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Date: April 9, 2004

To: Friends of Democracy Corps

From: Stan Greenberg
Jim Gerstein

RE: FOCUS GROUP REPORT
Findings from Recent Discussions with Voters

After one month of an aggressive paid media campaign in the battleground states and heightened coverage of the Kerry-Bush match-up, the electorate remains as evenly divided as it was on Election Day 2000. In the Democracy Corps national survey conducted two weeks ago, the election was even and only one percent of voters were undecided. The states with close results in 2000 are center stage again in 2004, and there are several important dynamics taking place among independent voters in key states which were evident in the latest round of focus groups that Democracy Corps held with swing voters in Florida, Ohio, and Oregon.¹

In our discussions with voters, we explored attitudes toward George W. Bush and John Kerry, views on major issues impacting the vote, and reactions to Richard Clarke's statements about Iraq and 9/11. We also compared Bush's current message with a Kerry message centered on American priorities, and looked at voters' responses to some of the candidates' television commercials.

We hope the findings from our discussions with these swing voters will provide a richer understanding of the impact the current political debate is making on their perceptions. Key observations include:

¹ Democracy Corps conducted focus groups in the suburbs of Orange County, FL outside of Orlando, the suburbs of Franklin County, OH outside of Columbus, and the suburbs outside of Washington and Clackamas, OR outside of Portland March 29-April 1, 2004. All groups consisted of independents or weak partisans who voted in the 2000 Presidential election and intend to vote in 2004. Each location held one men's group and one women's group. In suburban Portland, the participants were college educated with annual household incomes above \$50,000. In suburban Orlando and Columbus, participants were non-college educated with annual household incomes under \$50,000.

- Attitudes toward Bush remained unchanged from the many other focus groups we have conducted since 9/11. Positive feelings still revolve around his moral character, Christianity, strong family, leadership, decisiveness, and patriotism. The only policy related area where he received credit was 9/11 and his strong response during the nation's crisis. As usual, the doubts about Bush were wrapped in his close ties to big business, spending too much overseas at the expense of our problems at home, and for some, a go-it-alone foreign policy.
- Perceptions of Kerry are forming and most participants had some opinion of him, frequently reflecting the messages delivered in the Bush and Kerry television commercials. A dominant attitude was that Kerry changes his position on issues and tells people what they want to hear; he will also raise their taxes. And while people recognize his military service, for now, negative perceptions driven by the media dominate the positive ones.
- Overwhelmingly, people believed that Kerry would take the country in a different direction than Bush. But despite the prevailing sentiment that the country is headed in the wrong direction, the participants were divided over whether Kerry's direction was the right one.
- Despite the even division among the number of Gore voters and Bush voters within the focus groups – which, as usual, played out with highly polarized views on Bush and the parties – the Kerry message of prioritizing and creating a strong America, and going in a new direction was far better received than Bush's message of steady leadership demanded by these times. This held true in all groups regardless of gender, income, or education.
- Bush's and Kerry's positive television ads about themselves did not produce especially strong reactions, though Kerry's were received slightly better. The messages in Bush's negative ads against Kerry had penetrated voters' thinking during other parts of the discussion.
- Participants were well informed of Richard Clarke's comments and the ensuing controversy. Reactions to 9/11 revelations were different than reactions to Iraq, with participants resistant to assigning blame, especially on President Bush, for 9/11 whereas people were more willing to question Bush's reason for going to war in Iraq.
- Voters felt problems, such as American jobs moving overseas and rising health care costs, were being neglected. Throughout the discussions, people voiced their desire to shift our attention from Iraq and overseas to taking care of the priorities in our own country.
- Vice President Cheney's standing has fallen dramatically, driven in large part by his connection to Halliburton and secretive operating.

George W. Bush

Voters' attitudes toward President Bush are quite solid, and we have seen only slight changes over time among these swing voters. People offered favorable comments toward Bush for his moral character, religious commitment, and decisive leadership. There was also the usual praise for his handling the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 9/11.

