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To: Friends of Democracy Corps
From: Stan Greenberg
James Carville

RE: FROM UNDERPERFORMING TO OVERPERFORMING Notes for challengers based on the latest Democracy Corps survey

With nearly two-thirds believing the country is headed in the wrong direction and growing dissatisfaction with President Bush and the Republican Congress, we are on the verge of a change election that can produce major Democratic gains. Indeed, this new national Democracy Corps survey suggests that voters are prepared for an upheaval and change of party control, if the challengers define this election, run as outsiders and show voters where they would take the country. Right now, Democrats are underperforming, but voters are listening and receptive to them, and ready to respond to an effective campaign.¹

That any Democrat in the U.S. Senate is considering voting for the repeal of the “estate tax” – an over 700 billion dollar tax cut for the wealthiest one percent – helps explain why Democrats are underperforming. That leaves voters unsure about what Democrats stand for and undermines the main choice in this election.

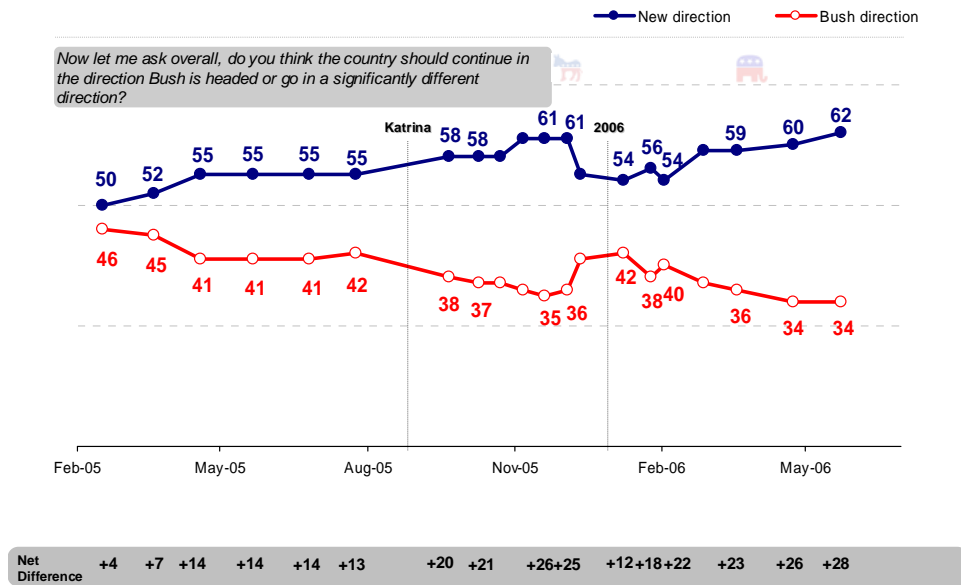
Democracy Corps conducted this special expanded survey as a kind of manual for running the tough campaign that can make the most of the current mood.

As a starting point, challengers must continue to nationalize the elections around Bush and whether to continue Bush’s direction. That is where the desire for change is growing the most: the percentage who *strongly* support going in a

¹ This memo is based on the findings of the latest Democracy Corps survey of 1,200 likely voters, conducted May 18-24, 2006.

significantly different direction rather than continuing Bush's has risen to 55 percent, the highest level ever in our polling. Clearly, the public is losing confidence in Bush on every indicator with just 38 percent now viewing him favorably on a personal level and only 21 percent strongly approving of his performance in office, both new lows.

Continue Bush or New Direction



Disillusionment with Bush has grown so strong that our tests show that a Democrat who runs against *Bush and the Republicans* performs better than one who runs only against the Republican incumbent. Negative views of Bush now substantially exceed both those of his party and the Republican Congress. The Democratic overall message against the Republican incumbent does better when addressed to the president first.

Democrats have a strong and consistent lead in both the “real” Congressional vote and Senate races.² In our latest survey, Democrats enjoy an 8-point advantage in the “real” vote for Congress and have led by an average of 9 points over the past three months. In the race for Senate, the Democrats hold an 11-point edge in the “real” Senate vote over the past three months and even more impressively, lead by 10 points in races with vulnerable Republican incumbents.

