

Seizing the New Progressive Common Ground

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November 10, 2011

The new progressive coalition shared an antipathy toward George W. Bush and his worldview, opposition to the Iraq War, and frustration with the lack of income and job growth – even before the economic crisis. They came to share a belief in Barack Obama. But then and now, they are extraordinarily diverse. They are young people, Hispanics, unmarried women, and affluent suburbanites. They do not share a common demography, geography, or ideology. Indeed, our surveys show that only about 25 percent of this bloc identifies as liberal, with the rest split between moderate and conservative.¹

What they share and what motivates them in these politically and economically challenging times is not at all apparent to the outside observer, even as the more homogenous conservative coalition marches ever more determined to end progressive governance.

In this new project by Democracy Corps, we conducted focus groups with the key parts of the progressive coalition in order to find what these Obama voters now share and what can motivate them in this new period. We conducted eight focus groups among unmarried women, young people, Hispanics, and affluent suburban voters in Sacramento, Raleigh and in the Philadelphia and Chicago suburbs, all of whom had voted for Obama.²

¹ Based on a survey conducted by Democracy Corps and the Center for American Progress, fielded from October 15-18, 2011 of 1000 likely voters.

² This memo is based on findings from eight focus groups conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps and the Voter Participation Center. All groups were screened for ideology and vote history. Participants included those who voted for Barack Obama in 2008. The groups were conducted in Bala Cynwyd, PA on August 9, 2011 among affluent suburban women (ages 40-60 with an annual household income over \$75,000) and young men (under age 30), in Chicago, IL on August 10, 2011 among young women (under age 30) and affluent suburban men (ages 40-60 with an annual household income over \$75,000), in Sacramento, CA on August 17, 2011 among Hispanic women and men, and in Raleigh, NC on October 5, 2011 among college and non-college educated unmarried women.



Looking back to the world of 2006 and 2008, these people saw a Democratic Party and a Democratic nominee who gave voice to their concerns, particularly their economic concerns. The Democrats were the ones who, at least relatively speaking, fought for them, and put the middle class first. Among youth, unmarried women and people of color, the Democrats represented a country moving to a more tolerant and inclusive place, culminating in the election of an African American as president. They had been inspired by Barack Obama, felt an emotional connection to him, and believed that he would fight for the middle class because, to them, he *was* middle class. They voted for change out of frustration with George Bush, the Iraq War, and a broken political system. They disliked the militaristic, evangelical, intolerant tone of the Republican Party and feared Republican leadership would bring the country back 100 years.

Progressives would not trade their diversity for the conservatives' ideological narrowness, but absent an understanding of what they share now, one cannot seize the new progressive common ground.

And to be frank, these progressive voters are very frustrated with the lack of change and direction, with many doubting that they can have any impact on things.

But despite these difficult conclusions, these citizens share something new and it provides an opportunity to re-engage them. They are ready to respond to leaders who understand what it means to be both struggling and middle class in America. And they need to hear that the same programs and protections they need and value – education, Social Security, housing – are not just politicians' bargaining chips. These voters depend on progressives to battle for middle class prosperity and that is the opening.

Common Ground

- **The smashed middle class.** Every participant from the marginally employed Hispanic man in Sacramento to the affluent white woman in Bala Cynwyd, PA, shares an identity as part of the smashed middle-class. That is the starting point to the common ground. To them, both “rich” and “poor” get a free ride, while they are not getting anything. So in the first instance, these voters can be re-energized, motivated, and united around messages, values and programs that address the condition and future of the middle class.
- **Defending middle class programs and values.** There is a growing urgency among all these groups on defending the programs that support the middle class. Education, housing, and Social Security are essential for their survival. They respond with real energy to the mission of preserving Social Security, improving education, and re-thinking housing and higher education financing.



- **Fear of the conservative agenda.** Most of these voters are angry about the slash-and-burn agenda of the conservatives, which is out-of-touch with the economic reality and hurting people. There is a potential for unity in marshaling that growing anger – advocating for the middle class, against the catering to the 1 percent, and defending education, Social Security and housing. They believe Republicans are taking a knife to the things really critical to their lives and future.
- **Stop protecting those that can afford it from paying some taxes.** It is a common sense across this progressive coalition that those that can afford it have to contribute more, even as the conservatives “want to cut nothing from the rich.”
- **Politics is in crisis and corrupt and must be reformed.** Politics have stopped working for these voters; nothing is getting done. Democracy is not working. The exasperation is so great that it is expressed as a lost faith in the American system. The hope of 2008 has given way to a sense of futility and belief that no matter who wins, nothing will change. But these voters embrace initiatives that prioritize reform, which has a new energy and urgency in this period of political dysfunction.
- **Disappointment addressed by strong advocacy.** These voters do share a disappointment in the president: not sure of the strength of his convictions; whether conservative bullying has made him ineffective; whether he can translate his ideas into change in Washington. But these members of the progressive coalition notice and get re-engaged when progressive leaders show a new urgency, battle conservative intransigence and advocate strongly for policies that will help the middle class.

