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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

From: Stan Greenberg
James Carville

RE: TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC PURPOSE
A Survey and Resource for Democrats Taking Stock

The Democrats emerged from the 2004 election defeated, but as a more than competitive party at the polls. But Democrats fell short and will continue to fall short, as they are faltering in the battle for ideas, purpose, strength, values and advocacy. With Democratic voters themselves leading the pull back from the party, it is obviously time for Democrats to take stock.

We want to emphasize how competitive and polarized our politics remain, lest progressives overreact to the defeat and the Republican's current ascendancy. The Democrats are ahead in the congressional generic contest. Bush, even on the eve of his inauguration, is a troubled president, governing a troubled country. A majority still want to go in a significantly different direction; a growing majority believe the war in Iraq was not worth the cost and prefer a multilateral approach to the world; an even larger majority denies the economy creates rising employment or income for most people.

But the Republicans are viewed more favorably overall than the Democrats, led by a crash of positive sentiment for the Democratic Party among voters who identify as Democrats. Republican voters look at the parties today much as they did before the election; among independents, regard for the Democrats dropped somewhat, though independents still prefer them to the Republicans. Democratic voters are another story: "warm" feelings for the Democrats dropped 12 points (from 86 to 74 percent) since the election. It is the Democrats who are demanding something more, perhaps a reckoning.

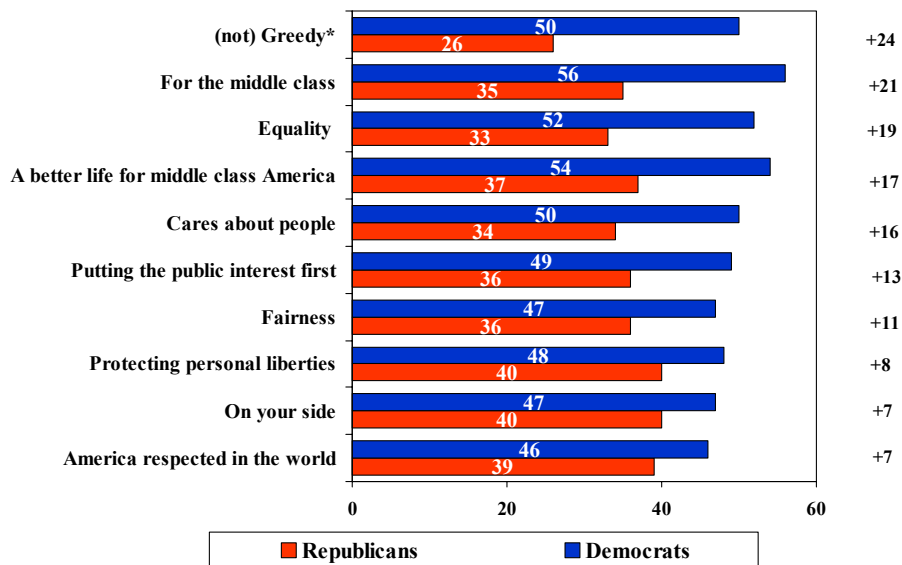
This survey is meant to facilitate the stock-taking, providing progressives with basic information about the parties at the beginning of 2005. We are not trying to be prescriptive at this point, rather to contribute to the critical discussions ahead.¹

Democrats Falling Short

Democrats begin with some core strengths, no doubt at the heart of their brand – a party that is better for the middle class, for equality, cares about people, fairness and, perhaps most important, much less indulgent of greed and that puts the public interest first. All those emerge as their strongest attributes (in comparison with the Republicans). In the regression modeling, putting the public interest first is one of the best predictors of feelings about the two parties. Democratic support for the environment may well form part of this public-interest dimension.

