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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

From: Karl Agne
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**THE CULTURAL DIVIDE &
THE CHALLENGE OF WINNING BACK RURAL & RED STATE VOTERS**

Focus Group Observations

Appleton, WI and Little Rock, AR, June 2005; Louisville, KY and Golden, CO, July 2005

Democracy Corps conducted eight focus groups over the last six weeks among rural voters in Wisconsin and Arkansas and disaffected Bush voters in Kentucky and Colorado¹ that powerfully demonstrated the tremendous challenge Democrats face in regaining the ground they have lost in these areas over the last decade. The problem is not Republican popularity – indeed, most voters in these groups were tremendously upset over the current direction of the country and saw little difference between Democrats and Republicans in Washington. However, there is one distinction they see clearly that severely limits the potential for Democratic gains.

In all eight groups, participants' broad dissatisfaction with the country's direction was focused on three issues – the lack of progress or a clear plan in Iraq, a stagnant economy without job security, and skyrocketing health care costs. President Bush and Republicans in Congress were faulted for their lack of effective leadership on these issues and their failure to offer new ideas. Furthermore, there was strong support for some specific progressive initiatives and a belief among many that Democrats would be more willing to tackle these issues and to offer new ideas in the face of current policies that are clearly failing. However, as powerful as the concern over these issues is, the introduction of cultural themes – specifically gay marriage, abortion, the importance of the traditional family unit, and the role of religion in public life – quickly renders them almost irrelevant in terms of electoral politics at the national level.

Based on survey data on the critical role of cultural issues and attitudes toward the personal values of candidates in the 2004 election, we designed these focus groups to gain a

¹ Democracy Corps conducted focus groups with independent voters and weak partisans from rural areas outside of Appleton, WI (June 29, 2005 – non-college women, ages 30-45, and non-college men, ages 45-60) and Little Rock, AR (June 30, 2005 – non-college women, ages 45-60, and non-college men, ages 30-45). We also spoke with voters in Louisville, KY (July 6, 2005 – non-college women, ages 30-45, and non-college men, ages 45-60) and Golden, CO (July 7, 2005 – college-educated women, ages 45-60, and college-educated men, ages 30-45) who voted for George W. Bush in 2004 but now disapprove of the job he is doing as President.

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better understanding of the attitudes of rural and red state voters on these complex issues and to discuss the relative importance of cultural issues relative to others priorities, including security, economic, and quality of life issues. Particularly among non-college voters, cultural issues not only superceded other priorities, they served as a proxy for many voters on those other issues. With most voters expressing little understanding of the differences between Democrats and Republicans or the relative merits of their positions on economic policy, health care, retirement security, and other issues, they felt it safe to assume that if a candidate was ‘right’ on cultural issues – i.e. opposed to abortion, but most importantly opposed to gay marriage and vocal about defending the role of faith and traditional Judeo-Christian values in public life – that candidate would naturally also come closest to their views on these other issues.

I'm proud to be an American because of the way this country was founded. And they stand up for this nation's Christian heritage. There's no question that – I believe this with all my heart – that this country is blessed the way it has been for all these years because of the way it was founded. And God's looked on us favorably. And I think Republicans have that at heart, most of them do. And it shows...in the moral stance they take. Because you hear all the time that there are no absolutes, but there truly is, and I think that they recognize that and try to push that through in their agenda. (Little Rock, younger non-college men)

College-educated voters, on the other hand, were much more circumspect about the focus on cultural issues among many Republican politicians. They decried efforts by President Bush and others to use the resources of elected office to enforce their moral beliefs on others, with the Terry Schiavo case and opposition to stem cell research serving as the most noteworthy examples. While these voters shared a deep-seated regard for the importance of family, concern over the impact of sex and violence in the media on children, and a desire for greater respect for many traditional social norms, they were averse to any efforts to legislate morality or to otherwise use government to restrict individual freedoms.

