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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

From: Stan Greenberg
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RE: THE BUSH BATTLE
Notes on the Most Recent Democracy Corps Poll

Faced with falling poll numbers and declining public confidence in his leadership on the economy and Iraq, George Bush is battling to regain public trust. The administration's counter-offense has produced some stabilization, but it comes with a continuing price tag and with continuing political losses. This survey largely affirms the framework for the emerging 2004 race, increasingly favorable for Democrats.

The latest Democracy Corps survey¹ does show Bush winning back a little of the lost ground on Iraq: a modest 50 percent now he thinks he has good plans, up 6 points in the last month, and that has produced more voters thinking the country is headed in the right direction (up from 37 to 42 percent). He has regained 4 points on honesty to 61 percent, but still 10 points below July. Overall, that has produced a modest 2-point increase in Bush's job approval, 55 percent, up from 53 percent. That represents a partial reversal of trends, mostly around Bush's pursuit of the war, but such gains are mostly isolated for now.

The framework for 2004 is taking shape, very much in the form that emerged in the previous Democracy Corps polls. If anything, the trends have become clearer.

1. *Political decline.* The President continues to lose ground in the match-up with the generic Democratic candidate. For the first time, we have the race even (47 to 47 percent), after trailing by 2 in September, 5 in August, 7 in July and 12 in June. For the first time since 9-11 (over two years), the Democrats are viewed more favorably than the Republicans and have moved into a 6-point lead on the generic congressional. With the Democrats now clearly ahead in the last three polls, we are confident that we have entered a significantly improved partisan environment for Democrats.

¹Democracy Corps conducted a national survey of 1,007 likely voters October 14-19, 2003.

2. Bush's personal attributes. While Bush's approval has gone up modestly, his personal favorability has not, with just over 50 percent giving him positive marks; a near majority (49 percent) still thinks he is in over his head – a remarkable lack of basic confidence in the commander in chief.

3. For corporations, not people. The focus on business involvement in Iraq, the tax cuts and budget have strongly re-enforced the impression that this President and administration act for big business, rather than people. On this dimension, Bush's position has worsened in the last month. Almost two-thirds now say Bush is more for big business than the average person (64 percent, up 2 points). Underscoring the role of Iraq in this perception, 55 percent say Bush is "President for the oil companies" – up 4 points (with intense agreement up 6 points). These crystallized perceptions may play a bigger role in our framework in the months ahead.

4. Cavalier use of the military and go-it-alone foreign policy. While Bush has convinced some voters that he has a plan and a resolve, at the same time, he has deepened the sense that he too cavalierly uses the military as he pursues a unilateralist foreign policy. A sizeable majority of 55 percent says Bush is "too quick to use our military abroad" – up 6 points this month. A like number says Bush has a "go-it-alone foreign policy that hurts our relations with allies" – up 3 points, with intense responses up 5.

5. Trade-off against home. Nearly 60 percent of the country now says Bush is spending too much abroad and neglecting problems at home." That is up 3 points, with intense responses up 6 – with 39 percent of the country now strongly believing this about the administration.

5. Losing control of the deficits. Remarkably, 62 percent want to go a "significantly different direction" from Bush on the deficit, compared to only 31 percent who want to continue Bush's policies – a 31-point net advantage for change, which has doubled since June. There is no other area where the public is so clear about changing the Bush course.

6. Economic worries continue. There is no evidence that macro economic change or public reporting about it has impacted thinking on the economy. In rank order, these are the top economic worries – rising health care costs, unemployment, employers cutting back contributions for employees' health insurance and benefits, the federal deficit, stagnant wages and salaries, and job losses to China – and all have remained high and stable over the last 30 days. High taxes is the lowest ranked economic problem and just 45 percent support the President's tax cut plan. (We will monitor the impact of the increased growth, but with an expectation that economic worries will matter to the great majority of Americans well into the campaign.)

Iraq

The country still wants to continue the Bush direction on the “war on terrorism” (64 to the 32 percent who want significant change). While the country is looking for change and increasingly, new leadership, it is not seeking an anti-war President. Large majorities of the country think it was right to remove Saddam Hussein. The war on terrorism continues and the Democratic Presidential candidates will surely advocate carrying it forward in effective and credible ways.

But the public is in a very different mood with respect to Iraq and with respect to our relations with our allies and countries around the world. Just 48 percent believe the war was worth the cost, while 46 percent now say it was not. Support for the war has dropped in every poll, including this one, since May. While 49 percent say they want to continue Bush’s direction on Iraq, 47 percent say they want to go in a “significantly different direction.”

