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

RE: NEW WORLD
Bush in Peril

As the Democratic nomination becomes increasingly clear, the Bush presidency becomes increasingly imperiled. For some time, we have argued that Bush's high approval ratings and even likeability were rooted in a post-9/11 period that made Bush's success indispensable to people's security. But as people now enter a new period and face a political choice, a new framework is taking form, which leaves Bush in grave danger. Right now, according to the latest national poll for Democracy Corps, Bush trails John Kerry by 4 points (51 to 47 percent).¹

The new framework is comprised of a number of elements that give it real solidity. Bush will not easily retake the lead, unless he is able to tarnish Kerry's reputation in the short term or achieve major gains on the economy and international front over the longer term. The elements include the following:

- ***The re-emergence of the Democrats' small partisan advantage in the country***, buried in the post-9/11 period. As Ruy Teixeira predicted, the Democrats now have a firm 5-point advantage in party identification – in this poll and over the past five months. The Democrats are now viewed more favorably than the Republicans (with a higher thermometer rating). That is reflected in a 6-point lead for the Democrats in a generic congressional battle. With the recent results in Kentucky, Democrats should be thinking expansively about where to battle for control of Congress.
- ***Voters want change***. The president's State of the Union Address staked his future on continuity, but the voters are looking for change. By 53 to 40 percent, they think the country is headed in the wrong direction and voters have grown increasingly pessimistic in the last month. When asked whether they wanted to continue Bush's direction or move in a "significantly different direction," voters

¹ Democracy Corps conducted a national survey of 1,010 likely voters February 10-15, 2004.

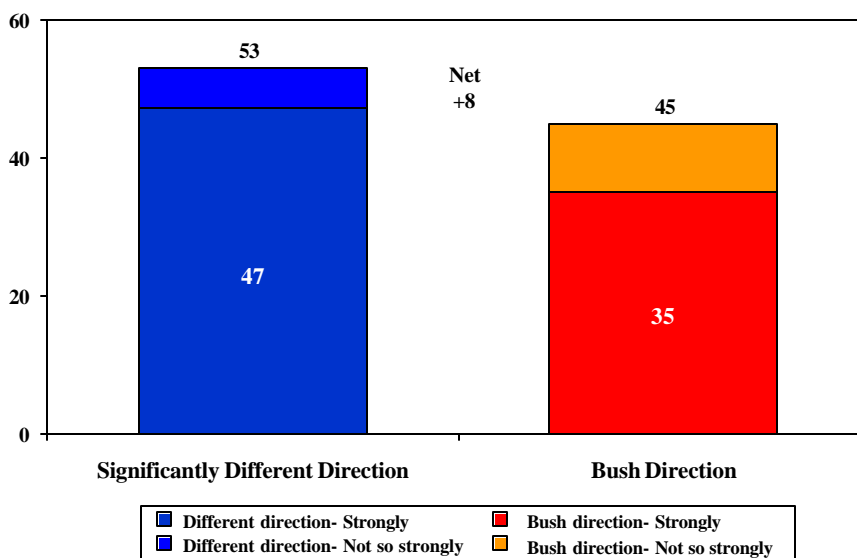
chose major change by 8 points – double Kerry’s current lead. As we shall see, that is rooted in values, priorities, the economy and foreign affairs.

- ***Voters want a hopeful future, at home and abroad.*** Bush has declared himself a wartime president who has promised the citizenry an active defense and greater security in an on-going struggle against our enemies. It is a fairly grim vision, with little hope and little aspiration for America itself. The public reacted negatively to this vision in the president’s State of the Union Address. Indeed, only 52 percent say the president “offers a hopeful vision of the future” – which is also the attribute most strongly predictive of the presidential vote. Bush’s essential posture may be misaligned with the country’s hopes.
- ***Troubled foreign policy.*** While the president gets high marks for handling the war on terrorism, he gets barely passing marks on handling Iraq and on foreign policy. On the former, Iraq, the public is divided down the middle on whether they want to continue the Bush direction and on whether the war was worth the cost in lives and money; on the latter, foreign policy, the public wants a new direction. Iraq and foreign policy are the areas that define the “war on terrorism” and where Bush is being evaluated, most impacting his vote and dragging him down. (At the moment, a large majority of the country, 55 percent, say Bush’s “go-it-alone foreign policy creates a lot of uncertainty in the world.”) Obviously major events can impact these numbers, but the unstable and unfinished war in Iraq, instability in the world and weakened alliances weaken Bush for the election.
- ***Not taking care of home.*** The president’s passions seem reserved only for problems abroad and in outer space. There is strong desire for a president who will take care of America: 57 percent say he is spending too much abroad and neglecting problems at home. Bush’s priorities are not right.
- ***Troubled person.*** Bush is just not that popular a president, and it is important to rethink the assumptions many of us bring to this task. His thermometer rating has fallen to 52.5 degrees, the lowest of his presidency: just 50 percent give him a warm/favorable response. Only 56 percent say he is honest and trustworthy and, more important, 44 percent say he is not. A majority believes he has “misled the country about the reasons for going to war in Iraq” (52 percent). Trust is difficult to reclaim. Moreover, he continues to fall on empathy, with just 49 percent saying he “cares about people like you.” George Bush is just not a president who gives people confidence, as 49 percent say “he is in over his head.”
- ***Troubled economy and economic policy.*** By a dramatic 15 points, voters want a change of direction on the economy (56 percent, versus 41 percent who want to

