



Back to Macomb

Reagan Democrats and Barack Obama

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Back to Macomb

Macomb County is indeed home to the Reagan Democrats whose defection helped crash the national Democratic Party after the 1960s and whose partial return since Bill Clinton has made the county a battleground and enabled Democrats to carry Michigan in the last four elections. This year, Macomb – 90 percent white, half Catholic, 40 percent union families, one third over 60 and with Barack Obama underperforming among its Democrats – is certain to play a key role in the presidential drama. The media will follow the presidential candidates who will no doubt troop down to Macomb County Community College in Warren, Michigan to show why they deserve the support of the Reagan Democrats.

In 1960, Macomb was the most Democratic suburban county in the country as John F. Kennedy won handily there, garnering 63 percent of the vote. Four years later, Lyndon Johnson increased the Democratic vote share even further, winning 75 percent of Macomb voters. But over the next 20 years, these voters turned on the Democrats, culminating with Ronald Reagan taking 66 percent of the vote in 1984.

In the five presidential cycles to follow Reagan, the county has turned into a presidential battleground. Clinton, in 1996 against Dole, was the first Democrat since 1968 to carry it, though only with 50 percent of the vote. Since then, the two presidential contests have been fought to a draw, with Al Gore taking it by 2 points and John Kerry losing it by 1.¹

Today, Barack Obama trails John McCain in Macomb by 7 points (46 to 39 percent), with 8 percent for Ralph Nader and 2 percent for Bob Barr. He is underperforming with Democrats, getting 71 percent of their support here compared to 85 percent nationally. There really is a reason for the candidates and reporters to go to Macomb.

But it is important to recall that Clinton lost here by 5 points in 1992 and still carried the state easily and that Obama faces nothing like the 20-point or 30-point wipe out in Macomb that contributed to Mondale and Dukakis losing Michigan handily. And a lot has changed in Macomb and Michigan, both in voting patterns and racial attitudes, that allows this race in Macomb to tighten and to make it possible for Obama to win Michigan without carrying Macomb.

After all, Obama is running 7 points ahead in our statewide poll conducted at the same time. Obama obviously will be able to count on immense enthusiasm and turnout among African Americans, but there is more going on than that – including Obama's over-performance in the growing suburban parts of the state, including Oakland County, where he is running a net 5 points above party identification and 9 points ahead of John McCain. Among young voters under 30 years, Obama defeats McCain 58 to 36 percent but Obama's success with younger voters is even broader. He leads McCain among all voters under 40 years by 48 to 41 percent across Michigan and matches that margin in Macomb.

Clearly, the rules of the game are a little different this year.



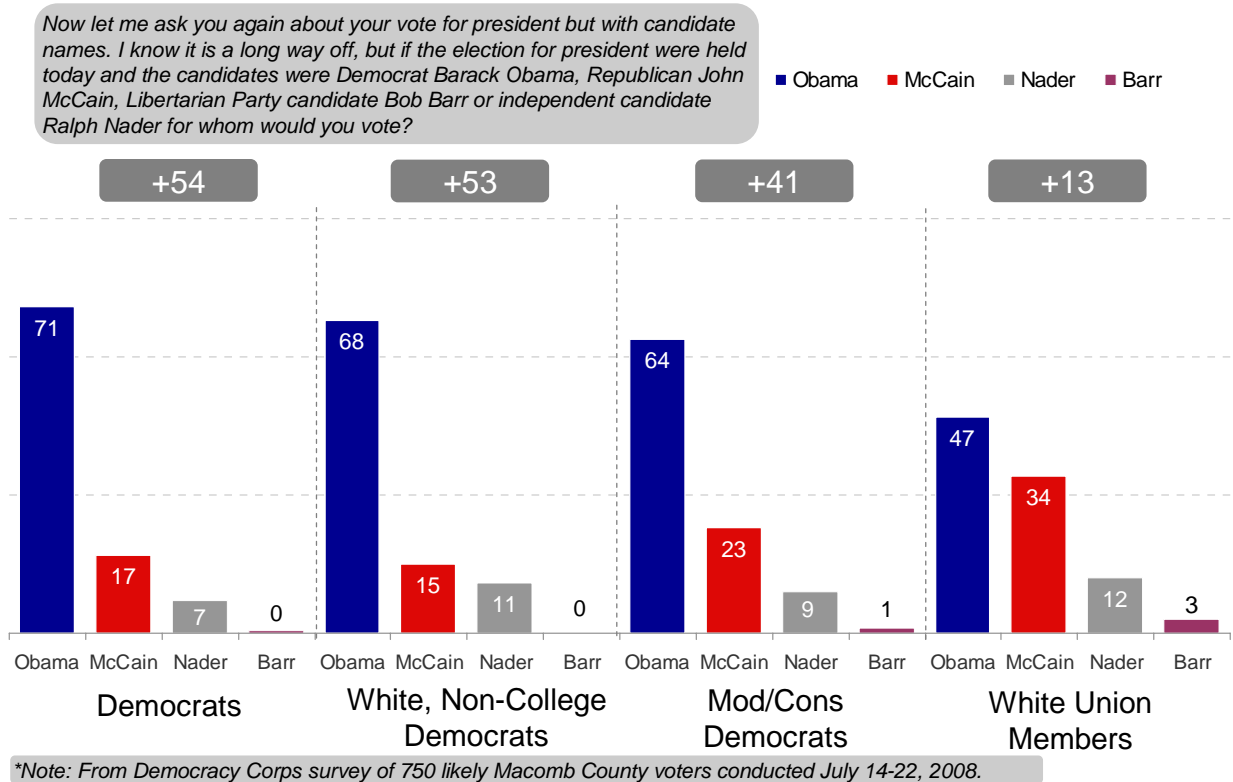
In 1985, Stanley Greenberg conducted focus groups in Macomb County and identified the Reagan Democrats and their cry to be heard. We returned to Macomb County to conduct this special study because of Macomb’s unique and continuing role. Our research included six focus groups in June and July with white non-college Democratic defectors (voters who identify with or lean Democratic or generally vote for Democrats but are not now voting for Obama), a survey of Macomb County voters and a parallel statewide poll, both conducted in mid-July.²

We asked some of the same questions used in 1985 that elicited such graphic responses – part of a special project to make sure we understand why some Democrats are holding back and whether there are strategies to build a progressive majority with them.

The Problem

There is a problem with “Reagan Democrats.” Obama is only getting 71 percent of Democrats in Macomb, dropping to 68 percent of white non-college Democrats, 64 percent of moderate and conservative Democrats and only 47 percent of white union members. Nader is getting one in ten votes in these blocs and his voters tilt to McCain in a two-way race.

