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To: Progressive community

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Early breakthrough moment in off-year elections

Guidance from focus groups of Trump & Clinton women voters in Ohio & Virginia

America has been roiled by the election of Donald Trump and total Republican control of the federal government. Will it be roiled again by a wave election in the coming off-year elections? That would require engaged and consolidated anti-Trump voters, demoralized Trump supporters and independent voters reacting against Trump and Republican overreach.

On behalf of Women's Voices Women Vote Action Fund (WWVAF), Democracy Corps conducted focus groups in the battleground states of Virginia and Ohio with the African American, white millennial and younger unmarried women and the white older unmarried and working class women who will play the critical role in determining whether that happens.¹ These are working women and they all have, to varying degrees, disappointed Democrats in terms of their vote and/or turnout in past off-year elections and in 2016.

Can Democrats get there?

This opening phase of focus group research gives us confidence that improved off-year performance, even a wave, is a real possibility.

The anti-Trump voters in these groups are engaging much earlier in the cycle than we have ever seen before. It is clear they are paying close attention to what is happening in the new administration and in the resistance and they hold intensely negative views of Trump. Their early engagement and intensity should impact what progressive groups do next.

But what might be the most important finding in this report is that the Trump voters too have reached a critical juncture. Less than 100 days into the Trump presidency there is an opportunity for further disillusionment and progressives should act on it.

¹ On behalf of Women's Voices Women Vote Action Fund, Democracy Corps conducted six focus groups March 23, 27, and 28 among working women in Ohio and Virginia: White unmarried women over 45 and white non-college women in Akron, Ohio, white unmarried women under 45 and white millennial women in Cleveland, Ohio, and African American women and white non-college women in Richmond, VA. Each group included a representative mix of Clinton (anti-Trump) and Trump voters.



To be sure, Trump voters in these groups (like the groups Democracy Corps conducted in Macomb County in February) are not expressing buyer's remorse. Many of Trump's supporters always doubted whether he had the right temperament and experience and wished he would stop tweeting. Half express those concerns now. But in none of the private written exercises at the beginning or end of these groups did any of the Trump voters indicate they regretted their choice.

They do not second-guess their vote because his opponents are so visibly resisting him and, they believe, refusing to accept the election result:

“More than half the people haven't come to terms with it. And they're still opposing it. We can't move on. And it seems like he tries to do things. They oppose it. Then everybody's out there protesting it.” (White non-college woman, Akron)

While some Trump voters are still “hopeful,” many worry the opposition will prevent Trump from getting anything done. They order his opponents to “stop being a bunch of pussies” and “being so sensitive and let's get some stuff done.”

But the failure of the Trump-Ryan ACA replacement and the release of the first Trump budget have allowed a very different concern to take hold. After being exposed to information about the “scary” consequences of the AHCA and Trump's radical budget priorities, the Trump voters began asking whether Donald Trump is so pampered he's unable to see how much his policies will hurt the ordinary person. That is a critical opening that could unravel support for Trump and the congressional Republicans.

It is clear something seriously had changed because when presented with the Congressional Budget Office findings about the AHCA and a long list of facts about the administration, there was no push back on their accuracy from Trump voters, as one always gets. The fact that Trump and Ryan were publicly humiliated by pulling their replacement bill from the floor made all the health care critiques credible. They accepted Trump owned the budget priorities presented because the inclusion of increased funding for the military and his signature wall gave credence to other facts about the budget.

For the first time since we have been studying the Trump voters, they began to reveal their deep-seeded doubts about his capacity to relate to regular Americans and grasp their struggles. They beg him to live a day in their shoes and show some compassion for the middle class, seniors and children in their handwritten post-cards to the president at the end of the groups.

The anti-Trump voters in these groups, on the other hand, already appear to be leaning into the upcoming elections. There is real intensity behind the Clinton voters' doubts about Trump. His presence looms large over their outlook and they use words like “flabbergasted,” “devastated” and “terrified” to describe how they feel about the country right now. It had only been 70 days, but they couldn't take another minute of him:

“In my eyes, the biggest issue is going to be this president. He's going to drive this country into a shithole.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)



“Every time Trump opens his mouth I want to scream.” (White millennial woman, Cleveland)

The opposition to Trump is a serious concern for Trump supporters; it also offers optimism for the anti-Trump women in the focus groups. They know that people are out there resisting:

“There are people organizing and finally getting their heads out of the sand and paying attention to what’s going on in politics.” (White non-college woman, Akron)

“I think maybe people are bonding over their hate for certain things, like protesting and a lot of people are bonding in groups. I mean, people have a voice now with social media and everything. They’re really getting it out there. A lot of people are being heard.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“I think it’s good that people are coming together. The Women’s March sticks out in my mind. That whether or not it’s for a good cause that you agree with or not, people are still kind of coming together I think is an important thing.” (White millennial woman, Cleveland)

Perhaps because they do not feel alone, the anti-Trump women in these groups actually pushed back against Trump voters in conversation, even when outnumbered in the room. The moderator had to make an effort to bring Trump voters into the conversation to ensure the outnumbered Clinton voters did not dominate the discussion and the Trump voters were heard. This turned out to be an unintended test of the strength of their views and resolve to resist.

This sort of intensity suggests some of the women who would typically drop-off in off-year elections – particularly the African American and younger women – are more likely to engage in the upcoming elections.

So, only two months into this new administration, we are confident that Democrats can communicate messages that engage anti-Trump voters and that begin to erode the confidence of Trump voters in both Trump and Republicans. While we did not break out independents in this analysis, there is every reason to believe that they are affected by the same dynamics and can be shifted as well. Before too long, we will be able to bring in values to frame positive messages, attacks and the choice in the upcoming elections in ways that transcend divisions, persuade audiences, and motivate targets for engagement.