Fertile Ground

These shared opportunities for engagement gain further power where you understand the mood and opportunity in specific parts of the coalition.

- **Non-college voters across the groups respond in particular to evidence of strength and conviction.** The white non-college-educated voters in these groups were particularly fed-up with politics altogether. They now say “it does not matter who wins,” even as some are attracted to conservative leaders who show strong convictions. Re-engaging them will be a difficult project, but it is certainly possible. More than any other group, these voters are re-engaged when leaders show strong conviction and say, “I’m ready for him to get in there and kick some butt.”



- **Older voters desperate to preserve a decent retirement as part of the middle class promise.** Across these groups, voters over age 40 felt very strongly about protecting Social Security and Medicare. They talk about a lifetime of hard work, but also about the security of being—and staying—middle class and comfortable into retirement. They worry about what happens if this is lost and are very energized about preserving retirement for the middle class.
- **For women across the groups, education is key to the future of the middle class and country.** While all are ready to hear a new plan to reduce the cost of education and mitigate the country’s heavy student loan burden, women—unmarried women, suburban women, and Hispanic women—focus more intensely on funding problems in education below the college level. They are concerned about federal, state, and local level cuts to public schools. To these women, cuts in education funding put the future of the country—and the middle class—in jeopardy.
- **For Hispanics, progressive policies are integral to family values and prioritizing community.** Hispanics in these groups identify closely with religious, family, and community values. They define these values as “conservative” but are reluctant to vote for Republicans because they find other aspects of the conservative agenda anathema. But progressives can engage these voters by addressing the progressive agenda in the context of their own ethics, family values, and community priorities – that transcend all the groups. Hispanics are very responsive to the battle for education, housing, and Social Security in the context of its own commitment to family values.

These members of the diverse progressive coalition felt an emotional connection to President Obama and his 2008 message, which has given way to disengagement and disaffection among some. However, they are eager to be re-inspired by leaders who are passionate about reforming politics in Washington, who get the depth of middle class struggle and will work for their revival. This report shows how to get there.

2008: Passion for Obama and determination to get rid of Bush

When we asked participants to remember why they voted for Obama in 2008, most respondents noted their emotional connection to Obama and his message. In almost equal intensity, they recalled their determination to get rid of George Bush, who was so tough on the middle class. That combination gave the new Obama voters a powerful and simple reason to get involved and vote.



The loss of the specter of President Bush was one of the reasons for this project, but the price for the possible loss of hope and faith in President Obama has now become more evident as a consequence of this research.

In 2008, these voters felt passionate about Obama personally: his charisma, presence, and life story. He seemed more authentic, more humble, and more in-touch with middle class economies and values. He seemed to be a different kind of politician, one with convictions and a strong desire to do what was right. These voters also felt passionate about his message of hope and change.

This response cuts across all groups; participants still feel a strong emotional connection to candidate Obama of 2008. They remember him as a “breath of fresh air,” “young, innovative, smart, different,” “a politician who finally ‘gets it’”, “what we needed.” They intensely recall that he was someone who could actually make a difference.

Why did I vote for Obama? I think for the first time in my lifetime I got to vote for somebody that I truly believed in and felt like was a good person. – Hispanic woman, Sacramento, CA

I was drawn by the contrast between Obama and McCain. I just found Obama much more engaging. – Suburban man, Chicago, IL

I remember thinking, where did that guy come from? ...I like the way he thinks and he seemed so open minded and so positive and he seemed to have so much hope...I made up my mind as soon as I found out he was going to put his hat in the ring. That he was the guy. –Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

The last election was electrifying, and it was amazing to me to—you know I’ve been voting since, you know, 100 years ago—and never in my entire life have I gone up to the polls and seen and stood in line like I did, and seen such passion for people and excitement in the nation. –Unmarried woman (college-educated), Raleigh, NC

He was such a great communicator when he was campaigning, you know, that I would just like hang. He was so concise, so clear. It was like he was sitting in my living room, not in like political mumbo jumbo, but just in clear terms explaining his plans. That’s what I liked about him so much. I understood him, frankly. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA

He was a breath of fresh air. He was...young, he was innovative, he was smart, he was different and that’s what we needed after many, many years with the same party and failing. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA



I thought he would be willing to make changes that some of the other people that were, at the time, were running for the office wouldn't maybe do and he was definitely...just willing to be more innovative and younger. And I think I felt like the economy, that government needed to be shaken up a little bit. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA

Across all groups, participants felt that Obama was “more for the middle class” because he was from a middle class background.

