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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and GQR Digital

From: Democracy Corps and GQR Digital

President Obama Scores With Middle Class Message

But Voters Skeptical That Washington, Including President, Can Actually Get Things Done

Dial testing and follow-up focus groups with 50 swing voters in Denver, Colorado show that President Obama's populist defense of the middle class and their priorities in his State of the Union scored with voters.¹ The President generated strong responses on energy, education and foreign policy, but most important, he made impressive gains on a range of economic measures. These swing voters, even the Republicans, responded enthusiastically to his call for a "Buffett Rule" that would require the wealthiest Americans to pay their fair share. As one participant put it, "I agree with his tax reform – the 1 percent should shoulder more of the burden than the other 99 percent. He [Obama] talked about being all for one, one for all – that really resonated for me." These dial focus groups make it very clear that defending further tax cuts for those at the top of the economic spectrum puts Republicans in Congress and on the Presidential campaign trail well outside of the American mainstream.

These voters overwhelmingly liked what they heard from Obama-- even those who voted against him in 2008 appreciated the address. But they continued to show deep skepticism that the President would be able to translate these words into actions. The more Democratic participants mostly blamed Republican obstructionism while the more Republican participants insisted that Obama might talk a good game, but his actions in office did not reflect the words in this speech. But participants across the political spectrum all agreed that Washington is broken and that progress on the important issues would be difficult until Congress addresses the corrupting influence of lobbyists and special interests.

This was not the easiest audience for Obama; although slightly more participants voted for him than McCain in 2008, it was a significantly Republican-leaning group (44 percent Republican, 32 percent Democratic). At the outset, these voters were split 50/50 on Obama's job performance and just 50 percent gave him a favorable personal rating. But the President gained ground

¹ Based on dial testing focus group research on January 24, 2012, by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps and GQR Digital. Research was among 50 swing voters in Denver, Colorado, using Perception Analyzer by Dialsmith.



after the speech; his job rating rose 8 points and his personal standing jumped 16 points, to 66 percent favorable.

■ **Table 1: Shifts in Measures**

Measures	Pre-Speech	Post-Speech	Shift (Post – Pre-Speech)
Obama Job Approval: Total Approve	50	58	+8
Obama Thermometer Rating: Total Warm	50	66	+16
Has Good Plans for the Economy: Total Describes Well	36	54	+18
Creating New Jobs: Total Confident	34	52	+18
For the Middle Class: Total Describes Well	42	66	+24
Energy: Total Confident	46	68	+22
Bridging the Partisan Divide and Bringing Americans Together: Total Confident	36	56	+20
Seems to Understand the Issues That are Important to My Life: Total Describes Well	42	62	+20
Makes Me Hopeful When I Hear Him Speak: Total Describes Well	38	66	+28

The Middle Class and the Economy

More importantly, Obama connected on the central thrust of his speech. Prior to the address, just 42 percent of these Republican-leaning voters said that Obama was “for the middle class.” But this measure jumped 24 points after the speech, to 66 percent. As the table above shows, Obama also saw large gains on having “good plans for the economy,” job creation, taxes and “understanding the issues important to my life.”



The dials spiked when the President made his strong populist pitch for the “Buffett Rule,” with Democrats exceeding 80 on our 0-to-100 scale and both independents and Republicans moving above 70. There was no polarization here, as voters across the political spectrum gave Obama high marks. And Obama’s framing of the economic challenges facing the country through the lens of post-World War II America was particularly effective. He also received high marks for his proposal to change the tax code to encourage “insourcing” instead of “outsourcing,” his call to change our “unemployment system” to a “re-employment system” and his appeal to make it easier for entrepreneurs and small business to grow and create jobs.

The President was least effective on the economy when he tried to take credit for economic successes, such as pointing to the 3 million new private sector jobs created in the last 22 months. He engendered much more positive responses when giving credit, rather than taking it, using stories about businesses such as GM, Chrysler, Energetx and Masterlock to highlight the success of his policies.

Energy

Obama also generated a strong response when discussing energy. This section received the highest sustained ratings of the speech from Democrats and independents, but it was also one of the few polarizing sections as Republicans reacted negatively to the President’s call for more support of clean energy (independents, like Democrats, responded very favorably). Overall, Obama gained 22 points on the issue, one of his biggest gains on the evening, as these voters endorsed his appeal to end subsidies for oil companies and instead focus those resources on expanding clean energy in America.

Education

The President also sustained high ratings when talking about education. He touched a chord with his offer to give schools the resources and flexibility they need to “to teach with creativity and passion; to stop teaching to the test,” pushing all three groups close to 80. These voters responded well to the proposal to keep student loan rates low and he drew positive reviews, particularly with independents, for his plan to turn community colleges into “community career centers.”

Foreign Policy

While Obama’s foreign policy ratings started the night higher than his ratings on domestic issues, he still managed to make modest gains on all of our foreign policy measures. Voters gave the highest ratings of the night to the two mentions of Osama bin Laden, both of which pushed the average dial rating close to 90, but other portions of the foreign policy section also scored well. Interestingly, independents consistently rated this section higher than even Democrats did, sustaining numbers in the 70s. President Obama also won spikes in the dials when he referenced “our last troops to serve in Iraq,” and the effort to “wind down the war in Afghanistan.”



