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Re-Energizing Unmarried Women

Focus Group Results among Unmarried Women

To: Friends of the Voter Participation Center

From: Voter Participation Center

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Unmarried women – who make up more than a quarter of America's voting-eligible population -- today feel disengaged and alienated from politics and that threatens their participation in the next election, according to new focus group research. The perceived failure of the new president to fulfill a key campaign promise — to change Washington — leaves these unmarried women appalled with both parties and politics in general. Few doubt the President's intentions. However, most doubt his effectiveness and this leads them to the broader conclusion that it may not matter who they send to Washington. The economy hasn't gotten better in their view and the government has become increasingly dysfunctional and embarrassingly ineffective. These women stand by the President for the most part, but are in a far different place than they were in 2008. As one woman memorably noted, she will vote for the President, but will not put his bumper sticker back on her car this year.

The good news is that a message speaking directly to their economic concerns and to the plight of the middle class re-opens them to the person and, to some extent, the process. Some begin to believe politics can matter again.

The Voter Participation Center (VPC) partnered with Democracy Corps and Finding Common Ground to produce a series of focus groups exploring common values among people of color, youth, affluent suburban voters and unmarried women. This memorandum isolates one population — unmarried women — and focuses more on their mood and level of political engagement a year before Election Day. These are focus groups and not projectable to the larger population of unmarried women in the country, but the sentiments we heard are broadly consistent with recent survey results and sentiments in other groups in this project.

Many women in our groups remain resilient in the face of difficult economic circumstances. Through networks of family, friends and, notably for some, government help, they persevere and continue to be hopeful about the direction of their lives. That relative optimism, however, does not extend to their nation or their government in Washington. These voters believe the system has broken down to the point of inoperability, has done little or nothing to help them or people like them and, most notably, that elections will not likely change this reality.

Neither political or ideological side provides an answer. These women, who all supported Obama in 2008 and lean Democratic in partisanship, hold the Republicans more culpable for what is wrong with Washington. But the problem also seems to them bigger than partisanship; it also reflects a system that has become almost irretrievably corrupted by big-money politics and insider deals.

The relationship these voters have with President Obama is complicated and careful scrutiny matters here because the conclusions they draw about this President speak directly to their disengagement from politics. Each of these voters recalled the energy and excitement of the 2008 campaign, the sense of connectedness that Obama, unique among politicians, established with them. He has not lost this. These voters still believe the President fights for middle class people like them and has their interests at heart. However, they also believe the President has been thwarted, abused and disrespected. However fair these comments, they do not only reflect poorly on the Republicans, but also reflect poorly on Obama's prestige and strength as President. Some women also believe that the candidate who set out to change Washington ended up being changed by Washington, as Obama has had to "blur the lines" to get anything done. Drawing the next conclusion — that it does not matter who is sent to Washington — is a small, logical step.

Some of this cynicism dissipates after these women hear messaging that puts the plight of the middle class — in other words, people like them—at the center of the economic and political debate in the country. At the conclusion of the groups, several women report feeling "reconnected" to the President and more cognizant of the stakes in this election cycle. But the President and other candidates on both sides face a far more incredulous audience this time out. Some women in the group believe the President specifically and politicians in general cannot deliver for the middle class, regardless of how hard they might try.

Survivor Tales

Like many other unmarried women throughout the country, the unmarried women we talked to in Raleigh are living on the edge.¹ Several participants are unemployed or under-employed; one, a real estate agent, obviously had an early taste of the recession. Economic hardship afflicts both college and non-college educated participants in our groups. The health care issue in particular looms large as many women either lack insurance or will soon run out of insurance. Notably, these women seem well aware that the benefits from the Patient Protection Act will not kick in until 2014, a little late for some.

