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President's State of the Union succeeds with unmarried women and white working class: They applaud empathetic narrative and call for middle class economics, though not the state of the economy

President Obama has navigated carefully between taking credit for an improving economy and expressing due concern for the millions of Americans who continue to struggle. In his 2015 State of the Union address, the President debuted a more confident tone, characterizing our economy as strong and continuing to improve, and laying out a dramatic vision for middle class prosperity in the 21st century. Dial testing¹ with white swing voters across the United States and online focus groups with white non-college educated men and women and white unmarried women suggest that voters summarily reject Obama's assertion of a recovered economy, but strongly endorse his vision for the future.

Working class Americans, including white working men and women and white unmarried women, are still struggling. They respond positively to the idea that, like the Erler family whom the President cited frequently during his address, this nation faced a monumental struggle, endured tough times, and has clawed its way back. But, they tune out any idea that the State of the Union is strong – that the nation's economy is robust and that they are sharing in it. They don't think middle class economics has worked *yet*.

Nonetheless, these swing voters accept the President's vision and trust where he wants to go — and they show immense support for his economic and family agenda. The major elements of Democrats' policy agenda appeal greatly to voters across party lines, resonating especially well among white unmarried women and white working class voters, groups which are among the main strategic targets for Democrats for the next several years and who share a set of priorities for middle class prosperity.

¹ Democracy Corps conducted online dial testing during the President's 2015 State of the Union address with 61 white swing voters across the United States and two follow-up online focus groups – one with white non-college educated men and women, and one with white unmarried women.



Voters respond to Obama identifying with tough times

Despite macro-level indicators suggesting a recovering economy, millions of Americans continue to struggle to get by and don't yet feel a recovery in their own lives. They appreciate political leaders who identify with their struggle and acknowledge the tough times that they have endured – and continue to endure – as the President did in this address. Voters' dial ratings dip for obvious reasons when Obama describes the depths of the recession, but rebound remarkably in response to the idea that our nation has banded together, endured, and survived. A few moments best illustrate that point.

Fifteen years that dawned with terror touching our shores; that unfolded with a new generation fighting two long and costly wars; that saw a vicious recession spread across our nation and the world. It has been, and still is, a hard time for many.

Just a minute into his address, the President directly addresses the challenges America has faced this century, including the recession, and dials drop accordingly. However, the line “*It has, and still is, a hard time for many*” elicits a huge response, with white unmarried women rising from the mid-40s to the low-60s and white working class men and women both soaring from the low-50s to 60.



Next, the President continues to recognize the plight of so many Americans who are still struggling.

America, for all that we've endured; for all the grit and hard work required to come back; for all the tasks that lie ahead [...]

Again, voters respond strongly and dials spike at the empathy, led by white working class women (who jump from 50 to the 60s) and white unmarried women (from 50 to the mid-60s).

Throughout his speech, the President invokes the story of a family – the Erlers – who endured a tough few years but ultimately made it through the recession. He compares their story with that of our nation, suggesting that we, too, have endured a tough few years.



“It is amazing,” Rebekah [Erler] wrote, “what you can bounce back from when you have to...we are a strong, tight-knit family who has made it through some very, very hard times.” We are a strong, tight-knit family who has made it through some very, very hard times. America, Rebekah and Ben’s story is our story. They represent the millions who have worked hard, and scrimped, and sacrificed, and retooled. You are the reason I ran for this office. You’re the people I was thinking of six years ago today, in the darkest months of the crisis [...]



Once more, voters respond to how the President identifies with what the middle class has gone through. Dials increase steadily through this section, with white unmarried women jumping from 60 to 70 and both white working class men and white working class women rising about 10 points in their ratings.

Post-speech focus groups reinforced the positive feelings voters took from these sympathetic moments and the idea that the country is united in working toward helping middle class families, with one white working class man noting that he liked that the speech gave him a sense that “we are all one country joined together.” A white unmarried Republican woman took away from the address that “Mr. Obama does care about all Americans.” Agreed a white unmarried independent woman, “He really does care.”