continue the Bush direction). As we shall see below, Bush has just got the economic policy and narrative wrong. He is obviously betting on strong economic growth breaking through, but for now, voters are turning against him. The margin for change doubled after the State of the Union in which Bush heralded the success of his economic policies and tax cuts.

- ***Lost Medicare debate.*** The public by 22 points, wants to go in a significantly different direction on prescription drugs (and by even more on health care). In this first phase, Bush has badly lost the debate over Medicare reform and his drug benefit. They are obviously spending tens of millions of dollars to reverse that, but for now, older voters and seniors have turned sharply against him.
- ***Corporate excess.*** The public's view of NAFTA has grown more negative and the public grows increasingly concerned with corporate excesses and influence in Washington. A majority of the country agrees with this strong phrasing: Bush "always does what the corporate special interests want."
- ***Democrats most engaged and intense.*** While Karl Rove has worked assiduously to work up the Republican loyalist base, it is the Democrats who have become most passionate about this election. Almost a third of the electorate is made up of Democratic "loyalists" (32 percent) – up 6 points in the last month and 5 points more than the number of Republican "loyalists" (27 percent). Just 36 percent say they will never consider or vote for the Democratic presidential candidate, a striking 42 percent of the electorate say they will never opt for George Bush.
- ***Independents, swing states, and swing districts lean strongly Democratic.*** The near unanimity of Republicans for Bush almost conceals how strongly the rest of the country wants to go in a different direction. Independents vote for Kerry by 52 to 41 percent. The independents lean strongly against the current administration on the war, on NAFTA and on corporate influence. It leads them to favor an overall significant change in direction by a striking 23 points (60 percent, versus 37 percent who would continue the Bush overall direction). The desire for change among independents is already twice the margin for Kerry, suggesting a strong pull away from the president. That is reflected in the electoral battlegrounds of 2004. Kerry is ahead by 6 points in the swing states and by 4 in the swing congressional districts. But in both cases, the margin for significant change is double that of the presidential vote: 10 in the swing states and 11 in the districts.

Bush Direction vs. Significantly Different Direction



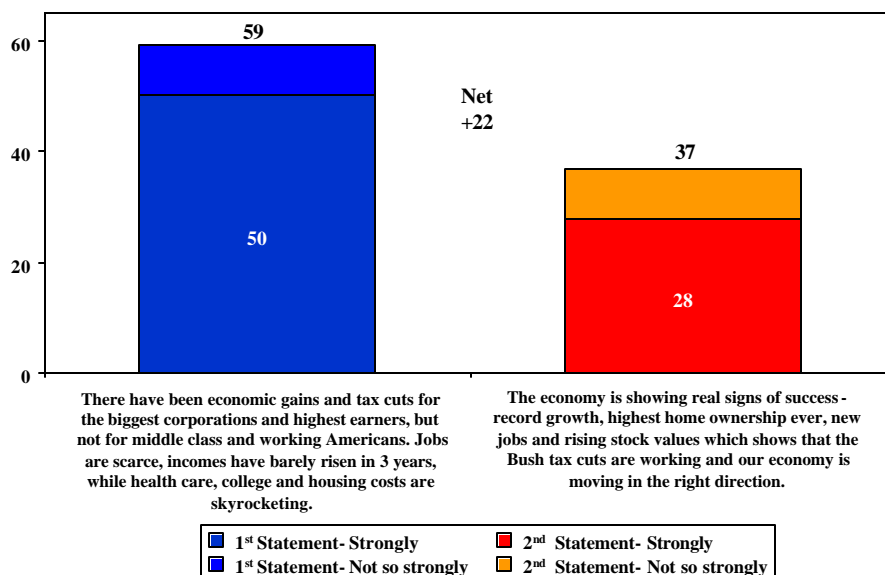
“Now let me ask overall, do you think the country should continue in the direction Bush is headed or go in a significantly different direction?”