Republicans seem to cave into the religious right, to the point that they promote state rights but throw all that out the window and get involved in Terri Schiavo. (Denver, younger college men)

These findings are not surprising in the context of recent electoral trends, with Democrats making slow but steady gains among college-educated voters over the past decade while increasing percentages of non-college voters support Republicans, contrary to their own economic self-interest. We believe most Democrats share certain core beliefs about civil rights, opposition to government restrictions on individual liberties, and separation of church and state that are inviolable, and we would not in any way advocate that Democrats change these beliefs or seek to obscure them in an effort to reverse recent losses among rural and red state voters. At the same time, Democrats must recognize the dynamics behind these trends and find a strategic framework that combines these core beliefs with an aggressive ‘change’ agenda that taps into broad dissatisfaction with the current leadership in Washington.

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There is no reason to believe that congressional Democrats can not achieve these goals or that the ‘D’ next to a candidate’s name is a cultural ‘scarlet letter’ that will automatically alienate rural and red state voters. Indeed, a recent survey of job approval marks for governors in all 50 states by SurveyUSA demonstrates the unique success of Democratic governors elected in states won by George W. Bush in 2004 in building majority support for their leadership and agendas, not by advancing right-wing issues or denying core progressive ideals but by rising above partisan stereotypes and advancing visions for their states that put the interests of their residents ahead of special interests.

APPROVAL RATINGS FOR ALL 50 USA GOVERNORS AS OF JULY 2005						
#	State	Governor Name	Party	Approve	Disapprove	NET APPROVAL
1	North Dakota	Hoeven, John	R	74%	20%	54%
2	Connecticut	Rell, Jodi	R	73%	18%	55%
2	South Dakota	Rounds, Mike	R	73%	18%	55%
4	Utah	Huntsman, Jon	R	68%	21%	47%
5	West Virginia	Manchin, Joe	D	65%	25%	40%
6	Virginia	Warner, Mark	D	63%	25%	38%
7	Wyoming	Freudenthal, Dave	D	62%	26%	36%
8	New Hampshire	Lynch, John	D	61%	26%	35%
8	Vermont	Douglas, Jim	R	61%	28%	33%
8	Hawaii	Lingle, Linda	R	61%	30%	31%
11	Oklahoma	Henry, Brad	D	59%	30%	29%
12	Idaho	Kempthorne, Dirk	R	58%	31%	27%
12	Montana	Schweitzer, Brian	D	58%	31%	27%
14	Nebraska	Heineman, Dave	R	57%	24%	33%
14	Arizona	Napolitano, Janet	D	57%	35%	22%
16	Arkansas	Huckabee, Mike	R	56%	38%	18%
17	Kansas	Sebelius, Kathleen	D	55%	35%	20%
17	Nevada	Guinn, Kenny	R	55%	35%	20%
19	Iowa	Vilsack, Tom	D	54%	38%	16%
19	Louisiana	Blanco, Kathleen	D	54%	38%	16%
21	New Mexico	Richardson, Bill	D	53%	41%	12%
22	Georgia	Perdue, Sonny	R	52%	39%	13%
22	North Carolina	Easley, Michael	D	52%	39%	13%
22	Rhode Island	Carcieri, Don	R	52%	42%	10%
22	Florida	Bush, Jeb	R	52%	44%	8%
26	South Carolina	Sanford, Mark	R	50%	39%	11%
26	Colorado	Owens, Bill	R	50%	41%	9%
28	New Jersey	Codey, Richard	D	48%	39%	9%
28	Tennessee	Bredesen, Phil	D	48%	44%	4%
28	Maryland	Ehrlich, Robert	R	48%	45%	3%
31	Indiana	Daniels, Mitch	R	47%	45%	2%
31	Massachusetts	Romney, Mitt	R	47%	46%	1%
33	Alabama	Riley, Bob	R	45%	47%	-2%
34	Pennsylvania	Rendell, Edward	D	44%	49%	-5%
35	Wisconsin	Doyle, Jim	D	43%	48%	-5%
35	Delaware	Minner, Ruth Ann	D	43%	49%	-6%
35	Minnesota	Pawlenty, Tim	R	43%	50%	-7%

