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To: Friends of Democracy Corps  
From: Stan Greenberg and Ana Iparraguirre

## Obama Emerging Ahead in Close Race

*Race begins to take definition in latest Democracy Corps National Survey*

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As the Democratic nomination contest comes to an end and candidates shift their focus to the general election, both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are emerging comparably ahead of John McCain in a close race for the White House. This memo will focus on Obama. He holds a 2-point lead in our survey,<sup>1</sup> which is just under the 5-point lead he has in the average of this month's public polling as well as our recent poll done with Public Opinion Strategies for NPR.<sup>2</sup> But this is a real race. Obama's vote has not risen above 48 percent and the intensity of support and opposition for each candidate is very similar.

McCain is no longer viewed more favorably than Obama but he continues to be an experienced candidate who can keep America strong and who is seen as honest. He has a plausible case to make as a reformer and somebody who will make government accountable. But the race is beginning to assume definition in ways that makes it very difficult for him to raise his vote or build enthusiasm. Indeed, McCain faces immediate challenges – a falling favorability both among Democrats and conservative Republicans that underscore some of the contradictions in his candidacy. We will be documenting McCain's personal faltering in both this national survey and the battleground poll in the 45 Republican-held seats.<sup>3</sup>

While Obama is also seen as honest and cares about people and more likely than McCain to break the gridlock and bring change, he still faces a lot of skepticism on the change he offers. His vote margin is about 10 points weaker than a generic Democrat for president (as is Hillary Clinton's). These are the "Obama gap" voters that are holding back but they also represent an opportunity to make gains.

Obama's work is made easier by the emerging partisan trends, issues, desire for leadership and choice before voters. The historic partisan shifts continue, even as the economy emerges even

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<sup>1</sup> Democracy Corps poll national survey of 1,014 likely voters conducted May 13-15, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Survey of 800 likely voters conducted May 7-10, 2008 by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and Public Opinion Strategies for NPR

<sup>3</sup> Democracy Corps poll conducted May 19-26, 2008 of 1,600 likely voters in the 45 most competitive Republican-held Congressional districts.



more dominant and desperate and even as voters reject arguments for staying in Iraq long term. While voters want a strong commander in chief, they also want leaders who can unite the country and give hope. Most important, Obama's definition of the race – McCain will continue Bush's direction and Obama will bring change – produces 56 percent more likely to vote for him, 8 points stronger than any definition McCain has yet offered. As with the primary, change is beginning to play a dominant role and remains dangerous for any incumbent party.

This memo will highlight the various developments that are giving this race definition at this pivotal point.

### **McCain's faltering standing and popularity**

McCain's overall favorability reached its lowest point in May and for the first time favorable and unfavorable feelings towards the Arizona Senator are at parity (40 percent warm and 40 percent cool). His negatives have gone up in our last four monthly surveys and he no longer has a net positive image (previously at a net +6). In the 45 Republican battleground congressional seats, we found the exact same pattern where McCain's net 9-point favorable image has fallen to just a net 1 point favorable rating. That is even more remarkable, given these are Republican held seats.

