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To: Friends of Democracy Corps
From: Karl Agne

**THE IMPACT OF KATRINA:
THE CURRENT POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT & NEXT STEPS FOR DEMOCRATS**

*Focus Group Observations
Philadelphia, PA and Des Moines, IA, September 2005*

Democracy Corps conducted four focus groups last week among swing voters in Philadelphia, PA (college-educated, higher income, suburban) and Des Moines, IA (non-college, lower income, rural areas).¹ These groups reinforced and provided a deeper understanding of much of what we had already learned through our earlier polling about the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the country's political environment – deepening pessimism about the direction of the country and particularly the economy; intense frustration with the failure of government at all levels to protect the most vulnerable in our society; voters moving away from President Bush in an unprecedented manner; and tremendous anger over the Bush administration's placement of inexperienced political hacks in positions of tremendous responsibility for our country's safety and security.

However, these focus groups also taught us a great deal about the forces driving these important trends, and perhaps most importantly, helped identify forward-looking policies that can help lay the foundation for a positive message that will enable Democrats to seize this moment of opportunity, converting deep-seated frustration with Republican leadership into real electoral gains.

The focus groups also demonstrated that, unlike the period following the 9/11 attacks, the fundamental changes taking place in the country's political environment are not simply a direct result of one catastrophic event. Rather, the fallout from Katrina has simply continued and strengthened a trend of alienation from President Bush and Republicans in Congress that started in August as voters reached their tipping point on Iraq and gas prices. The current dynamic – marked by broad dissatisfaction with the country's direction, a rapid decline in consumer

¹ Democracy Corps conducted focus groups with independent voters and weak partisan voters from suburban areas outside of Philadelphia, PA (September 14, 2005 – college-educated women, ages 30-45, and college-educated men, ages 45-60) and rural areas surrounding Des Moines, IA (September 15, 2005 – non-college women, ages 45-60, and non-college men, ages 30-45). Each group was evenly divided among voters who supported George W. Bush and voters who supported John Kerry in 2004.

confidence and ratings of the economy, voters across the spectrum pulling back from President Bush, and contempt for the Congress and its failed leadership – is rooted in broad failure on the critical issues of the day, not just one defining event.

Overwhelming Pessimism About Current Direction

Voters are extremely negative about the current direction of the country, with the economy and Iraq dominating their outlook, and the many failures surrounding Katrina reinforcing it. In the focus group discussion, there was virtually no sense that there is anything positive to hold onto at this point, save the fact that Americans have once again demonstrated their commitment to one another by rallying – through private charities and a variety of community networks – to help the residents of the Gulf Coast after Katrina.

The official response to Katrina is seen as nothing short of “a total disgrace” and “a horrible embarrassment,” and voters wonder what the rest of the world must think seeing the richest and most powerful country in the world fail its own citizens in such a spectacular fashion. The individuals in the groups were truly horrified that the images and descriptions on their televisions – people stranded on rooftops, looting in the streets, families huddled like refugees at the Superdome and the convention center, elderly patients drowning in their beds – were happening in America, not a “third world war zone.”

Government at every level shares the blame for the failed response, but most voters (and especially the men) believe the greatest failure was at the state and local level; those closest to the people and areas affected bear the greatest responsibility for what happened, particularly to the poor and elderly and infirm. In virtually every group, participants talked about the visual of the school buses stranded in the water – buses that could have been used to evacuate and thus save untold numbers of people – and the failure to provide any food or water for the Superdome as the perfect examples of the failure of local government.

When asked at the very outset what their greatest concerns were for the recovery efforts moving forward, voters identified the potential for abuse of relief funds as their top concern. But it is important to note that this fear was not focused on theft or fraud, but rather on tax dollars being funneled to special interests and general waste rather than helping those in need. In addition to this type of abuse, other top concerns included the skyrocketing deficit, the likelihood that the changes required to make us safer simply will not be made (just as they clearly were not after 9/11), and that our military will be stretched even thinner than it already is.