Obama underperforming among conservative Democratic groups





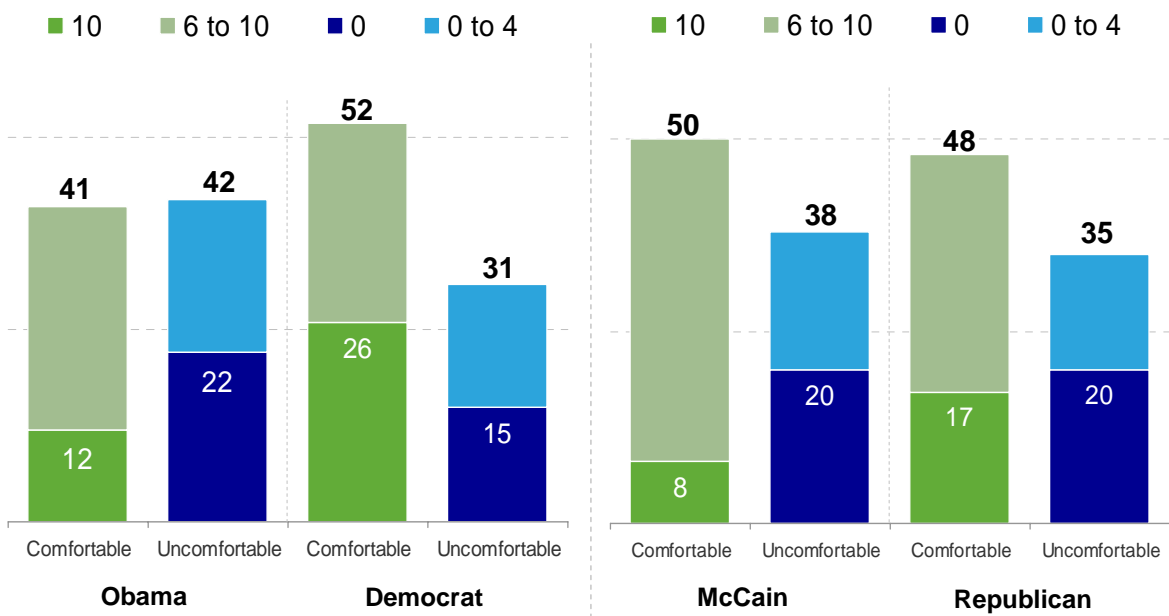
There are three groups that we will look at in Macomb that capture the problem. The first is **Democratic Defectors** – voters who identify with the Democratic Party or independents who lean toward the Democrats but who are not now supporting Obama. These are the voters who participated in our focus groups. They are 14 percent of the likely electorate in Macomb and 8 percent in the country as a whole.

The second is the so-called **Reagan Democrats**. This group is comprised of Macomb voters old enough to vote in 1984 who recall religiously voting Democratic but who switched at some point and started voting Republican for president. The largest bloc switched during the Reagan years, but many broke under Clinton and some under Nixon. Together, these “Reagan Democrats” comprise 21 percent of the Macomb electorate, compared to 19 percent nationally.³

For this project, we developed a scale from zero to 10 on how “comfortable you would feel with Barack Obama as your president” and a parallel one on how “comfortable you would feel having a Democrat.” About 41 percent of voters in Macomb opted for scores above the midpoint of 5 for Obama compared to 52 percent for a Democrat – the latter being very close to the vote that Democrats have received in presidential races in recent years. There is an “Obama gap” of about 10 points in Macomb, creating our third target audience in this project.

Macomb voters less comfortable with Obama as president

On a scale of zero to ten, how comfortable would you feel with **Barack Obama/A Democrat/John McCain/A Republican** as your President? A ten would mean you feel very comfortable. A zero would mean you feel not at all comfortable.





The almost too obvious starting point for these Democrats holding back is Barack Obama, the African American candidate. As the candidate has pointed out, he “doesn't look like all the other presidents on those dollar bills.” In these focus groups, it will be easy to pull out some of the more colorful racial quotes and dwell on race and racism as the main story. But that would be wrong and miss how many of these voters are struggling to figure out how to vote for Obama, how much Macomb voters have changed on race questions and how much opportunity Obama has to make gains here.

There are three challenges of rising importance for Obama and the Democrats.

- ***Challenge one: President for whole country, not mainly African Americans.*** The first challenge is racial but not necessarily racist. These voters want to know that Obama will be a president for the whole country and not mainly represent African Americans – and for many this is a threshold issue. The truth is, just 33 percent of Macomb County voters (and 40 percent of Democratic defectors) think that he will put the interests of blacks ahead of other Americans. Only 19 percent think he is similar to Jesse Jackson. However, these voters do not understand how Obama could sit in Reverend Wright's pews for 20 years; they are not certain what conclusion to draw and they are still watching and wondering. Many of these voters are self-consciously willing to set race aside, if they are sure Obama also will.

We will argue that race is a diminishing factor in the consciousness and politics of Macomb County's Reagan Democrats. More important than race are two other factors holding voters back.

- ***Challenge two: connecting with middle class anger on the economy.*** The second problem is that Obama's political and economic project for the country may be disconnected from the middle class anger and despair of these voters – the near venomous critique of corporate CEOs, politicians and elites of both parties who promote global trade at the expense of American jobs. Listening to Obama has not generated excitement about the change he will bring and his economic message has not helped him get there.
- ***Challenge three: the problem of national security, patriotism and a strong America.*** Probably even more important are these voters' questions about Obama on national security, patriotism and keeping America strong. The Reagan Democrats' recollection of the 1960s is not of the race riots and busing but much more of the Vietnam War, the hippies and protestors, and humiliation of America and our soldiers. These are strong-defense Democrats who give Obama remarkably low marks on national security and have great trouble dismissing what Reverend Wright said about America.



These Democrats holding back are puzzled about Obama to be sure: “*I would say mysterious*” one younger man responded when asked for one word to describe Obama; “*I feel we need to know so much more about you on so many levels,*” one older woman wrote in summing up her feelings about the Democratic nominee. Yet what stands out in these groups and in the survey is how desperate these voters are for change and how much they are struggling to get there: “*I would love to vote for you if you truly are going to make a change,*” wrote one older man in a post card to Obama. In fact, a third of Reagan Democrats and over 40 percent of Democratic Defectors are at least “winnable” for Obama on our “Voter Choice Scale” – meaning the 2008 race in Macomb can get much closer.⁴

Macomb and the Race Question

In our original research on Reagan Democrats in 1985 and again in Greenberg’s *Middle Class Dreams* almost a decade later, we wrote about the power of race in defining the political attitudes of voters here. Attitudes about the political parties were simply inseparable from race, with issues such as welfare and affirmative action playing a leading role in driving Reagan Democrats away from the Democratic Party. It was not a popular observation in official Democratic circles at the time.

This passage from *Middle Class Dreams*⁵ described the exercise we used then to explore these attitudes and the stark findings it revealed:

In each of these discussions, we read a statement: “America has a special burden to help black Americans make their way because, for years, America denied them freedom of opportunity and the right to vote.” The statement was attributed to Robert Kennedy – the last Democratic leader to bring together ethnic white Catholics and black Americans with one ethical vision. But the Democratic defectors of 1985 would have none of it:

- *That’s bullshit*
- *No wonder they killed him*
- *I can’t go along with that...*

Almost all of these individuals perceived the special status of blacks as a serious obstacle to their personal advancement.

We read the same statement to the focus groups of Democratic Defectors in Macomb in July and for some, it produced a warp back in time and a lot of unfriendly comments about racial preferences:

It is a bunch of crap. (Older, non-college man)



Get over it... Their own people sold them to us. Why don't they sue their own people? (Younger, non-college woman)

Didn't they get forty acres and a mule? That's more than I got. Where's mine? (Older, non-college woman)

They have been given special preferences by getting in schools when they are not qualified just so that they can get the education, getting the job that they are not qualified for and everything else. It needs to stop. (Younger, non-college woman)

If you're a female or a black male, they'll hand it over, but if you're a white male, forget it. You're not on the list. (Younger, non-college man)

If anything I think that we are now the ones that are the minority and they are the majority. (Older, non-college woman)

It was as if nothing changed.