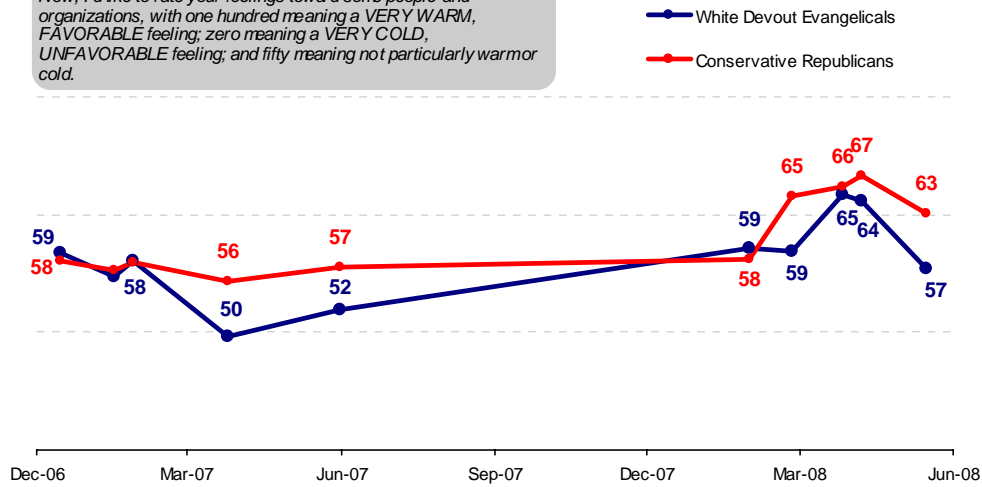
McCain's falling favorability is accompanied by a significant drop in attributes that drive his personal standing. In just one month McCain has lost significant ground in being "honest and trustworthy" (from 68 to 63 percent describes well), being "on your side" (from 48 to 44 percent describes well) and even "will keep America strong" (from 63 to 58 percent describes well).

McCain was initially successful in consolidating his Republican base while expanding his reach across the center and even among Democrats. But McCain's attacks on Obama and support of Bush on key issues are driving away Democrats, including moderate Democrats and maybe even independents. He has lost ground with older women, unmarried women and in union households. But his tilt to the center and possible dispute with an evangelical pastor seems to have cost him among conservative Republicans and evangelicals. McCain's thermometer score dropped 8 net-points among conservative Republicans and 14 net-points among white devout evangelicals.



### McCain's favorability takes a hit among conservative Republicans

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.

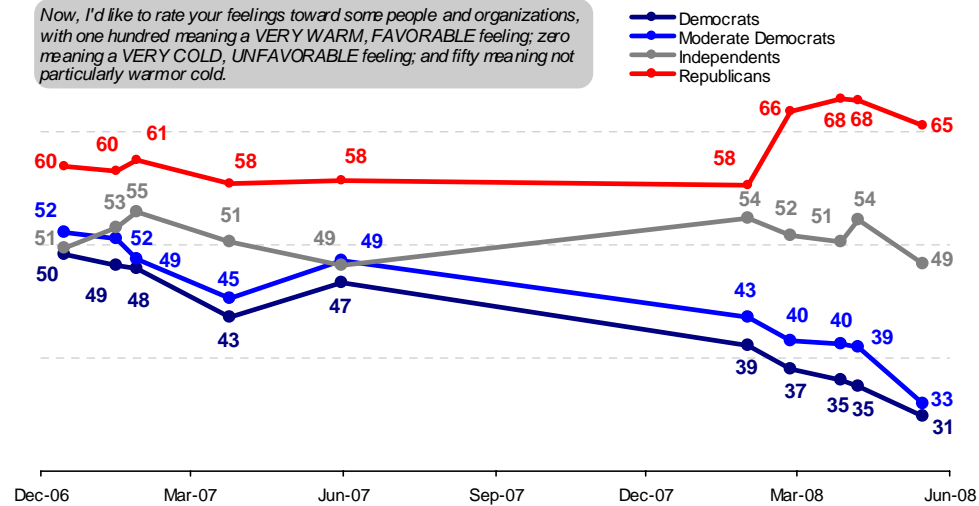


\*Note: From Democracy Corps surveys conducted over the last year and a half.

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### John McCain favorability declining