Katrina Having Significant Impact on Attitudes Toward Iraq

As documented in virtually every poll released over the last several months, public support for the war in Iraq has been flagging for some time, driven by increasing American casualties and the lack of any sense of progress. However, prior to Katrina, we saw a startling trend – as support for the war decreased, support for a withdrawal of troops also decreased. A growing number of Americans seemed to be resigned to the belief that while the war may have

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been started under false pretenses and conducted without any real plan for building a stable, democratic Iraq, we were obligated to ‘stay the course’ or ‘finish what we started.’ But these focus groups, as well as a number of post-Katrina polls, suggest the balance has now shifted.

The events surrounding Katrina highlighted two themes for voters. One of them – the realization that we have millions of Americans living in poverty, children without basic nutrition or medical care, elderly who face a monthly choice between food, heat, and medicine, and uninsured families one setback away from financial disaster – was present in conversations on Iraq before Katrina, but the suffering of Katrina’s victims and the long road ahead for the hundreds of thousands displaced by the storm really brought it into focus. Now, voters believe we must take care of those at home first, and if that means reducing funding or troop levels in Iraq, so be it. There is still little appetite for an immediate withdrawal, particularly among the men, but strong support across all groups to shift resources from saving the rest of the world to taking care of America’s increasingly urgent needs.

The second Iraq-related theme was really brought to light by Katrina and was not a part of most Americans’ beliefs before this tragedy. In the wake of the miserable performance of the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA, as well as state and local officials, they now see that America is not any safer or more prepared for a major disaster than it was before 9/11.

In the past, criticisms of Bush’s failures on a wide range of homeland security measures – including port and border security, equipping first responders, and improving the flow of information within the law enforcement and intelligence communities – were completely ineffective because they simply would not believe that this president, who staked his entire presidency on his response to 9/11, would allow such wholesale security failures on his watch. Now, after Katrina, voters are asking serious questions about security here at home, and they increasingly see the massive deployment in Iraq, particularly of National Guard troops whose primary responsibility is homeland security and response to domestic disasters such as hurricanes, as a security risk here at home. The latest *Newsweek* poll shows 70 percent of Americans now believe Iraq has either increased the risk of a future terrorist attack in the U.S. (36 percent) or made no difference (34 percent). So if the current deployment of troops in Iraq is not making us safer from terrorist attacks but is leaving us more vulnerable to a variety of threats here at home, there is little rationale the White House will be able to offer these voters for ‘staying the course’ much longer. Again, they do not see immediate withdrawal as the answer, but there is a clear demand for a reordering of priorities that puts the needs of America first.

Gas Prices Drive Broad Economic Concerns

Consumer confidence began to slip prior to Katrina but has plummeted in the weeks following the disaster. For some time, there has been growing unease over the tremendous pressure put on working families by the simple equation of rapidly rising prices – primarily health care costs and prescription drugs, but also everything from education to groceries – and stagnant wages. Low interest rates and rising real estate prices have been beneficial to some, but

the fundamental dynamic has left most middle class and working families feeling like they have no margin for error.

Gas prices had been a growing concern for many voters, but the huge price increases after Katrina have pushed this issue to the fore. Americans are feeling the burden of gas prices not just at the pump but in virtually every aspect of their lives, with everyone from airlines to restaurants to grocery stores passing on their increased shipping and transportation costs to consumers. It is impossible to overstate how central gas prices were to the economic uncertainty and fears expressed by participants in these groups, and there is an even greater danger right around the corner. While none of the groups raised the issue unprompted, indicating the economic concerns seen in current polling could grow even worse, the specter of home heating costs rising by another 30% - 70% is very daunting, with non-college women in particular fearing such an increase could push their families over the edge.

Bush Failures Too Great to Excuse Any Longer

For over two years now, every focus group discussion of George W. Bush's positive qualities has included the same basic ingredients. First and foremost, voters appreciate his leadership immediately after 9/11; they like his family (especially Laura Bush) and his strong commitment to his faith and traditional values; they like that he will state clearly what he believes and then stand up for those beliefs; and they believe he is deeply patriotic, cares about the country with a sincerity that most politicians can never know, and is "really trying hard" to do the right things, even if he seems to fail much more often than he succeeds. And for a lot of voters, those positives were enough to overlook his failings on so many issues, but not anymore.