I like the fact that he will not hesitate to say he is a Christian. I like that. There are not very many presidents who will do that because they are so worried about who is going to think this and who is going to think that. I like the fact that he is willing to say that and that he is not afraid of what is going to happen when he does say that. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

He performs well under pressure. You know, and he's not afraid to make a tough decision. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

He's a Christian man with strong convictions... I believe that's one of the most important things, if our country's gonna have a chance, we've gotta have God in it. (Columbus, non-college educated men)

He had the strength and the wisdom and courage more or less to lead us through 9/11, and keep us together. (Columbus, non-college educated men)

He proved himself in a sticky situation and you don't know is this how the next person is going to handle it if it happens again, or something. (Columbus non-college educated women)

I think he's a great leader from 9/11. (Portland, college educated women)

He has a wife and a pretty strong family value and I think that is a positive. I think that vision of him and his wife and the harmony and their relationship is a positive model for our country. (Portland, college educated men)

Just as positive sentiments toward Bush remained unchanged, so did the negative feelings toward Bush. Voters still do not think the President is doing the things necessary to tackle our problem at home, especially on jobs and the rising cost of health care. They questioned his ties to big business, whether he has the right priorities, and where we are headed in Iraq.

I think that the money was necessary to spend to go over there, but I think now we have to start bringing that back home and start spending it here and taking care of things here – getting more jobs and healthcare. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

He needs to pay attention to us. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

He's giving it to the corporations and they're just running with it. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

I just don't think he's concerned at all about the quality of life for most Americans. I think his family values stay at home. You know, he doesn't care about your family or my family, you know. (Columbus non-college educated women)

I don't see him being very consistent. I admire some of the moral stances he's taken, but he doesn't consistently apply them to everything. He claims to care about families and marriages and education, and yet, he supports corporations who are polluting the earth and destroying where these families live. (Portland, college educated women)

I was already appalled at the plan we had. I come from family of military. My father spent 47 years in and the only clear cut plan we had was to take control of those oil wells. When we went in, less than 24 hours, bang, we had them. We still can't even get water flowing. (Portland, college educated men)

John Kerry

Even though he is a relative newcomer to the national scene, most participants had heard of John Kerry and held an opinion of him. Their knowledge of Kerry reflected a surface understanding and there was a lot of interest in learning more about him. Positive feelings about Kerry centered on his military service and caring about the middle class. People called him a “war hero,” “Vietnam vet,” and a “stand-up guy” who is intelligent and focused on the issues that matter to them.

He served in Vietnam. You know, he's won two, three stars. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

Yeah, he was on riverboats, that was tough in Vietnam. It means you went up in the little valleys and lagoons and got the hell shot out of you. My Captain on the ship was an ex-Vietnam Vet, that same type of duty. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

Standup guy. Followed through with his military service. (Columbus non-college educated women)

He says he's gonna keep jobs here. I like that. (Columbus, non-college educated men)

He seems to show more interest in what's happening in our country more than other people, I think. (Portland, college educated women)

He is a veteran so he understands I think what going to war – you know the cost of it. (Portland, college educated men)

In addition to their positive feelings toward Kerry, participants also held clear and consistent doubts about the Democratic candidate, which have been heavily informed by the President and his re-election campaign. In fact, voters' language reflected the campaign's assertions as many people said Kerry "flip flops" on issues, is indecisive, and will raise taxes. This sentiment was especially strong in Orlando though it was evident throughout all the focus groups.

I heard that in the past he has voted for a lot of tax raises. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

Integrity, lack of decisiveness. I have no idea what his proposed policies are. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

You got that vote for the taxes, the gasoline hike and now he switched back here. So, okay, where is he really on the gas hike? (Columbus non-college educated women)

He will spend away money his term. Big government. Can't stay with his first choice on a bill, wishy washy. (Columbus, non-college educated men)

Well, he flips back and forth it seems. Initially, he was supposedly for us going to Iraq and now he's screaming for us to get out of there. (Portland, college educated women)

He has the persona of being flip-flopping and changing his mind a lot. (Portland, college educated men)

There was no doubt among participants that if Kerry were elected, he would take the country in a different direction. Even though they expressed resounding dissatisfaction with the way we are currently headed, these swing voters were uncertain and held mixed views over whether they want to go in Kerry's direction.