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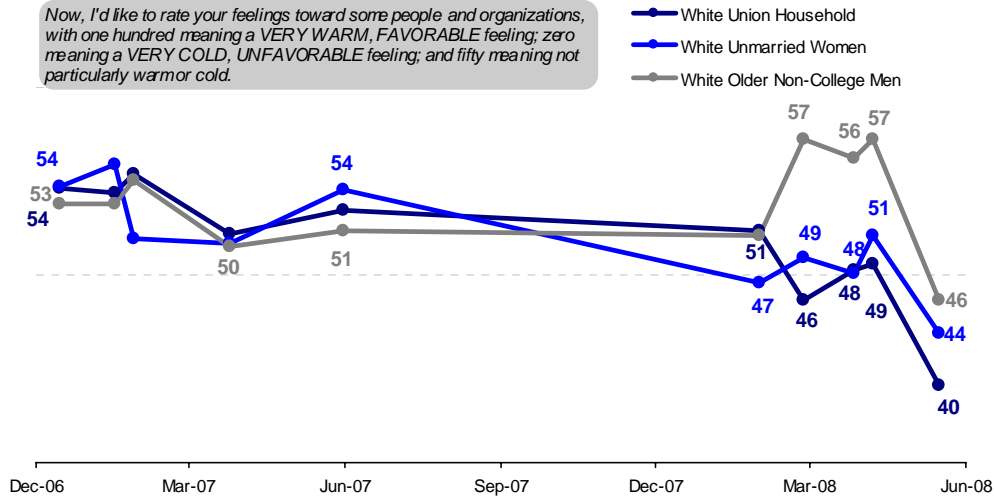


\*Note: Data represents John McCain's MEAN favorability rating from Democracy Corps surveys conducted over the last year and a half.



### McCain sees favorability decline in key groups

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\*Note: From Democracy Corps surveys conducted over the last year and a half.

### The Republican brand problem

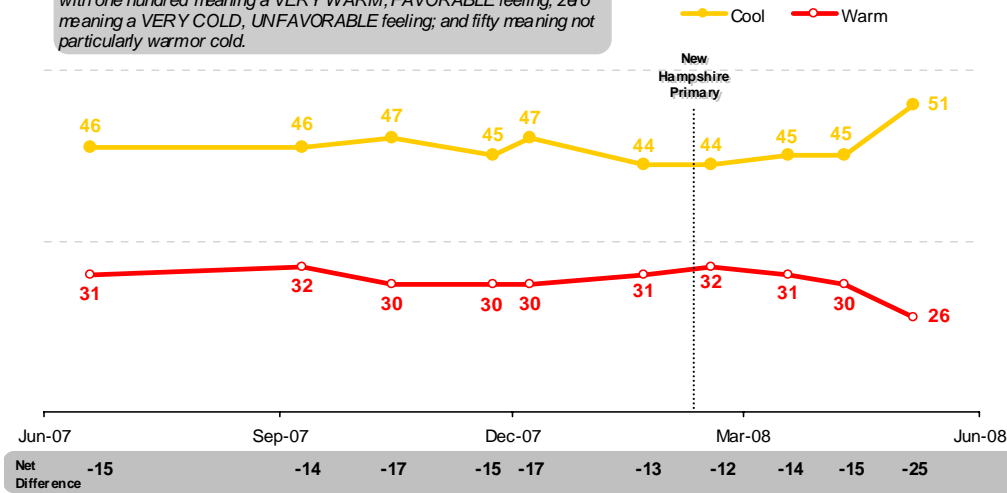
The partisan environment is remarkably favorable for Democrats, as the Republican brand is extremely damaged. The Democratic Party's overall image is actually stable – at a mean 50 degrees on the zero to 100 thermometer scale – at about where it stood in 2006 and 2004. But the Republican Party's image has fallen well below those periods to its lowest level in the history of polling this question. Now only 32 percent have a warm reaction to the party with a near majority of 48 percent viewing it coolly. Less than a third of voters identify as Republicans in this survey – which gives Democrats an 11-point advantage in party identification as a starting point.

The situation is even more challenging for Republicans in Congress as they fell 10 net-points in just one month – their lowest score in Democracy Corps surveys.



