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To: Interested Parties

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Trump's exhausted party

Democracy Corps just completed our first focus groups of the 2020 election with Republicans and Republican defectors, and this year's referendum on President Trump threatens to reach even deeper into the Republican Party than the 2018 blue wave. These focus groups provide our first window into the factions pulling off Donald Trump and why.

President Trump will be reassured that his Evangelical and Tea Party base is solid. They write, he "FIGHTS FOR EVERYDAY FOLK." "Very focused on the US economy." "Strong, keeps his promises, has American people's interest as #1." "Not influenced by special interests. Strong leadership." "Outsider who brought the economy to life, a straight shooter, genuine, loves his country."

Yet, he won't be so comforted that his own voters were mostly "worried" and about the direction of the country, with only a handful saying they are "hopeful."

And Trump will not be comfortable watching the visible cracks in his party that are translating into more and more voters pulling off Trump and turning to Joe Biden — much more than supported Hillary Clinton four years ago.

- The GOP Catholic women were a surprise, as Trump had previously consolidated them in our research.
- The shedding of moderates is accelerating. Our earlier polls already showed that the moderate proportion of the GOP had fallen to 16 percent, but the campaign relaunch in Topeka where he doubled down on division and coronavirus and science denial, pushed even further.
- The McCain conservatives groups also showed a further pull back from Trump and more willingness to vote for Biden than Clinton, though only our full national survey will tell us the real scale of defection. Up until now, the moderates were the whole story in GOP defection, but that may be changing.

Why are the fractures in the GOP growing and more voters willing to vote for Joe Biden?

First, Republicans themselves feel “worried and “frustrated” and sound as exhausted as the rest of the country by the unfinished crises, the uncertainty and inability to believe anything, and the deep divisions and polarization. They long for leaders who will rise above the infighting and show us how he or she will unite the country.

Second, many Republicans believe Trump is failing as a leader, even if they are still determined to vote for him. They want America to be better than this.

Third, more and more Republican voters watch President Trump make politics “all about himself,” rather than leading on urgent issues or working for the whole country.

Fourth, Biden has emerged as a comfortable figure during deeply uncertain times. He is well known, tested, and represents experience and stability to many people in these groups, including the majority who are not supporting him. He looks plausible for many disaffected Republicans who are so exhausted with the divisiveness and chaos of Trump's presidency.

All of these responses are being shaped in real time by the president's constant presence on TV and by ads from Trump, Biden and his GOP critics, and we have learned some important things.

First and most important, President Trump's appearances on TV or at rallies with wavering supporters only elevate doubts about him; they never reassure. There is no reason to fear the president has some reservoir of capitol to be deployed in the coming months. Nor is there any reason for opponents to do anything but present the president in his full authenticity.

Second, these GOP voters are by now highly literate in political advertising and messaging — they are acute in identifying production elements that they believe are manipulative or pander (editing, images, people featured in the background).

Third, the current environment has brought truth and sincerity to the top of mind. They are deeply skeptical of information and severe in their critique of what is sincere. They reject almost anything that requires them to accept facts delivered by a third party at face value, and reject anything that appears scripted or overly produced.

And for now, these Republican voters were quickly exhausted by Trump's current attack ads on Biden for being infirm — which was seen as overtly negative, even if they agreed with it. They were put off by the style of the attack on Trump for lacking courage. On the other hand, they wanted more information after hearing Trump's ad attacking Biden on China.

That revealed two successful ads watched by the GOP groups – one from the Biden campaign and one from the Lincoln Project.

These results are based on six Zoom focus groups conducted by Democracy Corps in late June: two thirds with Republican identifiers and one third with GOP defectors. In Arizona, we heard from McCain conservative men and McCain conservative GOP women who no longer identify as Republican; in Georgia, from moderate women who no longer identify as Republican; in Michigan, from conservative GOP Catholic women; and in North Carolina, from GOP Evangelical women and Tea Party men.

Mood during the crisis

In each group we asked people to finish the sentence — "I feel [BLANK] about the future of our country." We discussed in depth the reason for each word provided, but the dominant words up-front were "worried" and "frustrated" and "concerned." Others were bothered by the uncertainty — "nervous" and "anxious" and "uncertain." Someone responded with "the unknown" and another person said "a lot of ifs." Someone said "defeated." Only a handful said they were "hopeful."

