

**DEMOCRACY CORPS**  
**JAMES CARVILLE ♦ STANLEY GREENBERG ♦ ROBERT SHRUM**  
**10 G STREET, NE ♦ SUITE 400 ♦ WASHINGTON, DC 20002**  
**202-478-8330 (TEL) ♦ 202-289-8648 (FAX)**  
**WWW.DEMOCRACYCORPS.COM**

**Date:** March 2, 2005

**To:** Friends of Democracy Corps

**From:** Stan Greenberg  
James Carville

**RE: SOCIAL SECURITY**  
**A Time for Democratic Purpose and Renewal**

---

This ought to be the Democrats' moment, as the president's Social Security proposal crashes against the wall of the public's deep doubts. Support for the president's proposal has fallen to 36 percent and perhaps even lower, depending on question wording.<sup>1</sup> Worse for the president, 40 percent of voters strongly oppose his plan, rising to 63 percent among seniors. Congressional Democrats are now winning voters over 45 years by 12 points, according to the NPR survey, after faltering badly among aging voters just 4 months earlier. But Bush's plan is not that popular with younger voters who divide evenly on it.

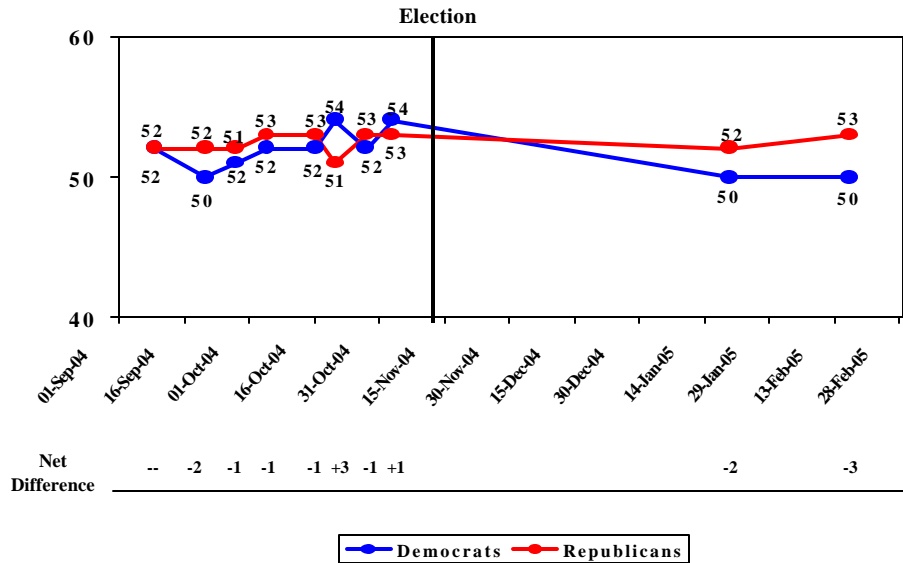
So, we ask progressives to consider, why have the Republicans not crashed and burned? Why has the public not taken out their anger on the Congressional Republicans and the president? We think the answer lies with voters' deeper feelings about the Democrats who appear to lack direction, conviction, values, advocacy or a larger public purpose.

In the latest Democracy Corps poll, the public's esteem for Republicans, including the Republican Congress, moved even further above the Democrats, despite the crash of Bush's signature policy initiative and grave doubts about the wisdom of Iraq and Bush's economic policies. While gaining confidence from the assault on Bush's Social Security plan, Democrats should pause to think about why Republicans are not crashing and how that impacts the Social Security debate in the months ahead.

---

<sup>1</sup> When asked "As you may know, George Bush recently presented his proposal to reform Social Security. Overall, do you favor or oppose his proposal to reform Social Security?" 36 percent of likely voters support the President's proposal (Democracy Corps survey of 1,001 likely voters, conducted February 13-17, 2005). When the question is worded simply as "Do you favor or oppose President Bush' proposed changes to Social Security?" support drops to 30 percent. (NPR Survey of 800 likely voters, conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Public Opinion Strategies, February 15-17, 2005).