These advantages are impressive, but they are not big enough for Democrats to recapture the House or Senate. The Democrat’s current advantage in the “real” vote for Congress is still a

² Democracy Corps uses the actual name of each party’s most likely candidate in both our Congressional and Senate vote questions. For cases in which a party’s most likely candidate could not be determined, a generic candidate (“the Democratic candidate” or “the Republican candidate”) was inserted.

couple points short of the swing needed to match 1994 and what the data says is possible for the party to achieve. On virtually every test of message and policy direction in this survey, the Democratic advantage is twice that of the current vote margin. The voters want to give the Democrats a bigger margin than they are currently achieving. If the challenger campaigns are effective, they can catch this wave.

If the Democrats and challengers fail to show voters something more, this disillusionment could show itself in fragmentation to smaller parties and more likely, a stay-at-home protest. The current measures of potential Democratic turnout and enthusiasm are not impressive. And while it is likely that a low turnout election will hurt Republicans more than Democrats, a stay-away protest vote could also cut into the margin Democrats might have achieved.

There has been no improvement in feelings about the Democrats in this change environment; in fact positive views of the party have actually declined over the past few months, with negative assessments slightly higher than positive ones.

The challengers need to take charge to maximize their change vote, which includes the following mutually re-enforcing actions:

- Pose a clear choice in the election: continue Bush's direction or an America that works for everyone. In the context of your challenge race, this is the framework that tested strongest in our prior surveys.

***A vote for (Chris Shays) is a vote to continue Bush's direction.
I'll vote to bring a new direction – an America that works for everyone.***

- Nationalize the election around Bush.
- Challenge the current course in Washington as an outsider seeking change.
- Whether by contrast or by affirmative actions, show your agenda for America – on energy, health care prices, American jobs and congressional pay raises.
- Address Iraq and the economy: where voters most want change and where our contrast is the strongest.
- Advance strong and clear positions on the Republicans' wedge issues, including security and Iraq and immigration.
- Consider some wedge issues, such as stem cell research, that fracture the Republicans.
- Mobilize base groups and consolidate gains with seniors and independent voters.

Critique, Agenda and Message Contrast

Democratic challengers can strengthen their position when running against Bush and the Republican Congress – above all, their lack of attention to making America strong at home, their corrupt ties to special interests, their working mainly for the big corporations, and their responsibility for the deficits. These were the strongest doubts in this survey and add up to the indictment: failing to build an America that works for everyone.

But it is not enough to articulate this critique. Challengers have the opportunity to cast themselves as a refreshing alternative. Those who wish to change the current status quo favored by Bush and the Republicans in Washington should offer clear alternatives on energy, American jobs, drug prices and Congressional pay raises. These issues can be unveiled on their own or in contrast with the approach of Bush and the Republicans.

- *Bush and the Republican Congress wrote a Medicare bill that will create record profits for drug companies but bars Medicare from negotiating lower drug prices for seniors. I will back a plan that works for seniors instead of drug companies, and require Medicare to negotiate lower prices.*
- *Despite gas companies earning record profits last year, Bush and the Republican Congress rewarded them with an energy bill that gave them over 7 billion dollars in tax payer funded handouts. I will vastly increase investment in alternative energy sources to cut our dependence on foreign oil and the oil companies.*
- *While the wages and salaries of average Americans have been stuck for five years, the Republicans in Congress have voted themselves pay raises every year. I will refuse any pay raises until the wages of average Americans begin to rise again.*

In our prior research, we identified seven issues that could become a powerful agenda for America, three of the strongest of which are highlighted above: Medicare negotiating lower drug prices, alternative energy, and opposing Congressional pay raises. The other strong policy options included: repealing the tax loopholes that encourage companies to send jobs overseas, raising the minimum wage to \$7 an hour, making college tuition tax deductible and implementing all the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission and inspecting 100 percent of the containers coming into America.

When we contrast this overall framework and policy agenda with the message, attacks and agenda of the Republicans, the Democratic candidate wins by 18 points, twice the size of the party's lead in the congressional vote. Among independents, the Democratic advantage in this debate grows to 35 points, over three times the edge they give Democrats in the vote for Congress. That strongly suggests that challengers can greatly improve their standing with the right campaign.

Contrasting Messages and Agenda

<i>Which of those statements come closer to your own view, the Democratic statement or the Republican statement?</i>	Total prefer
<i>The Democrat says, we need a change of direction in Washington. President Bush and the Republicans in Washington are too tied to special interests to make progress on the issues that affect average Americans. President Bush and the Republicans are accomplishing nothing, but I will work to expand the research and development of alternative energy sources to reduce our dependence on foreign oil, reform the new prescription drug plan so that Medicare can negotiate lower drug prices for seniors and I will vote against any Congressional pay raise until the budget is balanced.</i>	56
OR	
<i>The Republican says, Democrats will move our country backward. They support tax hikes that would increase the burden on middle class Americans and small businesses and favor more government spending that will increase the deficit. Their liberal policies on abortion and gay marriage are out of touch with American values and they would make our country less secure by making it harder for our intelligence agencies to hunt down terrorists within the U.S. Republicans will fight to keep taxes low, reduce the deficit and keep America safe from terrorism.</i>	38

Key Issue Battleground: Iraq and the Economy

The two dominant issues for voters who want change are Iraq and the economy. We have the opportunity to get both right and multiply the power of the change message.

