

Date: March 22, 2016

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What is motivating the Rising American Electorate in 2016

Observations from WWVW focus groups in Ohio

The country is in a desperate mood, expressed in the public's discontent with the direction of country. The anxiety begins with an economy you can't depend on that produces a struggling middle class, inequality and a growing disparity between rich and poor. It extends to a decline in morals and lack of personal responsibility, pushed by the media, which breeds more drugs and crime. And importantly, it is produced by a toxic political environment. Donald Trump's victories leave them questioning the country's values, whether they can trust their neighbors, and what the future holds. It is a dangerous brew that generates impassioned, engaged discussion in focus groups. It has created an election with high stakes.

This memo outlines the findings of four focus groups conducted by Democracy Corps on behalf of WWVAF and VPC in Cleveland and Akron, Ohio on March 8-9 among segments of the Rising American Electorate: African American women (we included both frequent and less frequent voters), white unmarried millennial women, white unmarried older women, and white non-college unmarried women.

Two story lines emerge from these groups. The financially pressed mostly working class white unmarried and millennial women get past their doubts about Clinton in this context to support a progressive narrative for change. A second story line dominates the African American group where the stakes of the election have suddenly changed dramatically and people process events through a new filter. These stories have increased chances for an engaged and consolidated vote in November. That should produce a major strategic turn in the campaign ahead.

The country's mood

There is striking negativity about the direction of the country. The words these women most commonly use include "*sad*," "*disappointed*," "*frustrated*," and "*confused*."



The recovering economy: “But, what kind of jobs are they?” Their discontent begins with jobs that don’t pay enough and don’t reward hard work and loyalty.

Well, personally, with working full-time and for a company for as long as I have, I don’t feel like I’m getting ahead. And I’ve taken on a lot more responsibility. (White unmarried older woman)

To bring back jobs that pay well and to replace some of these low paying jobs. I get tired of them citing – I’m not really against Kasich that much, but he’s always talking about how many jobs. He’s brought 400,000 jobs to Ohio. But, what kind of jobs are they? (White unmarried older woman)

I do real estate, so I see people’s wages are too low. (White unmarried older woman)

The lost middle class now with a greater consciousness of the disparity of wealth and trickle down. I have written for some time about the middle class, but something has changed. So many more people now talk about the loss of the middle class and inequality together: “*the wealth disparity, the loss of the middle class.*” Their first impressions of the economic situation include words like “*unequal,*” “*polarized,*” “*trickle,*” “*unfair,*” and “*corrupt.*”

I see everything being very divided, particularly where I work, I see a lot of nothing. People coming with nothing. Not being able to even find a job or anything like that, so I see a lot of dividedness between the upper and the lower class. (White non-college unmarried woman)

I think a big issue is inequality, which is very broad, but for example with poverty, I think people in poverty feel like they can’t get out. (White millennial unmarried woman)



There's people that are unemployed, there's people that are paid too much doing what they're doing. (White millennial unmarried woman)

CEOs, Wall Street and money in politics newly central to the economic and political story.

The first thing that comes to mind when they think about CEO's is their "*inflated wages*"; they are "*corrupt*," "*selfish*," "*working for the devil*," and embody "*greed*." Wall Street too is "*also corrupt*" and "*greedy*." They also use words like "*distrust*," "*unstable*," "*cutthroat*," and "*questionable*." What they do "*It's legalized gambling*." And it all translates into "money and politics."

The more you have, the more popular of a politician you'll be. (White unmarried millennial woman)

Bad mix. (White unmarried older woman)

And, yet, they're bedfellows. (White unmarried older woman)

The bad influence. Money just makes the bad influence. (White unmarried older woman)

Mood also shaped by decline in morals, focus on self, irresponsibility and drugs. When asked what is the most important problem that we're facing in our country today, the white millennial women rush to lament "*the decline in morals*." Their "*morals affect what they do with social media, environmentally, businesswise, every which way*." This was echoed across all of the groups without any prompting. They fear people today act without consequence or concern for others: "*Everybody's looking at themselves, only themselves, and not thinking beyond on that. And that's a real lack of civility anymore*." This negligence is witnessed first and foremost in the crime plaguing their communities. Gun violence and drugs are top of mind in all of our groups. They "*hear about a lot of robbing, shootings, drug deals gone bad*" and see a lot of drugs and overdoses in their own neighborhoods.