It would be a different direction, but I don't know if it would be the right direction. I mean this is a hard choice going on. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

I am kind of afraid that he might completely back us out of Iraq. I mean if he backs us out – and I'm not saying that I want people over there but like it would almost show how weak we are and it might invite even more problems than we are already having. (Columbus non-college educated women)

Maybe Kerry, being a little more intelligent and aware, will have more sense of what the rest of the world is thinking. The rest of the world thinks we are a bunch

of idiots right now, you know. You go anywhere outside of the United States and they are like, Bush, they hate Bush. And how does that serve the United States in the long run? It doesn't. (Portland, college educated women)

Two areas of contrast that emerged between Bush and Kerry were taxes and character. While participants held clear views on Bush regarding these issues, their emerging attitudes toward Kerry in these areas reflected several doubts that provided a sharp difference.

Taxes

As we have seen in the past, there was not a great deal of enthusiasm for President Bush's tax cuts. People undeniably appreciated the money – primarily felt through the child tax credit – but generally said that it was not enough money to make a difference, while questioning whether it did more harm to the economy than good.

I got a check for \$800 but then the tax return came and you had to claim it and you didn't get that much back when you filed your taxes anyway. It was like it just canceled it out. It was the same thing that you would have gotten now – you just got it a little earlier. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

When you got the \$100 check, I mean that was like, I wanted more. (Columbus non-college educated women)

The money came from somewhere. It wasn't just free money that he printed out and gave to us. It could not have helped the economy really. He moved it from one place to another. (Portland, college educated women)

While I was cashing the check, I thought it was ludicrous. My mother makes \$200,000 a year and she got a tax cut. She didn't want it. (Portland, college educated women)

I don't hold him responsible for the economy. I do hold him responsible for what he and his administration are doing in reaction to the economy. So, as much as I personally would like a tax cut, I don't like the idea of multi-trillion dollar debt trade balances. (Portland, college educated men)

But even though taxes were clearly not a strength for Bush, they posed a weakness for Kerry. When asked to cite doubts about Kerry, participants in Florida said:

I'm concerned about tax raise issues. What is going to happen there? Are there going to be tax raises and if so where are the tax raises going to be. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

He's, you know, voting consistently to raise taxes, and that kind of concerns me a little bit. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

After showing the Bush commercials, we asked voters if they believed their taxes would increase under a Kerry Administration. Despite the repeated assertions that they hate negative advertising and their lack of support for the Bush tax cuts, the nearly universal sentiment among both the higher income and lower income participants in the focus groups was that their taxes would increase if Kerry became President. Not one participant would defend Kerry on taxes, nor did they point to any plans he may have for lowering middle class taxes or his proposal to cut the corporate income tax.

And even after playing a Kerry commercial where he says he will raise taxes on the wealthy, one participant challenged:

I know when he says money away from the wealthy, he is really talking about me because let's face it anybody making over \$50,000 is considered wealthy in a politician's book. (Portland, college educated men)

Character

Participants could not point to any core convictions that defined Kerry. Although his military service did highlight something Kerry had done that reflected well on him, it was not enough as participants adopted Bush's language when describing Kerry as one who "flip flops." Kerry's perceived lack of convictions and strong character marked a stark contrast to what people liked about Bush. An Orlando woman captured the distinction when she said, "So Kerry fears man and Bush fears God." Some of the non-college educated women were also taken aback by the recent remarks about lying Republicans and foreign leaders.

I was a little offended when he they showed him badmouthing – when he said; Those dirty crooks – or something. (Columbus non-college educated women)

The whole foreign affairs thing where he said was talking to foreign leaders and then he wouldn't back it up. He was making me question how truthful he really is, especially politically. (Columbus non-college educated women)

I think he's nothing more than just a politician. And I don't trust him. You know, listen, I can say anything I want, but whether or not I will do what I say is a different matter entirely. And I just don't believe that he will have what it takes to follow through with everything that he said. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

He doesn't seem very sincere in his campaign. I don't get that when I listen to him. I feel like he's kind of blowing smoke, telling us what we want to hear now. (Portland, college educated women)

Bush and Kerry Messages

We pitted one of President Bush's core messages up against a Kerry message focused on a new direction that tackles our problems at home. Among these swing voters – half who voted for Bush and half who voted for Gore in 2000 – the Kerry message was the overwhelming choice. The Kerry message, preferred by two-thirds of the 54 participants:

John Kerry says, we need a new direction, to renew our country. That means a strong military and battling terrorists, but it also means starting to tackle our country's problems. Our go-it-alone foreign policy leaves US taxpayers rebuilding Iraq alone, but we should be doing more about our own economy, education, health care and retirement. We should start with the economy. President Bush thinks it is great because the wealthiest are doing fine. But jobs are scarce, middle class incomes squeezed and health care costs skyrocketing. Bush's tax breaks reward companies relocating or outsourcing jobs abroad, but we should reward companies creating jobs in America. He's barred the government from negotiating lower drug prices and transferred billions of Medicare money to the insurance companies. Kerry says we should tackle America's problems -- middle class tax cuts, enforce trade laws, make health care affordable, protect Social Security, and invest in education. He'll make the right choices for our country.