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35	New York	Pataki, George	R	43%	50%	-7%
39	Mississippi	Barbour, Haley	R	41%	52%	-11%
40	Maine	Baldacci, John	D	40%	55%	-15%
41	Oregon	Kulongoski, Ted	D	38%	50%	-12%
41	Washington	Gregoire, Christine	D	38%	52%	-14%
41	Texas	Perry, Rick	R	38%	53%	-15%
41	Illinois	Blagojevich, Rod	D	38%	55%	-17%
45	Michigan	Granholm, Jennifer	D	37%	59%	-22%
46	California	Schwarzenegger, Arnold	R	36%	61%	-25%
47	Missouri	Blunt, Matt	R	35%	60%	-25%
48	Kentucky	Fletcher, Ernie	R	34%	57%	-23%
49	Alaska	Murkowski, Frank	R	31%	61%	-30%
50	Ohio	Taft, Bob	R	17%	76%	-59%
Average				50%	41%	9%
600 adults age 18+ in each of the 50 states were interviewed 7/8/05 to 7/10/05 by SurveyUSA of Verona, NJ.						

There is no doubt that congressional Democrats start at a disadvantage, with red state and rural voters holding very negative views of the party on a number of fronts – most notably support for big government at the expense of personal responsibility, ‘moral issues,’ and security – but the real problem for Democrats is that their elected officials, and by extension their entire party, are perceived as directionless and divided, standing for nothing other than their own personal enrichment. This analysis may strike some as draconian, but the consistency and ardor with which these opinions were expressed across all eight focus groups were unmistakable.

I would like to believe that they represent the interests of working people and the middle class but they don't. Not anymore. I don't think they do. They're just out for their own personal gain themselves, the ones that are there. (Denver, older college women)

Their leaders always seem very weak and unprepared. I am never confident in a Democrat that comes up that he can handle the political issues that come up. Especially internationally or anything. I have just not been impressed at all with their capabilities. (Appleton, younger non-college women)

I think that they're in complete disarray and there's just no forward momentum to the Democratic Party right now. There's a total lack of leadership. (Louisville, older non-college men)

Despite these strongly held sentiments, growing frustration with Republican leadership presents an opportunity for Democrats to separate themselves from the growing mess in Washington and to advance an aggressive ‘change’ agenda that demonstrates their values through a real commitment to making a difference in the lives of working Americans.

In the current political environment of broad dissatisfaction with the country's current direction and increasing polarization on cultural issues, voters' attitudes toward both parties have grown increasingly negative and increasingly similar. Elected officials of both parties are viewed as putting their own personal economic and political interests, as well as the interests of their party, ahead of the larger public interest. Both parties are guilty of uncontrolled spending of tax dollars, and both parties have failed to live up to their promises on key issues of concern, particularly health care costs. But there are three areas where critical differences are seen between the parties:

1. **Defense and security** – George W. Bush's handling of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and his party's subsequent unconditional support of his conduct of the ongoing war on terrorism have come to define the Republican Party more than any other issue over the last few years. Republicans are seen as a party devoted to national defense, a party of strength driven by what one woman in Denver referred to as their 'not on my watch' attitude. The Democrats, on the other hand, are seen as weak and vacillating on defense, paying lip service to national defense but too hesitant to make difficult decisions. Part of this image is historic – from McGovern and Vietnam to a perceived reduction of military capability during the Clinton years – but most of it is tied to attitudes toward John Kerry and the dynamics of the 2004 election.

They seem kind of weak to me. Weaker on terrorism...They seem like they would be more eager to hold out the olive branch instead of recognizing the fact that this is my enemy. We need to defend ourselves. (Denver, older college women)

2. **Cultural issues** – Regardless of voters' attitudes on the role of religion in public life or their position on touchstone issues such as abortion and gay marriage or even their personal religious faith, they all see Republicans as a party with a clear and consistent position on cultural issues and an abiding respect for the importance of faith and traditional social norms. Democrats' lack of a consistent stance on cultural issues leaves a vacuum that is clearly being filled by voices on the right. Most referred to Democrats as 'liberal' on issues of morality, but some even go so far as to label them 'immoral,' 'morally bankrupt,' or even 'anti-religious.'