Obama really tended to represent more of the middle class and the average person as opposed to Bush, I think, representing more of the old money, the big wealthy Texas oil money, being very tied to old money and big corporate money. – Suburban man, Chicago, IL

He was an everyman. He felt like he was like me or you. – Unmarried woman (college-educated), Raleigh, NC

I liked that he was from not a well-to-do family. I felt like he could relate to the working people and that he said he didn't pay off his student loans until like he got the proceeds from his first book and I thought, well, he could understand what we're saying. I think a lot of people in politics are rich and they don't really, they don't get what you're saying when people are saying I can't cover my bills. I felt that he had a background, you know, raised by his grandparent, you know, single mother, I thought he could more relate to the average American. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA

While these voters were drawn to Obama in 2008, participants also recall, with almost equal intensity, what they were voting against in 2008: George W. Bush. Few participants talked about John McCain, and those who did dismissed him and Palin as a “joke.” Several participants had strong words about Sarah Palin, but these responses were not nearly as intense as their indictment of George W. Bush. Importantly, this indictment is almost completely framed by the former president's complete inability to understand what was happening to the middle class.

I just seemed like all those years, you know, Bush did not understand what was happening to the middle class. Things were getting, you know, it's basically disappearing. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA



Republican Redux: “Bush 2.0”

Their views of today’s Republicans are not much better. Of Mitt Romney they say: “plastic,” “politician,” “*trying* to be relatable,” “sneaky,” “underhanded,” “smug,” “text book.” Rick Perry receives higher marks from some, who find him a more eloquent and insightful version of another Texas governor. A few unmarried white non-college-educated women describe him as “handsome,” “kind on the eyes” and think he makes sense. Most, however, see him as a “good ole boy” and “Bush 2.0.” Bachmann fares worst of all. Using gendered terms, they indict her as “crazy,” “Palin 2.0” and “scripted.” They also believe the Republican candidates are primarily self-interested; their agenda is “to get elected” and push a big-business agenda, but not support the middle class.

These reactions run deeper than aversion to this collection of 2012 candidates. Most of these voters say that the Republicans look out for the rich and have no interest in progressive policies that help people like themselves. They have a narrow vision of the country and advocate for a small subset (the wealthy and big business) rather than the middle class.

Most importantly, the Republican agenda has nothing to do with making their lives better and their struggles easier. They see the Republicans taking a knife to the things they care about—that allow some to survive—while refusing to raise taxes on those who can afford to pay more.

They don’t want to cut nothing from the rich. They want to put it all on the middle class. They want to cut our Medicare. They want to cut our social security. They want to cut our schools. They’re cutting our police now. – Hispanic woman, Sacramento, CA

I almost watched them do away this year with money for college students and I have two sons in college and, you know, that hits home and I’m sure there’s other specifics that they’ll take the knife to that other people will just as angry about. – Suburban man, Chicago, IL

While most do think that the deficit is out of control, the Republicans’ prescription for economic problems simply does not make sense to them. To these voters, the debt was caused by tax cuts and two wars. Their common-sense economics tells them that the economy will not get back on track until the middle class gets back on track.

They want to cut spending and lower taxes, that’s all they talk about. – Suburban man, Chicago, IL

It seems like...the rationale is backwards. Cutting spending is going to boom the economy, that’s just economically not true. – Young man, Bala Cynwyd, PA



Well, I mean I definitely agree with we can't grow until we cut, but it's just like I don't know, it's just hollow. It's just, you know, you can cut spending and end deficit spending over 10 years and that will lift a weight on the economy. Duh! You know? – Young man, Bala Cynwyd, PA

For Hispanic voters, the distance between themselves and the Republicans is wide. On the whole, they express more conservative religious and family values than white suburban voters and young people. For this reason, they would be tempted to support Republicans. And yet many say they would never (or could never) vote for a Republican because they see Republicans as anti-Hispanic. In Sacramento, the Hispanic women talked around their issues with Republicans and shared a barely spoken agreement that they would “never go there.” This view was articulated in a more straightforward way in the men’s group: Republicans have an anti-Hispanic worldview. The more intolerant Republicans become, the further this group moves into the Democratic camp.

Hispanics are typically, we would be the perfect Republicans. We believe in the same things the Republicans always talk about. They're talking about family, you know, conservative values, etc, etc, right? But very few of us are Republicans. Why? The Republicans just don't get it. – Hispanic man, Sacramento, CA

Other voters, too, feel that the Republican Party is unsettlingly narrow, but for other reasons. Affluent, suburban, unmarried women and young voters were all turned off by the Republicans’ religious conservatism and narrowness. In the final groups of unmarried women, we showed a Perry ad introducing the candidate. A number of participants there responded well to the production value and at one point nodded in agreement, “*you can't dispute those facts.*” His resume (military, job growth in Texas) also created small openings. However, even among these voters who were open-minded to Perry as a person, found his religious references too aggressive. And, of course, the emphasis on Texas reminded participants too much of George W. Bush.

Crisis of Politics: “Washington is kind of scary”

There is a troubling thread that runs through these groups: participants, to more or less extent, no longer believe this democracy works for them. The perceived failure of the new president to be able to fulfill key campaign promise—to change Washington—discourages the college-educated and, worse, disengages the non-college-educated. Some of the non-college-educated concluded it does not matter who they send to Washington, given the difficulty of a president whose intentions they do not doubt, but whose effectiveness they openly question. The economy, of course, lies at the heart of this alienation, but it is also about a government that they find increasingly dysfunctional.



