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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner
From: Stanley B. Greenberg, James Carville and Andrew Baumann

President Obama's Political Project

National survey points to change in American society and America's relation to the world

With so much of the public's attention on President Obama's economic recovery package and plans for rescuing the financial system, Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner decided to step back and ask a more enduring question: what is the president's mission and larger mandate for the country, as seen by the public.¹ The president's approval rating is now nearing 60 percent and his personal favorability is already there, but more important may be the public's emerging understanding of Obama's political project, goals and mandate.

Not surprising, 80 percent of voters say that "putting the economy on sound footing to create quality jobs that can't be outsourced and to allow industry and new businesses to prosper" is important to Obama (rating this above 5 on a 10-point scale), with 39 percent saying it is "extremely important" (giving it a top score of 10) and when forced to choose, voters say this is his top goal. About 40 percent of voters say this is one of the two most important Obama goals for themselves, about the same percentage who say it is one of the two most important for Obama. And while 60 percent of these voters support his economic recovery plan, before its passage, a cautious 40 percent said that Obama was keeping his promise to create or save 3 million jobs. A quarter volunteered that it is "too early to tell."

In an open-ended follow-up,² just as significant a number of voters volunteered that getting the economy back on track is the precondition for all of Obama's other goals:

- *"If we can't stabilize the economy, we can't move forward to accomplish other goals we have set."*

¹ This memo is based on two national surveys of 1000 likely voters conducted for Democracy Corps by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. Most data comes from the first, conducted January 26-29, 2009. Updated data on Obama's standing comes from the second, conducted February 9-10, 2009.

² After being asked to rate each of 15 possible goals for Obama on a 10-point scale, voters were asked either a closed-end follow up, in which they were forced to choose two of those same goals as most important to Obama, or an open-end follow up, in which they were asked to recall the two goals from this list that were most important.



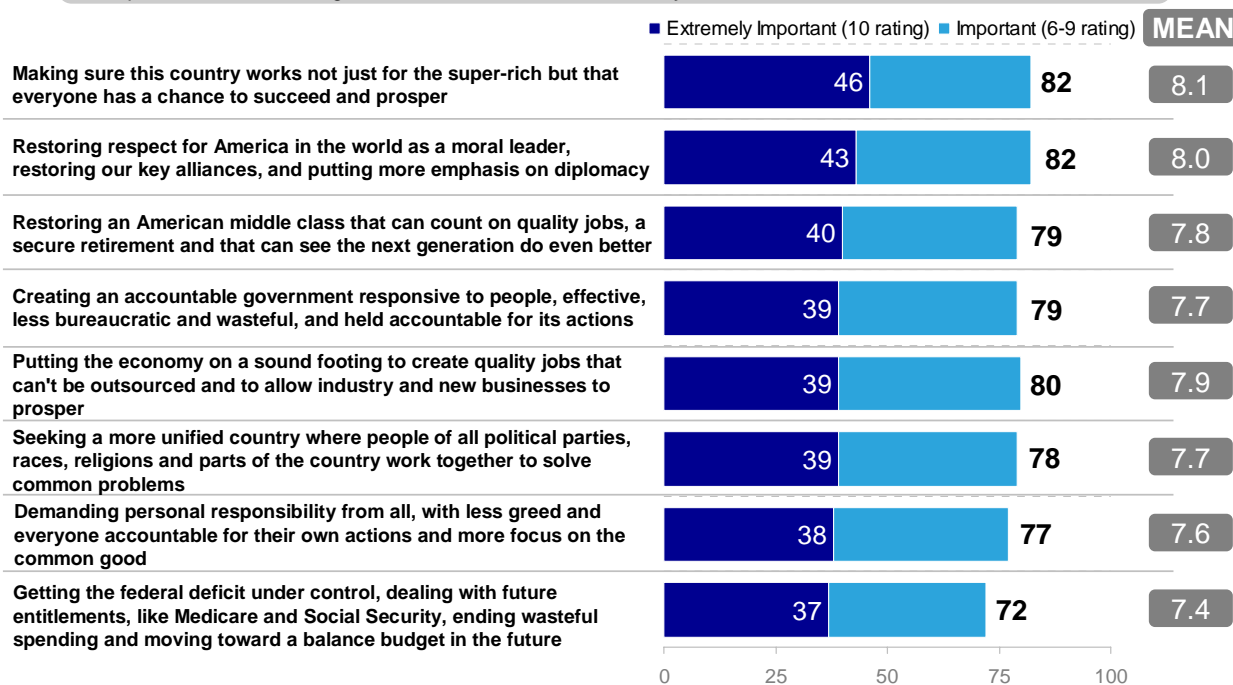
- “[Obama] has to get the economy going because nothing is possible without getting the country on a [sound] economy.”