### Party Thermometers

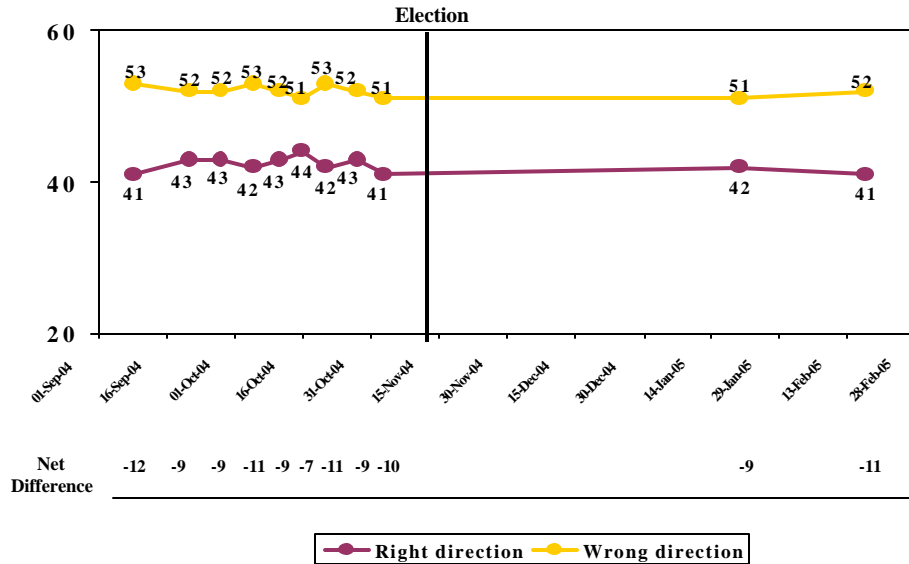


These observations are based on the latest Democracy Corps survey of 1,001 likely voters, conducted February 13-17, 2005. It also draws on the bi-partisan NPR survey and other public polls.

### Two Americas – Uninterrupted

One explanation for the lack of price for failure is the polarized and divided politics that leaves the parties trapped at near parity, regardless of events. There is a remarkable degree of stability in the responses to partisan political actors, leaving the president without a honeymoon following the election, but also without a crash after the Social Security launch.

### Country Direction



In the polls since the first of the year, around 41 percent thought the country was headed in the right direction; last fall, the number stood at around 43 percent. Around 46 percent want to continue Bush’s direction for the country, just 2 points higher than the campaign period last year. Bush’s approval stands at 51 percent, about a point higher than the post-debate period. It is almost as if the election never happened.

But perhaps these judgements seem frozen because the Democrats just have not emerged as a serious alternative on security and safety, values, opportunity and prosperity, or the national interest. That is our starting point in thinking about how to approach this period.

### The State of the Democrats

The Democrats are competitive because the Republicans fall down on so many key values and because the Republicans are making a mess in so many policy areas, from retirement to the environment, jobs and middle class incomes, health care, foreign affairs, homeland security, and military affairs to the deficits. That is daunting, but it is more a critique of the Democrats as an opposition than the Republicans as incumbent power-holders.

In this survey, we gave people a chance to evaluate the Democrats on their own, not in comparison to the Republicans or George Bush. What are the Democrats about?

The good news for the Democrats is that they are no longer struggling to banish the demons of the sixties. Bill Clinton accomplished many important things. Democrats are a plausible national party, not weighed down by grave doubts on liberalism, big spending, and taxes. About 55 percent of the country say these negative characterizations fit the party, but these were much higher in earlier times. Just a bare majority (53 percent) say the party caters too much to minorities and liberal special interests.<sup>2</sup>

The party's central positive identity is built around being for equality (68 percent), protecting personal liberties (61 percent), for families (60 percent) and encouraging people to do better (60 percent). That identity was shaped in the historic role Democrats played in expanding opportunity, equality and personal rights. Any future focus will begin with these shared ideas, even if they have become distorted under attack from the conservatives.

---

<sup>2</sup> In a Harris survey of 1,398 likely voters, conducted March 26-30, 1980, 69 percent of respondents agreed with the following statement: "The trouble with most liberal Democrats is that they think problems can be solved by throwing money at them, and that is wrong." When asked which party was better with dealing with the problem of too much government spending, 80 percent of voters chose the Republican party, while only 20 percent selected the Democrats. (ABC News exit poll of 24,438 voters, conducted November 2, 1982).