Getting the Economy Wrong

The president is staking his election on a successful economy and has decided, if he does not talk about it, nobody else will. They are trying to re-enforce positive indicators, in the face of slow job and income growth. Perhaps the administration will have more success if something dramatic happens in these two areas in the 8 months ahead, but for now, his position is deeply at odds with public thinking. As reflected in Democracy Corps focus groups and in this survey, voters see a very different economy and see him as increasingly out of touch.

In this survey, we counterpoised Bush’s statement about economic success from the State of the Union with a statement about uneven economic gains. Bush’s statement stresses signs of success, growth, highest home ownership in history, rising stock values, new jobs, underscoring that the tax cuts are working. The opposed statement stresses that the gains and tax cuts have centered on the biggest corporations and highest earners, not on the middle class and working Americans. For them, jobs are scarce, incomes have barely risen in three years and costs are rising for health care and college. As we can see below, Bush’s economic argument loses by an overwhelming 22 points (59 to 37 percent). A majority of the country (50 percent) strongly agrees with the anti-Bush economic narrative.

Uneven Economic Gains vs. Economic Success



"Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements. As I read each pair, please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right."

For the moment, the public has turned away from Bush's economic policy, as evident in a number of findings.

- **Employment.** By 22 points, voters want to go in a significantly different direction from Bush; and by 10 points on the more conservatively phrased question, creating more employment opportunities.
- **Middle class living standards and income and wages.** By 9 points, voters want to go in a significantly different direction from Bush.
- **Taxes.** Despite the president's new appeal for making his tax cuts permanent, voters do not want to go with Bush on taxes. Amazingly, by 53 to 42 percent, voters want a major new direction. That represents a continuing and significant shift to the Democrats on taxes.
- **Outsourcing jobs and NAFTA.** While we did not address the question directly, views of NAFTA continue to slide, with negative views outnumbering positive ones by 9 points. Intense opponents outnumber intense supporters by three-to-one.
- **Deficits.** Voters are aware of the out-of-control deficits, which says that the country's finances have gone badly wrong, threatening important priorities.

Voters want to change the Bush direction on “the federal budget” by 62 to 30 percent), now the strongest area of advantage for the Democrats.

Bush’s Standing and Vote

President Bush has variously been viewed as popular and achieving record-breaking job approval ratings. Now, he is not so popular (50 percent warm) and his job approval rating has fallen to 50 percent, with 47 percent disapproving. It is worth noting that it is approval, rather than popularity that matters most to the vote. In the regression modeling, changes in approval rating has four times the impact as changes in Bush’s favorability. But what are the issues and attacks that most impact Bush’s approval?

The following rank-order list of dimensions and issues is based on regression models predicting job approval and the presidential vote:

Bush’s lack of a hopeful vision for the future ***

Bush hostage of corporate special interests **

Bush’s honesty and trustworthiness**

Health care: continue or change direction

Iraq: worth it or not

Bush in over his head

Economy: continue or change direction

Employment/jobs: continue or change direction

These are the levers, when worked, that can have the greatest impact on Bush’s standing.

Emerging Voting Patterns

Kerry has emerged in the lead in the race, with evidence that some groups have been stirred and moved significantly over the last three months. The biggest shifts have come among young voters under 30 and with all voters over 50 years of age. There are dramatic shifts with older women and particularly white non-college older women; white high school educated have moved (reflected in the shifts among older voters), as have voters in union households; Catholics too have shifted significantly. There have been big shifts among independents and in the battleground congressional districts and states. There has not been an appreciable shift yet in rural areas that could impact many of the states key to an electoral college majority.