A troubling presidential race. Their uncertainty and anxiousness is elevated by the presidential race, specifically the emergence of Donald Trump. They find his views exasperating and are shocked by his campaign's tone. They describe him as "*divisive*," "*racist*," and "*chauvinistic*," among other things, and say he "*uses fear to gain support*." What will this mean for the country?

Hillary Clinton

Hillary Clinton is a positive figure for these women. She is "*serious*," "*strategic*," "*tenacious*," a "*hard worker*," "*committed*," "*resourceful*," "*a go-getter*," and "*when she gets in office, she's not going to be that easily broken*."

Clinton's experience in politics and government is one of their strongest arguments in her favor. They note her "*Previous experience in the White House as the First Lady*" and it is important to



them that “*She’s already been in there*” and saw “*firsthand what it takes to run a country.*” They also cite “*Her experience with foreign relations from her time as Secretary of State.*”¹ This is a reason to believe “*she’s probably more diplomatic than any of the other candidates*” and “*could probably deal wisely with other countries’ leaders.*” Her experience also gives her “*inside knowledge on important issues.*”

Above all else they believe Clinton “*would be better able to relate to women,*” understands the challenges they face as working women and mothers, would bring “*a woman’s perspective on important issues,*” and appreciates that “*It takes a village to raise a child.*”

I think she’s got the women’s issues in mind. (White unmarried older woman)

She’ll protect our reproductive rights, which I believe is very important. (White non-college unmarried woman)

I think also she has a family. Her daughter and grandchildren, so she’s got their future in mind too. So trying to shape the country for them is a big issue for her too I think. (White non-college unmarried woman)

In this toxic political season, she could bring a “*softer side to the world of politics.*” And “*She would inspire younger women if she gets elected.*” Finally, they note that “*She does have a president that we admired on her side.*” They are excited about “*Bill as First Husband.*”

Trustworthiness & Wall Street ties. Still, the primary and years in the political spotlight have taken their toll, especially among the white unmarried women. Her experience is a double-edge sword to the white unmarried millennial women who believe all career politicians fit a certain bill. We asked people to write down their doubts about voting for Clinton at the beginning of our conversation, and questions about her trustworthiness dominated the responses: “*dishonest; has been involved w/ politics too long. Sincerity isn’t there.*”

We tested a number of attacks against Clinton. These women say they are most concerned by an attack that begins by saying, “Clinton is continuously plagued by scandal and cannot be trusted as president,” and mentions the FBI investigation into her email server, Benghazi, and the Clinton Foundation. The constant stream of scandals erodes confidence: “*Just the scandal after – it’s just a list of scandals, and you wonder where it stops.*”

But when it comes to doubts that impact them personally, they are more concerned about connections to big business and Wall Street and worry “*she may be influenced by money [and] people with money.*” They wonder if taking donations means “*it’s going to be, if you scratch my*

¹ Interestingly, when it comes to her time as Senator or Secretary of State, the African American women and white unmarried millennial women admit “*none of us know what she did it’s not that, I mean it is a high position and everything, but we haven’t really heard a lot about it*” and they “*just don’t really think we know what that entails so to speak.*” (White unmarried millennial women)



back, I'll scratch yours." They wonder, does all this money mean she won't really stand up for the middle class?

