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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and the Campaign for America's Future  
From: Stanley Greenberg, James Carville, and Ana Iparraguirre

## **The New Politics and New Mandate**

*Report on the national post-election poll by  
Democracy Corps and Campaign for America's Future*

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The American people paid extraordinary attention to the race for president in 2008 and made a considered choice of Barack Obama. Voters want to give Obama a honeymoon to bring change in an urgent but considered and serious way. They want the new president to address a handful of big problems, some boldly, some step-by-step, but with a goal of major, long-term change, particularly on the economy. This is very different from 1992, the last time when voters elected a Democrat with a big agenda for change. Our times are much more desperate, the problems much bigger, and few voters felt the luxury of casting protest votes as many did for Ross Perot in 1992. Indeed, with Obama winning an outright majority and viewed very favorably across the electorate, voters feel a personal investment in his success.

They are looking above all for a new middle class economics that cuts taxes for the middle class and asks the richest and corporations to pay their share, a focus on a jobs-led recovery that restores America's long-term strength, major action to achieve energy independence and affordable health care for all and a responsible end to the Iraq war.

These observations are based on the 2,000 sample post-election survey that Greenberg Quinlan Rosner conducted for the Campaign for America's Future and Democracy Corps on election night and the night afterward. Since 1996 these organizations have collaborated to field a large post-election study and explore why Americans voted the way they did.<sup>1</sup>

While the campaign had many twists and turns, it is remarkable how much voters came to like and respect Obama at the end. Despite all the attacks, almost 60 percent came to view him favorably and almost 60 percent came to believe he had what it takes to be president. Importantly, feelings toward Obama were as important a predictor of vote as party. And voters want both parties to work with the new president and his agenda to get the change done.

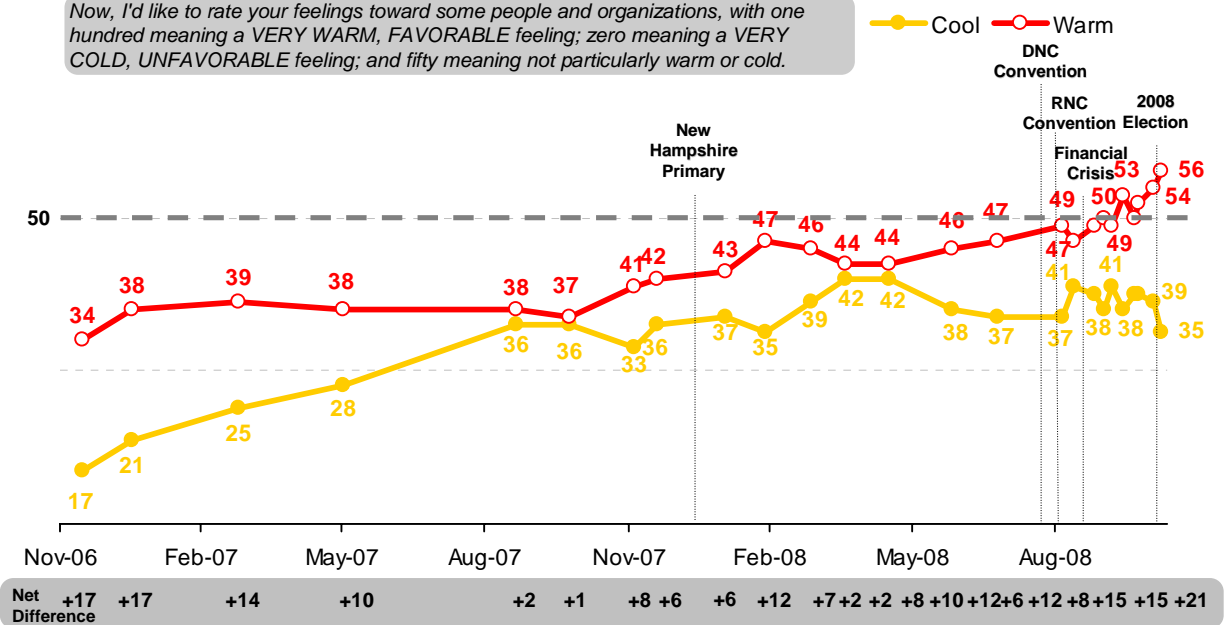
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<sup>1</sup> Democracy Corps and Campaign for America's Future post-election survey of 2,000 voters nationwide, conducted on November 4-5, 2008.