Trump voters and the limits to their love

The Trump supporting working women have good reasons for supporting Trump, and do all the more so because the elites are disdainful. Sure, certain things about his personality bother them, but that didn’t keep them from voting for him. They have no trouble telling you why they voted for him and they still believe he is trying to keep his promises.



Why Trump?

In written handouts, the working women in our groups were asked to detail the good things about Donald Trump, and clear themes emerged in their writing and subsequent discussion.

1. He is a “successful business man” – the positive quality most often mentioned by Trump voters (and Clinton voters as well) is his good “business sense.” A business man in the White House is a refreshing change, even if it comes with a learning curve. His business experience leads them to believe he is “hardworking” and “smart” and they hope that “as a business person he can help bring our economy back up” and create jobs.
2. He wants to deal with the border and immigration – Trump’s hardline on immigration made a difference to the Trump voters in these groups. They note he will “limit immigrants” and require “citizenship for all immigrants” and ensure “secure borders.” Some say he is already making good progress towards this in his first months as president.
3. He is “trying to fix health care” – these women were watching the Trump-Ryan health care bill news closely and “even though [it was] unsuccessful” they still trust Trump “wants to reform [the] healthcare situation.” They specifically believe that Trump promised better and *more affordable* health care for everyone.
4. He is a “straight-shooter” – Trump voters appreciate that the president is “plain spoken” and “straightforward.” There is “no BS!” from Trump because he always “speaks his mind” and is “honest (brutally).” Because he “isn’t politically correct” you know he is “not a politician.” You always know where this man stands because he tells you.
5. He “isn’t being paid” so he isn’t in it for the money – several Trump voters note that it “seems as if he wants to help the country [because] he left his business” and he has “given up [the] salary of [the] presidency.” That tells them he is “not influenced by others/parties endorsing or supporting his cause” and is “not corrupt.” They like that he “puts his money where his mouth is.” You can trust his intentions.

They have doubts too.

The working women who voted for Trump have their doubts too, which they wrote on handouts before conversations began so the strong feelings of the Clinton voters in the room would not influence them. They do not hide or apologize for their doubts about Trump. They have already worked through those perceptions.

Half of the doubts they offered related to his temperament:

- He is “too outspoken” and cannot control himself – most of these Trump voters are concerned with his rough-around-the-edges approach. He is “not polished and comes across harshly,” especially with all of the “negative talk about people.” As one Trump voter politely put it, he does “not always have the best way of saying what he means.” Others are



blunter, calling him “bombastic [and] unpredictable” and advising him: “Don’t talk off the cuff [it] doesn’t go well.”

- He is “arrogant” and “too egotistical” – many of these women are concerned Trump’s narcissism leads to behaviors that may make him a less effective leader. His arrogance means he is “unwilling to listen to others’ points of view” and “won’t admit when [he is] wrong.” His big ego means he is “thin skinned” and cannot take criticism. They wish he would “quit worrying about what everyone has to say” about him.

Concerns about Trump’s temperament in the context of foreign affairs may lead to tensions with other countries, and these groups were conducted prior to the airstrike in Syria:

- His style and lack of experience in foreign affairs – they fear that his free-wheeling style, insistence on counter-punching, inability to take advice and lack of experience may have consequences for foreign affairs. He may cause tensions in “relations with other countries” or embroil us in conflicts a more measured man could avoid. They advise him to “use his advisers – internationally.” They wrote:

“The way he feels towards immigrants could cause some concerns with other countries + some problems that could lead to war. His out spoken ways could offend the wrong people.” (White unmarried woman <45, Trump voter, Cleveland)

“Hot head. Worries about war starting, allowing draft.” (White unmarried woman <45, Trump voter, Cleveland)

These temperamental concerns come with the Trump territory. When the doubts move to something more emotive – as they do at the end of the focus groups – we will know the opportunity to dislodge or disillusion Trump’s supporters is real.

Taking it to Trump

Less than 100 days into Trump’s presidency, these groups reveal breaking opportunities to bring out very different and more fundamental doubts among Trump voters. (We suspect that these attacks only further engage the anti-Trump voters too.)

The Trump- Ryan effort to replace Obamacare: CBO report

All of these working women paid close attention to the House battle to repeal and replace Obamacare and they paid close attention to the highlights of the CBO report on the AHCA when we presented it to them.



The Congressional Budget Office (a non-partisan office established in 1975 to give unbiased reports on new laws) said this about the plan:

- It would cut Medicaid, the main source of funding for long-term care for seniors and the disabled, by \$833 billion over 10 years.
- 14 million more people will be uninsured immediately next year and 24 million more people will be uninsured by 2026.
- Premiums would go up by 15 percent in 2018 and by 20 percent in 2019.
- Out of pocket costs, including deductibles, will be higher.
- Premiums for seniors will be 25 percent higher by 2026 because insurance companies would be able to charge older patients five-times what they charge younger patients.

The unaffordability of health care has surged to the top of the concerns these working women want addressed. The Trump voters believe he promised to make insurance and health care more affordable for everyone and it was an important reason for voting for him. Even some of the Clinton voters admitted they hoped Trump would get costs under control. But as you can see by their initial reactions to the AHCA below, all of these working women were horrified that the Trump-Ryan replacement plan was so bad.

