particularly so in California.

Whether facing Democratic incumbents, challengers, or running in open seats – Republican House candidates will be linked to a seemingly endless stream of demagogic statements and policies from their presidential frontrunners, slapped with an already-damaged and sinking party brand, and facing an energized Democratic electorate in the most diverse state in the nation.

Bottom line: California's congressional Republicans are inescapably tied to and irreversibly damaged by the toxic race at the top of their ticket.

Democratic Brand Remains Strong in California While GOP Sinks

Recent polling in California confirms Democrats' strong standing and Republicans' abysmal prospects. A [USC/LA Times Poll](#) conducted between March 16 and March 23 found President Obama with a 65% total favorable rating. While President Obama currently enjoys a solid majority approval rating nationwide (with a recent [CNN poll](#) showing President Obama with his highest approval rating since 2013), his approval rating in California is particularly strong. Given that presidential popularity almost always impacts elections down-ballot, Democratic candidates across California look poised to benefit with a strong party brand boosted by a popular incumbent President.

Likewise, the USC/LA Times poll found Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton with a 52% total favorable rating, while Donald Trump had a whopping 73% total unfavorable rating. Similarly, the poll showed a clear 57% majority of voters holding an unfavorable view of Ted Cruz. The poll also showed Clinton leading Trump in a hypothetical match-up 59% to 28% and leading Cruz 59% to 31%. Perhaps most notably in a state that's more than 38% Latino, Clinton trounces Trump and Cruz with Latino voters, 78% to 13% and 74% to 20% respectively.

Even more ominously for the GOP, while the poll showed Trump leading the GOP primary race in California, it also showed a deeply divided party – 27% of California Republican voters polled said they would refuse to vote for Trump in November if he wins the nomination.

GOP congressional candidates have and will likely continue to struggle with a choice between alienating their base or attempting to decouple themselves from their likely ticket-mate. A number of GOP candidates have attempted to dance around the question already. Nevertheless, the recent statewide polling is a sign that the damage has already been done as significant numbers of voters have been turned off and offended by the leading Republican presidential candidates' demagoguery and rhetoric.

Trump/Cruz Effect Shifts Once Competitive Districts to “Solid D”

CA-16, CA-31, CA-36: The Trump/Cruz effect in California has also been in evidence in media reports as blue seats have been taken off the map for Republicans. In a recent rating shift of ten seats in Democrats' favor, by the [Cook Political Report](#), three of the seats were California districts currently held by Democrats – CA-16, CA-31, and CA-36. All three districts saw close or competitive races in 2014 and were moved to the “Solid D” column. In its race update, the *Cook Political Report* noted that the likelihood of Trump or Cruz leading the Republican ticket put each of the three districts out of reach for Republicans particularly given the districts' significant Latino communities.

CA-26: CA-26 also saw highly competitive races in 2012 and 2014, and House Majority PAC made significant investments in the district during both cycles. CA-26 was already listed by the *Cook Political Report* as “Solid D” for 2016 – prior to their changes for CA-16, CA-31, and CA-36. Republican candidate Rafael Dagnesses may be desperate to put this race on the map, but he shouldn't hold his breath with Donald Trump or Ted Cruz topping the ticket.

In Open Seat, Competing Republicans Cagey on Trump

CA-24: For evidence of California Republicans' nervousness about running with Trump look no further than the open seat race in CA-24. Both of the Republican candidates trying to make it past the top-two primary, Katcho Achadjian and Justin Fareed, have been outright cagey with press when asked whether they'd support Trump as the GOP nominee:

Whether he'd vote for his party's current frontrunner for president, a fellow political outsider, Fareed said he's keeping his focus on the congressional race. – [KSBY, 2/2/16](#)

When asked if he would support Trump as the Republican presidential nominee, Achadjian answered, "Time will tell." – [KSBY, 2/2/16](#)

Republican Challengers Already Tied with Trump & Cruz

In a district that President Obama won comfortably twice, it's no wonder Achadjian and Fareed are frightened when it comes to answering whether they'd support their party's frontrunner for President. However, despite their success so far at evading the most basic and essential question for every GOP candidate this cycle, the end result is likely to be the same if either candidate is on the ballot this November. As the *Cook Political Report* noted in its recent article, "House candidates are defined by their party and the top of the ticket more than ever."

Furthermore for Fareed, he and Trump share the [endorsement](#) of Congressman Duncan Hunter.

In some competitive districts, Republican challengers relented under media pressure and ultimately admitted they would support Trump in the general election. Others who have managed to avoid taking questions on Trump have still embraced the far-right fringe that allowed the rise of Cruz and Trump in the first place.