Washington is kind of scary. I don't feel like they're up there doing the things that are good for the country. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

I personally am embarrassed by both parties. I think they equally throw mud at each other. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

It's a broken system. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

It is just an all-out war. And not a war with another country but in our own country, in the government. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

I think generally, that a lot of people are fed up with politicians right now. I mean, look at the protests that are going on Wall St. and all over the nation, you know? People are sick and tired of politics or politicians. I would personally like to see somebody – a really good businessperson get in there. – Unmarried woman (college-educated), Raleigh, NC

I think they're being very childish. In the House and so forth. It reminds of pre-school. The way they're like – I'm not going to play. Back and forth. That's why a lot of things aren't getting done, it's just like no way am I going to change my mind. It's very, very childish. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

And then you have lobbyist who, you know, you may put a president in office but there's a lobbyist and all these people who have these private interests, and they're scratching each other's backs. And it doesn't matter who you put in office, because those things are going to happen behind closed door. And I feel very frustrated by that. The regular American person has nothing they can do about that. – Unmarried woman (college-educated), Raleigh, NC

While they uniformly blame Republicans more than Democrats and Congress more than Obama for this problem, their interpretation is not entirely partisan. The indictment is broader and more systematic. They believe nothing is getting done. Some participants in the unmarried women's group even indicated openness to a Republican candidate simply to break the gridlock in Washington. But in the end, they believe that change is impossible. They also believe that whoever gets elected will ultimately be enfeebled and corrupted by the system in Washington. Neither side seems to provide an answer. Although they all hold the Republicans more culpable for what is wrong with Washington, the problem also seems bigger than partisanship; it reflects a system that has become almost irretrievably corrupted by big-money politics and insider deals.



Complicated Views of the President

These voters' relationship with President Obama is complicated and careful scrutiny matters here because the conclusions they draw about this president speak directly to their disengagement from politics. Each of these voters recalls the energy and excitement of the 2008 campaign, the sense of connectedness that Obama, unique among politicians, established with them. He has not lost this. These voters still believe the president fights for middle class people like them and has their interests at heart. However, they also believe the president has been thwarted, abused and disrespected.

These progressive voters really did long for a president who would change the culture of Washington. The members of this progressive coalition were not looking for heightened partisanship, but something new. Unfortunately, they are not seeing that, leading to challenging conclusions about his ability and the system to bring change. The reactions produce an emotional loss that leave many asking despairingly about themselves contributing to the change.

These Obama voters are "frustrated" with the president's inability to deliver—or fight for—his programs. In discussing Obama, the image that emerges is a man who has been abused and bullied and is not proving effective. A number of older participants unfavorably compared Obama to Bill Clinton, noting the former president never shied away from a fight. It is notable that in the later groups, coming after the president's current assertiveness, participants applauded the Obama's willingness to take on the Republicans more forcefully.

One of the main things they felt the president promised in 2008 was that he would change Washington. Instead, voters believe that Washington is worse than ever.

I get tired of hearing, you know, 10 thousand dollar dinners and stuff like that where these people are homeless or they can't, you know, they can't get jobs and they're spending thousands of dollars, millions of dollars just to get elected and do nothing. – Hispanic man, Sacramento, CA

Politicians have two jobs, one job really and that is to get re-elected or to another job. So in order to do that they have to raise money and in order to raise money you've got to have contacts, you've got to raise it through the lobbyists...But that should not be his job. His job is not to get re-elected. His job is to do what we elected him there to do. – Hispanic man, Sacramento, CA

They're both just going to stand there and do nothing, you know? So I feel – and I don't watch it closely – but I feel like he has tried to stand his ground, and then he showed what it was like to give a little bit, and then they ram him and say, "OK, we want more." And it's just – he has no choice in a lot of it. – Unmarried woman (college-educated), Raleigh, NC



But I will say, yesterday I got an Obama bumper sticker in the mail, and I looked at a friend of mine and I said, "I'm not putting it on." – Unmarried woman (college-educated), Raleigh, NC

They see the president willing to compromise, “in the debt ceiling issue, I mean, they got pretty much everything they wanted.” Yet the conclusion is not that Obama has escaped the partisan trap, but has emerged looking weak.

I don't think the change came as much as he, not so much promised, but had hoped. I think there's still I guess potential for it, but I think it's kind of, the hope of it has been kind of going down. I think we all wanted a change and then when it didn't come like that immediately, it was kind of like where is it, but...I mean, we didn't get in the hole we are in now overnight, so it's not going to change overnight either. – Young man, Bala Cynwyd, PA

We need a passionate candidate back. – Unmarried woman (college-educated), Raleigh, NC

He was handed a mess when he walked into office, first of all. I mean, everything was a disaster, but I just don't feel he was strong enough as a person. I mean, he had everybody in his heart. Like, he wanted to help the people, but he just wasn't a strong enough president to do it for some reason. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA

I don't think he had the backbone that I thought he should've. I thought being the smart man that he was that he would have the strength to get things done...I don't think the healthcare bill that he passed was appropriate. I think it was a good idea to do a healthcare bill, but...I don't think they addressed the cost of healthcare necessarily as much as they should've and it just didn't turn out the way I liked it. I don't think the budget that they just passed was good enough. I think everything's sort of like mediocre and that's disappointing. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA

All, everything he ever tried to get through or tried to push, you know, the Republicans did block him but there are other ways to get things done. You see in politics all the time, there's arm twisting, you know, and there are so many different things they can be doing. – Hispanic man, Sacramento, CA

I said the word soft. It was the same thing, like I think a better word would've been, overwhelmed is definitely the right word. He just, I don't think he realized how hard the job was going to be. He seems more like he's trying to placate eve-



ryone and keep everyone calm, rather than going in, like, I don't care what you think, I'm going to make the right decision, you know, to help, for the better.
– Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA

I wish he were a little bit more forceful about certain things and that he had the, you know, had the courage of your convictions and act on them. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA

Indeed, even his strongest supporters in our groups seemed to think that he does not get behind the policies that he believes in.

With a few exceptions I should say, he took the safe, middle ground position and it struck me as not having any new ideas. Nothing like healthcare this time that you can fight for. You know, he's in favor of immigration, but on the other hand, you know, and he's this, he's for the middle class and there was really nothing here that I can put my thumb on that would say that's the one that I want to get behind.
– Suburban man, Chicago, IL

For all this, they still believe the president is sincere and believe he cares about the middle class, but many participants believe he is no longer capable of winning or delivering. Among women, but not as much among men, this is expressed in terms of sympathy. They believe the president has been thwarted, abused and disrespected.

This beat-down President who's been bullied and probably horrible things have been said to him. – Unmarried woman (college-educated), Raleigh, NC

That he hasn't given up on us. And even though he's been browbeaten and bullied, he still gets it and he's still working for us. – Unmarried woman (college-educated), Raleigh, NC

No president has ever had to deal with such disrespect, in the office. Blatant disrespect and racism. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

I tend to look at it as, he got into office and he went into the schoolroom and he's like the new kid on the block and he wants everyone to like him. We watched him move a lot more towards the middle and I personally, did not move with him. So that in itself was a disappointment for me anyway. I think for a number of other people. I think it's that kind of like wanting to be liked thing and that's not his job and I think that he's never going to have the charisma of Bill Clinton, no matter how hard he tries. So I think he should just skip that part of it and just work harder and go back to some of those things that he really said that he would get to. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC



While the women are sympathetic, the men are more likely to use terms like “he is in over his head.” This is a tonal difference that might result in the same end, but the framing is noticeably different between the men and women.

I just think the guy is beleaguered. I think he's in a little bit over his head and, you know, I just think the job is just like completely overwhelming, as it might be for anybody, but I just think he's in way over his head at this point and I don't really think he knows how to make correct decisions, to be perfectly up-front with you. – Suburban man, Chicago, IL

There is a real danger here that emerges especially among the non-college-educated participants. Many are fed up with politics to the point where they are disengaged. They feel that they cannot change anything and that “it doesn't matter.”

I don't think it's any more important than any other election, especially presidential. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

It's just another election to me. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

I think back then the promise of a new way of doing politics was extremely appealing. But the reality is that you still can't change it, they can't change the system. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

Nobody has mentioned that up until this point, we keep talking about the politicians, the politicians, but somebody owns them and that's the problem – we don't. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

I feel like it's rhetoric. I just feel like- in some form or another, we hear this all the time. Every time they can't make a decision on something, this is the rhetoric we hear.... It's just- I think it's just rhetoric because it doesn't change. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

But these voters come back when they hear passion and commitment. These voters desperately want the president to “kick some butt.”

We conducted six groups prior to the president's jobs speech and two while the president was on his post-speech jobs tour. These voters have paid close attention to the president's change of tone in recent weeks and this effort finds much support in these groups. They responded to the passion, conviction, leadership, and assertiveness.



I've seen him toughen up a little bit. I've seen him – just listened, especially through the last go around with the budget, use some strong language. I've seen him – heard him recognize opposing viewpoints and acknowledge them and it seems to me like he's trying to – blur lines. Set an example, I guess. But he seems to have toughened up a little bit. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

I'm ready for him to get in there and kick some butt. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

I think he was trying to compromise and now I think he's gotten tired of hitting a brick wall and now he's saying all right, well here's my stance. Take it or leave it. Like with this job bill, he was all about. Let's work together, let's compromise and then finally was like, all right, you don't want to compromise, you don't want to work together, here's my proposal, take it. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

I think he's trying really hard and you know, I think he keeps getting knocked down but he keeps coming back and he keeps coming back stronger and stronger and I like that about him. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated), Raleigh, NC

I definitely think I feel like his passion, like I've reconnected with him, you know? – Unmarried woman (college-educated), Raleigh, NC

Engaging the Middle Class: “This isn’t America”

Despite these difficult conclusions, these citizens share something new and it provides an opportunity to re-engage them. They are ready to respond to leaders who understand what it means to be both struggling and middle class in America. And they need to hear that the same programs and protections they need and value – education, Social Security, housing – are not just politicians’ bargaining chips.

