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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

From: Stan Greenberg
James Carville

RE: DEFINING THE CHOICE
A Strategy for Going Outside and Reaching New Ground

Every public survey now shows a country ready for a political upheaval in 2006. The latest Democracy Corps is no different.¹ Just a third of the country thinks things are headed in the right direction and less than that want to continue the direction of the current Congress. Almost 60 percent of the nation says they want to go in a “significantly different direction” than the President, with half the country feeling that way strongly.

Well before Katrina, George Bush was losing the public on Iraq, the economy, health care, Social Security and the deficits. The personal bond was broken, as people were no longer drawn to him personally. Only 43 percent have a warm reaction to his name and 45 percent say they are “finished with him.”²

But there is a difference between this growing discontent and a political upheaval. To get there, Democrats need to understand and define this moment for the country and reach to new ground. Democrats must visibly break with Washington and define the choice for 2006 from outside.

Right now, Democrats are not yet the answer for the growing majority seeking change. Democrats have moved into a very strong 6-point lead in the congressional vote, but that is being produced by the Republican slide, not Democratic gains.³ Right now, the Democrats have hit a

¹ Based on a survey of 1,000 likely voters conducted October 5-10, 2005.

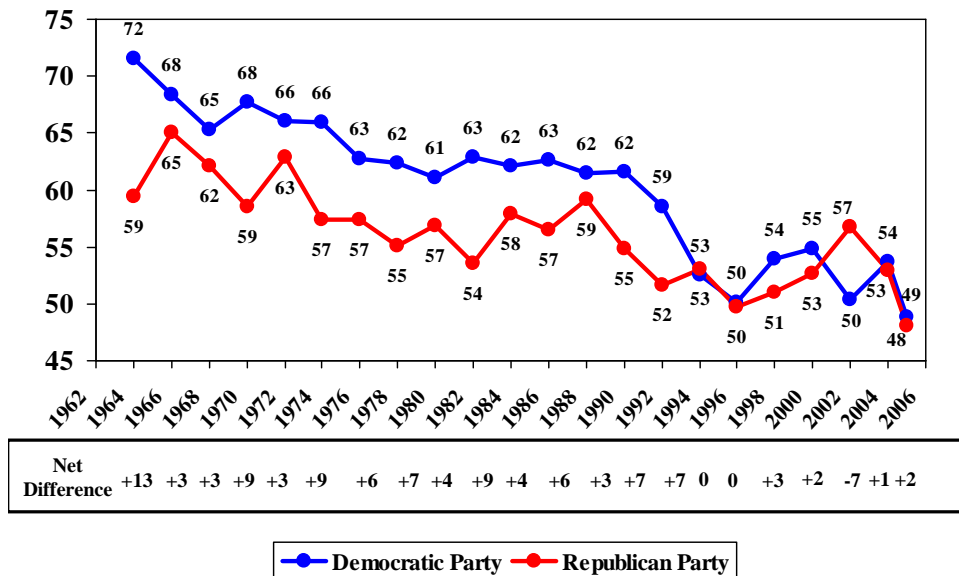
² From Democracy Corps survey of 1,000 likely voters conducted September 19-21, 2005.

³ In a congressional contest where the current incumbent is named and faces a generic challenger from the opposition party, Democrats hold a 6-point advantage, 48 to 42 percent. In a generic congressional vote between generic Democrat and Republican candidates, the Democratic advantage is 5 points, 46 to 41 percent.

ceiling at 48 percent; the party's image has not improved through the whole course of the Republican slide. Indeed, both national parties are at a half-century low point in public esteem.

The result is quite extraordinary. Democrats have already moved into a significant lead, but they are underperforming. Many more voters are open to supporting the Democrats but holding back; indeed, twice as many voters are open to switching to the Democrats as are open to switching to the Republicans.⁴ While 48 percent are voting Democratic, 55 to 60 percent want to vote for change.

