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State of the Union 2018: no sugar high *Dial meter research among the Rising American Electorate*

President Donald Trump delivered a remarkably unsuccessful, unimpactful State of the Union on Tuesday. This is according to live dial-meter research conducted for *Women's Voices Women Vote Action Fund* by *Democracy Corps* among 108 Rising American Electorate (RAE) voters – the voters that will decide control of Congress in 2018.¹ Presidents usually receive a post-address sugar high in dial groups, but the response to Trump was even worse than in 2017, when reactions were already much weaker than those observed for prior presidents in our research.

President Trump's speech produced a particularly small rise in personal favorability and job performance – increases smaller than those observed in last year's unsuccessful Joint Session to Congress. He merely took the edge off his intense disapproval and unfavorability. He failed to use this once-a-year opportunity to shift the momentum in the generic congressional ballot toward the GOP, which is the humblest expectation when a president has a devoted national audience for 90 minutes. In fact, he produced a 12-point shift to the Democrats among the white millennial participants in our dial-group. Critically, he increased the determination of white unmarried women, Latinos, and African Americans to vote in 2018.

He also failed to produce more than the most insignificant changes to his scores on key personal attributes – that is, the characteristics central to people's love or hatred of Trump. Despite focusing intensely on security issues during the address, the perception that Trump is "dangerous" was unchanged and there were only very minor improvements in being a "strong leader" and "keeping his promises."

The president will be embarrassed when he sees the comparison with President Obama's performance on these measures, particularly in his first term. That is why we titled this memo, "no sugar high" – the artificially strong results in State of the Union addresses are very hard to translate into sustainable gains.

With respect to his capacity to handle issues, Trump's address produced gains similar in scale to the shifts he made last February. He had a 12-point improvement in the perception that he "has the right approach to immigration" and belief he "will make health care more affordable," and produced an 11-point improvement in the belief he "will create jobs." That is comparable to the improvements in confidence that he will create jobs (+14) and keep the country safe (+12) witnessed after last year's SOTU address. Those

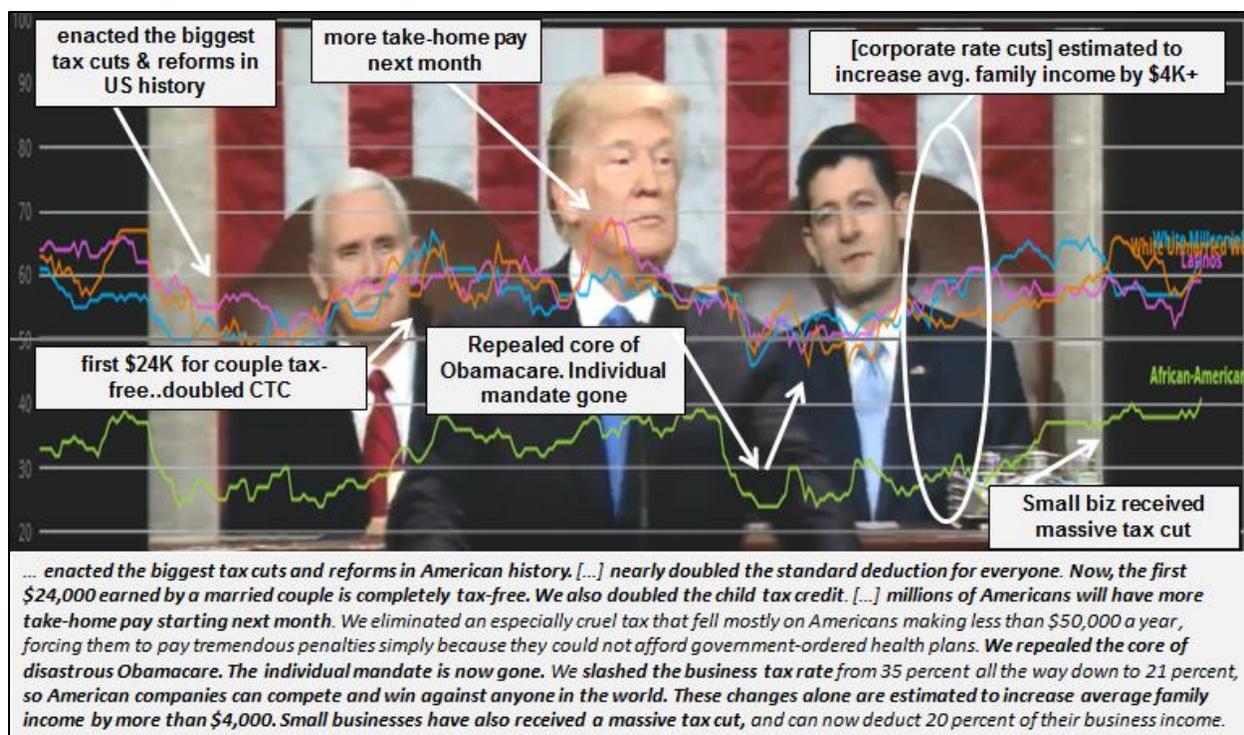
¹ On behalf of WVVAF, Democracy Corps conducted online dial meter research during President Trump's State of the Union address among 108 voters nationally: 30 African Americans, 28 Latinos, 21 white millennials, 29 white unmarried women. Surveys were administered before and after the live dial meter session. This research is qualitative and results are not statistically projectable onto a larger population.

