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From: Karl Agne

Focus Group Observations

Last week's focus groups in PA-07 (older college women, younger college men) and OH-01 (seniors, younger non-college women) echoed our earlier poll results in those districts in many important ways. However, before getting into the specific findings of the groups, I want to highlight something that has become a dominant theme in all of our focus groups.

Just as in our polling, on virtually every issue, Democratic messages are clearly preferred to the Republican alternatives, and there is an unmistakable gap between those likely to vote Democratic and those preferring our messages. And on every Democratic message, whether a broad message with lofty rhetoric or a nuts-and-bolts message built largely around reassurance, the reaction is the same — “sounds great, it'll never happen.”

The credibility gap facing Democrats, a natural extension of the fact that voters don't see us as standing for any clear ideas or issues, undermines all of our other work. This then leads logically to the central finding of our rural and red state research — if they can't discern a difference on jobs, health care, retirement, gas prices, etc., voters will default to security and values issues, and they will assume that a candidate who matches their values will also advance their interests on those bread and butter issues.

These groups provided evidence that a candidate who makes promises that seem achievable to voters and challenges them to hold him or her accountable is perhaps best positioned to overcome this gap. We clearly can't lose sight of the big challenges — particularly affordable health care for all and energy independence — but change that voters can see and measure seems critical to bridging the credibility gap. Some of the best examples of such measures that emerged in these groups were no pay raise without an increase in minimum wage (or really anything tied to no pay raises), expanded investment in stem cell

research, repealing tax cuts for companies that ship jobs overseas, and making college tuition tax deductible. And of course some threshold of change in Iraq, although defining the nature of this change remains difficult for voters, as explained below.

Political Environment

- Remains overwhelmingly negative, driven by Iraq and economy
- Gas prices are central to the economic concerns, but the foundation remains rising prices and stagnant incomes
- Iraq discussion is almost all negative, with dominant theme being the need to focus on problems here at home. More than ever before, we heard participants asking the questions “why are we still there?” and “what are we accomplishing?”
- Many express support for bringing the soldiers home, but most simply want a plan or an exit strategy, anything other than open-ended commitment; majority are still hesitant to embrace withdrawal because of concerns over what happens once we leave
- Seniors still express frustration with complexity of Medicare drug plan process, but everyone who had enrolled in the plan loved it; we have anticipated this short-term reaction for months now, but it is critical to consider as national Democrats consider an October focus on Social Security privatization and other seniors issues
- Positives on Bush are mostly the same (family man, good intentions, moral character, religious, doesn't back down) but two notable additions — visited the soldiers (this came up in three of the four groups) and keeping us safe (two groups explicitly expressed the belief that the absence of major follow-up attacks after 9/11 can't just be an accident)
- Negatives on Bush similar to what we've heard for several months, with Iraq and mental acuity /poor speaking skills leading the way. Also strong focus on too tied to oil industry, spending/deficit, weak on illegal immigration, and doesn't understand challenges facing real people
- Congress — corruption, corruption, corruption. Every conversation on Congress revolved around them looking out for themselves and their own interests at the expense of taxpayers — pay raise was central to this (“who else gets to vote themselves a pay raise anytime they want?”) but also pork and earmarks and lobbyists
- It is almost impossible to overstate the level of antipathy toward Congress in these groups, but there is an equally strong sense of powerlessness to do anything about it

