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Understanding the War on Women and Other Issues

A Perspective from Disenfranchised Groups

To: Friends and Allies

From: Women's Voices. Women Vote Action Fund
Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

The Women's Voices. Women's Vote Action Fund and The Voter Participation Center convened four focus groups among different women—including women whose voices are not always heard in Washington, such as unmarried women, single mothers and women of color—to explore reactions to the Republican record on women's issues, the economy, the Ryan budget, the debate over healthcare and reproductive rights and other issues that dominate this election cycle.¹

The most striking outcome is the disconnect between the conversation going on in Washington and the conversation going on among these women.

In Washington, politicians and pundits debate the War on Women, Hillary Rosen's comments, the Ryan budget and the peccadilloes of the Secret Service. These women talk about grocery bills, surviving unemployment, deferring student loan payments and the price of gas. As one woman noted, "it used to be we talked about luxuries. Now, we just talk about survival." A huge majority of these women have no idea even how to react to the term "War on Women" ("There is a war against us?"), know nothing about the Republican budget and little about the looming health care decision in the Supreme Court.

These women, reflecting the politics of their demographic groups, trend Democratic in their politics and generally support the President, but they initially expressed little passion about the upcoming election, the stakes in this election for people like themselves, and their choices in 2012.

Their attitudes about the election changed in the groups. When presented with some basic facts, specifically detailing Republican hostility to women and the impact conservative economic programs will have on their own lives, the women become angry, politically engaged and eager to make their voices heard in November.

¹ The Voter Participation Center financed research related to perceptions about policy issues in a nonpartisan context, while Women's Voices. Women Vote Action Fund financed research related to policy positions tied to a particular party.

This memo summarizes four focus groups conducted in Boston and Pittsburgh on April 16th and 17th, 2012. The groups were composed of single mothers, women under 30, women over 50, and unmarried women under 50. Focus group findings are not statistically representative and these findings cannot be projected onto a broader population. However, many of the core conclusions of this research find support in current quantitative survey work.

Main Findings

- **Economic struggle defines the lives of most of the women in our groups.** It is impossible to overstate the primacy of the economy in these women's current thinking. While they concede some improvement, particularly in Boston, no one believes the recession is over.
- **The President faces some challenges among these voters.** The women in our groups reflect broadly the Democratic and progressive politics of their demographic. Many defended President Obama noting that he has not had time to affect real change and that the Republicans thwart him at every turn. A significant minority of these women, however, criticize the pace of change and slow improvements in the economy and identify themselves as open to alternatives. At the same time, these voters find the alternative provided by the opposition party unappealing.
- **Romney offers nothing to these voters.** While some impressions of Romney are still inchoate, many women in the groups conclude Romney is entirely disconnected from their lives. The Boston location is notable here. While a handful of women recall the Romney term generously ("He was not a bad Governor") others remember his many budget cuts that cost these women in particular dearly. Women in Pittsburgh find him an "elitist", whose main appeal is that he prevented Rick Santorum—interesting given the western Pennsylvania location of the groups—from ascending to the White House.
- **No real energy or enthusiasm attends the 2012 elections.** Two of the groups included women screened to be low propensity voters. Still, for most of the women, voting in 2012 is more a matter of habit and civic conviction than driving interest in the candidates and issues. A common reason for voting is that voting gives them credibility to complain ("if you don't vote, you can't bitch").
- **As is the case with other groups of voters, the plight of the middle class frames their approach to the economy.** They believe the middle class is declining. These women added two notable caveats to this central framework. First, a significant number of these women do not consider themselves middle class and find the message somewhat exclusive to their interest. Second, women betray growing concern here about the rising cost of living, the cost of gas in particular. As one woman noted with slight exaggeration, "pretty soon the cost of one gallon gas will exceed the minimum wage." Candidates who speak to the economic interests of these critical voters would do well to focus on the inability of wages to keep pace with the cost of living.