Iraq. The Iraq war remains the biggest doubt about Bush and the Republicans and the largest contributor to the public’s mood for change. We know from another national survey conducted for MoveOn.org that the more the war is debated, the weaker the standing is of the Republican incumbent.³ The Democratic margin grows stronger after an extended debate on Iraq.

³ Survey for MoveOn.org of 1,000 likely voters in 68 Congressional districts defined as swing, was conducted April 11-19, 2006.

With 60 percent believing that it was not worth the cost and a strong majority feeling that it has actually made us less secure, the war is driving the desire for change and the frustration with Bush and the Republicans in Congress.⁴ Voters are actually divided on what are the next steps and whether troops should be withdrawn, but they are clearly angry at Bush for the choices he made and for America having such limited choices now.

The MoveOn.org survey shows that a challenger who is clear in his or her position runs better than one who is vague; the clear candidate gains on leadership qualities and seems like less of a politician. This challenger in the survey favored a re-deployment of U.S. forces within one year. We also found broad, though less intense support for a candidate who favored a re-deployment by the end of 2007. (In the section below, we will note how to undercut the Republican attacks, including not supporting any precipitous withdrawal.)

It is important to note that voters supporting a Democratic candidate for Congress are mainly motivated by the Iraq war. It is an important issue impacting turnout in the 2006 elections.

Whatever policy position candidates choose to take, it is important that the candidates critique the choices Bush and the Republicans have made – including no-bid contracts for Halliburton instead of body armor for the troops – the strongest critique tested in this survey.

The economy. We want a debate on the economy. Republicans are already arguing that their tax cuts have produced a strong economy. They have no choice but to make this case, as it is the only area where there is a plausible narrative for progress. But we want the debate because voters don't believe it. When Democrats engage Republicans on the economy, the challenger candidates benefit immensely, widening their lead.

When voters are asked to choose between a Republican message that the economy is “strong and growing stronger” and needs tax cuts, and a Democratic one that highlights rising costs, opposes high-end tax cuts and calls for new economic policies, voters choose the Democrats by a 23-point margin, almost three times their advantage in the Congressional vote.

⁴ Democracy Corps survey of 1,000 likely voters, conducted April 20-24, 2006.

Debate over the economy

<i>Which of those statements come closer to your own view, the Democratic statement or the Republican statement?</i>	Total prefer
<i>The Democrats say, some say the economy is great, and it is for a few, but most Americans are forced to deal with rising costs for gas, health care and college tuition. Despite this, Republicans in Washington are now calling for another 70 billion dollar tax cut for the wealthy. Instead, we need new economic policies that take action against the rising costs for gas, health care and college tuition.</i>	60
OR	
<i>President Bush and the Republicans say, thanks to our tax cuts for businesses and working Americans, our economy is strong and growing stronger. We have created over 5 million new jobs over the last two and a half years and last year our economy grew faster than any industrialized nation's in the world. Democrats now want to repeal the tax cuts, but we must protect them so our economy can continue to improve.</i>	37

Republican claims about the strong economy alienates voters and allows Democrats to talk about the financial squeeze from gas, health care and college costs, and new policies that would make the American economy work for all.

The Republican candidate does better when not mentioning the president and talks more cautiously about the progress made, though affirming the tax cuts and the foundation laid. But the candidate still loses the economic debate by 13 points, significantly stronger than the margin for Congress.⁵

The public today is very cautious about tax cuts in general, but particularly the most recent one almost exclusively for business and wealthy investors. When we just ask voters to

⁵ The less assertive message that did not include Bush’s name read as follows: “The Republicans say, although most people are not feeling the benefits yet, our tax cuts for businesses and working Americans have created a strong foundation for economic growth. Democrats now want to repeal the tax cuts, which would stifle our economic growth and increase the burden on working Americans. We must protect the tax cuts in order for our economy to improve.”

react to the term, “tax cuts,” only 39 percent give a positive response, a 17-point decline from five years ago. This reservation is a reflection of people’s experience with the Bush tax cuts and their concern over the growing deficits. The new tax cut of \$70 billion passed by Congress raises doubts for over two-thirds of voters. That tax cut should be part of the Democrats’ economic critique.

