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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

From: Stan Greenberg
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RE: FOCUS GROUP REPORT
Findings from Recent Discussions with Voters

As the 2004 Presidential election approaches, there are noticeable and substantive shifts in voters' attitudes toward George Bush. For most of his presidency, doubts about the President simmered below the surface, holding him back from making significant gains in the electorate despite high approval ratings in the aftermath of 9/11 and two military victories. But a confluence of factors – problems surrounding Iraq, lack of significant job growth at home while we become more invested overseas, and the ascendancy of Kerry and Edwards replacing Dean as the face of the Democratic Party – have altered the political landscape, and previously suppressed doubts about the President have broken through the surface.

The latest public polls show the Democratic frontrunner, John Kerry, running even or ahead with Bush, marking the first time Bush has not lead a specifically named Democrat. Although we are nine months away from the election and the head-to-head results will change several times between now and November 2, a real change is taking place in how voters view this President and the issues at stake in the election.

Democracy Corps recently completed six focus groups with swing voters that explored attitudes toward Bush, the economy, national security, and Iraq.¹ We hope these findings provide some texture to understanding the recent shifts in public opinion. Key observations include:

- Although participants still liked President Bush personally because he is religious and a good family man, support for his policy agenda was strictly limited to the

¹ Democracy Corps conducted focus groups in the suburbs of Bucks County, PA outside of Philadelphia, the suburbs of Orange County, FL outside of Orlando, and the suburbs surrounding Phoenix, AZ January 28 – February 2, 2004. All groups consisted of independents or weak partisans who voted in the 2000 Presidential election and intend to vote in 2004. Each location held one men's group and one women's group. In suburban Philadelphia, the participants were college educated with annual household incomes above \$50,000. In suburban Orlando and Phoenix, participants were non-college educated with annual household incomes under \$50,000.

area of national security where voters thought Bush is trying and they were still giving him room to succeed before drawing conclusions. But overall, Bush's support was weaker among these swing voters than we have seen at any time since the terrorist attacks transformed his presidency.

- 9/11 continued to play a central role in how people thought about Iraq as many said something had to be done to show the world we were serious. But several participants were anxious about Iraq, questioning where we are headed and why we were spending so many resources abroad while ignoring problems at home.
- There was no support for Bush's domestic agenda which was seen as out of touch on the economy and failing to address important problems like skyrocketing health care costs. And on Bush's signature tax cuts, support was even weaker than the tepid support we have witnessed in previous Democracy Corps focus groups.
- Anger toward corporations had not subsided and in fact was even more intense. Participants felt corporations have money, power, and enormous influence without regard for workers and public interest. Although they believed corporations are a "necessary evil" for providing jobs, participants were disgusted with the corporate culture and felt helpless against their power.
- Health care remained a highly explosive issue with participants highly focused on the rising costs. It was the biggest concern they had with the economy and regularly cited as one of the reasons the country is headed in the wrong direction. Voters were extremely eager for changes that would make coverage affordable and more sensible.
- Among the lower income non-college educated participants, jobs moving overseas was an important issue and reflected a trend that we have observed emerging in focus groups over the last year. These voters worried that these jobs were not coming back as unemployment and a lack of good jobs continues to plague the economy. Despite recent positive economic news, participants in all the groups did not think they were likely to benefit.
- Participants were concerned about the budget deficit because of the effect it has on our ability to meet important needs like Social Security and Medicare, and also because of the impact on the next generation. Voters were especially moved by television advertising that demonstrated the future impact of the deficit on kids.

George W. Bush

As we have seen in the past, our focus group participants identified religion, family, and decisiveness as the traits they like about George Bush. There also continued

to be a strong appreciation for his response following 9/11, and it is these sentiments that dominated the positive evaluations of the President.