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Reactions to the Trump-Ryan plan:

It's terrible. (White non-college woman, Akron)	It's scary and unsettling. (White non-college woman, Akron)
It doesn't look very good at all. (White unmarried woman 45+, Akron)	I don't even know what to think of it. (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)
It's not any better than what we had. (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)	I think this raises a lot of questions. (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)
It just sounds crazy. (White millennial woman, Cleveland)	This is scary. (White non-college woman, Richmond)
Obamacare is bad and this is bad. (White millennial woman, Cleveland)	It's not accomplishing anything. (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)
It's not doing anybody any good. (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)	There's no benefit in switching. (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)
That's not a plan, that's not anything better. (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)	Crazy. (African American woman, Richmond)
Ouch! (White non-college woman, Akron)	It's scary. (White unmarried woman 45+, Akron)
I think it's ridiculous. (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)	I think it's all bad. (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)





They were clear that this would not improve the situation:

“Why would you do this to America?” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“What sense does that make. It’s not going to help people. It’s not gonna help the middle class, it’s not gonna help someone whose son is diabetic or whose mom is – has cancer. It’s just not – this isn’t doing – make any sense.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“I knew it was bad, but this is just horrible. There’s nothing good on here. There’s nothing to benefit anybody except for wealthy Republicans. That’s it.” (African American woman, Richmond)

They were most upset that the Trump-Ryan plan would hurt seniors and the disabled; they shook their heads when they learned that. They were also shocked that premiums would go up by 15 to 20 percent. One woman, nearly crying, said “If I have to pay another dollar to my premium, I might shoot someone.”²

Trump voters, unable to justify such a horrible bill, complained “they’re rushing too much.” Some argued for more patience for this outsider president to get it right. Others began to worry his lack of experience may prevent him from bringing the promised change. Even if Trump voters still support him and want him to succeed, the very public loss in the battle to replace Obamacare with something that lives up to Trump’s campaign promises took a big toll on them.

Trump’s ‘America First’ budget

After grappling with the CBO findings and health care debate, the participants read a long and dense list of attacks on Trump’s governance. Nothing mattered as much for these working women as Trump’s proposed spending to build his wall, paid for by cutting funds for Meals on Wheels, after-school programs and cancer research.

We have rarely seen an attack breakthrough like this. They were given a list of ten criticisms including possible cuts to Medicare and Social Security after promising not to touch them, huge tax cuts for the top 1 percent after promising middle class tax relief, a cabinet full of Goldman Sacks executives after promising to “drain the swamp,” connections to Russia and possible collaboration of campaign operatives, and more. Yet over two-thirds of every group marked Trump’s budget priorities as a top concern and overall half of the participants said it was the

² Almost nobody was bothered that fewer people would be insured under the AHCA. Many thought that was because they were no longer forced to buy a plan without the mandate. For some that is a good thing: “So the positive that I see when I look at this is, this plan would stop forcing people to buy something they don’t want to buy. It’s very common sense to me.” (White millennial woman, Cleveland) “They did say that that number that they’re saying will be uninsured immediately doesn’t necessarily mean the poor. It means the fact that there’s not a mandate and that a lot of people will no longer carry insurance.” (White non-college woman, Akron) “OK it says that the good items are, it stop forcing people to buy things they don’t want to buy. So if you don’t - can’t afford insurance, you don’t get penalized for not having it.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)



most concerning criticism of all. That meant both Trump and Clinton voters were finally on the same page.³

He proposed to cut spending on programs like Meals on Wheels, after-school programs for children, and research on climate change and cancer. At the same time, he is proposing a \$54 billion increase in defense spending, including billions to build a border wall.

Trump's core budget priorities, specifically funding the border wall, wipes out programming that is personal for these working women. It is critical to learn from their reactions. Their attention went immediately to the impact the budget would have on Meals on Wheels and after-school programs for children. Many have experience with these programs and believe they are vital to the community. These cuts hit close to home and are relevant to their lives.

"Meals on Wheels, I might need Meals on Wheels, you know? You, just... if you have never known how many people depend on Meals on Wheels, you know? We did a volunteer, and the little scoop that they get...but so many older people just don't have anybody, and they just depend on it." (African American woman, Richmond)

"I've seen Meals on Wheels in action. I was a volunteer there. It's amazing to see that sometimes [Meals on Wheels] is the only touch with some of these people that they have is through this." (White non-college woman, Akron)

"These programs are community-based. And I think taking something like that away—you want to keep the communities together. And they say, usually, the people that bring you your Meals on Wheels are one of your neighbors. And after school programs are run by retired people who live in the community. And I think that's important." (White unmarried woman 45+, Akron)

"Those are things that everybody is concerned about. Parents work full time, they need that after-school care. What do you do if you don't have that? I baby sit sometimes for families and they need me, so I can relate. And people that can't afford food... (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

They worry that fewer children in after-school programs will exacerbate problems with drugs and crime facing kids with working parents in their communities.

Cutting funding for cancer research was another head-scratcher. It touches them because "everybody has known somebody, or knows somebody, or has somebody in their family that has been affected by cancer" and cutting funding for research will cost lives: "Cancer is one of the things

³ Many also marked as concerning an attack on the Trump-Ryan health care replacement for increasing the number of uninsured and not lowering costs. We now know that increasing costs, particularly for seniors and the disabled, is the most concerning element of the CBO report, so we must refine and re-test that attack to know its full potential.



in there. So that kills people right?” This was a big deal for one white non-college cancer survivor from Akron:

“Before I had cancer, it was always “what are they doing all these walks for? What are they doing all this for?” Now I have cancer. You would not believe what they have. Cancer, before...you would throw up day and night. And it wasn’t like that for me. I never threw up one time. I had cancer really bad. So keep doing the research and let’s cure it.”

They say we ought to be paying more money and attention to these programs and the people they serve, not less:

“I think it’s we don’t have enough money in these programs, then you want to take it away? Are the after school programs really that abundant? No. Meals on Wheels, are these elderly people - everybody cared for? No. I mean, you’re gonna cut “oh yeah, we don’t need any cancer research, we got that covered.” No. We don’t even have enough money for that stuff.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“I just think it’s messed up to – just like she was saying, just to take money from something that we need to be putting more – possibly more money into.” (White non-college woman, Richmond)

“I mean, he hit every group, just about. Seniors, children, sick people. I mean, he hit everybody on this one.” (African American woman, Richmond)

Many of them were more than okay with increased defense spending, but Trump’s choice to build the wall made many of them livid. Many people hold very strong views about the wall.

