

Date: September 15, 2008  
To: Friends of Democracy Corps  
From: Stan Greenberg and James Carville

## **The Changing Presidential Race after the Conventions**

*Report on national survey and survey of presidential battleground states*

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The latest events in the presidential campaign have tightened the race dramatically. In Democracy Corps' latest surveys of 1,000 likely voters nationally and 1,017 likely voters in the presidential battleground states, the vote margin has shifted 7 points towards John McCain nationally and 9 points in the battleground. This swing puts McCain ahead of Barack Obama by 2 points nationally (48 to 46 percent), consistent with the national public polls, and by 1 point in the battleground states (48 to 47 percent).<sup>1</sup>

Though these results are challenging, this is still an election that Obama has at least an even chance of winning. In the battleground states, he is running 3 points ahead of Kerry's performance in 2004, and thus, he is very much in the position to put together the majority he needs to win the Electoral College. Moreover, the Voter Choice Scale (constructed from eight survey questions) shows no further trend for McCain; indeed, among independents nationally, there are nearly twice as many voters "winnable" or "in-reach" for Obama (17 to 9 percent). And finally, the shift in the party composition of the survey following the Republican convention (from an average of 8.5 points Democratic advantage throughout this year to a smaller 3-point lead last week) is very likely to ease back — probably putting the two candidates into a dead-heat soon.

That said, it is now show time for progressives, Democrats, and the Obama campaign, all of whom will have to display new intensity to get this race on track. This is still a change election.

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<sup>1</sup> Democracy Corps survey of 1,000 likely voters nationally and 1,017 voters in the battleground states conducted September 8-10, 2008. Battleground states include: CO, IA, IN, FL, MI, MN, MO, MT, NC, ND, NH, NM, NV, OH, PA, VA and WI.



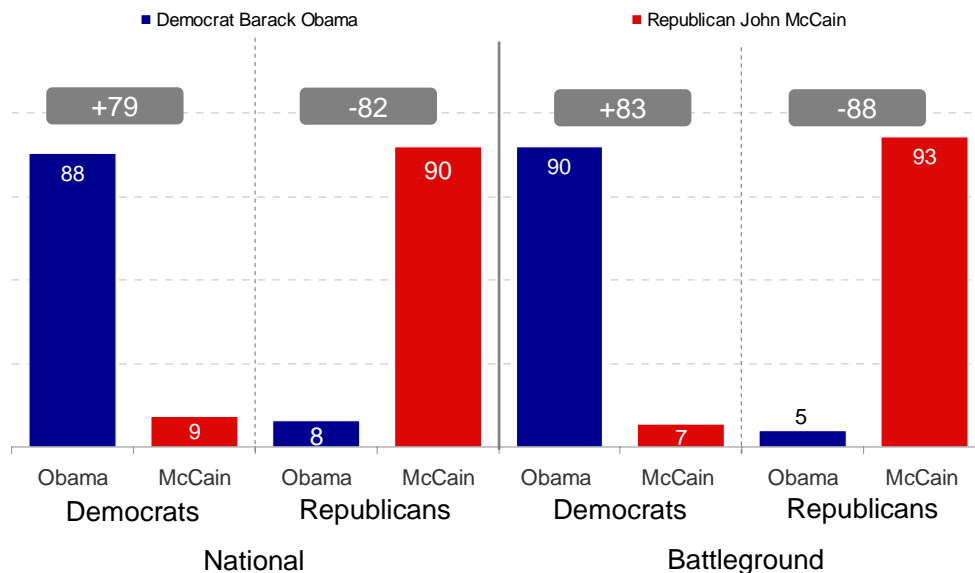
### Significant Base Consolidation: especially Palin

A central piece of this renewed strategy will be to confront much of the public commentary about what is happening in the race that is either wrong or outdated and leads to a false interpretation of what needs to be done. That is especially true in the introduction of Sarah Palin.

Both parties have been successful in consolidating and energizing their bases during the convention. Barack Obama and John McCain are getting roughly 90 percent of voters within their own party. Furthermore, both parties report a comparable and remarkably high interest in this year’s election, particularly in the battleground states where more than eighty percent of Democrats and Republicans rate their interest as “10” on a “1 to 10” scale, erasing for the moment an advantage Democrats have had for a couple of years.