This shared sense of smashed middle classness is really what holds these groups together and engenders support for progressives. Every participant – regardless of socioeconomic background or income – identified in some way with middle class values and struggles. Even the wealthiest of our participants does not feel the luxury of economic security; the new economy has taken that away. On the other end of the spectrum, even the marginally employed and poorest of our participants did not identify as “poor” in a formal sense. To be poor, to them, means that you get things for free.



There is universal agreement that the Democrats, and especially President Obama, support the middle class, in part, because this is where Obama came from. These voters believe the Democrats are the ones who are on their side. Of Obama, they say, “I think he truly wants to provide like a better lifestyle for the middle class.” And “Barack Obama being like, you know, brought up in the middle class, I feel he could relate.” This is what drew many to Obama originally: “I see him caring about the middle class... Like all his policies sort of resonate with the average person, making the average person’s lives better.”

And this is truly the connecting thread between these groups: someone needs to be looking out for the interests of those who are neither very rich nor very poor. They rely on the Democrats to promote programs that will ensure middle class security and promote middle class progress.

America’s always had sort of a, you want to say a three set class, the middle class being really the engine that fuels everything. And, to me, it seems like that’s what we were getting away from. The middle class seemed to be disappearing more and more and it just tended to be going to more of a, if you want to say a two set class. And I still feel that today. You know, this is interesting how we all say the same thing over and over again and it’s such a non-sexy issue, but every one of us feels it. You know, our parents’ aspirations, truly where we are, what we aspire for our kids and, you know, at least I think ...we see this turning into every place else in the world that isn’t America. – Suburban man, Chicago, IL

Protect the middle class, start actually, get the middle class back to, actually more than protect, get the middle class back to where it used to be. – Hispanic woman, Sacramento, CA

[President Obama’s] number one priority should be the middle class...keep money on education, keep healthcare costs down, make sure medical and Social Security is there... I think if he wants to get the middle class back and that is his target... Acknowledging the middle class, how great they’ve been, here’s what we want to do, here’s how we’re going to do it, even though there will be some obstacles. – Suburban man, Chicago, IL

I see the middle class is disappearing and if the middle class keeps disappearing we’re going to have the haves and the have-nots. I mean, I used to read articles in the ‘90s about that and I’m like, you know, I was in my 20s then so that can’t happen and that can’t happen and now I see it happening. I see people losing jobs. I see... outsourcing jobs and ... we’re losing money and the middle class keeps being hit. – Hispanic woman, Sacramento, CA

You know, this is interesting how we all say the same thing over and over again and it’s such a non-sexy issue, but every one of us feels it. You know, our parents’



aspirations, truly where we are, what we aspire for our kids and, you know, at least I think those of us that are educated, shall we say, and have our own view, exactly what he said that we see this turning into England or every place else in the world that isn't America. – Suburban man, Chicago, IL

You know, that everybody that's poor wants to be middle class and people that are middle class, maybe we used to aspire to be rich, but today we're aspiring just to hold on and make sure our kids are there too. – Suburban man, Chicago, IL

Opportunity and the future of the middle class

While they believe that Democrats and the president are more for the middle class than the Republicans, they require someone to show strong commitment to the programs that matter to middle class people—programs these voters believe are required for middle class survival and prosperity. There is a great deal of concern that politicians will bargain away support and funding for education, housing, Social Security, and economic opportunity – and therefore bargain the middle class out of existence. In order to engage these voters, leaders need to give full-throated support to maintaining funding for these programs.

Education

Education is at the center of these voters' issue agenda. Education, in general, speaks to their concerns about the present and the future: their ability to provide opportunities for their children, secure their place in the middle class, and maintain American competitiveness in the 21st century.

Suburban, Hispanic, and unmarried women are more passionate about K-12 education funding than young voters and men and they worry deeply about their local schools and state-level cuts to education budgets.

You've got so many problems in the schools and you've got these teachers that are overwhelmed- you've gone from when we were in school, one to 20 and now you've got one to 35. Class has literally doubled- and so you've got parents trying to think that all these people are- all these teachers are supposed to be raising their kids for them and you don't have that support, and you've got teachers getting ;aid off, which increases the class size again, so it just perpetuates the problem. – Unmarried woman (non-college-educated) Raleigh, NC



While men and young voters were less energized by cuts to lower education, all participants expressed deep concern about the cost and quality of higher education and what it means for American global competitiveness.

Other countries are getting way ahead of us. – Hispanic woman, Sacramento, CA

The education costs were too high and that's how we're way behind other countries. – Hispanic woman, Sacramento, CA

I agree with the fact that will not be able to compete with the world-class education systems in China, India and Japan because that's true. – Young man, Bala Cynwyd, PA

Distractions in the education system are going to lead to us losing our economic power. – Young man, Bala Cynwyd, PA

The cost of higher education is deeply concerning all around. Many of the young people in our groups have first-hand experience with disruptions in the college-employment continuum. If they, themselves, do not have post-graduate experience living in their parents' basements, they report that a majority of their friends are working on advanced degrees in unemployment. The calculus just doesn't make sense anymore: the wages available to them – if the jobs exist – do not exceed (or in some cases even equal) the student loan debt they incurred.