“I don’t [agree on the] border wall. I think that’s a waste of money. I think we shouldn’t be spending money on that.” (White unmarried woman 45+, Akron)

“Particularly I was looking at the wall that they’re building because I hate this wall.” (White non-college woman, Akron)

“My biggest trouble is the wall. I have no problem putting more money into the defense. I really don’t, but when you start putting the money into the wall, which I’m just so opposed to.” (White non-college woman, Akron)

“I’ve heard that immigration from Mexico has been declining recently so there’s no reason for it. There–It wouldn’t serve a purpose in any way at all.” (White millennial woman, Cleveland)

For the younger women we spoke to, the wall is more of a vanity project and symbol of hatred than matter of practical necessity.



“The wall does nothing really, other than to serve a point.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“I feel like the wall is just a very expensive symbol.” (White millennial woman, Cleveland)

“Yeah, I feel like it’s just him being like, ‘Oh, now I’m President. I said I was gonna build a wall so I’m gonna fuckin’ build a wall.’ Like, ‘I get what I want.’” (White millennial woman, Cleveland)

It’s certainly not more important than cancer research, Meals on Wheels and after-school programs:

“Then he’s going to spend billions to build a wall, but if I need chemotherapy, I can’t get it, but they got a wall?” (African American woman, Richmond)

“It just seems like he – his priorities are in the wrong place, to spend that much money on putting up a wall when it could be helping save lives or feeding hungry people or taking care of our own country.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“So he’s taking money from things that are actually happening every day, and putting more money towards hypothetical situations, which I think makes him very out of touch with the reality of life for many, many people.” (White millennial woman, Cleveland)

What do Trump’s budget priorities say about him? The white working class women said his budget shows “he’s never been poor” and “never been hungry” and he has “no compassion.” These working women believe “he needs to be more in touch with what people need.”

“It says that he is not looking at what people are actually using.” (White millennial woman, Cleveland)

“I think Donald Trump needs to see the real struggle.” (White non-college woman, Richmond)

“I mean, you know, he’s just not sympathetic to that, because he has never experienced it. So, because he’s never experienced having to pay for healthcare, or, you know, being sick, and instead of going to the emergency room, waiting until Monday, just because you don’t want to get a deductible of \$1,000.” (African American woman, Richmond)

This conversation portends a more fundamental and emotive concern about Trump.



The disruptive potential power of these attacks on priorities and health care

Attacks on Trump for his conflicts of interest, swamp cabinet, self-dealing and expensive trips to Mar-a-Lago do not matter now because his supporters are certain he is so rich he cannot be owned and that he has sacrificed greater wealth to serve the country. But once they think he may make health care even more unaffordable and doggedly pursue his wall at the expense of the hungry, elderly, young kids and cancer patients, they worry his living the lifestyle of the rich and famous may lead him to miss how much he might hurt those less fortunate than him. This is the context in which Trump’s wealth matters to his voters.

At the end of every group, we asked the participants to write a postcard to President Trump and share anything they thought he should know. A significant number of the Trump voters sent a message privately that had barely been heard from them before.

<p>President Trump,</p> <p>Please try to work on one or two things at a time so you can finish them. Also, take care of the poor or lower class, feed the children, take care of the elderly. Do not lose sight of people who are not as fortunate as you. I voted for you! Don't make me look like a fool!!</p>	<p>Dear Mr. President,</p> <p>For us to move ahead and truly live the American Dream, how can you help us be a better America? Have you been in our shoes and how would your perspective change if you were. Please know we are being patient but can't take much more negativity, politically. Thank you!</p>
<p>Dear Trump,</p> <p>You are doing a great job 😊 Please try and take some time and really see what is going on for the people less fortunate than yourself and make America great again like you said you would!! From a hardworking, 2 job having, single mom in VA</p>	<p>President Trump,</p> <p>You have the potential to do good things – you have a great business sense but you need to find more compassion/empathy into what many Americans face. Focus on helping those in our country + not on what can cause more harm.</p>

Those were just *some* of the calls for empathy from Trump voters. Just two Trump voters expressed such concerns in their initial doubts earlier in the night. That dramatic shift signals what is possible after reflection on the Trump-Ryan health care failure and his budget priorities.

Two Trump voters even started to wonder if they had been played, writing:

<p>President Trump –</p> <p>I would just like to know if you are going to try to accomplish what you campaigned for, or if it is all bullshit?</p> <p>Thanks, From a concerned citizen</p>	<p>Mr. President,</p> <p>I would like to have a personal meeting with you to discuss some concerning issues that affect my livelihood! I am not a happy American with all you have done!</p>
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These postcards make clear this is a huge opportunity for progressives, and they should raise this fresh, fundamental doubt aggressively.

What worries working women

Working women form the great majority of voters to be persuaded and motivated across the Democratic base of minorities, millennials and younger white unmarried women and the swing blocs of white older unmarried and working class women. To understand what animates and moves working women and what messages and attacks get traction, you need to understand how close to the edge they are living. The fact that most of them are unmarried compounds their worries about their checkbooks, kids and communities.

“The cost of living. It’s crazy.”

While they see positive economic progress and more jobs available locally, these working women don’t trust this economy and overwhelmingly use words like “volatile,” “unsure,” “uneven,” “unstable,” “standstill” and “fluctuating” to describe it. Even those who see the economy as “on the mend” and “improving moderately and steadily” are fighting for everything – to keep up with expenses, to save something for retirement, to balance work and raising kids well, to move somewhere with better and safer schools for their kids.

Even though we have reached a point of full employment, the economic anxiety is evident across all of the working women – and is particularly acute among the African American women – because they have not seen a raise in year. Stagnant wages and rising costs leave them consumed by the cost of living. They say it is the number one economic problem they want leaders to solve.

