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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

From: Stan Greenberg
James Carville

RE: FIRST ENGAGEMENT
Notes on the latest Democracy Corps Poll

With the first engagement of the two presidential campaigns, the contest has evened up, with Bush ahead perhaps a couple of points, 50 to 47 percent.¹ That represents a 7-point swing against Kerry in the last month, producing this even and very polarized contest. Just one percent of voters are undecided, 8 months before the election.² Remarkably, the 32 percent Kerry “loyalists” are matched by the 31 percent Bush loyalists; while 41 percent are off limits to Kerry, 41 percent are off limits to Bush. This race will move, but not very far beyond this even divide.

The shift against Kerry is a product of the Bush White House successes in attacking his record after Super Tuesday. Negative reactions were pushed up 10 points, to 39 percent (with the public now evenly divided in their assessment, with 40 percent offering warm/favorable responses). That has taken the edge off of the desire for change, though a clear majority still wants to move in a different direction. On the Iraq anniversary coverage, Bush has moved up a couple of points on handling Iraq, on strength, and on job approval to a modest 52 percent.

The gains for Bush have been won nationally, driven by the national news, and not uniquely in the battleground states where the ad war has been waged. Indeed, it is possible that the race there has been more stable, with the Democrats holding the edge.³

But there is every reason to believe that, despite the even divide and the losses in this first skirmish, Kerry will move back into the lead. In this survey, after the messages and after a strong attack on Kerry, he retakes the lead, 50 to 48 percent – a 5-point swing

¹ Democracy Corps conducted a national survey of 1,004 likely voters March 16-21, 2004. The survey was completed prior to Richard Clarke’s interview on *60 Minutes* and the ensuing news coverage.

² Only 6 percent were undecided, before we asked them to which candidate they leaned.

³ Based on polls for MoveOn.org Voter Fund.

in a difficult political environment. This survey gives one confidence in the power of the Democratic message and the various attacks on Bush's political character. When Kerry has the chance to introduce himself, voters will be receptive to learning more and will better reflect the Democratic trends in the country.

It is important to underscore the underlying dynamics favorable to the Democrats.

- By 8 points, 50 to 42 percent, voters believe the country is moving in the wrong direction.
- While Bush has gained marginally on job approval, none of his personal attributes have improved. This is a very stable poll with Bush still very vulnerable.
- All the worries about the economy continue or have become even more pronounced, particularly on job losses to countries overseas. Health care costs remain unchallenged as the biggest economic worry, with 53 percent describing it as a "very serious problem."
- By a 22-point margin (59 to 37 percent), voters believe the economic recovery is uneven, and failing to create jobs, increased incomes or reduced health care costs, rejecting the Bush characterization of economic progress. Bush has made no headway with his economic argument.
- Barely half the country believes Bush has a hopeful vision for the country (52 percent).
- Nearly all of the Kerry messages tested significantly stronger than Bush's messages, which were derived from his well-crafted speech to the Republican Governors' Association. The message advantage clearly goes to the Democrats.

There is a lot of message guidance in the Democracy Corps survey, which is what we want to elaborate on in this memorandum.

There is tremendous power in messages centered on the economy, corporate excesses, citizenship and even foreign policy, but the strongest message centers on the aspiration to renew America. The country is desperate for a leader who will prioritize addressing America's problems and creating a strong country. That message has the capacity to encompass all of the powerful themes that are moving voters to want change.

The message takes the Democrats back in the lead, even when voters hear an attack on Kerry for being out of the mainstream, centered on crime, taxes, welfare and gay marriage.

Democrats can clearly reclaim the initiative in the weeks ahead.

Message Framework for the Campaign

In this survey, we tested a series of message statements. The one focused on renewing America scored nearly 8 to 10 points stronger than any of the other messages tested. The others were strong – and stronger than nearly all the Bush messages – but lacked the intensity and breadth of the focus on building a strong America. After hearing the message below, 59 percent said they were more likely to support Kerry, including 38 percent much more likely; a total of 70 percent were positively inclined to the message.

We need to recommit ourselves to building a strong America. For sure, that means a strong military and commitment to battle terrorists. But it also means prioritizing our own country. Rather than a go-it-alone foreign policy that requires American taxpayers rebuilding Iraq alone, we should be devoting more resources to our own education, health care and retirement. Companies should not be rewarded when they relocate abroad or outsource jobs to India. We should reward companies that create jobs in America. We should renew our commitment to a strong America.

The elements of this message include the aspiration to address America's problems and create a strong America. It is reassuring on security (must have strong military and battle terrorists), but asserts the need to prioritize our own country and address our own problems. It contains a critique of Bush's priorities and foreign policy (a go-it-alone foreign policy that leaves America rebuilding Iraq alone), when we could be devoting more resources to education, health care and retirement. It contains a central economic critique, centered on jobs: companies should not be rewarded for outsourcing and relocating; they be rewarded for creating jobs in America. That is an explicit and implicit critique of Bush's pro-corporate policies that hurt America and the middle class. Finally, it speaks of renewing America, underscoring the sense that we need to regain something that has been lost in Bush's Washington, when ordinary people and the country were the main focus and both thrived. It is an uncompromising call for a strong America.