Handled 9/11 extremely well. (Phoenix non-college educated men)

Takes care of business when it comes down to what really need to be done, has tried to put America back on its feet after 9/11. (Phoenix non-college educated men)

He really kicks butt on terrorists, that's a good thing. Which I really like, I think that's really great about him. His moral values and the issues on abortion, gay marriage, protecting our country, with the national security, he's on top of most issues. (Phoenix non-college educated women)

He showed the United States had strength after 9/11. He didn't just kind of panic or back down. (Orlando non-college educated men)

He took some type of action after 9/11. Whether it was the right action, I don't know. Just that he'd actually did something. (Philadelphia college educated men)

I think he handled the 9/11 thing well right after it happened. (Philadelphia college educated women)

I like his religious convictions and stuff. I know that is a hot topic or whatever. I think he had strong convictions in the way he handled 9/11 and all that stuff. He reminds me of Ronald Reagan and he is strong that way. (Orlando non-college educated women)

Religion. I mean at least he is a religious man, and you know, he's not afraid to show it. (Phoenix non-college educated women)

His faith. His character. He's not afraid to express it. (Philadelphia college educated women)

But the President did not receive a broader set of positives, and any hopeful feelings toward Bush were limited to the area of national security and his moral character. This sharply contrasted with the domestic arena where Bush inspired little confidence and garnered no enthusiasm for his efforts. Whether it is the job market where he was seen as out of touch with the painful reality facing Americans, health care costs that are out of control, deficit spending that is passing the bill to the children, or simply spending too many resources on Iraq at the expense of addressing problems at home, voters did not expect George Bush would do much to help them in the areas they need it.

We need a fresh face in there, somebody with a different agenda. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

Yeah just a fresh face. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

I have doubts about the medical insurance and how he is ever going to solve that problem because it is one of the most major problems that we do have today and also I think he puts way too much energy into the war. It seems like her point of view, it just seems it isn't ever going to end. He doesn't make them think that I don't know – he has an answer to what is going to help it and sometimes he just seems to talk in circles so much. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

I'm not sure what direction he's going in at times. Health care reform stinks. We don't have any that I know of. Although personally, every time, constantly we are getting hit with increases in health care. Every health care plan you have is increasing costs, and I don't know exactly the root of that problem, somebody else might. But prescription plans, HMO's, they are just...I don't know what his...if he knows what's going on there. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

I think he has a good heart in general, but I think his policies, they are not reflecting...he's going about it the wrong way. I mean I would have given him two or three different areas a few years ago, but he's such a disappointment to me that I can't think of a real strong area. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

I don't think he's in touch with Joe average. I don't think he has a clue. He does not strike me as somebody who is sincere, so I think he runs with a higher circle. I don't think that he is aware of the issues that people are experiencing on a daily basis. (Philadelphia, college educated women)

I think he is more concerned about what is going on overseas than what is going on in his own backyard. (Phoenix non-college educated men)

I feel like he focuses on other countries too many times. (Phoenix non-college educated women)

When we showed people Bush's State of the Union address, the reaction to his economic message revealed his distance from voters on this central issue and why the President did not get the bump in the polls that customarily comes with this major speech. Participants watched video of Bush delivering the following excerpt from the State of the Union:

“In the last three years, adversity has also revealed the fundamental strengths of the American economy. We have come through recession, and terrorist attack, and corporate scandals, and the uncertainties of war. And because you acted to stimulate our economy with tax relief, this economy is strong, and growing stronger. You have doubled the child tax credit from \$500 to \$1,000, reduced the marriage penalty, begun to phase out the death tax, reduced taxes on capital gains and stock dividends, cut taxes on small businesses, and you have lowered taxes for every American who pays income taxes. Americans took those dollars and put them to work, driving this economy forward. The pace of economic growth in the third quarter of 2003 was the fastest in nearly 20 years; new home construction, the highest in almost 20 years; home ownership rates, the highest ever. Manufacturing activity is increasing. Inflation is low. Interest rates are low. Exports are growing. Productivity is high, and jobs are on the rise.”

In both the college educated and non-college educated focus groups, Bush’s message of economic accomplishment and hope fell flat on these voters who said they are experiencing a different reality from Bush. Even though some participants reflected national polls that indicate many Americans believe the national economy is getting better, most people in these focus groups did not feel that the economic improvements were reaching them. In fact, these voters – especially the blue collar and lower income workers – felt that their economic situation was not improving and unlikely to do so because the rich and corporations get the benefits.