## Obama favorability jumps post-election

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.

Obama’s election took place with a substantial Democratic advantage at the polls – in party identification (7 points) and in party image (net 7-degree gap in party thermometers), as the Republican brand hit rock bottom in 2006 and never recovered. But unlike the 2006 wave election, after which both parties were viewed negatively, the Democrats’ image improved and on Election Day 2008, emerged with a net-positive image. This was also true for the “Democratic Congress,” which reached its highest favorability point since January 2007. Obama’s popularity and image carried over to the party and congressional Democrats, which puts them in a better position to own this new period.

The result was a second wave election in a row, with Obama winning 53 to 46 percent – a 10-point swing from 2004, powerfully affirming the 10-point swing achieved in 2006 and adding to the House and Senate majorities. Obama’s 364 Electoral College win was truly national, taking states in nearly all regions of the country.<sup>2</sup>

Obama’s election also created a new coalition of groups that not only looks more politically durable, but that re-enforces the image of the Democrats as more future-oriented, open and growing. He won in an inclusive way, without playing identity politics, the support of 95 per-

<sup>2</sup> Obama is expected to pick up an addition Electoral Vote from the Nebraska second district around Omaha, which will raise his total to 365 Electoral Votes.



cent of African Americans (13 percent of the electorate), two thirds of Latinos (9 percent) and about two thirds of Asians, groups that, together, formed nearly a quarter of the electorate. Obama also made gains with white voters. He also won at least two-thirds of unmarried women (20 percent of the electorate, 70 percent for Obama) and most important, young voters (18 percent, 67 percent for Obama). He took 60 percent of post-graduates and remarkably, 55 percent in the suburbs. Along with winning back many Catholic voters and union households, and running respectably in rural areas, Obama was able to put together an impressive, cross-country victory.

Obama's election produced the first African-American president and that piece of history helps define the victory, but it is also defined by the big surge in support of the growing groups in the population – Hispanics, the fastest growing segment in the U.S. population, and with young voters under 30. This support also encompassed white younger non-college men as well as white women under 50 years of age, groups that produced some of the biggest swings to Obama over Kerry's 2004 performance.

The new Obama Democratic coalition contrasts with the Republicans' in a way that could make this a long comeback. McCain's gains – the oldest, most rural, most evangelical and most southern voters – also define the party. Remember, Obama made considerable progress over Kerry's 2004 performance with white Catholics and white mainline Protestants, splitting the latter evenly, so the Republican base is even more isolated now. That southern white voters went even more heavily for McCain than Bush keeps the Republicans mired in the dynamics of the old South while politics in the rest of the country has moved to new dynamics. And while the rest of the country wants Republicans to work with President Obama, Republican voters are divided on whether their leaders should help or fight him.

Obama's election was also produced by an extraordinary shift in the way the citizenry gets information and relates to candidates, and Obama's ability to exploit this at every level (see our separate report "The Extraordinary Campaign"). With a lot more resources, Obama dominated traditional TV advertising (+25-point advantage on seeing his ads) and had considerable advantages on someone knocking on the door (+13 points) and calling on phone (+8 points), though much smaller advantage with mail (+4 points). He had +15-point advantages on people visiting the campaign's website or watching a commercial on line. Outside of TV, Obama's biggest advantage (+18 points) was on being contacted by a friend, neighbor or co-worker on Obama's behalf – no doubt driven by Obama's success in use of social networking, email and texting.

