

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

**Date:** January 31, 2006

**To:** Friends of Democracy Corps

**From:** Stan Greenberg  
James Carville

**RE: CORRUPTION AT THE CENTER OF THE CASE FOR CHANGE**  
**Notes on the State of the Union based on Democracy Corps' Latest Survey**

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The president has devoted the last two months and the lead up to the State of the Union defending the Iraq war and criticizing his critics as weak-kneed in the face of terrorism. The result is a very modest gain on approval – from 42 to 44 percent in our likely-voter surveys and 38 to 42 percent last week in the average of the public polls. That is paralleled by some increase in voter reluctance to give up on Iraq too soon. But President Bush is battling on many fronts, without effect, against deep doubts about his direction, his leadership, Republican priorities, Iraq and the economy, and now about corruption.<sup>1</sup>

The danger for the Republicans is that corruption integrates all of these doubts and makes them matter to people's lives. The lobbyists got their way on an energy bill that gave oil companies more subsidies while doing nothing about high gas prices and home heating; a prescription drug bill that helped the drug companies but gave seniors higher prices and confused plans; and in Iraq, no-bid contracts for Halliburton, fined millions for overcharging the military, costing billions in wasted spending. The Republicans are at the center of a lobbying scandal in Washington that has hurt average Americans.

The widening corruption scandal is the real-time news reality that enables Democrats to establish that they are on the side of the people, to express themselves as the agents of reform and change, and to educate the public on the personal consequences of the Republican lobbying scandal.

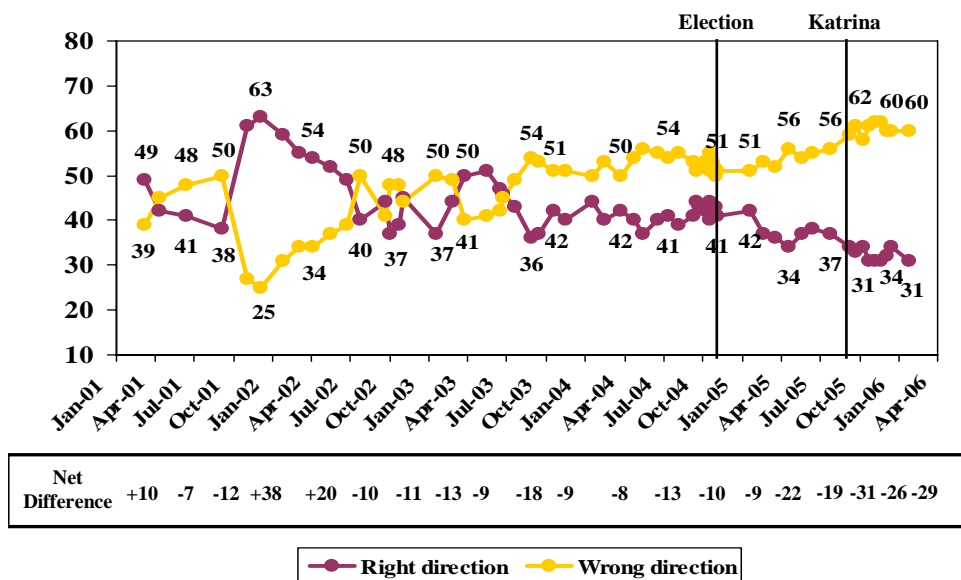
The president and the Republicans are beginning to panic because they are chipping away at elements of the structure for change but have not really touched the bigger structure, which is

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<sup>1</sup> This memo is based on the latest Democracy Corps survey of 1,005 likely voters, conducted January 22-25, 2006. The margin of error was +/- 3.1%.

complex and strong and now, long-standing. They must do something very big to escape the political limits of the current structures. Right now, the Democrats enjoy a very stable 8-point lead in the generic congressional battles – and a stable lead in the Senate and House contests (using incumbent names) – that has not changed since September of last year – for the last five months.<sup>2</sup> The country seems locked into a 10-point swing away from the votes cast for Congress in the last presidential election.

### Demand for new direction remains high



That lead is built on the following elements, which have not been dented by events or by the president’s more concerted efforts over the past two months:

- Just 31 percent say the country is headed in the right direction, the lowest level for years, with 60 percent wanting a new direction. This bottom line conclusion about the country is affirmed in multiple polls this week and says volumes about this period.
- Just 38 percent want to continue Bush’s direction for the country – almost at the low point on that indicator. The 56 percent who want to go in a “significantly dif-

<sup>2</sup> The Democratic advantage in the generic congressional vote has been stable since July. In the vote for Senate, with the actual candidates named, the Democrats hold a 15-point advantage, and in a congressional contest where the candidates are named, the Democratic lead is 4.5 points, which is well within range of the average over the past five months.

ferent direction” is down from the 60 percent at Bush’s worst moment in November.

