

## **Is Larry Lessig a Viable Candidate for President, and if Elected, Should he Step Down or Step Up and Stay Until the Job is Done?**

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On October 5-6, 2015, Westen Strategies conducted a survey of 1008 registered Democratic voters for the Lessig2016 campaign, prior to recent media attention. The online survey used a stratified random sample to match the demographics of Democratic voters (see Appendix).

### **The Goal**

The goal of the survey was twofold. The first and most important goal was to test the viability and advisability of a “referendum candidacy,” in which the candidate would step down after passing his signature legislation, aimed at solving the problems of unequal voting (the corrupting role of campaign money; gerrymandered districts; and restricted access to the polls).

The second goal was to assess the viability of a candidacy by Larry Lessig, after voters read a few paragraphs about him and watched a 56-second video. *The goal was not to identify his current position vis-à-vis other candidates.* The appropriate way to do that would be the way most news organizations have, unfortunately, failed to do: including all viable candidates in their polls, *including* Lessig, and simply asking who likely Democratic voters, at this early point in the campaign, are most like to vote for. Rather, the second goal was to assess the likelihood of Lessig becoming a strong contender for the nomination *if* voters were exposed to him in the same way they have been exposed to the frontrunners, and were included in the Democratic debates.

### **Methodology**

Voter first read information about Lessig and his central agenda: fixing our democracy first. He argues that nothing can get done until we get the corruption out of our elections and return to equality of citizenship through voting, and offers a simple three-point plan for allowing anyone who can develop support from the people in their district, state, or the country to fund their campaigns, in a way that powerful interests and billionaires like the Koch brothers cannot outspend them; voters can choose their member of Congress rather than the other way around, by limiting the gerrymandering that creates “safe” but often polarized districts; and making Election Day a national holiday to celebrate our freedom, and to allow parents, seniors, and people who have multiple jobs to vote.

Voters saw a 56-second video describing Larry’s candidacy. They also read brief paragraph-long descriptions of his positions on some of the major issues facing our country, such as tax reform, comprehensive immigration reform, and a range of social issues.

To determine whether voters would be willing to consider Lessig as a “referendum president” who would step down and let the Vice President finish out his term, or whether they would prefer he “stay until the job is done,” we split the sample into three random subsamples. The first group heard about his referendum presidency idea. They were then asked how likely they would be to vote for him. Then were then asked whether they would be more or less likely to vote for him if he stayed in office to insure that “lobbyists did not come back and undo everything he and the American people had done,” and to “test drive” this new corruption-free government by starting to pass legislation for the middle class and ordinary Americans instead of the wealthy and well-connected.

The second group first heard about Lessig’s intention to step down after “fixing our democracy first,” but were told he was considering “staying until the job is done,” whether one or two terms, for the same reasons.

The third group, like many voters in the survey who were hearing about him for the first time, read and heard the same information about him *except* his idea of stepping down after passing his signature legislation. *After* indicating their level of support for him, these voters were *then* told about the idea of him stepping down, and were asked if they would be more or less likely to vote for him if he took that path. Voters in two (the first and third) conditions were also asked, after gauging their reaction to a referendum presidency, if they would prefer that he limit his presidency to one term, imposing term limits on his own candidacy.

## Results

The survey answered our two primary questions. First, two-thirds of voters who were asked about the idea of Lessig stepping down after accomplishing his goal – passing legislation that would end the corrupting role of money in politics and restoring one-person one-vote – said they would be *more likely* or *much more likely* to vote for him if he “stayed until the job was done.” Few preferred that he run as a “referendum candidate” who would step down. Voters roundly rejected his limiting his presidency to one term. The findings were clear: *voters want Larry Lessig in the race, and if he is elected, they do not want him to step down or limit his presidency in any way.*

Second, after seeing a very brief description of Larry Lessig and his agenda, over half of all voters surveyed reported that they would seriously consider voting for him. To see how he might fare against the other Democratic candidates if given the kind of exposure other candidates have received (e.g., Lincoln Chafee, who was included in the first Democratic debate), the last question we asked voters was to choose among the declared Democratic candidates for President the one they would most likely support at this moment – Clinton, Sanders, O’Malley, Webb, and

Chaffee – but, unlike the vast majority of polls, including Lessig as one of the options. Although we place little credence in the exact numbers, because respondents had just been exposed to information about Lessig, and we did not similarly inform them about the other candidates, the findings were striking: he was highly competitive with the front-runners.

## The Take-Home Message

Three things are clear from this first internal poll of the Lessig campaign:

- **Voters want Larry Lessig in the Democratic race for President.** They understand, as multiple polls have shown, that the system in Washington is rigged, and they are excited about an outsider who has the will and knowledge to fix our democracy, so that we return to one man one vote, not one dollar one vote.
- **Although fixing our democracy would be his first and signature issue, and his election would indicate a strong mandate for ending the corrupting influence of money in politics, voters want to see him “stay until the job is done,”** whether that takes one or two terms. They do *not* want him to step down or self-impose term limits.
- **Once voters learn about Lessig’s focus on fixing a corrupt system dominated by Big Money as well as his positions on the other major issues facing the country, he is immediately competitive with the frontrunners in the Democratic race.** From this survey, we cannot speculate as to how high his actual support would be against the other candidates, because we did not similarly expose them to information about the other candidates (although at least Clinton and Sanders have certainly received extensive exposure. However, the data are clear that Larry Lessig is a viable candidate for President who voters should have the chance to hear in the Democratic debates.

One final point is of note. Lessig is not just a candidate who appeals to the left or the Democratic “base.” *Moderate Democrats and Independents who lean Democratic* support his candidacy at or more strongly than self-described “strong Democrats.” The findings on Independents are consistent with polls by multiple news organizations and public opinion research firms, including major surveys conducted just this year, showing that 75 to 85 percent of voters, across party lines, believe we need to make fundamental changes or develop a completely new way to fund campaigns to end the corrupting impact of money in politics.

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## Appendix: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>			
	42%	58%			
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Latino</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Other</b>
	68.1%	16.0%	9%	3.7%	3.1%
<b>Education</b>	<b>High school or less</b>	<b>Some college</b>	<b>Tech or Assoc degree</b>	<b>College</b>	<b>Post-college education</b>
	22.7%	16.0%	16.4%	27.1%	13.6%
<b>Age</b>	<b>18-29</b>	<b>30-39</b>	<b>40-54</b>	<b>55+</b>	
	23.0%	19.0%	28.7%	29.5%	
<b>Region</b>	<b>Northeast</b>	<b>Pacific coast</b>	<b>Midwest</b>	<b>Plains</b>	<b>South</b>
	23.2%	12.1%	24.7%	8.6%	31.3%
<b>Party allegiance</b>	<b>Strong Democrat</b>	<b>Not so strong Dem</b>	<b>Independent leans Dem</b>		
	49.0%	28.4%	22.4%		