More surprising, given the dominance of the stimulus story, is that voters see through this to other goals – which are seen as somewhat more important to the Obama project – and thus give the presidency definition beyond the recovery. “Making sure this country works not just for the super-rich but that everyone has a chance to succeed and prosper” is seen as Obama’s most important goal (82 percent rate it above 5, with 46 percent giving it a 10). Voters are looking for a new equity and movement away from an era when the “super-rich” were center-stage. Nearly as high is “restoring respect for the middle class that count on quality jobs, a secure retirement and that can see the next generation do even better.” Together, these two responses are singled out as much as the economy as Obama’s top goal. In the open-ended recall of Obama’s top goals, voters see Obama as “restoring balance,” “making everything fair,” and building “a strong middle class because that will make the economy well.”

For the public, at the heart of the Obama project is a turn away from greed and the super-rich and toward the middle class and its values, with greater opportunity, security and rising prosperity. But again, voters are still cautious on the reality of change: 40 percent believe he is keeping his promise to reform taxes to benefit the middle class instead of the wealthiest Americans, with a quarter saying it is too early to tell.

President Obama’s most important political projects

I'm going to read you a list of goals that some people have set for the new president. On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 meaning NOT IMPORTANT AT ALL, 10 meaning EXTREMELY IMPORTANT and 5 the half-way point, please rate how important each of these goals are to Barack Obama... not to yourself.





Equally surprising given the focus on the economy are the 82 percent who say that “restoring respect for America in the world as a moral leader, restoring our key alliances, and putting more emphasis on diplomacy” is important to Obama (including 43 percent who say it is extremely important). The view that he wants to change how America relates to the world is nearly as strong as the perception that he is committed to greater equity and restoring the middle class, and ranks above short-term job creation. This response underscores the scope of what voters think Obama is trying to achieve. What may be more surprising is that 60 percent believe Obama is keeping his promise to restore America’s standing in the world, with 53 percent saying he is “making progress” on that front. His election and actions, and the reaction of the world, are giving this change real concreteness with the public.