- The polarization of the country is deeply imbalanced against the president. The percent who strongly disapprove (42 percent) far exceeds the number who strongly approve (27 percent). Dangerous for the president, there has been no rise in the number of strong supporters over the last six months, leaving the Republicans with a contracted base – their lifeline since the Bush presidency. There are just significantly fewer enthusiastic supporters.
- Personal regard for the president has not improved in the most recent period, and indeed it has fallen on our thermometer score. The number of people who feel strongly attached to the president has not risen.
- On all comparisons, the president does worse than his party by about 5 points on being “on your side” and “shares your values.”
- Feelings about the Republican Congress have fallen to their lowest level.
- Independents break overwhelmingly against the Republicans and the direction of Congress: only 16 percent want to continue the direction of Congress. The Republicans are at risk of ceding the center ground – which has become hostile to them over the last six months.

***Whether the Democrats realize these big gains will depend in part on whether Democrats lead the change – become the voice of the public’s frustration; emerge as champions of the ordinary voters, outsiders and reformers prepared to change a corrupt Washington that works for the corporate special interests, not the people.***

Despite recent important Democratic moves on reform, there is no evidence that the Democrats are seen to have taken up this battle position. The public has gotten there ahead of their leaders. The overall image of the Democrats has not improved, mostly split between positive and negative assessments. They are not seen more favorably than the Republicans. On key attributes, the voters prefer the Democrats, particularly on “reform and change” and on “putting the public interest first.” The Democrats have no advantage on “shares your values” and only a modest one on being “on your side.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the six-month period of deepening problems for the Republicans, the Democrats have not improved on these attribute comparisons.

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<sup>3</sup> In the regression model, the most important attributes to shift to impact the vote are “shares your values” and “putting the public interest first.” The Democrats are doing okay on the latter, but only even on the former.

### **Iraq Interlude**

In the context of the Iraq elections, the president has not persuaded the public to love the war, but he has made some marginal gains on whether there is a chance of success and of increased security. He has bought himself a little time, but not if the situation on the ground fails to support the narrative. There is no change in the overall feelings toward the war and a large majority of 57 percent who think it was not worth it.

The president has managed to push up since October the percent who believe the war has made us more secure, up from 41 to 44 percent, though half the country still thinks the war has made us less secure. He has managed to keep the country split on the question of whether we should begin to reduce the troops or keep them there until the country is stable.

These are marginal gains in a very negative environment, with the public polls giving the president an average approval rating of less than 40 percent on handling Iraq.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Corruption and Reform**

Voters almost universally believe the level of corruption in Washington is a serious problem – with 44 percent saying it is a “very serious problem.” On the Abramoff scandal, there has been a dramatic increase in the number saying they are very or somewhat concerned – from 35 to 63 percent in just the last month.

While many more see this as a Republican scandal than a Democratic one (39 to 18 percent), a larger bloc, particularly among the independents, sees this as involving both parties.<sup>5</sup> The Democrats are not seen as more ethical than the Republicans. While the Democrats have a double-digit lead on “reform and change,” only 33 percent say they are “fighting corruption in Washington.”

This is a powerful opportunity to join the real time battle as the voice of the public and public interest, critics of the lobbyist influence, champions of bold reform, and story tellers about Washington – the place where corporate lobbyists win out over the people on things that matter to people’s lives.

What bothers people the most about corruption is not the fouling of the process, but the impact on real things – energy prices, the Iraq war and Medicare reform. Those are “facts” that upset people the most and, as we shall see below, the consequences that make the scandal real, and indeed, Republican.

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<sup>4</sup> Public poll average for January on Bush’s approval on Iraq was 39 percent.

<sup>5</sup> Among independents, 44 percent see both parties responsible for the corruption in Washington, 14 points above voters overall.