CA-07: A lack of [transparency](#) is business as usual for GOP candidate Scott Jones, so it's no surprise he wasn't eager to make public his views on Trump. While Jones required an awkwardly high number of follow-ups, the [Sacramento Bee](#) finally got him to confirm that he would indeed vote for Trump should Trump be the nominee. Jones already faces a tough fight against Democratic Representative Ami Bera.

CA-52: The Republicans hoping to challenge Rep. Scott Peters have wasted no time inflicting self-damage by amplifying the Trump-Cruz effect on their own campaigns.

GOP candidate Denise Gitsham joined Ted Cruz as a speaker at the far-right [CPAC](#) (Conservative Political Action Conference) in Washington last month. Gitsham used her speaking opportunity to tout her credentials as a part of the right-wing fringe – telling the

conference which espouses anti-immigrant, anti-choice, and anti-LGBT views, “I’m one of you.” Standing with Cruz and the most radical members of her party won’t do Gitsham any favors in this competitive swing district.

Another GOP candidate, Jacquie Atkinson, told the [San Diego Union-Tribune](#) last month that “she will support Trump if he wins the nomination.” Atkinson may have disqualified herself by pledging to support a potential nominee who has suggested punishing women for making their own personal healthcare decisions. However, in CA-52 she’s not the only candidate to irreversibly hitch themselves to the Trump train.

A third GOP candidate, John Horst, even went so far as to pen an [op-ed](#) in praise of Trump. In his op-ed, Horst even claims “a Trump presidency could possibly be the best thing that has happened to our constitutional form of government in our lifetime.”

Incumbent Republicans Face Anti-Trump Turnout

In multiple California districts, particularly those with high Latino populations, GOP incumbents are feeling the Trump-Cruz effect too as they find themselves in electoral danger and find Democrats on offense. The *Cook Political Report* named CA-10, CA-21, and CA-25 as heavily Latino districts where “Republicans have huge problems” with Trump or Cruz at the top of the ticket.

CA-10: Republican Congressman Jeff Denham also seems particularly nervous having desperately flailed between more than one Trump diversion tactic. Denham tried playing coy without ruling out support for Trump:

Rep. Jeff Denham (R-Calif.), another top target with a large Hispanic community in his district, hasn’t endorsed either, but didn’t rule out ever supporting Trump. – [The Hill](#), [3/6/16](#)

Before that Denham even tried putting a positive spin on Trump’s candidacy telling the AP:

“Donald Trump is, I think, tapping into an energy that is bringing more people out to vote,” said Rep. Jeff Denham, whose northern California district went for President Barack Obama twice. – [AP](#), [2/27/16](#)

Unfortunately for Denham, as one California GOP strategist told [Politico](#), “The idea that Trump is going to help with federal races is like putting lipstick on a pig.” Not to mention – Denham already managed to tie himself to Trump before the presidential campaign – [touting an appearance with Trump](#) in an official press release.

Adding to Denham’s headaches is the presence of a fellow-GOP challenger in the June 7 top-two primary who’s certainly not shy about tying himself to Trump. On his [campaign](#)

[website](#), GOP candidate Robert Hodges touts his agreement with Trump's divisive plans on immigration.

And if Denham's erratic responses to Trump's candidacy weren't proof enough of his worry, his placement of a seven-week media buy in advance of the June 7 top-two primary is an indication that fallout from the GOP ticket has him running scared in every direction.

CA-21: Racially-charged rhetoric and plans to deport millions of families aren't likely to play well in this diverse, 71% Latino district. Try as he may to run from Trump and Cruz, Republican Congressman David Valadao will still have to answer for the statements of his party's eventual standard-bearer.

CA-25: One now-competitive Republican-held district that wasn't on the initial maps of most pundits is [CA-25](#). Knight has stayed mostly silent on Trump – failing so far to disavow him. Like Trump, Knight has no problem encouraging violence at public events – even physically [threatening](#) a protestor himself.

Conclusion

With Ted Cruz or Donald Trump leading the GOP, California is ripe with opportunities for Democrats to win congressional races in 2016, and House Majority PAC stands ready to play a key role in making that happen.

In 2012, our organization spent almost \$4 million in California races when Democrats picked up seven congressional seats in the state. We invested \$3 million in California in 2014 when Democrats held every competitive congressional seat in California despite a national Republican wave.

With the Koch Brothers and other outside GOP groups in a [“scramble”](#) to try and insulate their congressional candidates from the down-ballot damage, House Majority PAC will once again make smart investments where necessary to reduce spending gaps, counter misleading GOP attacks, and maximize the opportunity for Democrats to win in congressional districts across California and the country.