Participants responded very well to the message as it spoke directly to their priorities – namely, help at home and addressing the pressure on the middle class. And many also agreed with Kerry's assessment that Bush has a go-it-alone strategy that hurts the country. It is critical to recognize that the security reassurance at the beginning of Kerry's message was essential, inoculating Kerry from Bush's central critique on Kerry's commitment to the military and intelligence.

It is addressing more of the issues that we all discussed and he is talking about middle class and where we all fit and helping us out. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

One of the things that stood out to me as a truth of like where we are, the middle class income squeezed and healthcare cost are skyrocketing in the first one. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

We need a new direction. That is a good way to start. We need to be doing more about our economy, education, healthcare, retirement. I think those are very important things. (Columbus non-college educated women)

I like the way he says we should tackle America's problems and more about our own economy. (Columbus non-college educated women)

...middle class income squeezed, which we are . . . I mean you know, I work two jobs sometimes, and we just barely made it. And my wife worked up until last year too. She had her own business and she gave it up 'cause she just . . . even

with the tax break she got, she just couldn't make it anymore. So she just closed it down. (Columbus, non-college educated men)

And that middle class income squeeze, it's just true. The middle class is having a much smaller hand. I think it should be a more stable country. (Portland, college educated women)

The go-it-alone foreign policy, the middle class income squeeze speaks to me, health care costs skyrocketing, the rewarding companies relocating or outsourcing jobs abroad, negotiating lower drug prices. I mean, it spoke more specifically and I would agree with her rather than going on with this whole 9/11. It's more that I'm going to make you feel good, wave your American flag. And this one addresses more this is what we are dealing with. (Portland, college educated women)

Although Bush's message of leadership through 9/11 highlighted his main strength and the contrast with Kerry's tax increase highlighted a strong doubt about Kerry, the Bush message did not resonate as it ignored the problems facing these participants who were already doubtful of Bush's commitment to deal with domestic challenges. The Bush message:

President Bush says, Americans face a very clear choice in this election. John Kerry flip-flops on issues critical to our national security, from support for our troops in Iraq to funding for our Intelligence agencies, but wants to raise taxes by \$900 billion to pay for more government spending programs. In the face of extraordinary challenges, I have provided the leadership these difficult times demand. We responded decisively to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, overthrowing outlaw regimes that threatened the security of our people, and delivered on my promises to cut taxes and increase accountability in our schools. I will continue to rebuild a military decimated by Democratic cuts, to decrease wasteful spending, and to ensure middle class taxpayers keep more of the money they earn.

Reactions to Bush's message were primarily unenthusiastic, even among those who chose it over the Kerry message.

I went on a believability thing. You know, I mean the top one (Kerry) is what I wish for, and the bottom one (Bush) is what I really think's gonna happen. And you know, do I think he'd raise our taxes? Yes. Cut taxes? I think the Bush Administration will probably do that or try to do that again. Rebuild that military? You know he's gonna do that. Decrease wasteful spending? I think he could and with the middle class taxpayers to keep more of our money. Personally I think that Bush will do it. I wish the things that Kerry says up there were true. I would love to vote for somebody like that, but I think that's reaching for the brass ring. (Columbus, non-college educated men)

You know, what worries me about John Kerry, this flip-flopping thing. You know, almost like is he gonna flip-flopping and we're gonna have to worry about terrorism if he's elected President? You know, is gonna just shut down the military thing all together? And this \$900 billion scares me to death. Where the hell. Taxes on \$900 billion more? That number is astronomical man. Think about it, \$900 billion! (Columbus, non-college educated men)

More often, the Bush message elicited negative reactions for speaking past the problems that participants want prioritized.