<b>Positive Attributes of Democratic Party</b>		
	<b>Describes very well</b>	<b>Total Describes well</b>
<b>For equality</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Protects personal liberties</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>For families</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Respects religious faith</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Encourages people who strive to do better</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Optimistic</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>For the middle class</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>For greater opportunity</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Knows right from wrong</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>For reform and change</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Future-oriented</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Can be trusted to keep America safe</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Shares the moral values of most Americans</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Good for the economy</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Cares about people like you</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Puts the public interest first</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>For greater responsibility</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>On your side</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>For a strong military</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Know what they stand for</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Stands up to the big special interests</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Think long term, not just short term</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Shares your values</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Has new ideas for addressing the country's problems</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>44</b>

We offer this data for progressives to make their own judgements, though we would highlight a number of patterns that underscore the challenge facing Democrats.

- The Democrats should own being for the middle class and opportunity – the ideas at the heart of successful Democratic political projects, from FDR and JFK to Bill Clinton. That just 57 percent say that describes Democrats places a cap on what progressive Democrats can achieve. Opportunity should be as central as equality for modern Democrats.
- Democrats are in opposition, but are seen as only modest advocates for reform and change: 56 percent, including only 20 percent who think it is a very good description.
- On elemental values, Democrats get only a lukewarm nod from the voters: just 56 percent think they know right from wrong; 51 percent

that they share the moral values of most Americans; and a meager 47 percent that they share your values. Just 48 percent associate the Democrats with the phrase, “for greater responsibility.”

- Democrats have failed as advocates, battlers for the average citizen: only 51 percent say the party cares about people like you, falling to 48 percent for on your side and just 47 percent for willing to stand up to the big special interests.
- The Democrats pass the threshold on security and national defense but only if it is a very low threshold: 53 percent agree that the Democrats can be trusted to keep America safe; just 47 percent say the Democrats are for a strong military.
- After the Clinton boom and Bush bust, just 51 percent see the Democrats as good for the economy. What is the legacy and ideas Democrats bring to the economy? What approach did John Kerry bring? The public is obviously unschooled.
- The Democrats do not have a special standing on the public and national interest: a bare 50 percent says the Democrats put the public interest first, falling to 47 percent for thinking long-term.
- Less than half the country, 47 percent, says it knows what the Democrats stand for.
- At the bottom of the list is a problem that may be at the heart of the Social Security debate: just 44 percent say the Democrats have new ideas for addressing the country’s problems. It is not hard to imagine why voters would come away from the last two presidential contests or from the Democrats’ posture in opposition with any other conclusion.

What matters the most for Democrats depends on what you are trying to produce – a higher assessment of the Democrats or a better result against the Republicans, congressionally and presidentially.

We looked first at the level of esteem for Democrats, using a regression exercise. What mattered most were attributes related to security and safety, then values, being future-oriented, having convictions and ideas, are being for families and equality.

<b>Predicting Feelings about Democratic Party</b>	
<b>Variance Explained = 59.5</b>	
<i>Party Attributes</i>	<i>Standardized Betas</i>
For a strong military	.119
Weak	.084
Can be trusted to keep America safe	.084
Shares your values	.071
Think long term, not just short term/ Future-oriented	.062
For families	.060
Know what they stand for	.059
Big spenders	.054
Not strong enough on security and defense issues	-.050
For equality	.052

The world looked very different when trying to assess what mattered most in how people voted for Congress. Then, values were much more important, with security issues losing significance. Most important were “shares your values,” along with “for greater responsibility” and “sharing the moral values of most Americans” and “knowing right from wrong.” Also important were protecting personal liberties, having ideas, concerns about spending and catering to liberal interests, as well as being on your side.

