

**Date:** April 4, 2000

**To:** Friends of Democracy Corps

**From:** James Carville  
Stan Greenberg  
Al Quinlan

**RE: EMERGING CONTOURS AND THEMES FOR 2000**

*Recommendations based on a national survey released by Democracy Corps*

---

Today, seven months before the election, the parties and candidates look evenly matched. In the latest national poll conducted for Democracy Corps, the Democrats maintain a 3-point lead in the generic congressional contest, while Bush maintains a 2-point lead in the presidential race.<sup>1</sup> Among the most-likely electorate, the Democratic advantage slips to zero, while Bush moves up to a 5-point lead. For all intents and purposes, the parties seem to be starting the general election season even.

However, if the Democrats remain on the offensive, there are very good reasons to believe this election will shift Democratic – though probably late in the cycle, maybe even in October. A shift in favor of the Democrats will not happen on its own. But Democrats will make gains if they advance the right thematic contrasts (tax cuts and short-term versus investment and long-term), if they elevate the right issues (education, Medicare and health care), and if they provide the right reassurances (values and targeted tax cuts). This combination marginalizes the Republicans and makes the Democrats right for these times.

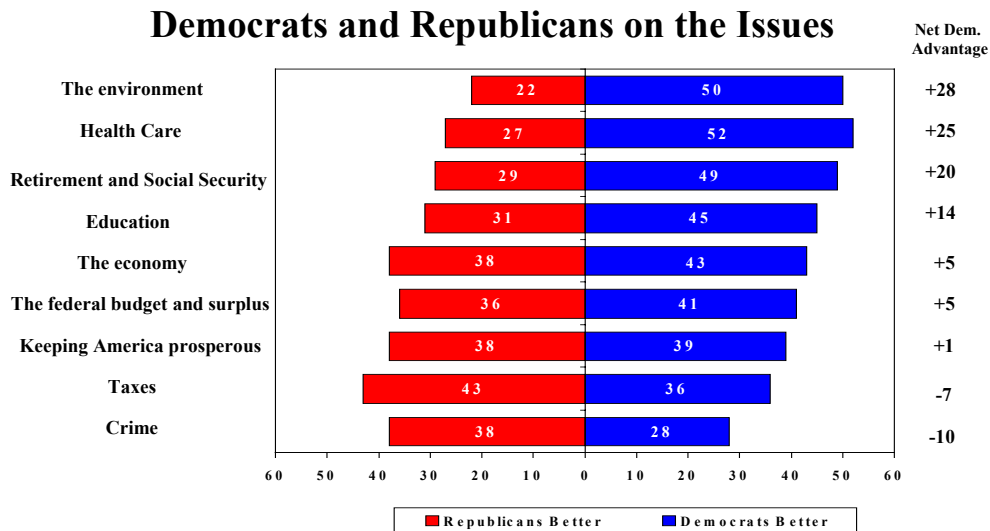
Why do we think Democrats have a chance to make significant gains late in the cycle? Consider the following themes, which emerge from the latest Democracy Corps research:

- 1. Democratic consolidation.** Bush has already consolidated Republicans (only 9 percent are supporting Gore), but Gore has not yet achieved a similar unity among Democrats, as 15 percent are currently voting for Bush. When the conventions are finished, all signs indicate that Gore will successfully unify Democrats. That process alone will wipe out the current Republican margin at the presidential level.

---

<sup>1</sup> Democracy Corps' survey of 1000 likely voters was conducted March 13-15, 2000 and was publicly released on March 30<sup>th</sup>. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3.1%. This analysis of their data was prepared to help Democratic candidates design their campaigns for 2000.

2. **Underlying issue structure.** Democrats are maintaining extraordinary advantages on the issues that face the country. The top concerns for voters are education, health care and retirement security. On education,<sup>2</sup> the Democrats are preferred to the Republicans by 14 points; on retirement and Social Security, Democrats are 20 points ahead; and on health care, an issue on which the Republicans lack any real credibility, the Democrats are preferred by 25 points. Taxes are an important concern as well, but the strong advantage Republicans have traditionally enjoyed on this issue has withered to only 7 points.