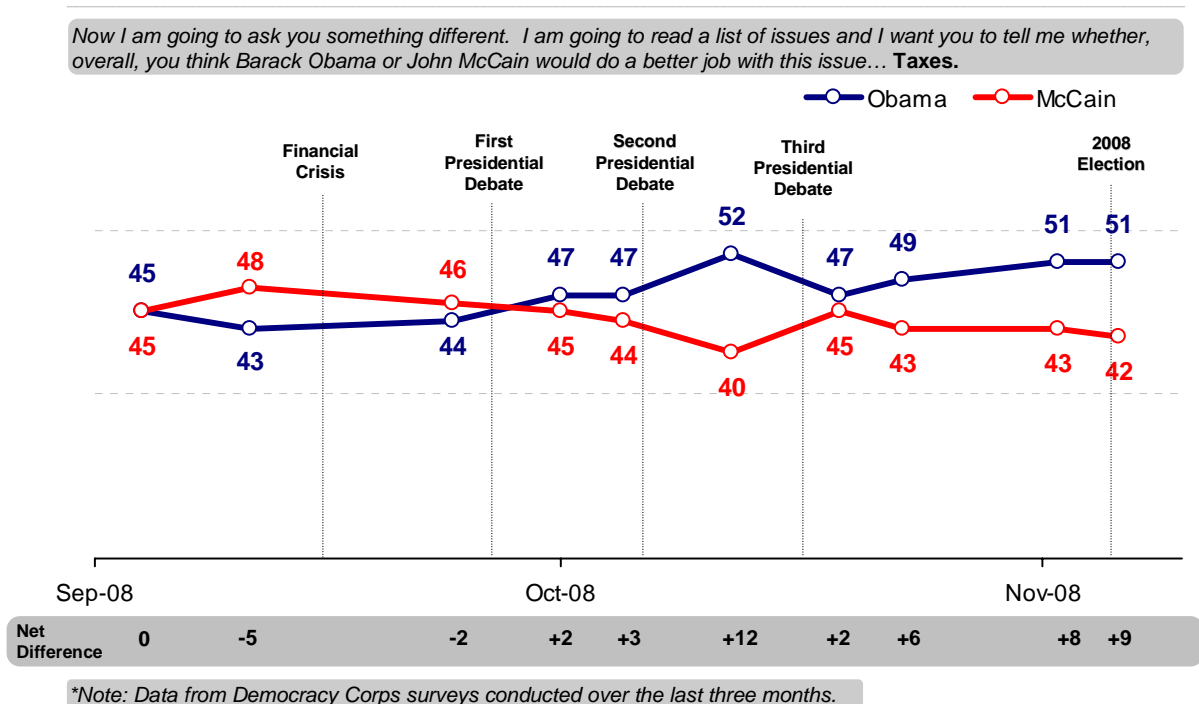
Among voters under 30, political campaigning is already in a new era. A striking 44 percent) visited a campaign website and 37 percent received emails. Personal engagement was substantial, as 15 percent volunteered for one of the campaigns. And a majority was contacted in the final days to encourage them to vote.

Obama's election was also produced by, if not an ideological earthquake, a major shifting of the plates. While some have talked about this being a "center-right" country, the electorate



that sent Obama to the White House considered the ideological issues and came at them sharply on the side of progressive choices on public policy. McCain spent massive time and resources trying to define Obama as “too liberal” and “too ready to raise taxes,” but those perceptions did not rise significantly in the campaign – and indeed fell at the end – with Obama emerging with a remarkable 9-point advantage (51 to 42 percent) on “would do a better job on taxes.” In the closing three weeks of the campaign when McCain stuck to the single message that Obama would tax the rich and introduce socialism while Obama said, yes he would, and cut middle class taxes instead – and won the argument decisively. Even McCain voters in the end did not select his commitment to tax cuts as a major reason to support him, as *taxes* failed as an economic and ideological draw for Republicans.

### Obama dominates closing tax debate



On virtually every dimension of the liberal-conservatism debate, voters have moved to a new place. They show a new openness for the country to use government for a range of public purposes: restoring taxes on the wealthiest and corporations to bring sustained relief for the middle class and regulate corporate excess to protect the public. A large majority wants to reduce troops in Iraq, while support for multilateralism over a go-it-alone, military-centered policy has held at historic highs. And despite results on some ballot measures this year, voters show a new level of tolerance on sexual preference, with 54 percent saying homosexuality should be accepted, not discouraged.