Unified Response

Despite the heated partisan polarization in Washington, for the most part, Obama generated a unified response across the partisan spectrum. In most speeches like this, we see significant sections where the dial lines of Democrats and Republicans completely diverge. But aside from a few instances (such as energy), the President was able to move Democrats, independents, and Republicans together. As one participant noted, “What he said tonight appeals to everyone. If any of it comes to pass it would be fantastic for the country.”

Post Dial Focus Groups

Following the speech, we conducted two breakout focus groups with participants who shifted in Obama’s favor on the economy: one group of 2008 Obama voters and one of 2008 McCain voters. Across the board, participants thought the speech was hopeful, laid out an ambitious economic agenda, and hit some key policy points that resonated with all voters. Even among his detractors, we heard positive feedback about the scope and substance of the message.

Obama voters still have a lot of hope for the future. These respondents note a positive shift in the President’s tone and confidence over recent months, including in this speech. They believe he has become more firm and aggressive in his positions while maintaining his willingness to work with Republicans. These Obama voters wanted to hear the President take a strong stand on jobs, tax reform, political reform, energy, and funding for education. They were not disappointed.

While they largely blame the Republicans for “obstructing” the President’s legislative priorities and register their regret at Obama’s inability to get his agenda through Congress, tonight they believe the President has laid out a solid bi-partisan plan to “re-invest in America.” To them, this means “insourcing” and growing American jobs, improving the quality and reducing the cost of education, building green energy infrastructure, and reforming the tax code to reduce the deficit and empower middle class people.

To these Obama voters, tax reform is key. As one participant noted, “many in Congress want to continue to give tax breaks to super wealthy – I like his ideas on finance reform, holding people accountable. It makes me crazy when bankers get a 5 million dollar bonus.” They say “the 1 percent should shoulder more of the burden than the other 99 percent.” Tax reform is not limited to millionaire surtaxes—these voters registered strong approval for the President’s plan to use the tax code to encourage “insourcing” and to punish those companies who are not investing in American jobs and workers.

The President’s education agenda also struck a chord among his supporters. They are deeply concerned about the rising cost of post-secondary education and the declining quality of elementary and secondary schools. As one respondent noted, “Education is absolutely critical – with my education, my parents invested in me, I was going to be able to live the American dream.” An-



other noted the growing wealth disparity's effect on access to education: "He [Obama] made an important point – a creation of an elite based solely on education – and it's financially based – because of the high cost of college." These voters note that education is the "foundation" for a strong economy and a strong middle class. As one voter said, "You can't make the change in this country without building the foundation of education underneath." They strongly support the President's plan to encourage public-private partnerships between industry and community colleges, which would prepare workers for the high-demand jobs of tomorrow. This extends to green energy infrastructure—and participants immediately make the connection between new energy and new jobs. They say, "Alternative energy – good jobs, local jobs – I think we have a tremendous opportunity here – it's about creating goods and services – invest in infrastructure."

Most importantly, these voters believe the political system needs to be reformed. They are very concerned that the tenor of debate in Washington puts ordinary voters last. They blame lobbyists, big corporate campaign contributions, and a closed circle of influence in Washington for creating much of the mess. One participant noted that "Politicians have become corrupt – they don't recognize – they think the people that make 500 million a year deserve that – they don't see that huge favors are being levied." Another appreciated that the President "talked about lobbying efforts – people should not be able to invest in the companies that they've been lobbying for." To these voters, this is a fundamental issue and one that could become important this election year. "People are becoming more and more aware of the corruption" and will hold politicians accountable to it in 2012.

Impressively, in other post-speech focus group, among participants who voted for McCain in 2008, participants were intrigued by the President's middle class message. While they showed more pronounced skepticism than other voters, they applauded Obama's foreign policy achievements, agreed with his message on energy, and were willing to consider his economic message. A few members of this group said that despite voting for his opponent in 2008, they would probably vote for Obama if this were their first exposure to the President – "If he is a brand new guy, he'd probably get my vote."

Everyone in the McCain voter group spoke highly of Obama's foreign policy successes. Several said that the speech reminded them of the successes in the war on terror that they had forgotten about. In the words of one participant, "He did some pretty good stuff in the war, he got bin Laden, he's continued drone attacks started by President Bush, and he's been a bit of a butt kicker." Specifically, they appreciated the references to the death of Osama bin Laden, the victory in Libya, and the status of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Those in the McCain voter group were also interested in and open to Obama's energy policy. They believed it was very important to focus on developing new energy resources and to achieve energy independence, both for the purpose of national security and jobs, echoing the sentiment from the Obama-voters group.



These participants also appreciated some economic parts of the State of the Union speech, especially his recognition of the difficulties middle class Americans currently face and bringing jobs back to the U.S. The single most positive reaction by this group was to Obama's message of building an economy built to last, which allows the middle class to do things such as buy a house and get a good education. One young participant pointed out that buying a house was well out of reach for him and people of his generation and that he believed the President acknowledged those problems, which he appreciated. Other participants spoke highly of the proposal to provide rewards to companies that brought jobs back to the U.S. from abroad, noting that this proposal was a new idea that he supported.