Associations: Party Comparisons

Democratic Advantages



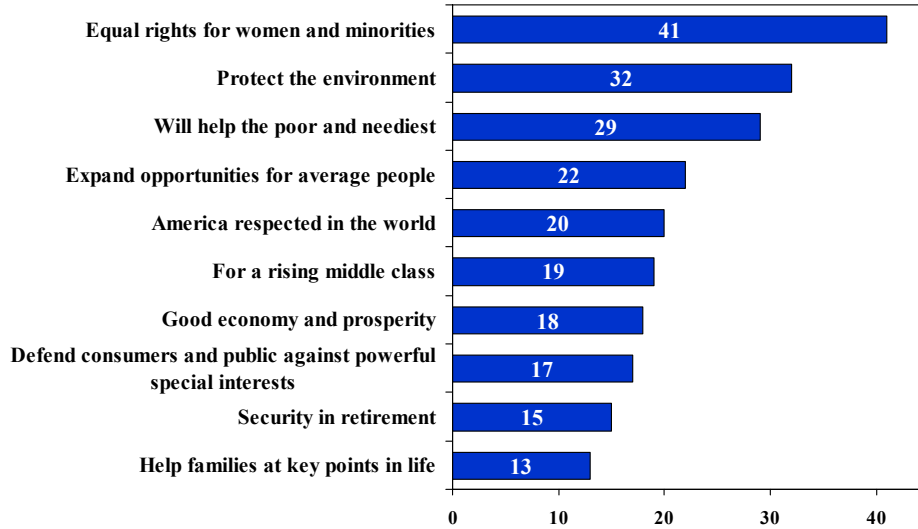
*Asked as "Greed," this was the only negative association tested in the battery

The Democratic advantage on the middle class dimension, and probably greed, is driven more by doubts about Republican partiality for the privileged than by confidence in Democratic support for the middle class. When we asked voters what were the most important positive things about the Democrats (without comparison to the Republicans), they focused on equal rights for women, protecting the environment, and helping the poor and neediest, rather than expanding opportunity for the average person, for a rising mid-

¹ Democracy Corps conducted a national survey of 998 likely voters conducted January 16-20, 2005. The margin of error is +/- 3.1%. For the entire poll, go to www.democracycorps.com

dle class, and for a good economy and prosperity, which fell much lower on the list of positives. And when we ask about the negative attributes of the Republicans (without comparison), the biggest is their being for the big corporations and most privileged.

Democratic Party Positive Attributes
Top Three Choices

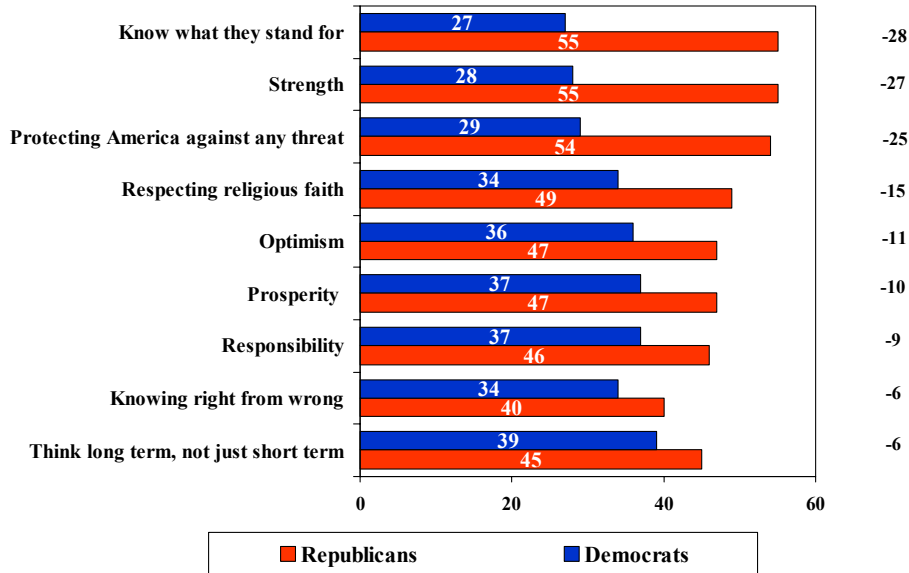


“When thinking positively about the Democratic Party, which THREE of the following phrases do you associate with the Democrats?”

But on the key dimensions essential for the Democrats’ re-emergence as a dominant national force, the party falls woefully short. As voters compare the parties, they see a Democratic Party without purpose and defining ideas; a party not at all strong (weak politically, without strong leaders and direction); not the go-to party on protecting the country; ambivalent on basic values, like right and wrong and responsibility; and only marginally ahead on advocacy for people, being on their side.