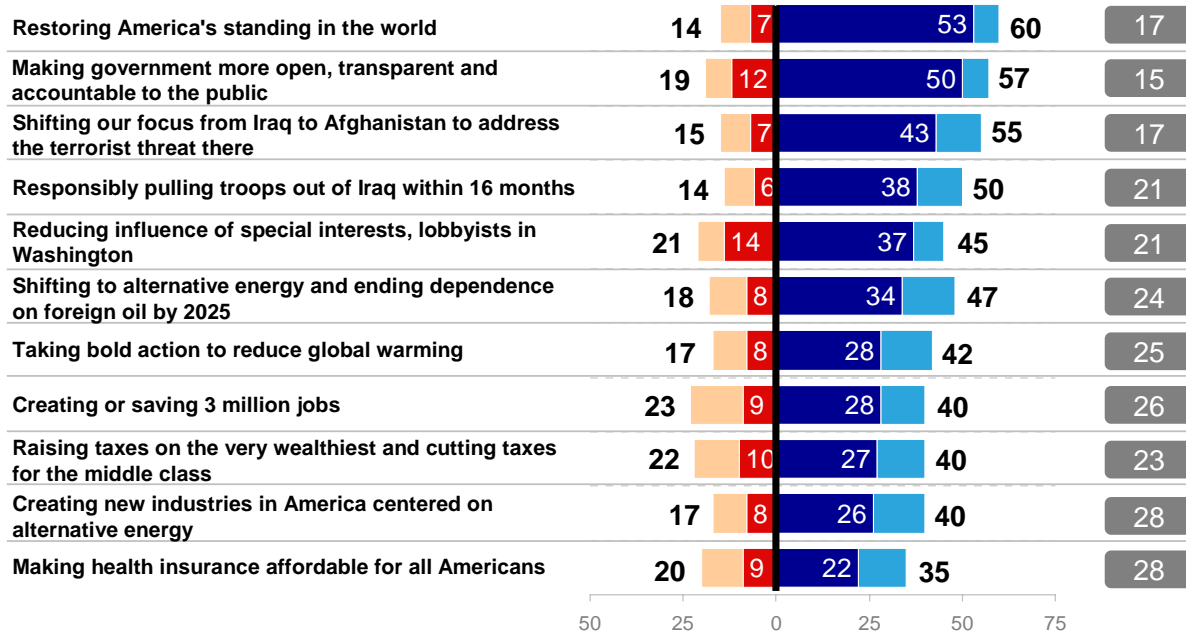
Almost 80 percent see another key dimension as important to Obama and central to his project: “creating an accountable government, responsive to people, effective, less bureaucratic and wasteful, and held accountable for its actions.” When asked to choose the most important goals for themselves, a striking 30 percent cited the demand for government accountability or personal responsibility and accountability as one of their two choices. Voters are looking for a change in the way government relates to people and here, 57 percent say Obama is trying to keep his promise with 50 percent saying he is making progress.

Obama promises and progress

I'm going to read you a list of things that Barack Obama said he intended to do if elected president. For each one, please tell me whether Obama is keeping his promise or not keeping it. (If keeping) Is Obama making progress or not making progress? (If not keeping) Is Obama trying or not trying to keep his promises?

Too Early to Tell

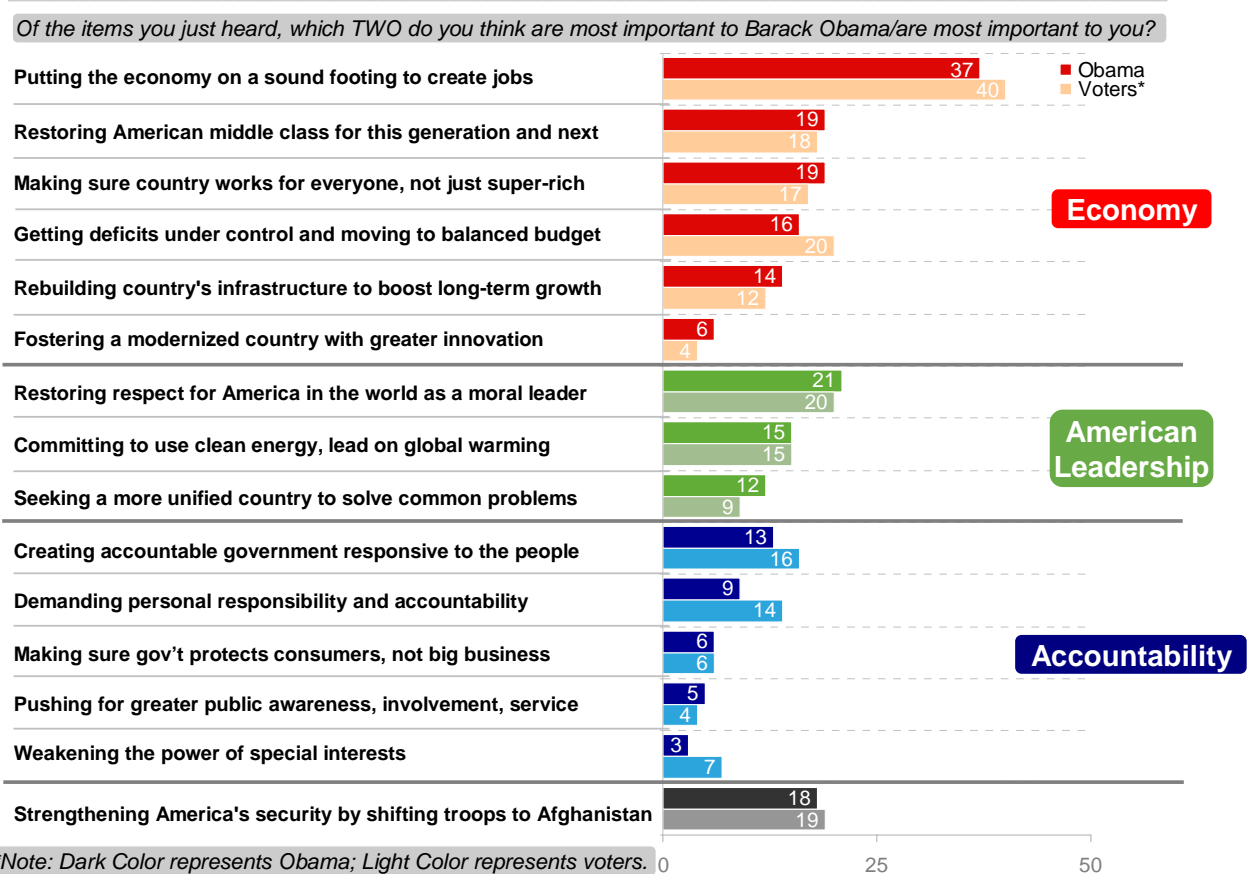
■ Not keeping, not trying ■ Not keeping, trying ■ Keeping promise, making progress ■ Keeping promise, no progress





