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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner

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## An Agenda for Change

### *Voters' Priorities for the New Administration*

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Amid a deepening recession, Barack Obama will enter the White House facing an American public hopeful that he can bring about the change on which he campaigned and which Americans desperately yearn for. Obama's strong standing has not yielded an inch since his election, as he enjoys a better than 2:1 favorable-unfavorable ratio and 40 percent view him *very* favorably.

In a newly released survey of 1,000 voters by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Democracy Corps,<sup>1</sup> 57 percent approve of the job he is doing as President-elect, while just 19 percent disapprove. And by a 68 to 23 percent margin, voters support Obama's policies and goals. Voters back his economic plan by a 63 to 22 percent margin and even when pitted against a Republican opposition message, Obama's economic plan prevails by an 19-point margin.

Yet, while the survey offers real encouragement for Obama and his agenda, it also highlights important lessons for the new administration to consider when framing the debate:

1. **Everything Obama does on the domestic front will be viewed through the economic lens of jobs, opportunities and business growth. For people, the disparate elements – jobs, new energy, affordable health care, education, and tax cuts – are all part of a single narrative about producing opportunities for people to prosper and succeed.** The old breakdown of economy vs. health care vs. energy vs. education no longer applies. Voters are focused on the economy, but their economic priorities are alternative energy jobs, affordable health care regardless of pre-existing conditions, and other non-traditionally economic issues. In fact, out of 33 initiatives tested, voters placed the greatest priority on investing in alternative energy, while two health care initiatives made the top six.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a national Democracy Corps survey of 1,000 likely voters conducted December 16-18, 2008.



2. **The economic agenda must include the here and now, as well as fundamental changes to our economic paradigm.** Voters are not thinking about short-term vs. long-term or big vs. small. They want action to address it all. Part of this is about language, as we saw in our congressional battleground research last year when we noted the strength of “economic recovery plan” language over “stimulus” language, but much of it is substance – initiatives that create immediate jobs like transportation projects are important substantively, but voters want fundamental economic shifts like a move towards an alternative energy economy.<sup>2</sup> People want to deal with the long-term economic situation by investing in the emerging industries that will produce quality jobs down the road, alternative energy foremost among them.
3. **Job creation clearly stands at the center of voters’ priorities, but they view small businesses as a key to creating those jobs.** Throughout this survey, we see convincing evidence of voters’ warm feelings towards small businesses and strong support for initiatives that help small businesses grow.
4. **Finally, Obama must show accountability and a real effort to cut waste if he wants the room to achieve an investment agenda.** Undoubtedly, the country’s economic predicament warrants a bold agenda, which the public embraces. However, years of failed leadership have spawned a growing skepticism about government, which we observed in our March 2007 memo, “[Getting the Public to Listen](#).”<sup>3</sup> For Obama to succeed, he needs to show a new leadership that respects voters’ skepticism towards government and reassures voters that he will change business as usual. This involves tone (and his overtures to Republicans help on that front), but it also involves substance. It requires new initiatives to cut waste and very importantly, Obama will need to show that voters are getting real bang for their buck with new spending – that every element can be seen to produce concrete results for the dollars spent. His appointment of a Chief Performance Officer clearly shows he gets it.

### **Obama Standing: Strong and Stable**

In the post-election period, Barack Obama’s standing has been strong and stable. Voters’ assessment of him improved in the last few days of the election, then further strengthened in late November and now remains steady. With a mean of 62 degrees out of 100 on a favorability thermometer, 54 percent offer a favorable view of Obama, while just 26 percent perceive him unfavorably. Additionally, 57 percent approve of Obama’s performance as president-elect, while just 19 percent disapprove, a slight uptick from November when 53 percent approved. Indeed, nearly four-in-ten voters *strongly* approve of the job that Obama is doing as president-elect.