Party Thermometers Since 1964
Mean Thermometer Scores



Democrats can push beyond the 48-percent ceiling if they become the party of change, but that is more than a word. To become the agent of change in the year ahead, the Democrats will have to be reformist, populist and nationalist, armed with new ideas for renewing the country. The public is angry at Bush and the Republicans for neglecting the country and the American people, for working their heart out for the few rather than for everyone, and for losing control on problem after problem facing the country. It is a powerful indictment, but until now, voters feel they have been making the critique on their own.

⁴ Using the Democracy Corps voter choice scale, 16 percent of the electorate is considered “winnable” for Democrats while just 8 percent are considered “winnable” for Republicans.

But this is an electorate, this Democracy Corps poll shows, that is very ready to listen to the Democrats when they poise the choice in the election, drive home the critique and offer a new direction.

The Ceiling

We want to take a detour to talk about the ceiling that leaves the Democrats with the votes of about half the country. Congressionally, the Democrats have won between 46 and 50 percent of the vote from 1992 to 2004; presidentially, the Democrats have received between 43 and 49 percent, hitting 48 percent in the two post-Clinton elections. (If we allocate the Perot voters based on their second choice, Clinton would have received 53 percent in 1996).

With the ability to win about half the votes in the country, Democrats can still be competitive presidentially and almost win every election. But that ceiling leaves the Democrats short in elections for the House of Representatives, where the Republicans have immense incumbent advantages. It leaves them even shorter in the U.S. Senate where Wyoming and New York are equally represented, and rural states play such a big role; and it makes it difficult to build a sustainable majority in the Electoral College, which is also subject to rural and small state bias.

2006 will only produce an upheaval if Democrats make a break with the forces that have put them just short of a majority in the country.

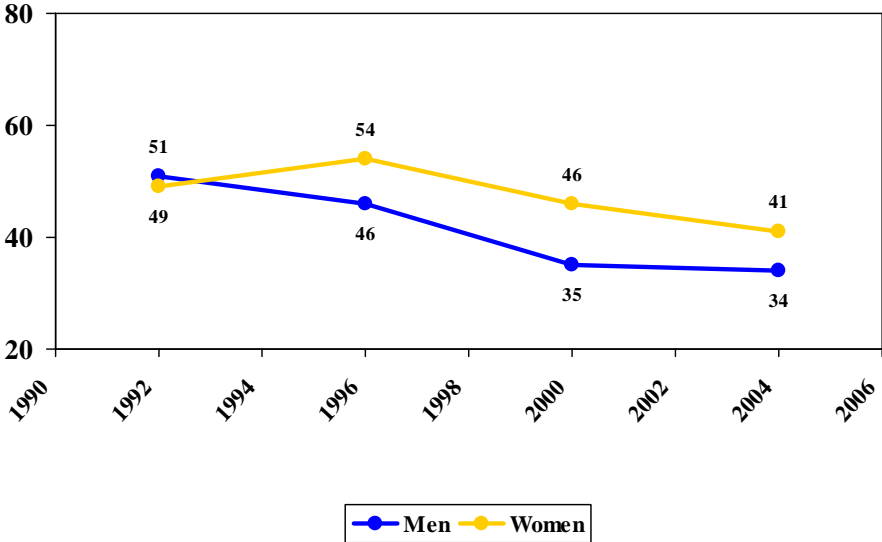
The Democrats should revisit the Perot voters and their concerns, even if Perot himself has faded from view. His voters were the most anti-political and anti-elitist, anti-big government and big corporations, anti-free trade and anti-immigration. They were pro-military but anti-foreign entanglements. They were libertarian and secular, pro-gun and pro-choice. The Perot voters were younger, more blue collar and rural, and economically pressed and uneasy in the new economy. They were also angry with the political and economic elites that failed to represent them. In 1994, the Republicans recruited them to their successful revolution against the Democratic Congress; in 2000, Bush ran against the cultural elites and political establishment in Washington and brought the Republicans back from their failed showings in the 1990s.

