

Date: June 24, 2008
To: Friends of Democracy Corps
From: Karl Agne

Focus Groups Read Out

Cleveland and Roanoke

We did four groups over the last two days with Democratic defectors in Cleveland, OH and Roanoke, Virginia.

Nothing in these groups led me to question the findings outlined in my memo last week. All of the findings on attitudes toward Obama and McCain were simply reinforced here. However, we did gain deeper understanding on a number of key dynamics in this race and in voters' attitudes toward the two candidates.

1. I am now absolutely convinced that Rev. Wright is by far the primary obstacle standing between Obama and the Democratic defectors. In every group, we see a combination of the introduction of Obama's bio, footage of him speaking on taxes and in the ads, and natural debate between participants blunt many doubts, from his supposed Muslim roots to concerns about taxes. But the one concern that can't be minimized and can't be forgotten is Rev. Wright. Voters' concerns are already strong, but once we show the video clips of him, they go to another level. As discussed previously, the anger and vitriol that he displays horrifies these voters.

The fundamental question for voters is why or how Obama sat there for 20 years and listened to this vitriol, and there simply is no acceptable answer to that question for many of them. His ultimate rejection of Wright and departure from the church are quickly dismissed as calculated and 'too little, too late.' Voters reason that Obama either secretly agreed with Wright, lacked the courage and judgment to stand up to his hate-filled sermons, or disagreed but mistakenly thought they were acceptable for his own children and his fellow churchgoers to hear; whatever the explanation is, it raises very fundamental doubts for them about his ability to lead our country.

Perhaps even more importantly, these doubts open the door for more insidious concerns to gain traction. Several voters discuss their fears of a 'hidden agenda.' There are no real details here, but it is the ultimate result of several interrelated concerns:



- A belief among many of the more fervent Hillary supporters that Obama's victory in the primary was orchestrated by the superdelegates and other shadowy elites who ignored the will of the voters
- Frustration with the fact that Obama doesn't have a long track record that has been publicly vetted and has seemingly been pushed to the front of the line before voters have had a chance to really examine him properly
 - *"He came out of nowhere and now he wants to be President"*
 - *"There's too much that we don't know about Obama"*
- Cynicism that tells them no one makes it this far this fast in politics without the help of powerful forces. This combines with fears about racial preferences to raise deep concerns about his true loyalties.
 - *"Where does your loyalty lie – is it all of us or some of us?"*

There is one additional aspect of the Wright discussion worth highlighting. In several groups, Catholics in the group have specifically spoken up in defense of Obama, citing their own fundamental disagreements with many of the Church's teachings but also their continued sense of connectedness to the faith and their own parish community. An interesting and very specific trend across several groups and locations.

I'm not sure if there is an effective answer to the Wright question, but it is clear from these groups that, unlike the other doubts about Obama, it isn't going away and it can't be minimized. At their core, concerns about Wright are concerns about who Obama really is and what he believes in the deepest recesses of his heart.

2. Putting an end to the flirtation between McCain and Democratic defectors depends on defining McCain as 'more of the same' on specific issues, most especially the war in Iraq, oil and energy, and fealty to big business. Health care is also an area of real potential here. There is an unmistakable personal affinity for McCain as a war hero, a caring and empathetic figure, a moderate, a patriot, and someone who isn't afraid to speak his mind. We can't afford for that personal affinity to combine with emotional doubts about Obama to cloud the clear issue contrasts between McCain and these voters.

The concept of McCain as a political maverick, a straight talker who votes his conscience regardless of partisan lines, is the most powerful aspect of the McCain narrative. More than anything else, this creates the space he needs between him and Bush. And once again, we heard significant evidence that McCain's anti-war ad is making an impression and convincing voters that he has a plan to bring the troops home and to do everything possible to avoid further military actions.

But McCain does not yet own the 'maverick' label. His repeated flip-flops on the very same issues that he needs to establish his independence and 'maverick' status could cut this critical message for him right off at the knees. And we did not test it, but I remain very convinced that his support for offshore drilling could be a godsend – a clear flip flop that



aligns him perfectly with Bush and shows him catering to big oil while doing nothing to deliver help to needy consumers or to advance the real solution of renewable energy.

3. The reaction to Obama's new 60-second bio ad was extraordinary. I remember the positive reaction that Kerry's 60-second bio engendered four years ago, and there is no question that 60-second positive spots almost always perform well in groups, but this is very different.
 - After viewing the ad, the immediate reaction was almost uniformly that respondents were impressed by how genuine and sincere he was. Given the doubts about him, this reaction is critical and shows the power of the ad.
 - It is so important for Obama to speak directly to voters. There is an unmistakable connection that he makes with viewers, whether in speeches or in this ad, and almost every group highlighted the contrast between Obama speaking directly to them and McCain being introduced by a narrator.
 - The focus on accomplishments was very important to voters. They appreciated the focus on heartland values and patriotism, but it was the focus on his record and on specific accomplishments (especially welfare reform and help for wounded vets) that really helped to connect him to 'average Americans' by showing 'how he made a difference for us.'
 - The handling of his childhood was very well done in this ad. Many voters pushed back on the relevance of his upbringing, especially the fact that he was raised by a white mother and grandparents, and resented what they saw as a self-serving emphasis on it in our bio exercise. The ad, however, uses images and neutral language to convey his humble roots without raising a single objection in any of our groups.
4. The importance of Obama passing up big money and Wall St. to work as a community organizer in Chicago is the most important part of his biography. Again, the specific language that we used in the bio exercise is important here:

After college, Obama turned down the ability to make big money on Wall Street or with a big company. Instead, he became a community organizer in Chicago with a church-based group seeking to help a diverse set of poor neighborhoods – white, black, and Latino – decimated by the closing of local steel plants. He says this experience made him the leader he is today, with a focus on bringing people with varying interests together for a common purpose and trusting ordinary people to get things done rather than relying on politicians and powerful interests.

With the most fundamental doubts about Obama focused on what he truly believes and where his loyalties really lie, this message is critical. Voters consistently said that this message told them that he cares more about people than money, that he is not a typical



politician, that he has the right priorities, and that he really cares about lower and middle class Americans.

They highlighted two other aspects of this message – the diverse nature of the neighborhoods and the workers he sought to help as an organizer and his ‘focus on bringing people with varying interests together for a common purpose and trusting ordinary people to get things done rather than relying on politicians and powerful interests.’ This language really resonated with voters, as we will explore below.

5. There is a theme emerging from the bio exercise and the ads that has real potential as a follow-up to the bio ad now running – pulling people together and getting things done. The bi-partisan nature of his successes in Illinois and in Washington is very important to voters, as is the idea of him bringing together poor neighborhoods of whites, blacks, and Latinos to work toward a common purpose. But bringing people together doesn’t really matter without the results.

Obama was elected to the Illinois state senate in 1996. In the Illinois Senate, he immediately demonstrated an ability to reach across party lines to get things done and led bi-partisan efforts to enact welfare reform, provide health coverage for 154,000 uninsured Illinoisans, pass the state’s most sweeping new ethics law in a generation, and expand access to early childhood education programs.

Between the bio exercise (especially the messages on his post-college career and his state Senate record above) and the ads, we see a growing connection between Obama and the middle class. This goes beyond traditional partisan stereotypes; it is about a man who knows what it is like to suffer and to go without, who sacrificed to help others in that situation, and who throughout his time in office has used his growing power and influence to take steps to provide concrete help to ‘average Americans’ who keep falling further and further behind.