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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

From: Jim Gerstein

Democracy Corps Focus Group Report *Des Moines, IA*

In the course of conducting 28 focus groups in competitive Congressional districts to test television advertising this election cycle, Democracy Corps has observed an intense and growing disdain that voters have for the negative advertising dominating the airwaves. As the campaign has drawn out and voters get bombarded with negative ads, the election atmosphere has further contributed to voters' pre-existing disgust toward Congress and politicians who put their party interests and own personal motives ahead of the public's priorities. Even when simply asked about how things are generally going in our country, focus group participants will dive into specific complaints about the kind of negative political campaigns that are being run.

The cumulative effect of the negative advertising cuts a couple directions. People are certainly exasperated by the negative campaigning and complain about it vociferously, but we also see the impact of hard-hitting ads when executed properly. In fact, tough ads that link what voters hate about Congress to likeable Republican incumbents have proven highly effective in providing compelling reasons to fire the sitting Republican. Similarly, ads that link Democratic challengers to what people fear about Democrats – such as raising taxes – succeed in raising doubts about unknown challengers when these attacks go unanswered. The benefit for Democratic challengers in this environment is that the case for change has unmistakably been made – in the paid and free media, as well as events on the ground – and voters are clearly demanding a change.

But many voters are still uncertain of the kind of change that Democrats will (or can) bring, and they are starving for positive messages that define the change – or in the case of incumbents, messages that list real accomplishments. With the development of some new advertising that seeks to address this challenge, Democracy Corps conducted two focus groups last night in Des

Moines, Iowa.¹ To simulate the existing political environment, we first showed participants ads running currently running in the local Congressional race between Leonard Boswell and Jeff Lamberti. After the back and forth between the two candidates, we showed four ads produced by independent groups: 1) AFV's "Together," a positive spot which appeals to past American successes as evidence that we can bring real change if we work together; 2) September Fund's "Bush," a humorous spot which shows a series of people asking a bush for answers to the real problems facing the country; 3) September Fund's "Agenda," which highlights different Democratic initiatives that demonstrate Democrats offer a better way; and 4) Vote Vets' "Veteran," a moving spot which features a disabled Iraq war veteran asking people to vote against a Member of Congress who voted against health benefits for veterans while giving Congress a pay raise.

We note that the following assessments of these particular ads are only based off two focus groups, but several aspects are very clear and reflect attitudes seen across the country during the last month of the election. We also must highlight that the women's group was much more favorable to all the advertising than the men's group which was very cynical and reacted negatively to nearly every commercial that we showed.

Vote Vets: Veteran

"Veteran" was undoubtedly the most effective ad presented, and elicited one of the strongest reactions we have seen throughout the entire cycle. Even though it is a very hard hitting critique, it rose above the typical "negative ad" complaint. With a disabled vet speaking to camera from his wheelchair (which is only revealed at the end of the spot), the participants found his indictment of the incumbent Member of Congress entirely believable and compelling. But the ad was much more powerful than simply providing a strong reason to fire the incumbent. This ad stirred raw emotions, making many viewers very angry and even moving a couple participants to tears.

The message in the ad came through crystal clear for participants across both groups: vote against Congressman Gutknecht because he gave himself a raise while leaving the troops behind. The attack fits exactly with voters' image of a Congress that they see putting its own interests ahead of everyone else – even our troops in Iraq. Delivered by a veteran who comes across as sincere, angry, and a typical patriotic American who now lives in a wheelchair, the ad evoked very intense support for the Democratic candidate.

¹Democracy Corps conducted two focus groups – one women's group and one men's group – on October 30, 2006 in Des Moines, IA. Participants were Independents, weak Democrats, and weak Republicans who said they were undecided in their vote for Congress. Participants' ages ranged from 30-55 years and there was a mix of college and non-college educated voters.

“Veteran” was the strongest testing ad in both the men’s and the women’s groups, and can have a tremendous impact in the election. Given the spot’s broad appeal and the growing centrality of Iraq as a factor in next week’s vote, *this ad can make the difference in those second and third tier Republican leaning districts where incumbents are vulnerable and Democratic challengers are within striking distance.*

AFV: Together

“Together” was extraordinarily well-received by the women’s group. For these voters who had been expressing their desire for change, the ad resonated strongly and clearly conveyed a new direction. The ad does not say who to support, but the women’s group unmistakably associated the change message with the Democrats – not because they consider achievements like the moon landing or the internet as Democratic successes, but because the Republicans represent a status quo that must change.

Yet the ad’s power went beyond the change message. People said they felt “empowered” and “patriotic” after watching it. Its upbeat tone and delivery was a striking difference from all the other political advertising that they have watched over the last few months, and unlike other political ads, “Together” made these voters want to go to the polls. As one woman stated, “it’s our responsibility, if we want change, to vote for the people who will do it.”

The ad did not have a similar impact with the men. As noted earlier, the men were a very skeptical group, and had negative reactions to all the ads – with the exception of “Veteran” and a Boswell bio spot. For these men, “Together” lacked detail and substance, while two of them had trouble identifying who the ad was for.

If a campaign had only one spot to air, it would not be “Together” because the message on its own is not enough to sell an individual challenger or fire a particular incumbent. But the spot is remarkably powerful and can be very effective when it plays off the negative environment that dominates so many Congressional races. *With voters looking for a reason to vote and with an overwhelming desire for change driving the nation’s mood, “Together” can have a major impact where the airwaves have been inundated with traditional attack spots.*²

²The 30-second version of “Together” was received better than the 60-second version. Participants viewed both ads in a similar light, but most felt that the 30-second version had more energy and was more engaging. Moreover, the additional footage in the 60-second spot did not move those men whose chief complaint was that the spot lacked substance.

September Fund: Bush

The women's group found "Bush" to be very funny, and it engaged them. More importantly, the spot tapped into their dissatisfaction with Bush, and they felt the ad articulated precisely what they wanted to say to a President who just does not listen. One woman even asked if we could send Bush the ad. But the "Bush" spot did not persuade undecided voters to vote for or against a particular candidate, and was perceived more as an indictment of Bush than of Congress.

In the men's group, "Bush" received the same weak response as they gave other ads. But a few comments provided a different insight than the usual skepticism that they had been expressing. Namely, the message itself was contrary to the positions of some Independents and weak Republicans who either like Bush or were not motivated by the critique of Republican policies raised in the commercial.

The findings in the two focus groups suggest that the "Bush" spot is a good motivator for the base, but not useful as a persuasion ad. It would be considerably more effective in Democratic leaning districts where Bush is very unpopular and a Republican incumbent is struggling to survive against the tide, but the spot is not likely to be effective in more traditionally Republican districts where the incumbent's support for Bush policy is not the driving reason to replace that Member.

September Fund: Agenda

"Agenda" appealed to several women participants because it made an affirmative case for what Democrats would do if elected. Given their level of dissatisfaction, these voters were ready to give Democrats a chance, and the ad did distinguish itself as telling people what the party stands for. But it did not evoke the same level of enthusiasm as other ads, mostly because people had trouble believing that Democrats would achieve these goals.

Not surprisingly, the men's skepticism of all things political led them to disparage the ad, and they highlighted the lack of plan to turn these ideas into reality.

This ad can work and the concept of a positive agenda is important in defining the change, but its execution requires more substance and detail to give voters confidence that the goals articulated are more than just political promises.