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Report on Democracy Corps Focus Groups

The latest wave of Democracy Corps focus groups, conducted in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, and Denver, Colorado, are a stark reminder of how macro-economic indicators that cause hope in Washington have little resonance outside the Beltway. Voters continue to feel tremendous financial pressure and serious concerns about the job market.¹

There are clear differences in the perceptions among the various demographic groups that participated – seniors, older non-college educated women, younger college educated men, and voters under 30 years old – but their overall mood (very negative), focus on the economy (intense and worried), reaction to health care reform (massive confusion), and attitudes toward Congress (they are all to blame) are common regardless of age, gender, or education.

Despite Macro Level Improvements, Voters Still Struggling and Negative

The economy dominates discussion about what is happening in the country. People are very worried about jobs – many participants had recently lost their jobs or had friends or family who lost their jobs. Even when someone finds new employment, it does not pay the same and is often a rung below their previous position. The most troubling aspect of the economy is that people have a hard time envisioning how the good jobs return. With our jobs constantly getting shipped overseas and “America not making anything anymore,” there is no clear path for getting ourselves out of this economic crisis.

¹ This report is based off of findings from four focus groups conducted in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania (with seniors and women aged 45-60 without a college degree) and Denver, Colorado (with voters under 30 years old and men aged 30-45 with a college degree). All participants were Independents, weak Democrats, or weak Republicans.



While perceptions of the economy are very negative and people across all groups emphatically believe we are still in a deep recession, important differences are clear based on education and income levels. The non-college educated participants describe their economic situation in intensely negative terms and have absolutely no sense that things are turning around anytime soon. The college educated participants are also economically pressed and negative, but their economic pressures are not as draconian and they do express some hope about the future that is absent from the non-college educated groups.

We need jobs here. People need to eat and take care of their...we need to be taken care of over here. – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

They need to bring more jobs back in here. They sent everything overseas and things come back and it's wrong. – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

I know my company just declared bankruptcy. – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

For the first time in my entire life I'm out of work. – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

Yes, we have plenty of people that are out of work and they need food and they need shelter. I mean, yes, a lot of homeless people have a lot of problems, but there are people that are losing their house that are on the street. My sister is ready to lose her house because she's just not making it. I feel that he should do something here. – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

My concern is that the job...speaking about the job market and jobs that are created, we are losing jobs in the private sector, which is our manufacturing base, which is the base of this country. We are creating jobs in the government sector, which create nothing, which contribute nothing, which produce nothing, which in the end, who is going to feed the beast? It's us who are out doing manual work that are paying our taxes to feed the beast. And eventually that is going to stop. – Voter, over 65 years old, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

Right now I think we're just treading water and probably will be for a while but I think generally with, I hope in a couple years it will be better. – College Educated Man, Denver, Colorado

Macro-economic indicators are not trickling down to these focus group participants. They are looking for changes in their own lives and the lives of people they know, and the creation of 162,000 new jobs in March or the leveling off of unemployment has no real meaning for them. When asked about the latest jobs report, many have heard about it and are unimpressed,



with several people noting that most of the jobs are temporary census jobs and the report does not include people who either gave up looking for a job or are re-employed in a lousy job.

Where have they created these jobs? – Non-College educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

You said it was 162,000. It sounds really good at first, but when you look at it over the whole country, that's nothing. There are millions of people. – Non-College educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

The only thing I really have to use is the people that I know that are still having trouble finding jobs and were laid off and then hired back for a month and then laid off again. – Voter, under 30 years old, Denver, Colorado

I heard that, I think it made me hopeful for a second until I heard that those are census jobs which only last like 6 months. – Voter, under 30 years old, Denver Colorado
When they mentioned the jobs, they are talking about the Census takers. – Voter, over 65 years old, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

President Obama's efforts to address the economy are viewed as well intentioned and (for some people) modestly helpful. But there is also a strong belief that Obama lost his economic focus during the long battle over health care, and barely anyone raised the stimulus bill when asked about actions Obama has taken. After being reminded of the stimulus bill, these participants feel it helped more than it hurt.