"I've got three grown daughters that are all married and seven grandchildren and I have more uninsured family members than I do insured family members." – Non-College Educated

"I have several friends – we kind of find each other. They're all around my age or older and unable to find work and end up having to settle for basically minimum wage jobs" – Non-College Educated

"I know that my son is on insurance now because of that program, because he's in college, and so he's on my ex's insurance, but people don't really see it. I don't see any of it

¹ Unmarried women only earn 57 cents for every dollar that married men earn, Current Population Survey, 2008

because it won't affect me for – I don't know even know what year that it would actually – 2014. 2014, I got a while.” – Non-College Educated

“I'm not happy with my employment. I'm a realtor, so my employment is sucking right now. Yeah. So I'm not happy with that.” – College Educated

“I work for the county, and we haven't had a raise in three years. And I work for the school system, and I feel like we keep going backwards.” – College Educated

“As an individual, I have always had my medical paid for by the county, by the school system. And this is the first year they're starting to take money out of our paychecks just for our own individual health care. It may be small, but something tells me where it's small, it will begin to build. And the deductibles are going up, the copays are going up, and they're charging us. And that, to me, is getting to be incredible. Everybody used to look at your state jobs and your county jobs and all this – that's where the great benefits are. Benefits are dwindling, so that they won't be as attractive to people anymore.” – College Educated

More interesting are the strategies these women have developed for surviving our tough economic times. By relying on informal networks of friends and family, these unmarried women have gotten by and some manage even to thrive. A number of women, poignantly given the current budget debate, rely directly on government assistance, but for a majority, their personal networks have allowed a sense of hope and optimism, even joy, to build in their lives despite everything.

“I've been getting some help from my family, my parents, financial help. I am getting some help from the government right now because I'm involved in a program to help save my house. So I'm starting to find these other avenues out there but I have some really good friends. And I guess in general, I always have this out there hope that things will turn around. I don't know how I would exist if I didn't have that.” – Non-College Educated

“I live with another person, we're not married to each other but we share his home and yeah, we're helping each other. It's a little bit of symbiotic relationship, really. It's an expensive place for me to live, my income and it's helping him with his meager income and both of us are getting on in years and just making plans to make things more self-sufficient and that is something to look forward to. To learn to do something new, first of all, that benefits me and that helps me plan for the future, that's what makes me optimistic, to have a partner in that where both of us are going to be in the same boat.” – Non-College Educated

“For me, it's my family and friends. And I've helped – like I had a sister that was going into foreclosure, and I helped her get out of that. I think you're kind of getting tighter, for me anyway, I find that my relationships are a lot tighter. And you know, I'm getting a lot of calls from family members that are in different parts of the country, because everyone's kind of struggling.” – College Educated

Undermining Democracy

While these women can find hope and optimism in assessing their own lives, they reserve little hope or optimism for their country or government. Washington is not simply dysfunctional, but embarrassing.

“Washington is kind of scary. I don’t feel like they’re up there doing the things that are good for the country” – Non-College Educated

“I personally am embarrassed by both parties. I think they equally throw mud at each other.” – Non-College Educated

“It’s a broken system” – Non-College Educated

“It is just an all out war. And not a war with another country but in our own country, in the government.” – Non-College Educated

“I think generally, that a lot of people are fed up with politicians right now. I mean, look at the protests that are going on on Wall St. and all over the nation, you know? People are sick and tired of politics or politicians. I would personally like to see somebody – a really good businessperson get in there.” – College Educated

“I think they’re being very childish. In the house and so forth. It reminds of pre-school. The way they’re like – I’m not going to play. Back and forth. That’s why a lot of things aren’t getting done, it’s just like no way am I going to change my mind. It’s very, very childish.” – Non-College Educated

Participants find the Republicans broadly culpable for the dysfunctional governance, but not solely responsible. They also see systematic barriers in our government that precludes Washington from acting on their behalf or even doing anything at all. This perception leads to a dangerous conclusion: elections may not matter, whatever “change agent” we send to Washington will be unable to deliver.

The biggest difference to emerge between the college educated group and the non-college group is that non-college women approach the next election cycle as a habitual, civic obligation, rather than an opportunity to make their voices heard. They do not understand how fundamental and vital the debate over the economy and the role of government will be. College educated women have a greater sense of what is at stake next November.