The Democrats also need to acknowledge the losses they took on values since the mid-1990s, as the Republicans waged culture war against Clinton, Gore and Kerry.

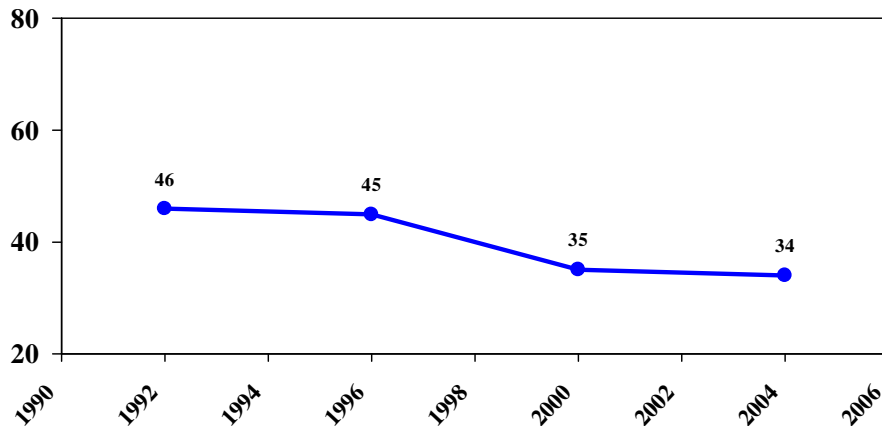
Despite that, the Democrats created a near majority with their coalition of suburban and more secular voters, the best educated and more cosmopolitan, union households, and the growing number of minority voters, particularly African Americans and Hispanics. But that has been more than offset by their dramatic decline among white rural and blue collar voters – the consequence of the values issues but also of Democrats not figuring out how to incorporate the dis-

lodged Perot voters. Since 1996, Democratic presidential candidates have run about 12 points weaker here. It is hard to win congressional and Senate races when the Democratic national candidate is getting only about a third of the white rural and non-college vote.

White Non-College Voters: Declining Support
% Support for Democratic Presidential Candidate (2-way)



White Rural Voters: Declining Support % Support for Democratic Presidential Candidate (2-way)



Well, those voters may be dislodged again, as Washington sinks into corruption, the economy fails ordinary people, gas and health care prices skyrocket and deficits rise out of control, while the U.S. is bogged down in Iraq. Katrina put a spotlight on the choices made by the Republicans in Washington that leave us in this state. That is why 55 to 60 percent of the country is ready to vote for change.

To realize their potential vote and create an earthquake, Democrats have to step back and make a break with the past that enables them to speak to these voters again. There are now a whole new set of issues that push these issues in play – including income stagnation, gas and health care prices, Iraq war spending, and Washington corruption and elitism. To maximize these issues and reach these voters, Democrats have to run as outsiders and reformers, against this government of the few and as champions of the many, and for a program that puts the American people first.

Defining the Choice

The Democrats have the chance to define this period and the choice before the voters, and to show that Democrats offer ideas and a way forward for people and the country. These are choices, not just critiques – showing, in addition, that Democrats have different beliefs and policies. We tested a series of such choices in the Democracy Corps poll and found that voters are hungry for leaders to provide this kind of definition and interpretation and to offer an alternative.

The effective choices poised here break through the ceiling and take the Democrats up toward 60 percent. The most effective Republican definitions of the choice fall about 12 points short of the Democratic ones. Democrats are about to win the battle to frame the election.

The strongest Democratic definitions of the choice in the election are presented below. While we will look at other definitions in future surveys, they point to the centrality of the Republicans working for the few, not for everyone, for putting corporations not people first, for losing control before so many problems, and later we shall see, for not putting the American people first.⁵

⁵ We tested a number of definitions of the choice centered on change, but each of them described the Republicans as “failing on the problems that matter to people.” That is apparently too strong a definition at this point, and so we are not yet sure of the power of a message centered on change.