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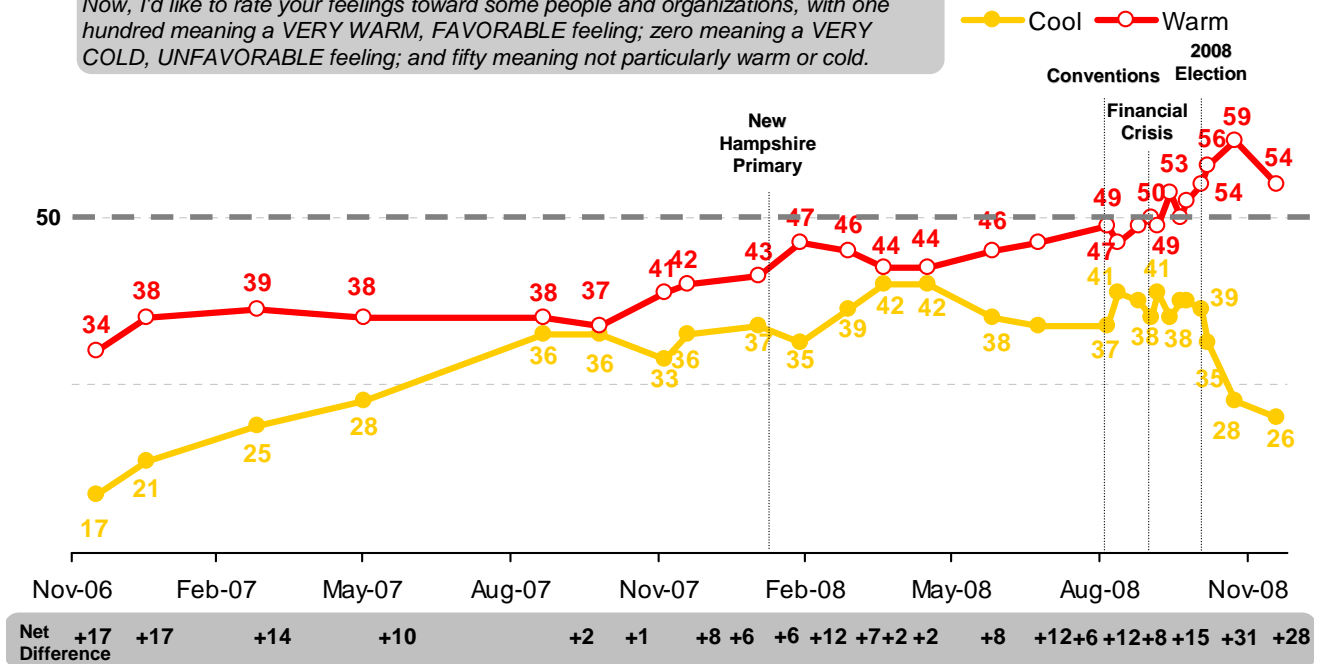
<sup>2</sup> Based on a Democracy Corps survey of 1,600 likely voters (1,780 unweighted) in 50 Republican-held districts conducted October 13–16, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Memo of March 1, 2007. <http://www.democracycorps.com/strategy/2007/03/getting-the-public-to-listen/>



## President-elect Obama's net favorability remains extremely high

Now, I'd like to rate your feelings toward some people and organizations, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold.



\*Note: From Democracy Corps surveys conducted over the last two years.

We see no signs that Obama's appointments have caused discontent with liberals. In fact, 91 percent of liberal Democrats approve of Obama's performance as president-elect with just 2 percent disapproving. Equally important, Obama's favorability standing with independent voters remains quite strong – 53 percent favorable, 23 percent unfavorable.