My big thing is the moral issues that they stand for...Or the immoral. They're for the abortion and the gay movements, and individuality, and do what you feel instead of the way it should be. (Appleton, younger non-college women)

It appears to me in the last few years the Democrats have been—I view them as more anti-religious, almost opposing any kind of religion or propagate religion, like what happened in Colorado Springs a few weeks ago. (Denver, younger college men)

I still think that the Democrats are too politically correct. They don't want to step on anybody's toes. Whatever you've done, you had the right to do it. (Louisville, older non-college men)

Rather than being tied to specific issues, these beliefs are fueled by a perception of Democrats as ‘too politically correct,’ ‘caring too much about the rights of a few rather than the rights of the many.’ While there are clear racial overtones to these feelings among some voters, these attitudes were most powerfully captured in symbolic issues such as display of the Ten Commandments in public buildings, removing God from the Pledge of Allegiance, or outlawing public manger displays at Christmastime. On each of these symbolic cases in point, there was a broad perception that Republicans would be on the side of American tradition, Judeo-Christian values, and the forgotten majority while Democrats would stand up and fight for a subversive minority seeking to erode the moral foundation of our country.

We should be able to put a manger in the city market. I believe that...we are Christian and we should be able to put a manger there. They're giving everybody else rights. But it's the Christian that we're not allowed to give. Everybody else can get what they want to...Look what's on our money. 'In God We Trust'...That's right...No Ten Commandments in the court house and stuff. And no pledge of allegiance to the flag. We're in America. (Little Rock, older non-college women)

You know, in God we were built, our country was built on God's principals. And if we're to maintain that we need to maintain God's laws along with it...It says it right on the coins...Yeah, you can't pull that apart. And they're trying to pull it apart; you know the separation of church and state. And Republicans tend to stay away from that and allow these things. It's the Democrats that are pulling us away from having Ten Commandments in places. (Appleton, younger non-college women)

- 3. The economy and whose interests are being represented** – This is the one area of clear distinction where Democrats are currently fighting from a position of strength. Republicans are overwhelmingly seen as a party that is unrepentant in its fealty to corporate interests and unconcerned with the growing economic uncertainty felt by most Americans facing employment concerns, stagnant wages, rising prices, and the crushing cost of health care seemingly hanging over every aspect of their lives.

Just about everything relating to promoting big business and lending to the security of big business at the expense of the average citizens. I think that's the thing I dislike the most about the Republican Party. (Appleton, older non-college men)

I think they have a very strong direction, it's just that its big business. I think they're keeping all of their promises, but not to us, they're keeping them to their buddies. And yeah, I do think that it's runaway and will continue to be that way. (Appleton, older non-college men)

Democrats are seen as being more on the side of the middle class and working Americans, more in touch with the challenges facing these Americans. However, voters only see this manifested in costly government social programs or political alliances with labor unions and minorities. There is absolutely no sense that Democrats have a viable alternative vision that would truly promote broad economic growth or increased prosperity for working Americans.

The Road Ahead – Running Against The Mess In Washington

These focus groups powerfully demonstrated that as Democrats seek to redefine their party, both for the 2006 election and beyond, they face some hard truths. No matter how disaffected they are over Republican failures in Iraq and here at home, a large chunk of white non-college voters, particularly in rural areas, will remain simply unreachable for Democrats at the national level. Furthermore, Republicans and their allies on the right have very effectively used their bully pulpit and their media echo chamber to define Democrats as weak on defense and security issues, hostile to religious faith and the role it plays in most Americans' lives, enamored with big government solutions to every problem, and obstructionists with no positive agenda or new ideas of their own.

Democrats who seek to draw parallels to 1994 and Republicans' success in turning dissatisfaction with Washington and the country's direction into a sweeping off-year congressional victory must recognize that Democrats are not making any gains, even as Republicans continue to lose ground, and no such victories will be possible until Democrats can rebuild their own standing in voters' minds. The unity Democrats showed in opposing President Bush's Social Security privatization plans was an important first step for a party seen as weak and standing for nothing, although it also served to reinforce the belief among many red state and rural voters that Democrats are quick to oppose Republican initiatives but have no positive agenda of their own.