gains did not translate into broader gains with staying power nationally, and we do not expect the similarly weak improvements this year to be any different.

Nonetheless, there is a lot to learn from the RAE voters' reaction to Trump's speech [and from our recent panel survey findings](#) that showed what messages, framing, and critiques allowed Democrats to increase support and turnout. When RAE voters react to Trump's claims about rising wages, investments in job training, new job announcements, and affordable health care and prescription drugs, they are sending a message to Democrats to get their act together and propose the disruptive changes and agenda they want.

Economy & Jobs

Donald Trump appeared determined to convince voters of the value of his recent tax cuts and the reality of an economic revival in the country. But the results of his economic "good news" story were mixed as voters were glad to hear about specific new investments or companies creating jobs, but doubted other claims about manufacturing jobs, rising wages, or "tax cut bonuses." Despite the constant reminder of job announcements from *Apple*, *Exxon*, and auto-manufacturers, there was no movement at all on whether he was "ending the outsourcing of jobs" – which was key to his appeal to many Obama-Trump voters.



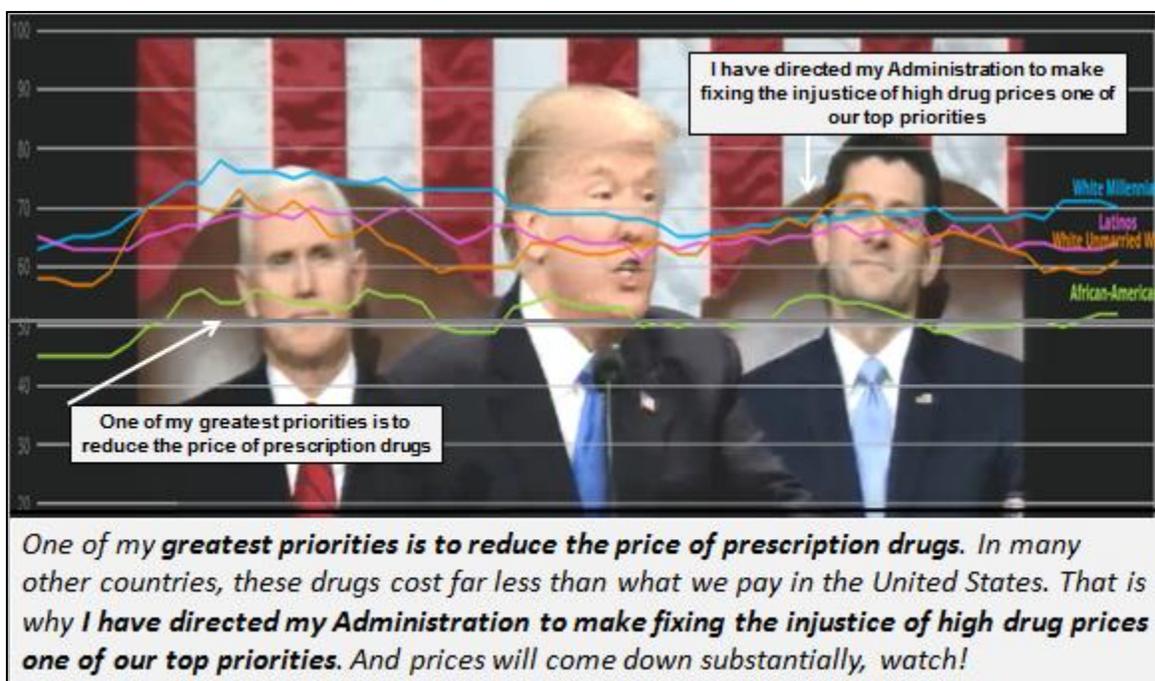
The RAE's ongoing struggle in low-paying jobs is evident in their dial meter response each time Trump argued that more money would be in their pocket at the end of the day. The new GOP tax bill earned a knee-jerk drop across all lines that only rebounded when they heard about the first \$24,000 of a couple's income being tax free, the doubling of the child tax credit, and more take home pay in their pockets next month. That is especially true among the African American and millennial voters. Similarly, business tax cuts did not move the needle until they were claimed to soon increase the average family income by \$4,000 or it was made clear that these tax cuts helped *small* businesses.