- **The “War on Women” is lost among most women in the groups.** The term “War on Women” is baffling and confusing to the huge majority of women in the groups and a video showing politicians (Nancy Pelosi, Barbara Mikulski, Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, etc.) referencing the “War on Women” left them even more confused (“I don’t know what they are talking about”). As a broad framework for the election, this approach has some limitations.
- **But the facts about Republican health and economic policies related to women carries great power and potential.** When presented with a list of Republican votes and positions against women, the whole atmosphere of the room changed. Voters who were ambiguous about their choices made defeating this agenda a priority. Voters who were indifferent to voting in 2012 could not wait to make their voices heard. Contraception and choice emerge as leading drivers of this narrative in our groups, but these votes also focused on changes in the Affordable Health Care Act that would again allow insurance companies to charge women higher rates than men.²
- **The Ryan budget reinforces the worst perceptions of Republicans among these voters.** These women begin the groups suspicious of both the Republican Congress and Romney. After learning about the Ryan Budget—including a defense of this approach using Ryan’s words—their worst stereotypes are reinforced. While women here, particularly older and more middle-income women, recognize the budget crisis, the credibility of this plan and its supporters are undone by the length of time it will take to reach being in the black (“I’ll be long gone by 2040”) and by the tax cuts for the wealthy.

“Now We Talk About Survival”

Many of the groups selected for this research—unmarried women, single moms, women of color, younger people in general—represent the most economically marginalized groups in our nation. More broadly, as many have reported, while the recession initially hit men harder, the recovery has been particularly weak for women as men have gained four times as many jobs as women. These economic trends are well represented in our groups.

“We don’t talk about luxuries anymore with people. Now we talk about survival.” (Single mother, Boston)

“I didn’t grow up with money. I have been working since I was 14. I didn’t go to college, but I have friends with degrees and they can’t get a job either.” (Young woman, Boston)

“You come out with school loans, and if you get a job, it will be a minimum wage job, and will not cover your loans.” (Unmarried woman under 50, Pittsburgh)

Macro-economic trends, such as rising stock prices and growth in the GDP, are irrelevant to their understanding of the economy. What matters most is what they see around them and, of course, their own personal economic situation. In this context, these women reject the notion

² Few women in the groups seemed to understand this provision is part of the Affordable Health Care Act.

that the country is out of recession. What solace they see in this economy is that some people they know have it worse.

“I haven’t seen any raise in a while, but I still have a job.” (Older woman, Pittsburgh)

“I am lucky to still be working. I see a lot of people laid off.” (Single mother, Boston)

As we shall see below, these women react viscerally to evidence of conservative attacks on their health care and reproductive choices and their autonomy as women. These attacks can not only change electoral preference but also improve turnout and participation among disenfranchised women. But progressives also need to keep in mind that unless we are talking about the economy, we are not talking to the core interest of these critical voters.

Views of the President

Barack Obama remains an inspiring figure for most of the women in these groups, particularly younger women and women of color. Above all, he conveys a sense of empathy, a belief that he cares about their problems and is trying to help them. This sets him apart still from other politicians. At the same time, their posture toward the President is largely defensive. They quickly note “change takes time,” that Obama is not solely responsible for everything that happens in his government and, most prominently, that Republicans have thwarted him at every turn.

A significant number of these women indicate less enthusiasm for voting than was the case in the past and certainly less enthusiasm for voting for Barack Obama in 2012 than was the case in 2008.

Their affection for Obama is more personal than policy driven. Obama to them represents the rare politician who really cares about people like them, who is, at minimum, trying to make a difference in their lives.

“I think Obama deserves another chance. If you look at what he has inherited, no one could have done better.” (Single mother, Boston)

“We have a very good president and I like the way he is involved.” (Unmarried woman under 50, Pittsburgh)

“This is the first president in my lifetime that has ever, ever given a speech that had anything to do with my life. I feel like the President is talking about things in my own life.” (Unmarried woman under 50, Pittsburgh)

At the same time, there is a small but notable majority who believe empathy is not enough. For them, the difference between the promises of 2008 and their current economic reality is too big a gulf to overlook. Moreover, when asked whether the President has been good for the middle class, few women rise to the President’s defense.

"I would like to see some more results. It goes back to unemployment." (Older woman, Pittsburgh)

"I cannot think of anything good, except all the soldiers coming home." (Young woman, Pittsburgh)

"I don't think he does anything for me. I am still paying a lot of taxes." (Single mother, Boston)

Fortunately for the President, the alternative provided by Romney and the Republicans at this point is not appealing to these voters. That said, the President has some work to do among these voters, particularly in terms of sharpening an economic narrative that allows these women to reconcile Obama's promise in 2008 with their current economic standing.

