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Women in the Rising American Electorate are immediate registration targets Findings from March 2019 Focus Groups

In light of the historic 2018 turnout and even higher interest in the 2020 election found in Democracy Corps' first survey of 2019, we were tasked by WVVAF to conduct focus groups with unregistered and low propensity voters among the Rising American Electorate to confirm and inform their choice to begin registration programs at this early point.¹ These groups resoundingly confirm that choice.

The women in the RAE – African American women, white unmarried women, and white millennial women – were already highly politically engaged, clear about why they need to register and vote now, and encouraged that change is possible after over 100 women were elected to Congress. They reacted strongly against Trump and his tweets, particularly to his divisive language and overreaching claims that this is the “greatest economy.” Indeed, this is a unique situation where every time Trump tweets to argue his case, he motivates backlash with our targets, justifying the early start for registration programs.

The RAE women interviewed cited lack of interest as their top reason for failing to register and vote in past elections, but as many unregistered RAE observed last year, they “have no right to complain if you didn't vote.” (White millennial woman, Atlanta) The damage that Donald Trump has done has raised the stakes and these women now have a very clear reason to register and vote: “Change is needed, and a new president is needed.” (African American woman, Charlotte)

Think about whose hands our lives are in and what can happen if the current president gets back in office. We need to elect candidates that our great for not only our country but our local cities & counties. (African American woman, Charlotte)

We need to make a difference and let our voices be heard to change some of the decisions that were put in place these past few years by voting for a better candidate. (African American woman, Charlotte)

Importantly, many of these RAE reported they failed to participate in the past because they felt their “vote would not have a difference,” but many now believed it was possible for people to come together and change the direction of the country by voting: “If you currently do not like what is happening, then vote to make that change. We the people collectively can make the change.” (White unmarried woman, Phoenix) They were particularly encouraged by the recent election of over 100 women to Congress.

¹ Democracy Corps conducted a series of five focus groups among unregistered eligible members of the Rising American Electorate or registered voters who had not voted in 2018 and 2016: white millennial men and African American women in Charlotte, NC on March 4th 2019, white unmarried women in Phoenix, AZ on March 5th, and white millennial women and African American men in Atlanta, GA on March 6th. Research of this nature traditionally is done partly for VPC and partly for WVVAF using appropriate allocation methods.

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There are three powerful political developments shaping the RAE women's consciousness:

1. President Trump and his tweets. Trump's tweets remind the RAE of everything they hate about him – the divisiveness, overreach, exaggeration, arrogance, pettiness, inability to be presidential, and partisanship. Just showing four of Trump's tweets fully engaged the focus group participants.



The tweet that upset the RAE women most was one that claimed, “*Republicans have created the best economy in the HISTORY of our Country – and the hottest jobs market on planet earth. The Democrat Agenda is a Socialist Nightmare. The Republicans Agenda is the AMERICAN DREAM! Vote.GOP.*” Some found this characterization of the economy incredibly out of touch. “he's too boastful some of the stuff he does he just over exaggerates some of his stuff. It's just not needed,” explained one African American woman. But most focused on how inappropriate, over the top, and divisive this tweet is.

He said the democratic agendas are a socialist nightmare. That's why it's just like, he shouldn't be using just the way he's talking he shouldn't be using. (African American woman, Charlotte)

Numb. The garbage talking is so heavy on both sides. (White unmarried woman, Phoenix)

I feel like it was inappropriate. He didn't think it through, he wasn't advised properly or whatever. (White unmarried woman, Phoenix)

Why would somebody be so angry to say that? (White unmarried woman, Phoenix)

One, it seems very immature. It's like boys against girls or it just seemed varied of mix or it makes our nation divided, which is why I think that it's - seems upsetting to me when it's you know, like, basically you're against each other. [...] That seems really weird for a president to tweet. (White millennial woman, Atlanta)

Not only was Trump's attempt to label Democrats as socialists considered “hyperbole” and not taken seriously at all, but it also overshadowed his positive argument about his accomplishments. Even the one or two RAE interviewed who thought the economy had improved and that Trump deserved some credit observed, “that other [Democratic socialist nightmare] thing that came out of that kind of ruined his whole optimistic beginning.” (White millennial woman, Atlanta)

These tweets reinforce the greatest doubts about Donald Trump, as provided in their written comments before viewing these tweets. First and foremost, they say he “encourages hate” and “leads and supports”

separation instead of bringing us together and lifting us up. They do not trust him to be unbiased and to treat people equally and they said he was racist, homophobic, and sexist. Second, they considered Trump an “immature” “bully” who “acts like a spoiled child” or a “bully.” Third, they worried Trump is “not mentally equipped to be our leader.” They expressed major concerns about his “stability” and whether he has “the knowledge required to lead this country.” One woman even worried that “he is going to flare off one day and push the red button, not even thinking about the aftermath.” As evidence of his lack of maturity, knowledge, and mental stability they cited how he “tweets like a high-schooler.” On a related note, many called him an “arrogant” “attention-seeker” who was constantly thinking about himself. Finally, they said he was “power hungry” and “selfish” who is not “putting Americans’ best interests at heart.” Each time Trump tweets, he reinforces all of these concerns.