Quit criticizing so much and have a little bit more of your own direction. Whether it's right or wrong, pick a direction and go...Be on the offense instead of the defense. (Appleton, older non-college men)

The Democrats have opposed these efforts...Well, where is their great idea for protecting jobs? Where is their great idea for lowering health costs? They don't have it. (Appleton, younger non-college women)

They want to point out the issues that go wrong that the Republicans are making. And yet, they don't really have a solution of their own...That's why they don't ever win now. (Little Rock, older non-college women)

In thinking about how Democrats approach the 2006 election and beyond, it is important to note that, with control of the White House and significant congressional majorities in both the

House and Senate, voters very much see Republicans as the ascendant party at this moment. Republicans will bear the lion's share of the blame if voters remain incensed at the direction of the country and the leadership in Washington, but Democrats are currently seen as part of the problem in Washington, not part of the solution. These focus groups clearly suggest that Democrats' best chance to differentiate themselves from Republicans in a more effective way and to define their own values, their own vision, and their own ideas for the future is to run against the current mess in Washington and to present an aggressive 'change' agenda that challenges the conventional wisdom about Democrats and creates a clear contrast between Republicans' record of serving their corporate and special interest supporters at the expense of their own constituents and Democrats' willingness to challenge the status quo and make measurable progress on issues that really matter in the daily lives of working Americans.

We did not attempt, in the course of these focus groups, to test specific Democratic proposals or to offer a legislative agenda. Rather, we talked to voters about their priorities and the issues on which they would like to see their own member of Congress – Democrat or Republican – focus his or her energies. We found tremendous frustration with the list of accomplishments of the current Congress – particularly intervention in the Terri Schiavo case, efforts to change congressional ethics rules to protect Tom DeLay, cuts in veterans' benefits, and Congress' decision to vote itself a pay raise. Most importantly, voters raised a number of areas that they would like to see Congress prioritize which present tremendous opportunities for Democrats:

- *Health care* – It is almost impossible to overstate how concerned voters are with the spiraling cost of health care services and insurance. Health care is seen as both the fastest rising expense for most families and businesses and the greatest threat to a secure retirement. And health care is raised again and again as the issue where both parties have most dramatically failed to deliver on their promises for many years. In thinking about possible solutions for the growing health care crisis, three ideas gained the greatest support among participants in these groups.
 - *Price caps for prescription drugs* – There is no greater villain in discussions of the economy and domestic issues than the pharmaceutical companies, who voters see reaping record profits while wasting billions of dollars on unnecessary advertising, gouging American consumers, and conspiring with Congress to deny Americans access to cheaper drugs. Rather than simply negotiating lower prices or allowing imports from Canada, voters want hard price caps that allow companies to remain profitable while ensuring seniors and other Americans aren't forced to choose between food, rent, or the medicines they need to stay alive.
 - *Preventative health* – Voters decry the pennywise, pound foolish approach of many insurance companies toward Americans' health, particularly younger and healthier Americans who could benefit from basic preventative health measures. As more and more Americans embrace elements of holistic health and local governments demonstrate the financial and health benefits of preventative health

programs, voters want to see their own insurance companies focus on long-term health rather than just short-term profits.

