

Date: May 4, 2009

To: Ed Gillespie  
Founder, Resurgent Republic

From: Stan Greenberg  
Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

**RE: RESURGENT REPUBLIC**

Dear Ed,

Congratulations on forming Resurgent Republic with the goal of replicating “on the right the success Democracy Corps has enjoyed on the left.” Like Democracy Corps, you are promising to become a resource for groups and leaders, enhanced by the public release of credible surveys and focus groups and, indeed, your first survey has been widely discussed and already used by Republican leaders. Well done.

You would probably be surprised if I didn’t have some reactions and advice to offer, as you explicitly state you are “modeled on Democracy Corps.” Given your goal, I am perplexed that your first poll would be so outside the mainstream on partisanship. Your poll gives the Democrats just a 2-point party identification advantage in the country, but other public polls in this period fell between +7 and +16 points – giving the Democrats an average advantage of 11 points. Virtually all your issue debates in the survey would have tilted quite differently had the poll been 9 points more Democratic.

One thing Democracy Corps has tried to do is be very “conservative” – watching very closely to make sure all our choices in survey design are well grounded or tilted against the Democrats, including the choice of “likely voters” that normally favors the Republicans. You have probably noticed that our job approval ratings for George Bush were almost always higher than the average of polls, just as our job approval ratings for Barack Obama are now somewhat lower.

If the Resurgent Republic poll is to be an outlier on partisanship, then I urge you to explain what about your methodology produces it – or simply to note the difference in your public release.

The problem of partisanship pales before the problem of self-deluding bias in question wording that might well contribute to Republicans digging themselves deeper and deeper into a hole.

Your most important finding was the strong opposition to Barack Obama's budget when you describe it for voters. Ed, from your platform on *Meet the Press* you told Republican leaders they can confidently oppose this budget and expect independents to side with them.

Your Republican leaders would have been well served had you asked first whether voters favor or oppose the budget, without describing it – as Democracy Corps does routinely. That would have shown a majority or large plurality in favor of the budget, as in all other polls. Instead, your survey begins with this stunningly biased description: "President Obama has proposed a budget for next year that would spend three point six trillion dollars and have a deficit of one point four trillion dollars." That would be okay if you think that is all voters will learn from the media and Democrats about the budget. I suspect they are already hearing about inherited deficits from Bush, the funding for the jobs recovery plan, health care reform, education and energy independence, and about deficits cut in half – all aspects of the budget. Don't you think the leaders and groups you are advising deserve to know how this might really play out?

It is a shame because you didn't need to construct this biased exercise to show that voters are concerned about spending and deficits and that is indeed the strongest critique Republicans can offer. In our own recent polls, we have flagged this concern for progressives and urged them to continue to underscore accountability, long-term deficit reduction, and middle class tax cuts.

For years, James Carville and I pushed Democrats and liberal groups to examine inherited positions in new times, but you are at risk of doing the opposite – urging Republicans to stay the course on key arguments with self-deluding results. In some cases, you prove competitive or you win the argument by presenting the Democratic argument as flat but the Republican full of emotive terms. In Democracy Corps, we always try to use the language actually used by our opponents.

Nothing is more self-defeating than attributing to the Democratic argument the language and themes Republicans use to attack Democrats rather than the language Democrats use themselves. In effect, your survey has you winning an argument with yourself. Indeed, that is where you start your analysis of the first poll – telling readers in bold and underlined type that you are winning the big ideological debate by two-to-one, which "verifies America remains a center-right country." In this seminal debate, one side says:

**Government policies should promote opportunity by fostering job growth, encouraging entrepreneurs, and allowing people to keep more of what they earn.**

The other, pathetically out-of-touch side says:

**Government policies should promote fairness by narrowing the gap between rich and poor, spreading the wealth, and making sure that economic outcomes are more equal.**

With that demand for equality rejected two-to-one in the survey, Resurgent Republic can tell conservatives to be confident: you are on the winning side of this historic argument about government and the economy.

The problem is that this is the language Republicans use to characterize the Democratic argument, not what Democrats use themselves. Yes, it is true that candidate Obama made the off-hand comment on “spreading the wealth” in an exchange with “Joe the Plumber.” The Republicans tried to use that in the last two and a half weeks of the campaign and Obama’s lead on handling taxes and the economy went up steadily, ending with a double-digit lead on both.

While campaigns may succeed on “gotcha,” you will not win a big argument if you do not respect the other side’s argument and you do not learn from experience. We tested in a different context this philosophic choice, using Obama’s words and ideas – “government policies should rebalance the tax code so the middle class pays less and the wealthiest pay their fair share.” In our work, it is the strongest argument for the budget.<sup>1</sup>

The section on energy and cap-and-trade is a parody of the real debate. The implication is that Democrats believe climate change is so serious that it must be addressed, regardless of cost to the economy, with higher taxes. Unmentioned on the Democratic side of the debate is the conviction that investment in energy independence creates new jobs and a new economy and energy costs have to be offset with middle class tax cuts. Failing to construct real debate must leave Republicans puzzled about why the Democrats’ advantage on handling the energy issue has risen to nearly 30 points among likely voters.<sup>2</sup>

I recognize that in focusing on economic, not cultural issues, Resurgent Republic is making a statement about a new direction for the party and its coalition. But it does not help a party renew itself with survey results so removed from the real debates taking place around it.

I do wish you luck with Resurgent Republic. I’m fully aware that our first public survey a decade ago might well have been critiqued on similar issues and that getting it right under these pressures requires constant vigilance. I look forward to the debate.

All the best,

Stan

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<sup>1</sup> See Democracy Corps national [survey](#) of 1,000 2008 voters (830 likely 2010 voters) conducted March 4-8, 2009, Democracy Corps national [survey](#) of 1,000 2008 voters (863 likely 2010 voters) conducted March 25-29, 2009 and Democracy Corps [survey](#) of 1,500 likely 2010 voters in the congressional battleground conducted April 16-21, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> From Democracy Corps national [survey](#) of 1,000 2008 voters (830 likely 2010 voters) conducted March 4-8, 2009.