This is a broad and powerful message – strongest in the battleground states, among Democrats but also independents, all age groups though particularly those under 50, across America's diversity though intensely high for minority voters, all types of families though particularly unmarried women, and for all those earning under \$75,000 per year. For college graduates, the message does well and about equal with others that we will discuss below. But Democrats should be excited about the prospect of a message

and election that brings back much of downscale America that has pulled away on values in recent years.

It is important that this message be aspirational and optimistic about the future, particularly as Bush lacks vision for the future, according to the public. Voters want change and renewal.

The second strongest message focused single-mindedly on the economy. It is critical of Bush's job policies and job losses, his neglect of income stagnation and health care costs. It includes a strong critique of his pro-corporate tax policies that seek to make their tax cuts permanent, while encouraging the export of jobs. It sets out the goal of full employment, lowered health care costs and new investments in education and technology.

The message does well, including 48 percent more likely to support Kerry, including 34 percent much more likely. It gets the attention of older men and union households, though they also respond to the strong America message.

My overriding goal as president is a strong economy. For sure, we will have a strong defense and battle the terrorists. But we face long-term and major economic problems that the Bush administration does not get. They think it is okay with the very wealthiest and biggest corporations doing okay. But we've lost 3 million jobs, many to India and China, incomes are barely going up, health care costs are skyrocketing and employers are cutting back benefits and pensions. Deficits are out of control and Bush's only economic policy is permanent tax cuts for the wealthy. What we need is a new commitment to full employment and jobs in the U.S., lowering health care costs, middle class tax cuts, and new investments in education and technology. Let's move our economy in a new direction.

We tested three different messages focused on the partiality of the Bush administration. They are nearly as strong as the economic message. The top two identify with the values of ordinary citizens, critique the current corporate culture (excess and greed) and look for a more inclusive country. For both, about half the country says they would be more likely to support Kerry, with about 30 percent much more likely. Two-thirds overall react positively to these messages and represent an elevated characterization of the election choice.

We should honor hard work and responsibility and build opportunity. But today, our government favors corporate special interests and has allowed greed and irresponsibility to have their way. I understand companies wanting to make profits, but the president should get the balance right and encourage job-creating here, rein in out-of-control health care costs and protect the environment. My priority is an economy that all can depend upon. I will appoint a credible economic team, work to cut the deficit in half and reform government, close tax loopholes and cut middle class taxes, invest in education and technology. We need a government that respects our values.

My goal for America is pretty simple - to restore the idea that every citizen matters. After this period of corporate excesses, we need more loyalty to employees and commitment to country. Enriching the middle class should be just as important as enriching the top 1 percent. We need to return to an America of rising opportunity, when people learned responsibility and commitment to community and country. I believe in the old-fashioned idea of citizenship when all share in America's prosperity and all share an obligation to do more for their country.

The most singularly anti-corporate message does well, but not as well as the other messages on partiality, the economy or priorities. After hearing it, 45 percent say they would be more likely to vote for Kerry, 30 percent much more likely; 59 percent overall react positively to it.

We need to change the way they do business in Washington. They run up massive deficits, hurting our long-term economic well-being and passing the bills to our kids. They create a feeding trough for corporate special interests who turn Medicare reform into a giveaway for prescription drug companies and an energy security bill into a tax giveaway for oil companies. They support policies that encourage American companies to move or outsource the jobs overseas. Well, I think it is time for a change when the politicians in Washington put the people and country first.

Contesting Bush

While the survey points to the strength of a priorities' message, we put up a composite message – stressing a commitment to renew both our economy and our country – against Bush's strongest overall message. That took Kerry into the lead by 2 points, a 5-point swing. This message would no doubt be strengthened by the incorporation of a critique of Bush's foreign-spending priorities. Nonetheless, it does very well, suggesting the power of our message position.

Now, I am going to read a pair of statements by President Bush and John Kerry about their views of the country and the election. For whom would you vote if you heard the following statements from John Kerry and George Bush?

John Kerry says, we need to move in a new direction - to renew our economy and our country. President Bush says the economy is great, but that's true only for a wealthy few. Deficits are exploding, while jobs are scarce and being exported overseas. Middle class incomes are stuck, while health care costs are skyrocketing. And now President Bush wants permanent tax cuts for the wealthiest and tax loopholes that encourage corporations to relocate abroad. But I want to create opportunity and build a strong America. I favor middle class tax cuts, tough enforcement of our trade laws, rewarding companies that create jobs in the U.S., investment in education and training, and limiting rises in health care costs. It is time to make the right choices for our country.

WHILE George Bush says, I hope we have restored honor and dignity to the White House and provided steady, strong leadership through very challenging times. I believe faith and personal responsibility built our country and are the key to what we want for our children. We continue to move forward in protecting our people from the threat of terrorism and rebuilding our economy. Regrettably, Senator Kerry takes both sides of so many issues, though he has a clear record of cutting intelligence and defense, and raising taxes, including on gasoline. My vision is different, to give every American more control of their own money, their health care coverage, and their retirement savings, because I believe the individual, not the government, is the answer.

The race has been joined, as we all appreciate, with initial gains for Bush, but that does not foretell the future. As the Democrats reclaim the initiative, they are well positioned to take the lead and capture the public's imagination.