- *Linking health care premiums to income* – This very progressive idea – setting health care premiums at a certain percentage of each employee’s income (perhaps somewhere between 5% and 10%), so that higher income employees pay a greater share of a company’s overall costs and employees pay more only as their income rises – gained surprising support from Bush voters in Colorado and Kentucky.
- *Ethics and lobbying reform* – Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the current mess in Washington for most voters is the complete lack of accountability for members of Congress, from out-of-control deficit spending to ethics violations to a retirement plan that frees them from dependence on the Social Security trust fund they deplete each year to pay for other priorities. Add this to the unfettered power of lobbyists in securing favors for their corporate and special interest clients at the expense of American taxpayers, and you have a system that is viewed as completely out of touch with average Americans. It is a system begging for any enforceable reforms that can break the current perception of pay-for-play cronyism and make members of Congress live by the same rules they place on their constituents.
- *Veterans’ benefits* – Participants in these focus groups were surprisingly cognizant of Republican efforts to cut veterans’ benefits and reacted very angrily, calling such efforts ‘unreal,’ ‘an absolute travesty,’ and ‘beyond all my comprehension.’ This issue is magnified by current frustration with the course of events in Iraq and the failure of the Bush administration to advance any real plan for success. Attacks on John Kerry and other Democrats in 2004 for voting against body armor and other supplies for troops in Iraq, however unfair they may have been, played a role in current questions about Democrats’ commitment to the armed forces and the country’s defense. A sustained effort to keep the promises made to America’s veterans would not only demonstrate Democrats’ commitment, it would highlight the twisted priorities of the Bush administration and Republicans in Congress.
- *Stem cell research* – Polling has consistently demonstrated the broad public support for stem cell research, and these focus groups clearly reinforced those findings. However, the real power of this issue is its ability to confound many voters who otherwise align themselves with Republicans on cultural issues and to change the very definition of ‘moral values’ from the narrow classification of abortion and gay marriage advanced by the religious right and its allies.

While much of the debate in Washington and in the media has been focused on the science, voters discuss stem cell research in strictly moral tones. They don’t differentiate between existing and new lines, nor do they discuss embryonic vs. cord blood; they simply see the opportunity to develop new medical breakthroughs as a moral imperative.

- *Energy conservation and alternative energy sources* – Along with the outrageous prices of prescription drugs, the failure of Congress to enforce stricter fuel efficiency standards on automakers stood out in virtually every group as a prime example of the power of lobbyists to promote an agenda clearly antithetical to the public interest. While a few participants insisted that we could simply drill our way to a solution, spiraling gas prices and America's dependence on foreign oil combined to create a firm commitment among the vast majority that we must decrease our demand for oil in the short run and invest heavily in alternative fuel sources for a long-term solution.

This is a pressing economic issue and a matter of national security, but it is also a challenge to American ingenuity. Just as we invented the telephone, launched the Internet revolution, and were the first to put a man on the moon, it is unfathomable to these voters that America would not be the country to lead the way in developing the next generation of energy production, and they are clearly open to an ambitious effort that combines public and private resources toward this urgent goal.

- *Pension protection* – Skyrocketing health care costs, concerns about the future of Social Security, and rising prices for everything from gas to groceries have increased concern about retirement security for all working Americans. Adding to this concern are the growing number of cases in which companies, including massive employers such as United Airlines, are defaulting on their pensions, leaving millions of workers and retirees without the income they worked for their entire careers. Once again, voters see this as a case of major corporations and greedy executives run amok and blame government for allowing such blatant corporate mismanagement to persist unpunished. They are looking to Congress to protect pensions and to hold corporations and executives accountable for their handling of pension funds.

It is important to note that the issue areas highlighted by voters in these groups were all topics that impact the individual lives of working Americans, either directly or indirectly. They didn't talk about troop levels in Iraq, nor did they focus on traditional 'moral values' issues such as abortion and gay marriage. They have a clear sense of where they feel Congress should be focusing its efforts, and in each of the areas outlined above, there is a clear choice between the special interests on one side and ordinary Americans on the other.

Far from a legislative proposal or a comprehensive 'change' agenda, we offer these issue areas and policy ideas as demonstration of the priorities of rural and red state voters. These voters are extremely frustrated with the current direction of the country and have serious misgivings about Republican leadership in Washington. But their deep-rooted doubts about Democrats and their affinity toward Republicans on cultural issues will prevent them from voting for Democrats for Congress unless Democrats can tap into their frustrations with an aggressive 'change' agenda that holds Republicans responsible for the current mess in Washington and presents a Democratic alternative that will deliver measurable results and make a real difference in their personal lives.