Backlash against positive characterization of an economic recovery

The President set out to make a point in this address beyond identifying with the struggling middle class. More than he has in past years, Obama introduced a more assertive tone, one which suggested that the country had turned the corner and recovered, past tense, from the recession. Like the Erler family, he suggested, we are *back*, and the economy is *strong*.

Voters balk at this assertion. Each time the President describes the state of the economy in positive terms, or emphasizes the success of the American recovery, dials remain flat or drop. There are exceptions on individual issues where voters rally behind a positive economic statistic, or express approval of the nation’s improvement in one area. But on the larger assessment of the



economy, voters are clear that they do not share Obama's optimism. As one working class man puts it, "the economy has improved, but not recovered." Voters are clear that they face a cost of living crisis – jobs don't pay enough to live on – and they immediately push back on the assertion that the economy has emerged from recession stronger.

The President makes his case for the status of the recovered economy at two distinct stages in his speech. First, he unequivocally claims that our economy is strong.

The shadow of crisis has passed, and the State of the Union is strong.

This is Obama's most direct, assertive line about the recovery, and voters' reaction is muted, if not downright negative, especially among key groups. White working class women and men both decline into the mid-60s and mid-50s, respectively. And white unmarried women show even clearer discomfort with the President's statement, dropping from the 70s down to 60.



Real-time reactions to this assertion from these swing voters reinforce their unenthusiastic response. "The economy has improved but not recovered," said one working class man, a Republican. "The economy has a long way to go," said another working class man, a Democrat. Voters clearly do not embrace Obama's description of the nation as *strong*.

Obama's second broad assessment of the economy comes when he continues his discussion of the Erler family. He describes how Rebekah and Ben moved past the recession, buying a new home, having a second son, and Ben finding a better job. Voters respond positively to their story, with dial ratings increasing, especially among white working class women. However, when Obama shifts the focus back to the nation – saying that we, too, have moved past the recession and "emerged stronger" – voters disagree.

It's been your effort and resilience that has made it possible for our country to emerge stronger.



Voters clearly hold back on this statement – these swing voters are not ready to say that our nation is back, and stronger, like the Emlers. White working class voters in particular fail to respond to the President’s characterization of the economy as robust and recovered.

Several other specific points of proof that the President cites supporting his claim about the economy’s recovery inspire a positive reaction, including the nation’s low unemployment rate, the increasing number of college graduates, the degree to which we are free from foreign oil, our success at reversing the tide of outsourcing, lower gas prices, and our improving college and math scores.

But at a number of other critical times, the President receives a mixed or negative reaction upon making the case for the economy being fully recovered. Including:

Economy Growing

Tonight, after a breakthrough year for America, our economy is growing and creating jobs at the fastest pace since 1999.

Voters’ reaction to this statement is mixed, with white unmarried women dropping, white working class men increasing, and white working class women remaining at about 60. The reaction is more polarized by party, with Democrats responding well but Republicans dropping.



Healthcare

More of our people are insured than ever before. [...] In the past year alone, about ten million uninsured Americans finally gained the security of health coverage.

Health care remains a great challenge. Despite the ‘good news’ about there being fewer uninsured Americans, voters’ dial ratings drop sharply, especially among the white working class. And, white unmarried women dip from 70 to 50. Beyond Democrats, most voters don’t count healthcare legislation as a success. In post-speech breakout groups, both men and women note a



feeling of overreach on health care, like the President declared the issue fixed when the reality is far from that.



Risen from Recession

At this moment—with a growing economy, shrinking deficits, bustling industry, and booming energy production—we have risen from recession freer to write our own future than any other nation on Earth.