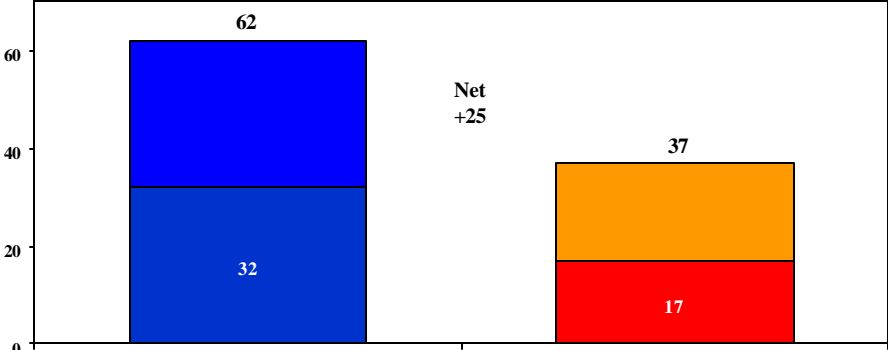
In terms of the most likely Democratic support groups, union households are voting strongly Democratic, but white union households could be producing a stronger Democratic majority. White seniors break even, but that represents about a 5-point gain over the past decade. (The sample size is too small to speak about African-Americans and Hispanics, though the numbers here are encouraging.) Among whites, the strongest support groups are college-educated women (+5), union households (+10) and older non-college educated women (+9). But it is important to note that the strongest Democratic group among whites are the unmarried women (+16), though they are also the least institutionally connected and most uncertain to vote.

Kerry and Democratic Messages

While there is considerable message refinement ahead, the latest survey shows Democratic messages of real power. Each message leads about half the electorate to be much more or somewhat more likely to vote for Kerry; overall, over 60 percent indicated some greater likelihood of voting Democratic.

The three strongest messages are presented in the graphs below. They are nearly equally strong and capture part of the framing suggested above. The first, stresses the need for a president who will stand up for ordinary citizens and to the corporate special interests. The second deplors the values that now rule in Washington and the corporate board room, the irresponsibility and greed, CEO excesses, when we should be honoring those who work hard and love their country. And the third focuses on Bush's go-it-alone foreign policy, misplaced priorities and failure to meet our obligations at home, while stressing Kerry's commitment to advance America's interests and share the burden.

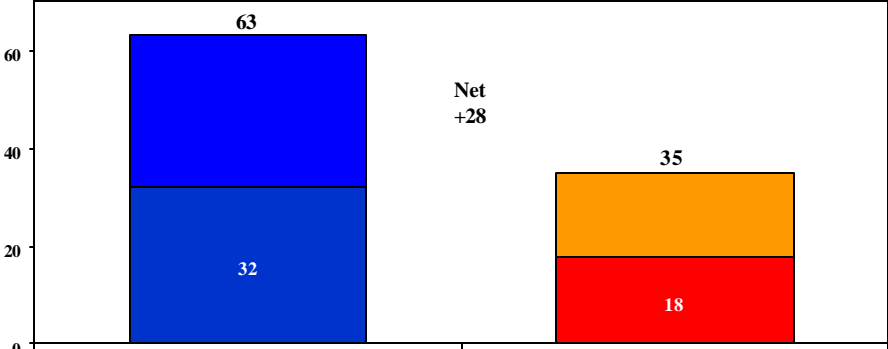
Kerry Message: Stand Up for Ordinary Citizens



We need a president who will stand up for ordinary citizens and stand up to the corporate special interests - like big oil, the HMO's, and drug companies that flood President Bush's campaign with money. I am running for President to restore fairness and prosperity to our economy. I will battle to stop the drug industry from overcharging Americans, and I will repeal the Bush tax cuts to those making over 375 thousand dollars so we can invest in education and health care for all.

- Much more likely to support
- Somewhat/A little more likely to support
- Less likely to support
- No more likely to support

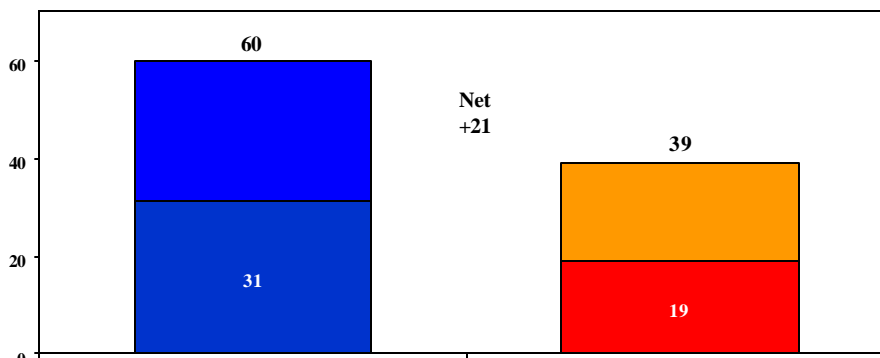
Kerry Message: Critique of Corporate Values