The Bush one talks an awful lot about the 9/11 stuff. I don't know, I just think that's being helped. I don't think it's been handled properly from the beginning. The whole tactic of going to war to fight terrorism is misplaced. It's just making people angrier and more of them angry. (Portland, college educated women)

Bush is not even willing to stick his foot in his mouth and say, there is this problem. I am going to address it. Kerry at least willing to make a statement and stick his foot in his mouth and say – so 4 years from now if Kerry wins, somebody is going to pull out these statements and say Kerry said he was going to do this, and do this and do this, the Republicans and they are going to say, well he didn't do that. Bush is walking a line that is just – he is just not saying anything. (Portland, college educated men)

Campaign Commercials

We tested some of the campaigns' television commercials that have been on the air in the battleground states, during this critical period following the conclusion of the Democratic primary. None of the commercials overwhelmed participants, though we could see the impact on voters' perceptions as reflected in their assessments of the candidates. Kerry's positive biographical spot received a better response than Bush's positive spot that highlighted his response to 9/11 and leadership.

For Kerry, the references to fighting on important issues and his war record resonated, but this alone was not enough to inspire confidence that he would deliver on his promises or overcome participants' sense that he is just saying what he thinks they want to hear.

Well, he is going to stress that right now because we are concerned about military issues. We are concerned about somebody who can defend us. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

He is a politician. He is going to say what we want to hear. That is always my impression. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

I don't like John Kerry, but as far as the advertisement goes, I think it was a very effective advertisement, because people are very focused on military. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

Obviously you can't go into a lot of detail in a 30 second spot but I think I liked his concepts. I mean, I liked him giving the overview and I found that to be refreshing. (Portland, college educated men)

I think he defined all the problems, he just didn't tell me what he was going to do about it. (Portland, college educated men)

For Bush, the emphasis on 9/11 and the war on terror highlighted who he is, but it did not move people to believing he would transition to tackling problems at home.

It was very George Bush. Just very simply stated. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

He's gonna stay strong on terrorism. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

It was feel-goody and that was good in a way, but I thought it was what I would expect to hear from him. I mean he said the things I thought he would say, but I wasn't terribly impressed. Another ad. (Columbus non-college educated women)

He identified the problems. Again, I am waiting for someone to tell me what they are going to do about it. (Portland, college educated men)

We also showed two Bush commercials that attack Kerry – one attacking a \$900 billion tax increase if Kerry is elected and another attacking Kerry's vote against \$87 billion to the troops in Iraq which finishes with Kerry saying he voted both for and against the aid. Neither commercial evoked an especially strong response, but again, we did see how voters adopted the campaign's language in other discussions when describing Kerry. Reacting to the Bush commercials, many participants believed the attacks which raised doubts about Kerry.

On Kerry raising taxes:

I thought it was truthful because I heard some of those things before. (Columbus non-college educated women)

You can't believe everything you hear. It scares you. I mean, like you said, they showed the record, doesn't mean what he is going to do, but you still kind of go, what might he do, so they are talking about something in the future...It raises some concerns. (Columbus non-college educated women)

It kind of points out the fact that if Kerry's elected, we're gonna be spending more money. He's gonna take more money out of our pockets, that's generally what it comes across as. (Columbus, non-college educated men)

I thought the point of the commercial was: is John Kerry going to raise your taxes and he gave evidence that I should be concerned that that would happen and that is not something I want to see happen. It convinced me to be concerned about that. (Portland, college educated men)

On Kerry's opposition to supporting the \$87 billion to Iraq and trying to vote both ways:

I'm not in the military and I never have been, but I'm all for taking care of those men and women. Give them what they need. And that commercial looked real in showing that Kerry doesn't want that, or that's not a priority for him. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

Just like we said earlier, he is a little wishy-washy, Kerry. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

That last statement drove it home. He actually did vote on it and then he voted against it. He basically said it right there. He voted on it and then he voted against it. What's his stand on it? You know. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

I think, again, it just drew the question of where does he stand. (Portland, college educated women)

Still, others were bothered by the sense that Kerry's statement was taken out of context:

Usually when they are voting on those issues it is just not one little thing, it is all this other stuff. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

He still don't really know specifically what it was that he changed his mind on. What specifically he was voting on or how much money or it was just kind of....those bills are complicated and they throw stuff in. They think they are voting on one thing, but then there's like ten other things they stick in there to trick the people. (Portland, college educated women)