The reasons for negativity are broad given the context. For some it is the division and polarization that they think the president "enjoys" and "fans the flames of." Others cite exhaustion and the mental impact of the crisis.

It's been a roller coaster. There's times I've been okay and I sleep well and it is hard to sleep. Mental health issues crop up. I have to admit, this has been really depressing. (GA woman)

Things have been shutting down, probably not coming back. My goodness, suicides are up, aren't they? There's just so much unemployment, unbelievable. (NC man)

I just I don't know what direction we're headed for; I feel like it's the uncertainty of everything. I don't think we have the leadership right now that'll take us where we go. I don't want to get too one way or another. I try to listen to both sides, but I feel like we're in a bad place right now with our leadership. (GA woman)

It seems like there's so many things happening at once, right on top of each other. It's hard because at some point I feel really optimistic but at other times, we have fires, we have COVID, we have election issues, we have economic, we have racial issues. It's really hard for people to stay focused. (AZ woman)

Trump's divided America

There was a real sense that people are exhausted by negativity and partisan battles, heightened by the pandemic and economic crisis. There is a deep desire to come together right now.

We don't hate each other. We want to work together to become the great country we are striving to be. (AZ woman)

I'm really frustrated because as human beings we're better than this. We're in the middle of the pandemic and instead of helping each other we decided that wearing a mask is inferior or not strong enough to wear a mask. I have a 70-year-old mother and I don't want her to get sick. It's a frustrating situation that we could be better than this. We're tearing each other apart over stupid issues. (MI woman)

It's very tough so just, kind of like, people disagree for the longest time but they've had at least some basis of commonality. They're just on team A or team B and if you're on that team then the other doesn't like you anymore. It's difficult to talk about certain issues. You'd think a big pandemic like COVID would bring us together but that's kind of gone out the window. (AZ man)

I've felt nothing is going right. We're not a nation united. It's this team against this team. It's hatred and anger, it's very negative. To ask right now, not knowing if I'll have work, I don't feel like anything is going right. (GA woman)

Trump's uncertainty and disinformation

And many express concern about the inconsistency of information from official sources and the lack of coordination, and they are skeptical of anything reported by the media and anything coming from third party sources.

I just don't know what to believe anymore. It used to be that sometimes the media would put spin on things, but I just don't know what the truth is anymore. Wear a mask, don't wear a mask. You're asymptomatic and you can pass it on, and you can't. Fauci is saying one thing and the CDC is saying another thing and DC is saying another. I feel like we have to flip a coin. (GA woman)

I think that there is disparity between correct information and incorrect information. At one point we had one one-thousandth of a percent for COVID so that is a very small number and then you hear it's eighty percent. So, people don't know what is right. So then that causes the governor to not do his job and open up the state like he's supposed to. He's currently being sued. (NC woman)

The unknown, you don't know what is going to happen next. Everything is changing here in AZ. Our governor finally closed some things but not everything. I feel like it changes every day what is going on. How people are feeling about things, what's happening. (AZ woman)

Trump's failed leadership

The desire for strong leadership emerges in open ended descriptions of their doubts about President Trump (and also in the positive things they say about Biden). The positive perceptions of Trump are centered on the economy, both before the pandemic and also for beginning to open back up. He also scores marks for being a “patriot” who has the country’s “best interests at heart”, and that he “stands up for America” and “makes us safer.” Many also say he is not a “typical politician.”

However, from the outset, many cite clear concerns about his leadership, both verbally and in written responses, and more come forward with their concerns over the course of each night.

I feel that President Trump is out of his league. He tried, but he really didn't manage to be as strong of a politician that this country needs. He was a failed businessperson and I feel that he is failing our country. He has helped our economy as Republicans can do, but at too high of a cost. (GA woman)

The lack of leadership during the pandemic and leaving the public sort of in the dark after the task force was disabled.... feeling like he kind of disappeared and not taking the pandemic seriously (AZ woman).

He's the face of the Congress but not a normal president. I don't really care for Obama but at least he came out and spoke about the right things. (NC man)

His leadership is failing in the last 4 months-he seems overwhelmed and lost. (AZ women)

In May, Democracy Corps conducted online dial meter research during a 60-minute reel of otherwise unedited footage from 5 of President Trump's most recent Coronavirus Taskforce briefings. In open ended responses among votes who approved of his handling of the coronavirus outbreak and the economy, approval was driven in no small part by voters' confidence in the experts on his team, rather than in the president himself. Now that he is in a public fight with these same experts, he no longer looks capable by association and the tone has changed.