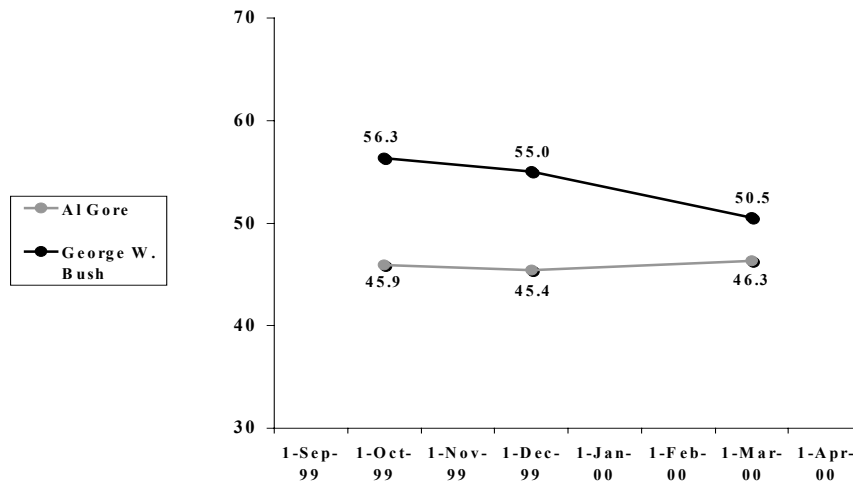


If the issue agenda of the presidential race and of the Congress parallels voters' top concerns, the underlying issue structure will begin to make itself felt.

3. **Trends.** Most of the emerging trends are moving Democratic. Gore's position has improved dramatically, Bush's personal standing is faltering, and significant voting blocs – particularly Catholics – have moved both toward the Democrats and in favor of Gore.
4. **The Bush problem.** While Al Gore's standing has remained stable over the course of the last six months, Bush's image has grown steadily more negative. The more voters see him, the more doubts they have. The Democracy Corps thermometer score for Bush (ranging from zero, very cold or unfavorable, to 100, very hot or favorable) has fallen from a mean of 56.3 degrees in October of last year to 50.5 degrees now – a major drop.

<sup>2</sup> The education issue has emerged as the strongest predictor of congressional voting, according to a statistical regression model. The economy and health care – both of which favor the Democrats – are the next strongest, followed by taxes.

## Thermometers



These statistics are reflected in the focus group comments about Bush among swing voters: *smarmy, phony, riding on his Dad's name, big money, supercilious, looks down on people, thinks he can buy the Presidency, too cocky, don't trust him, unqualified, special interest money.* In the statistical regression model, the single biggest predictor of presidential vote, even stronger than party identification, is which candidate “has what it takes to be president.”

5. **The McCain-reformist opportunity.** There is a sizeable bloc of reformist voters who strongly supported John McCain's candidacy (18 percent of the electorate). These are mostly independents, with some Republicans and Democrats; they are white and somewhat more likely to be older and non-college men; they are not secular but are much less devout than mainstream Republicans. Right now, these strong McCain voters give Bush a 4-point margin and the Republicans a 9-point lead for Congress. *But these McCain-reformist voters are very volatile.* After hearing messages from both parties, these independent-minded voters shift sharply to Gore, giving him a 5-point margin. They also rate the Democratic overall investment message higher than the Republican tax-cut message by a 4-point margin. The McCain voters are clearly willing to shift Democratic.
  
6. **The economy.** As Election Day approaches, voters may want to protect the strong economy and avoid choices that involve risk. Right now, the Democrats are preferred to the Republicans by 5 points on the economy and 5 points on handling the federal budget and surplus. Historically, Republicans have been favored on these fiscal and economic issues, but no longer. Democrats, and Gore, may well represent the safe choice come November.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Gore's strongest advantage over Bush is on being “moderate – not extreme.”

7. ***The emergence of Gore.*** Historically, vice-presidents have not emerged with their own distinct identity that interests voters until the time of their conventions (e.g., George Bush) or even as late as October (e.g., Hubert Humphrey and Gerald Ford). Therefore, it is not surprising that Al Gore has not yet emerged with any appreciable advantage over Bush, even on the issues that Democrats dominate, such as education. Unlike the Democrats in Congress, Gore's vote trails Democratic Party self-identification by 7 points. But the nominating process will soon showcase Gore's unique issues and biography, and as he emerges from under the shadow of President Clinton, his electoral position should strengthen.<sup>4</sup>
8. ***The thematic contrasts.*** As will be evident in this memo, Democrats stand much closer to the thinking of the American people on what the country should be doing at this historical moment. If the Democrats frame the right choices now, voters will make the right choices come November.

### **Tax Cuts for Individuals versus Investment in the Country**

The massive Bush-Republican tax cut is the single biggest thematic advantage available to Democrats in 2000. They should never lose sight of it.