The dials stagnate here: white working class men and white unmarried women hover at 50, while white working class women rise slowly to around 60 – still very low ratings relative to the rest of the speech. These voters clearly do not endorse the President’s assertion that we have risen from the recession so successfully.

Fastest Economic Growth, Deficits Cut, Health Care Inflation Low

We’ve seen the fastest economic growth in over a decade, our deficits cut by two-thirds, a stock market that has doubled, and health care inflation at its lowest rate in fifty years.

Dials rise at the beginning of this statement highlighting the positive economic news, and then drop sharply on health care, once again. White working class women drop from the mid-60s to high-50s, while white working class men drop from 60 to 50.

Middle Class Economics Verdict

So the verdict is clear. Middle-class economics works.

Voters fail to respond to the President’s assertion that the middle-class economy has worked, with dials staying stagnant at 60 and white working class women dropping from the mid-60s to



60. Voters reject this interpretation of where we are – they don't think the economy has worked for them – yet.

Recovery Touching More, Wages Rising

Today, thanks to a growing economy, the recovery is touching more and more lives. Wages are finally starting to rise again. We know that more small business owners plan to raise their employees' pay than at any time since 2007.

Voters respond to the growing economy – dials rise moderately, especially among white working class men. But on wages rising, the trend is essentially flat – white working class women remain at 60, white unmarried women briefly drop to the 50s, and independents stay flat.

Manufacturing Booming

Our manufacturers have added almost 800,000 new jobs. Some of our bedrock sectors, like our auto industry, are booming.

Again, voters fail to respond. White unmarried women drop 10 points, while white working class voters do not budge.

And in post-speech focus groups, there is an undercurrent of discomfort with the President's congratulatory tone throughout the address.

"Almost cocky about economic growth."

-White working class man, Democrat

"His usual speech where he makes everything sound like it is better than it really is."

-White working class man, independent

"You can't say there are less people without jobs when workers that are done with unemployment are not counted. So for me, the economy is not better."

-White working class woman, independent

Voters are sending a clear message to the President and to all our political leaders: while the economy may be improving, it certainly hasn't improved for everybody. The President's concern for the plight of the middle class resonates, but he receives a muted – or even negative – response when asserting that the economy has recovered. Some specific areas of improvement bring about a more positive response, but on the whole, this macro-economic progress has not benefited these white unmarried women and white working class voters, and they do not believe the state of the union is strong. They have confidence that we can get there and are willing to follow the President and Democrats' lead on the way, but they feel as though, for now, the car has not fully exited the ditch.



Working class voters embrace forward-looking economic agenda

Clearly, the page has not yet fully turned for white unmarried women and white working class voters when it comes to the economy. But, they continue to be hopeful that America can get there and that there are real policy changes that can help middle class families get the hand they are looking for in this economy.

These working class voters do not want timidity from their President and elected leaders; while they respond favorably to themes of bipartisanship and people working together, some of the best reviews post-speech reference the President as being more forceful and confident than in recent times. One white non-college Republican woman stated that “Obama wants to make some bold changes in the last two years of his presidency” as a positive takeaway, while a white non-college Republican man was favorable to the President being “confident in a sustained economy and really took a strong stand on a couple of issues.”

Working class men in particular react very strongly to the President asserting his agenda and talking about vetoing legislation that puts progress at risk. These voters are hungry to see something get done that will improve their economic situation, and the dials move up as the President discusses vetoing any efforts to roll back policies to help the middle class.

We can't slow down businesses or put our economy at risk with government shutdowns or fiscal showdowns. We can't put the security of families at risk by taking away their health insurance, or unraveling the new rules on Wall Street, or refighting past battles on immigration when we've got a system to fix. And if a bill comes to my desk that tries to do any of these things, it will earn my veto.



While these white working class voters disagree that the economy has turned a corner, they respond to an economic framework that offers a fair shot for everyone to succeed within a new middle class economy. The dials among white unmarried women and white working class voters all surge at the discussion of everyone playing by the same set of rules, and spike again with the mention of a plan to help working families with childcare, college, healthcare, and retirement.