#### After Conventions, Parties Consolidate their Base

*Now let me ask you again about your vote for president, but with candidate names. If the election were held today and the candidates were Democrat Barack Obama, Republican John McCain, Libertarian Party candidate Bob Barr, or Independent candidate Ralph Nader, for whom would you vote?*



Sarah Palin’s nomination and the Republican convention had a big impact on the state of the race -- though not the one the press has talked about. First, rather than persuading Hillary Clinton’s supporters to vote for McCain, Palin drove Clinton’s primary voters further into the Obama camp, with roughly 80 percent of Clinton’s primary supporters now voting for Obama. Second, the McCain-Palin ticket has solidified the support of white non-college men who are now voting for McCain over Obama by 63 to 29 percent nationally (a margin virtually identical to what Bush achieved against Kerry in 2004) and by 62 to 31 percent in the battleground states. These voters, who shifted towards the Democrats in 2006, are likely moved by McCain’s biography and national security and defense credentials, as well as Palin’s cultural rhetoric and style. The combination of these two candidates on the campaign trail — together with some discomfort



by white non-college men about Obama — could make this a difficult group of voters for Obama to reclaim. We are not sure whether these voters will go back and this dynamic will likely tighten the race in the industrial Midwest states and maybe even the Western rural states.

### **New Dynamic One: elevating strength, experience, honesty and national security**

The race is as close as it is because of other big factors beyond the party bases that will be contested by the campaigns in the coming weeks before the debates.

The latest shifts have been driven in part by the Republicans' effectiveness in painting Obama as too liberal, too inexperienced and a weak leader who favors giving up in Iraq. Obama addressed all these doubts effectively in Denver, but St. Paul erased the gains and more: there was a 5-point increase in those voters seeing Obama as "too liberal" (from 49 to 54 percent), and an 8-point increase on "too willing to reduce troops in Iraq" (from 57 to 65 percent). After Denver, Obama moved even with McCain on *strong leader*, but McCain took a 12-point lead following St. Paul. And even though Obama's work in Denver had narrowed McCain's margin on national security, McCain came out of his convention with a 25-point lead on this issue.

*The Republicans changed for the moment what the main drivers of the presidential vote are – reducing the importance in our regression model of the economy and right kind of change and increasing the importance of which candidate is viewed as honest and trustworthy a strong leader, able to keep America strong, and having what it takes to be president. While who is on your side was still very important, Obama lost his lead on this issue – as the content of politics switched from the economy and change.*

One of the biggest recalls from Obama's speech was his steeliness and that produced significant shifts on *strong leader* and even on *national security*, but that image has faded.

### **New Dynamic Two: contesting and diminishing the role of change and the economy**

McCain has contested the mantle of change and defined it in his own terms that are believable to some voters. McCain and Palin portray themselves as mavericks willing to stand up to their own party and ready to cut wasteful pork-barrel spending and taxes. In doing so, Obama's advantage on *the right kind of change* has been sharply reduced and change is no longer the most significant driver of the presidential vote. That is why the race has closed.

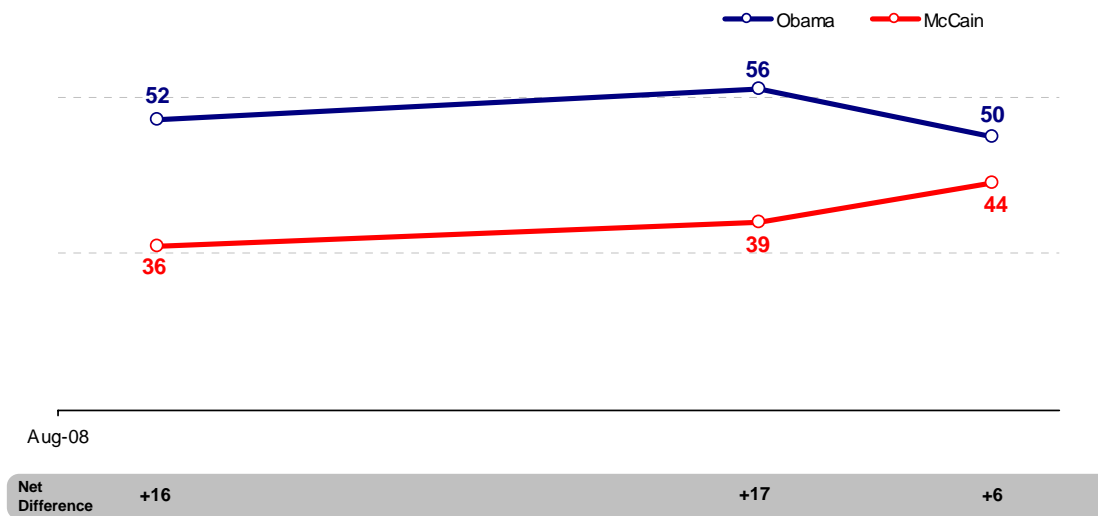
In the absence of a coherent change message from Obama, many voters are accepting McCain's definition, particularly since they want to change Washington and clean up government. As a result, Obama has lost his double-digit advantage over McCain on *the right kind of change*. He now holds only a 7-point lead nationally and 6-point advantage in the battleground