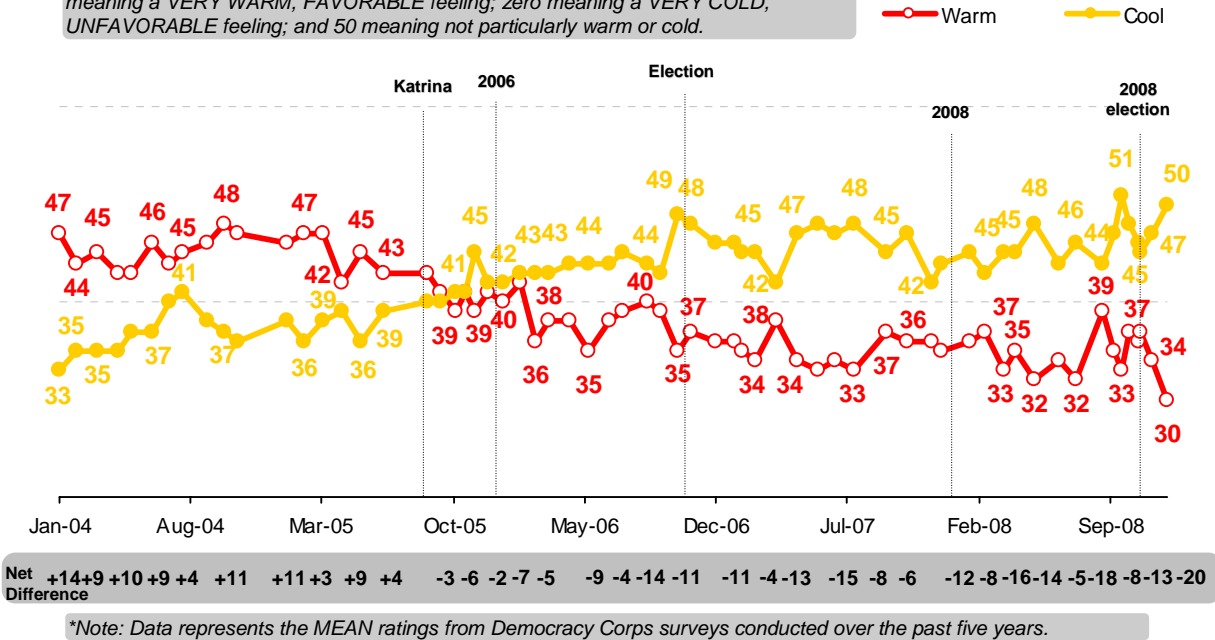
### A Weak Republican Brand

Republicans enter 2009 with a tarnished image. Just 30 percent of voters hold favorable opinions of the Republican Party, while 50 percent view them unfavorably. This is the weakest standing for the Republican Party we have ever recorded.



## Republican thermometer at its lowest

Now, I'd like to rate your feelings toward some people and organizations, with 100 meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and 50 meaning not particularly warm or cold.



While the Democratic Party does not enjoy a wellspring of support, it stands in a much stronger position than Republicans with a rating of 44 percent favorable to 38 percent unfavorable. Democrats have the advantage of far better standing with independent voters and greater intensity among their base.

**Table 1: Thermometer Scores by Party ID**

	Republican Party Favorability		Democratic Party Favorability	
	Warm	Cool	Warm	Cool
<b>Democrats</b>	6 percent	78 percent	80 percent	5 percent
<b>Independents</b>	21 percent	52 percent	35 percent	39 percent
<b>Republicans</b>	66 percent	13 percent	6 percent	77 percent

### Voters Hope for Obama

Voters mix their deep concern about the country's grim economic conditions with a hopefulness that Obama can bring the change on which he campaigned. By a 68 to 23 percent margin, they support his policies and goals, with no erosion over the last month. Additionally,



63 percent support his economic recovery plan, while just 22 percent oppose. Even when pitted against GOP messaging in opposition, voters support Obama’s plan by 19 points.

### Democrats’ recovery plan favored over GOP opposition

*Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements. After I read each pair, please tell me whether the DEMOCRATIC statement or the REPUBLICAN statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right.*

#### Democratic Statement: Recovery with Tax Cuts

Democrats say we need immediate and decisive action to get our economy back on track. Rather than short-term fixes that throw money at the problem, this plan will save or create 2.5 million jobs in two years while making America more competitive in the world and reducing our dependence on oil by rebuilding and modernizing our roads and schools, **cutting taxes for the middle class**, investing in energy efficiency and expanding new technologies.