I don’t know where he is coming from. Not in my picture. (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

What world is he in – Bush world? (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

Not unless we win the lottery. (Phoenix, non-college educated women)

Then we just get more tax, so even if we get, again going back to taxes, if we get more tax, yeah we have maybe a little bit more coming in, they’ll say give us tax relief over here, but now they’re allowing bigger companies to charge taxes or raise prices, so it just washes out. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

I didn’t really believe in that. I don’t think unemployment has gone down – it is just that people can’t file claims anymore and I think that is what they base it on. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

That was my situation when I got laid off and I looked and looked and with all my experience I could not find work. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

When Bush asserted that the economy is improving, it served to widen the gap between him and the participants. The prevailing sentiment among 50 swing voters across 6 separate focus groups clearly indicated that they felt more likely to be left behind Bush's recovery than to be next in line to benefit. For these voters, it was as if the "recovery" not only lacks jobs, but also leaves out the middle class.

I don't think you are going to see them (benefits) right away, no. Maybe two years down the road. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

I don't think you are going to see it now. Like I said, what's \$400? (Philadelphia, college educated men)

We are not up high in the tax bracket. We are the middle income. Middle income pays for everything and white collar people get everything they want. (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

It seems like most of the tax benefit goes to the big companies and they keep it. It doesn't come down to us. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

One woman responded to the question of when people would benefit from the recovery by simply stating:

I think the middle class feels like dirt. (Philadelphia, college educated women)

Bush Tax Cuts

The Bush tax cuts were the only area where Bush received credit for even trying to do something on the economy as some participants expressed their satisfaction in receiving money back. Positive statements about taxes were driven primarily by the child tax credit. These participants liked the fact that the President made an effort and gave them some needed cash.

I was personally pleased with the child tax credit. (Philadelphia college educated women)

The tax cuts helped me short term because now we are getting \$1,000 a kid on our child tax credit. And I have four of them. (Philadelphia college educated men)

I think he hit the nail on the head with like so many of those things that affected me, like the marriage penalty thing. That was very legitimate. I remember doing our taxes when we were married and if we did them separate, it really was

beneficial. I liked that and the child credit. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

Again, that tax break, it was to help get the economy going, even though, on the other hand there was the debt moving up. But it was kind of nice to, you know, idea, like he was thinking, "Let's try to get them back some of their money that we take so much of, you know?" (Phoenix, non-college educated women)

But throughout his presidency, we have seen tepid support for Bush's tax cuts, and this sentiment has in fact weakened even further. And despite the President's efforts mentioned above, most participants felt the cuts did little to improve the economy, the money was not enough to make a real difference in their lives, and most of the benefits went to the rich anyway.

We asked participants to choose between two statements: one that stated the tax cuts were working and the economy was moving in the right direction versus one that stated the tax cuts went to corporations and the rich instead of middle income people whose incomes are stagnant while costs are rising.² Across the board, regardless of gender, education, and income, participants chose the second statement.

College is going up, health care is going up, you see everything going up. And it hasn't trickled down to us yet. (Philadelphia, college educated women)

I think there shouldn't be a tax break for big corporations. Give the tax cuts to the middle and lower. (Philadelphia college educated women)

I picked it just because of the...like I said my economic standing is...I don't pay attention to the tax cuts helping...or whoever they are helping because of all the increases in the other things that are just costing so much more compared to any other things increasing. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

Yeah, everything keeps going up steady. I mean there's no spike in it for me lately. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

Well the burden is going to fall on the middle class and the working Americans. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

²There have been economic gains and tax cuts for the biggest corporations and highest earners, but not for middle class and working Americans. Jobs are scarce, and incomes have barely risen in 3 years, while health care, college and housing costs are skyrocketing

vs.

Recent news of record growth in the national economy, along with new jobs and rising stock values, shows that the Bush tax cuts are working and that our economy is moving in the right direction again.