Both parties didn't do nothing. If they would just get this health bill over with, fine, now let's start to help out the economy. They didn't pass any other bills because they were wrapped up in this damn thing for six months, a year, whatever it was. They haven't done nothing. – Voter, over 65 years old, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

I feel as if they are not listening to the people. And in the last like fourteen months, all you hear is healthcare, healthcare, healthcare. Almost 10% of unemployment out there....There are a lot of people who want jobs. They don't want to hear about healthcare. They are more interested in jobs. – Voter, over 65 years old, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

He did make a stimulus thing for people with unemployment. That was a good thing. He did help the economy with the student loans, that helped a lot. – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

I've been on unemployment for eight months and without that I would have sunk. I don't like it, but hey it's there. And he put the stimulus plan in, so besides the money I was getting, every two weeks I was getting a little extra \$25 from him. That made all the differ-



ence. I didn't see Bush giving it to us. – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

Similarly, nobody has heard about the recent jobs bill. When told of what was in it, participants feel it is a sensible approach and they like the bill. Interestingly, the termination of a tax loophole that enables people to avoid taxes on offshore accounts is one of the most compelling components. While this does not necessarily create jobs, it touches a nerve and communicates an effort to instill some fairness to a system that is abused by rich people at the expense of honest taxpayers.

There are a lot of wealthy people who have their money in offshore accounts. As a matter of fact, a lot of them do. If they can close the loophole and make them pay, that's fine with me. – Voter, over 65 years old, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

I'm thinking the same way they are thinking, why should they get away with that? That's money being taken away, not putting back in our money here in the United States. And that's been going on for years, hasn't it? – Voter, over 65 years old, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

Well, that's (people avoiding taxes with offshore accounts) just shy of organized crime. – College Educated Man, Denver, Colorado.

Like the jobs bill, financial reform efforts are largely going unnoticed (with the exception of some seniors). And, like the offshore tax haven provision in the jobs bill, there is great potential to tap into public anger about the banks that took “our money” and will not provide loans to hard-working people who need them.

Confusion Over Health Care Reform

All participants are fully aware that health care reform recently passed. Despite the year-plus public debate over reform and the broad impact of the new law, participants are very confused about it. They do not know how it will affect them, though they expect it will increase their own costs, lower the costs of others, and raise the deficit.

I don't think it will affect me. I'm paying for mine, so what is that going to do? – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

I foresee it...helping more...32 million people without insurance... it's geared towards lower class, people who don't have insurance, couldn't afford it, what have you. I personally see more taxes on my horizon... – College Educated Man, Denver, Colorado

(Costs) will go up. Who is going to pay for all these people getting it (health insurance)? – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania



I don't know much about it... I don't know enough about it though. I know there are different stages of when things get released. – College Educated Man, Denver, Colorado

I'm confused about it. I don't know what it is and what it's going to do and who it's going to affect or who it's going to help, who it's not going to help. I mean I have no idea because all I've heard is the big debate and all the aftermath after it, all the vandalism and that kind of stuff. I haven't actually heard any details about it. – Voter, under 30 years old, Denver, Colorado

And I don't know how you can understand it. From what I've seen in the paper and stuff like that, it just doesn't make any sense. It's beyond me anyway. I just hope that they redo it again somewhere along the line. That's my opinion. – Voter, over 65 years old, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

I think the wisdom of my peers is relatively intelligent. They are not against the bill, but they find it very difficult to understand exactly how it's going to affect them, what is included and what is excluded and what impact it is going to have to not only themselves, but on the middle class as well. We know what it will do to the people that have no insurance, but we don't know what impact it will have cost wise or any other ramifications that may go along with it. – Voter, over 65 years old, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

We don't know nothing. We need to know more (about the health care bill). – Voter, over 65 years old, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

The lengthy partisan battle over health care reform leaves a bad aftertaste for participants. People are desperate for information and want to know what the new law means for them, but they just see the two parties waging their usual fights instead of providing the honest information they crave. And amid this bickering, they are frustrated that the talented orator Obama has not adequately explained the new system to people.

And that's what he should be doing. He should be making it really simple so we can understand it, so we don't keep saying, no, I heard this, no I heard this. – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

Despite the concerns over what is in the bill and irritation that it has distracted Obama and the government from addressing the economy, people are eager to see it succeed and are generally pleased that something was finally done. The system was broken and at least the president set his mind to passing reforms that he felt would fix what is wrong.