<b>Predicting Congressional Vote</b> <i>% Correctly Predicted = 95.0</i>	
<i>Party Attributes</i>	<i>Standardized Beta</i>
Shares your values	2.406
Protects personal liberties	2.030
For greater responsibility	1.866
Shares the moral values of most Americans/ Knows right from wrong	1.710
Has new ideas for addressing the country's problems	-1.486
Big spenders	1.210
Cares about people like you/On your side	-1.138
Caters too much to minorities and liberal special interests	1.068

When we try to predict the vote for president – such as the contest between Kerry and Bush – the values and security attributes emerge as equally important. Whatever the context, there is no escaping the importance of convictions, values and how parties and politicians act for the public and national interest.

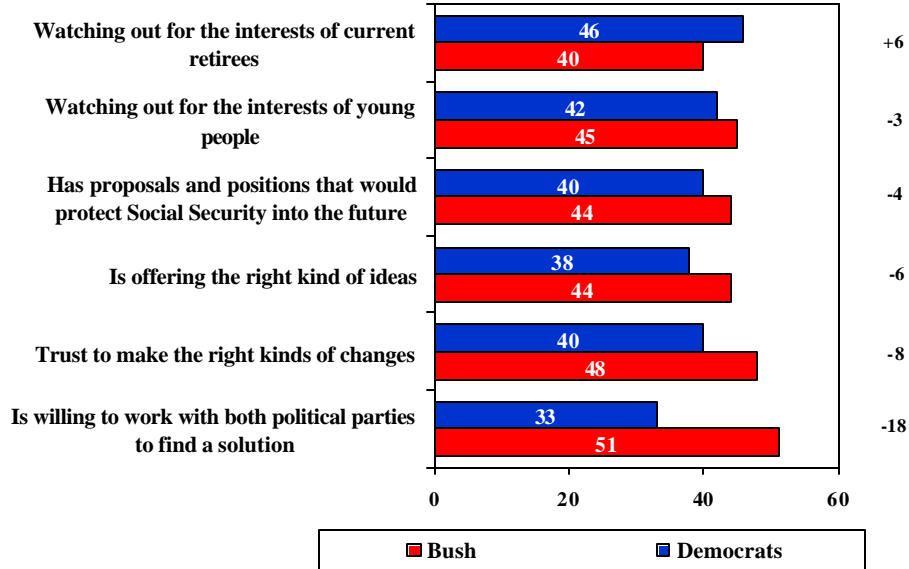
<b>Predicting Presidential Vote</b> <i>% Correctly Predicted = 92.9</i>	
<i>Party Attributes</i>	<i>Standardized Beta</i>
Shares your values	1.882
For a strong military	1.470
Not strong enough on security and defense issues	1.218
Respects religious faith	1.041
Too liberal	1.026
Weak	.946

### **Public Learning from the Social Security Battle**

Some will focus on the faltering support for Bush’s Social Security proposal, but we are more struck by his survival as somebody who at least has a purpose and ideas, even if wrong-headed. In the bi-partisan poll for NPR, the Democrats bested Bush on only one Social Security related item, watching out for the interest of current retirees, though only by 6 points (46 to 40 percent). The president prevailed on all other comparisons, including offering the right kind of ideas and trust to make the right kind of changes.

