



Truman National Security Project

Memo to Congress: Conducting Successful Military Outreach: Rules of Engagement

For the first time in recent history, Democrats came from 30 points behind to poll at a statistical tie with Republicans on national security: 43-41% (Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner survey, May 2009) Unfortunately that gap reopened with a 47-34% split. **Progressives must go on the offensive to have the opportunity to permanently close the four decade security gap.**

To succeed, progressives must address the continued perception that conservatives do a better job of ensuring a strong military. **The polling shows an 31 point gap in the public's view of which party will do a better job of "ensuring a strong military."**

*These results should be of interest to all Members of Congress.

The 2008 election suggests that outreach conducted to veterans and military families is paying tremendous dividends. This community has moved significantly over the last two Presidential cycles. The success can be directly linked to the targeted effort by leaders to engage and include the military community in its policies and efforts.

Connecting with this community of Americans who have dedicated their lives to our country's service is incumbent upon our nation's political leaders. Not only do we owe them a sacred trust, but listening to their voices is crucial to fully representing most constituencies. In 44 states, veterans compose more than 10% of the population. In more than a fifth of Congressional districts, veterans constitute more than 10% of the voting age population. Members whose districts are near military installations, such as AZ-08, have even higher representation.¹ Military families (spouses and adult children of service members), and individuals on active duty create an even larger constituency.

Common wisdom holds that the military is ideologically conservative: after all, Vietnam Veteran and Senator John Kerry lost the veteran vote 65 to 35 against a rival who had not served. **This is increasingly false.** In 2008 President Barack Obama won the majority of all veterans under age 60, and narrowed the gap to 55 – 45 across the entire veterans community while campaigning against a Vietnam vet and war hero.²

¹ 2005-2007 American Community Survey, 3 Year Estimate based on Census polling.

² Exit polling by Edison Media Research. (http://www.exitpoll.net/exit_polling.html)



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2008 Presidential Election: Veteran Vote

- **Ages 59 and younger (48% of the community): 52% Obama; 45% McCain**
- **Ages 60 and older (52% of the community): 37% Obama; 61% McCain**

Our nation's military community needs more than fair-weather friends. Building long-term relationships and deeper understanding is essential. However, it is not difficult. A few easy actions can yield tremendous impact.

Three Simple Steps Members can take to Connect with the Military Community

1) **Establish a Veterans or Military Advisory Council to provide advice and forge relationships with credible messengers**

The military community is tightly connected, and has a common language, values, and means of expression. It is important to build a team of veterans and military family members who meet regularly to provide Members with ideas and feedback, and who can advise on the best means to communicate with this community. This "Military Advisory Council" will allow Members to have advocates within the community who can visit Veteran Service Organizations, provide advice to congressional staff, write letters to the editor or op-eds, and support or explain the Member's policies.

A committee should be founded on two reliable co-chairs. They should commit to recruiting members for the Advisory Council and leading a monthly phone call, sometimes with the Member, at other times with the Military/Veterans' Affairs LA.

By identifying supportive members of the military community who can advise and represent Members within their community, at Veteran Service Organizations, local military ceremonies, and similar venues, creating a Military Advisory Council is an essential and easy first step in building a bridge into the military community.

The military community is not monolithic. In creating your council, it is important to ensure that you include the following:



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Who Should Serve On A Military Advisory Council?

Veterans who span generations, from WWII through the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Veterans who served in the Reserve and National Guard.

Veterans across services (Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard)

Military family members of active duty personnel, Reserve & National Guard.

Male and female members

Multi-racial members

NOTE: Active duty military should not be approached to be a part of this effort, as this could be seen as politicizing the military or violating the Uniformed Code of Military Justice.

2) Actions Speak Louder than Words: Visit a local military base or Reserve/National Guard unit or hold a military family roundtable

A Member's Military Advisory Council can identify a military base, hospital, or Reserve/National Guard unit in the Member's District, and work with the leadership at those locations to set up a tour of the facility, meetings with enlisted service members or officers, or an appearance at an event, such as a celebration of returning troops or a promotion ceremony. The Member's presence at such events will have a lasting impact for those in that unit and their families. For greatest impact within the military community, at least some such visits should be made without press. Forgoing press shows an understanding that such visits are about the service members, while the close-knit nature of the military will ensure that the Members' support is known throughout the community.