states on what was a key driver of his vote. Obama has also lost his double-digit advantage on *standing up to special interests in Washington* and is now tied with McCain on this measure of government reform.

### Obama loses ground on “bringing the right kind of change”

Now I would like to ask you which presidential candidate you associate more with these terms, Barack Obama or John McCain. Would that be much more or somewhat more? \*Battleground Data\*



While Obama had surged ahead on the economy — his biggest gain at the Democratic convention — that advantage narrowed to 3 points nationally and in the battleground states after the Republican convention, even as Republicans set the agenda in ways that made the economy a weaker driver of the vote. Meanwhile, taxes have become more of a factor in the vote.

Republicans managed to shift the focus away from the economy even as this issue is far and away the number one issue for voters.

Obama can reclaim ownership of change and the economy by engaging McCain on these issues.

McCain can’t change Washington because he voted with Bush 90 percent of the time and McCain’s lobbyist-dominated campaign is determined to continue Bush’s economic policies. Republicans are trying to conceal that McCain wants even more tax breaks for corporations and oil companies, to accelerate policies that export American jobs, and like Bush, will do nothing about sky-rocketing energy and health care costs crushing the middle class.

But Obama will change Washington and rescue the American economy. He rejects lobbyist money and his economic plan begins with



squeezing out lobbyist-created pork, cutting middle class taxes, making energy and health care more affordable, and prioritizing American jobs. That is the change we need and the one Bush and McCain can not bring.

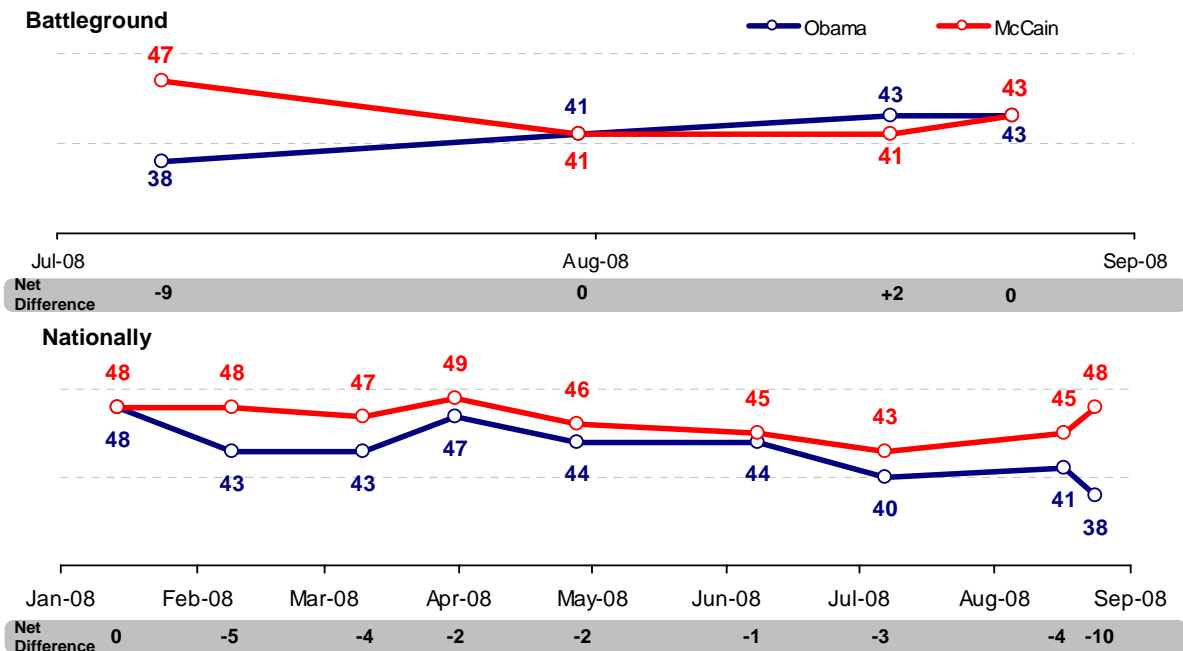
In this survey we tested a change message that incorporates some of these themes (though not all of them) and it tested 3 points stronger than Obama’s vote nationally and 2 points stronger in the battleground. These results suggest that Obama can move up his vote by engaging on change, debunking McCain’s narrow narrative and making a bigger offer.