“I struggle with food – the food bill, the cost of groceries. And I go to discount places. But I see things climbing.” (White non-college woman, Akron)

“The cost of living, period. It’s crazy. To be my age, in order to have extra money I have to take a second job. (White unmarried woman 45+, Akron)

“My thing is just the cost of living, because that's my biggest concern on everything. Because crime ran me out of the city, and I had to move to Chesterfield, and it's just, everything is so high. I'm actually paying \$300 more a month to live in Chesterfield than I did Richmond, but I feel safer. So, I mean, you can't have it all, but I can't get nowhere, because every time I look, something's going up.” (African American woman, Richmond)

“I was lucky to get a 3% raise every couple of years.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“Everyone’s like, ‘Cleveland is so affordable,’ and I’m like, ‘Well, then why can I barely pay my bills and I work a full-time job?’” (White millennial woman, Cleveland)



A group of women in Akron exploded into conversation at one point when someone brought up hikes in their water bills.

Almost all of the things they are struggling with – from good jobs to health care, from saving enough for retirement to paying for childcare, from their student loans to the groceries and utilities – can be subsumed under this problem of rising costs and wages that have not kept up. One woman explained the chain-reaction of problems caused by rising prices on her fixed budget:

“I can't budget what I need to do, and, you know, save the things that I need to – that I want to save, because every week, it's something different. If it's not my insurance going up, but I'm not getting no raise, and then I'm getting a bill when I go see the doctor, from something as simple as the eggs going up.” (African American woman, Richmond)

Health care: more and more unaffordable

Health care (and health insurance) is one of the biggest expenses working women are struggling to afford and the costs are steadily rising. Don't try to tell these women that the rate of inflation is less than previous years. They are struggling and desperate for change, and that is true whether they are in the exchanges or not.

Those getting insurance through their employer complain their “paycheck isn't keeping up with premiums” and the co-pays are so high they avoid going to the doctor:

“I have an HMO with my work and I know that the premiums and the deductibles and out of pocket costs that I'm paying now are just absolutely astronomical as it is. And I can't imagine having to pay more and just be able to survive. As it is, it's almost like the insurance, it's there, it's great, but it's almost like it's not doing exactly the job that it needs to be doing because it's still very expensive.” (White non-college woman, Richmond)

“I'm at a job now where I haven't gotten a raise in three years, and my insurance has been going up for the last three years. My out of pocket cost is much more. I never went to the doctor, and everywhere – every time I go – I don't care what doctor it is, I got a bill coming in the mail. Never has that happened to me, and now they're talking about a 6.1% increase coming up now in April.” (African American woman, Richmond)

Those who are not on employer-based insurance are frustrated with the Affordable Care Act because they are required to buy expensive plans with high deductibles – in effect, health insurance you can't afford to use – or face a penalty.

“There's still a lot of people not in [the exchanges] or that don't have healthcare, because it's not quite affordable.” (White non-college woman, Richmond)

“I couldn't afford to go to the doctor, I couldn't afford my co-pay. I was forced to pay all last year, never got any benefit out of it.” (White non-college woman, Akron)



“Just not so happy [with Obamacare], I can't afford \$2,000.” (African American woman, Richmond)

“You need insurance, and you have to have it, but you second-guess yourself because of the cost of it. And it's high.” (African American woman, Richmond)

These women are not eligible for Medicaid – even in Ohio – and openly weighed the high deductibles against the threat of the penalty:

“I know somebody right now who had to get it before income tax because they were scared of the fine and they have a \$14,000 deductible. Some people don't even use \$14,000 in medical care a year. I very seldom go to the doctor.” (White unmarried woman 45+, Akron)

“A friend of mine said the penalty is less than what it is to have it. She could not afford to have it.” (White unmarried woman 45+, Akron)

Clinton and Trump voters alike are desperate to see major changes to make insurance and health care affordable for all, not just those with good jobs that provide good employer-based coverage or those on Medicaid.

An impossible level of student debt

The cost of a college education weighed heavily on the minds of many mothers and student loan payments were a major problem for the younger unmarried and millennial women we met.

“College. It doesn't matter which one you go to. I've got one in Ashland and one in Kent. And it's like, oh, my god.” (White non-college woman, Akron)

“I have \$107,000 in student loans. I'm almost done with my master's degree. I have three classes left, and my son's going to be going off to college in a few years. Double that.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“I personally barely make enough in a year to cover one year of tuition last where I went to college which just, I mean, that makes no sense. So it's like you go through life, you go to a good school, you get a degree. I personally also struggled to find a job, finally get a job, and then you're buried in loans. It goes back to education is the problem.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

They point out this debt will hold them back from a good middle class life for a long time:

“One of my major concerns is student loans. And just the growing cost of education. It's something that I'm dealing with, and something that I'm worried about the next generation of kids having to deal with. How do you live a life that's supposed to be better than



what your parents have, when you are strapped down by all of this debt? How are you supposed to go forward from that when you're paying off education that is now absolutely necessary for you to have for the most part, if you want like a middle class lifestyle, if that can exist anymore." (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

Social dysfunction: how do you protect your kids?

On top of their economic anxieties are deep concerns about raising children well in the face of increasing social dysfunction in their communities and families. Just imagine how much these problems are compounded for working women, particularly the majority who are unmarried.

The women in Ohio see the opioid-epidemic plaguing their state all around them. "People are dying left and right" and "It's not the dope boys on the corner" now, it is "everywhere" and "everyone" and "really close to home."