But a lot did. While most rejected the quote for our times, a large portion of the participants qualified their remarks with historical references that granted Kennedy's relevance in an earlier time.

The quote of Kennedy was very true at the given time. (Younger, non-college woman)

He stated a fact, and it was right at that time. Well, I think that it's still right. We did hold them back, and a lot of people were cheated. It's hard enough to do it when you have the background and schooling and etc. (Older, non-college man)

Something had to be done, because they had been held back so long, but now it's gone on too long. (Older, non-college man)

Well because at the time it was necessary because blacks were just starting to get the right to vote and they were, other privileges as far a education and stuff go, we needed to make some investment to equal the playing field at that time, which they did. What they did with it at that time is what you see now, like the City of Detroit, it is their damn fault the predicament they are in. (Older, non-college man)

Somehow, the racial history has been repressed or displaced, and it is not at the top of mind for most Macomb voters, even in a year when there is so much water-cooler and media talk about the possibility of the first black president.

Detroit was the setting for one of the first urban race riots in 1967. George Wallace made himself by taking 14 percent of the vote nationwide in 1968 and then won the Michigan Democratic primary with 51 percent of the vote (and 66 percent in Macomb) four years later.



Bitter disputes over busing in the early 1970s shaped partisan politics in suburban Detroit, including Macomb. Yet when we asked voters about these times at the outset of the focus groups (before discussing anything else), these subjects hardly came up. One person mentioned some problems in Detroit and another, the busing issue, but none of the other participants picked up the discussion.

In the Macomb survey, we asked about attitudes toward affirmative action and other race-related issues and tried to predict voting and attitudes toward Obama. We have a non-finding, which is a finding. Feelings about affirmative action are barely correlated with feelings about Obama or feelings about the Democratic Party. People clearly have strong views on affirmative action, but these feelings do not seem to have much to do with how they are evaluating Obama, the Democrat.

Affirmative action did correlate a little more strongly with how comfortable you feel having Obama as president and with how comfortable you feel having a Democrat as president, but the correlation was stronger with the party than with Obama, the black candidate for president. This suggests that race might be a factor but it is embodied as much in the extant identities of the parties as in reactions to Obama himself.

To put this to a test, we constructed an experiment in the survey where half the sample was read an attack on Obama that hit him hard on taxes. The other half of the sample was read an ugly attack using Reverend Wright's vitriolic words (see text box below for full wording of the attacks).

- **Taxes:** *In the Illinois state senate, [Obama] voted to raise taxes more than three hundred times, and in Congress, Obama voted for the largest tax increase in U.S. history. Now he wants to repeal the Bush tax cuts and raise the Social Security tax by another trillion dollars. Obama's tax increases will damage the economy and hurt the pocketbooks of average Americans.*
- **Wright:** *[Obama's] pastor Jeremiah Wright says America is to blame for the AIDS virus, that blacks should sing, quote "God Damn America," instead of God Bless America and that we brought the nine-eleven attacks upon ourselves. He even compared US Marines fighting in Iraq to the Romans who persecuted Jesus. Yet Obama attended Wright's sermons for 20 years without ever protesting.*

In Macomb, we thought that the racially tinged attack would be stronger or, at the very least, would produce more voters shifting away from Obama when we asked people a few questions later to vote a second time on the presidential race. This was an opportunity to reveal the strength of any underlying racial feelings. These Macomb County voters did not act to type. The tax attack raised more doubts than the Reverend Wright one (68 versus 55 percent) and produced marginally more voters pulling away from Obama. Frankly, these financially pressed Reagan Democrats were more concerned that their taxes would be raised than with Obama's relations with Reverend Wright.⁶



That these Macomb voters do not seem to be voting predominantly on race is based on certain tentative conclusions about him and his racial politics. Only a minority of 33 percent believe Obama will put the interests of black Americans ahead of other Americans. Reinforcing the point, we found that many more voters here thought that Obama was like John Kennedy than Jesse Jackson. They see Jackson as somebody who “uses the ‘black card’ too much and Barack doesn’t:”

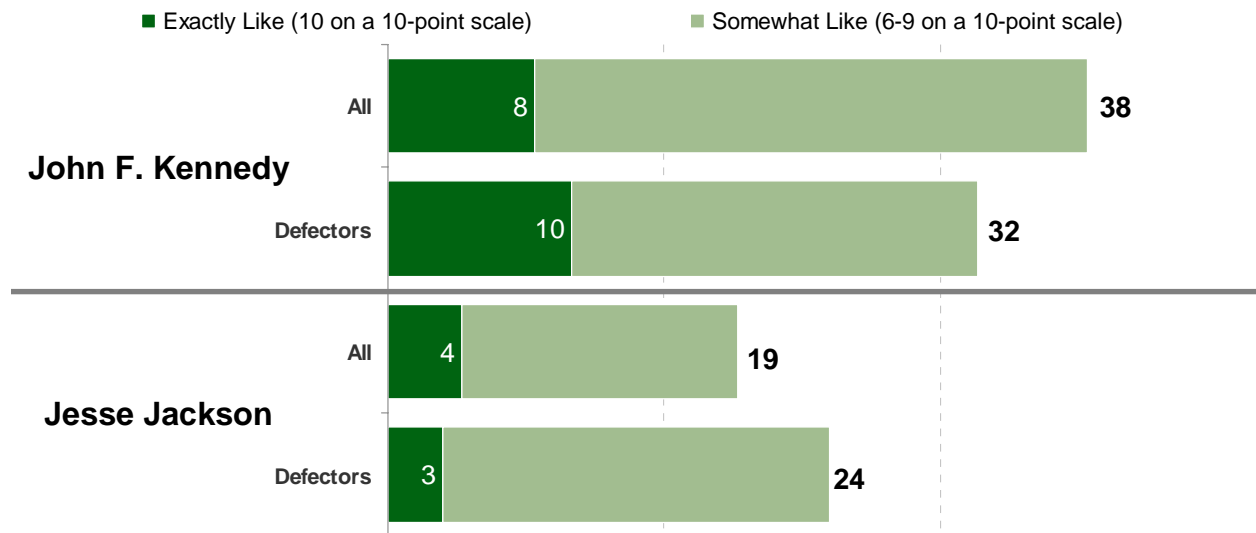
I don’t see anything [similar about Obama and Jackson]... Jesse Jackson’s all about the spotlight. (Younger, non-college man)

[Obama] doesn’t play the race card... So, I mean, I like that about him. He is not in that group with all that NAACP and all that. (Younger, non-college man)

In the Macomb survey just 24 percent of Democratic defectors say Obama is like Jackson, little more than Macomb voters as a whole. Meanwhile, these defectors are 6 points less likely than all Macomb voters to say Obama is like John F. Kennedy.

Macomb defectors don’t see Obama as similar to Jackson

I am now going to read you a list of names and I’d like you to tell me where on a scale from 0 to 10 you would place Barack Obama if a 10 means he is EXACTLY LIKE the person who’s name I just read and 0 means he is NOTHING LIKE the person who’s name I just read. You can use any number between 0 and 10.