### Republicans in Congress unimaginably low

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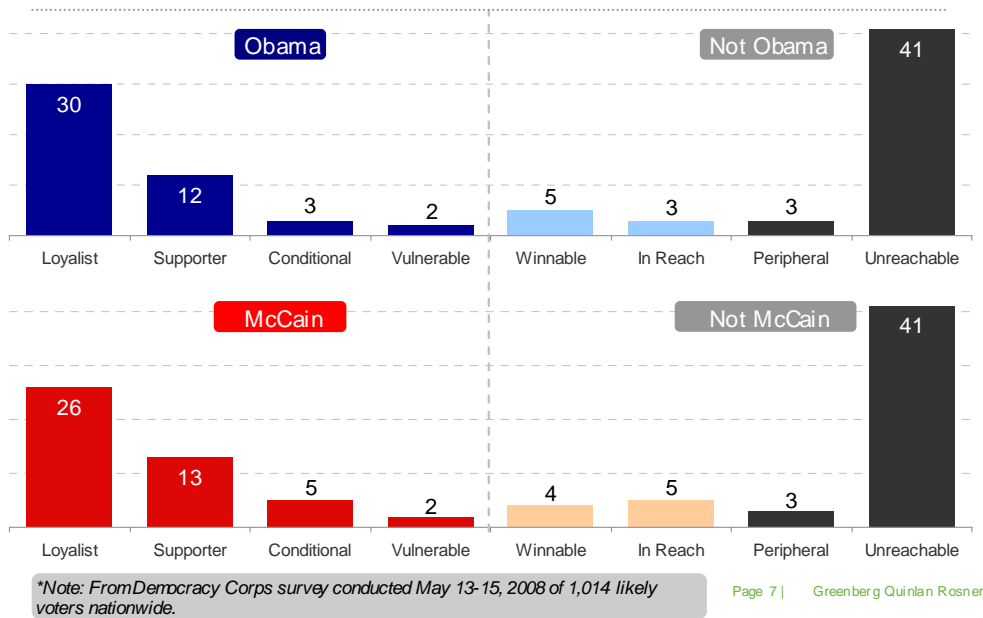
\*Note: From Democracy Corps surveys conducted over the last several months.

### The structure of the Race

For all the partisan advantage and challenge facing McCain, Obama has only a small lead – reflected in the structure of the race as shown in the Voter Choice Scale below. This scale uses eight questions to determine intensity of support, the probability of it being eroded, the scale of winnable voters and the number that are unreachable. At this point, the patterns of Obama and McCain’s support are nearly identical. While there is a lot of ferment in this environment, it is not yet reflected in movement in the race itself.



### Voter Choice Scales: parallel worlds



The closeness of the race is rooted in the current structure, which can clearly change. McCain has now consolidated 89 percent of Republican voters, while Obama has consolidated only 80 percent of Democrats. The period in June when the primaries end will clearly be a pivotal moment. The two candidates split independents but that is why McCain is in contention. In 2006, Republicans lost independents by 18 points. Obama will aspire to run stronger here as the generic Democrat wins independents by 8 points.

While this memo focuses on Obama, Clinton also runs 2 points ahead of McCain but the structure of that race would have been very different. She consolidates more of the Democrats, but runs much weaker among independents.

### Emerging Definition of the Election

The focus on change is becoming as inescapable in the general election as it was in the primaries. With 75 percent saying the country is off on the wrong track, this is a no-brainer but this survey now shows how real that can be in the current race. We tested a series of choices and asked – is that a real difference between McCain and Obama and does it make you more likely to support him? Obama’s definition of the race focused on change has much broader and intense appeal than McCain’s definition focused on strength and experience, liberalism, taxes and independence. The strongest definition says McCain “will continue Bush’s direction” and Obama “will bring change,” leading 56 percent of voters to say that is real and does make them more likely to support Obama. Adding that McCain will continue Bush’s direction on Iraq and the economy increases the intensity to 44 percent much more likely. This is the first result that says Obama has the chance to raise his support above his current 48 percent vote.