"I see a lot of it. I have family members whose kids have fallen to it. It doesn't happen to the poorest of people, it happens to the richest as well. More and more it's coming around, and it's younger and younger and younger." (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

"I mean, it's a serious thing in the city. But guess what? There's a lot of it in our suburbs. I know a lot have OD'd, and you know, they're not informing people of that." (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

"People still try to pin it on poverty type thing, and it's not. It's in the suburbs. It's your boss. It's everyone." (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

"It affects tax payers. It affects the families of the users. I mean, I know people who have people that use drugs in their families whether it's heroin or not, it trickles down. Everyone from the abuser out is affected." (White millennial woman, Cleveland)

"It's way more in the suburbs. My sister was—I mean, she's clean now and I've met a lot of people. I've lost a couple of friends and I'm from Parma so it's really bad." (White millennial woman, Cleveland)

"There's two kids I know that already dies from our graduating class from drug abuse." (White millennial woman, Cleveland)

The younger unmarried women were particularly concerned about how the crisis is being address at the schools and complain there is too little education for a problem of this scale:

"I think the biggest problem right now is that the 9, 10, 11, 12-year-olds are not being educated in real life. Like real life, how to stay away from drugs, how to stay away from violence. How to be respectful. Real life things."



“[My younger ones] went to private school, and my older one is at [REDACTED] High School now. And neither one of the schools – there’s absolutely no education on drugs.”

“No education. If everyone was to ask their school – my son went to [REDACTED] School, he’s an addict, recovering. My daughter is in 7th grade. There’s not enough education to teach these kids.”

As if that weren’t enough, these working women worry about violent crime in their communities.

“I’ve lived here about a year so I think, yeah, violence is the biggest thing you see.”
(White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“Me being a mom, it’s like how can you sit back and kind of like look at what’s going on and not – I don’t know. To me, it’s very concerning. Kids with guns and all. That’s – the children are our future, and it doesn’t look very optimistic.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“I think the violence is really scary. Sometimes you’re afraid to leave your home because it’s just not in the rural areas or in the projects or things like that. It’s just everywhere. You can be anywhere.” (African American woman, Richmond)

All of these threats make it more important than ever to be around to keep your kids on the right path. They worry about finding the right balance between work and family.

“Working out the details of work and not to become a burden because that’s not me, but – it’s just the balance of life, making sure that they’re healthy and well-adjusted and not running in the streets.” (White unmarried woman 45+, Akron)

“Everything. I mean, there’s so many things to worry about as a parent. You know, you’re not – especially with teenagers or young adolescents today. You have to worry about them getting into the wrong groups.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“You get increased with violence, because the kids – They don’t have nowhere to go, nothing to do [after school].” (African American woman, Richmond)

“My biggest concern is being a single parent, raising three kids alone, and worrying about – I have two older boys that’s 23 and 18, and a 13-year-old daughter. And just social media, and bullying. .. Just trying to, I guess, [make enough so they] can keep up so they won’t get picked on, but also raise them to understand, you know, still, that you have to have morals, values and manners, and so on.” (African American woman, Richmond)

It’s significant that these social issues are so important to the younger unmarried, millennial and African American women – women considered Democratic base voters. They feel helpless in the face of these trends.



Handouts & immigration

The perception that there is a robust welfare system that rewards people who do not work or contribute through taxes, especially illegal immigrants, was a real issue in these groups that was not isolated to just the more conservative white non-college women.

For most of the women we spoke to, “we all are” immigrants, immigration is part of our national identity and new immigrants “have their place here, just like all of us.” They agree that they are “good generally” and “everyone kind of deserves a chance.”

But for some Trump voters, illegal immigration matters a great deal and one of the good things about Trump was his commitment to dealing with it. The debate was less about safety concerns and immigrants taking jobs than it was about illegal immigrants taking from the American people because “if you’re here illegally, you are not contributing.”

“They just want somewhere to go to free school.” (White unmarried woman 45+, Akron)

“It seems like they get more – A lot more things than we do.” (White unmarried woman 45+, Akron)

“I think that it’s wrong that people come into the country and don’t pay taxes. They have businesses in their names, and then get tax breaks and this and that. That’s wrong and that needs to stop.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“I have a friend, her husband’s been here for 20 years, and not a US citizen. He’s a business owner, and he does that for tax purposes.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“My husband when he was painting, he would paint with a man who was from El Salvador. He would joke, I’m going to save about \$10,000 or \$15,000 and build myself a mansion when I get back home. His [pay] checks..he didn’t pay taxes. He was [taking home] double my husband’s checks. And then on top of it, they had five kids, they got Social Security, they got food stamps.” (White non-college woman, Richmond)

They wonder, “when are we going to start taking care of us?”

It is important to note that this concern was not isolated to the Trump voters and white working class women. There was a particularly animated discussion among the African American women on the subject that was not contested by any of the women in the room:

“They should be allowed to come here, but I think they should have to do everything that we have to do in order to get what they’re getting. They shouldn’t be allotted a certain thing...you know, we’ve been here, and we, you know, pay taxes, and we do everything. So we all should be able to get it the same way [as they do].”



“Yeah, they get too many handouts. They get tax breaks. They get Medicaid. People who need it that's here can't get it, because the people ain't paying taxes is getting it.”

“It's just easy. You know, they just – they know when they get here, they're just going to get handed a silver platter. Here, what do you want?”

“I think that's wrong, morally wrong. What about the people here who need it, who are really striving for that, who can't even get that option to get it at all? You've got to go through all this red tape. By the time you get through the red tape, I am tired.”

The good news is none of these working women mentioned deportation as a solution. In fact, only a handful called for greater restrictions or border security and only one person mentioned the wall as a positive thing. (Most saw it as an expensive symbol that did not express our country's values.) Their major complaint actually recommends an earned pathway to citizenship, with all of the responsibilities that entails. The most important thing, from their point of view, is whether immigrants are paying taxes: “I don't think you should send them back. I think you should work with them and make them legal and have them start paying for the system.”