**Note: Democratic defectors are those who identify as a Democrat or a Democratic-leaning independent but are not voting for Obama.*

But this is one of these cases where focus groups may be more believable than the poll because there is no doubt these Democratic-aligned voters hold back and have a lot of questions to ask Obama. Many of these center on his experience and what he really believes, all the



rumors they hear about his flag pin and his Muslim faith. At the outset of the groups, we asked people to write down their doubts and to discuss them, and they display serious reservations and already pretty well-developed negative perceptions.

Many of those center on this question about who he will really represent: *“Is he out for all the people or just certain ones?”*; *“Will he bring in Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton after he wins?”*; *“Everybody is going to probably say because he is mixed, he is half-black he is going to cater more to them.”*

One of the men – a moderate Democrat around 40 years old with some schooling beyond high school – was nearly consumed with the question but also could not let go. *“I totally agree with what you’re saying about the opportunities [for major changes if Obama is elected] but a big suspicion that I had that if Barack Obama gets back into office ... are we going to see this big shift in the United States? You know, reparations for slaves and just a whole shift in mindset. And I know that is not why we should vote is because of the race issue.”*

In the old Macomb and in the old way of getting information that would have settled the issue, but Macomb has changed and people now have entirely new ways of getting information and are using them. Then, the man continued on:

I go on Barack Obama’s site a couple of times a week and I really want to vote for him and I want to see change in this country. I checked on factcheck.org to see who is lying about what everyday and it is a great site, factcheck.org, they send e-mails out. But you know I remain undecided who am I going to vote for.

He remains undecided because electing Obama could be a big change: *“let’s face it one way, we been Caucasian for a whole entire country’s life you know, our whole life and now we are going to change to having a black president.”* But then, he quickly qualifies about Obama, *“He doesn’t play the race card. He distances himself from all of those types of influences.”* But then he asks himself, *“are we going to be surprised after things change you know?”* He talked about the good racial balance in the current cabinet: *“it is not like all Caucasians in the cabinet.”*

To the nods of others, he summarized his feelings, *“I guess I have fears. I don’t know why I do but, and I don’t know how it would affect me in my daily life either. I just got to be honest about it. I don’t know. It probably wouldn’t even affect me in my daily life.”* And thus, he remains undecided.

The Reagan Democrats and Democratic Defectors, the mostly Catholic blue collar Democrats of Macomb still have distinct views on race and are uncomfortable with many policy conclusions taken for granted in the elite world. They are not the least bit uncomfortable sharing those views in sometimes colorful and strong terms. Nonetheless, race is not as top-of-mind and central to their political consciousness. Even as they hold these views and express these doubts, one-in-four Reagan Democrats not now voting for Obama are thinking of supporting him and about half of Democratic Defectors are as well.⁷



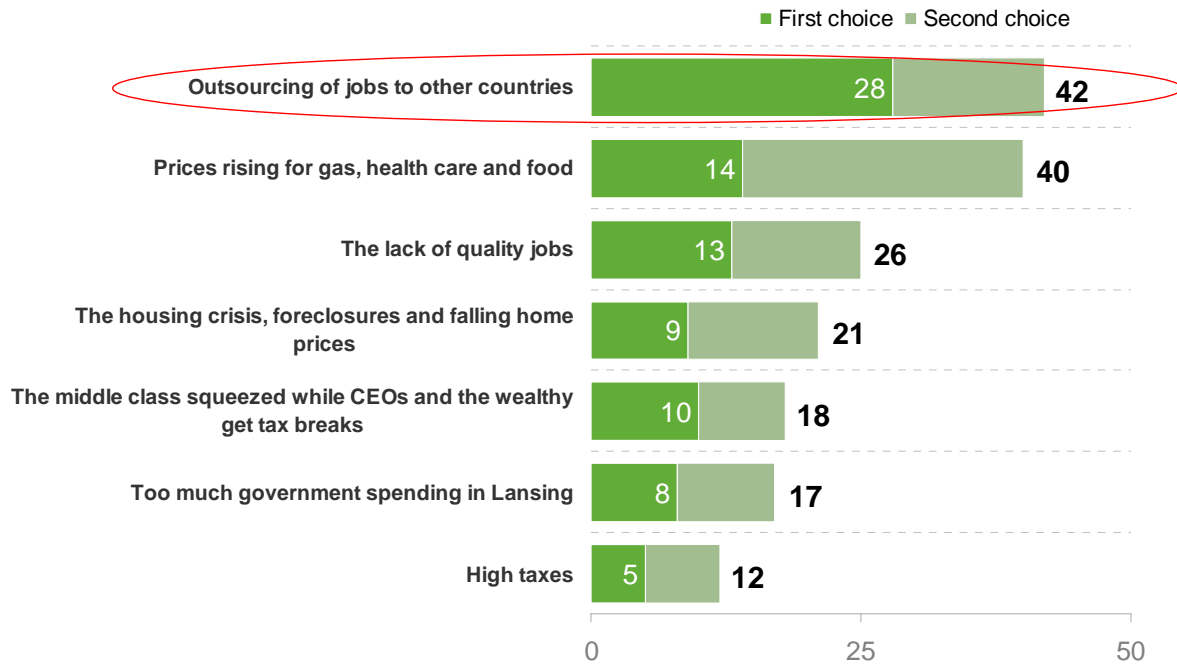
They remain open to Obama because they are desperate for change and a middle class America where the American worker is center stage again.

Desperate for Change

It is their anger about the economy, sense of betrayal by elites and their desperation for change that keeps the Macomb and Reagan Democrats open to Obama. These are some of the most economically distressed voters in the country. Barely one-in-ten see the country moving in the right direction today, driven by deep distress about the rising prices and the outsourcing of jobs. When they focus on Michigan’s economy, outsourcing of jobs to other countries outstrips all other dimensions as their top concern by a two-to-one ratio, far surpassing government spending or taxes which are at the bottom of the list.

Macomb voters’ biggest economic concern: outsourcing of jobs

Now I am going to read you a list of problems relating to Michigan's economy. After I read the list, please tell me which is the most important problem facing the state's economy.



**Note: From Democracy Corps survey of 750 likely Macomb County voters conducted July 14-22, 2008.*

Looking beyond the numbers, voters here are passionate in describing the impact that these trade agreements have had on their lives and their communities, as well as the deeper impact of the fact that America simply does not produce any of its own goods anymore. This is a



very personal and emotional issue for voters, who see big corporations and elites selling out their country and their employees for their own profit.