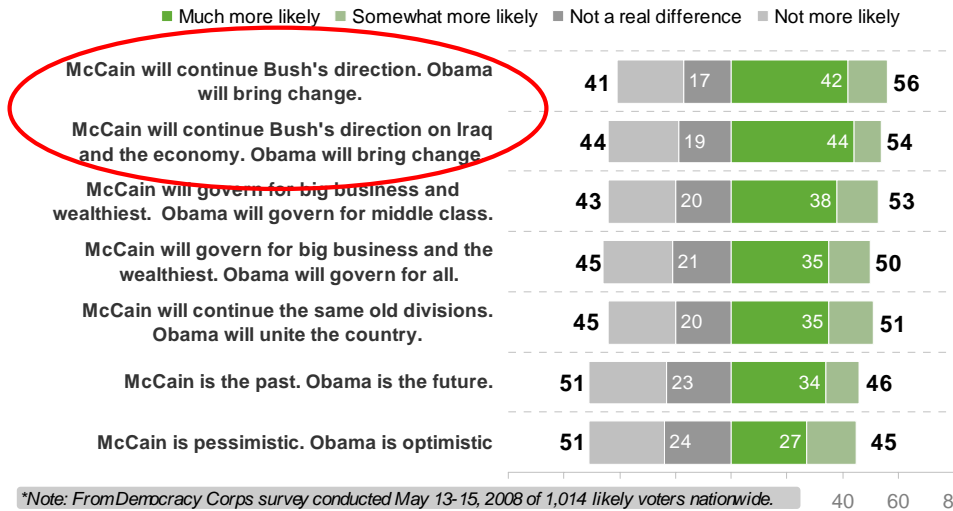


Just 48 percent respond similarly to McCain’s strongest definition: “Obama is not up to the job and McCain has the experience to be commander in chief”; and 45 percent respond to “Obama is not feared by our enemies and McCain will keep America safe.”

More importantly, this battle has the chance to consolidate the Democratic base after the primary. A stunning 80 percent of moderate Democrats say this definition is real and makes them more likely to support Obama, two-thirds much more likely.

### Obama defining the election

Now, I am going to read you what some people say are some differences between Barack Obama and John McCain. For each one, please tell me if it is a difference that makes you MUCH MORE LIKELY to vote for Barack Obama, SOMEWHAT MORE LIKELY, or NO MORE LIKELY to vote for Barack Obama, or is it NOT A REAL DIFFERENCE between Barack Obama and John McCain.



### Image Challenges for Obama and McCain

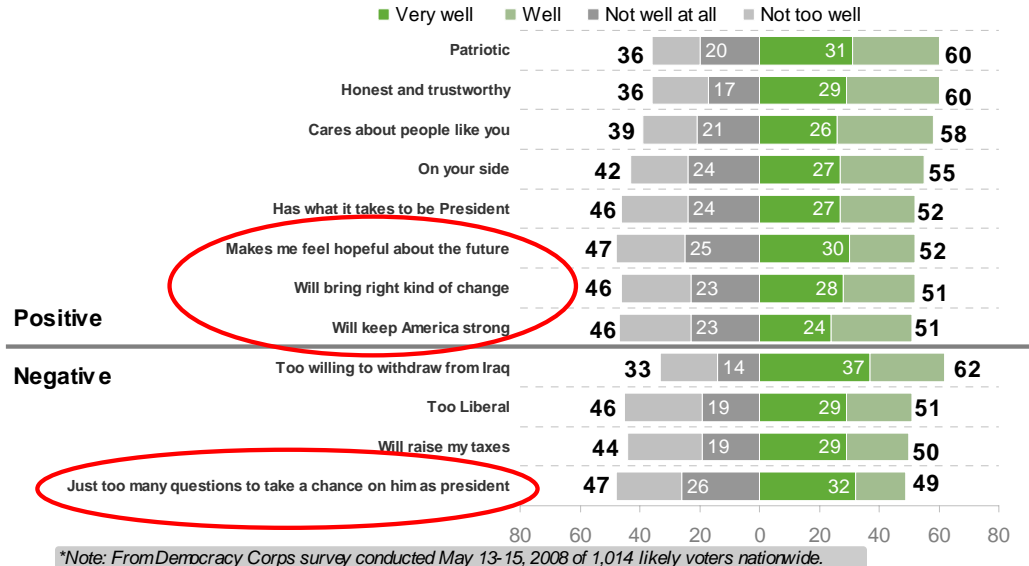
Obama and McCain have comparable overall standing with near equal numbers of warm and cool reactions to their names. In some ways, both have lost luster, though without being seen negatively. Both score well on honesty, which in the current anti-political environment is a change itself.