Challengers should challenge Bush and the Republicans on the economy.

Strength on the Wedge Issues

The Republicans, as we have seen in the San Diego special election, will use a host of issues to try to undercut the Democrats current advantage, including immigration, gay marriage, “cutting and running in Iraq,” and more.

Each challenger will address these issues appropriately, consistent with their convictions. Let us underscore some findings, however, on two issues, immigration and Iraq.

On immigration, Democracy Corps has released a study on the Democrats’ strongest themes and messages.

The Bush administration has lost control on the immigration issue, failing to enforce the laws on the borders and with employers. It is not practical to deport 11 million immigrants, and thus we should have a path to citizenship for the law-abiding. New citizens should learn English. But we also need stricter enforcement on the borders and penalties for companies employing illegal immigrants. Democrats believe we need greater respect for the law at all levels.

On Iraq, Democrats should stress that “we can’t have a precipitous withdrawal,” before offering their alternatives on Iraq. That is completely consistent with a phased re-deployment over the next 12 months or other options. But that reassurance allows voters to feel reassured that the challenger understands the difficulties and the risks and the sacrifices made.

But Democrats also have the opportunity to advance their own wedge issues, such as ***stem cell research***. Nearly 60 percent of voters support a Constitutional Amendment that would require the federal government to fund the expansion of stem cell research, but that overall number is suppressed by conservative Republicans. Among key swing audiences, such as independents, support rises to two-to-one, with half strongly supportive.

Turnout Challenges

Republicans have a lot of difficulty at the moment with their base, which they will seek to address through immigration, gay marriage, tax cuts and the like. The Iraq war, gas, and health care prices makes that more difficult for them, but they have well-developed symbols and well-developed technology to reach their voters.

Democrats have their own base challenges, if they are to get the kind of turnout that is needed in an off year election. Democratic voters in this poll are no more likely to vote than are their Republican counterparts. Indeed, positive assessments of the Democrats have declined over the past few months. And in comparison to 1994, the Democrats' negative ratings are now 14 points higher than the Republican party's rating at this point.

Such uncertainty regarding Democrats ability to mobilize their base makes it all the more important for the party to target the base voters who can be directly reached and mobilized.

- No group is more important to target than unmarried women. These women favor Democrats in the vote for Congress by a 29-point margin, yet these are the voters with the greatest potential not to vote. A quarter of these women voted in 2004 but not in 2002.
- African Americans are more supportive of Democrats than any other base group, but they are also much less interested in the upcoming election than voters overall. This underscores the importance for Democrats to reach these voters by engaging on the economy and American jobs, health care and gas prices, and the minimum wage.
- Hispanic voters also give Democrats a sizeable advantage in the vote for Congress, and the debate over immigration has fueled their interest in the election. It is now up to Democrats to not only maintain this enthusiasm but also register and turn out as many of these voters as possible.⁶
- Democrats won union households by a 14-point margin in 2004, but their lead in the vote for Congress now is twice that size – suggesting opportunities for major gains. These are change voters, a little skeptical about Democrats, but there to be mobilized in unprecedented numbers.

⁶ Democracy Corps is currently conducting a survey on Hispanic voters and will be releasing a memo with further insights within the next few weeks.

Seniors

Democrats are now doing very well with seniors after losing them by a 6-point margin in 2004. The party now leads these voters by 18-points which is of particular importance given the central role that the prescription drug benefit will play in this election. Seniors are currently evenly divided on the plan, but there is strong support among these voters for changing the program to allow Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices. They were strongly opposed to the president's plan to privatize Social Security and right now are very cautious about the Republicans' priorities.

The shift of seniors and other swing groups is an important reason for Democratic gains this year, making them a primary battleground in the final months. Democracy Corps will be conducting a special survey of seniors within the next six weeks to explore strategies for Democrats.

Concluding Note

This memo is intended to help challengers frame the election and take the offensive. We understand that the mood for change makes it very possible to produce an historic shift in 2006, produced by the success of challengers in surprising places. We think the strategy, the choice, agenda and targets presented in this memorandum will allow challengers to maximize their position.

The good news is that the tea leaves are pretty easy to read, once free of the bubble in Washington, D.C. We are optimistic that candidates will pose the right choice and woe the incumbent.