The political party landscape

Fortunately, Democrats have a lot to offer these working women. Unfortunately, most of the focus group participants could not be more unaware of it, even after an election year and eight years of a Democratic president. These women tend to think the Republicans are for the rich white men, but the Democratic Party's approval rating is not very high and the gap in favorability between the parties has narrowed because the Democratic brand and agenda is so undefined.

Democrats will certainly fall short if they can't fill in the picture about what Democrats really believe and value, particularly on the economy. They must begin building a powerful contrast between the parties and choice in the upcoming elections if they are to get the attention of these struggling working women.

The Republican Party brand – trickle-down, for rich white people

Working women, even the Trump voters, are unsure about the Republicans in Congress and where they stand vis-à-vis Trump. They know that Trump “doesn't have a lot of support from the Republican side,” “Paul Ryan wasn't even going to support him,” and it “doesn't seem like he even fits in.” Some “think they're trying to get on the same page.”

What we do know is that the Republicans in Congress do not improve Trump's brand. If anything, he has helped their brand, especially when it comes to jobs. One woman explained that when she thinks of the GOP and jobs, she is “kind of only thinking about Trump and what he was talking about on the campaign trail. What he's currently trying to do now is just keep manufacturing jobs, bring manufacturing jobs and coal, and things like that.”



The good news ends there for the Republican Party, particularly on the economy and taxes. Working women see the GOP as a trickle-down party. Only their well-off friends will see tax cuts, not the working class:

“That they know all these – get through all these loopholes, and create all these loopholes for themselves, that’s going to benefit them, and the little man just gets, you know, pushed aside.” (African American woman, Richmond)

“I still feel like they’re not trying to tax themselves in the other top percentage of the wage earners.” (White non-college woman, Richmond)

“It’s all to benefit them. In a way, not worried about us, but trickle it down a little bit.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“Not really supporting the lower class. More so geared towards the middle and the upper classes.” (White millennial woman, Cleveland)

“I think they want to pay as less taxes as they possibly can, and make it hard for us. Make us middle class or lower class pay more than we can afford.” (White non-college woman, Richmond)

Republicans care about “themselves” and people like them – and they are all “rich white people.” Saying this made the African American women laugh out loud. But in all seriousness, it is a very negative brand, and Republicans carry that baggage with them into the off-years.

Democrats: for the “average Joe” and less fortunate, but not a better economy & jobs

Democrats are not nearly as defined as the Republicans. Across the groups, working women hesitated to come up with something when asked, “What comes to mind when you hear the Democratic Party?”

After thinking about it and when asked about the main differences between the parties, the Democrats are seen to be more concerned with the “average Joe,” “the lower and middle class” and “people that are less fortunate.” The Republicans, by contrast, are for the rich and big business:

“I think the Democrats are for the people, and the Republicans are just for the money and themselves.” (African American woman, Richmond)

“I think Democrats are wanting you to be successful. I feel like Republicans are like, ‘the big businesses, we’re gonna make you successful.’”(White millennial woman, Cleveland)

“Company wise, the CEO are the republicans and the workers are the democrats.” (White non-college woman, Akron)



“I think that the Democrats seem to cater more towards the poverty-stricken, welfare. Where the Republicans are more, you know, the higher class.” (White unmarried woman <45, Cleveland)

“Democrats want to do the social programs, you know...The Republicans are more like, you know – corporate in nature.” (African American woman, Richmond)

Some people explain that “Democrats know the struggle, and understand it, and the Republicans don't” because Republicans are wealthier:

“I think in a lot of ways it is just who they – what they value and what they go after. I think the democrats are more down to earth, more what's happening. They're more aware of what's happening with the everyday people where I think the republicans think they know what's going on in our lives but they're more focused on business and higher people that make more money. There's more connection there and I don't think it's just the circles that they run in.” (White unmarried woman 45+, Akron)

Even though Democrats are for the average person and the little guy, and Republicans for the wealthy and big business, the Democratic Party brand is not defined by economic priorities. President Obama left office with unemployment below 5 percent, but the participants offered no association with the words “Democrats and jobs.”

The Democratic Party is instead defined by their commitment to social justice, civil rights and equality. When we asked these working women what were the priorities of the Democratic Party, the dominant response was ensuring social justice, protecting rights, and concern for social services. A few Clinton voters also say they care about the environment, education, and healthcare. The Trump voters tended to associate the Democrats with handouts. Again, almost nobody mentioned economic policies or jobs as Democratic priorities.

That is pretty remarkable after an almost year and half long presidential campaign where the economy was the top issue according to voters. Only the African American women were able to articulate points of the Democratic economic agenda and connect them to things they had heard during the campaign. It speaks volumes in these battleground states that the Democratic priorities on the economy were so undefined for these financially pressed unmarried, millennial and working class women.

Toward principles and messaging that reaches Trump and Clinton voters

In order to better understand how to reach working women with messaging, we need to understand their values. In each group, voters were given a list of “principles that should guide how people act” and asked to pick the ones that were most important to them. This turned out to be one of the richest parts of the focus groups with critical learning that needs to be integrated into progressive messaging.