■ Dem Stmt Smwht  
■ Dem Stmt Strongly

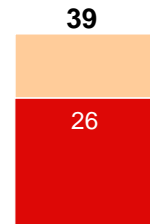


Total Democratic Statement

#### Republican Statement: Democratic Plan Wasteful

Republicans say this plan is nothing more than a massive increase in wasteful spending. **It would mean more pork-barrel projects, more waste and it would lead to higher taxes on all Americans at a time when we can least afford it.** We need to cut wasteful spending and keep taxes low for working families and small businesses, not choke our economy with higher taxes and more wasteful pork spending.

■ Rep Stmt Smwht  
■ Rep Stmt Strongly



Total Republican Statement

Two-thirds of independents support Obama’s policies and goals, as do 43 percent of conservatives and even 34 percent of McCain voters.

Moreover, voters are not concerned that Obama will overreach on most of the key issues facing the country. On energy in particular, just 25 percent believe Obama will go too far. And on health care and the economy, just 36 and 30 percent worry Obama will go too far in making changes. Only on Iraq are voters divided, with 45 percent believing Obama will go too far in reducing troops.

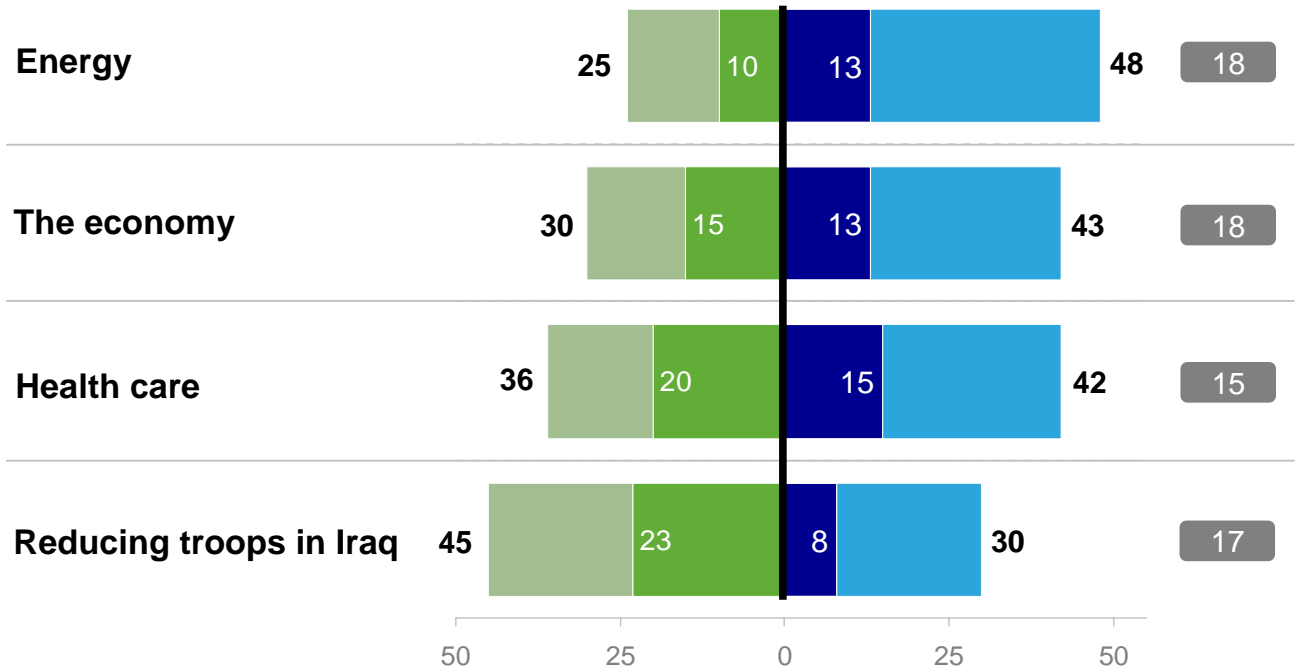


### More worried Obama won't go far enough on energy, economy, health care

Now let me read you a list of issues. For each issue please tell me if, when Obama takes office, you worry that he will not go far enough in making changes to address that issue or that we will go too far in making changes to address that issue?