But even with that, voters remain cautious about government spending and taxes after eight years of bloated spending, deficits, corruption, incompetence and special-interest rule. Thus, they divide evenly on worries we won't invest enough versus we will overspend and raise taxes, and whether we should move boldly or step-by-step to achieve health care reform. With people close to desperation on their own personal finances, they want to see reformed, accountable government that will respect people's tax dollars and listen to voters, not the lobbyists and special interests. But do not mistake the legitimate desire for reform and a different kind of government with a desire for the small, limited government that McCain and Republicans offered voters in the election. They are looking for a reformed and progressive government that will act for the middle class and the public interest.

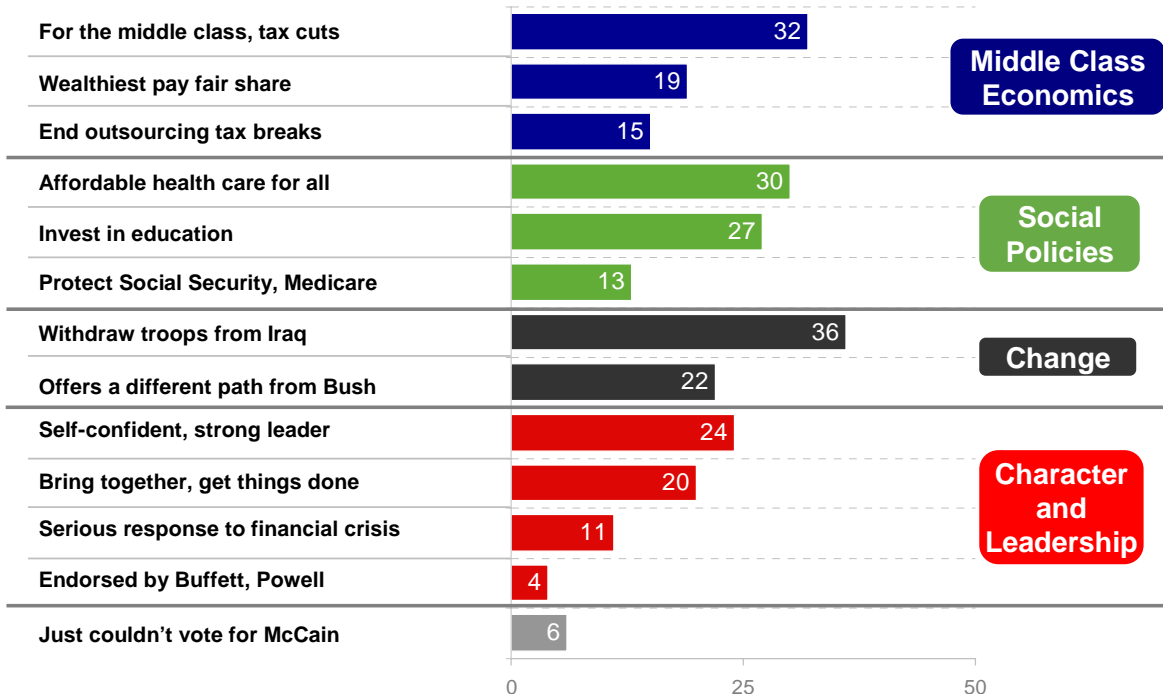
### **The Choice**

On Election Day, our survey shows that voters chose Obama in a large part because of his support for a middle class economics: that he would be for the middle class and cut middle class taxes first, and would get the wealthy and corporations to pay their fair share of taxes. Close behind as a reason for supporting Obama was his plan for affordable health care for all and to invest in education and make college more affordable. Many chose Obama because of the desire for change from Bush and because of Obama's leadership qualities (his self-confidence and being a strong leader but also his being somebody who can bring people together and end the old politics to get things done).



## Reasons for supporting Barack Obama

Now let me read you a list reasons to support Barack Obama. Which THREE describe the most important reasons why you voted for Barack Obama?



Do not lose sight of the fact that ending the war in Iraq was the single biggest reason to vote for Obama, mentioned by 35 percent, and among independents and Obama voters who considered voting for McCain at some point, Iraq (42 percent) and cutting taxes for middle class families (37 percent) were the top reasons to go with Obama. Moreover, Obama’s message of unity and bringing people together was especially appealing to independent voters who are frequently turned off by partisan politics.