There is the erosion of the middle class because we have a government that allows and encourages companies to outsource those good paying middle class jobs and that is the erosion of the middle class right there. Fair trade has not been fair. (Older, non-college man)

Stop shipping our jobs overseas. My daughter's homework assignment was to find things in the house and list where it is made. I looked at it, read it, said write China. She goes 'mom,' I said everything is made in China. I told her you find me something in this house that is not made in China. (Younger, non-college woman)

The free trade thing is what did it, but it was only supposed to be between Mexico and Canada, but companies have realized that they can go to China now and make stuff. (Older, non-college man)

I lost my job before at Fisher Price Toys due to China and now I'm on the verge of losing my job again as a mold engineer due to a lot of molds being built in China. I don't shop at China-Mart, or Wal-Mart, because of that and I believe that we are giving away a lot of millions or its billions, I'm sorry, in tax breaks when we need to keep it in the house. They've got too many hidden agendas with all their tax breaks. (Younger, non-college man)

I mean you go to the store and buy the American flag and it has a tag on it that says made in China. The American flag made in China. (Older, non-college man)

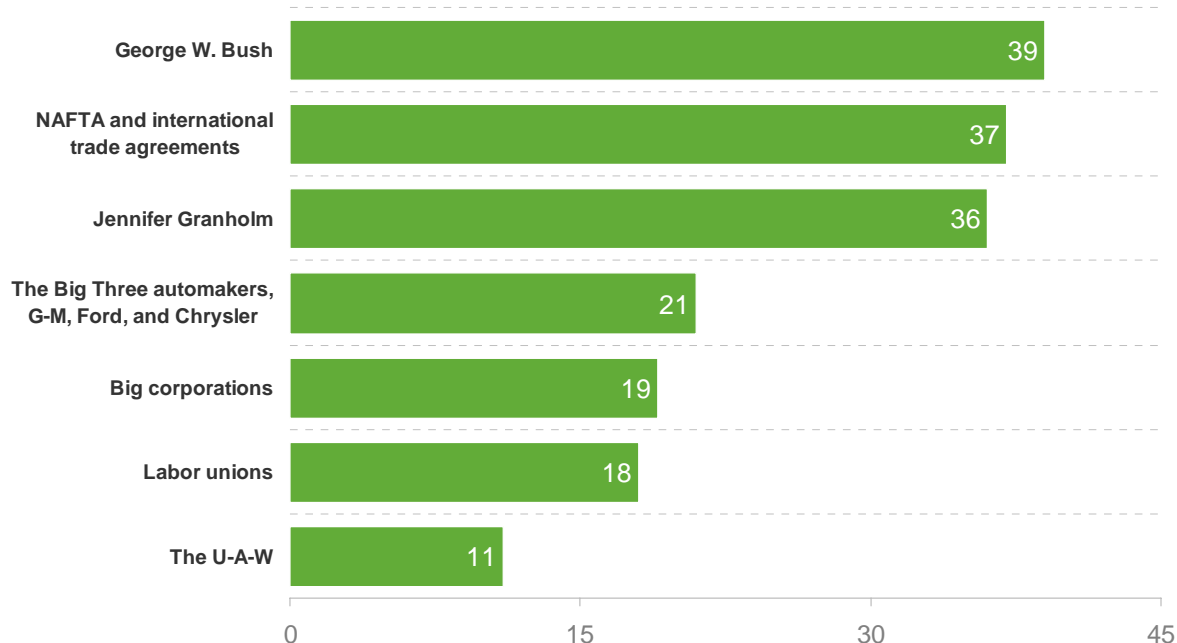
These voters blame everybody at the top, starting with President Bush and the Democratic Governor, Jennifer Granholm, who is even more unpopular than Bush; they have little regard for either party, with Republicans winning out for voters' contempt. When it comes to Michigan's economy, they point the finger of blame almost equally at President Bush, Gov. Granholm, and international trade agreements, such as NAFTA. The Big 3, large corporations, and unions also share some of the blame, but they are in a second tier well below the three primary culprits. It is hard to find a place in the country where NAFTA and international trade agreements are held in more contempt. This is particularly marked for Democratic defectors, just 7 percent of whom view these agreements positively while almost two-thirds view them negatively.

Macomb voters, and particularly the Democratic Defectors, are angry about the economy in a unique way because they are focused more on lost jobs and the conscious decisions of the powerful that have undermined the middle class.



Economy: Macomb voters blame Bush, trade and Granholm

Now I am going to read you a list of names and groups. After I read the list please tell me which TWO are most to blame for Michigan's economic problems.



*Note: From Democracy Corps survey of 750 likely Macomb County voters conducted July 14-22, 2008.

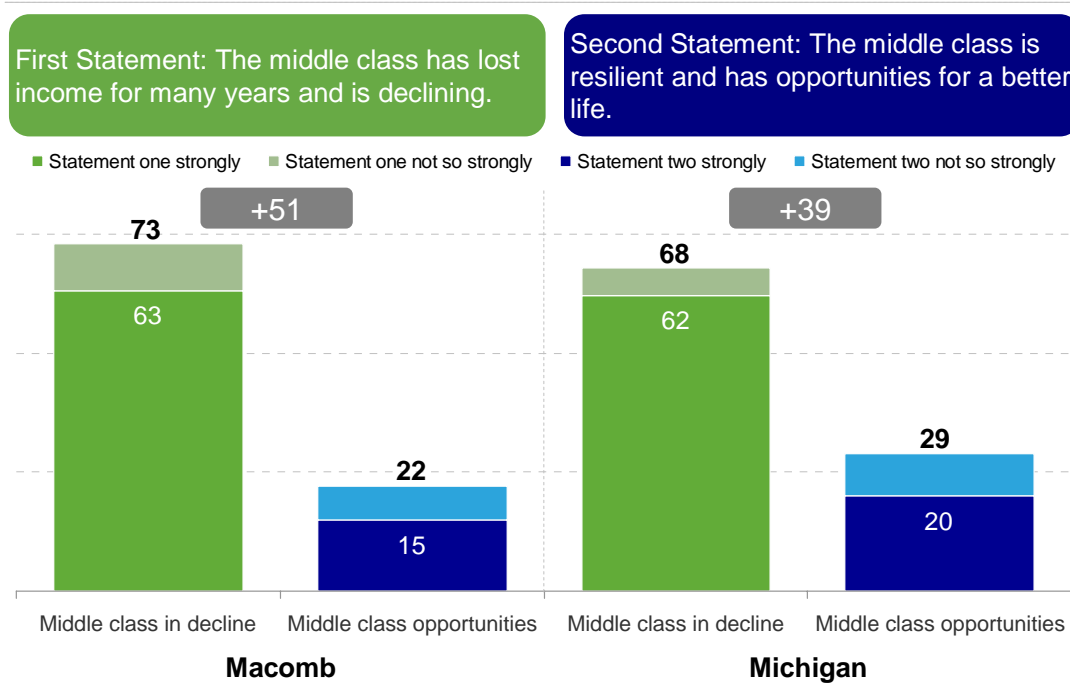
The Squeezed Middle Class: Beyond Minorities

Voters in Macomb County, even more so than in the rest of the country, view the challenges facing them, their communities, and the country as a whole through the prism of the middle class. On the one hand, these voters strongly believe that America was built by a vibrant, growing middle class, and that a thriving middle class is essential for our economy. On the other hand, when they look at our country and their own communities today, they see a middle class that is disappearing. About 70 percent of Macomb voters see it in decline, not “resilient” or with “opportunities for a better life.”

Rising prices, stagnant incomes, spiraling health care costs, the housing crisis, greedy CEOs and corporations shipping jobs overseas are all conspiring to trap middle class families. Getting ahead, making a better life – the very heart of the American Dream – has become an impossibility; getting by is now the best these voters can hope for, and even that may soon be out of reach: “*They are just making it so there isn’t any middle class. Soon all we’ll have is the filthy rich and the filthy poor.*” (Older, non-college man)



Macomb voters see American middle class in decline, not resilient



But this is not 1985 when Macomb voters also shared a deep middle class consciousness, but focused on minorities and government aid for blacks, Welfare and above all and affirmative action as major grievances and part of the squeeze. As Greenberg noted in *Middle Class Dreams*, the Democratic defectors of 1985 “expressed a profound distaste for black America, a sentiment that pervaded almost everything they thought about government and politics. Blacks constituted the explanation for their vulnerability and for almost everything that had gone wrong in their lives.”⁸

But this is a very different Macomb and these are very different times. Welfare, crime, reverse discrimination, blacks and Detroit were never mentioned in the discussion of why the country and state are off track, except for some asides about Detroit’s pathetic mayor. That was not what they were angry about or felt had much impact on their lives. Sometimes it is as important to pay attention to what is not said, as to what is.