The tax cut as the first priority for the country simply misses what most people think the country should be doing at this unique moment of opportunity. The economy is going well, and many people are beginning to feel more financially secure. But voters are not looking for a short-term tax cut that only benefits individuals, indeed, probably only the wealthiest. They want the government to use the surplus to address big problems and strengthen the country – retire the debt, secure Social Security and Medicare, and invest in education.

In focus groups, people were skeptical about a large tax cut: “what programs will be cut,” “what about the debt,” “should be put back into Social Security,” “it could be put to better use.” As long as the money is not squandered, people want to see their tax dollars used to strengthen the country. They see the Bush tax cut as spending the entire surplus and ignoring the country's long-term obligations.

The Democracy Corps survey presented voters with two candidates, reflecting the priorities of the two parties:

---

<sup>4</sup> Even though Gore's thermometer rating has not risen, Gore's vote against Bush has risen from 39 percent during most of 1999 to 45 percent now. There are good reasons to expect further gains.

**The Republican candidate believes the federal budget surplus should be used first to strengthen Social Security *and then to cut taxes for American families.***

**The Democratic candidate believes the federal budget surplus should be used first to strengthen Social Security *and then to invest in education and Medicare.***

The voters opt for the Democratic candidate by 7 points (50 to 43 percent) and, when presented in the presidential context, for Gore by 9 points (52 to 43 percent). Even when giving the Republicans parity on Social Security, Democrats win if the choice is simply investment versus tax cuts.

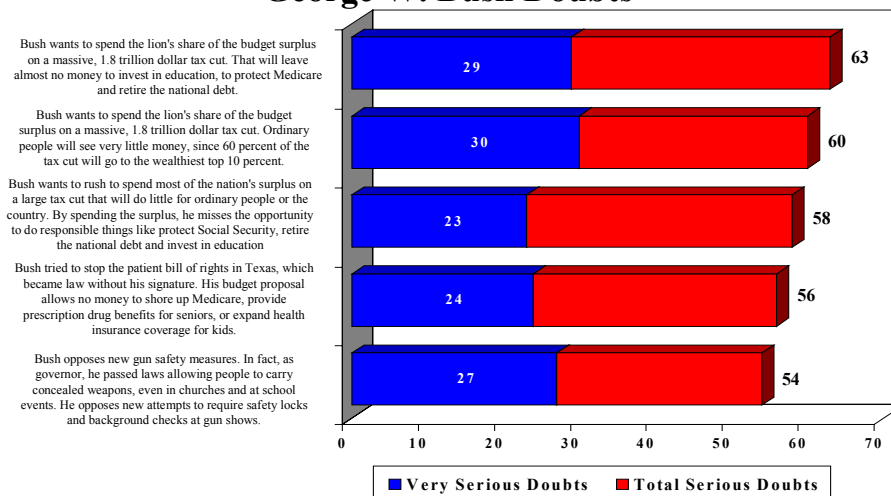
The strongest attacks on George W. Bush all feature his massive tax cut and what it means for our ability to invest in other areas and what it means for ordinary taxpayers.

**Bush wants to spend the lion’s share of the budget surplus on a massive, 1.8 trillion dollar tax cut. That will leave almost no money to invest in education, to protect Medicare and retire the national debt. (63 percent serious doubts)**

**Bush wants to spend the lion’s share of the budget surplus on a massive, 1.8 trillion dollar tax cut. Ordinary people will see very little money, since 60 percent of the tax cut will go to the wealthiest top 10 percent. (60 percent serious doubts)**

Over 60 percent say these statements raise serious doubts about George W. Bush and almost a third say very serious doubts.<sup>5</sup>

**George W. Bush Doubts**



<sup>5</sup> The other attacks on Bush that raised serious doubts included attacks on his health position, gun safety, and the environment (focused on Texas’ worsening air quality and Bush’s record). These are all significantly weaker than the tax-cut attacks, but they have power.

Democrats must never let up on the Bush tax cut – it denies the country the ability to live up to its obligations, to help American families, and to make a stronger America.