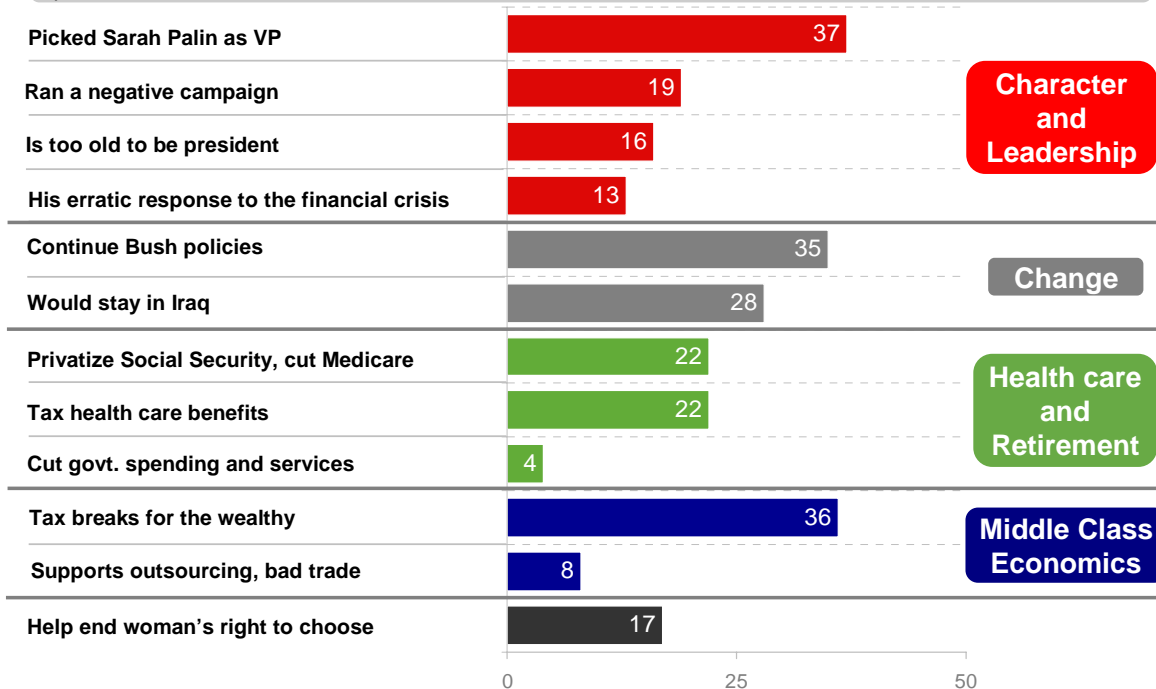
While McCain made the race close at one point, voters ended up with many reasons to be against him. Rather than being the independent and strong leader you could trust, he picked Sarah Palin, and became totally negative and erratic. Palin drove away independents and undermined McCain as the candidate of experience. Voters wanted change from Bush, change from the rich getting all the brakes and change in Iraq. The changes McCain did offer – on health care and Social Security – were not the changes voters wanted.

Sarah Palin has become a shorthand response for voters, like inexperience for Obama, but it is hard to underestimate her importance, even if the meaning is unclear. Before the election, attitudes toward her were better predictors of the presidential vote than attitudes toward McCain. And among those wavering Obama voters who considered McCain, 52 percent said Palin was a key reason *not* to support McCain, well above those who never wavered in their Obama vote.



## Reasons not to support John McCain

Let me read you a list of doubts about John McCain. Regardless of how you voted, which THREE describe the most important reasons NOT to vote for John McCain?