Percent Neither/just right

- Very worried he will go too far
- Somewhat worried he will go too far
- Very worried he won't go far enough
- Somewhat worried he won't go far enough



### A Bold Agenda for Getting the Country Back on Track

Voters' high expectations for Obama require an approach that addresses urgent economic problems, while also fundamentally moving towards a new economy. Americans want a major job creation program the magnitude of FDR's (53 percent) rather than a less costly economic boost that would allow us to keep the budget deficit under control (43 percent).

Though it is clear that passing an economic recovery plan at all costs trumps keeping the deficit under control among voters overall, we also see among key electoral blocs evidence of concern about achieving long-term budget balance and eliminating wasteful spending. Across a number of measures, independent voters are more evenly divided in considering deficit reduction and controlling wasteful spending vs. immediate economic recovery. As we discuss below, Obama must reassure voters that his investments will be spent wisely and he will take seriously the challenge of making government more efficient.



### Overcoming Skepticism towards Government

At the same time that voters want a major job growth investment, they also call for new accountability measures to ensure those investments are well made and deliver returns. The failure of leadership over the last eight years deepened voters’ distrust of government. This distrust has little to do with the ideological argument about expansive or limited government. Instead, it is about effective leadership that looks out for the people’s interest. This requires that new investments are coupled with cuts of wasteful spending and performance audits to ensure that new spending delivers results.

Remarkably, three of the top four initiatives tested from a list of 33 focus on corporate or government accountability. Rarely in our experience do accountability measures stack up with health care, education, jobs or energy initiatives in a survey. Accountability measures typically carry understated importance – allowing leaders to build voters’ trust, which gives them more room for investment. The fact that accountability measures test near the top speaks volumes to their importance in helping Obama tackle his larger agenda.

■ **Table 2: Government and Corporate Responsibility Proposal Popularity by Party Identification**

	All Voters		Democrats		Independents		Republicans	
	Extreme import.	Ex./Very Import.	Extreme import.	Ex./Very Import.	Extreme import.	Ex./Very Import.	Extreme import.	Ex./Very Import.
<b>Conduct a performance audit in every government department and agency to identify areas to cut wasteful spending</b>	39	77	40	78	44	80	35	74
<b>Require all businesses that receive government assistance to end corporate bonuses until they pay taxpayers back</b>	40	72	45	79	43	73	32	63
<b>Conduct a line-by-line review of the federal budget and eliminate government programs that are not performing</b>	36	72	30	73	47	77	35	66

\*\* Numbers show percent of voters.

Importantly, the accountability measures test as well with independents as with Democrats, which is remarkable given that we presented the proposals as Obama initiatives. The accountability measures also score the strongest of all initiatives among Republicans, including moderate Republicans, a sign that these measures may be a good vehicle to shore up support from across the aisle.