When we give Macomb voters a choice to explain the current plight of the middle class, over half focus their resentment on global trade, CEOs who “care more about their companies than their country,” and politicians who “support trade agreements backed by corporate special interests,” while fewer than 30 percent focus on “affirmative action for minorities who don’t take responsibility for their lives” and illegal immigrants “getting free government benefits.” They have a clear theory on who is responsible and blacks and other minorities are barely in the line of fire.

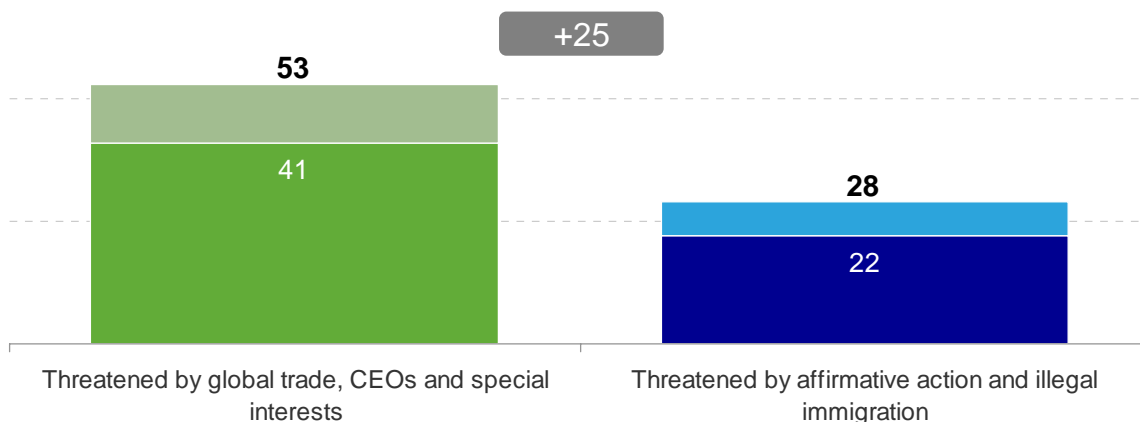


Macomb Voters blame global trade, CEOs and politicians not minorities

First Statement: The middle class today is more threatened by global trade, CEOs who care more about their companies than their own country and politicians who support free trade agreements backed by corporate special interests.

Second Statement: The middle class today is more threatened by affirmative action for minorities who don't take responsibility for their own lives and by illegal immigrants getting free government benefits.

■ Statement one strongly ■ Statement one not so strongly ■ Statement two strongly ■ Statement two not so strongly



**Note: From Democracy Corps survey of 750 likely Macomb County voters conducted July 14-22, 2008.*

The hope that a new president will remember the role of the middle class in the country is one of the reasons these voters are still searching. When asked in the focus groups to send a message to each candidate for President, jobs and the middle class were a constant focus, particularly in messages to Obama.

Bring Back Michigan; jobs; no more foreclosures; help the middle class (Younger, Non-college woman in a post card to Obama)

Don't forget the middle class. (Older, non-college man in a post card to Obama)

What is the Problem?

So why are these voters in Macomb holding back from Obama? They are not sure they really know him well enough to trust him and race is a consideration that rises to the level of a threshold issue, with voters wanting to be sure he will represent everyone, but there are two other, perhaps bigger dimensions.

First, they are not sure he is consumed with the economy and consumed with it in the way they are. They are angry at the elites of business and politics who have sold out the

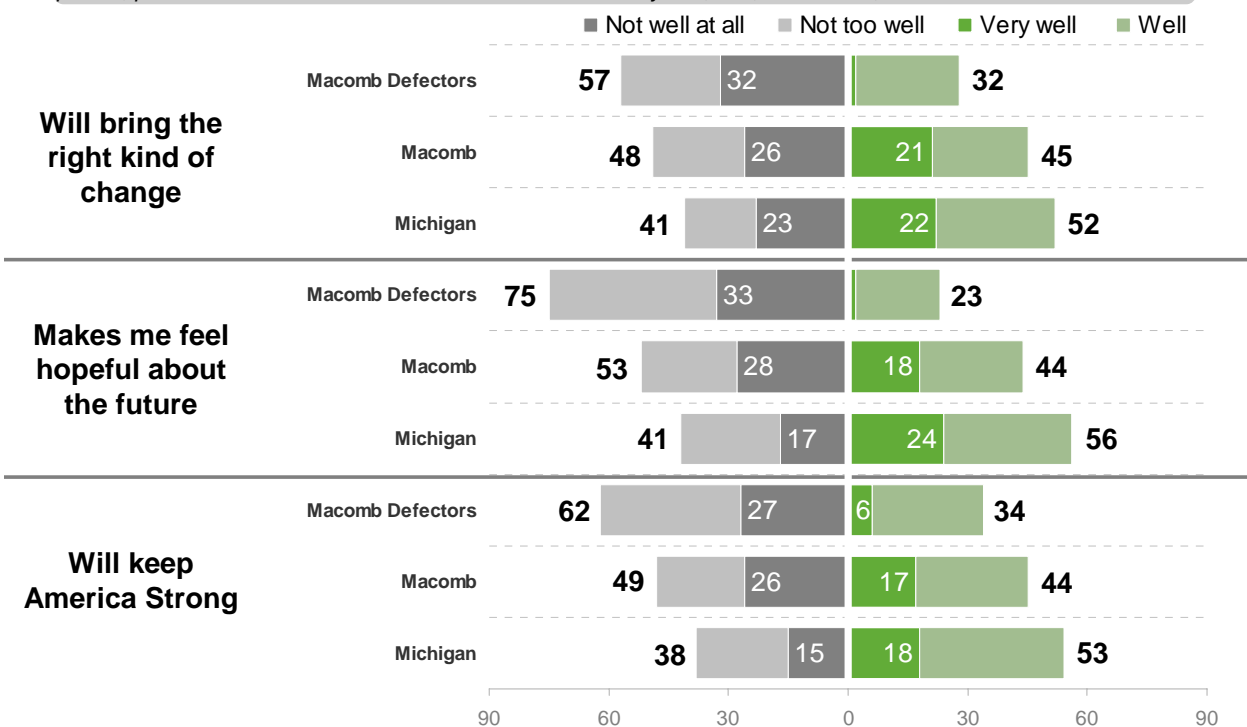


American worker and middle class and they want to vote for a Democrat or a leader who gets that this is project number one. In our regression modeling for Macomb, who will do a better job on the economy is the number one driver of the presidential vote.

Macomb voters are watching Obama closely and they are not sure his political passions are theirs. Just 45 percent say Obama will bring the right kind of change or makes them feel hopeful about the future, falling to about 30 percent or less for the Democratic Defectors – those Democrats holding back. Again, the regression modeling shows that these measures are key drivers of Obama’s personal standing and vote in Macomb, suggesting these voters are finding his project disconnected from their central struggle.