She may have previous political influences from corporations which may sway her to make decisions that are not in the people's best interest. (White unmarried millennial woman)

Will "big business" and conservative Democrats influence her decisions? Will she follow through on promises to close the gap between the "rich" and "middle class"?" (White unmarried older woman)

[Maybe] she'll care more about you if you've got money versus if you're somebody that's not – doesn't have money, maybe, or just a normal, everyday kind of person. (White non-college unmarried woman)

Obama gridlock & the first woman president. More than before, these women voiced concerns about a female candidate. They have seen how Republicans have treated the first black president. They fear her opponents will prevent her from governing because she is a woman:

I just put the Congress and the House, I'm concerned they won't cooperate because the American people might condemn her just because she's a woman, the same as they do Obama because, I feel, because he's Black. (White unmarried older woman)

Because she is a woman, she may have a more difficult time implementing changes, and if they're all guys and she's a woman. (African American woman)

It was surprising to hear this come up as much as it did in all of these groups, including among her strong supporters. They may judge by the tone of the campaign and Trump's machismo that this commentary will only amplify. They wonder how this will impact all women.

Listening to Donald Trump

These women are paying very close attention to Donald Trump and what he is saying. Despite their overwhelming concern about Donald Trump and the tone of his candidacy, they could still understand some of his appeal. We asked each group to write down reasons to support Donald Trump and they saw his business experience as a major argument in his favor: *"He's a successful businessman, so he knows something about building up businesses and money and all that, and those ideas can be helpful."*

Some find his candor *"refreshing,"* appreciate that he *"Speaks his mind,"* and is *"not scripted."* This distinguishes him from other politicians: *"I like that because I think a lot of us are just to the point we're pissed off with a lot of the politicians because of how they are. They'll say one thing and then they get in office and it's the complete opposite of what they said they were gonna do."* If he were president *"It will not be business as usual, and you'll always know what he's*



thinking.” This is integrally related to the fact that he is self-funding his campaign and can speak for himself, not the donors: “He supports his own campaign, which I think is a good thing and bad thing because he does not have to worry about impressing sponsors.”

When we asked them to read messages from Trump, women in every group found points of agreement. Group after group responded to his overall message because it promised to make healthcare affordable and save Medicare by negotiating drug prices, because it promised to bring jobs back, and it acknowledged that we need to make better trade deals.

This is best illustrated by their response to Trump’s message on immigration. They agree it is important to address illegal immigration, but his approach leaves them torn. One African American woman admitted there was a grain of truth to his arguments on immigration and offered this poignant observation:

Donald Trump has been saying the things that we have joked about, and we only say it in joking because we don’t want to be looked at like a discriminatory person. [...] To be honest, if his approach were different, if he took it seriously, I might have considered him a serious candidate. (African American woman)

As women and minorities [notably also in Trump’s crosshairs], they refuse to scapegoat immigrants they say are mainly taking jobs Americans don’t want and have good intentions.

Deep Doubts about Trump. While these women are listening to Trump, they express deep doubts about his chauvinism and racism, intolerance, bullying and a leadership style that would harm America internationally.

Trump’s attitudes toward women, intolerance of diversity and prejudices towards certain communities is unacceptable for these groups.

He’s encouraging people’s uninformed racial & religious views and reinforcing that ignorance. This makes us no longer the land of the free, but the land of the white rich men. (White unmarried millennial woman)

Divisive, sexist, racist, rude, insulting, and he does it to everyone. (White unmarried older woman)

Chauvinistic. (White non-college unmarried woman)

Views women as accessories. (White unmarried millennial woman)

His views on religion/foreign[ers]. (White unmarried millennial woman)

He is racist, unrealistic, pushes a violent and hate based agenda. He doesn’t know who David Duke is. (White non-college unmarried woman)



He wants to drastically change certain things with our country, ex. No immigrants or building a wall. (White unmarried millennial woman)

Wanting to ship out any and all foreigners. (White non-college unmarried woman)

Don't like his racism towards certain groups. (White non-college unmarried woman)

Stylistically, they believe he bullies people to get his way: “Bully.” “Uses fear to gain support.” “Rude [...] He puts people down.” “Rude. Judgmental.” They believe he is “impulsive,” egotistical, “he’s always right,” “Has to be his way or no way.”

Accordingly, very many respondents worry about his impact on America’s relationships and role in the world. Trump would be problematic in foreign affairs and cannot be trusted on national security.