“It’s just another election to me.” – Non-College Educated

“Every election is an important election.” – Non-College Educated

“We’re at a pivotal point, and yet we can go either way.” – College Educated

This is a group of likely voters with a rich vote history. Almost all of them said they were almost certain to vote in November. But another group of unmarried women, a group with a more mixed record of voting, likely would share the same skepticism about the ability of the national election to change things as the women we talked to here. They have not been habituated to voting every two years and the cynicism indicated above will diminish turn out among lower propensity voters if not checked in the next 12 months. Notably, current tracking of unmarried women in survey work already shows significantly lower levels of political interest and engagement among these voters.

Republicans Fail to Inspire

The President (see below) is struggling to keep these voters politically engaged, but the Republicans are having an even tougher time. These voters react poorly to the Republicans generally and Republican candidates in particular. This outcome is not surprising for a group of 2008 Obama voters, but the group included a number of Independent women who “don’t vote the party” whose comments on the Republicans are no more edifying.

Two broad themes emerge in their reaction. The image of the Republicans is *small*. They have a narrow vision of the country, they advocate for a small subset (the wealthy mostly and big business) of American voters and they tend to be narrow-minded on issues of race and LGBT rights. They also find the Republicans *stale*. They hear in the Republican messaging the same rhetoric Reagan used 30 years ago and the same philosophy George W. Bush used to govern the country less than five years ago.

It does not sound like change.

“No, I mean, I just felt like I was hearing blah, blah blah” (reacting to Perry ad)- Non-College Educated

“Any progress we’ve made in gay marriage would go complete the opposite way.” – College Educated

“I think we would have George W. again.” – College Educated

“I think a lot of it stems from where I worked for many years. It was a Republican law firm. And I didn’t like how things were run in that little world. It went against my grain a lot. And so I just see it, you know, magnified in Washington. I think they’re very, very selfish. It’s not about America, it’s about them and their pockets, and their family, and their jobs, and their money. And their good ol’ boys who they repay” - College Educated

Participants also believe Republicans stand up for the wealthy and big business, definitely not people like them.

“I’ve always pictured the Republicans as the ones that look out for the rich. That they take care of rich people, they do things for rich people.” - Non-College Educated

“They look out for the wealthy.” - Non-College Educated

Participants in Raleigh were shown a video of Romney talking and a two-minute Perry ad from his website. The exposure did not reengage these voters in our political system. These unmarried women found Romney overly “slick” and somewhat plastic. They doubted he had any further convictions beyond getting elected.

“I felt like he was just up there to look good for himself.” – Non-College Educated

“He’s fighting for whatever office he’s running for.” – College Educated

These voters credit Perry for sponsoring a well-produced ad and some of the messaging in that ad breaks through. This ad begins with a litany of economic problems which he lays at the foot of the President. A handful find this a fair critique, but also note the previous president is culpable as well. Notably, in this context, these voters’ main criticism of Perry is that he reminds them too much of Bush. The issue here is not simply Texas, but that Perry’s swagger and simplistic approach to problems also echo the 43rd President.

“I don’t think Perry will ever make it because he’s too much like Bush” – Non-College Educated

“Conservative to the core.” – College Educated

“There’ll be more tax breaks for the rich, there’ll be more tax breaks for corporations – the military will get out of control. We’ll lose our individual rights.” – College Educated

Disappointing and Disrespected

In 2008, Barack Obama inspired these voters like no other candidate in their lives. These voters believed *candidate* Obama cared deeply about middle class people like themselves. For them, he was an instrument of middle class progress who would help make their own lives better. He persuaded them that participating in politics would generate solutions that worked for them. *President* Obama in their eyes still cares deeply about the middle class, but is not capable of improving their lives or advancing the middle class.

Many of these voters are committed to voting for Obama. But they will not carry the same enthusiasm for the President they carried last time out. One Obama voter noted that she just got her 2012 Obama bumper sticker in the mail, but will not put it on her fender.