That's what middle-class economics is—the idea that this country does best when everyone gets their fair shot, everyone does their fair share, and everyone plays by the same set of rules. We don't just want everyone to share in America's success—we want everyone to contribute to our success.



So what does middle-class economics require in our time?

First—middle-class economics means helping working families feel more secure in a world of constant change. That means helping folks afford childcare, college, health care, a home, retirement—and my budget will address each of these issues, lowering the taxes of working families and putting thousands of dollars back into their pockets each year.



Within this economic framework, there are some clear areas of agreement and divergence when it comes to the specific proposals put forth. The President's proposals on issues like education, child care, paid sick leave, innovation, and infrastructure score big with white unmarried women and working class voters alike, as does the President's plan to close tax loopholes for the wealthy and special interests to help invest in the middle class.



However, opinions splinter in the specific focus of these issues, speaking to the need to tailor messages to these key groups. In post-speech breakout focus groups, the emphasis is different – white unmarried women place a heavier focus on talking about the middle class generally. Meanwhile, white working class voters, particularly working class men, are much more intent on the impact on small businesses and job growth as part of the economic agenda. As a result, white working class men respond with less enthusiasm on proposals they believe may hurt small business owners, including child care, paid sick leave, or an increased minimum wage.

Closing tax loopholes for the wealthy and special interests

Importantly, white unmarried women and white working class voters are united behind a central plank of the President’s middle class agenda—his efforts to close tax loopholes on the rich in order to “help more families pay for childcare and send their kids to college.” The President’s populist message broke through and succeeded here, as all the dials spike for a prolonged period. This was particularly true of the working class men, who respond well to the President providing an answer on the “how do we pay for all of this?” question that comes up repeatedly with other proposals.

This year, we have an opportunity to change that. Let’s close loopholes so we stop rewarding companies that keep profits abroad, and reward those that invest in America. Let’s use those savings to rebuild our infrastructure and make it more attractive for companies to bring jobs home. Let’s simplify the system and let a small business owner file based on her actual bank statement, instead of the number of accountants she can afford. And let’s close the loopholes that lead to inequality by allowing the top one percent to avoid paying taxes on their accumulated wealth. We can use that money to help more families pay for child-care and send their kids to college.



Community college, student loans, and skills training

The proposal to provide two years’ free education at a community college to allow students to enter the new economy without crushing debt from student loans also generates broad approval.



In post-speech focus groups, both white working class voters and white unmarried women acknowledge that a high school education is no longer sufficient and that those coming into the workforce need to have additional education to be successful.

White unmarried women and white working class voters—both men and women—all respond strongly and in unison to the idea of making community college “free” and “universal”, a remarkable accord. And, white working class men are even more attracted to helping reduce student debt, with dials spiking into the 80s at this proposal.

Forty percent of our college students choose community college. Some are young and starting out. Some are older and looking for a better job. Some are veterans and single parents trying to transition back into the job market. Whoever you are, this plan is your chance to graduate ready for the new economy, without a load of debt. Understand, you've got to earn it—you've got to keep your grades up and graduate on time. Tennessee, a state with Republican leadership, and Chicago, a city with Democratic leadership, are showing that free community college is possible. I want to spread that idea all across America, so that two years of college becomes as free and universal in America as high school is today. And I want to work with this Congress, to make sure Americans already burdened with student loans can reduce their monthly payments, so that student debt doesn't derail anyone's dreams.

But, trust in government and the lack of details on funding is a problem for white non-college men on the free two year community college proposal. Even while saying it is something they think would be helpful, they immediately ask “how do we pay for it?”

On the other hand, women—particularly white unmarried women—also worry about how to pay for the proposal, but in the breakout focus group were much more likely to try to offer some idea of how this could be adopted, citing things like a tax increase or dedicated funding from lotteries, etc. This is something they want, and they are eager to make it a real possibility.