**Trust on Social Security Issues: Bush vs. Democrats**

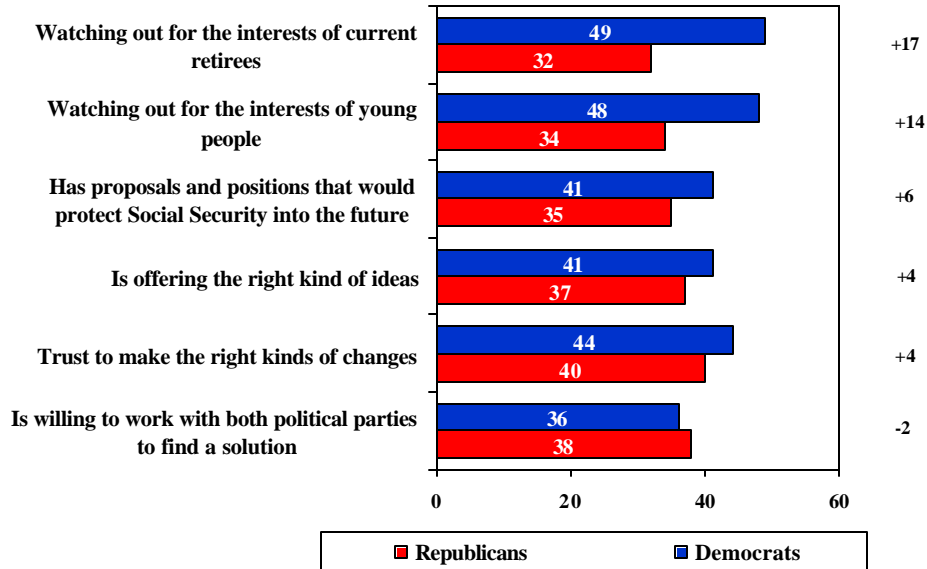
NPR Survey



Importantly, the same was not true for the Republicans as a whole, who suffer by the same set of comparisons. Democrats prevail strongly on watching out for the interests of current retirees and young people. The Democrats prevail on protecting Social Security and on the right kinds of ideas and changes, but only by about 5 points. There is a strong case for Democrats to turn their fire on the Republicans, instead of the president, but their fire would be more powerful if rooted in a definitive direction and convictions.

### Trust on Social Security Issues: Republicans vs. Democrats

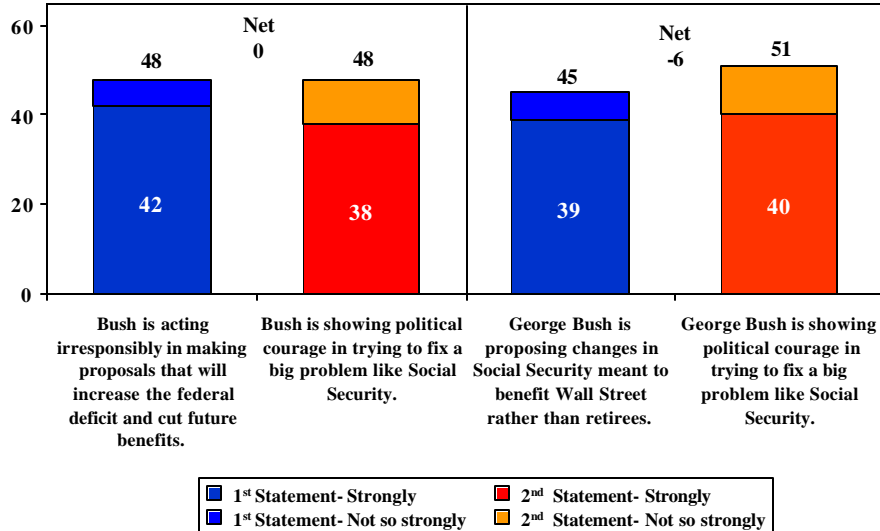
NPR Survey



But bottom line, Republicans are winning the battle of seriousness, even as they lose the specifics of the Social Security battle: 46 percent say it is Bush and the Republicans who are “being serious about how to address the Social Security challenges, compared to only 41 percent who say the Democrats.

When we joined various Democratic positions against a president who was showing the courage to address the nation’s problems, we did no better than a draw. The Democrats are disadvantaged because their arguments are stripped bare, without the motivation that will give them added strength. Democrats are surely right to wage nuclear war on Bush’s proposal, but do voters understand that they go into battle armed with convictions, ideas and a commitment to the public interest?

**Bush: Showing Political Courage vs. Acting Irresponsibly**



*“Now I’m going to read you some pairs of statements. As I read each pair, please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right.”*

**Elevating the Social Security Battle**

The Democrats have wreaked more political damage because they have been conflicted on the problem, change, and ideas.

We appreciate that the Democrats had to win this first battle in order to keep the worst from happening, to be united, and to put the Republicans deep on the defensive. It is because of those successes that the Republicans are struggling to keep their first legislative priority alive, which will ultimately impact the mood about this Congress. The strongest attacks on their plan include the 40 percent cut in Social Security benefits, the 2 trillion dollar increase in the deficit whose cost is borne by the younger generation, the freezing of Social Security benefit levels, covering a smaller and smaller portion of retirement, and that the plan actually does not make Social Security more secure.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, we are winning the current message battle. In the NPR survey, the best argument for Bush’s proposed changes loses to our attack on the plan by 12 points, 53 to 41 percent.