## Corruption at the Center of the Case for Change

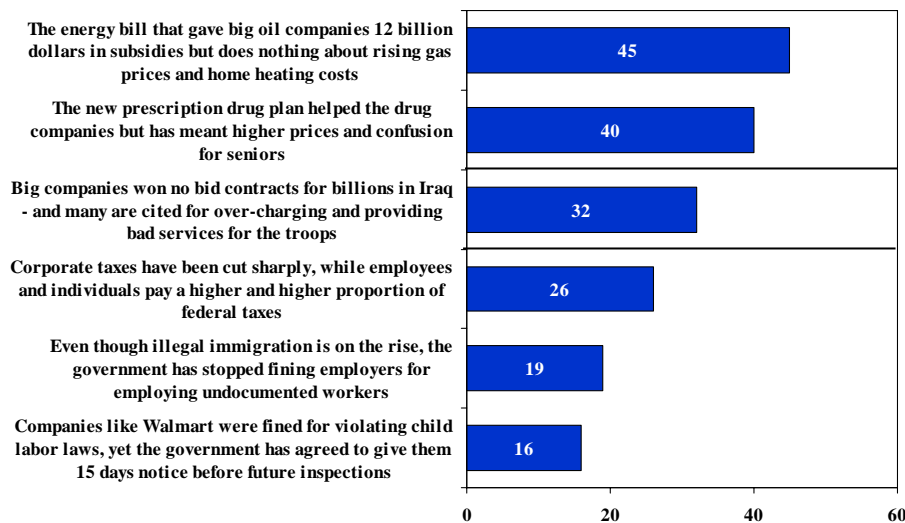
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Let's start with the facts. Nothing bothers people as much as the energy industry using its influence to get a favorable energy bill that does nothing about energy prices and home heating costs. That is followed by Halliburton's no-bid and special-interest deals in Iraq, which hurt the troops and overran the costs, as well as the top Medicare administrator taking a job with the drug companies after creating the prescription drug mess for seniors.

<b>Evidence of Corruption</b> <i>How upset does that make you?</i>		
	<b>Extremely Upset</b>	<b>Extremely/Very Upset</b>
<b>Even after they earned record profits last year, the oil industry used their influence in Washington to get an energy bill that gives them 12 billion dollars in subsidies but does nothing to lower gas prices or home heating costs</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Halliburton, the former company of Vice President Cheney got 10 billions of dollars worth of no-bid contracts, and they have since been fined 2 million for overcharging the government and are suspected of costing the government an additional 1.4 billion in wasteful spending.</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>The top Medicare Administrator Tom Scully negotiated to get a lobbying job with the drug companies, even as he helped draft the new prescription drug bill, which helped the companies more than seniors.</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>66</b>

The same three issues rise to the top when we ask people to choose which consequence matters the most to them, and again, they focus on energy, Iraq, and prescription drugs.

### Issue impact of corruption and lobbyist influence



*“In the last year, there have been many stories about corruption and lobbyists in Washington. I’m going to read you a list of things that may have happened because of lobbyist influence. Please tell me which TWO bother you the most.”*

The corruption scandal is all about energy, Iraq, and the prescription drug mess – the dominant issues for the public. The scandal is an integrating and a powerful statement linking cause and effect. It enables Democrats to speak for the people, from outside, and explain the consequences of the Republicans’ ascendancy in Washington.

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The Democrats, particularly those outside the Congress itself and outside the Beltway, have the opportunity to champion the boldest possible reforms. That gives them legitimacy to be heard on their main message – corporate lobbyists dominate Washington, hurting the people on energy, Iraq and prescription drugs. Support for bold reforms makes one relevant in this unfolding scandal and gives groups, spokespeople and challenger candidates the legitimacy to demand accountability from Washington, which has hurt people.

The strongest reforms for the public include the following:

***Block any pay raises in a year the government runs a deficit.<sup>6</sup>***

***Ban members of Congress and their staff from taking any privately funded trips.***

***Limit how much money candidates can spend in their own campaigns, to limit special interest influence.***

***Create an independent, bi-partisan ethics committee to enforce rules on abuse by members.***

***Ban members and their staff from receiving any gifts, including free meals, from lobbyists.***

***Make it illegal for former members of Congress or staff to join a lobbying firm until they have been out of Congress for 10 years (or 2 years<sup>7</sup>).***

***Require disclosure of all meetings by lobbyists with members of Congress and staff, and the issues they discussed.***

All Democrats will want to join this battle – underscoring what happened on energy, in Iraq reconstruction and with prescription drugs as a consequence of lobbyists running out of control. Challenger candidates, however, are in a unique position to take up the banner of reform, joined by the progressive and grassroots groups across the country. They have the chance to greatly sharpen the critique and narrative, and to put Democrats on the side of people, against the lobbyists who hurt the public.

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<sup>6</sup> Support for these proposals ranged from 37 to 51 percent much more likely to support, with over two thirds of voters supporting each overall.

<sup>7</sup> Half of the survey sample was read a 10-year ban, and the other half was read a 2-year ban, with comparable results.