With the 2014 Congressional elections only 10 months away, Members of the House and Senate are thinking very carefully about the issues they will focus on in their campaigns.

Advice was recently given by the RATE coalition, whose members include Walmart, FedEx, Verizon, Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, Time Warner Cable and others. In a recent memo, RATE co-chairs Elaine Kamarck and James Pinkerton advise candidates that tax reform is a winning issue in 2014. RATE supports lowering the corporate income tax rate from 35% to 25%.

Recent polling by Hart Research Associates shows that RATE is dead wrong in its political recommendations. Voters do not want to cut corporate taxes. What they want is a tax system that requires corporations and the wealthy to pay their fair share.

We disagree with RATE’s analysis and recommendations, but we agree that tax reform “is a winning issue” in 2014. Here’s why:

**Voters want corporations and the wealthy to pay their fair share:** Voters are aware that many large corporations shift profits to tax havens to avoid paying their fair share of federal income taxes, and they know that some highly-profitable corporations pay absolutely nothing. When Hart Research asked voters if they approve of “close[ing] loopholes that allow corporations and wealthy individuals to avoid paying U.S. taxes by shifting income to offshore tax havens,” 62% said yes; only 36% said no. There is consensus about closing tax loopholes across the political spectrum – Democrats support by a margin of 65% to 34%, Independents by 65% to 31%, and Republicans by 55% to 43%.

In fact, this position wins with men, women, young voters, middle-aged voters, seniors, families earning less than $60,000, families earning between $60,000 and $100,000, families earning more than $100,000, union voters, non-union voters, college graduates, and non-college graduates.

Voters strongly want a fairer tax system in other ways as well. They favor eliminating the “carried interest” loophole for hedge fund managers by a remarkable 68% to 28%. This pattern holds regardless of party affiliation – Democrats favor eliminating the carried interest loophole by 71% to 25%, Independents by 71% to 26%, and Republicans by 61% to 34%.

Voters strongly support the Buffett Rule – setting a minimum tax rate of 30% for Fortune 500 CEOs and other millionaires so they don’t pay lower rates than the middle-class – by an overwhelming 72% to 22%. Democrats favor this position by 85% to 12%, Independents by 75% to 22%, and Republicans by 51% to 35%.
Money raised from closing loopholes should be used for new investments and deficit reduction, not for reducing tax rates: The Hart Research poll found that by 82% to 9%, voters believe that “reform[ing] the tax system by closing corporate loopholes and limiting deductions for the wealthy” should be used to “reduce the budget deficit and make new investments” rather than to “reduce tax rates on corporations and the wealthy.”

RATE offers polling data to support a different point in their memo – that voters want a simpler tax system – but it offers no evidence that voters favor cuts in the corporate income tax rate.

For these reasons, candidates who follow the RATE Coalition’s recommendation to run on the issue of cutting corporate taxes would be putting themselves at risk. Their danger would be compounded if they stake their reputations on RATE’s top talking points – “tax reform is key to economic growth,” and we need to lower the corporate tax rate.

- A cut in corporate tax rates from 35% to 25% would result in an increase in economic output of less than two-tenths of one percent, according to the Congressional Research Service.

- Big and profitable corporations paid an effective tax rate of only 13% in 2010, according to the Government Accountability Office.

- Some large profitable corporations pay ZERO federal income taxes some years, according to Citizens for Tax Justice.

Voters are already distrustful of politicians, believing they are too cozy with powerful special interests. They will be even less forgiving of candidates who call for cutting corporate taxes instead of closing corporate tax loopholes.

Making it simpler means making it fairer: The RATE Coalition is correct to suggest that voters want a simpler tax system. But it is wrong to imply that voters who want less paperwork can be bamboozled into thinking that simplification means lowering tax rates on large corporations. An astute political opponent will rightly point out that simplification should mean closing loopholes in our current laws that allow some corporations and individuals to avoid paying their fair share. Large corporations should not have an advantage over smaller ones because they can employ hundreds of lawyers and accountants to figure out how to hide profits in offshore tax havens. Making the tax code simpler should also mean making it fairer.

Times have changed – change with them: Most American families are still reeling from the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. Millions of homeowners are still “underwater.” The words “banks,” “bonuses,” and “bailouts” can send people into a rage. CEOs are not seen as cultural heroes but as culprits. Americans know that corporate profits are at an all-time high, and that companies are stashing profits offshore instead of investing in American jobs.

In these conditions, running a campaign on the proposition that cutting taxes on large corporations will help the middle class is a risky and perhaps a career-ending course of action.