### New Dynamic Three: contesting independents

McCain has made important gains with independent voters nationally — moving from a 4 to 10 point lead, with the biggest movement among independent men, older independent and college independents. In the battleground states where voters get more media and are exposed to the candidates, however, the race among independents is much closer, with Obama and McCain still splitting these voters evenly at 43 percent each. Still, McCain has made gains with women, older independents and college-educated independents. Democrats won independents by 18 points in 2006 and being in this closely a contested race makes it hard for Obama to move up.

### Presidential race for independents

Now let me ask you again about your vote for president, but with candidate names. If the election were held today and the candidates were Democrat Barack Obama, Republican John McCain, Libertarian Party candidate Bob Barr, or Independent candidate Ralph Nader, for whom would you vote?





### **New Dynamic Four: the lost frontier of non-college older voters**

Finally, Obama has lost ground with white voters over 50 years of age — particularly, non-college, white seniors and women. This is the most challenging trend because Obama began losing these older voters during his own convention, despite Obama's identity, vision and biography gaining him votes nationally and in the battleground states. But these older voters appear skeptical about Obama because of his youth, perhaps his race, and because of concerns about him being too liberal, not patriotic enough or too willing to raise taxes. They also find McCain's biography and strength especially appealing. Whatever the reason, these voters have been moving away and making it hard for Obama to build up a lead.

Some of these losses are being offset by new registration among younger voters and increased turnout and support from African Americans and Latinos, as Obama is over-performing John Kerry's 2004 margin with all voters under 50 years old, including whites without a college degree.

Nonetheless, as hard as it is for the Obama campaign to reach out to these voters, it is hard to leave them off the table because many older white women, non-college women, unmarried women and senior women are more Democratic than where they stand right now. These voters give congressional Democratic candidates a bigger share of the vote and supported John Kerry by a bigger margin in 2004 than Obama gets from them now. Democrats have an opportunity to appeal to these groups of women by delivering a strong message that addresses their deep concerns about the economy and health care and what will happen to their lives in desperate times. Falling in this same category are white union households and perhaps white non-college men between 50 and 65 years old (pre-retirement).

These are the key troublesome groups where there is clearly a desire to vote more Democratic:

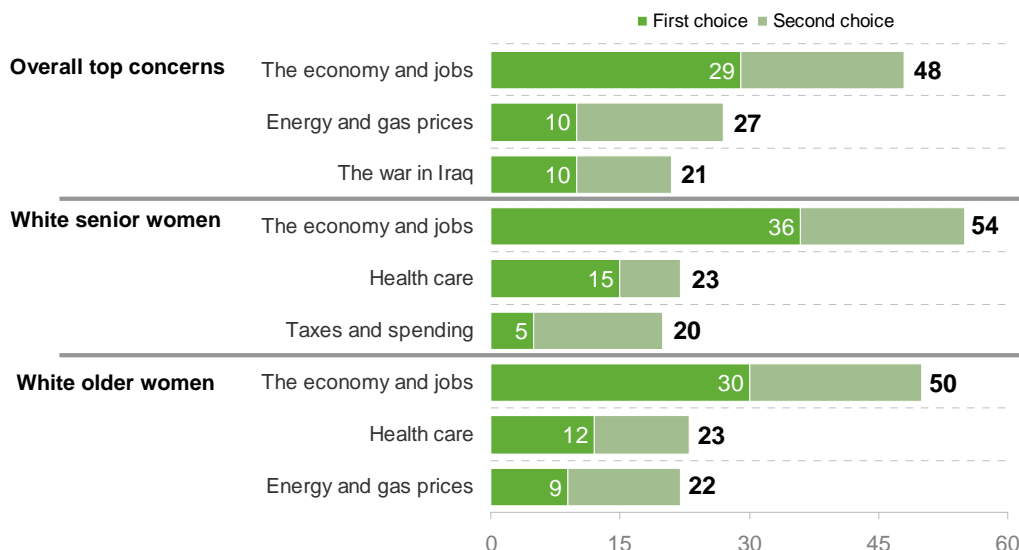
- **White senior women:** Obama only receives 39 percent of their votes -- 8 points below the Congressional Democrat (who receives 47 percent) and 8 points below the proportion of white senior women identifying with the Democratic Party. The same pattern is evident in the presidential battleground states where Obama underperforms the Congressional Democratic candidate by 7 points and party identification by 5 points.
- **White older (over 50 years of age) women:** Obama only receives 40 percent of the vote among white women over 50, which is 6 points below the level of support they give to the Congressional Democratic candidate (46 percent), and 6 points behind the proportion of this bloc who identify as Democratic.
- **White older (over 50 years of age) unmarried women:** Obama receives 46 percent of the vote from white unmarried voters who are over 50 years old. Though this is a good