These focus groups provide a rich understanding of a trend that is unmistakable in post-Katrina polling – an unprecedented pullback from Bush among all voters, most notably the Republican-leaning independents who provided his margin of victory and even many within his conservative and partisan base. This pullback is clearly based on his poor performance in office but is most notable because, while voters have long expressed disapproval of Bush's performance on virtually all of the top issues facing the country, his personal charm and trustworthiness, combined with his appeals to faith and critical cultural issues, simply mattered more to a large percentage of voters. But that is no longer the case for most voters in the current environment.

Current doubts about Bush are mainly focused on two areas, with the first being Iraq. Voters largely believe Bush made a series of mistakes in deciding to take action in Iraq, but the same steadfastness which they used to praise in Bush, they now see making him too stubborn to acknowledge those mistakes. Bush is viewed to be in over his head in Iraq, committed to an ideal victory that does not match the reality of the situation on the ground and unable to shift his thinking or make concessions that will be needed to ensure security in Iraq while reducing U.S. troop levels and funding. Further damaging images of Bush on Iraq is the continuing belief that his determination to go after Saddam Hussein came at the expense of efforts to capture Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan; to the degree that Katrina has resurrected memories of 9/11, that

matters more to Americans than it has for quite awhile.

The second and even more powerful area of doubt about Bush is based on questions about who he really cares about. Since he first ran for national office, Bush has always been seen as too cozy with big corporations and the wealthy, particularly oil companies, and polls show clear majorities believe he cares more about big businesses and special interests than average Americans. But his flippant response and seeming obliviousness or lack of concern to the suffering of so many Americans in the immediate aftermath of Katrina was simply too much for many Americans. Less publicized actions his administration has taken since that time, particularly awarding more no-bid contracts to Halliburton while Gulf Coast residents were still stranded and fighting for their lives, only serve to further reinforce these beliefs.

Iraq is also a contributing factor to the belief that middle class and working families consistently fall to the bottom of Bush's priority list. Bush takes every opportunity to reaffirm his commitment to the Iraqi people and to back up that commitment with seemingly limitless resources, yet when it comes to empathy, resources, or just some new ideas, 'he has nothing for the American people.'

There is an important nuance in public attitudes toward Bush and the federal government's response to Katrina that should be highlighted here. Voters in all four groups were quick to say that they do not hold Bush personally responsible for the poor performance of the federal government; his administration and his bureaucracy are to blame, and even though he is responsible and deserves blame for putting unqualified hacks in charge, he is not responsible for their predictable failures. When asked to describe Bush's response to Katrina, participants focused almost entirely on 'slow' and 'unprepared,' but there was little sense of a willful failure. It should also be noted that, while these groups took place before Bush's prime-time speech to the country from New Orleans, voters were not at all impressed with his initial attempts to take responsibility 'to the extent the federal government didn't fully do its job right,' with reactions ranging from 'he had to do something' to 'too little, too late.'

Finally, we offered respondents two statements about Bush's leadership and asked them to choose the statement with which they agreed more:

President Bush is making the right choices and making our country safer.

OR

President Bush is making the wrong choices, and as a result, our country is less safe.

By a margin of almost 2-to-1, these voters (including all 10 members of the non-college women group in Iowa) agreed that Bush is making the wrong choices and making us less safe. When pressed to identify specific choices he has made that have left us less safe, they pointed to Iraq (particularly the overcommitment of National Guard troops at the expense of safety here at home), a failure to increase preparedness in this country (as evidenced by the Katrina response), and alienation of our international allies. Those who said Bush's decisions are making us safer built their defense entirely on Afghanistan, the initial decision to go to war in Iraq (but not his conduct of the war since then), and the notion that we are fighting the terrorists 'over there'

rather than here at home.