DEMOCRATS: THE CHOICE		
	Much more likely	Total more likely
The Republicans are working to enrich the few. The Democrats say, our country should work for everyone.	41	59
The Republicans work their hearts out for the wealthiest and big corporations. The Democrats say, let's put people first.	41	57
The Republicans have lost control on so many problems. The Democrats say, we need a new direction.	38	54
The Republicans have lost control on the deficits, Iraq, gas and health care costs. The Democrats say, we need a new direction.	46	60

After hearing the strongest of these definitions, almost 60 percent of the voters say this is a real difference and it makes them more likely to vote Democratic.

Not surprisingly, the strongest Republican definitions center on taxes and defense, but only 46 percent of the voters say that is either a real difference that makes them more likely to vote for the Republicans for Congress. Their framing of the choice is much weaker – 14 points weaker – than the potential framing for Democrats.

The voters are clearly much more disposed to support the Democrats when they define this period in America and also the choice, with Democrats representing change and a different direction. They are looking for the Democrats to stand up for the American people and an America that works for everybody, not just the few.

The Case for Change: From Lobbyists to Social Security

In the current climate, the Democratic attacks on Washington are unusually effective. The strongest fit within a framework of Republicans taking care of their best-healed supporters and hurting ordinary people. Corporate lobbyists are the villains of the piece, with seniors, drivers and others paying the price. When the Republican Congress enriches their own members, that adds further fuel to the anger at Republican Washington.

DOUBTS ABOUT REPUBLICANS <i>Strongest Attacks</i>		
	Very serious doubts	Total serious doubts
The number of corporate lobbyists has doubled in the last five years, and they are acting like pigs at the trough. Republicans in Washington have voted for a new 15 billion dollar tax break for the oil companies and given drug companies the right to raise drug prices for seniors.	41	71
The country is facing the war in Iraq, families are pressed by call-ups of the National Guard and Reserves, record federal deficits, cuts in domestic preparedness and a Social Security shortfall, yet Republicans in Washington voted to give themselves a pay raise of over three thousand dollars this year alone.	41	70
Republicans in Washington supported privatizing Social Security, which would mean an end to Social Security's guaranteed retirement income and a 40 percent cut in benefits for future retirees.	39	67
Republicans in Washington took in 12 million dollars in contributions from drug companies in 2004. They passed a Medicare reform bill that will give them 139 billion dollars in profits and bars Medicare from negotiating lower prices. Drug prices for seniors have gone up over 10 percent a year.	38	69
Republicans in Washington have passed an energy bill that gives oil companies 15 billion dollars in new tax breaks, while gas prices skyrocket, and also passed a Medicare bill that will create 139 billion in profits for drug companies, but produces higher drug prices for seniors.	38	69

The strongest and simplest attack focused on the two-fold increase in the number of corporate lobbyists and their success in winning new tax breaks for the oil companies and in securing the right of drug companies to charge seniors what they choose. An astonishing 71 percent said that raised serious doubts for them, including 41 percent who said it raised very serious

doubts. This is the Congress that voted itself a pay raise even as the Iraq war wages on, families are pressed to deal with National Guard and Reserves call-ups, the deficits rise and Social Security's finances remain unaddressed. And while the president may have put off consideration of Social Security privatization, that they proposed cutting seniors' guaranteed retirement remains a powerful indictment of the Republicans' approach to government.

