

**DEMOCRACY CORPS**  
**CARVILLE ♦ GREENBERG**

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**To:** Friends of Democracy Corps  
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**Democracy Corps Focus Group Analysis**  
*Frustration, Demand for Change Continue to Grow*

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**Key Findings**

- Political environment remains largely unchanged, with intense pessimism driven by Iraq, health care, and a general sense that government is failing across the board
- Democrats in Congress are given credit for trying to deliver change, particularly on Iraq, but frustration with the failure to actually accomplish meaningful change is growing more acute
- Trumpeting Democratic accomplishments is not enough; minimum wage doesn't affect most voters, who still see no change in their own lives
- A message highlighting bills Bush has vetoed (Iraq and stem cells) as well as those he promised to veto (student loans, 9/11 Commission, uninsured children, prescription drug prices) resonated very strongly, reinforcing Democrats' commitment to change and proving to be an effective attack on incumbent Republicans.
- Commitment to withdraw troops from Iraq continues to grow stronger; DSCC ad makes powerful impression and raises real questions about moderate incumbents
- Cutting funding for war still an untenable option, but effort to override Bush's veto would match public mood and put onus on Republicans rather than Democrats
- Immigration debate still all about benefits and fairness; comprehensive solution preferred, but must reward those who contribute to the system and punish those who seek to abuse U.S. values and generosity

In our latest round of Democracy Corps focus groups<sup>1</sup>, we visited two Republican districts (NY-25 and IL-10) where Republican moderates won close elections over Democratic challengers who had been heavily outspent and are now likely to seek a rematch in 2008. We wanted to see how the political environment has changed since 2006 and whether the Republican moderates holding these seats had successfully separated themselves from President Bush and the mess in Washington or whether the worsening political environment in the country would be enough to close the gap and sweep these incumbents out in 2008.

- These four groups strongly demonstrated that voters' frustrations have only deepened since the last election. President Bush has weakened his party even further, and Republicans who continue to support him, especially on Iraq, should face real electoral consequences next year.
- The political environment revealed in these groups was as poisonous as we have seen, with virtually no sense of progress on any front. The reasons for this were unchanged, with Iraq still driving the mood to a degree that can't be overstated.
- Discussion on Iraq was divided between anger over the lack of progress, lack of mission, and loss of life on the one hand and frustration over the government's continuing waste of resources 'over there' that should be spent on the growing list of crises 'here in our own country.' That list is clearly headed by health care, with a lack of quality jobs, rising prices, immigration, and homelessness all drawing significant concern.

In discussing their frustration with the mess in Washington, their attitudes toward Republicans are most striking. Positives that we used to hear on strength, commitment to the military, values, and fiscal discipline have simply disappeared. Now, the dominant associations are with big business/big oil, taking care of themselves and their buddies, and never standing up to Bush, especially on Iraq. Support for lower taxes is really the only positive Republicans can still claim, but even that is diluted in voters' minds by their out-of-control spending and preference for tax breaks for big businesses rather than ordinary Americans.

- Optimism for the new Congress is quickly waning. Many voters still express a wait-and-see attitude, but most have now returned to the same concerns we heard last year – accomplishing nothing, career politicians just trying to get re-elected,

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<sup>1</sup> Democracy Corps conducted focus groups among likely 2008 voters in Rochester, NY on July 18<sup>th</sup> (younger non-college women and older non-college men, all with annual household incomes below \$50,000) and in Arlington Heights, IL on July 19<sup>th</sup> (older, college-educated women and younger college-educated men, all with annual household incomes over \$50,000). All participants were Independents or weak partisans who had supported both Democrats and Republicans over the last two elections.

do nothing but argue with each other, lobbyists, wasteful, paid too much money, and most of all, out of touch.

Democrats in Congress are given credit for wanting change and most especially for ensuring that Bush no longer has a blank check from Congress. **But in most voters' minds, it boils down to results; good intentions and legitimate finger-pointing aside, things simply haven't changed under Democratic control.** This hasn't changed their preference for Democratic control or their continuing anger toward Republicans, but it does explain the rapid return of record low approval marks for Congress.