Broad Disapproval of Congress Unaffected by Katrina

Voters continue to express overwhelmingly negative views of the Congress, regardless of their partisan or ideological leanings. Criticisms of Congress generally fall into one of four general critiques:

- *Do-nothing Congress* – Despite the long list of challenges facing the country, voters cannot point to a single step Congress has taken to address their needs or improve their lives. The only accomplishments they can identify are wasteful, pork barrel spending and Members of Congress voting themselves pay raises.
- *Partisan division* – The primary reason voters believe ‘Congress is the opposite of progress’ is that too many Members of Congress put partisan interests ahead of their own constituents, to the point that they would rather vote against good legislation than give the other party a potential victory.
- *Corruption, lobbyists, and self-enrichment* – While voters believe many people run for office with good ideals and a desire to make a difference, they believe the culture of Capitol Hill, dominated by lobbyists, perks, and a perpetual, all-consuming need to win re-election, corrupts those ideals and then keeps those compromised individuals in office for as long as possible.
- *Wealthy and out of touch* – Voters are keenly aware that a disproportionate number of their representatives in Washington are millionaires, enjoy a retirement package far superior to Social Security, and face few, if any, of the challenges – including health care costs, gas prices, and job insecurity – which they themselves face on a daily basis.

When pressed on why, given the visceral dissatisfaction expressed toward Congress, approximately 95 percent of incumbents win re-election each time, voters point to their ability to raise untold amounts of campaign funds from lobbyists and the lack of compelling alternative candidates.

Given the obvious focus on Katrina in these groups, we must note that Congress is not a part of the Katrina dynamic at all for most voters. They do not see a constructive role for Congress on this issue, and their larger cynicism has been borne out in developments over the last few weeks, with Congress rubber stamping relief funds without necessary oversight or accountability and Republican leaders exploiting the tragedy of Katrina to push for a wide range of partisan pet projects. Despite this, every group strongly rejected the idea that Katrina would have any effect on their vote in 2006, candidly admitting that this tragedy has not really impacted them in their personal lives and they are still most likely to vote on what matters to their own lives.

Katrina Failures Provide New Openings for Democrats

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In order to better understand the most powerful impressions voters took from the Katrina disaster and how those lessons will impact future political decision making, we reviewed a lengthy list of outrages tied to all aspects of the tragedy. Overall, voters are disgusted that no one stepped forward to take responsibility and provide real leadership before the storm, and once the storm had passed, all relevant players were more concerned with pointing fingers than helping those in need. The failures of local and state government were attributed mostly to the incompetence of individual leaders while the failures of the federal government were a reflection of bureaucracy and a lack of concern for real people

Looking at specific instances of failed leadership, the fact that it took an entire week for enough troops to reach New Orleans to restore law and order was the most consistently chosen outrage and served as the ultimate symbol for the slow response and lackadaisical approach of the Bush administration. The fact that Bush, Chertoff, and Brown all claimed to not know information that was readily available in the media was another example of their feckless response to the suffering of so many people. A final symbol of the federal government's failure that created strong reactions was the example of the Duke University students who drove into New Orleans from North Carolina and saved six people when FEMA claimed no one could get into the city.

In developing a Democratic critique of the response to Katrina that is most relevant to the ongoing debates facing the country, three lines of attack resonated most effectively among these swing voters:

1. *While thousands of Katrina victims were still stranded and awaiting rescue, the Bush administration appointed Bush's former campaign manager, now a corporate lobbyist, to oversee rebuilding contracts, and he immediately awarded Halliburton, Dick Cheney's old company, a lucrative naval contract.*

This message – which did not even mention Halliburton stealing millions of dollars for services it did not provide in Iraq – was very effective, particularly among the non-college voters, who observed that, even when people are suffering and we are in the midst of a horrible tragedy, it is still 'business as usual' for the Bush administration – nothing will stop them from putting their wealthy backers before real people and the country as a whole.