Talk about extracting from a vote the point that you want to bring home, rather than what Kerry was trying to communicate with that vote. (Portland, college educated men)

Richard Clarke

The Clarke revelations and resulting controversy had clearly made its way into participants' thinking, as they were well aware of the details surrounding the issue. We showed participants two excerpts of the *60 Minutes* interview with Richard Clarke – one about 9/11 and the other about Iraq – and their reactions were very telling of how voters distinguish between the issues. When Clarke's discussion focused on 9/11, participants resisted the idea that Bush could have done a better job on terrorism prior to the attacks. People looked for reasons to defend him because they felt Bush has always kept their best interests "at heart," and they simply did not want to assess blame for such a tragedy. This attitude has been present among voters since the terrorist attacks, and appears solid at this point in time.

I hate the after blame. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

It was a whole bunch of people's fault. It wasn't just one person or one cabinet or whatever. I think it was a whole bunch and there is no sense of playing the blame came now. It is over with. It is done with. Now, let's fix it. You know, let's not go back. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

I don't think there's any way they could have predicted that happening. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

See, I have a hard time with that because we do this in this country all the time – not just with 9/11 but everybody else. The bad people were the terrorists, not the people that maybe missed the point or didn't see what was coming. (Columbus non-college educated women)

I think it is ridiculous. You can't second guess situations like that. No one ever thought in their wildest dreams that people would jump an airplane, fly into a building, kill themselves and everyone else. (Portland, college educated men)

But with regards to Iraq, participants were more willing to question Bush and his reasons for going to war. Clarke's Iraq comments did not necessarily raise new questions for people, but they did feed existing doubts. Intensity toward Clarke's comments reflected individuals' attitudes over the war, strengthening doubts more among those who leaned against the war while meeting varying degrees of resistance among those who supported the war.

I think he did manipulate people. We were vulnerable at that time. I think he told the American people what they wanted to hear. He gave us a face and a name to that horrible tragedy. And he used that vulnerability. (Portland, college educated women)

He manipulated the whole situation. (Columbus non-college educated women)

He wanted to get Saddam out of there, but he used the whole 9-11 thing to cover it up. Yes, Saddam is reported to have gassed his own people in the North, he's reported to use gas against Iran, throwing scud missiles at Israel during the first Gulf War. But what has Saddam done directly towards the American people? Well nothing, other than the trying to get, you know, George W. Bush Sr. (Columbus, non-college educated men)

We couldn't prove that Saddam Hussein had anything to do with 9/11. No proof has come out and weapons of mass destruction. Everything he said, we've haven't found yet. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

We could have had Osama bin Laden already done and taken care of if we hadn't gotten sidetracked with the Iraq deal, whether it be personal or whatever. We should have stayed on one thing. (Portland, college educated men)

Many participants questioned Clarke's motives for making his statements and believed his timing intentionally coincided with the release of his book and an effort to capitalize. And Clarke's declaration that he would not work in a Kerry Administration had not broken through. It is important to note that most did not question the truth of what Clarke said, rather it was the motive.

Second guessing once again. You got some guy grandstanding trying to sell a book. You see it all the time with different cabinet members. (Portland, college educated men)

I think he's just trying to sell a book. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

He got a \$2 million book contract. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

He is going to make money selling his book. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

Timing makes me question because right now he doesn't have a job, he's looking to back somebody and he has a book he wants to sell, so back then he should have said; they could have and they didn't – instead of right now (Orlando, non-college educated women)

After discussing Clarke's comments, participants read a composite of the White House reaction to Clarke. Despite participants' doubts about Clarke's motives, many participants found the aggressive White House response to be an overreaction that did not respond to the substance of Clarke's allegations.

I almost feel they are making him sound worse than he is just because he wrote the book. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

They have to say something to make it sound like he is not credible either. I mean, you got to believe what you believe, what you've heard and other than that, I don't believe we found any weapons of mass destruction and there was no reason to go over there unless we knew for sure, which obviously we didn't know. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

I think both of them as political commercials and there is some truth in it and you have to pull out the truth. And zero credibility. No, I don't think the man has zero credibility. You can't tell me that. When they say that then it takes away their credibility. (Columbus non-college educated women)

Well I look at that and I go "That's a smoke screen." Because if he was the person in charge of the worst decade of terrorist activity, why the hell would the Bush Administration put him in place? (Columbus, non-college educated men)

That was very vague. (Portland, college educated women)

They didn't say what they did. (Portland, college educated women)

Prioritizing America

A central theme that appeared throughout the focus group discussions was the participants' frustration that problems at home were neglected usually because of our attention in Iraq. Voters raised the issue unprompted, and clearly expressed their desire to finish the job in Iraq and redirect energy to home.