Middle income pays for everything and white collar people get everything they want. (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

I've done nothing but go paycheck to paycheck since I had to divorce my husband. I mean I can't get ahead. I want to look at buying a house. I've got kids that are gonna be going to college soon, you know. I've gotta have a home so they can come home to it, you know? (Orlando, non-college educated women)

When the tax cut gets framed in terms of priorities, participants moved beyond simply questioning its effectiveness, and resulted in angry reactions toward this core Bush policy. We asked participants to choose their biggest concerns from among a list of things happening in the economy. One of the most frequent items cited was the concern that \$35 billion in tax cuts went to those making over \$375,000 at the same time education programs were cut by \$9 billion. This statement enraged participants.

That's sickening. They have so much money they don't know what to do with it. And it's getting to the point of pathetic. I mean they should be forced to give back, forced to do something for the country. I think this is ridiculous. (Phoenix, non-college educated women)

Do rich people really need breaks when it comes to money? I mean they are already rich. (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

It's absolutely offensive that the tax breaks are going to the rich Americans. (Philadelphia, college educated women)

I think education is one of the most important things for the children and the country, so that they aren't buying guns and drugs. To me, education is the key for them to have a better life. (Philadelphia, college educated women)

I'm tired of hearing the local governments coming at us every year after year, raising our taxes, raising our taxes. I understand they got contracts and we need teachers, but somewhere that's got to stop. And if the federal government keeps on taking money from them, they are just pushing it right down to us. It's not their fault. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

War in Iraq

As mentioned earlier, national security was the primary reason participants offered for standing behind Bush. Nearly two and a half years after the terrorist attacks on the United States, 9/11 remains a central part of these participants' consciousness, and in many ways framed the way they talked about the war in Iraq. Despite expressing ambivalence about the war, participants conveyed that their core support for the President in Iraq was that he showed the world we would respond after getting attacked on 9/11.

It was a victory in the war on terrorism because at least we are doing something...I think it was a victory in the fact that it says to the world, we are not going to stand by and do nothing. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

I think it sends a message that we are here, we will act, that we are not just sitting here waiting for the next thing to happen so that we can react to it. That we are going to move forward and work our way through getting everybody. And maybe this is just the small guy on the way to the big guy, but we are doing....taking steps. (Philadelphia, college educated women)

Reactions to Bush's national security message in the State of the Union address were mostly favorable, and differed sharply from the overwhelmingly negative response he received on his economic message as mentioned earlier. We showed participants video of the following excerpt from the State of the Union:

"I know that some people question if America is really in a war at all. They view terrorism more as a crime, a problem to be solved mainly with law enforcement and indictments. After the World Trade Center was first attacked in 1993, some of the guilty were indicted and tried and convicted, and sent to prison. But the matter was not settled. The terrorists were still training and plotting in other nations, and drawing up more ambitious plans. After the chaos and carnage of September the 11th, it is not enough to serve our enemies with legal papers. The terrorists and their supporters declared war on the United States, and war is what they got.

Some in this chamber, and in our country, did not support the liberation of Iraq. Objections to war often come from principled motives. But let us be candid about the consequences of leaving Saddam Hussein in power. We're seeking all the facts. Already, the Kay Report identified dozens of weapons of mass destruction-related program activities and significant amounts of equipment that Iraq concealed from the United Nations. Had we failed to act, the dictator's weapons of mass destruction programs would continue to this day. Had we failed to act, Security Council resolutions on Iraq would have been revealed as empty threats, weakening the United Nations and encouraging defiance by dictators around the world. Iraq's torture chambers would still be filled with victims, terrified and innocent. The killing fields of Iraq -- where hundreds of thousands of men and women and children vanished into the sands -- would still be known only to the killers. For all who love freedom and peace, the world without Saddam Hussein's regime is a better and safer place."

This section of the President's address was generally well received as participants agreed that the world is better off without Saddam Hussein and it was good that Bush sent the message, "we're not going to be as wimpy as we have been." According to these swing voters, "they declared war on us," and taking action was the right thing to do.

He felt like something had to be done, right or wrong, but at least he did something. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

I agree with him. I told you take the fight to them. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

I have only one word and that is Hitler. Evil prevails when good men do nothing. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

I mean it's awful, it's sad. The whole thing's just awful and sad, but I don't know, this kind of sent a message. "Leave us alone, or . . ." (Phoenix, non-college educated women)

But at the same time, many participants were frustrated and angry about the developments on the ground in Iraq. And these voters voiced strong dissatisfaction that too many resources are going into the war while problems are not getting addressed at home.