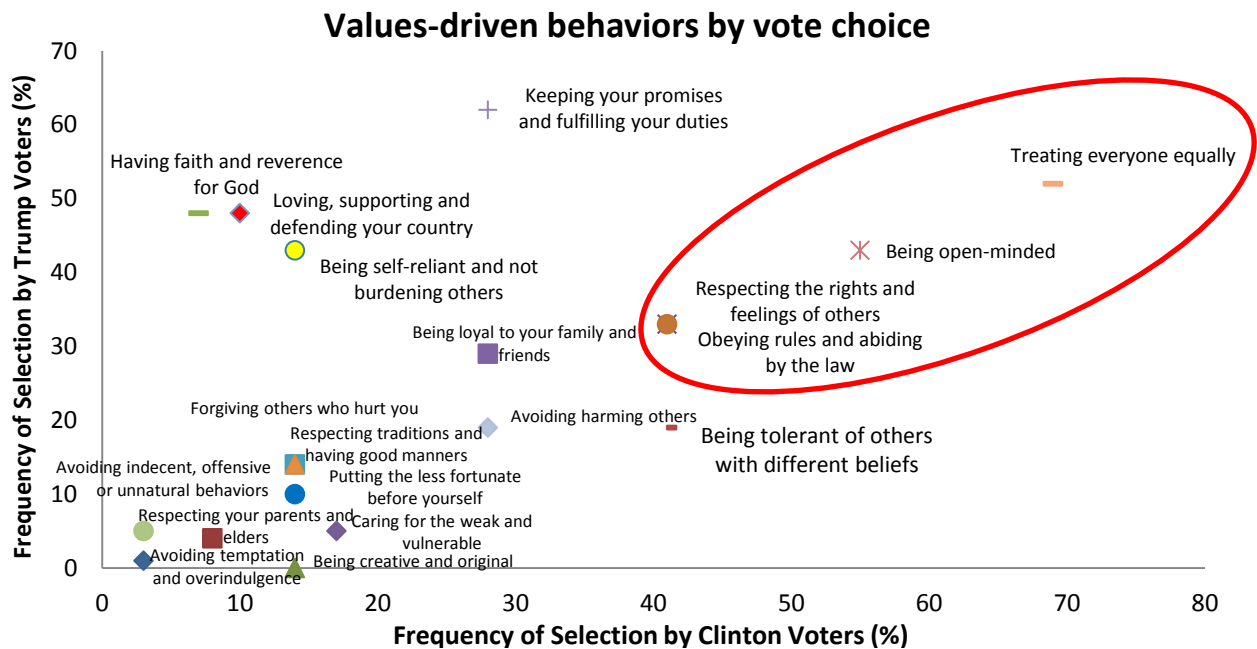


If your goal is to motivate the anti-Trump voters, you can see the principles that matter the most to the working women who voted for Clinton. They are:

- Treating everyone equally
- Being open-minded
- Obeying rules and abiding by the law
- Respecting the rights and feelings of others
- Being tolerant of others with different beliefs

If you want to persuade Trump voters, the principles most important to them should figure in your argument. They believe it is most important to keep your promises and fulfill your duties, treat everyone equally, love and support and defend your country, have faith and reverence for God, and be self-reliant and not burden others.

In era of growing polarization, you can see the Trump and Clinton voters share a lot more than you might think when it comes to their guiding principles. Maybe the moment will open an opportunity to find political common ground.



The values of working women can frame positive messages as well as attacks. This report highlighted the disruptive potential of a critique of Trump for being so well-heeled that he fails to see how his policies will hurt the less fortunate. That attack may have even more relevance for voters when you remind him that we are tasked to treat everyone equally. If Trump proceeds to make health care even more unaffordable or to cut taxes for the wealthiest while the middle class gets nothing, the Democratic message should remind him of the obligation to keep one's promises and fulfill one's duties.

These findings obviously are rich with possibilities.



Toward the Democratic alternative

The Democrats enter the off-year with a party brand that is barely engaging. Right now, the serious energy is behind the growing opposition to Trump. But these working women were excited about some of the future possible directions for the Democratic economic brand.

We showed them three types of Democrats and all of the women, Trump voters included, were enthusiastic about the policies they put forward. Critically, their affinity precedes any of the values-faming that would make them more emotive and important.

Below are the agendas that we showed them, and we underlined the pieces that made the greatest impression on these women.

Democrats who are focused on the working people struggling to deal with jobs that don't pay enough and the high cost of health care and childcare. They want to ensure equal pay for women, paid family and sick leave, and affordable childcare for working families. They support a living wage and empowering workers by strengthening unions. They want tax cuts for the middle class and affordable health care. They want to invest in education and infrastructure so we'll have a middle class again.

Democrats who want to battle against big money and corporate special interests so our economy raises everyone's income, not just the richest and well-connected. They strongly opposed NAFTA and trade deals negotiated in secret that override US food and safety laws. They want tough regulation on reckless banks and Wall Street that cost consumers so much money. Rather than hiking CEO pay, they want new laws to encourage corporations to invest in training, raising wages and creating jobs here. They say we must invest in education and infrastructure so America works for the middle class again.

Democrats who believe America can have the most competitive economy and create more jobs. They want free trade to open up markets and to support our exporting industries. They want to reduce regulations so businesses can innovate and to help small business. They believe we must constrain government spending and bring down deficits so we can make greater public investments in education, technology and infrastructure.

What stood out the most to them were policies that would impact their pocket-books and help them with the cost-of-living – things like affordable childcare, affordable healthcare, middle class tax cuts, paid family leave, better paying jobs and equal pay. They also agreed that greater investments in education and infrastructure would help rebuild the middle class. Finally, some saw great value in helping small business, supporting unions, ending secret corporate trade deals that override American food and safety laws, and incentivizing companies to invest in their workers instead of CEO pay.

Moment of opportunity

Voters are watching events closely and reacting. They are not waiting for a traditional moment in the election cycle to engage. The anti-Trump working women are deeply impacted by the events



of the first two months of the Trump presidency and are leaning-in to resist. More importantly, the working women who voted for Trump have been shaken by the defeat of the Trump-Ryan health care replacement and Trump's budget priorities. As they learned more, their disillusionment grew stronger and revealed a fundamental new concern about Trump, centered on him being too wealthy and protected to appreciate how much he is hurting the less fortunate.

This is a critical new opportunity. The progressive world and Democrats should not let up on their attacks on the Trump-Ryan health care alternative – specifically how it would make health care even more unaffordable and actually raises costs for seniors and the disabled. They should let everyone know of his main budget priorities: his wall paid for by cutting funding for Meals on Wheels and after-school programs and cancer research.