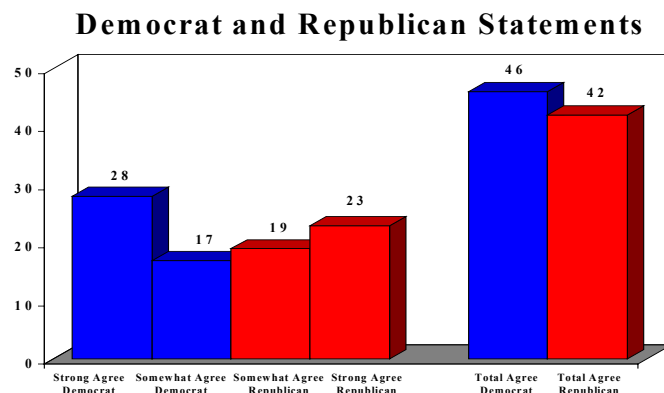
### The Dominant Discourse

We tested the strongest possible Republican message on giving people back their tax dollars, but with strong reassurance on locking up Social Security and a strong statement on education and accountability, punctuated with a call for individual responsibility and change. The survey counterpoised that message against a Democratic message focused solely on the opportunity to put the country’s house in order and to make national investments. Even without reassurances on targeted tax cuts and values, Democrats win this thematic choice. Voters are particularly attracted to the Democrats’ desire to strengthen the nation for the long-term over the Republicans’ desire to shift resources to the individual and the short-term.

***Republican Statement:*** This is not a moment for bigger government. Americans face the highest tax burden since World War II. The country is doing well and has its first budget surplus in 30 years, but we need a tax cut for everyone who pays taxes, because it is their money, not the government’s. We should lock up the Social Security trust fund from being raided and then give people more control over their retirement savings. We should give people choice in education so there is more accountability and so parents can have the best schools for their children. This is a moment to get back to individual responsibility. We need a fresh start.

***Democratic statement:*** This is a moment where we have a chance to act responsibly as a nation. The country is doing well and has its first budget surplus in 30 years. This is not a time to squander our good fortune, but instead to act for the long-term interest of the country and future generations. We should put our financial house in order and retire the national debt. We should secure Medicare and Social Security well into this century, and we need to make a major investment in education. History will judge the choices we made at this important moment.

After hearing these statements, 46 percent said they agreed with the Democratic statement compared to 42 percent with the Republican – a 4-point Democratic advantage.



### **Democratic Reassurances: middle-class tax cuts and values**

We have no doubt that had the Democratic message included reassurances – as the Republican message did – the Democratic message would have prevailed with a larger margin. A 4-point thematic advantage is not sufficient. In order to realize the 7-to 9-point advantage evident in the tax cut vs. investment choice described above, Democrats need to provide important reassurances as well.

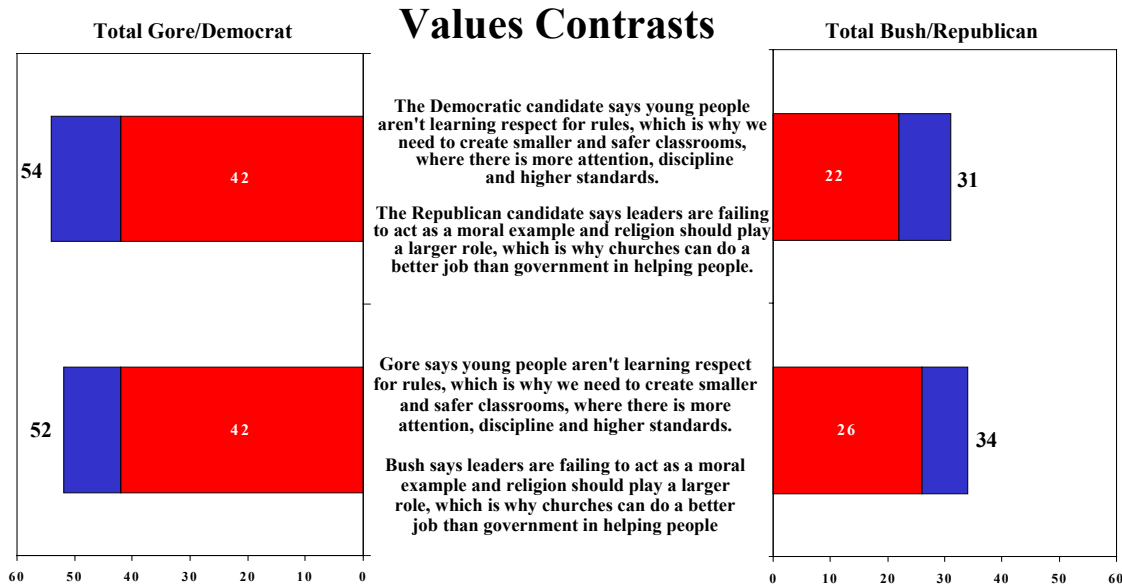
In order for voters to feel comfortable choosing the Democrats to strengthen the country (through investment), they want to know *that Democrats will not overspend and that they will be governed by the values of mainstream America.*

The first reassurance is on taxes. By supporting targeted tax cuts to working families and the middle class, tax cuts that do not squander the entire federal surplus, Democrats will surely gain. Such a position sends a message of spending restraint, and it also says that there will be some tax relief – but only for those who need it.