While accountability has registered as an Obama goal and Obama has made some bold steps on lobby reform – along with some prominent exceptions – the public is less certain that Obama makes “Weakening the power of special interests in Washington so that politicians address issues important to voters, not big lobbyists” a priority. This tested at the bottom of the list of Obama goals, with just 32 percent saying it is “extremely important” to him. It is also less clear that the public ranks this as a central goal, given the other issues forming the Obama mission. However, it likely indicates that with so many other issues to deal with, voters perceive special interests as being lower on Obama’s list. Only 45 percent of this attentive public thinks he is keeping his promise to reduce “the influence of special interests, lobbyists in Washington,” and only 37 percent think he is making progress.

Obama’s and voter’s two most important goals



Another goal seen as important to Obama is “seeking a more unified country where all political parties, races, religions and parts of the country work together to solve common problems.” While Obama speaks often of this mission, it is not yet seen as one of his top priorities when voters are forced to choose; nor do a lot of voters say it is the most important goal for them.



In the current environment is not surprising that fewer voters think that central to Obama's project is "getting the federal deficit under control, dealing with future entitlements, like Medicare and Social Security, ending wasteful spending and moving toward a balanced budget in the future" (72 percent rate it as important). When forced to choose what's most important to Obama, only 16 percent cite deficit reduction – 4 points lower than voters' own priority for the goal.

It is worth noting that as the economic recovery package moved toward passage in the House and Senate, 41 percent of voters said that with the deficit over a trillion dollars, the country cannot afford the stimulus package. That bloc could rise over time, wishing for deficit reduction to be a bigger part of the Obama political project.

On a number of key policy areas and pledges, voters in these first weeks are taking more of a wait-and-see approach to what the president does. So, only 40 percent say he is keeping his promises on "creating new industries in America centered on alternative energy," and only 35 percent on "making health insurance affordable for all Americans." On both issues, 28 percent say it is too early to tell if Obama will keep that promise.

While the first weeks of the Obama presidency have focused on the first priority, getting the initial parts of Obama's economic plan into place, the public is very attentive to the larger character of the project and how it can change the American society and America's position in the world. Over 60 percent of voters say Obama and the Democrats are making progress addressing the country's problems, twice the number who say they are faltering, but that judgment and the character of the Obama political project will emerge in the struggles ahead.