We got to kind of start leaving Iraq and all that and kind of focus more back on us. (Orlando non-college educated women)

We need to come back to America and deal with ourselves, the problems that we're having. (Orlando non-college educated women)

I'm a real concerned about the money that he is giving out to Iraq because every time I turned around all I heard was more money, more money and I know we've got a lot of money, but we need money too. (Columbus non-college educated women)

I think he just . . . He let domestic affairs completely be clouded after 9-11. I think it was all "Let's go after the terrorists." I think that's great. Let's put the assets in place. But we gotta take care of home first. (Columbus non-college educated men)

The government I think is not putting the proper focus on education, care for our old, care for our young, security of – the well being of the whole country. Not just security of certain aspects of our country. (Portland, college educated men)

The 87 billion dollars remained etched in people's memories and our ongoing financial commitment sparked anger among the participants, who were concerned with skyrocketing health care costs and American jobs moving to other countries.

I think that the money was necessary to spend to go over there, but I think now we have to start bringing that back home and start spending it here and taking care of things here – getting more jobs and healthcare. (Orlando non-college educated women)

I have a hard time with us spending eighty-seven, is it billion dollars to get Iraq back on their feet? When we have people here that have no jobs. I mean I just don't get it. (Columbus non-college educated men)

But isn't it ironic . . . if they didn't have the money to put in for health care, to help pay for health care and education. But damn, I can come up with eighty-seven billion dollars to help rebuild a country. (Columbus non-college educated men)

That is what's scary about it. I mean you have people in our own country in similar situations, why do they get our money? (Columbus non-college educated women)

I mean, I feel sorry for the people in Iraq and I know they need their city rebuilt and water and electric, but we do too. It is like, just every time – well they need more money. (Columbus non-college educated women)

Cheney and Halliburton

For a long time, people appreciated Vice President Cheney's role in the Bush Administration as he was part of a team they considered experienced and important for the President. But this has changed and we have been noticing a significant decline in voters' sentiments toward the Vice President. In Democracy Corps polling, support for Cheney has fallen dramatically as his favorability score has dropped 24 points since taking office. In the focus groups, the only positive thing people attributed to him was his intelligence, calling him "very smart" and "a bright man," while the dominant description was harsh, with participants describing him as "deceitful," "secretive," and a "scam artist." Many were also disillusioned by his absence from the public view.

We don't care much about him and unless somebody mentions his name, you've forgotten that he is even there. He is a name. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

We can't put our trust or even support into somebody we don't even know. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

Just hiding in the shadows. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

What is he doing for the United States? He is hiding. (Columbus non-college educated women)

What was the purpose of him having the meeting about the country's energy policy? We don't have closed doors without disclosing any of the companies and CEO's and so forth that were present at those meetings. (Columbus, non-college educated men)

Puppet master. (Portland, college educated women)

Cheney's relationship with his old company and his secretive style are at the core of his reduced standing with voters. Participants' first reaction to hearing Cheney's name was "big money" and "Halliburton."

He is in it for the business. He is digging holes in Iraq. (Portland, college educated men)

A fundraiser and he gets out there and like pulls in the money for corporations. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

I didn't really like the fact that Cheney's ex-company led the oil contracts and they were way overcharged. (Columbus non-college educated women)

Cheney, being affiliated with Halliburton and when it came up, none of that was put up to bid whatsoever, okay, as far as companies that were asked to provide bids. You know, can you supply these services, you know, support the troops and so forth during these operations. You know, none of that happened whatsoever. Cheney stepped in and said, you know, we're at war, this contract. Halliburton and that's it." (Columbus, non-college educated men)

Final Note

Opinions are forming on Kerry and the election is very close. After a remarkably early engagement highlighted by massive television expenditures, the Bush campaign had partial success in their effort to define Kerry while bringing the election to even. Democracy Corps continues to track the head-to-head between the two candidates, and will have the latest results next week, as well as new numbers on the power of the competing messages.