The second reassurance is on values. In past Democracy Corps surveys, the Republicans enjoyed a 5-point advantage on “sharing your values” – a strong predictor of vote. The Democratic value deficit expanded to 15 points among whites and 25 points among white married voters. Against the backdrop of the Clinton controversy, voters want to be sure that Democrats understand the growth of permissiveness in society and the breakdown of respect for rules among young people. Voters think that is the biggest problem facing families today.

We suggested in an earlier memorandum that Democrats should identify with the challenges facing families, help people achieve their goals for their own families (a safe community, good education, affordable health care and a secure retirement), and identify with the need for greater personal responsibility – the learning of limits and norms.

***Framing the Values Debate.*** This survey suggests Democrats can reach a higher ground in the values debate, when the discourse centers on parenting, education, and the classroom – where the public is comfortable seeing a greater attention to values, learning norms, and behavior. In this context, Democrats can acknowledge the loss of respect for rules and seek to create a safe environment where children learn discipline and responsibility. Such a values discourse trumps a Republican one centered on moral character and the promotion of religion. In that context, the public is uncomfortable with the public promotion of values.



As illustrated above, voters prefer the Democratic candidate on values by a gaping 23-point margin (54 to 31 percent). When those identical statements are presented as a Bush-Gore choice, Gore wins the values argument by 18 points (52 to 34 percent).

### Achieving a Majority: targets of opportunity

Democrats will make their first gains in this election with women. For example, it is among women where there is the largest gap – 4 points – between party identification and vote for Congress (+16 points on party identification and +12 on vote for Congress). Among men, there is only a 1-point gap. In short, women are underperforming for Congress relative to their partisan identification, and Democrats can make gains here. This gap currently exists for all women, regardless of age or education.

There is some evidence in the survey that younger women (under 50 years) and Republican women are particularly responsive to the Democratic message. They are more likely than other voters to shift in favor of the Democratic message at the end of the survey. Furthermore, while Democrats have improved their position with seniors – over 60 percent of who are women – Al Gore is running very poorly there. He is losing by 19 points among white seniors, a group which gave Bill Clinton strong margins in 1992.

However, if Democrats concentrate solely on younger, senior, and Republican women, they will be seeking to build on a minimal majority in the country. The Democrats will not recapture a real, governing majority unless they recognize that their targets are broader.

For example, 15 percent of the electorate is comprised of “winnable” voters for the Democrats. This “winnable” bloc is defined as those who are not now voting Democratic but who say there is a chance they will and who give the Democrats equal or higher thermometer ratings than the Republicans. About half of these winnable voters are undecided right now in the generic congressional vote, and half support the Republican. But Democrats can make headway among these voters – 45 percent support Al Gore, and over 40 percent favor the Democratic theme statement over the Republican one (chosen by just 32 percent).

These winnable voters are comprised of 53 percent women and 47 percent men – in effect, evenly divided. Democrats can’t afford to walk away from half their best targets and focus on the women alone.

Among the winnable voters, 71 percent are married, compared to just 56 percent of those now voting Democratic. Democrats must reach voters who are in families, even though Democrats are not now running well with such voters. For example, Democrats are now losing white married voters by 16 points (which is consistent with their party identification). But that represents a gain from three months ago, when Democrats were down by 20 points. Democrats can and must perform better among married voters.

Likely related to the family issue, 41 percent of “winnable” voters go to church every week, compared to just 33 percent of those already voting Democratic.

The “winnable” voters are somewhat more likely to be non-college educated, though the largest bloc includes those with some post-high school education (37 percent, compared to 28 percent among Democratic supporters). We know that these voters tend to be somewhat more moderate and conservative than other non-college voters generally. For example, 83 percent of the winnable voters describe themselves as moderate or conservative (compared to 68 percent of Democratic supporters).

While men are tougher to reach, it is worth noting that Democrats improved slightly with white men in this survey (down 15 points, compared to more than 20 points in December). The gains were particularly striking with younger men (down 12 points, compared to 28 points).

The point of this section is to get Democrats to think more expansively about their audience for building a workable majority in 2000. If they combine an investment message with important reassurances on taxes and values, they are in a position to make gains with families, as well as non-college and younger men, not to mention McCain voters. Democrats should enter this campaign with the ambition for a majority that can break the impasse in Washington and realign the country.