Innovation and infrastructure

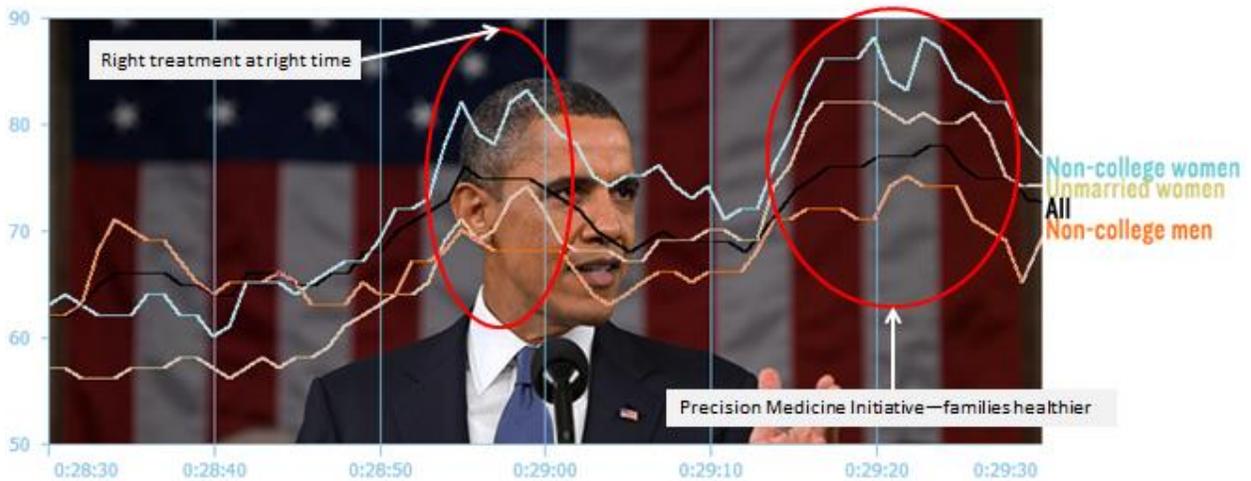
A major piece of the President's address concerned making a renewed commitment to modernizing our nation's infrastructure, allowing us to create jobs and compete in a changing global economy. White working class and white unmarried women voters respond enthusiastically to this issue, with dials spiking dramatically into the high 70s and low 80s as Obama advocates for infrastructure upgrades to help build our economy and develop the industries that will create jobs “here in America.”

So no one knows for certain which industries will generate the jobs of the future. But we do know we want them here in America. That's why the third part of middle-class economics is about building the most competitive economy anywhere, the place where businesses want to locate and hire. Twenty-first century businesses need 21st century infrastructure—modern ports, stronger bridges, faster trains and the fastest internet.



While all of these voters respond to building our infrastructure and creating new jobs and industry, tapping into the American value of innovation also appeals to white unmarried women and white working class women in the President’s discussion of 21st century business. For working class women in particular, this was the highest 30-second segment of the President’s address, speaking to his call to use American know-how to ring in a new era of medicine that will create jobs and eradicate disease:

21st century businesses will rely on American science, technology, research and development. I want the country that eliminated polio and mapped the human genome to lead a new era of medicine—one that delivers the right treatment at the right time. In some patients with cystic fibrosis, this approach has reversed a disease once thought unstoppable. Tonight, I’m launching a new Precision Medicine Initiative to bring us closer to curing diseases like cancer and diabetes—and to give all of us access to the personalized information we need to keep ourselves and our families healthier.





Paid sick leave and affordable child care

The President's proposals to take on issues facing working families hit home with white unmarried women and white working class voters. Among these voters who continue to struggle in this economy, the offer of just a little help to claw their way back scores big.