On foreign policy, more voters now say they want to go in a significantly different direction than continue with Bush (47 to 45 percent). People understand the instability and the cost of a unilateralist foreign policy, borne in the front line by the troops and paid here at home with reduced funding for essential programs. Bush continues to lose people’s confidence in this critical area.

When it comes to the 87 billion dollars, voters are conflicted because they do not want to leave the troops exposed. In this survey, 47 percent support the money and 49 percent oppose, though there are many more strong opponents. But when it comes to the vote in Congress, a majority opts for “yes,” largely because of the argument to support the troops. The biggest bloc of voters agrees with a member “who votes yes to support the troops but expresses many doubts about the open-ended reconstruction aid.”

Wherever members come out on this issue, supporting the troops should be a consistent, and consistently reaffirmed, Democratic commitment.

87 Billion Dollars

The President’s request for the \$87 billion is no doubt contributing to his worsening position on priorities, budgets and the economy. The support mentioned above is reluctant. Thus, the \$87 billion remains a powerful symbol of the squeeze Bush has put the country in with his policies.

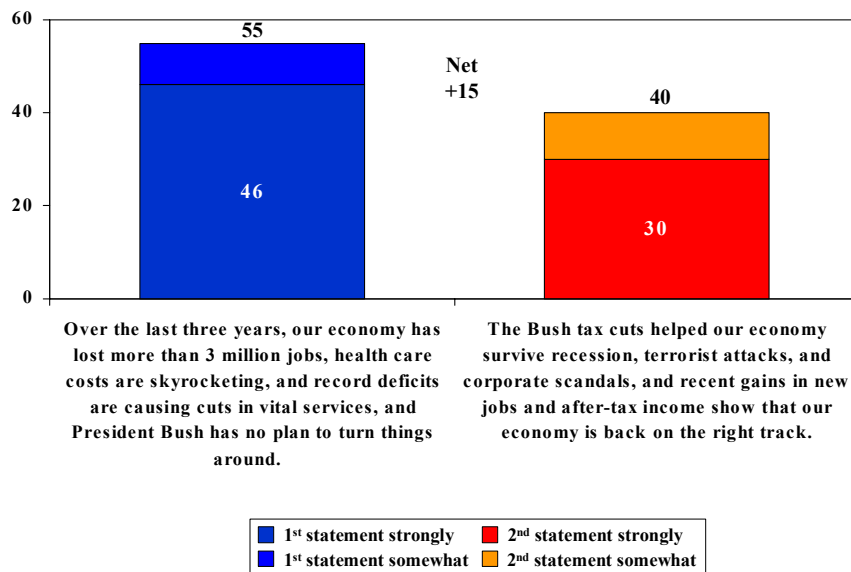
The two strongest critiques of the \$87 billion and the Iraq policy center on the forced spending cuts at home and the continuing loss of life in Iraq. Each raises serious doubts for almost 60 percent of the voters, including almost a third who have “very serious” doubts after hearing these statements.

MOST EFFECTIVE CRITIQUES OF IRAQ POLICY		
	Very serious doubts	Total serious doubts
<i>Because of the 87 billion dollars for Iraq, the government will be forced to cut spending on education and health care, and fail to meet the necessary funding for Social Security.</i>	31	59
<i>Since President Bush declared an end to major military action, 194 American soldiers have died in Iraq, American forces suffer 20 attacks a day, and there is no plan to relieve the burden on our soldiers.</i>	30	58

The Economic Debate

The President is losing the essential economic debate (economic problems vs. making progress) by about 10 points when poised in partisan terms and by 15 points when poised without a partisan choice. Job losses, deficits and rising health care costs, for now, trump the President’s focus on the impact of 9-11, tax cuts and new job gains.