The opinions he’s causing other countries to have about him, which in turn makes our country as a whole look bad. (White unmarried non-college woman)

World-wide comparisons to Hitler-hatred. (White non-college unmarried woman)

Will lose allies. (White unmarried millennial woman)

Don't think he will be taken seriously internationally, other leaders will think he's a joke, we are vulnerable. (White unmarried older woman)

Will not be able to work w/ foreign leaders. (White unmarried older woman)

And what he says about Muslims and Mexico, what is he going to do when he has to deal with them? (White unmarried millennial woman)

And they worry about his cavalier talk about use of the military. “We have a pretty strong military, but a lot of this statement about bombing oil fields; it really shows how much empathy he lacks.”

We tested a number of attacks against Trump and their responses mirrored these concerns.

FOREIGN POLICY: Donald Trump will not keep our country safe. He says he gets his foreign policy advice from watching TV shows, and thinks his experience at a military academy in high school qualifies him to be commander in chief. Foreign policy is serious business, and there is nothing more dangerous than an erratic strong-man who can send your children to war or fire a nuclear weapon.

INTOLERANT: Donald Trump began his campaign calling immigrants criminals and rapists and promising to tear apart families to deport the 12 million immigrants currently living in the U.S. He advocated for an unconstitutional ban on all Muslims entering the



country and he refused to immediately disavow the endorsements of white supremacists and former Klu Klux Klan leader, David Duke. The president should be building bridges to bring people together, not erecting walls.

Clinton Vision and Message

Level the Playing Field Message. Clinton's positive attributes and the doubts about her matter so much because these women crave positive change. The strongest message we tested condemns inequality and vows to level the playing field with reforms and progressive policies.

LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD: We need a country that works for the middle class, not one governed by trickle-down economics. Today, jobs don't pay enough to live on and families and small businesses are struggling, yet CEOs and billionaires are using their lobbyists to write the rules so government works for them, not you. So, we should start by barring corporate and secret contributions and empowering small donors. And we should make sure taxpayers get their money's worth and root out waste and special interest tax breaks. Then, we can level the playing field for the middle class again. Protect Social Security against any cut in benefits. Make sure any trade agreement creates American jobs. Make college affordable and cut student debt. Help working families with child care, paid sick days and equal pay for women. And make sure the wealthiest pay their fair share in taxes so we can invest in American again.

The commitment to reform shows this candidate is serious about governing and has a plan for achieving their agenda. These women tend to believe reforming government so taxpayers get their money's worth is the most important thing to happen, but they also say the system is corrupt and want to see campaigns reformed so big money is out of politics.

Working Women. Policies to help working women are also very important. They appreciate a candidate who *"acknowledges a demographic reality that there are a lot of women who are the sole breadwinner for their household and their children."* They truly believe that *"the easier that we can make it for women to do what they need to do, I think that will also bring more prosperity to the country."* Someone who wants to ensure equal pay, paid family leave and affordable childcare shows *"they realize a woman's role has changed"* and *"they actually care about women."*

Trade. These women believe a commitment to trade agreements that create American jobs is an important addition to this message. Trump's attack on Clinton's trade position is a strong hit against her in these groups, and bringing trade into her message helps mitigate these concerns.

Education a high priority. Improving the quality of education at all levels is a high priority in each of the groups, and a growing concern compared to past focus groups. The women notice a difference between the education afforded to them and what is available to their children today: The white non-college unmarried women named this the highest priority of the next president: *"I think that Obama really focused on healthcare and that the next president should probably be*



focusing on higher education and preschools probably.” A strong message will include improving the quality of education for students at all levels in addition to making college affordable and reducing student loan debt.

How does all this affect turnout?