### **'Accomplishments' Not Enough in Defining Democratic Congress**

Across these four groups, there was virtually no knowledge of any Democratic accomplishments in the first six months of this new Congress. A couple voters mentioned the minimum wage (with disclaimers that it was already higher in their own states) and stem cells (with disclaimers that Bush vetoed it and so nothing was really accomplished). More importantly, aside from providing a check and balance on President Bush, voters couldn't articulate any ways in which things are different now, in Washington or the country as a whole, with a Democratic Congress. They still expressed a belief that Democrats want to deliver change, but they are either too busy pursuing their own political ends or too powerless to actually follow through.

We tested two approaches to trumpeting the record of the Democratic Congress. The first, as exemplified by the Americans United for Change ad tested in IL-10, takes a positive approach focusing on minimum wage as a promise delivered and shifting to other issues that have passed the House. The ad in particular left voters underwhelmed; minimum wage is a good accomplishment, but it had no impact on these voters and was clearly inadequate in conveying a sense of progress or real change. Other accomplishments of the House were encouraging to them, but the fact that none of them had become a reality meant they were little more than campaign promises. Results and meaningful change in their own lives are what matter, and they just haven't seen enough of that yet. More importantly, these messages didn't answer the question they raised – 'why aren't more of these changes being accomplished?'

The second approach we tested was a more aggressive framework, demonstrating the Democratic commitment to change and shifting the onus for the lack of progress onto President Bush, in whom these voters have lost all faith.

*President Bush has vetoed bills to begin withdrawing troops from Iraq and to allow greater stem cell research. He has also promised to veto Democratic bills already passed by the House or Senate to lower student loan rates, implement the homeland security recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, expand health coverage for uninsured children, and allow Medicare to negotiate lower prescription drug prices.*

This message fundamentally shifted the debate in the groups, with voters wondering why Democrats weren't including those facts in their advertising and expressing shock that Republicans are continuing to support President Bush and to defend his vetoes. In their eyes, Bush is a failure whose term can't end soon enough and there is no explanation for why Republicans in Congress would continue to support him and his failed policies, whether in Iraq or here at home. As one woman in Illinois asked rhetorically after hearing this message, "Are you going to stay with Bush or are you going to get with the people?"

### **Holding Republicans Accountable on Iraq**

For more than a year now, the majority of swing voters in our groups has expressed a strong desire to bring our troops home from Iraq. However, those sentiments have been mitigated by significant concern about what happens in Iraq once we leave and whether a withdrawal could actually make our country less safe here at home. For some time, those potential consequences have held increasingly less sway as frustration with the lack of progress in Iraq and the growing cost to our country has grown. Worsening security conditions in Iraq have now led a clear majority of those in our groups to say that our presence in Iraq is now making us less safe, trumping most of the concerns about possible consequences of a withdrawal of troops. Voters are still very concerned that the withdrawal be done in a deliberate and thoughtful manner that gives the Iraqi government a change to maintain order and does not contribute any more than necessary to the chaos in that country. And they are still too likely to associate advocates of a withdrawal from Iraq with immediate withdrawal of all troops with no consideration for the security situation there. But more than ever, they are adamant that the withdrawal must start now.

In many voters' eyes, our role in Iraq has shifted in recent months. We have gone from supporting the Iraqi government to enabling them. Our soldiers have gone from protecting a fragile peace to being stuck in the midst of an increasingly bloody civil war. When asked what will happen if American troops do withdraw, the answer was consistent and simple – Iraqis killing each other now, and they will keep killing each other once we leave. The only difference is that we'll stop losing American lives and start focusing on problems here at home again.

Looking at Congress, voters believe that Iraq is a prime reason why nothing else is happening – it is sucking up all of our resources and attention. Therefore, despite the fact that Democrats have repeatedly passed withdrawal legislation that has been vetoed by President Bush and Republicans have continued to support those vetoes, they believe Democrats must keep fighting this battle. They must not repeat the Republicans' mistake of ignoring our problems here at home, but they also must not give up on Iraq.