Obama’s main attributes

Now, I am going to read you a list of words and phrases people use to describe political figures. For each word or phrase, please tell me whether it describes Barack Obama very well, well, not too well, or not well at all.



Obama benefits from Democrats’ overall advantage on handling the economy and leads McCain by 8 points on this central issue. But when we present a simulated Obama economic message centered on restoring the middle class and American jobs, middle class tax cuts and investing in alternative energy, it does just okay – 49 percent say they are more likely to support Obama because of it, 10 points above his vote. But Obama’s message is not as strong as McCain’s and after the debate there is no shift of the vote to Obama. A striking 57 percent say, after hearing McCain’s message, that they are more likely to support him. His message of keeping our economy and country strong by cutting taxes on the middle class and small



businesses, ending pork spending, defeating terrorists in Iraq and ending our dependence on foreign oil gets heard in Macomb.

Candidate messages

Now, let me read you a statement Democrat Barack Obama/Republican John McCain makes about some of the important issues facing our country. Please tell me whether this statement would make you much more likely, somewhat more likely, a little more likely, no more likely, or less likely to support Democrat Barack Obama/Republican John McCain in this year's presidential election

Obama Statement

Washington has forgotten about the middle class but I'll change that by making the tax code fairer and creating quality middle class jobs again. My plan cuts taxes for one hundred fifty million middle class Americans and I'll end tax breaks for companies that send jobs overseas and give them to businesses that create jobs at home. I'll renegotiate trade deals to protect American workers from unfair trade practices. Instead of spending trillions in Iraq, I'll use that money to rebuild our schools and roads and invest in alternative energy so we can cut our oil use by 35 percent and create millions of quality jobs.

- Somewhat more likely
- Much more likely



McCain Statement

America faces serious challenges, and to overcome them we need to keep our country and our economy strong. To make our economy thrive again we need to cut taxes for middle class families and job-creating small businesses, but most importantly we need to get our budget under control by rooting out government waste and ending pork-barrel spending in Washington. We must preserve our standing in the world by building on our recent success and defeating Islamic extremists in Iraq and finally ending our dependence on foreign oil so we can stop sending money to countries that are friendly to terrorists.

- Somewhat more likely
- Much more likely



**Note: From Democracy Corps survey of 750 likely Macomb County voters conducted July 14-22, 2008.*

McCain's message is proving stronger because it too is focused on the middle class and middle class tax relief, brings in small businesses which matter to these voters, offers alternative energy and attacks pork-barrel spending, which gives it an outsider feel. To these voters, he may sound like the guy who wants to go to Washington and shake things up. The message, however, also brings in the aspiration for a "strong" country and economy and "defeating" extremists in Iraq – alluding to the other and perhaps most important reason why many of the Democratic defectors are holding back: they are strong defense Democrats who give Obama lower marks on national security than voters across the state and nation.

Second, it is hard to underestimate the importance of American strength, respect for the military and American soldiers, and love of country and their role in holding voters back. When we conducted an exercise at the outset of the focus groups involving an open-ended recall about the 1960s, the recall was dominated by talk of "hippies," drugs and Vietnam. These Macomb defectors look at this period as a time when the counter-culture got more attention and respect than the returning Vietnam vets who were humiliated, along with the country. While the



racial wars were barely in their consciousness, Vietnam and the cultural liberals' and elite's lack of respect for those who served was at the top of their minds.

These feelings play right into existing doubts about Obama and were evident in our survey of Macomb voters. While 53 percent of voters statewide think Obama will keep America strong, just 44 percent of Macomb voters and 34 percent of Democratic Defectors agree. These doubts are greatly elevated by the images of Reverend Wright and Internet rumors, creating a deep lack of trust. Many refuse to dismiss their worst fears – that he does not love America or even might be a terrorist plant with a secret agenda.

I'm not sure I would trust you. (Younger, non-college woman in a post card to Obama)

Why is he really running? What is his secret agenda? (Older, non-college woman)

I agree with your ideas, I just wish you had a different name. (Younger, non-college man in a post card to Obama)

One minute he's Muslim, one minute he's Catholic, then he was raised as a Protestant or Atheist. It's like... It's hard for me to trust him. (Younger, non-college man)

Your statements seem in line with the Welfare of our country. I only hope you remember our country has three colors: red, white and blue. Stand for "we" the people and you will make a great president. (Older, non-college man in a post card to Obama)

Terrorist ties? Won't cover heart with hand... Won't wear flag pin on lapel. Untrustworthy? Shady? (Younger, Non-college man listing his doubts about Obama)

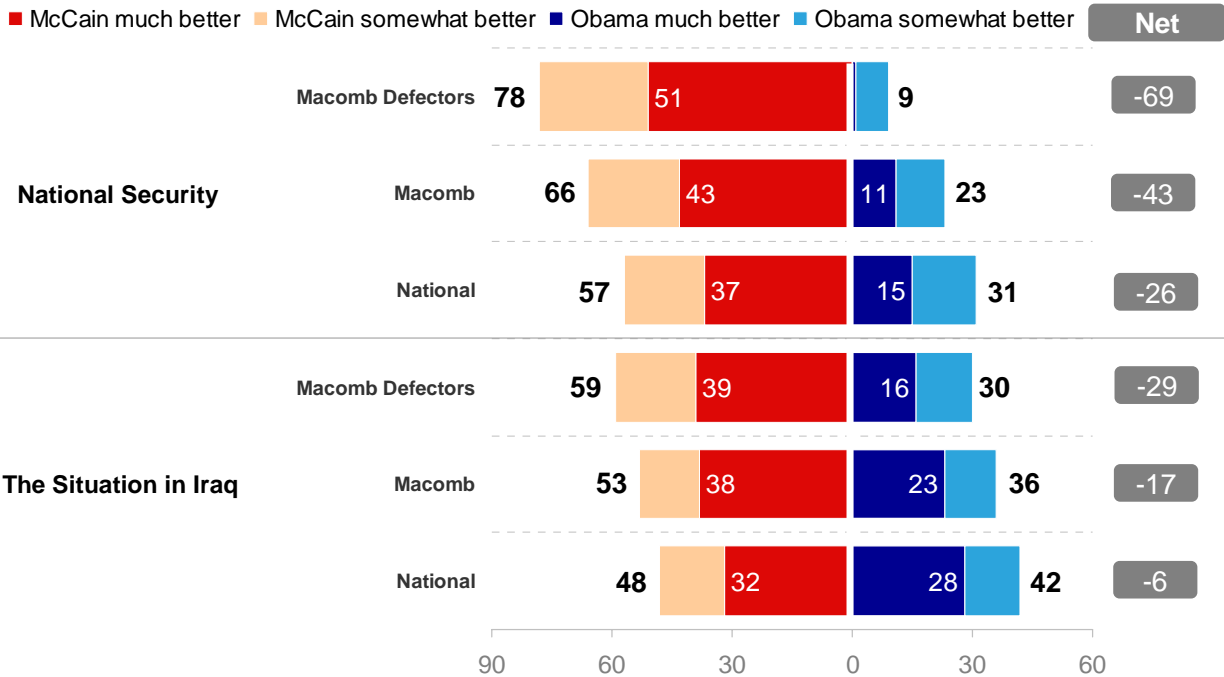
Our regression modeling shows that trust on national security is nearly as strong as the economy as a driver of the vote. When combined with trust on Iraq, national security actually trumps the economy and becomes the most important factor in changing the mind of these Macomb County voters.