margin, it is 6 points below the support they show for the Democratic Congressional candidate and 11 points below the proportion of this bloc who identify with the Democratic Party.<sup>2</sup>

### Target groups: top concerns nationally

*Now, I am going to read you a list of concerns that people have. Please tell me which ONE of these you think the President and Congress should be paying the most attention to. \*national data\**



There is also evidence that Obama is underperforming with white union households as well as with white non-college men under 65 years of age. Obama and the Democrats are not doing well with white senior men and, even worse, there are few reachable voters among this bloc both nationally and in the presidential battleground. That means the bulk of the opportunity to regain support must lie with white non-college men 50 to 65 years old -- pre-retirement voters.

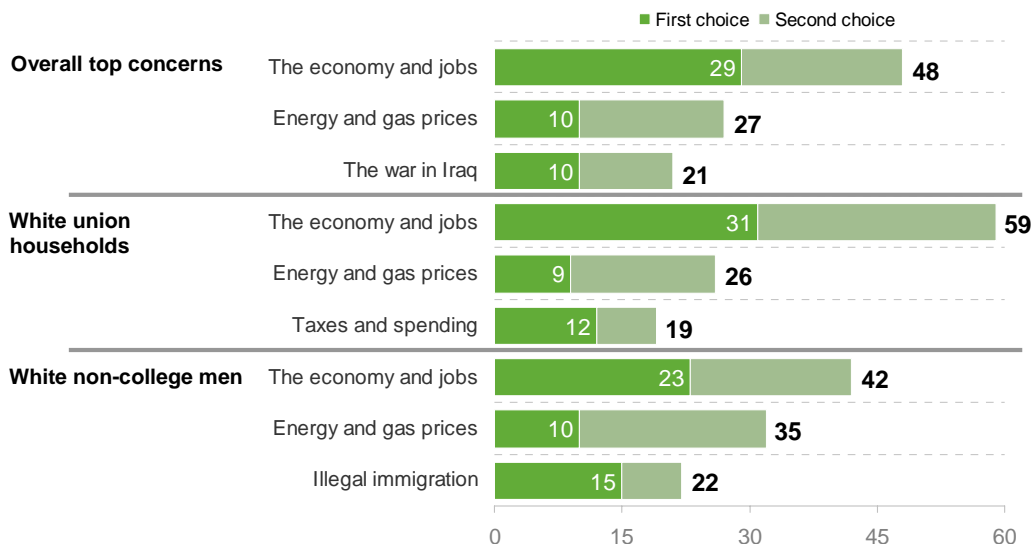
- **White union households:** Obama receives 44 percent of the vote, 8 points below the Congressional Democrat (52 percent) and 9 points below the number of Democratic identifiers.
- **White non-college men:** Obama receives just 29 percent of the vote among this group, 8 points less than they give the Congressional Democratic candidate (37 percent) and 5 points less than the proportion that identify as Democrats (34 percent – with leaners). Though this represents a significant underperformance there is good potential with this cohort, though it is mostly produced by voters 50 to 65 years of age.

<sup>2</sup> From a oversample of women done for Women’s Voices Women Vote that fielded in conjunction with a national Democracy Corps survey conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research September 2-3, 2008.



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While the battle to reach these voters is complex, it should not be taking place in a context where Democrats are losing their hold on the economy and change. These target older voters overwhelmingly are focused on the economy, as well as energy and gas prices.

Barack Obama faces a challenging race, but the good news is that there is immense opportunity to engage, change the dynamics of the race and reach out to these key voters. Even now, Obama has a better than even shot at getting enough Electoral College votes to win. We hope this memo will crystallize the state of the race and help all those involved to improve the odds even more.