I'm outraged that the 550 soldiers that have died over there, and I believe its for all the wrong reasons. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

Hmm, I think I'll send eighty-six billion to Iraq today...How much more do I have to work to keep paying for this? It's incredible. I can't believe he gets his way so much. And he spends money like I have it to give. He needs to...the needs of this country and not everybody else's. (Phoenix, non-college educated women)

I agree that we should never have gone in. And now we have created this huge mess that will take a lot of funds from our country to go over there. I think it's going to be a long time, we were talking about a transition period, I think we are talking a lot longer than anybody realizes. And it's going to drain a lot of money from our country. I think we went into something....whatever the case may be, I don't think we had all the facts. And we are all now paying for it. (Philadelphia, college educated women)

Why are we paying for them to rebuild their country when we have all these problems here....like jobs going over to other countries and everything like that. It just doesn't make sense. We do it every time, everywhere we've ever gone. We pay more to clean up instead of other things that we should be working on. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

We're more concerned about being abroad than here in the states. (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

We're somewhere else and not taking care of the people here. (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

On the growing controversy over weapons of mass destruction and the reasons given for going to war, participants did not identify this as a driving factor in their

attitudes toward the war. Certainly, some said they wanted to find the weapons, but generally people were simply more concerned with where we are headed at this point.

I think it had to be done, but I'm talking about a plan to get out of there once they got in there. I think that's what they should go for now. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

I don't think there's a question that it's a better place without him, but where do we stop? We are spread too thin militarily throughout the world. We know North Korea has got nuclear capability. Do we go there next and then where? Is the United States the world's policeman, as they say? (Philadelphia, college educated men)

Well I think we did the right thing by doing that. Like I said earlier, I wish we would have found the smoking gun. He did say that they found something similar to activity, was it 12 things that somebody found over there? I think it needed to be done because that man killed a lot of people for no reason. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

I think Bush had the right idea to take the fight to them. I mean you can criticize him all you want about going to Iraq and not finding anything, but I think taking the fight to them was the right idea. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

Sometimes we stick our nose where we shouldn't and we need to be careful about that, but there needs to be something done over there. I just hope that the country can run itself when it gets put on its own two feet. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

I don't know, I just feel like we've pretty much done our job there. I feel like we should move out now and give it a chance to see what's gonna happen. (Phoenix, non-college educated women)

For these voters, the WMD controversy was not about whether we should have gone to war. Rather, it spoke to how they assessed the President's honesty.

He (Saddam) is better being out of power, but the whole fact of the matter is he (Bush) lied to the American public and basically said he is an imminent danger. (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

Several voters were moved by a hard hitting television ad that showed a polygraph needle reacting wildly to Bush's statements in the 2003 State of the Union about Iraq, calling it "a good commercial" and "impactful." And reactions to the ad demonstrated that Bush's trustworthiness was no longer bullet-proof.

Those are facts. (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

That would be refreshing if we got the truth. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

It gets you thinking. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

Intensification on Key Issues

Participants in this latest wave of focus groups underscored the importance and power of some key issues before the country. Unlike the economy, an issue that many voters have considered cyclical and primarily independent of Bush, there were other economic-related problems that voters viewed as areas where Bush has failed to take action. Specifically, participants demonstrated intense dissatisfaction with corporations, health care, and American jobs going overseas.

Corporations

We have witnessed highly negative sentiments toward corporations for a long time, but these focus group participants brought their anger to a different level as the corporate theme recurred throughout the discussions regardless of the topic in front of them. As in the past, participants expressed the importance of business in generating jobs and called it a “necessary evil,” but they did not hold back their assault on corporations which were seen as “bullies,” “too powerful,” “destroying the environment,” “greed,” and “Enron.”