Election 2006

- Many voters acknowledged disgust over direction of the country was inspiring apathy more than energy for the upcoming elections. They are desperate for change, but there is no sense that the election is a vehicle for change. *Engaging these voters and turning them out must start with convincing them that change can be achieved through electoral means in the first place.*
- Personal traits (honesty, integrity, someone who will do what they say they are going to do) remain most important factors in deciding how they will vote, but immigration, war, and energy are the most important issue-based criteria cited
- No one across the four groups had heard anything from their respective congressional candidates (but Gov races had penetrated to a small degree), and even the most educated and well-informed struggled to say what the parties are talking about in this election
- Reasons to vote GOP were clear to most voters — keep us safe from terrorism / support military and defend core values; a few also cited lower taxes and pro-business growth. Just as importantly, these were viewed as believable and credible reasons to vote GOP.
- When asked reasons Dems offer for why voters should choose them this year, the only real responses offered were that Democrats aren't Republicans and “aren't for the war;” health care reform also got a couple of mentions. But there was no clarity on how Dems would be different on Iraq and no belief whatsoever that there would be any significant change in Washington, or in the country's direction, if Democrats take back the House and/or Senate.
- We pushed hard on “the future-oriented choice,” that is the consequences of Republicans remaining in power. There is broad agreement that GOP change messages lack credibility, and voters are most concerned about no change on Iraq and gas prices, with some focus on deficit as well. Voters are still opposed to Social Security privatization and react strongly against it, but they didn't see it as a real threat; every group had the same response to it as a 2006 message — privatization was a bad idea, the Republicans realized that and dropped it, it just won't happen whether they have control of Congress or not
- But the future-oriented choice messaging is constantly undermined by the fact that voters don't expect any real differences with a Dem Congress. Iraq and gas prices are areas where we should be able to define real differences, but right now voters in these groups just don't see it

Iraq

- Voters were very disconnected from the big debates in Congress, but some developments have clearly penetrated, most notably that some GOPers are now speaking out against status quo in Iraq (but GOP is still seen as largely united on the issue)
- Most voters described the GOP position as stay the course, but more than in previous groups, many described it more in terms of achieving stability and getting out as soon as practicable without losing stability; this is an important nuance because it moves GOPers from ‘stay the course’ to ‘withdraw the right way’
- Dems were seen as opposed to current situation in Iraq and wanting to get out as soon as possible, but no agreement on when that is and no plan to make it happen; Democrats not seen as united on this issue, with positions ranging from ‘get out now’ to ‘start to get out now’ to ‘set a timeline for getting out soon’
- We offered four possible directions on where we go from here (Bush/Cheney, JCOS Myers, Levin/Biden, and Kerry/Feingold), voters overwhelmingly chose Levin/Biden position. Key pieces were rejection of open-ended commitment (costing our country too much) and reassurances (no precipitous withdrawal and won't allow terrorist elements to seize control). Also key that it sets a timeline for beginning to withdraw but no timeline for final withdrawal (shows flexibility to events on the ground, commitment to security rather than politics). Rhetoric is focused on “forcing the Iraqis to assume greater responsibility for their own security” and necessity of beginning to redeploy as only way to “begin the process now toward Iraqi self-sufficiency”
- However, when we introduced a very strong Rove/Cheney ‘cut and run’ critique, the pendulum swung back away from Dem position and back to an even split. Their message has four key pieces:
 1. we are indeed making progress (i.e. our sacrifices aren't in vain)
 2. there's still more to be done
 3. can't bail out before we complete our mission
 4. cut and run tells the whole world America doesn't have the stomach to fight and win the war on terror

This ‘cut and run’ formulation seems likely to continue to hurt us if we don't better define the change we seek in Iraq.

- The GOP is clearly seeking a choice between ‘stability, then withdraw the right way’ and ‘cut and run;’ defeating this frame requires that Democratic candidates not only define their own position but make their Republican opponents the champions of the status quo

Messaging

- I covered most of the important pieces at the start of this note — credibility gap undermines all messages, small promises (led by pay raise/min wage link) are best reassurance for establishing credibility
- In tackling the big challenges facing the country, voters remain most enthusiastic about affordable health care for all and energy independence, but there must be a security piece as well. Voters reacted very well to a Democratic message making security of ports and borders a top priority, and they repeatedly looked for an Iraq piece in the discussion of achievable goals that can establish credibility as agents of change
- We tested an accountability message that attacked the GOP Congress as a ‘blank check’ then promised Dems will restore checks and balances by using subpoena power to investigate series of abuses including Katrina funds, price gouging by oil companies, Halliburton contracts, polluters off the hook for toxic clean-ups, and \$9B in missing cash in Iraq. Voters were enthusiastic at first, and it was more believable than other Dem messages in many ways because it was Dems picking a fight with GOP. Enthusiasm waned as they contemplated the possibility of endless congressional hearings filled with partisan sniping and nothing getting done on issues that matter. But the effectiveness of the accountability theme and litany of abuses (especially price gouging) shouldn't be lost.