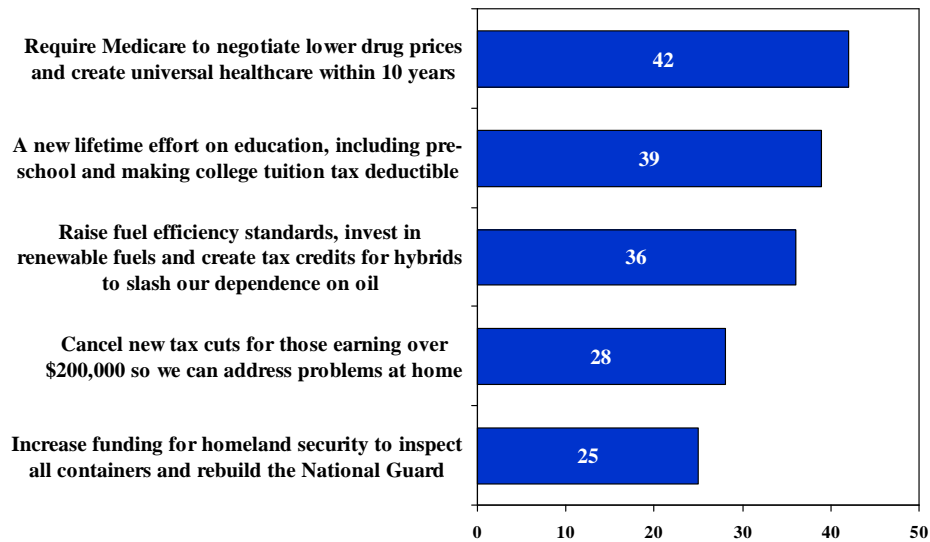
The Republican attacks on Democrats score only glancing blows in this context. Even their strongest attacks raise serious doubts for barely half the voters, almost 20 points below that for the Democrats. This is a moment for change and the contestants are badly mismatched.

Democratic Plans and the Budget Battle Ahead

While there is much more work to be done on any Democratic "Contract with America," voters clearly respond very positively to the idea that Democrats have things they want to accomplish to change America. In this survey, we tested a six item list and asked voters to choose two that would be most important for them. That produced a Democratic agenda centered on health care, education and energy, followed by a top-end tax cut repeal and homeland security.⁶

⁶ Lobby reform scored at the bottom of the list, but the focus was on barring members of Congress from becoming lobbyists, which may seem obscure to people. In addition, lobby reform stands out more as a critique of current practices in Washington, rather than a positive agenda that will impact people's lives.

Democratic Policy Proposals
TWO most important policies



“Now I’d like to read you a list of policy proposals from a Democratic candidate. After hearing the list, please tell me which TWO policies would be the most important for Congress to pass.”

We tested a similar package for the Republicans, which included protecting Social Security, tax cuts, tight immigration control and protecting borders, limiting lawsuits to reduce health care costs and Katrina rebuilding. By 54 to 38 percent, voters said they were more interested in the Democratic agenda.

The cascading set of issues before America will all be faced together in the battle of the budget. That is where the big choices will be made. The President’s position is clear: “we must fund the rebuilding after Katrina while continuing to cut taxes for all taxpayers and cut domestic spending programs.” But the President is out of touch with America’s priorities today – very much reflecting the frames discussed above, which center on putting the American people first and having a government that works for everyone. The Democrats’ strong position going into the budget stresses –

- Cancel any new tax cuts for those earning over \$200,000
- So we can fund rebuilding after Katrina
- So we can fund our education and health care needs (domestic spending)
- While keeping the federal deficit down

Voters prefer the Democratic approach to the budget by 59 to 36 percent – a 23-point margin. But all the elements are important: canceling the tax cut, Katrina rebuilding, education

and health care, and deficits. Without inclusion of the deficit concern, the Democratic budget position weakens to a 14-point margin (55 to 41 percent) – still a significant advantage but lower.

We also tested a Democratic budget position without the Democrats mentioning the cancellation of the tax cut, focusing instead on attacking the Republicans in Washington for refusing “to make tough choices,” and with rising commitments to Katrina and Iraq, they are losing control of the budget and deficits exploding. But that critique only runs even with the Republican budget statement. By emphasizing the canceling of top-end tax cuts, Democrats gain the credibility and space to defend domestic investments and their interest in controlling deficits. That is a position supported by almost 60 percent of the country.

What is special about this period is the fact that between 55 and 60 percent of the country is rallying to the Democratic plans and direction, most clearly articulated in the budget debate. The focus on Democratic ideas and priorities is very much at the center of our opportunity to break through the 48 percent ceiling.