National security is the one area where McCain is demolishing Obama – way beyond anything we have seen in our national surveys. Nationally, McCain has a 26-point advantage on handling national security, but in Macomb his lead grows to 43 points and among Democratic Defectors to a breathtaking 69 points. While not as dramatic, a similar pattern exists on Iraq. Nationally, McCain is somewhat more trusted to handle Iraq by 6 points, but in Macomb, it is 17 points. Just 36 percent of Macomb voters choose Obama to handle the issue, falling to 30 percent among Democratic Defectors.



Macomb voters more pessimistic about Obama on security issues

Now I am going to ask you something different. I am going to read a list of issues and I want you to tell me whether, overall, you think Democrat Barack Obama or Republican John McCain would do a better job with this issue.



The focus group discussion reveals several levels of concern about Obama on national security, where the potential consequences of his inexperience are greatest.

He shows a lack of knowledge about foreign policies, he wants us to get out of [Iraq], but I don't know if he has the expertise to do it. We agree, but if you don't know how to do it right then you can't do it. (Older, non-college man)

I don't really know if he knows enough about foreign policy and stuff that is so important to the way the world is now, but he just sprung onto the scene and we don't have years to know where he stands. You know what I mean? He is a breath of fresh air, but I don't know. I just don't know. (Older, non-college woman)

I don't think he can handle our war situation. (Younger, non-college man)

There are also the doubts detailed earlier about his religion and his upbringing and whether these factors could lead to mixed loyalties in the battle against terrorism and Islamic extremism.



Is he a terrorist? That's the biggest thing; we're trying to stop terrorism and here we've got, you know, somebody with Muslim background ... I've seen enough stuff over the Internet that digs into his life and just, I don't know. (Younger, non-college man)

The unproven track record and the Muslim issue is, you know, it's just not a good time to be talking about that. (Younger, non-college man)

What about his name though? We are in conflict with a country of terrorists, and his name sounds like a terrorist. It's Barack Hussein Obama. (Older, non-college man)

As we know that Reverend Wright will feature prominently in the campaign against Obama, we showed them two clips of his worst sermons. These troubled the Macomb defectors and, most of all, they focused on his diatribe against America.

If he was my pastor and he stood there and said God damn [America], I would be out of that church. He would not say that to me, and it makes me wonder if Obama, is like he wearing a mask and is he going to take this mask off when he wins and become this? (Older, non-college woman)

That's some strong stuff... Come on, he is damning the country he is going to be President of? (Older, non-college woman)

But you are talking about a man that is going to be President of the United States, and he is GDing America. (Older, non-college woman)

I think this guy, this Reverend Wright or whatever, the black preacher there, he didn't just start preaching like this. He has been preaching like this for years and Obama has been taking his kids and wife and family and then all of a sudden he is like acting oh wow, like this is news to him. He has been listening to this crap for 15 years man. (Older, non-college man)

Conclusions

Barack Obama trails in Macomb and among the Reagan Democrats, but it is important to emphasize, he is not being demolished in the fashion of Mondale and Dukakis and may well have a formula for carrying the state in any case. But many of the Democrats holding back want to vote for Obama and are looking for ways to get there, despite a lot of questions.

The nature of the problem as described in this report is also illustrative of the elements of the solution. These voters need to hear and be reassured:

1. Obama will work for the whole country, not for minority groups. His disagreement with Jesse Jackson was noticed by these voters.



2. Obama's economic message must be much more outsider, focused on a disappearing middle class and lost American jobs and the elites, including McCain, who seem indifferent while the American economy declines.

3. Obama's love of country and determination to make a strong America must be central to his purpose, identity and goals.

The Reagan Democrats are back – and perhaps more than in any election we have witnessed in years, very much undecided, watching the candidates closely and trying to find a way to vote for change.

**Appendix A: Presidential Vote History in Macomb County and Michigan**

Presidential Vote History: Macomb and Michigan				
	Macomb County		Michigan Statewide	
	Dem - Rep	Net	Dem - Rep	Net
1960: Kennedy - Nixon	63-37	+26	51-49	+2
1964: Johnson - Goldwater	75-25	+50	67-33	+34
1968: Humphrey - Nixon	55-30	+25	48-41	+7
1972: McGovern – Nixon	35-63	-28	42-56	-14
1976: Carter – Ford	47-51	-4	46-52	-6
1980: Carter - Reagan	40-52	-12	43-49	-6
1984: Mondale - Reagan	33-66	-33	40-59	-19
1988: Dukakis – H.W. Bush	39-60	-21	46-54	-8
1992: Clinton – H.W. Bush	38-43	-5	44-36	+8
1996: Clinton – Dole	50-39	+11	52-38	+14
2000: Gore – W. Bush	49-47	+2	51-46	+5
2004: Kerry – W. Bush⁹	49-50	-1	51-48	+3
2008: Obama – McCain¹⁰	39-46	-7	46-39	+7

¹ See Appendix for results of all presidential elections in Macomb County since 1960.

² Democracy Corps survey of 750 likely voters in Macomb County conducted July 14-22, 2008 and a Democracy Corps survey of 764 likely voters in Michigan conducted July 14-21, 2008. For comparative purposes, this memo also references a Democracy Corps national survey of 1,000 likely voters conducted July 21-24, 2008.

³ Democracy Corps national survey of 2,000 likely voters conducted June 22-25, 2008.

⁴ Our Voter Choice Scale (VCS) combines responses on the vote, the candidates' thermometer scores and the parties' thermometer scores to place each respondent on an 8-point scale (from "Loyalist" to "Unreachable") measuring how open they are to voting for each particular candidate. When pressed to choose in a two-way race, 18 percent of Democratic Defectors select Obama and another 28 percent are rated as "Winnable" on our VCS – those voters who are not supporting Obama but are most likely to in November. So a total of 46 percent of these voters are open to supporting Obama. Among Reagan Democrats, 25 percent choose Obama in a two-way choice and another 7 percent are classified as "Winnable" for a total of 32 percent.



⁵ Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams*, Yale University Press, 1996. Pages 39-40.

⁶ To test this we split our survey with one half of respondents hearing the Wright attack and the other hearing the taxes attack. Both splits also heard the same attack on John McCain as well as the same positive messaging for both candidates. We then re-asked the vote upon completion of all messaging.

⁷ When pressed to choose in a two-way race, 18 percent of Democratic Defectors select Obama. Another 20 percent say there is a fair chance they might support him in November while another 19 percent say there is a small chance they might support him, for a total of 57 percent saying there is a chance they will support Obama. Of the 75 percent of Reagan Democrats that are not already supporting Obama, 11 percent say there is a fair chance they might support him and another 13 percent say there is a small chance they might.

⁸ Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams*, Yale University Press, 1996. Page 39.

⁹ Past vote totals collected from US elections atlas at uselectionatlas.org.

¹⁰ Based on parallel Democracy Corps polls conducted July 14-22, 2008 of 750 likely voters in Macomb County and 764 likely voters across the state of Michigan by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research.