Even among his loyalist base, many wish he would listen to experts and stop “making everything about himself.”

He kicks out everyone of his cabinet members when he does not like what they say about him. He hates everyone. He does not listen to others. (AZ woman)

I wish he would listen to his advisers and not say whatever comes to mind sometimes. (AZ man)

He will not listen to others and wants what he wants. Like someone said he wants yes and people. I want someone who will listen to others. And I think he's handled this pandemic terribly. (GA woman)

Many feel that he takes everything too personally, and when communicating he does not focus on the issues that matter. In earlier groups, Trump's use of Twitter and his impulsiveness is the most frequently cited concern is that "he could say things better" or they "wish he would stay off Twitter. This came through here as well, but there was a sense that implications are greater now in the crisis and his tendency to "fly off the handle" and be too "impulsive."

In the context of the pandemic and unprecedented division, his defensiveness and self-promotion prevents him from speaking like a leader on the issues that matter, and cuts deeper into their confidence in him than before. One conservative woman from Michigan expressed concern that he tends to think "everything is about him and looks at it from that angle."

Perceptions of Biden

Positive perceptions of Biden lacked intensity in open discussion but were nearly all centered on his personality and ability to lead in a way that unites the country — the two things it became increasingly clear they wish Trump could demonstrate. Participants were more reserved in the open discussion of Biden positives, but mentioned that he is a "good man" or "nice man."

More revealing were the private written responses where the dominant theme was his experience, temperament, and ability to listen to others. The words "experienced" and "level-headed" came through multiple times, as did comments that would focus on "bringing people together" rather than exploit "division" and that he would "listen to people."

The negatives are his age above all else and concern that he would only serve a single term and pass on the presidency to a yet unknown vice president. Indeed, some many who offered a positive assessment of Biden's personality followed up with concerns that he is simply too old and not up to the task.

While Biden's ability to listen to others and take advice is a positive, it also places greater importance on his choice of a vice president and his advisors. People are aware that he would be a one-term president, and some said his VP pick and choice of advisors would be a consideration for them. For those on the fence, the main thing holding them back is not Biden as much as the unknowns around who might carry on after him.

Winning the media battle

A few things form the foundation of the message dynamic here — briefly summarized below, followed by a deeper analysis of the reactions to some of the ads we showed to the groups.

- **Astonishing political media literacy.** These battleground state GOP voters are by now highly literate in political advertising and messaging — they are acute in identifying production elements that they believe are manipulative or pander (editing, images, people featured in the background).

- **Elevated skepticism around what is true.** The current environment has brought truth and sincerity to the top of mind. They are deeply skeptical of information that is delivered by a third party source and reject ads with a foundation requiring them to accept statements from a third party source as factual.
- **Elevated definition of sincerity.** These voters are tough in their critique of what is sincere — they reject almost anything that appears scripted, overly produced, or has a hint of partisan hyperbole. Obtuse delivery of negative information and statements, even if objectively true, undermined several of the ads on the basis that they were manipulative or just more of the divisive politics as usual that they reject.
- **Fatigue and calls for leadership.** The current environment has left both Trump's loyalists and those on the threshold of abandoning him feeling rudderless, which many admit or allude to in our opening discussion about the direction of the country. They are exhausted with the crisis, but that includes their tolerance for overtly negative ads—even if the ad supports their current view.

Two ads that resonated and why

Unite us (positive ad from Biden campaign): Both the defectors as well as many in the Trump base register a positive response to the Biden ad on leadership. Some say they do not believe it coming from him, question his ability to accomplish greater unity, and some even said they wish the message was coming from Trump. Bottom line—the message is what people are looking for right now.

I don't believe that and I sure wish that was Trump's commercial instead. (NC woman)

I don't like that he went out of his way to ensure every frame had a black person in it. Could've included others. Biden was so focused on African Americans. It felt pushed. (NC woman)

He got in there, I'm going to be a president that won't invoke people hating people. That's where I'm like, it's not the gun that kills, it's the person. I thought it was decent. He had decent delivery. There was some emotional imagery in there of people coming together but it just fell short a little bit. Like he's going to be the answer, won't be any hate, any gun, any blowing up schools. (GA woman)

How a President Leads (Lincoln Project ad about Trump): Both the defectors as well as many in the Trump base gave a positive response to the Lincoln Project ad contrasting the leadership of former Republican and Democratic presidents with Trump.