But Obama will need to do better on key attributes if he is to move his vote above his current 48 percent vote. Just over 50 percent say he “will bring the right kind of change” as well as that he makes them “feel hopeful about the future.” About 55 percent say he is “on your side,” but that is a modest number for a Democrat who is supposed to battle for ordinary people. Voters do have questions about Obama: 49 percent agree that there are “too many questions to take a chance on him.” Fortunately, this is the point in the election where voters will be looking for information and to find a way to vote for change.



### Obama 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 John McCain very well, well, not too well, or not well at all.



McCain will have trouble running in a period of change: just 40 percent believe McCain “will bring the right kind of change” and a majority of voters now see him as “too close to Bush.” Only 44 percent say he is “on your side.”

The regression modeling of the vote suggests that these attributes really form the battleground impacting the vote. The strongest drivers center first on whether Obama and McCain will bring the right kind of change or make you feel hopeful as well as whether they are too close to Bush. Any movement up or down on those three attributes moves the vote. But also important is whether Obama and McCain will keep America strong and whether Obama has what it takes to be president, underscoring the importance of experience and leadership. For Obama, being too liberal is also a factor in the vote, suggesting the importance of reassurance on moderation. But for McCain, staying in Iraq too long is a factor, underscoring the challenges he faces on the war.



Regressions: candidate attributes driving the vote

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Attributes that drive Obama vote:	Odds Ratio
• <i>Will keep America strong</i>	2.41
• <i>Makes me feel hopeful about the future</i>	2.24
• <i>Has what it take to be president</i>	2.21
• <i>Too liberal</i>	2.08
• <i>Will bring the right kind of change</i>	2.01

Attributes that drive McCain vote:	Odds Ratio
• <i>Will bring the right kind of change</i>	1.86
• <i>Will keep America strong</i>	1.85
• <i>Too close to Bush</i>	1.46
• <i>Will stay in Iraq too long</i>	1.40

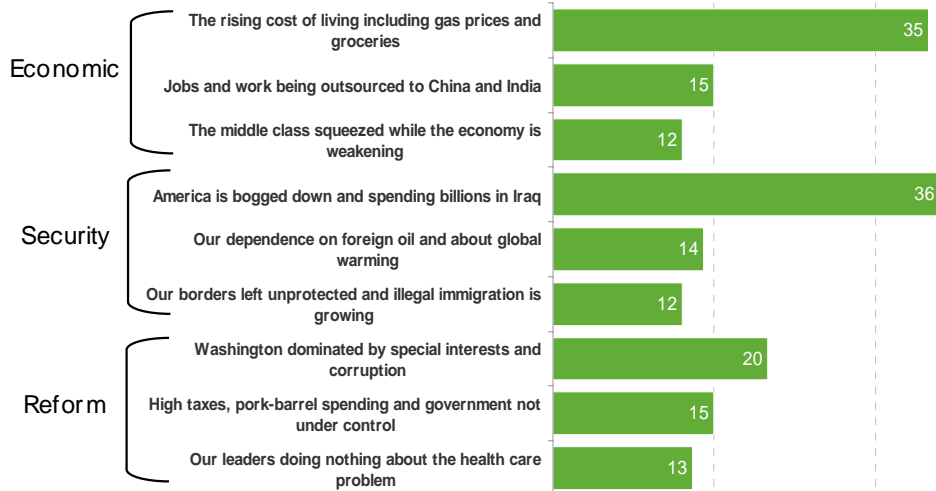
### **It's the Economy, Stupid**

Voters say that the economy is the biggest driver of the vote this year, but when we ask about why the country is off track an equal number pick security (Iraq) and economy related issues. The two biggest items are America continuing to be bogged down in Iraq and spending billions and the rising cost of living, including gas prices and groceries. Among independents, being bogged down in Iraq still tops the list however running even with the high cost of living in second is “Washington dominated by special interests and corruption,” each chosen by independent voters 29 percent of the time.