<sup>3</sup>The best attacks on the Bush plan are presented in the appendix.

<b>The Social Security Debate</b>	
	<b>% Favor</b>
<p><b>Democrats say we should make changes in Social Security to guarantee its long term security, but the Republicans are greatly exaggerating the problem to make sweeping changes that endanger the program. Democrats say the President’s plan adds two trillion dollars to the deficit and continues to spend down the Social Security Trust Fund. Their plan would cut benefits for future retirees by up to forty percent and helps Wall Street more than seniors. Democrats recognize the shortfall that will emerge in forty years, but believe we should act carefully, and create a bi-partisan commission, to make the right kind of changes to continue Social Security’s guaranteed benefits for future retirees.</b></p>	<b>53</b>
<p><b>Republicans say that voluntary personal accounts are a good idea because it is voluntary and will allow younger workers to earn more for their retirement while saving Social Security for future generations. Republicans say that people currently on Social Security or about to go on Social Security will not be affected at all. They say that if no changes to the program are made, the Social Security system will either have to significantly cut benefits or significantly raise taxes on workers. Republicans say Democrats have no plan to save Social Security, and that Democrats are wrong to say that there is no problem with Social Security.</b></p>	<b>41</b>

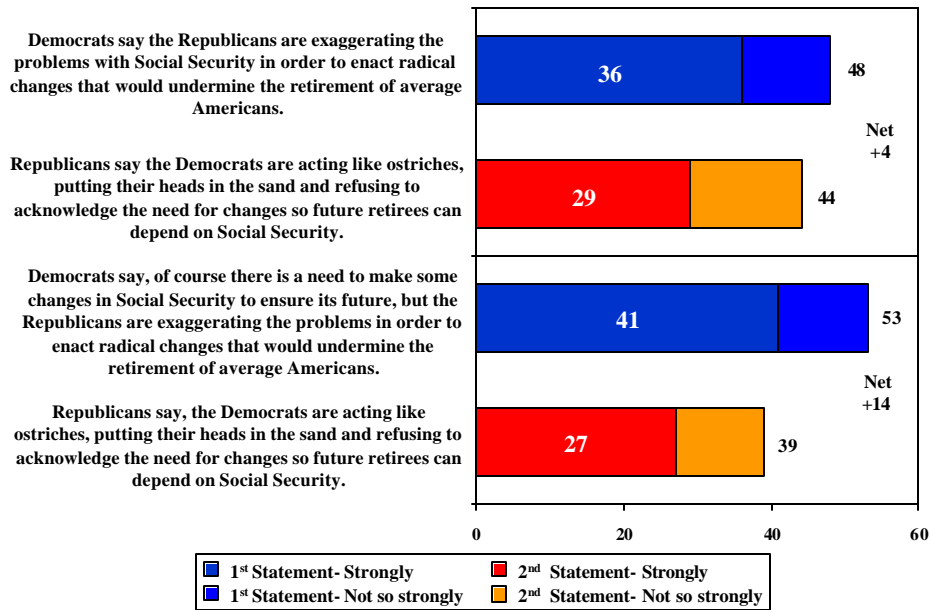
But the Democrats limit the damage to the Republicans and limit their opportunities for gain by constraining the attack. Total war means more than attacking the worst features of the Bush plan. It means viewing this battle as an opportunity to show what we believe.

*The problem.* Democrats have hesitated to say there is a problem with Social Security, despite the fact that 63 percent of the country says the program is in crisis or faces a major problem. Only a lonely one in ten voters thinks we are fixing a problem that is a half century away. To say there is no problem, simply puts the Democrats out of the conversation for the great majority of the country that want political leaders to secure this very important government retirement program. Voters are looking for reform, change and new ideas, but Democrats seem stuck in concrete.

Of course, the Republicans are exaggerating for their own ideological purpose. That said, there are a range of problems related to retirement, from Social Security to pensions, savings, costly prescription drugs and Medicare. It does not follow that acknowledging “a problem” leads logically to privatization and private savings accounts. Indeed, it could lead to higher taxes on the wealthy, new savings opportunities, regulations to ensure pensions, and new measures to limit health care costs.

