

# **Democrats settle on fairness issues hoping to avoid a repeat of 2010 midterm disaster**

By Wesley Lowery, Published: April 13 [E-mail the writer](#)

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/democrats-settle-on-fairness-issues-hoping-to-avoid-a-repeat-of-2010-midterm-disaster/2014/04/13/bf4ca178-c188-11e3-bcec-b71ee10e9bc3\\_story.html?hpid=z3](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/democrats-settle-on-fairness-issues-hoping-to-avoid-a-repeat-of-2010-midterm-disaster/2014/04/13/bf4ca178-c188-11e3-bcec-b71ee10e9bc3_story.html?hpid=z3)

On the defensive about their prospects in the midterm elections this fall, congressional Democrats have spent all of April savaging the Republican budget proposal, decrying the Koch brothers and championing a series of bills meant to ingratiate themselves to struggling middle-class voters.

In promoting legislation that would extend unemployment benefits, increase the minimum wage and promote equal pay for women, the Democrats have declared themselves the party that will ensure a “fair shot” for all.

Republicans, they insist, are the party of special interests. It has been a classic Washington messaging campaign for these partisan times.

But with two weeks of impassioned speeches behind the Democrats, their new midterm strategy faces its first real road test: As members of Congress begin a two-week recess, they must sell that message to voters back home.

“This election in Louisiana, for me, is not going to be won in Washington,” said Sen. Mary Landrieu (D), who is considered one of the most vulnerable Senate incumbents up for reelection this year. “My election is going to be run

in Louisiana. . . .Washington is so focused on this inside-Beltway [game], and what our people are focused on is jobs and economic opportunity.”

But the talking points that will flow from Senate Democrats at town halls and other campaign stops have been refined in event after event in Washington in recent weeks.

Barely a day has passed in which Majority Leader Harry M. Reid (Nev.) has not taken to the Senate floor to rail against the Kochs — the billionaire brothers who have helped finance a wave of ads opposing Democratic incumbents — while top House Democrats Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) and Chris Van Hollen (Md.) have picked through each component of the budget proposal approved by the GOP-controlled House last week. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D-Md.) has taken every opportunity to declare that now is the time to secure equal pay for equal work for women — typically clutching the collar of her blouse for illustration while noting that women even have to pay more for dry cleaning.

“There are pretty stark contrasts here, and we know that when we bring out our base vote, we’re in a pretty powerful position,” said Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.). “In 2010, we fell on our face and we paid for it. We’re not going to make that mistake again.”

Republicans, in turn, have continued to hammer vulnerable Democratic incumbents over the botched rollout of the health-care law and say that the 11-pronged

legislative agenda introduced by Reid and other top Democrats is meant solely to mobilize voters and is not a legitimate attempt to legislate.

“They’ve already conceded that their ‘agenda’ for the rest of the year was drafted by campaign staffers. It’s a stunning admission,” Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said Thursday during a floor speech in which he contended that congressional Democrats are “single-mindedly focused” on the midterm elections. “It’s time they shelved the political games and worked with us to pass practical, bipartisan legislation for a change — legislation that can finally rescue the middle class from so many years of economic failure.”

Republicans say that the midterm elections — in which they stand a significant chance of reclaiming control of the Senate — will be a referendum on the Affordable Care Act. They say the recent Democratic push for bills that would extend emergency unemployment payments, attempt to address gender disparities in wages and raise the minimum wage — all of which face significant political hurdles — amounts to nothing more than political pandering and opportunism.

“We passed budget reform legislation to provide more accountability here in Washington and a more accurate picture of what we spend,” House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) said last week, defending the budget proposal by Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) that has come under constant Democratic fire. “Meanwhile, Democrats here in Washington continue to play their usual politics, using

their old playbook of pitting one group of Americans against another. And frankly, it's pretty obvious that their efforts have failed.”

But despite Republican grumblings, top Democrats say that their efforts have been successful. “Look at this week. This week, the talk is pay equity, not ACA. We won't have every week like that, but we'll have more and more weeks like that because we're talking about things that people really care about,” Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said last week. “We're at a turning point. . . . These last few weeks have been sort of a game-changer. I think that the day when Obamacare will be the only dominant message is over.”

Recasting the conversation away from the health-law rollout — a shift that, Democrats concede, is even more difficult now that Kathleen Sebelius's resignation as secretary of health and human services could prompt a confirmation battle focused entirely on the law — is only the first part of the battle.

But that strategy has its detractors among Democrats. Last week, Sen. Joe Manchin III (W.Va.) said that Reid's attacks on the Kochs had perhaps gone too far.

Meanwhile, noting the Koch brothers' relatively low name recognition nationally, Democratic aides in Washington and activists throughout the country acknowledge that Reid's anti-Koch crusade probably will be more effective at riling Democratic donors than mobilizing Democratic voters.

**“The Kochs are a dirty word, but it’s a dirty word to a pretty small and already pretty politicized group, and those people aren’t swing voters,” said Walt Auvil, a former county chairman for the Democratic Party in West Virginia. “I don’t think very many swing voters know who the Koch brothers are or care.”**

**Other critics point out that Democrats used similar attacks on the GOP budget proposal in the 2010 midterm elections, in which the tea party wave crushed Democrats in races across the country and gave Republicans control of the House.**

**But Auvil and Democrats in other states with highly competitive Senate races this year are much more upbeat about the other components of the “fair shot” messaging. “To the extent that they can clearly articulate a message that you’re for a higher minimum wage and for paycheck fairness and they’re not, that gives you some traction, at least here in West Virginia,” Auvil said.**

**That is echoed by top Democratic lawmakers, who insist that their push for votes on the minimum-wage increase and the Paycheck Fairness Act — even if ultimately unsuccessful — will awaken left-leaning voters who might otherwise have slept through November’s election.**

**“Pay equity affects women — that’s 53 percent of the vote. Minimum wage affects about 25 percent of the people. . . . It’s a real turnout” issue, Schumer said last week. “People want positive answers. Republicans have**

**blocked Barack Obama's agenda since the days of the stimulus. . . . People want answers for the future."**