Nothing for You Here

Mitt Romney and the Republicans offer nothing to these voters in their eyes. They find the Governor cold, elitist and phony. They believe the Republican Congress has done nothing but block the President since the 2010 election. Even in Massachusetts, where voters are naturally more familiar with Romney, he comes off as largely indifferent to their issues and irrelevant to their lives.

"Himself. That's who he stands for." (Young woman, Pittsburgh)

"Lately I just feel like I am choosing the lesser of two evils." (Unmarried woman under 50, Boston)

"I don't think he cares about the middle class. He is so out of touch because he is rich." (Single mother, Boston)

The Republican Congress fares worse. In their eyes, the Republican Congress has accomplished nothing since reelection. Its main role is to obstruct and serve the wealthy. It is important to recognize there is a distinction between viewing a political party as *indifferent* to their priorities and a party as *hostile* to their interests. The former produces a group of voters somewhat ambiguous about their choices in 2012 and listless about voting. The latter produces an electorate that is angry, engaged, and committed to participating.

Voting in 2012

Historically, the demographic groups represented in these focus groups do not participate in our democracy to the same degree as other groups. In 2010, 12 million eligible and registered unmarried women did not vote according to census figures, for example. When asked about voting in the groups, most commit to the franchise, but their motivation for voting reflects more on habit and civic duty than on the unique stakes of this specific election cycle. The most common reason for voting is that voting gives them permission to complain about the state of things.

"Don't complain about the government if you don't vote." (Older woman, Pittsburgh)

“If you don’t vote – no complaining, you have no right to voice your opinion when you didn’t act on the one thing that allows you to have an opinion.” (Young woman, Pittsburgh)

“If you didn’t vote you can’t complain about what happens.” (Single mother, Boston)

“Voting is like our voice. The government isn’t going to read your Facebook statuses about how much life sucks.” (Young woman, Pittsburgh)

These voters are disconnected from Washington. The “War on Women” is largely undeclared in their eyes; they have little awareness that the House passed a budget that would cripple their economic interest. Relatively few of these women will find their way into the Republicans’ column. But, at this point too many of these women do not perceive real self-interest in the outcome of the election. If Democrats are going to realize their potential among these voters, that needs to change and it needs to start—as is the case with other groups—with a powerful economic message.

Middle Class Blues

While these voters, on average, struggle with a different and more precarious economic condition than other voters in the American electorate, the women in our groups share with other groups a central understanding of what is happening to our economy. Specifically, they believe the middle class is disappearing, that the wealthy and special interests are growing and that this country cannot thrive without a thriving middle class.

Participants in these groups chose between a number of statements describing the economy, including both progressive and conservative narratives.³ Two narratives that dominate this list address a disappearing middle class and rising cost of living.

	Total
The middle class is declining in this country. Regular Americans are working harder for less, while special interests and those at the top get all the breaks. This economy will not prosper without a thriving middle class.	22
The cost of living keeps going up. Gas will soon reach five dollars a gallon, groceries cost more and more, and middle class families simply can’t stretch a paycheck any further.	18
We need to do more to help people help themselves and provide more job training and investments in education and college so people can earn their way into the middle class.	9
We should help those people struggling to find work, but there has been a dramatic increase in unemployment benefits, food stamps and other welfare programs. We need to provide incentives for people to get off of welfare.	7
This country succeeds when everyone gets their fair shot and everyone pays their fair share. Right now, big corporations and oil companies are getting subsidies and tax breaks, while job training programs and other programs that help average people are being cut.	6

³ Reaction to conservative themes are analyzed below.