I mean, I'm graduating next semester and I have tons of friends who graduated and most of those friends don't have one job, like at all. You know, it's just I see them getting screwed and it's nice to know, I mean it's nice to think that maybe like my kids won't be as screwed. – Young man, Bala Cynwyd, PA

This fear is not exclusive to young people. Both affluent suburbanites and Hispanic participants see their own children, and their children's friends, struggling to enter adulthood saddled with massive debt and few prospects for paying it off.

I mean, my brother owed \$100,000 because he went to graduate school and all that stuff, so they're getting out with big debt. – Suburban man, Chicago, IL

I mean I have a college degree, but what's the incentive for a lot of these kids to go to college right now? When they get out, they can't get hired. – Suburban man, Chicago, IL

Most kids are coming out of school with huge debts and they don't have jobs to go to. – Hispanic man, Sacramento, CA



Both my kids just got out of college and unemployed for the past 2 years. It's very expensive... You've got people who graduated with, you know, 40 thousand dollars, 60, 70 whatever thousand dollars in debt and they're not going to be able to pay these babies off much less they can't get jobs right now so they're screwed. Right? You've got this big debt and you don't have a job... So, you know, we're getting smacked all around. – Hispanic man, Sacramento, CA

All participants talked about education in the future tense – in phrases not dissimilar from the ways in which we frequently hear respondents talk about the deficit. That is, if we do not take action on education costs now, we will be saddling future generations with debts from which they may never be able to recover.

We have to have affordable education so they can compete because it's just going to get harder and harder for future generations. We need to make changes now basically to survive the future. If we don't make the changes now, we make them in the future, it'll probably be too late. – Young man, Bala Cynwyd, PA

For less affluent participants, education is the only means to grow their earning potential. The loss of opportunity in post-secondary education not only had direct impact on them, but also on their children.

Most importantly, all participants framed the problems of American education in terms of middle class expectations. To them, the American Dream means that if you work hard and go to college, you will be able to secure, at the very least, a stable middle class lifestyle: homeownership, good schools for your kids, and greater advantages and opportunities to the next generation. This part of the dream falls back on itself when it comes to education. Everyone in these groups was raised to believe that education would provide middle class security. That is no longer the case. The cost and quality of education cuts to the heart of their identity as, and struggles with, being middle class.

The middle class is disappearing because education is not a priority. – Hispanic woman, Sacramento, CA

The middle class aren't able to afford to send their kids to college anymore. – Hispanic woman, Sacramento, CA



War on Wall Street

Although the groups generally pre-dated the Occupy Wall Street movement, most participants align with the sentiments of the protest. These participants believe the wealthy and big banks are broadly responsible for the economic collapse. Despite this culpability, they continue to find privilege in Washington and increasing taxes on these interests represents both common-sense and justice.

Raise the taxes for the 2 percent that ain't paying really as much as I'm paying. I'm paying like about 33 percent taxes; they're only paying 5 or 10 percent and they're making billions and millions of dollars, okay? So they're putting everything on our backs, the middle classes back. – Hispanic man, Sacramento, CA

I'm kind of tired of coddling companies. Companies are creating jobs and they're creating them overseas and they're just not creating them here because they're cheaper and I'm tired of this whole coddling effect that we want to inspire confidence for companies to create jobs or provide incentives to create jobs. From my perspective, a lot of it is a choice that they make and I just don't like the statement. – Young man, Bala Cynwyd, PA

Importantly, this extends to suburban voters as well, who watched their retirement savings diminish in 2008 and whose economic philosophy is centered on middle class purchasing power. However, it is important to note that these voters are more measured – they are not “anti-business” and are less apt to use populist tones. The current 1% economy does not fit their economic philosophy and, further, they are keenly aware that, while well-off, they are not part of the Wall Street elite either.

We wouldn't have gotten into the recession we were in if they hadn't allowed big banks and mortgage companies to give money to people that didn't have the ability to pay. So, they should've regulated them back then and now that they didn't, the government didn't do their job then and let the banks get out of hand. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA

Personally, I'm not opposed to big business but when it's at the expense of people who are losing their jobs every single day and losing their homes every single day and the banks were involved in that process, I don't have much problem criticizing that group. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA

Social Security

While young voters are more open to Social Security reform (they believe it will not be there when they are ready to retire anyway) voters over the age of 40 feel very strongly



about Social Security and Medicare. They talk about a lifetime of hard work, but also about the security of being—and staying—middle class and comfortable into retirement. They worry about what happens if this is lost and are very energized about preserving retirement. The threat to Social Security and Medicare has caused a lot of these voters to intensify their convictions about what is right and wrong – and to stake a more progressive claim about the middle class American economy. Deficit or not, to these voters, Social Security is not an issue on which the president should compromise. If the president is to remain a champion of the middle class, he will need to stand strong on Social Security and Medicare.