Progressives should appreciate this incredibly unique situation. What the opponent considers to be his best arguments reinforce voters’ greatest doubts about him and remind them why they want change. The opponent making his own case actually motivates his opposition and dismays his supporters.

2. The House of Representatives with over 100 newly elected women. Progressives have totally underestimated the RAE’s level of excitement for this new Congress and its over 100 newly elected women. Simply asking for the first word of phrase that comes to mind when they think about “*The House of Representatives with over 100 newly elected women which is now controlled by the Democratic Party*” produced animated reactions among not just the RAE women, but also the white millennial men. They believe that this is the right kind of change and that more women will make Congress more effective.

It’s progress, it’s moving in a good direction. (White millennial woman, Atlanta)

I’m clapping. (White millennial woman, Atlanta)

It sounds good. Democrats are women, I like it. (White unmarried woman, Phoenix)

Yeah I am glad to see there is more women and I hope that they actually dismantle the boys club brick by brick and get in there and really do what needs to be done. It’s time. (White unmarried woman, Phoenix)

I think it’s great. Change is good. (White unmarried woman, Phoenix)

Amazing. (African American woman, Charlotte)

It’s about time. (African American woman, Charlotte)

The greater representation of women in Congress makes the RAE women in particular feel “empowered” and “like everybody is heard.” They talk about the value of equal representation, “so that there’s kind of a voice spoken for everybody” and “different opinions in the room so that you can come to an actual educated [decision].” (White millennial women, Atlanta) One African American woman in Charlotte said, “They’ll understand women’s issues,” and another asked if the women were parents because “then they will understand” their lives. They hope that “Girls are gonna get it together and get stuff done.” (White unmarried woman, Phoenix)

3. Division and a desire to transcend it. The sense that the country is divided was palpable. “That was the biggest thing that I feel like is happening right now,” explained one white millennial woman, “We’re

very divided and that's causing more problems than there should be. It's almost like drama.” Trump and his tweets are believed to be stoking this division, as the reactions to his tweets above illustrated. They know that we have been divided in the past, but they say that this is a new low: “I hate the way we're kinda - we're in chaos and there's a lot of division right now. I mean, there's always gonna be division but I think now it's even more so than has been in the past with any other president.” (White millennial woman, Atlanta)

It has reached a point that many white RAE expressed reluctance to discuss politics with their friends and families. One white unmarried woman from Phoenix said that she was more likely to talk about political issues with “a stranger on a bus, somebody you're never going to meet again,” than with a family member. Many white RAE reported they were reluctant to state their positions on social media as well, for fear of alienating a client or coworker:

I'm a real estate agent, if I have position online, that's the difference between me making a check or not. (White unmarried woman, Phoenix)

I would say I do not ever speak of any hot topics on social media. I feel everything you put on the internet is there forever and I think professionally anything that you put out there, can come back to bite you. (White millennial woman, Atlanta)

The white millennial women in Atlanta joked that posting political views can be the new ‘posting a drunk photo’ on Facebook for an employer.

They are so “upset” and “worried” and “saddened” by the constant fever pitch in our public discourse and their personal lives that they have become “tired” and “overwhelmed.” (African American women, Charlotte) There is a strong desire for a different tone from the next president.

We tested a number of frames from a Democratic candidate for president, and the best testing frame was one that talked about overcoming hate and division. It acknowledged that “*powerful forces are trying to sow hate and division among us*” and called for a return to the American values of “*we, the people*” over “*us versus them.*” Finally, it asks that the country unite to elect leaders who are honest and decent. They don't expect division to end, but hope for a president who will not seek to incite it. As one white millennial woman in Atlanta summarized, “I would like someone who's graceful and dignified, and not like outrageous in the things that they say, because they're representing our country.”

To be sure, two progressive economic frames – one focused on ending the rigged political and economic system and to bring big disruptive change for everyone and one focused on changing the perverse incentives in this country so we once again respect the dignity of work – together appealed to more of the RAE than the frame focused on division. Both will be strong currents that will get heard in the Democratic primary.

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We learned other things that are important for progressive messaging and for WVWVAF as they develop their programs.

Anti-corporate mood and wages that don't keep up. Because Trump so often talks about how great the economy is, progressives must never forget how much that conflicts with the lived experience of ordinary people.

Simply asking for a word or phrase to describe their reaction when the moderator said “wages not keeping up with the cost of living” produced a reaction strong enough to remind you just how much they are living on the edge.