In a partisan debate focused on “the problem,” Democrats gain only a 4-point advantage when they say simply that Republicans are exaggerating the problem, while Republicans accuse them of acting like ostriches. However, when the Democrats say, “of course there is a need to make some changes in Social Security to ensure its future, but the Republicans are exaggerating in order to ...,” the Democrats win the change debate by 14 points (53 to 39 percent).

### Acknowledging the Social Security Problem



The Democrats new standing is not just about the efficacy of the right language. It is about being a party that wants to bring change and do the right thing to secure retirement for generations of retirees.

**Ideas and plans.** The public does not think the Democrats have any particular ideas around retirement. In the NPR poll, they lose to the president by 6 points on having ideas and defeat the Republicans by only 4 points. A majority of the country rejects the idea that the Democrats are trying to stop Bush’s plan because they have a “better way to make Social Security secure.”<sup>4</sup>

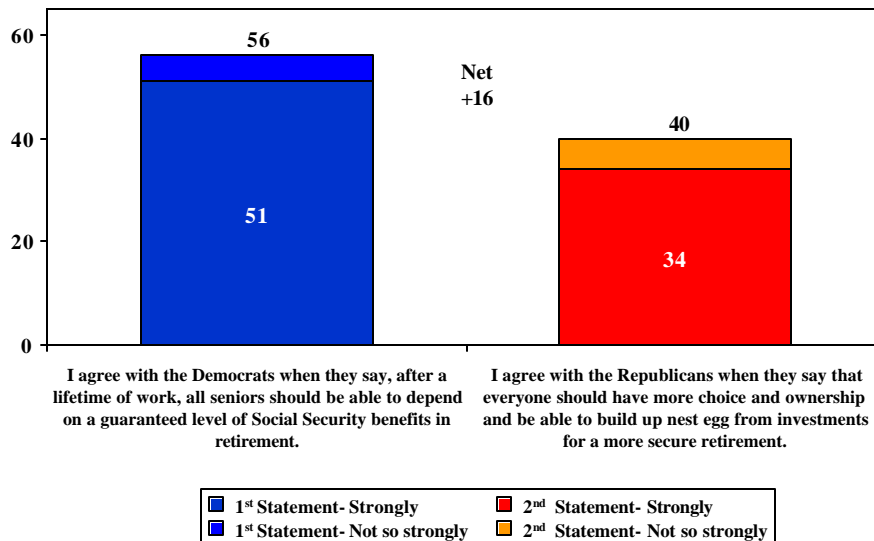
<sup>4</sup>When asked to choose between the following two statements: “The Democrats are opposing Bush’s Social Security plan because they have a better way to make Social Security more secure” OR “The Democrats are opposing Bush’s Social Security plan just to stop Bush and the Republicans,” 50 percent of voters side with the Republican argument that the Democrats are opposing the plan for partisan purposes, while only 42 percent believe Democrats are opposing it because they have a better plan (Democracy Corps survey).

In the very short term, Democrats should not go beyond a bi-partisan commission as in 1983 and principles, but Democrats can advance a range of policy options that change the terms of debate – not making Bush’s upper-income tax cuts permanent, new savings and investment accounts, and a program to limit drug prices. We think Democrats should relish the idea of how to create a more secure living for retired Americans.

**Principles.** The failure to cause more damage may also lie in the area of principles, more than ideas and plans. In the same Democracy Corps poll, 58 percent of Americans were quite ready to believe that Democrats were trying to stop Bush and the Republicans because “they think his plan will make Social Security less secure.” In the context of principle, just 37 percent thought they were just being obstructionist.

The Democrats should elevate the battle by stating the principles that divide Republicans and Democrats on this issue. As a debate of principles, the Democrats slaughter their opponents, with 51 percent strongly aligning with the Democrats. Republicans confidently give voice to ideas of choice and ownership, but Democrats should speak with even greater confidence that people, after a life time of work, should be able to depend on a guaranteed level of benefits. After all, this is a battle about values and convictions. It should be joined in those terms.