2. *The National Guard was created specifically to defend our homeland and to provide emergency services in times of disaster, yet over 8,000 members of Mississippi and Louisiana's National Guard, as well as millions of dollars of equipment, were deployed rebuilding Iraq and were unavailable when they were most needed here at home.*

Much of the success of this message came from reminding voters that the National Guard was created specifically to deal with homeland security and national disasters. Their deployment to Iraq is yet another example of Bush putting his obsession with

Iraq before America's needs.

3. *Before any damage assessments had even been done, House Speaker Dennis Hastert said a lot of New Orleans "could just be bulldozed," and Congressman Richard Baker of Louisiana said, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We could not do it, but God did."*

These quotes from Hastert and Baker, but particularly Baker, evoked powerful reactions, particularly among the women in both locations, and reinforced how completely out of touch Republican leaders in Congress are. As one irate woman in Iowa plaintively wrote, 'may God have mercy on your [Hastert and Baker] souls for being so cold and uncaring about peoples homes and lives.'

Offering a Democratic Vision

It was very clear from our discussions how much the failures surrounding Katrina are leading Americans to rethink how safe and prepared we are for another disaster, whether natural or terror, and there is a real hunger for leaders to step up, acknowledge the problem, and offer real solutions. The various positive measures we discussed in these groups for taking care of the victims of Katrina – including housing, health care, education, and unemployment – were all generally well-received but were honestly considered a given. The attitude among most voters was that we are obviously going to take care of the people with no homes, that is a given, but what are we going to do to make sure it does not happen again?

From a list of more than a dozen proposals from across the political spectrum for moving forward after Katrina, four specific ideas emerged and together form a compelling argument for Democratic leadership:

1. **Designate a strong leader with unquestioned integrity to oversee the rebuilding process and the huge sums of taxpayer money going to it.** It is most important that this individual have a proven record of efficient, effective management experience and a proven independence from the corporate ties of the Bush administration.
2. **Reduce funding and troop levels in Iraq so we can focus more resources on defending and rebuilding our own country.** As highlighted earlier, Katrina has fundamentally altered the debate on Iraq and created more support than ever before for this message. But the message framework for this is not about failure in Iraq, it is about taking care of your own home first. There is a growing belief that we are rotting from the inside, ignoring the growing number of poor, homeless, and uninsured in our country while trying to save the rest of the world, and images of people standing on rooftops or bodies floating in flood waters only reinforce this. Given the huge price tag for post-Katrina rebuilding and recovery, everyone but the Republican leadership recognize that hard choices will need to be made, and this is where Americans believe a large share of the funds should come from.

3. **Equip first responders across the country with compatible equipment that operates on the same wavelength and allows them to communicate with one another in emergency situations.** This relatively modest step is symbolic of the inexcusable failure to make needed changes after 9/11, and the fact that it could be accomplished for half the cost of one day's operations in Iraq, made it all the more powerful.

4. **An Apollo project-level commitment to using American know-how to develop and produce alternative energy sources to achieve energy independence within ten years.** The panic over gas prices, which we expect will only grow stronger as the weather turns colder, has clearly increased already-strong support on this issue. This is the kind of bold step that Democrats must take if they want to really separate themselves. This issue is very difficult for Republicans, who must either sign on or very publicly carry water for their very unpopular special interests allies.

One last possibility that we must address is the Democratic proposal for an independent commission based on the 9/11 Commission. Voters are not interested in anymore finger-pointing, but they definitively do want to know why government at all levels failed and what we must do to ensure this type of failure never happens again. Broad support for this type of commission is tempered by concern that there was not sufficient oversight and follow through to make sure the changes recommended by the 9/11 Commission were carried out. Americans need reassurance that any investigation include measures for oversight and accountability that will ensure needed changes are indeed made. After all, it is now four years later, and first responders in New York still cannot even communicate with one another in case of another emergency.

There is no question that Democrats need a positive vision and agenda that goes beyond Katrina to address fundamental national challenges – challenges such as health care, ethics and lobbying reforms, the deficit, and short-term gas prices – but the four positive post-Katrina steps that emerged from these groups lay an excellent foundation.