“But I will say, yesterday I got an Obama bumper sticker in the mail, and I looked at a friend of mine and I said, ‘I’m not putting it on’.” – College Educated

“That he hasn’t given up on us. And even though he’s been browbeaten and bullied, he still gets it and he’s still working for us.” – College Educated

“What’s disappointing to me is the reason – I feel, he can’t start creating change – what’s disappointing is the dance he has to do to even get something on the table and get it discussed. I feel like he, his whole group is spending so much time trying to have positive PR or combat the negative PR – the battle they’re fighting doesn’t have anything to

do with the promises they made. The battle they're fighting has to do with everybody who has become an obstacle to the progress." – Non-College Educated

"I feel like he has tried to stand his ground, and then he showed what it was like to give a little bit, and then they ram him and say, "OK, we want more." And it's just – he has no choice in a lot of it." – College Educated

The image of Obama that emerges is akin to a quarterback without pass protection. He might have skills, he might be trying, his heart might be in the right place, but he can't be effective lying on the ground. These voters criticize the Republicans for knocking the President down, for being disrespectful and abusive, for blocking him at every turn. Nonetheless, the President's standing also suffers as a result. A number of women note that Bill Clinton had more fight in him. Others compare him to Jimmy Carter, another President with the right intentions, but insufficient impact.

"This beat-down President who's been bullied and probably horrible things have been said to him." – College Educated

"No president has ever had to deal with such disrespect, in the office. Blatant disrespect and racism." – Non-College Educated

"I tend to look at it as, he got into office and he went into the schoolroom and he's like the new kid on the block and he wants everyone to like him. We watched him move a lot more towards the middle and I personally, did not move with him. So that in itself was a disappointment for me anyway. I think for a number of other people. I think it's that kind of like wanting to be liked thing and that's not his job and I think that he's never going to have the charisma of Bill Clinton, no matter how hard he tries. So I think he should just skip that part of it and just work harder and go back to some of those things that he really said that he would get to." – Non-College Educated

Other women argue that the candidate who set out to change Washington ended up having Washington change him. They criticize the President for "blurring the lines" and failing to fulfill a number of key campaign promises. These voters appreciate health care reform, but also believe this law has, so far, done little to improve their ability to keep or afford health insurance.

"You know, he's gotten a little slick, and I don't really like slick Obama." – College Educated

"That's why I didn't donate – because if I actually got to sit in a room or a dinner and try to carry on a conversation with him, you know, I wouldn't know where to start. Because other than the jobs plan that who knows if it's going to get passed or not, you know, health care is meh. You know, not what it was supposed to be, I don't think." – College Educated

"I'm really disappointed in the whole health care program. It's a big plus that it actually happened because many years before that a lot of other people tried and it never got off the ground but I think what it did, he just turned off so many people by it". – Non-College Educated

“Like closing down Guantanamo Bay. I mean, that was like a big thing. My son went out the minute he said that, my son said, “I’m going to go work for that guy.” Because American’s don’t torture our enemies – and that’s what’s happening now in Guantanamo. So he went out there and said, “Mom, it’s going to be closed, it’s going to be closed.” Well, it’s still open. So when the Obama camp called him and said, “Do you want to help,” he said, “No, I’m not going to do that.”– College Educated

In light of these comments, and similar comments from prior groups, it is significant that these voters have both noticed the President’s new assertiveness in marketing his jobs bill and budget fight and applaud the President for taking the fight to the Republicans. This new posture by the President finds broad support in these focus groups.

“I’ve seen him toughen up a little bit. I’ve seen him, especially through the last go around with the budget, use some strong language. I’ve seen him recognize opposing viewpoints and acknowledge them and it seems to me like he’s trying to blur lines. Set an example, I guess. But he seems to have toughened up a little bit.” – Non-College Educated

“I think he was trying to compromise and now I think he’s gotten tired of hitting a brick wall and now he’s saying all right, well here’s my stance. Take it or leave it. Like with this job bill, he was all about, Let’s work together, let’s compromise and then finally was like, all right, you don’t want to compromise, you don’t want to work together, here’s my proposal, take it.” – Non-College Educated

These women believe the President has proven he can take a punch; he still needs to prove he can throw one. Some of these women, a minority, are open to voting against Obama simply to break the gridlock in Washington.