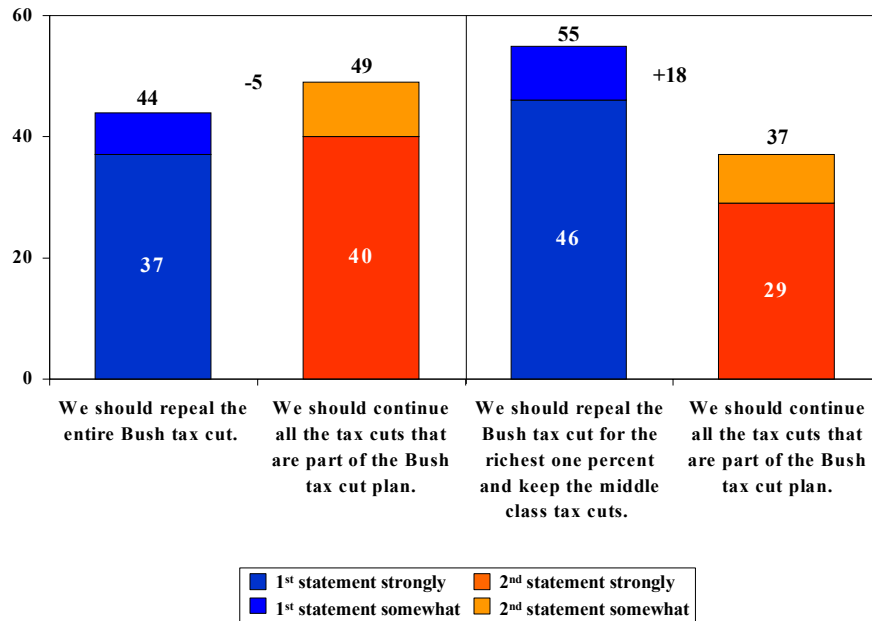
Figure 1: Bush Economic Record



That is consistent with the continuing desire for change on the economy: 55 percent want a “significantly different direction,” while 41 percent would continue with Bush’s direction. That structure remains intact and largely unchanged. The desire for change potentially could be eroded over the next year, but we will monitor and help point to the areas where the public remains most critical of Bush’s economic policy. Macro-change normally takes many years to offset three years of economic decline, but we are alert to the importance of this issue.

As the Democrats offer their own economic plans and critique, it is important to showcase tax cuts for the middle class. The results of this survey are dramatic on this point. A Democrat advocating the repeal of all Bush tax cuts loses the argument to Bush by 5 points (44 to 49 percent). But a Democrat who wants to repeal the top rate cuts and maintain middle class tax cuts wins the debate with Bush by 18 points (55 to 37 percent). That is a 23-point swing to the Democrat, which will hopefully impress those addressing this issue in the Democratic primaries.

Figure 2: Repeal Entire Tax Cut vs. Repeal Only for Richest



Finally, when offered a choice between an election focused on economic issues versus one focused on cultural ones, the voters overwhelmingly choose the former (corporate abuse, unemployment and rising health care costs).

Core Message

Last month, we suggested a core message to Democrats based on the findings of the September Democracy Corps survey. In our new poll conducted last week, we put that message up against the best Bush message. Our core message, as one can see below, defeats Bush's by 6 points – in a poll where Bush and the Democrats run evenly in a generic contest.

MESSAGE COMPARISON		
	Much more likely to support	Much/somewhat more likely to support
<i>The Democratic candidate says, President Bush has no plan for the economy and Iraq and is overwhelmed by the big problems facing our country. 3 million jobs lost, health care costs up thirteen percent a year. The budget deficits exploding. His go-it-alone foreign policy has failed to win allied support, which means US taxpayers and US troops carrying the full burden. His top priority is tax cuts for corporations and the wealthiest one percent. That means cuts in spending for education and health care, and a lack of funds for Social Security. I will repeal Bush's tax cuts for the wealthiest 1 percent, preserve middle class tax cuts, and make sure we place a higher priority on taking care of our problems here in America.</i>	29	47
<i>President Bush says, we are keeping our promises to the American people. Our record tax cuts gave taxpayers more of their own money and set the stage for sustained growth, but there is more work to be done. We'll create a million new jobs in the next year, lower health care costs by eliminating frivolous lawsuits, and set a new energy policy that decreases our dependence on foreign sources. Since 9/11, we have taken necessary steps to protect our people and weaken terrorist organizations. In Iraq and Afghanistan, we removed regimes that promoted terrorism and freed their peoples. Democrats have failed to fully back our troops in Iraq and now want to raise taxes to pay for more government programs. America needs strong leadership and a commitment to permanent tax relief.</i>	24	41

Conclusion

One year out from the election, the Democrats have the better message and a partisan advantage, which reflects the structure of public thinking about the President and the state of the country. This political reality has gained even greater clarity and force as the President battles to regain his standing. Obviously, there is a long battle ahead, but one that Democrats should feel confident in joining and hopeful about winning

The sure Bush re-election has become an even proposition at best. The foreign policy issues the Republicans trumpeted as their strong suit are becoming a source of weakness. And here at home, despite signs of some macro-economic improvement, a recovery accepted as real by real people seems likely to lag behind. And by election day, the primary beneficiaries of any gains seem likely to be the same wealthier group that benefited from the Bush tax cuts. Even beyond this, the Bush Administration has no policy at all to deal with the single greatest economic concern – the rising costs of health care.

Democrats have available a stronger message than Republicans and the prospect of a second one-term Bush Presidency is very real.