It is in that context that we understand the rising lines for Trump's commitment to helping workers on a path to better jobs and wages through workforce training, paid family leave, and help for former inmates. These goals earned a strong response from the white unmarried women and led to some of the highest dialing among African Americans all night. Responses to his infrastructure plan were similarly well received, particularly among white millennials.

Health care

The cost of living crisis is also closely tied to health care and the RAE is struggling with premiums and deductibles that are too high and prescription drugs that are too expensive. This is a concern we have heard repeatedly from voters in focus groups.

To be sure, [the RAE in our January web-panel](#) gave the Democratic Party higher marks on dealing with health care affordability than the Republicans and Trump who failed so horribly at reform in 2017. And yes, the RAE is also supportive of the Affordable Care Act and dialed down instinctively when Trump mentioned he had successfully repealed the heart of Obama's signature policy. But Democratic silence on dealing with costs gives Trump more openings.



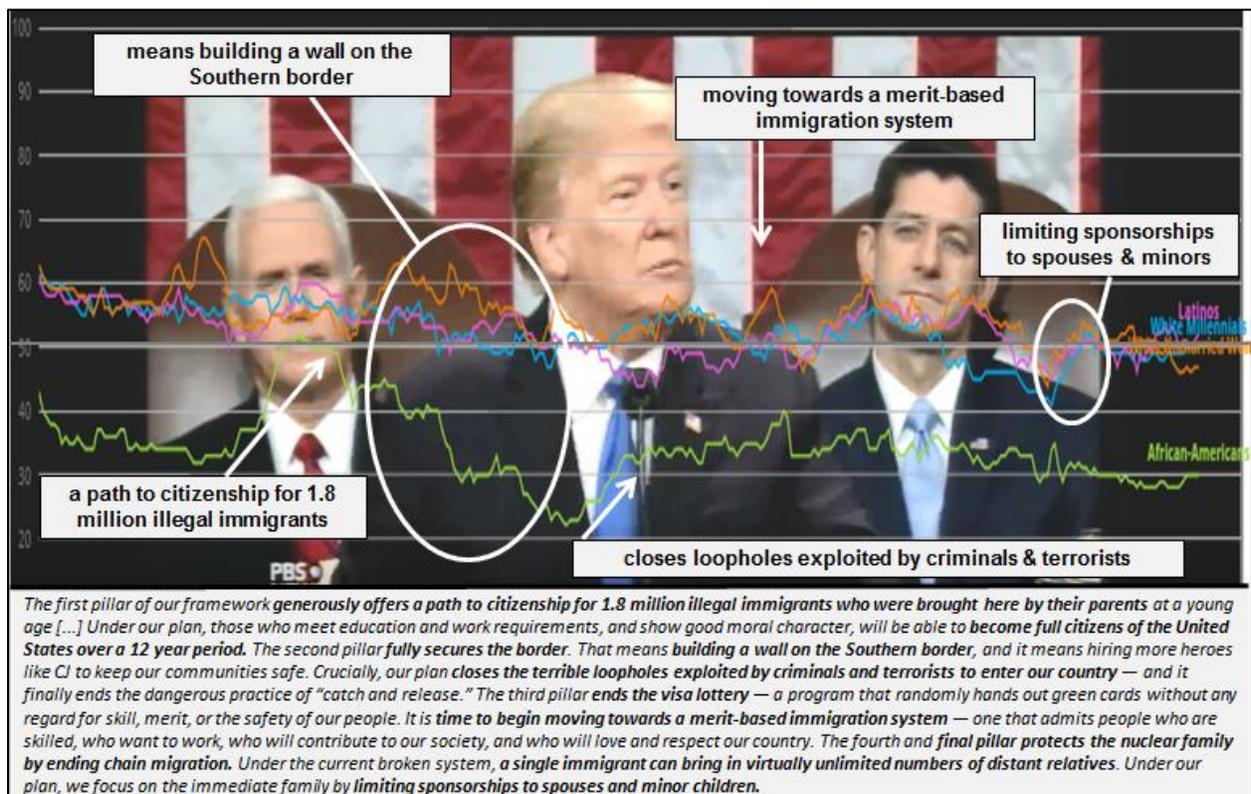
Lines rebounded instantly when our viewers learned of the repeal of the individual mandate that had required them to buy plans too expensive to be useful. Trump's claim that "one of [his] greatest priorities is to reduce the price of prescription drugs" was a high-point across all of the lines.

But Trump has not turned the corner on health care with this address. The positive dial reactions would be more impressive if he actually had plans to address the problem, and though Trump succeeded in making gains on "making health care more affordable" in the end, they were not of the magnitude expected of this mode of research.

Immigration

All members of the RAE dialed up at the President’s offer to legalize DREAMers and all dialed down dramatically at mention of the border wall. His appeals to illegal immigration and MS-13 crime were divisive and polarizing, especially among the African Americans who had a keen ear for scapegoating in these groups; they were skeptical of every mention of criminal immigrants, plans for border security and reforms to legal immigration.

But it is clear from the dial-meter reaction that certain parts of the RAE are listening and receptive to Trump’s immigration message and plans for reform. White unmarried women, white millennials, and Latinos were all broadly supportive of the proposed changes to legal immigration that are likely to hold up a deal on the DREAMers – from a merit based system to ending family reunification as we know it.



There is also some evidence that the Latino participants responded to his immigration vision and the speech generally. After hearing Trump’s immigration plan, there was a clear willingness among Latinos to support a congressional candidate who will “work with Trump and Republicans,” while every other group of the RAE said they wanted a candidate to “be a check” on Trump and the GOP.