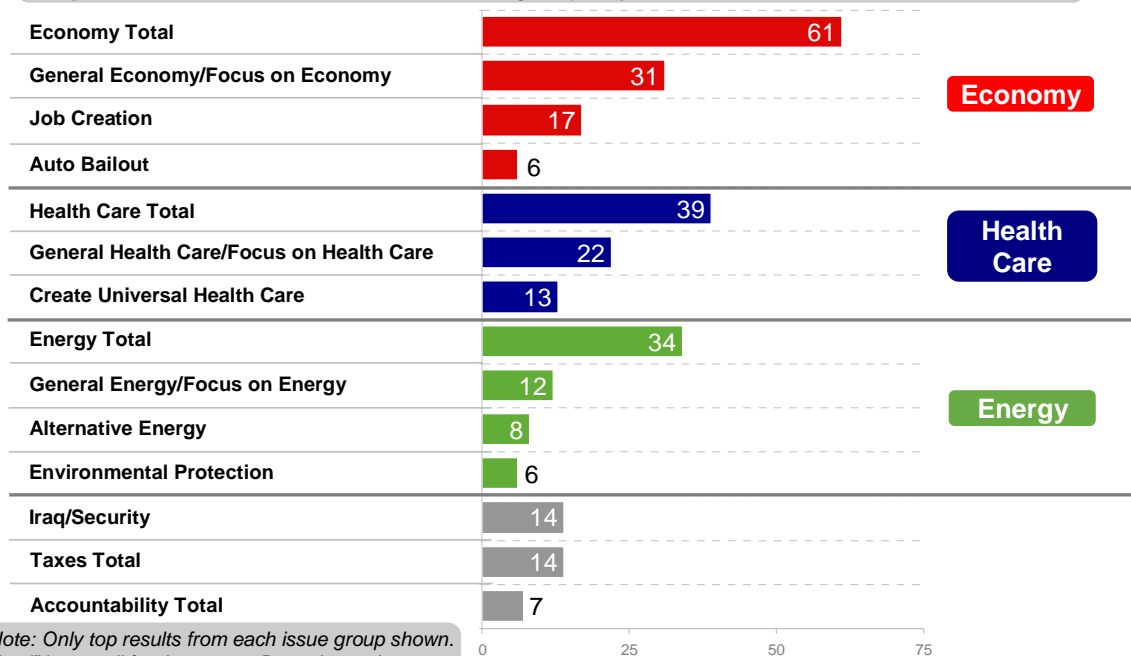


## The Convergence of Issues and a New Economic Paradigm Centered on Job Creation

Not surprisingly, the economy stands atop voters' priorities for the incoming Obama Administration. Even after hearing a list of proposals across a range of issues, 42 percent of voters volunteer the economy as their singly highest priority and 61 percent cite it as one of their top two priorities. And on the priority voters place on the economy, there is little difference by party, gender, education or most other demographics.

### Highest and next highest Obama priorities, combined

*Of the various policy proposals you just heard, which one do you think should be President Obama's single highest priority? And what should be President Obama's next highest priority?*



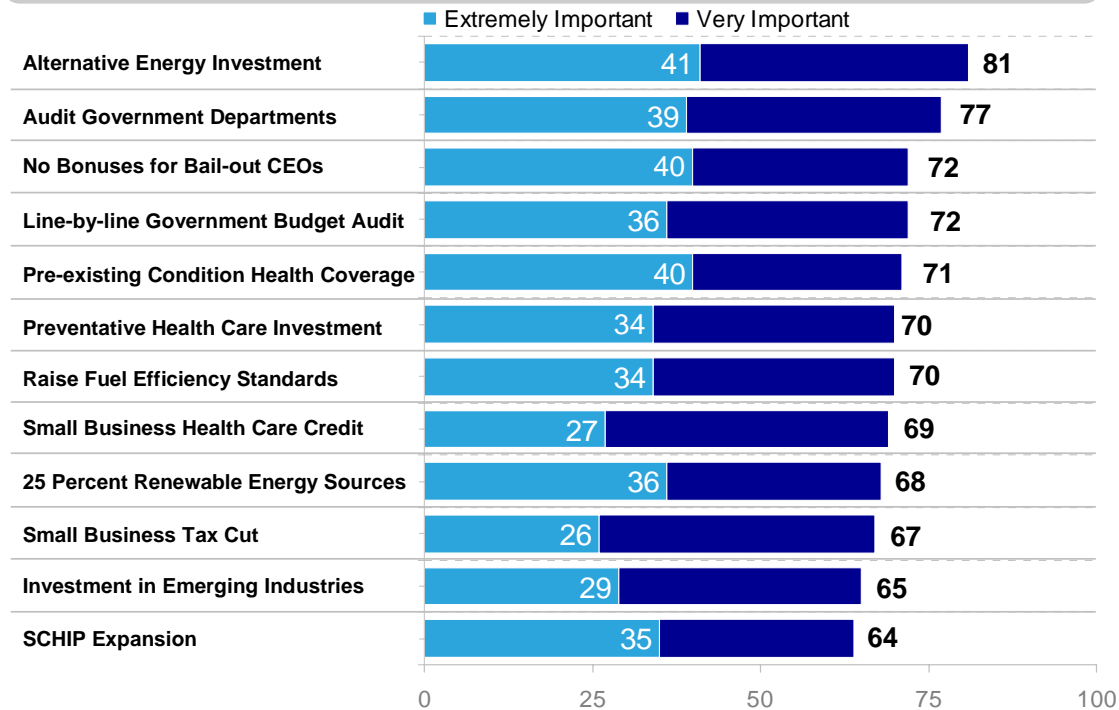
*\*Note: Only top results from each issue group shown. "Total" is overall for that group. Data shows the combined highest and next highest numbers.*