We're not going to have any Social Security and so we're worried about it. We're going to have to work till, I mean, endless unless we... win the lottery or something. It just seems dismal. – Hispanic woman, Sacramento, CA

Seniors have bills to pay, a lot of them are suffering right now and they're living on their Social Security only and considering they just said that we've got 44 million people on food stamps right now, the large majority of them are seniors. They're not, they're just getting by right now and how could you transfer the cost of Medicare to seniors that don't have it in the first place? A lot of seniors aren't going to the doctor right now because they're having a hard time. Even if they have Medicare, a lot of them don't go to the doctor because of all the billing and all that forms and mixed up, confused what to do and there's a lot of sick seniors. My dad lives in Florida, he's 82. I see what goes on down there. It's tough.
– Suburban man, Chicago, IL

Housing

To these voters, homeownership is a big part of the American Dream and, for the last 60 years, has been central to middle class identity. The mortgage crisis that began in 2007 upended their ideas about what homeownership means to middle class existence.

For young voters, homeownership is completely off the radar, and several participants had moved back home to live with their parents. Among less affluent participants and Hispanics in Sacramento, the foreclosure crisis is real—it is in their neighborhoods and the victims are people they know. To affluent suburbanites, the housing crisis has meant that their biggest assets have sharply declined in value. This issue cuts across all groups but in different ways.

A couple of my very close friends are just about to put their houses on the market because they can't afford them anymore. I mean, just in my like circle of friends.
– Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA



Well, we live in a very small town and we have our own school district and usually houses in Jenkintown sell overnight, you don't even get a chance to put the sign up and now we're pretty much flooded with houses. People that need to sell, people that want to sell, you know, many different reasons and without a good housing market, we can't afford to have a good school which is the only reason that we would have a good housing market, so it's a real Catch-22. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA

Your home used to be like your security, that if all else failed, you lost your job, you empty your savings, well you could always sell your house and be okay. And now people are realizing that they lost their job, they've gone through their savings, you know, my friends as examples, but now they don't even, like, you know, they're what they call, what we say is they're upside down in their mortgage. They owe more than the house is worth, so even if they can get out of the house, they'll still owe, you know, and it's frightening, it really is. – Suburban woman, Bala Cynwyd, PA

Just the, you know, the housing market and the American dream, you know, to buy a home, that you will go to school, being able to do those things once again. We've come so far away from it. – Hispanic man, Sacramento, CA

The Smashed Middle Class

Because the middle class suffered inordinately in this economy, the one message that was by far the most popular in all of our groups focused on the struggles of the “smashed middle class.” For every group, this message seemed to tap into their frustrations.

This message says:

America's strength has always been built on a rising middle class. You worked hard and you could have confidence that America took care of everyone. We saw rising incomes, strong families, more people owning a home – and more and more Americans working so their kids would do better and get a good education. Hard work and responsibility paid off. But the middle class has been smashed. People haven't seen a real raise in a long time and the economic crisis has left people on the edge. Getting the middle class back has got to be our nation's focus. So, let's keep our money on education, get health care costs down and make sure Medicare and Social Security is there for them. The congressional Republicans say we have to end Medicare and transfer costs to retirees, because we can't raise taxes on the wealthiest and oil companies. That's not the right course. We must never lose sight of the goal that all Americans can still believe in the American dream and achieve success.



This statement brought these frustrated voters back in – it made them hopeful again and made them feel like *someone really gets it*. Among one group of unmarried women, every participant at the table gave this message the highest possible rating. More notably, it tapped into the connection these voters felt in 2008 and spoke to their hope that the president will turn things around.

Participants agreed that “smashed” was an accurate descriptor. It was the first thing they pinpointed about the message: “smashed, the middle class smashed.” Another chimed in: “yeah definitely smashed, yeah.” The message made another woman cry, as she felt that this message completely tapped into her struggles. “It’s going directly, its hitting the middle class people... speaking to us in these statements.”

The message engendered an extended emotional discussion that should inform the development of this framework going forward. The shift in the economy has left people feeling completely upended and exhausted.

We are the ones that or were the ones that were always able to, I mean, you were talking about your kids being unemployed [and taking care of them]. Well, this was the first time, for 3 months I didn't have a job and when my kids needed me to help them I couldn't. It was the hardest thing for me; it was embarrassing. [crying] Because they always looked up to Mom. They've always been able to...But I always was able to help them. – Hispanic woman, Sacramento, CA

Because it's suppressing, it's suppressing us. We want to be there, we want, you know, to have things too and have money but they're suppressing us. They're getting the breaks. We're not getting the breaks. – Hispanic woman, Sacramento, CA

This middle class message inspired these voters. They felt connected and passionate again. And they need progressive leaders to get passionate again. This is what brought non-voters to the polls in November 2008. It is what will re-engage them in politics now. Most of all, they want leaders who can understand the troubles of, and stand strong for, the middle class.