A roundtable with military families is another clear way to show your support and gain crucial feedback. Military families are the backbone of our service: their opinions strongly affect reenlistment as well as military morale. Yet according to a recent online Blue Star Families survey, 94% of military family members feel, "the general public does not truly understand or appreciate the sacrifices made by service members and their families."³ A Member's Military Advisory Council can help locate a representative cross-section of military family members for a discussion. The Member should bring

³ The Blue Star Families survey can be found at: <http://www.bluestarfam.org/index.php?flag=logos>



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supporters who are military family members, and should listen to the struggles facing this group.

3) Focus on Policies that Matter to Troops: Create a Military Pledge

A pledge to veterans, active-duty service members, or military families is a clear way to demonstrate your commitment and understanding, while gaining insight into the breadth of your military community. Members can also capture the information of supporters who care about veterans and military families by asking for a reciprocal pledge from constituents.

Choose an issue that is important to troops. A veterans' healthcare pledge allows Members to clearly state their views on one of the most crucial and personal issues to veterans: the need to ensure quality healthcare for those who have served. Other issues that are important to active-duty troops or military families include sub-standard housing, especially for enlisted Marines and Army; family strain from repeated deployments; and other costs of the high operational-tempo—such as job loss for reservists. A pledge to those who have served to act on one of these crucial issues not only demonstrates your support for veterans; it also engages non-veterans who care about a Member's respect for this community.

Three ways to use a pledge include:

Create a "Veterans for X" or "Military Families for X" portion of a Member's website that includes the pledge. Post an online op-ed or blog discussing the pledge and ask for the names and email addresses of those who will join the member in signing.

Design a hard copy version of the pledge for volunteers. Hold sign-ups at fairs, parades, house parties, or other locations. Support this with a script. "I would like to share with you some information on (Member) who is supporting our military. You can learn more about (Member) but can we ask you today to sign a pledge your support to our military."

Share the hard copy of the Pledge with Veteran Service Organizations (such as Veterans of Foreign Wars or the American Legion) at an event with these organizations. This speaks to veterans in their language, and demonstrates support for their service.



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SAMPLE

A Pledge to Our Veterans

SAMPLE

I'm asking everyone to join me in a pledge that only when our veterans have accessible and quality healthcare will their service be honored. Our troops fight bravely for this country and it's up to us, through our vote and through our words, to fight for them by holding our elected officials accountable for reforming the Veterans Administration in three ways:

1. Allow All Veterans Back into the VA. We will work to reverse the 2003 ban on enrolling modest income veterans, which has denied care to a million veterans.

2. Making healthcare more accessible to veterans. The Veterans Administration has some of our nation's best doctors, but there simply are not enough of them to treat those that require care. The average patient to doctor ratio at these facilities is 650 to 1, and veterans are being forced to wait six to twelve months before receiving treatment.

3. Reducing the backlog of nearly 1,000,000 veterans' claims currently waiting for approval of disability benefits claims. Disabled veterans shouldn't have to wait six months to receive the benefits they have earned and so desperately need.

SIGN UP FOR UPDATES ON HOW TO SUPPORT OUR VETERANS

Our current system is failing our veterans, and until we ensure that our veterans have access to quality health care, so are we.

Member's Name & Signature

Today's elected leaders have a unique opportunity to establish new security policies that will keep America safe in the 21st Century. A leader's success in gaining the military community's trust goes beyond military matters, and may be viewed by others as a referendum on security credibility. By acting now to build relationships of trust, Members can ensure that such outreach is not seen as campaign-posturing, but instead lays a deep foundation of understanding and support with our military community.

For further information, contact Jonathan Powers, Iraq War veteran and COO of the Truman National Security Project, at jonathan@trumanproject.org.