Associations: Party Comparisons

Republican Advantages

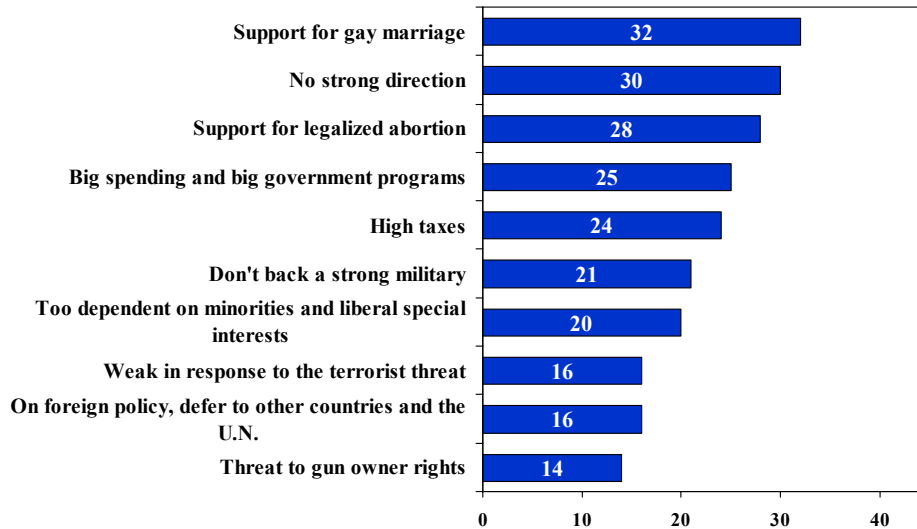


The starting point for all else is the Republicans’ 28-point advantage (55 to 27 percent) on “knowing what they stand for.” In focus groups, participants talk about “there are too many gray issues for Democrats” and “they’ve got to start standing for something. You can’t be all things to all people.” That is re-enforced by a sense that John Kerry was a “flip-flopper,” underscoring the lack of clear direction. “Kerry one day was over here, and then he was over there. Yeah I do think that’s right and no, I didn’t say that,” said one participant. Another said, “He’s the guy that holds up the line at McDonald’s.” The collective impression is that Democrats have no strength of conviction or clarity of direction. That reflects the most immediate national election, but also 2002 when Democrats sought the lowest common denominator and failed to challenge the Republicans on taxes, the economy or Iraq. In the regression model, knowing what the parties stand for is one of the top predictors of party ratings.

While weaknesses on strength and protecting the country are quite important to the current period, this finding may have much more to do with George Bush’s current post 9/11 role, then with grave, nagging doubts about the Democrats. Being for a strong military was far away the biggest positive attribute of the Republicans (without comparison, cited by 44 percent). When we asked voters about the negative attributes of the Democrats (without comparison), they focused on the cultural issues, like gay marriage and abortion, as well as Democrats having no strong direction. There was a modest amount of concern with big government and taxes, but all the security issues – not backing a

strong defense, being weak in response to the terrorists or too dependent on the UN for foreign policy – fell to the bottom of the list.²

Democratic Party Negative Attributes
Top Three Choices



“When thinking negatively about the Democratic Party, which THREE of the following phrases do you associate with the Democrats?”

Indeed, Democrats have a modest advantage on America being respected in the world (+ 7 points) – at a time when a majority of the country (55 percent) thinks that is at least as important as military strength in making the country secure. Democrats must do well on security, but it is not at all clear that the issue is blocking them from getting a hearing with the public.

Values may be such an impediment. The Republicans have significant advantages on respecting religious faith, on responsibility and knowing right from wrong. As we saw earlier, the biggest worries about the Democrats center on the cultural issues.

The Democrats have a small advantage on being “on your side” (+7 points), but that is not impressive for a party that is supposed to fight for the average family. As we noted before, few voters see the Democrats primarily focused on raising the middle class. Even fewer say it is the party that defends consumers and the public against powerful special interests. The Democratic Party does not seem particularly authentic as a battler for people.