The Rising American Electorate still scores low on interest level in the election and turnout was relatively low in the Democratic primaries. But, will that be true in an election against Donald Trump? These groups suggest our interest question is capturing their disillusionment or lack of interest in politics, rather than a conclusion about voting. The women admitted they were “*kind of indifferent*,” “*really haven’t followed [the race] as closely as [they] should*,” and only know about “*what makes the news, pretty much. I don’t do any in-depth research.*”

There were a couple of Sanders supporters in the white unmarried millennial and white non-college unmarried groups who were following the Democratic race with interest, but most of these women had not yet tuned in. For now, the Republican primary “*circus*” has taken all of the oxygen in the room. And the presumption is that Clinton will be the nominee and they will pay more attention closer to the election: “*I’m just looking forward to it being a little bit closer so I can do more research on who’s left and that kind of thing.*” (White unmarried millennial woman)

But Trump’s presence in the race changes the stakes for these women. They see their future, the country, and more on the line: “*our country will be at stake*,” “*he will make a mockery of the entire thing*,” “*all hell literally would break loose*,” and “*the world will crash!*” With so much at stake, the women in all of the groups are strongly motivated to vote *against* Donald Trump and there is reason to believe that will be powerful enough to drive turnout: “*I’ll vote. I always try to get all my friends. If that guy gets in, we’re really in trouble.*” (White unmarried older woman)

And while some of the handful of Sanders supporters maintained they would only vote in November to stop Trump, saying “*We have to, but it’s almost with your eyes closed*,” others were eager to vote for whoever is the Democratic candidate in November and could offer reasons to support Hillary Clinton.

African American women in 2016

There is good reason to believe that African American women will turn out to vote in large numbers in 2016 even without President Obama on the ticket. We recruited a mix of high frequency and less frequent general election voters, but you could not tell by this discussion. The stakes are incredibly high for these women.

The feeling of uncertainty and desire for better was strongest among the African American women. They want to hear plans for making things better in this political season, but whenever they turn on the TV all they see is coverage of Donald Trump’s latest outrageous statement. What about the issues, they wonder?



I'm just disgusted. Everybody's mud-slinging. Nobody's really talking about issues that affect us, the working-class people.

It's more fighting versus, like she said, dealing with issues, statistics, game plan, strategic planning. You don't hear too much of that.

I mean, it's a lot of issues that need to be addressed, but they're not really saying how they're going to fix it. They're just too involved in the entertainment part of bashing that candidate and then it's just – I don't even really watch it anymore.

They are done with the distraction and political theatre: *“I put sad because people are just following entertainment. I mean, they're not – I mean, I'm just sad about it. I don't know what the world's coming to, what to look forward to.”*

It is difficult for them to understand why people support Donald Trump in spite of, or perhaps because of, his intolerant views. Where once they trusted such explicit prejudice was a thing of the past or at least no longer acceptable in a presidential campaign, they now question how widespread these views are in American society. And they take it very personally.

Frustrated that it seems to be that people are taking Trump seriously. And confused as to why.

I'm upset that Donald Trump is this far ahead, and people are still – they are still supporters [...] I can't believe that people are actually listening to this.

Sad about just the mindset of people, the ignorance of people.

The possibility of Donald Trump claiming the country's highest office further fuels their uncertainty about the future – their future, the country's future, indeed the world's future. They simply cannot afford for things to get worse: *“Four years seems like a short time, but the possibility of eight is a long time. I'm 30, and if in eight – if this person stays in office for eight years and I'm on the cusp of 40 and nothing has changed, everything has gotten worse, then I just feel like my life is backsliding.”*

President Obama's legacy is also at stake and they are determined to protect his accomplishments: *“The things that Obama did improve is at stake, because if there were a president who's not for Democratic beliefs or whatever the Democrats have set forth, that's going in shambles. And he worked hard [at] that [for] eight years.”* They *“want to keep it going, what President Obama put in place for the most part”* and that means *“we've got to keep a Democrat in office.”*

This group suggests the African American women will come out in force in November.

Every vote counts. And you not voting is actually a vote because your one vote could make the difference, and I don't want Donald Trump.



I want to make sure that if I have a comment or a disagreement or anything about it, at least I made a difference and voted, and I feel like I'll be able to do that because I did vote.

Even without President Obama on the ticket, they say this election is perhaps more consequential for them than previous elections: *“Because really this is a bigger test than, I believe, our last four years, because if we don't vote, I think we're going to be in worse trouble than if – even if Obama hadn't gotten there.”*