The Iraq battle can take one of two forms. Some war opponents continue to push for a de-funding of the war. Voters comprehensively reject this strategy; they instinctively believe it could endanger troops, and they don't trust Bush or his military leaders to actually withdraw the troops even once funding is cut. After all, as was pointed out in Illinois, these are the same

people who sent the soldiers there without proper body armor and vehicles in the first place. The second form is an effort to overturn Bush's vetoes and to translate the overwhelming support for withdrawal among the American public into an overwhelming majority among the individuals chosen to represent them. This strategy not only reflects the will of voters, it puts the target where it belongs, on potentially vulnerable Republicans, rather than on vulnerable Democrats, who also fear the consequences of cutting funding to the troops.

The DSCC ad recently put on the air in four states demonstrates the power of a potential campaign to overturn the veto. Voters did not necessarily find the ads visually impressive, but the message was simple and effective. They immediately raised fundamental questions about Republican incumbents who continue to support Bush. At least 8-in-10 voters in each of these groups voted for the Republican incumbent in their district in 2006, and more than half said they would likely vote the other way if this ad were true about Mark Kirk or Jim Walsh, both of whom have in fact voted six times to defend Bush's position in Iraq (the Senators in the ads had only voted four times). Similar to the Bush veto message detailed in the last section, this ad presented a simple choice – 'stick with Bush or get with the people' – and had a clear impact, especially at the current moment when no other political ads are polluting the environment. Several voters noted this dynamic, saying that the same ad two months before an election would just be mudslinging but now, it is educational and positive because it gives voters information they need to make an informed choice.

### **Immigration Debate All About Fairness**

We also dedicated a section of these groups to immigration and understanding voters' mixed attitudes on where we go from here. Despite the focus on Iraq, health care, outsourcing, and other major issues in the open-ended conversation, there was broad agreement that immigration is an extremely important issue because it trickles down to health care, jobs, education, and so many other issues that are critical to voters' daily lives, even if they don't interact with immigrants or feel their impact directly. From the outset, it was clear that most voters saw comprehensive reform as the only viable solution, with immigrants too ingrained into our economy and even many local communities for deportation to be a realistic scenario.

Concerns about immigration were overwhelmingly driven by public benefits, and it quickly turned into a broader discussion of welfare and the clear line drawn between those who contribute to our society and those who abuse the system for their own selfish gain. There was wide agreement that many immigrants work hard (emphatic on this point), pay taxes, obey the law, and are doing everything they should to realize the American dream of providing a better life for their families. However, there was also agreement that too many come to this country to abuse our generosity – taking welfare benefits, using emergency rooms for their routine medical needs, getting a free education for their kids – without contributing to the system that provides such generosity. This makes them no different in voters' eyes from many Americans, of course, but the fact that they broke the law by coming here and still receive these benefits is simply too

much for those who do work hard and play by the rules and yet still can't afford health care for their own families.

Looking at a solution, this emphasis remained. We offered 12 possible aspects of a solution drawn from across the ideological spectrum, asking participants to choose their top priorities and to eliminate any they found fundamentally unacceptable. 'Deny government benefits to anyone who can't prove U.S. citizenship' was a top priority for 27 of the 40 participants; 'provide a path to citizenship for those currently in the U.S. who clear criminal and terrorism background checks' was next at 15, followed by 'dramatically increase agents and security technology along our border' at 14. This ranking perfectly captures the mix of emotions and attitudes voters have on this issue.

In the end, it all comes down to what they repeatedly called 'fairness.' America has always rewarded hard work and welcomed those willing to pull their weight, and we should continue to embrace that ethos, even if it means offering citizenship to those who broke the law by entering the country in the first place. At the same time, we will never get a grip on this issue and find a viable solution unless we strengthen the border enough to know who is here legally and who is not and we stop incentivizing those who come here just to take from our society. This point drew voters back to the Iraq debate – we have enough poor and hungry and needy in our own country, we don't need to take the rest of the world's problems as well.