“I’m independent, but I’m so tired of hearing people being, “I’m a democrat, so I’m always thinking this way,” or “I’m a republican, so I’m always thinking this way.” So I actually – I’ve been watching Chris Christie – that man is awesome.” – College Educated

“I support him (Obama) but I’m not definitely going to vote for him. I’m open to hear what anybody has got to say. “ – Non-College Educated

Two areas emerge that breaks this cynicism. The first is the positive response to Obama’s assertiveness on the jobs bill and budget. They react well when they see a candidate fighting for something that is relevant in their lives. The second is their reaction to messaging that puts the middle class at the center of the political and economic debate in this country.

Real Class Warfare

The starting point for voters’ experience in this economy is the plight of the middle class. This is a reality these voters have experienced first-hand. Some are unemployed. Others work in real estate or work in public service and have seen their sector of the economy contract in recent years. Wages diminish, costs go up, and the ability of these voters to remain in the middle

class—or aspire to the middle class—grows more difficult. The political system seems both indifferent and ineffective in framing a solution.

A political and economic narrative for the President that starts here finds traction among these women. In fact, in one group, every participant in the room gave this message the highest possible rating.

America's strength has always been built on a rising middle class. You worked hard and you could have confidence that America would take care of you. We saw rising incomes, strong families, more people owning a home – and more and more Americans working so their kids would do better and get a good education. Hard work and responsibility paid off. But the middle class has been smashed. People haven't seen a real raise in a long time and the economic crisis has left people on the edge. Getting the middle class back has got to be our nation's focus. So, let's keep our money in education, get health care costs down and make sure Medicare and Social Security is there for them. The congressional Republicans say we have to end Medicare and transfer costs to retirees, because we can't raise taxes on the wealthiest and oil companies. That's not the right course. We must never lose sight of the goal that all Americans can succeed and achieve the American dream.

"I definitely think I feel like his passion, like I've reconnected with him, you know? Because the scattered feeling that we've gotten from reading some of it, what I got from reading some of this- now I feel like this is the passion and the focus that I voted for to begin with." – College Educated

"No. In fact, I feel a lot more positive about him after the last two hours. That he hasn't given up on us. And even though he's been browbeaten and bullied, he still gets it and he's still working for us." – Non-College Educated

Interestingly, one message that did not work as well is a specific pitch aimed at women. Many of the women in these groups live in single-income households; issues like pay-equity and insurance discrimination should disproportionately impact these single women. But some women push back, noting that the recession has been hard on men too.

"That kind of turned me off from the whole statement. Everybody is so focused on women's rights and equality for women, we're kind of losing focus on the men too. Granted we should all be considered equal when it comes to job and pay and things like but if you look at family life, men really got it tough." – Non-College

"There's more stay at home dads than there are stay at home moms. The dads are starting to take that parental role because the women are being able to get the jobs, they are in – and they're getting higher pay jobs than the men are." – Non-College

Identity politics, per se, is an ineffective approach, at least among these women.

Conclusion

The single women we talked to in Raleigh were articulate and well informed. Many are struggling economically, but despite that, remain hopeful and optimistic about their lives. Unfortunately, they do not see much help from their government or a political recourse for their frustration. Washington to them is dysfunctional, corrupt, infantile and, most poignantly, irrelevant to their lives. Although they love the President and see some things to admire in the Republican candidates, they do not believe any candidate, or either party, is capable of delivering meaningful change. Out of habit and duty, they may vote, but without the conviction that their vote will make a real difference. Other unmarried women, similarly disengaged from politics, but less committed to the franchise, will not vote.

The answer is a greater focus on the plight of the middle class, as well as these women's lives. The 2012 election needs to get personal for them, and fast.