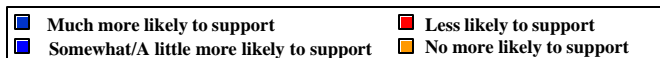
I am upset with the values that now rule in Washington and corporate board rooms. Irresponsibility and greed now seems okay. It's now okay, it seems, for a CEO to make 41 times as much as the ordinary worker, for CEOs to cash out with stock options while employees lose their pensions. While the country is at war, the government protects tax breaks for corporations that relocate abroad and still get defense contracts. I intend to bring different values to Washington, where we honor those who work hard and love their country.

- Much more likely to support
- Somewhat/A little more likely to support
- Less likely to support
- No more likely to support

Kerry Message: Foreign Policy



We have to finish what we started in Iraq, but President Bush's go-it-alone foreign policy has weakened our alliances, put our troops in danger, cost us billions of dollars, and hurt our ability to meet our obligations here at home, to improve our own country. As a Vietnam veteran who knows the cost of war, I say it is time for a new policy that enables us to put America's interests first and work closely with our allies to share the burden in Iraq and win the war on terrorism.



The messages together suggest the power of a Democratic message focused on having a president who will battle for the middle class and the ordinary citizen, indeed, for the whole country, rather than a president who is part of the current culture of Washington, where almost any corporate excess is excused.

The Culture War and John Kerry

With the Democrats now moving into the lead in the presidential race, the Republicans will surely move to tarnish John Kerry's standing – to push him out of the mainstream and out of touch. Indeed, given the structural factors that are putting the Democrats in the lead, this becomes an ever more urgent task. The period after Super Tuesday is likely to be ugly and may well be the most important two months of the election period.

The president signaled in the State of the Union that he would seek to battle the election on the terrain of cultural issues and values. A large portion of the address was devoted to protecting the institution of the family, with the issue of gay marriage the most important lever. That is understandable, in political-tactical terms. In this poll, 49 percent of the country thinks society should discourage homosexuality, while 44 percent thinks it should be accepted. That is actually a fairly remarkable number, a fairly even divide on an issue that is supposed to create a wedge in the Democratic world. Still, the intensity is on the opponents' side (43 versus 30

percent) and a range of key groups break heavily against such tolerance, including seniors, non-college older women and voters in rural areas. There is a logic to all this.

In this survey, we launched a series of attacks on Kerry's record – things that have been described in a range of publications, including *The New Republic*, and reflect the battering that Kerry took during the 1996 race against Governor Weld. While there may well be other vulnerabilities, the strongest here center on taxes, crime and cultural liberalism (including gay marriage and welfare reform). Each raise very serious doubts for about a third of the electorate and total serious doubts for about 60 percent. (The results are in the distributed frequency questionnaire.)

Each respondent was read five long attacks on Kerry. (They also heard three messages from Kerry, as described above, and the order randomized.) They did their damage, as Kerry, previously ahead by 4 points, fell 4 points behind the president. These attacks, unanswered, would obviously damage the current frontrunner and imperil his lead.

But a strong response gets heard by seemingly receptive voters. At the end of the survey, we presented voters with a Kerry rejoinder which challenges the attack on his values and patriotism. Highlighting his service, opposition to gay marriage and commitment to tolerance and diversity, Kerry declares that the election is about changing Washington by giving voice to ordinary citizens rather than the corporations. He describes his agenda of job creation, getting health care costs under control, education and retirement. After this rejoinder, Kerry reclaims the lead in the race (50 to 47 percent), essentially back to the original race, favoring the Democrats.

The Republicans are attacking my values and questioning my patriotism, but I served my county proudly in Vietnam and value the veterans who rally to me now. Apparently, President Bush wants an election about gay marriage, and I'm opposed to that. I believe in tolerance and diversity. But we need big change in America, so ordinary citizens, not corporations, get heard in Washington. We need to create jobs and get healthcare costs under control. Rather than more tax cuts for the very richest and exploding deficits, we need improved education and a secure retirement. So, I welcome an election about how we best take care of America.

This is clearly a moment for Democrats to be pressing their advantage as the structure of the race is firmed up. That structure will be tested in the months ahead as the Democratic nominee faces a sustained attack, but this poll suggests, Democrats can engage confidently and solidify their strong prospects for 2004.