This ad worked well because it passed an important test on not being too negative, not playing into division. The tone of the ad is nostalgic, reminding people of better times, and it ends on a hopeful note. It invokes the right emotions and avoids the negative ones. There is no information being delivered by a third party, just the words of each president featured, thus no facts to be skeptical of. This is also important in how the ad depicts Trump. We know these voters believe Trump's unscripted comments reveal his genuine self, and they now "distrust what he is saying" when it seems scripted. We also know hearing him speak already drives them away, so simply letting them hear Trump's own words contrasted with the words other presidents' cuts deeper into Trump than any ad where an attack comes from another individual or text on the screen. The production is simple, and they are less likely to feel they are being manipulated by a partisan agenda.

I thought it was powerful, they're showing both Democratic and Republican presidents in moments in time with leadership where they needed to rise to the top. I don't know that I love the spin on it at the end, I don't know that was the right image to use. It definitely gave me chills. Makes you question when times are rough, what do you need in a leader. There was something about restoring economy. Yeah, I think Trump is immature, is he a bad person no, but you know, there's an element that resonated with me when I saw the imagery. (GA women)

You see the other presidents, they were involved, they seemed like they cared about the people but when it got to Trump it wasn't as caring. The police in the streets and you don't see him as involved. (MI woman)

They showed leadership and they were trying to bring people together and not divide. I thought it was a pretty upbeat commercial with true leadership being shown and difficult times from some of the times from the people in the commercial. (AZ woman)

Why other ads didn't work as well

We tested several other negative ads against both Biden and Trump, and most did not land well for a number of reasons:

1. Most were overtly negative, with narration or quotes from a third party making personal attacks on Biden and Trump.
2. Others contained too many facts, which generated skepticism or in some cases a neutral response until they could look them up. Some ads were even confusing.
3. Another issue with the factual ads, particularly on corruption or Trump weakening the rule of law, is that they generated a defensive response, with some participants basically saying, so what, he is no more corrupt than those who came before him.

Appendix A

Doubts about Trump from his defectors

Using the private chat, write down all your **doubts** about President Trump.

Participant	Response
NC woman	dictator, controlling, evil, media censorship, working with Russia
GA woman	it would serve him well to only stick to the facts when he's speaking. less on the personal attacks
GA woman	trump doubts: just showing zero leadership right now, cannot stop tweeting; immature, etc.
GA woman	Trump Negative: angered/alienated our allies, tried to eliminate pretty much anything related to human rights, lies like a rug, and is embarrassingly ignorant
MI woman	Negative Trump...His hatred toward people he doesn't agree with. His defiance against wearing a mask to protect the public. His treatment of women. His tweeting.
MI woman	Doubts- he is a horrible speaker, selfish, leadership skills - he has none, what we have been going through these last few months in the United States.
AZ woman	His divisive personality.
AZ woman	Racist, bigot. Rude womanizer. Vulgar.

Appendix B

Emails to Trump from his defectors

Please write an email to President Trump about anything you want him to know. Take your time. We will not discuss what you write.

Participant	Response
GA woman	if I could email pres. Trump, I would ask him to try harder to stick to facts in his press conferences and rallies. we need him to present as more presidential and unifying in his words and actions
GA woman	dear trump: I stand with you on SO many issues, I believe in you and know that you are a good person and a strong leader; I think you need to come back to the people at this time and take the pandemic seriously and wear a mask and have plans in place so we the public can feel more secure. And stay off twitter please:)
GA woman	Donald Trump, you are an embarrassment to this country and you need to quit talking about how much golf Obama played and resign
MI woman	Dear President Trump. I voted for you in 2016. I am ashamed to admit it. Please do what is right for this country and resign.
MI woman	Dear President Trump, You did a great job in the beginning producing jobs and producing a strong economy but I'm not sure I can vote for you again based on your lack of leadership these last few months. Also, I don't like the way you put down people. What can you do to persuade me to vote for you in November? I would need to see a big change from now until Election day. Thank you, Jennifer L.
AZ woman	Mr. president, I'm praying for you but I do not support you. you are too vulgar and divisive.
AZ woman	You have an opportunity to bring this country together, so please make it not about you, and do the right thing.