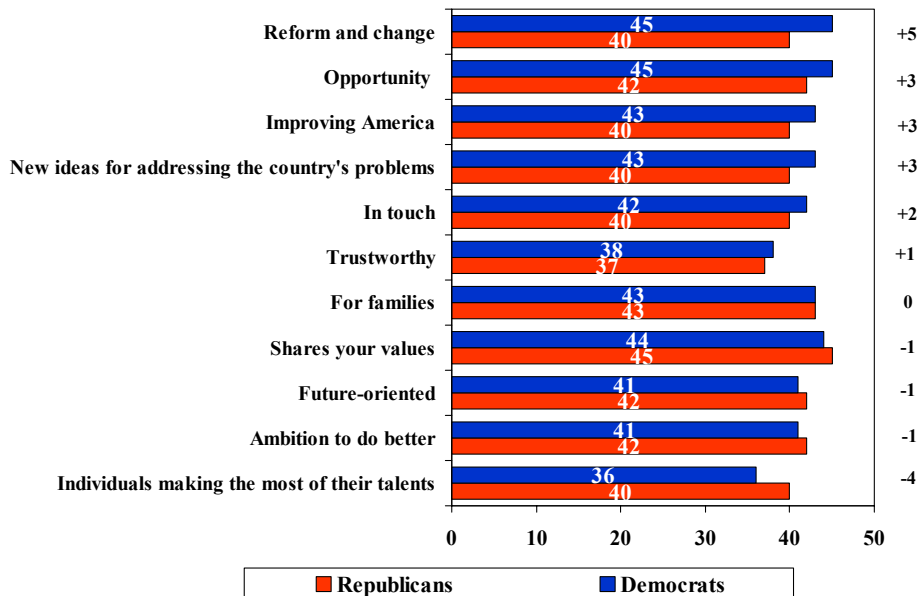
² Our post-election survey showed similar results on doubts about John Kerry. The biggest doubts were about him being a “flip-flopper” and his positions on gay marriage and abortion, while doubts about his ability to handle security issues were at the bottom of the list.

The Contested Values

For all the problems Democrats have on clarity, strength, values and advocacy, they are nonetheless at parity with the Republicans. Imagine if this period brought new clarity, a defining framework and direction, a new unity in challenging the Republicans, greater attention to values and a passionate advocacy for average Americans.

What is striking is how much of the values playing field is contested and up for grabs. Right now, the voters mostly cannot distinguish between the parties on reform and change, opportunity, or improving America and new ideas, though Democrats begin with a small advantage. The parties are indistinguishable on being in touch, trust, being for families, shares your values, the future and ambition to do better.

Associations: Party Comparisons
Contested



Some of these should belong decisively to the Democrats. How can the out-of-power Democrats throw out the Republicans when Democrats have almost no advantage on change and reform? Given their history, how can the Democrats not own the value, opportunity? How can the pro-business and pro-wealthy Republicans be tied on being in touch? And after the decade of the nineties and the uneven growth in Bush's first term, how can the Republicans have a decided advantage on prosperity?

But after the culture war waged by the Republicans, how can they have no advantage on shares your values, trustworthy, and being for families?

The party that figures out these paradoxes will tilt the playing field decisively.

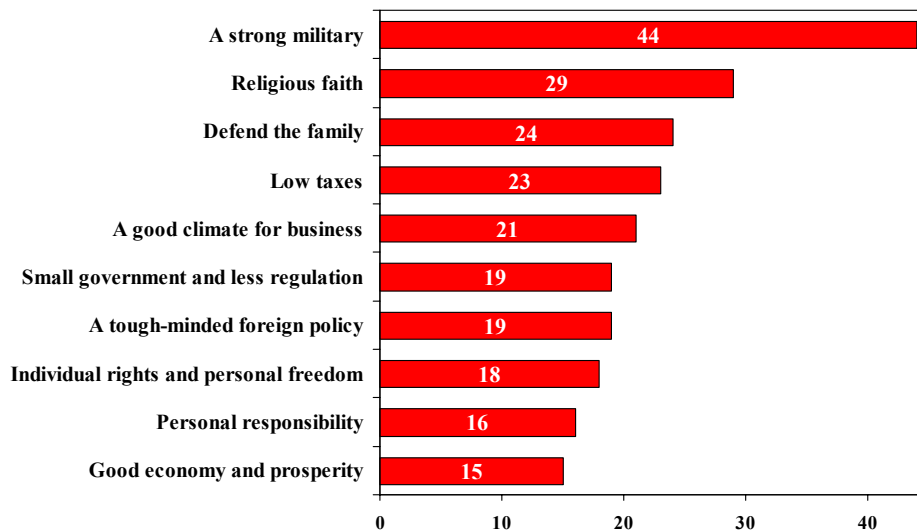
The Troubled Republicans

Because the Democrats face great challenges to shape their political future, we should not presume that the Republicans are particularly strong. Perhaps the most striking finding is the 50 percent who want to go in a significantly different direction from Bush, even as he was taking the oath of office. Just 46 percent want to continue his direction.