The companies don't feel any need to be loyal to the employees and so now employees have a sense of insecurity wherever they go. (Philadelphia college educated women)

Basically it's businesses are running the country, big corporations, things like that. It's the American way. (Philadelphia college educated men)

And what pisses me off is the owner of the company just bought this \$300,000 home. And \$100,000 boat and he couldn't give us a raise last year. And I know my own personal struggles, so I think.... I don't know. (Philadelphia college educated women)

How about the CEO making \$5 million instead of \$25 million? Why does the CEO have to make \$25 million a year and the company operated at a loss for that year, but they're still paying him \$25 million. (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

That's really scary to think you can work all those years, put all that money in there, and just have nothing, just because somebody was so...I don't know, you gotta be...Yeah just evil to be able to hurt people like that.” (Phoenix non-college educated women)

When one participant raised the issue of job losses overseas, another reacted:

Doesn't that go back to big corporations too? Doesn't that go back to there should be some kind of regulation there? If you are going to do business and reap the benefits of being an American company then you are going to be an American company. You are going to employ American people and you are going to manufacture it in America and if you can't, then you are moving your whole operation overseas and try to do it from there. You're not living here either. Sorry, I know it sounds mean, but go live in China. (Orlando non-college educated women)

Throughout all the Democracy Corps focus groups conducted since Bush became President, participants have tied Bush and the Republicans to the corporate culture. These focus groups were no different and we have seen that it is not even a debate whether close connections exist between Republicans and corporations, as people described Republicans as “big business,” “money,” and “rich guys,” and associated big corporations with “Republican” and “Bush Administration.” This conclusion about Republicans has been cemented, carrying especially strong weight among the non-college educated participants.

I think again they're more for the corporate American. (Phoenix, non-college educated women)

It seems like they always go to more of the business, the big business instead of the workers of course. I know it's bred that way, but still, it still seems like it's going that way. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

And in reaction to Bush's economic message in the State of the Union:

More interested in large corporations and the wealth than the common people. (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

Health Care

These focus groups reinforced the notion that health care is as emotional and powerful issue as any facing the country. The issue came up unprompted when participants were simply asked to talk about the country's direction. Immediately, health care was commonly cited as a reason why the US is going in the wrong direction. Participants compared the costs of their plans, and some complained about being forced to forego coverage because it is unaffordable. Costs were consistently named as the biggest problem with the health care system.

The co-pays keep going up, the coverage keeps going down and my premium just skyrockets. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

It just amazes me when you go to a doctor's office you see them for 10 minutes and it's a \$185 bill. I mean you're not paying that in insurance, but somebody's paying it. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

Being self-employed, I don't have health insurance and it kills me to go to the walkup clinic out of my own pocket. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

I got a 90-year-old mother-in-law that we sort of help along and it is just amazing the money that she spends on prescriptions, it is just astronomical. I thought mine were bad, but hers are - you know sometimes it is a choice of whether she eats or takes her medicine. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

As we have seen with other problems that participants identified, they pointed the finger at big business – in this case, pharmaceutical and insurance companies. The problem struck people as so serious and the cause so clear that some participants – even among the non-college educated voters who traditionally oppose government intervention – voiced their desire for government involvement to control costs. This sentiment echoes similar calls in several other focus groups conducted by Democracy Corps over the last three years.

The drug company stuff is a big thing too, because I think they dictate the cost and that is why the prices are going up, is that waste and marketing or whatever. There is no regulation. They are just running the show. They're just calling it and there is just no regulation. (Orlando, non-college women)

And there may be a way to make a drug for less money and another company can do it, but the bigger name companies are monopolizing that market and it is just not possible. (Orlando, non-college women)

It seems to be that the health care industry is a bratty 2½ year old who needs to be smacked hard and nobody has the balls to do it yet. And it seems to me that they are just hoarding everything, all of our money and telling us what we can and can't do. It would appear that nobody wants to make them stop it. (Philadelphia, college educated women)

Actually I think somebody questioned, where is the money going? It's going to the insurance companies. The doctors aren't getting more because they are all getting slammed by the insurance company. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

People knew this issue well, talking about intricate details and the Canadian system as an alternative. Some were even angry with the US government for blocking Americans from getting cheaper drugs in Canada.