### Why wrong track?

Now I am going to read a list of phrases people use to describe why our country is going in the wrong direction. After I read the list, please tell me which TWO come closest to your own view of why the country is going in the wrong direction.



\*Note: From Democracy Corps survey conducted May 13-15, 2008 of 1,014 likely voters nationwide.

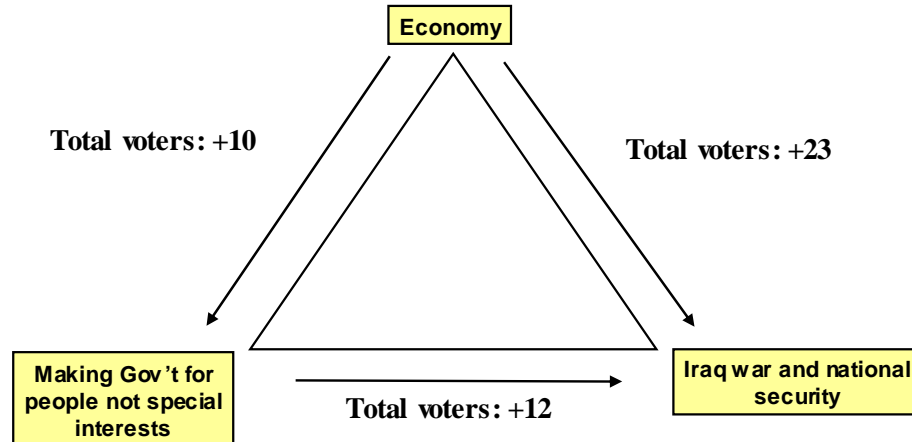
When, we force voters to choose, the economy wins out decisively: 10 points more important to voters than making government work for the people, not special interests and 23 points more important than the war in Iraq and national security. On this critical issue, Obama has a stable 6-point advantage over McCain, though that is half the advantage that Democrats have over Republicans on the economy.<sup>4</sup> With which candidate can do a better job on the economy a significant driver of the vote in our modeling, it is important that Obama address that issue with more authority and advocacy.

<sup>4</sup> Data based on Democracy Corps poll of 1,956 likely voters nationwide, conducted February 20-26, 2008.



### Economy most important to vote in November

Now I'm going to read you some more pairs of statements. After I read each pair, please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right. For my vote in 2008, (Iraq OR economy OR making government work for the people instead of special interests) will be the more important issue.



*\*Note: From Democracy Corps survey conducted May 13-15, 2008 of 1,014 likely voters nationwide.*

### Time for Reform

While McCain is a plausible reformer, changing government is an important dimension in this election and here Obama has a larger advantage. Voters see Obama as more likely to “break the gridlock in Washington,” by 14 points (48 to 34 percent). Nonetheless, Democrats still have a long way to go to ensure McCain is seen as a Washington insider. Despite recent reports about McCain’s campaign being plagued with lobbyists, half of voters still do not see him as “part of the mess in Washington.”

### The War in Iraq

Iraq is already a central argument in the campaign and one Obama wins on the merits. No matter how we develop the debate, McCain loses it by nearly 20 points, as over 60 percent of voters want to start reducing troops. In our survey in the 45 most competitive Republican battleground congressional districts, McCain’s commitment to have most troops out of Iraq by 2013 wins him no more support. The war grows ever more unpopular and even greater stability is a reason to reduce troops, not stay longer.

Whether Obama turns this into a political advantage will turn on whether they trust him to handle these troop reductions. Over 60 percent say Obama is “too willing to withdraw from Iraq” and by 2 points (47 to 45 percent) voters trust McCain rather than Obama to handle the situation in Iraq. It is clear that voters are looking for more reassurance that Iraq will be handled deftly and responsibly. If that happens, that too could change the race.