Many of the economic problems that we face in this country have their roots in the social issues. Forty-one percent of our children are being born out of wedlock, without a father in the picture, and studies show these children are more likely to drop-out of school, more likely to experiment with drugs, and more likely to end up on welfare.	3
Ninety-nine percent of America is still in a recession, but the one percent at the top are doing better than ever.	3
The government is getting bigger and bigger and our economy is not creating jobs. More government is not the answer and will only make the problem worse.	2
The government is getting bigger and bigger and our economy is not creating jobs. More government is not the answer and will only make the problem worse.	2
We now have the highest corporate tax rate in the industrial world and increasing regulations. We need to cut taxes and regulations to allow our economy to grow.	0

In discussing these statements, the women in the groups broadly sense that the middle class in this country is disappearing, but the most vivid and tactile economic theme is the rising cost of living.

“Cost of living. The cost of gas is \$5 a gallon and the minimum wage is \$8 an hour. That does not make sense.” (Unmarried woman under 50, Boston)

“But food is more expensive, gas is more expensive. And you don’t want to say anything because you want to hold on to your job.” (Single mother, Boston)

A handful of women in the groups find the middle class theme somewhat off-putting because they do not define themselves as middle class. This does not mean that middle-class messaging does not apply to these women; it does mean that candidates reaching out to these voters should be aware of the demographics they are targeting. One or two small changes (i.e. “...This economy will not prosper without a thriving middle class *and working class*.”) makes this problem go away easily.

“Yes, I just don’t like to hear about the middle class only. There is a whole other class that has never had the rights that the middle class is now losing.” (Unmarried woman under 50)

To engage these voters means to engage them on the economy and that means addressing, first and foremost, their concerns about a disappearing middle class. They concur, of course, that having fewer middle class jobs is bad for the country on a macro-economic level; for many voters here, the impact is more direct than that. It means fewer opportunities to climb up the economic ladder. It means that they will not have the income to keep pace with the rising cost of living.

What War on Women?

Women in the groups were asked directly if they believed Republicans were hostile to women. They were also shown a video where a series of politicians used the term “War on Women.” They react to both inquiries with blank stares. Though some recall controversy over contracep-

tion and Rush Limbaugh's vulgar comments—this played a particularly big role in the Massachusetts and the debate between Scott Brown and Elizabeth Warren—even among these leaning Democratic voters, the term “War on Women” is unfamiliar to them. This is a key example of something Washington talks about and debates, but does not penetrate the rest of the country.

“War on women – what is it, how does it relate to the job situation? I don’t understand everything that is being cut.” (Unmarried woman under 50, Boston)

“I’m still not sure what the war on women is about.” (Unmarried woman under 50, Boston)

However, when women in these groups read a list of anti-women legislation and policies, the whole atmosphere in the rooms changes. Voters who were open to voting Republican quickly changed their mind; women who were ambivalent about participating in the 2012 election could “not wait to vote” or even “get friends to vote.”

These voters find the arguments on choice and contraception the most offensive. These women could not understand a party that opposed both contraception and abortion. But other items played a role as well, particularly their position allowing insurance companies to charge women higher rates than men. This is part of the Affordable Health Care Act and arguably part of the law and health care messaging that has been under-developed over the last two and a half years.

	Total
Republicans across the country have introduced more than 1,100 bills in state legislatures restricting access to abortion in 2011 alone, including a law in one state mandating that women seeking an abortion undergo an ultrasound and be shown the ultrasound images at least 24 hours before the procedure, even if it entails undergoing an invasive procedure to get an accurate ultrasound image.	17
The Republican majority in Congress proposed a budget that would slash \$810 billion dollars over the next 10 years from Medicare and Medicaid that many women rely on for their health care.	10
Republicans in Congress attempted to redefine rape so as to deny crime victims access to emergency contraception.	10
The Republicans in Congress want to repeal the law that prevents health insurance companies from charging women higher rates than men.	8
The Republican majority in Congress passed a bill to eliminate funding for Planned Parenthood, which provides basic health care and cancer screenings to millions of American women and abortion services.	8
Even though 600,000 public service employees have been laid off in the last three years and 64 percent of them have been women, Republicans in Congress opposed a bill that would have allowed thousands of teachers and nurses to keep their jobs.	7
Republicans in Congress recently attempted to allow employers to discriminate against women by denying health care coverage for birth control for any reason.	7
Even though men are getting 80 percent of new jobs being created in this country, Republicans in Congress oppose a new law cracking down on employers who discriminate against women.	3

“That is ridiculous. It is discrimination. How can you charge more?” (Single mother, Boston)

“They don’t want abortion, but they don’t want to give you birth control.” (Young woman, Pittsburgh)

“It is completely ignorant for a man to decide if a woman got raped, whether she should have that baby or not.” (Unmarried woman under 50, Boston)

In the end, the conclusions these voters drew about the Republicans were not limited to narrow issues of choice, contraception or health care, but included broader assumptions about their preferred role of women in our culture and the perceived desire among conservatives to turn the clock back on equality.