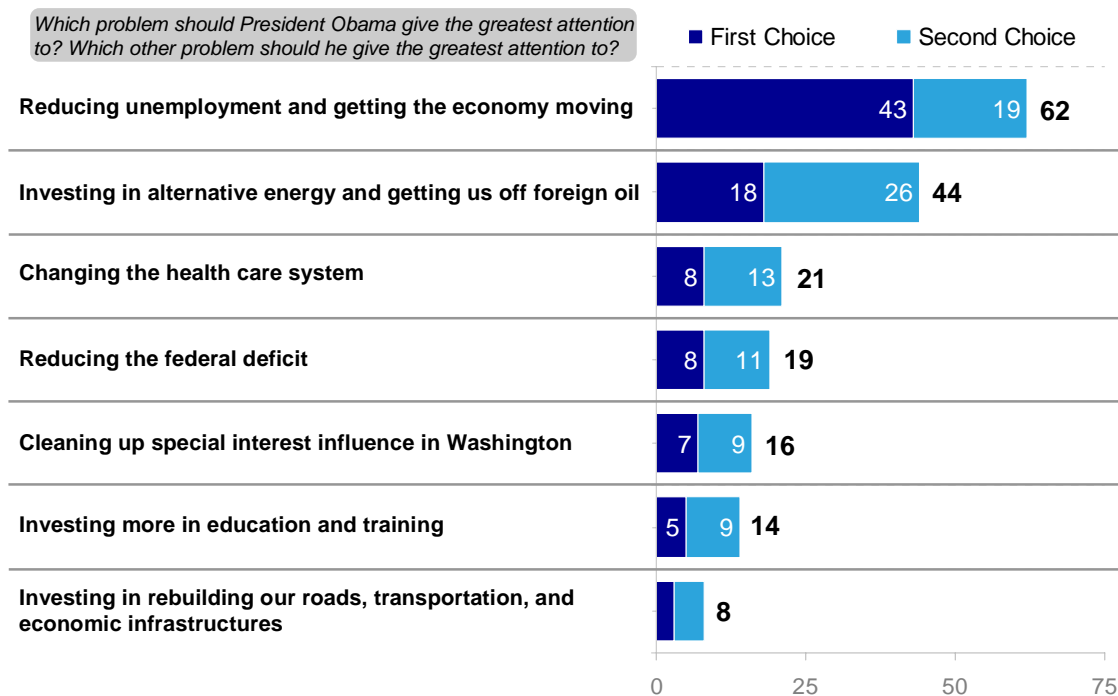
Obama took a sustained lead in the race when the financial crisis hit and gave him an advantage over McCain on handling the economy, which grew through the debates and the final “Joe the Plumber” phase when McCain attacked Obama for his redistributionist and socialist tendencies. Obama ended up with a 13-point advantage on handling the economy.

## The Mandate

The starting point for President-elect Obama is obviously the economy – the defining issue in the election and for a country slipping into recession and worse. When asked to prioritize a range of policies related to the economy, over 60 percent of voters focus on reducing unemployment and getting the economy moving. After that, over 40 percent want to move to investing in alternative energy and getting off foreign oil, perhaps linked to their first priority. About half of that would then turn to health care. Deficit reduction is a lower priority.