Look at Canada. Look at how...And I'm not talking about communism. I think we should switch over to like the way they do their health care. I just think

there's too many people going without, and there's too many people having bad credit checks because hey can't afford to pay their health care. (Phoenix, non-college educated women)

And the federal government is fighting tooth and nail to keep people from getting the same damn drugs from Canada for 40 or 50% cheaper. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

I pay the same amount as you might pay with your insurance, but your insurance covers you and I'm coming in with cash and I'm still being charged 185. You know, but I've got to come up with the same amount of money and then they'll say, okay Blue Cross and Blue Shield said we'll make a deal. We're only going to charge 140 to the person that has Blue Cross and Blue Shield, but I'm being charged 185. I don't understand. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

Jobs Moving Overseas

With participants not feeling an improvement in their economic situation, a growing grievance that we have witnessed in focus groups over the last 6 months has been the loss of jobs to overseas. Voters in these most recent groups reiterated this concern, and pointed out that different sorts of jobs are being lost to other countries, whether it is blue collar work to Mexico and China or technical support services getting outsourced to India. This concern was especially felt among the blue collar participants and their deep concern about the nature of this job loss, stating “there are certain industries that they aren't even going to have here anymore.”

If all the jobs are being taken over there, what will be left here? (Orlando, non-college educated women)

Levi's is no longer made in the United States. That's a shame. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

We're losing the jobs. We'll never get them back, 'cause they're doing it for cheaper. (Phoenix, non-college educated women)

This job loss even colored how participants in the blue collar focus groups thought about foreign policy. When we asked about the country's foreign policy, we were seeking to improve our understanding of attitudes toward dealing with the international community, addressing terrorism, and protecting America's interests. But often, voters' reactions were to talk about the effects of trade and our border control on our employment situation.

I don't understand why we let our jobs go to other countries. All these big companies are sending their workers – the work that is done here is sent out of the country for much cheaper. (Orlando, non-college educated women)

All the jobs going overseas. But if you dig back far enough, it started after World War II, where we started trading with other countries, who we saw as less fortunate to do the jobs. And now they're taking the jobs. (Phoenix, non-college educated women)

It seems very bizarre to me, especially with what happened with September 11th. They were in our country for 5 years. They were flying our airplanes. They were using our flight schools...How could that have happened? (Orlando, non-college educated women)

Federal Deficit

The budget deficit was also an important issue for participants, though not as emotional an issue as corporations, health care, and jobs moving overseas. Two tracks of concern emerged when discussing the deficit: 1) the effect on draining our ability to meet vital needs like Social Security and Medicare, and 2) the impact on future generations.

Well you worry about what Medicare or Social Security and everything, our future, what all is gonna be happening by the time we need, you know, we're gonna be needing it. You know, with this deficit. (Phoenix, non-college educated women)

Nobody is seeing 30 to 50 years down the road. Things like Social Security. And they are worried about spending now and the next generation will take care of whatever mess we make. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

Just think what we could do with that money we are paying interest on. Use that for health care, use it for other things. It's just being wasted right now because of the debt we have. (Philadelphia, college educated men)

Yeah, I sort of think we're digging a big ditch that we're not going to get out of here and I think the next generation and even our generation too is going to, its going to cost us. I think its like just writing all these checks like there's no tomorrow and there's an endless supply. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

We also showed participants a television ad about the deficit. In the ad, kids are shown in blue collar jobs working to pay off the debt. When framed in this manner, the issue was more personal and emotional, and took on a values component.

I thought of my seven-year-old and I thought, that's going to be her in 20 or 30 years. Paying off this bill that she didn't create. (Philadelphia, college educated women)

I mean we all talk about who's going to pay that trillion dollar deficit that they've run up and it's not us. We'll be dead before then. It's going to be our kids.

They'll be saddled with it 20 years from now. (Orlando, non-college educated men)

We are trying to depend on our children to clean up our mistakes. We should be trying to make the world better for them instead of them trying to fix our problems. (Phoenix, non-college educated men)

Final Note

While these focus group findings reflect the views of only 50 swing voters, it is clear that dynamics have shifted in the political environment. Democracy Corps is continuing to poll monthly through the election and will examine how these shifts can broadly impact the direction of the 2004 election. Next week we will have a new poll and more to report on the opportunities that lie ahead in the effort to bring change to the country.