I hope it helps. I mean I hope whatever they did was for the good of the country and good for everybody. I don't want things to get worse than they are so hopefully they are doing the right things. – Voter, under 30 years old, Denver, Colorado



When given a list of positive and negative statements about the new law, the strongest reasons to support the reform center on curbing abusive insurance company practices – namely, outlawing the denial of coverage because of pre-existing conditions, not allowing insurance companies to rescind coverage after someone gets sick and requiring explanations for premium increases. These elements speak to a key component of what bothers people about the current system, and many have heard about these practices. This far outweighs the other reasons to support such as covering 32 million uninsured people (“this will cost *me*”), this will lower the deficit (not believable), and the endorsements by the AMA, Nurses, Hospitals, and AARP (“what’s in it for *them*”)

It is worth noting that most in the seniors group are not impressed by the elimination of the doughnut hole in Medicare Part D. Only three of the eight seniors choose this option, but several participants are in the VA program and unaffected by the doughnut hole, so this likely does not reflect the broader senior reaction to closing the doughnut hole. Perhaps, more importantly, these seniors are much more apt to see Medicare suffering as a result of the 1.2 trillion dollars in cuts that accompany the new law.

The most effective negative statements about health care are those that play off the fear that the federal government will have unprecedented involvement in health care decisions. The idea that people must purchase health care or receive a fine is attacked because it violates rights and is impossible to enforce. With all the misinformation floating around out there, the different arguments invoking a government takeover resonates and strikes people as very believable.

The bottom line on health care: people are uninformed and misinformed, and want a simple explanation (“give me the *Readers Digest* version”). Overall, they are pleased it passed and they adamantly oppose any effort to repeal the law, which would be a major step backward and underscore how dysfunctional Congress is. People believe the bill is not perfect, but they undoubtedly want to see problems fixed instead of repealing the whole thing.

I think, I mean then what (after they repeal)? Then it’s another 20 years until somehow it gets on the table? – College Educated Man, Denver, Colorado.

See that’s the whole thing. This thing just takes too long. He went on this ticket that he was going to change the healthcare, everybody wants something changed. So finally we get a change, but then the Republicans go and they say, oh no, we are going to do this in November. So in November it gets sent back again, where the heck do we go? So we still haven’t moved forward or back, we are still the same. We are broke. – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

Voters Remain Angry and Frustrated With the Parties

There is strikingly little change in attitudes toward the parties. Democratic and Republican images seem ingrained – Democrats are for average Americans and spend a lot of taxpayer money, while Republicans are for big business and cutting taxes.



They (Democrats) care for the everyday guy....The old and the poor and the young, and they just seem more compassionate. – Non-College Educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

(Democrats stand for) more government, more control, more taxes. – College Educated Man, Denver, Colorado.

They (the Republicans) stay out of business. They pretty much let them run on their own, which is actually I think a good and a bad. They let them go too far. – College Educated Man, Denver, Colorado

They (the Republicans) are strong in the old boy's club, the good old boy's club. And one hand washes the other. – Non-College educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd Pennsylvania

The one thing the two parties share is their dedication to fighting each other instead of fixing the country's problems. These politicians are putting their party and own reelections ahead of the country, and "they care about winning instead of working together for the country."

Both parties are at each other's throats. They don't even want to talk and I don't know why. – Voter, over 65 years old, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

Congress is also seen as living by a completely different set of rules than the rest of the country. While Americans are changing their lifestyles to adapt to the economic situation, Congress is not changing one bit.

Maybe I watch too much Michael Moore, but those movies he puts out, those senators and congressmen, they don't send their boys overseas. They've got all that health insurance that they don't pay for. They get the same salary when they retire – Non-College educated Woman, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

There are two difficult aspects for Democrats that emerge from this environment where both parties are seen as failing the country: 1) The participants who oppose Obama and his agenda – including some Obama voters who have been disappointed – are far more passionate about what is going wrong than the participants who supported Obama and want to see the president's direction continue. For these swing voters, the desire to stop government spending that has failed to produced any meaningful economic improvement far outweighs the desire to continue this path and give it a chance. 2) Seniors are much angrier about the current situation and considerably more engaged in the election than the young voters who are generally pleased with Obama's direction but not enthusiastic about voting in the November mid-terms. This is just not a presidential election that excites young voters in the same way as when Obama was on the ticket.

The one dynamic that is working in Democrat's favor is the complete lack of credibility among Republicans. As much as the participants are concerned about Democratic spending,



they feel the Republican Party offers no new ideas and is just trying to block everything for political purposes. The Democrats may be disappointing, but the Republicans do not represent a meaningful alternative.