Times are hard. (African American woman, Charlotte)

I need a second job. (African American woman, Charlotte)

Stressful. (African American woman, Charlotte)

Terrifying. (White unmarried woman, Phoenix)

It seems like they give you [in one place] and then take it from another. There is no increase. (White unmarried woman, Phoenix)

It's far off. (White millennial woman, Atlanta)

Most of the RAE targets we interviewed described a near crisis in their finances. The crisis is a long-term crisis as well, as there was tremendous concern that the cost of living was preventing them from being able to save enough to retire one day.

With this as the context, Trump’s rants about how this is the best economy in the history of the world with rising wages does not just strike voters as out of touch, but drives them crazy and further against him, as we saw by their reaction to his tweet about the economy above.

These voters are also in a deeply anti-corporate mood as evidenced by their forceful, negative reactions to CEOs, pharmaceutical companies, and money and politics. “Nothing that doesn’t include four letter words,” comes to mind, said one white unmarried woman from Phoenix. CEO’s are “shady,” “greedy,” and “not paying their people.” Pharmaceutical companies are “despicable,” “money hungry,” and “prey on people.” Politicians are “corrupt” and “not about the people they claim to represent” and money and politics are like “peanut butter and jelly.” That nexus of money, corporate power, and politics cuts a strong critique of who is winning in the Trump economy, while they are struggling with these cost of living issues. As one white unmarried woman from Phoenix put it, “Everybody in Congress being millionaires [..]. I mean we are in debt with it and people starving.”

Climate Change. Climate change is more important than ever. It is now one of the most cited issues when we ask open-endedly what are the issues that are getting their attention right now and what are some of the things that are going wrong in the country. They say climate change is “real,” and “scary,” and “not taken serious enough.”

Undefined Democratic presidential candidates. Progressives’ power lies in RAE voters’ reactions to Trump’s tweets, the desire to overcome divisiveness and the over 100 newly elected women in the House, *not* in their reaction to the Democratic presidential candidates.

The reaction to the Democratic primary and the candidates thus far was vague and evolving. But that does not mean the RAE do not have strong reasons to engage. They were focused on the damage Trump was doing, desire to put an end to the divisiveness, and the historic number of women elected to the new Congress, which tells them that change can happen.

Distrust of social media. The widely publicized misuse of social media makes them very distrustful of news on these platforms. “With social media, a lot of times, things will pop up and then you have so many people and the comments. And people are just talking so you don't know what's true, what's not true. People come up with their own stories,” explained one African American woman.

The news that they see on social media now goes through that filter and they have strategies to ensure they are getting the facts.

I just recently started watching the news more because social media, you don't know what's real, what's fake, fake news. (African American woman, Charlotte)

When I look online, I make sure it - if I see a news article and something catches my eye, I look up that actual law, or the actual thing rather than going by just what the news article says. So I make sure I find sites that are like.gov, .org, and then take into consideration. (White unmarried woman, Phoenix)

In addition to their reluctance to engage online to avoid further division among disagreeing family and friends, especially among the white RAE groups, the concern for “fake news” made them hesitant to engage politically on these platforms.

Perhaps mail and phone programs have more credibility during this moment of social media skepticism. At the same time, when people try to get information about issues important to them, and when they say they want to learn more about the organization sending them this piece of mail, their starting place is the internet. WVVAF should be thinking about ways to appear as a trusted source when someone searches for them and reaches the website from a search engine, and when you direct voters to your online registration programs.

Millennial consciousness. The RAE was aware that the millennials – those born in 1980 or later – are driving a lot of the resistance to Trump. Millennials of both races were aware of their distinctive role. One millennial woman just out of college said that she and others in her generation were more interested in politics now as a result of it becoming cool to support Bernie Sanders on campus in 2016.

Some of the non-millennial RAE we spoke to mentioned that their children were pushing them to get involved to make a change. “My son, he's very, we gotta change the world, mom. It all starts with you, it all starts with us, we've gotta - how is it going to change if you don't,” explained one white unmarried woman. One millennial woman in Atlanta was talking more about issues to her mother: “The bigger part of my family is probably more conservative, but my mom, my small part [of the family], a lot of the big issues, lately, I've really brought up more conversations than I used to.” Finally, many young mothers were starting to see how important it was for them to take action to leave a better world for their children.

While most RAE said they were reluctant to bring up politics with friends and family, the millennials in these groups, particularly the African American millennials and youngest white millennials recently out of college, were more inclined to do so, as it was “very typical” of their generation and group of friends. (White millennial woman, Atlanta)

Older white Trump voters were also aware of the role that millennials play. In focus groups with Trump voters last summer, Democracy Corps heard these defensive Trump voters complain about the generational divide in their families, communities, and workplaces as younger people confronted them about their politically incorrect views and support of Trump.

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WVWVAF's programs should be ambitious to take advantage of the opportunity presented by these RAE women, including early registration efforts.