**Elevating the Social Security Battle**  
Democratic vs. Republican Principles



*“Now I’m going to read you some pairs of statements. As I read each pair, please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right.”*

**Toward a Democratic Narrative**

As one joins the Social Security battle – or the budget battle or tax reform battle, for that matter – Democrats should have a dominant narrative. What is this all about? What principles and goals to Democrats carry from one battlefield to the next? What is the war about?

To guide that discussion, we advanced some examples of narrative to facilitate the ongoing discussion. These are set out below, recognizing that each can be developed to gain greater strength and relevance. As a start, it is worth noting that 60 percent say they are more likely to support the Democrats after hearing each of these. In a couple of cases, a near majority says they are “much more likely” to support them.

<b>Democratic Vision Statements</b>		
	<b>Much more likely</b>	<b>Much/smwt more likely</b>
<b>The Democrats say America is only strong when we are strong at home, as well as in the world. We must invest in our own people to expand opportunity and build our own economy. Promoting American jobs, industry and technology is our starting point and mission in building a strong America.</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>The Democrats say, we need to work to create a 100-percent America, where everyone has a chance for a better life, not just the privileged few. An opportunity for education, to care for their families, affordable health care, and a secure retirement. America should be admired because we built a 100-percent country at home.</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>The Democrats say we are desperate for leaders who act responsibly, speak honestly with the people and put the public interest first. We should stop giving tax cuts to those who need it least, while running big deficits for important problems but then passing the on the bills to future generations. Leaders should be stewards for the country.</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Democrats say ordinary citizens are pushed aside by the powerful interests who rule in Washington and in the corporate boardrooms. We need change and reform in Washington and Wall Street, so people get heard, their needs and the public interest put first when we address the budget deficits, the environment, health care, Social Security and other national challenges.</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>The Democrats main mission is to strengthen and defend the middle class, whose incomes have stagnated in this economy and who are low priority for the current government. But a strong middle class means a strong America.</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>The Democrats believe in building an America strong at home and strong in the world. As with Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy, we see America as an ideal with unbounded opportunity and freedom, admired in the world. An America that is militarily strong and engaged in the world to expand the climate for freedom.</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>60</b>

The strongest messages center on investing and building up America, creating a 100-percent opportunity country, and responsibility and stewardship. The second tier of

messages center on reform, middle class, and military security. Let the debate begin so that we join all these battles, advancing a narrative that raises confidence in Democrats. With that backdrop, we suspect the Republicans will pay a much heavier price for their failings.

Appendix

<b>Democratic Attacks on Bush Proposal</b>		
	<b>Very Serious Doubts</b>	<b>Total Serious Doubts</b>
<b>His plan will require a 40 percent cut in Social Security benefits.</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>His plan would increase the deficit by 2 trillion dollars.</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>His plan borrows 2 trillion dollars to fund private investment accounts for young workers, yet it is young people who will get stuck with the cost of today's deficits.</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Today, two-thirds of retirees depend on Social Security for half their income. Under the Bush plan, Social Security benefits would be frozen at today's level and would cover less and less of people's retirement.</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>While the president's plan allows young workers to invest a portion of their Social Security payments in stocks, the government decides which stocks they will be allowed to invest in.</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>His plan to create private investment accounts does nothing to make Social Security more financially sound and actually will require a 2 trillion dollar increase in the deficit.</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Because of Social Security, only 10 percent of seniors live in poverty today, but under the Bush plan, as many as 25 percent of seniors would fall into poverty.</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>His plan diverts billions of dollars from the Social Security trust fund to pay Wall Street firms to service the new accounts, which will reduce Social Security benefits for seniors.</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>The Social Security reforms will leave Social Security benefits to the ups and downs of the stock market.</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>The president's plan changes the Social Security formula so future retirement benefits no longer rise with increasing wages in the country, which would mean a 40 percent cut in benefits in the future.</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Today, Social Security's guaranteed benefit is critical for the nearly 60 percent of seniors who are women, who would suffer in any plan that cuts benefits and subjects benefits to the stock market.</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>His plan will cut the benefits of all future retirees, even those who decide not to invest their Social Security payments in private accounts.</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>The plan will mean cuts in payments to disabled workers and orphaned children whose parents paid into the Social Security system during their work years.</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>According to the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office, people could expect higher benefits from the current Social Security system than from a privatized system.</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>49</b>