### Most important economic issues: 2008



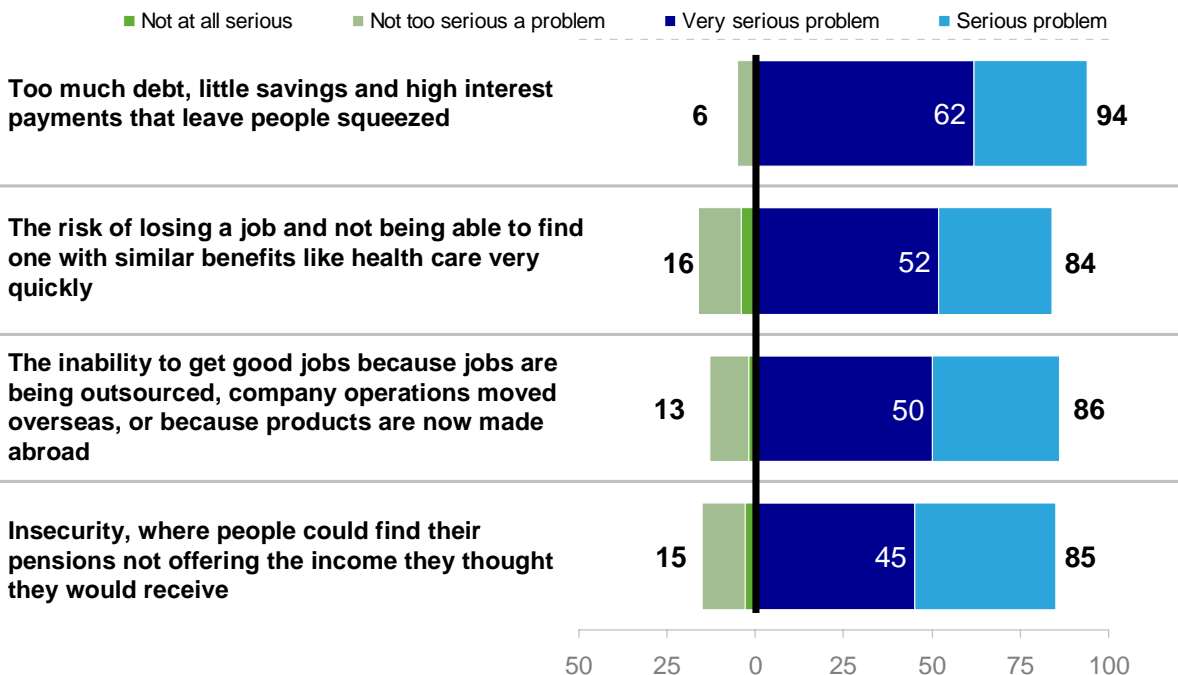
While these priorities are recession driven, voters are viewing the economy through the financial crisis and what has happened to incomes and jobs over a longer period, and they are looking for a new direction, maybe new values that lead to more responsible behavior. They think the biggest problem is “too much debt, too little savings that leave people squeezed.” The housing foreclosures are a poignant reminder of the excesses that hurt people, but it seems the whole country has been operating above their means and paying the price: 62 percent think this is a very serious problem, 10 points above everything else.

The next two biggest problems are jobs related – with people at risk of losing their good jobs with health care benefits and fearing the new ones will leave them on their own (52 percent very serious) and with jobs and production being outsourced and nothing being made in America (50 percent). With the stock market volatile and in free fall, there are nearly as many who see the main economic problem as people’s pensions losing value (45 percent).



### Most serious economic problems

*I am going to read you a list of issues relating to the economy. For each issue I want you to tell me whether today you think it is a very serious problem, a serious problem, not too serious a problem, or not a problem at all in the current economy?*



The election created a mandate for action in these specific areas, but also created a climate for additional action. Voters want to see more personal and corporate responsibility, more regulation in the public interest, a shift of tax burden away from the middle class with the top end carrying their fare share, investment in new energy, and action to make health care affordable for all. They want to see Iraq come to an end so can we can address other security needs, as well as priorities at home.

The initial confidence in Obama’s handling of the financial crisis grew into a broader confidence that he can manage these weighty issues in a considered and competent way and can bring the government back to the middle class. That probably begins with cutting middle class taxes on a year-to-year basis. Our prior surveys found voters skeptical about a “stimulus” package and looking for an “economic recovery program” focused on the long-term. Voters want big, not modest changes, but do not always want them to be abrupt. On energy, voters were very responsive to acting boldly to a national goal on energy independence, as we shall see below. On health care, voters also want big change and almost half want to act boldly, but almost half would prefer going step-by-step.

That so many voters who want big changes also remain cautious about overspending and taxes underscores the mandate for reforming government and making it responsive and account-



able. Rather than a caution or a “but,” voters in this election were telling leaders they have to change government too.

### **The Agenda**

When we presented the 2008 voters with the possible initiatives that the president and Congress could take up, voters proved consistent on their priorities, elevating the issues on which they judged the candidates and the mandate from the election. Voters are looking for the new leaders to prioritize energy independence, ending the Iraq war and addressing Afghanistan, regulating the banking system so it can’t bring the country down again, and making health insurance affordable for all.

Voters also give importance to a range of other things – including changing the balance in taxes and investing in roads and transportation to stimulate new economic activity. The challenge now is for new Democratic leaders to understand their mandate in this change election and to govern successfully and in new ways. Only then will we know whether the electoral upheavals that gave Obama his historic national majority and the Democrats full control in the House and Senate will produce an enduring new political balance in the country.