But the path to economic recovery goes well beyond traditional economic issues. In fact, among the 33 initiatives, investing in alternative energy ranks as the most important step Obama can take, with two health care proposals among the top six. The old break down of issues no longer applies – alternative energy is at least as much a jobs issue as an environmental or national security one; health care is at least as much a financial issue as a social one.



## Top policy proposals

*I'm going to read you a list of proposals that Barack Obama is likely to make on a variety of issues. For each one, please tell me how important it is that Obama enact this proposal. Is it EXTREMELY important to enact, VERY important to enact, just SOMEWHAT important to enact, NOT AT ALL important to enact or would you actively OPPOSE that proposal?*



### *An Alternative Energy Economy*

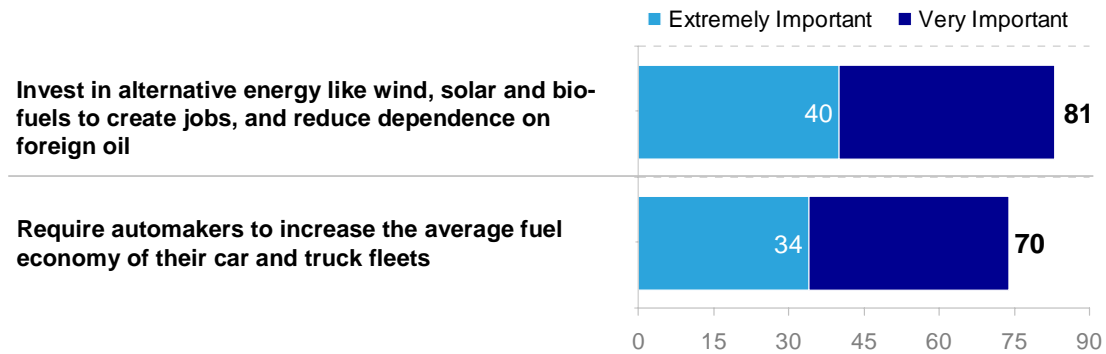
Americans now view alternative energy and energy efficiency as central components of an economic growth and job creation agenda. Investing in alternative energy scores as the single highest proposal with 81 percent calling it extremely or very important. Higher fuel standards is tied for the top six with 70 percent calling it very or somewhat important. While the results of these policies have environmental benefits, energy has emerged as one of the central economic issues of this period.

As noted earlier, just 25 percent of voters worry that Obama will go too far in bringing changes to the nation's energy policies. This is the issue where voters are most concerned he will not go far enough, and it is also the one issue on which we see very little partisan differences: nearly half of Democrats (49 percent), independents (48 percent) and Republicans (46 percent) worry that Obama will not go far enough in bringing changes to our energy policies.



### Investing in alternative energy tops other energy proposals

Here is a list of proposals Obama might make on **energy**. For each one, please tell me how important it is that Obama enact this proposal. Is it **EXTREMELY** important to enact, **VERY** important to enact, just **SOMEWHAT** important to enact, **NOT AT ALL** important to enact or would you actively **OPPOSE** that proposal?