“The Republicans have been emphasizing the debt so they can cut social programs. They want to go back to the 1920s.” (Single mother, Boston)

“They act like they know what’s best. It’s very controlling.” (Unmarried woman under 50, Boston).

As a narrative for the entire campaign cycle, the War on Women comes off as a bit narrow. Some women in the groups note that some of the economic arguments also apply to men. However, as a specific argument, the “War on Women” emerges as a powerful indictment of a Republican incumbent, specifically, and of Republicans in general. As important, it seems particularly effective in driving progressive turnout. These conclusions are vivid in these groups and emerge in recent quantitative research as well.⁴

Ryan Budget Reinforces Republican Stereotypes

Another issue that dominates Washington but does not seem to penetrate the world outside the Beltway is the Ryan budget. Outside of opposing Obama, the voters in our groups have no idea what the Republican Congress has been up to. When presented with a pair of statements, one largely reflecting the President’s recent comments on health care and another statement reflecting Paul Ryan’s more progressive defense of this budget, these participants overwhelmingly support the President.⁵

Participants concede one point to the Republicans – that there is a debt crisis in this country – but the Republican position is undermined by the length of time it takes under the Ryan budget to balance the budget and by the tax cuts for the wealthy, which these voters recognize as anti-theftical to deficit reduction. More directly, many of the programs targeted by this budget aim squarely at these voters’ economic interests and reinforce their perceptions of Republicans as indifferent to their priorities.

“By 2040 I won’t be here. I could care less.” (Older woman, Pittsburgh)

⁴ <http://www.democracycorps.com/strategy/2012/04/women-push-back-in-the-battleground/>

⁵ See Appendix for statements used in the groups.

“The poor and the elderly; they are going to suffer from everything. The higher-ups will be okay.” (Older woman, Pittsburgh)

These women are more divided on the Affordable Health Care Act. Many know this was recently litigated in the Supreme Court and a handful recognize that the individual mandate was the point of constitutional contention. Part of their reaction reflects a misperception that this law punishes people who cannot afford it. Not everyone recognizes the new law subsidizes insurance for lower income people. But a small number of women in the groups adopt more conservative positions pushing back against the notion of government requiring people to buy health insurance.

“Everyone deserves health care. It does not make sense to me to be punished for something you can’t afford.” (Unmarried woman under 50, Boston)

“I feel like everyone should have health insurance. At the same time, I don’t want someone to tell me what I can and can’t do with my insurance.” (Older woman, Pittsburgh)

The Ryan budget aims squarely at the economic interests of many of these women. It reveals Republican priorities and these women’s place within those priorities. Politics around health care, even among this base group, is more complicated and progressives would do well to focus more on the law’s impact among women—requiring insurance companies to charge women the same rates as men—than attempting to debate the individual mandate.

Appendix

Pairs:

Disguised as a deficit reduction plan, this budget is really an attempt to impose a radical vision on our country. If passed, nearly 10 million college students would see their financial aid cut and investments in clean energy technologies that reduce our dependence on foreign oil would be cut by nearly a fifth. Over 200,000 children would lose their chance to get an early education in the Head Start program. Medicare as we know it would be over. The wealthy would get a tax cut, while the middle class would be stuck with the bill, declining opportunity and a growing gap between rich and poor.

We have a debt crisis in this country. Every child born in America today begins with a \$30,000 share in the national debt. The people who need government the most, people who are poor and elderly, are the ones who get hurt the first and the worst if we have a debt crisis. By getting our fiscal house in order, we prevent a crisis from happening. The current Medicare system is not sustainable without reform. We need to reform these programs and get people off of welfare and back to work. We need economic growth policies so we can actually have a growing economy with job creation and economic opportunity for the people who've never seen it before.