White working women and unmarried women embrace the proposal to make affordable high-quality child care an economic priority. They agree strongly with the President's assertion that this is not a side issue or a women's issue, and their dials surge in response while white working class men falter somewhat in this discussion. However, these men come back on board and the dials increase when the President introduces his plan to help with child care by offering a dedicated middle class tax cut.

On another challenge facing working families—paid sick leave—both white working class voters and white unmarried women give the President full backing as he asks Congress to put paid sick leave to a vote. White working class and unmarried women are most receptive; however, white working class men also surge at the President's call for action.

Today, we're the only advanced country on Earth that doesn't guarantee paid sick leave or paid maternity leave to our workers. Forty-three million workers have no paid sick leave. Forty-three million. Think about that. And that forces too many parents to make the gut-wrenching choice between a paycheck and a sick kid at home. So I'll be taking new action to help states adopt paid leave laws of their own. And since paid sick leave won where it was on the ballot last November, let's put it to a vote right here in Washington. Send me a bill that gives every worker in America the opportunity to earn seven days of paid sick leave. It's the right thing to do.

Clearly, white working class voters and white unmarried women respond to the President's forward-looking framework and see the agenda he has laid out as reflective of their values and their hopes for the future.

Conclusion

President Obama took an important step in reaching out to critical white unmarried women and working class voters in his State of the Union address. However, there are important lessons to be learned and incorporated into discussions of the economic agenda in order to gain the confidence of these voters heading into 2016 and beyond. Concerns about big government and gridlock linger; this leaves these working class voters with a "watch and see" attitude, even among those who are favorable to the agenda the President laid out. There are differences in how different audiences approach these concerns and, consequently, how the President and Congress will have to tackle them.

Among white working class men, the biggest sticking point is government spending and costs. They react immediately to any proposal like two years free community college or paid sick leave with questions of how to pay for new policies when the country continues to face a huge deficit



and debt. There needs to be a clear accounting of how things get paid for in order to get buy-in; they are more responsive when the priorities and tradeoffs are clear, i.e., we are going to close tax loopholes for corporations to invest in helping middle class families get child care or skills training. These working class men are also strongly supportive of reform and getting waste out of government in any manner possible.

Another challenge that the President and Democrats face is finding a way to bring people together to move proposals through a hostile Congress. While white unmarried women and both white working class men and women alike believe the President to be sincere in his desire and willingness to work with the other side, the reality is that few believe that the current political environment makes any of that realistic. In breakout groups, many of the women note that the President's track record does not give them confidence that he will be able to accomplish any of this.

Moving forward with a bold and aggressive agenda that calls for real reforms on waste in government and closing loopholes for special interests that can help middle and working class families turn the page to a new economic prosperity will be crucial in attracting these voters in 2016.



Methodology

Research was conducted on January 20, 2015 by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Democracy Corps and Women's Voices Women Vote Action Fund.² Participants were 61 white swing voters nationwide who split their votes fairly evenly between Democratic and Republican candidates over the past several Presidential and Congressional elections, though there were slightly more Obama voters than Romney voters. The group's self-identified partisanship was 33 percent Democratic, 34 percent Independent, and 33 percent Republican. The group included 27 women and 34 men, including 13 unmarried women.

Dial testing focus group research was conducted using Stratalys Research. Moment-to-moment data collection was powered by LiveRead by Stratalys. Researchers using LiveRead have the ability to add critical, real-time quantitative feedback that compliments qualitative analysis, which results in clearer, more focused intel for their clients. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Researchers measured and examined several participant subsets including political identification and many other demographic variables to aid analysis.

This research also included two online focus groups immediately following the speech to explore reactions to the speech itself. These were conducted using Q2® and were among white non-college swing voters and unmarried women.

² Women's Voices Women Vote Action Fund (WVWVAF) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan 501 (c)(4) organization founded in 2005 and dedicated to increasing the voting participation and issue advocacy of unmarried women. Learn more at www.wvwvaf.org