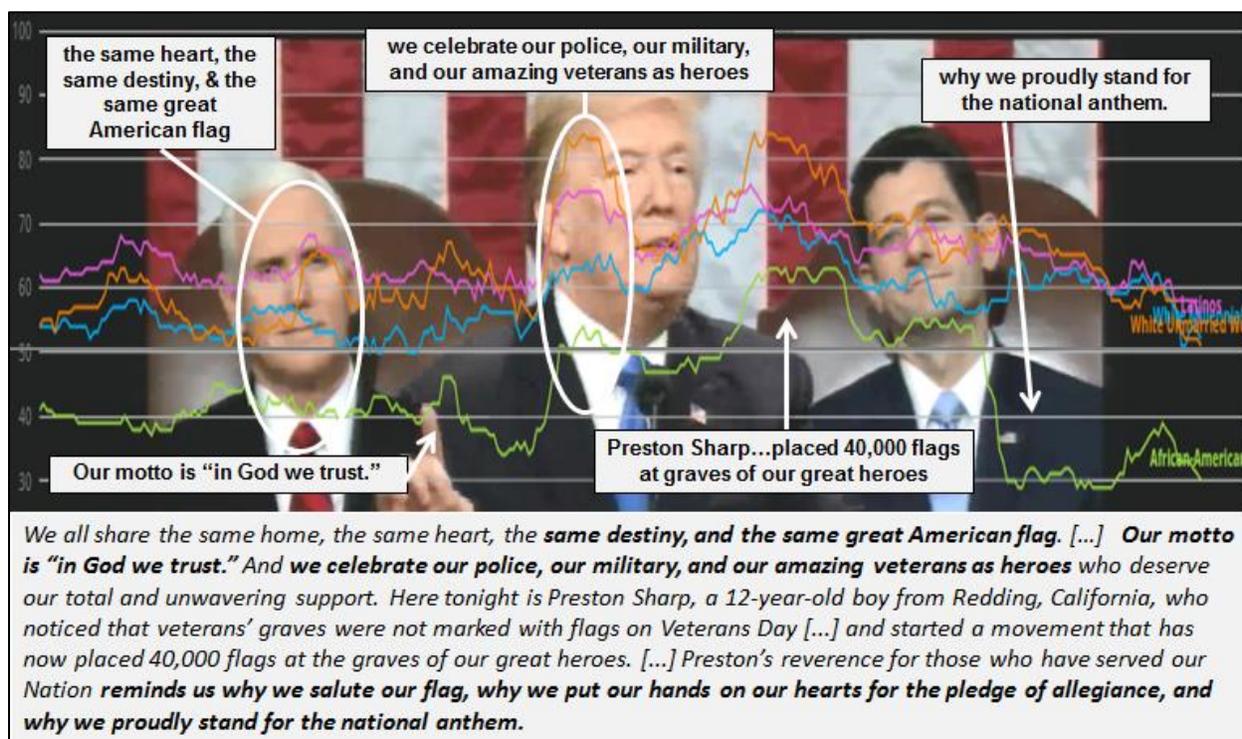
% LOOKING FOR CANDIDATE	CHECK TRUMP/GOP	WORK w TRUMP/GOP	CHECK-WORK
TOTAL	60	40	+20
Latinos	41	59	-18
White unmarried women	59	41	+18
White millennials	63	38	+25
African Americans	76	24	+52

At the end of the night, the President only produced a 12-point shift in trust to handle immigration, when our experience in dial research suggests only more exaggerated dial-group shifts translate to broader improvements nationally.

Security & Patriotism

Despite spending much of the evening focused on national security issues, Trump did not move the needle on the perception that he is dangerous, with 62 percent still saying this described him well at the end of the night. Even his announcement of the defeat of ISIS barely moved the needle.

He did manage, however, to produce one of the most polarized responses of the evening by wrapping himself in the flag and anthem and aligning himself with law enforcement and veterans.



Conclusion

State of the Union dial groups typically produce an exaggerated response that translates to a few point increase in public polling. Based on these dials, we expect that if there is any post-State of the Union movement in Donald Trump's personal favorability rating in national polling, it will be smaller than observed last year. (According to [538](#), there was a mere 1-point increase in his approval in the days after the 2017 SOTU.)

While we have noted a few points in the evening where Donald Trump succeeded in driving up the dials, Trump and Republicans do not have plans to make good on most all of those policy commitments. For instance, the GOP Congress has no intention of proving for paid family leave, Trump is dramatically cutting funding for worker training programs, and there is no plan to reduce the cost of prescription drugs.

With their very limited shifts in personal favorability and approval, the RAE shows how little faith they have in this President. Six-in-ten say they want a candidate for Congress in 2018 who will stand up to Donald Trump and the GOP Congress, not work with him, and across the board the RAE became more determined to vote in the 2018 midterms.