The Republicans' positive standing (without comparison) is rooted in their building a strong military and their strong faith in religion and the family. They get some attention on taxes and a good business climate. But people do not single them out on the "good economy and prosperity" or their "tough-minded foreign policy."

Republican Party Positive Attributes

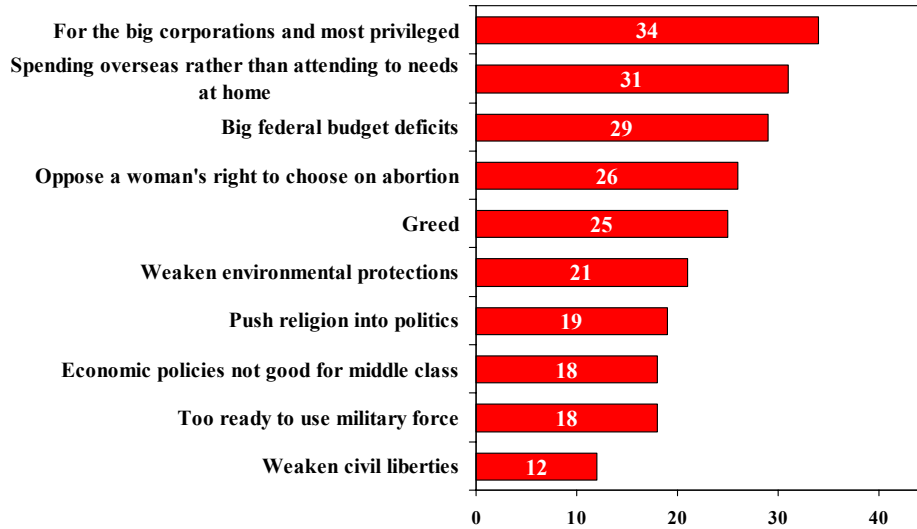
Top Three Choices



"When thinking positively about the Republican Party, which THREE of the following phrases do you associate with the Republicans?"

When focused on negative attributes, voters crowd around some very big concepts: the idea that the Republicans are for the big corporations and the privileged, that they are attentive to problems overseas rather than in America, and that they have run up big federal budget deficits.

Republican Party Negative Attributes Top Three Choices



“When thinking negatively about the Republican Party, which THREE of the following phrases do you associate with the Republicans?”

Beginning Ideas

This survey was conducted to provide fresh information for developing discussions in the progressive community. Ourselves, we are very far away from recommending a firm course for Democrats. Nonetheless, we conducted a sample battle of ideas just to see how Democrats might begin to challenge the Republican framework. In this test, the Republicans say their most important principle is “self-sufficiency,” and everything else follows from that. The Democrats say their most important principle is “increasing opportunity and community,” and similarly, construct a framework of connected ideas.

COMPETING FRAMEWORKS		
<i>Opportunity and Community versus Self-Sufficiency</i>		
	Strongly Prefer	Total Prefer
The Democrats most important principle is increasing opportunity and community. They think that America is stronger when we invest in people, reward hard work and build a stronger middle class. A good community creates greater security in health care and retirement. Their goal is a rising prosperity for all, not just the few. They deplore the greed and big special interests that act at the expense of the public. We are respected because of our military, but also because of our commitment to the American dream. ³	45	51
The Republicans' most important principle is self sufficiency. They think America is stronger when we promote personal responsibility and strong family values based on morality and faith. Government should get off people's backs so they are free to make their own choices. Taxes should be kept low so that businesses can succeed and America can prosper. We are respected in the world because we built a strong military and do what needs to be done to protect our freedom.	38	45

The voters preferred the Democratic framework by 51 to 45 percent, a 6-point margin. We highlight that only to underscore that Democrats have an immense opportunity to define the choice, set out their ideas and proposals, and contest for the soul of America.

³ Half the sample was given this message with the word “responsibility” rather than “community” in the first sentence, but the results were no different.