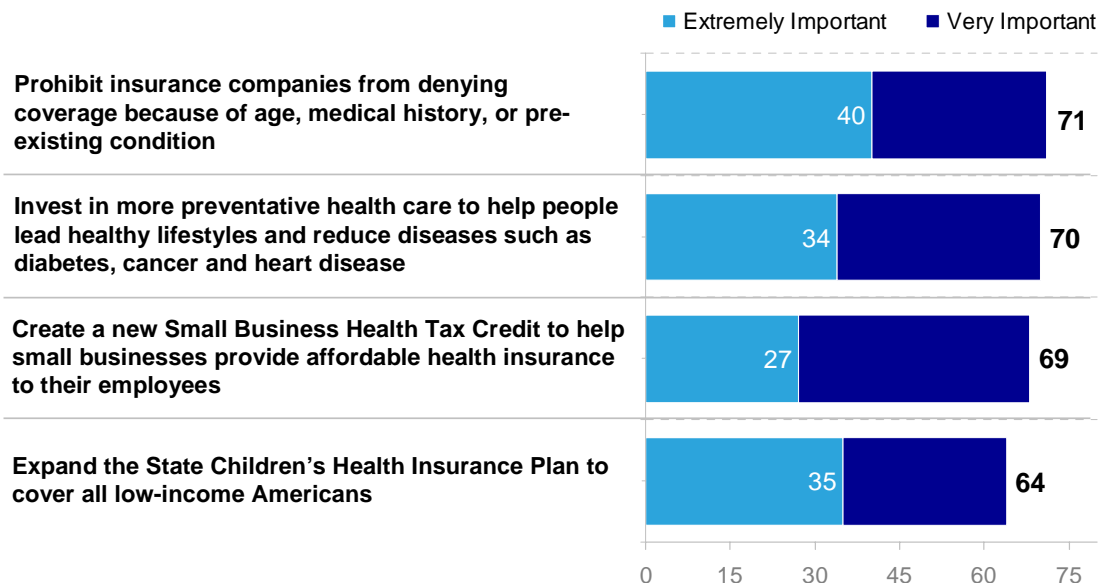


### Affordable Health Care

Like energy, health care has moved from the realm of social issues to an economic issue. It is deeply intertwined with jobs and economic security. The fifth strongest proposal would prevent insurance companies from denying coverage to those with pre-existing conditions (71 percent extremely or very important). The sixth strongest invests in preventative health care (70 percent extremely or very important). And the eighth strongest offers a health care tax credit for small businesses.

### Top health care proposals: pre-existing conditions, preventative care

Here is a list of proposals Obama might make on **health care**. For each one, please tell me how important it is that Obama enact this proposal. Is it **EXTREMELY** important to enact, **VERY** important to enact, just **SOMEWHAT** important to enact, **NOT AT ALL** important to enact or would you actively **OPPOSE** that proposal?





### *A Small Business Focus*

While much of the news coverage focuses on the Big Three automotive companies, Wall Street, or other big corporate players, voters look to small businesses as the key to economic revitalization. Whether it is health care costs, alternative energy and energy efficiency jobs, or other parts of the economy, small business initiatives carry great resonance with voters. Two small business initiatives – a small business health care tax credit and small business tax cuts – score among the top ten initiatives. Unlike big corporations (25 percent favorable to 48 percent unfavorable), voters hold very warm sentiments towards small businesses (82 percent favorable to 8 percent unfavorable).

### *Tax Cuts Important, but not Crucial*

Tax cuts are welcomed and relatively popular, with 60 percent of voters rating a proposal to permanently cut taxes on middle class Americans as extremely or very important. Moreover, this issue was a critical piece of Obama's winning economic message during the campaign. He clearly cannot walk away from that now. However, their importance to the current debate should not be overplayed. Among the 33 proposals tested, middle class tax cuts ranks only in the middle of the pack, behind investment in emerging industries, tax cuts for small businesses, and several energy and health care-related items. Additionally, when we matched messaging in favor of Obama's economic recovery plan both with and without language on middle class tax cuts against the same Republican message against the plan, the inclusion of the tax cuts did not make a significant difference in the result (with tax cuts the Obama plan won by 19 points, without them it won by 17 points).