

MEMORANDUM

To: Interested Parties
From: Karen Finney, DNC Communications Director
Mike Gehrke, DNC Research Director
David Boundy, DNC Political Director
Date: March 28, 2008

Re: Focus Group Research on John McCain

Our recently completed focus group discussion sessions among swing voters in Minnesota and West Virginia indicate that Senator John McCain is a candidate who, in many important respects, is seriously out of sync and out of step with the characteristics and priorities that voters are seeking in a president this year.

While voters have some broad sense of Senator McCain's personal history, they readily acknowledge that they know little about his positions and record on the issues they care about the most—especially the economy and health care. When voters hear what Senator McCain has said and done on those issues, they see someone who has a backward looking approach and who is badly out of touch with the realities average people face in their lives today. **They certainly do not see Senator McCain as the departure they are looking for from the policies and direction of the Bush Administration.**

Particularly unsettling to voters are some of the following aspects of Senator McCain's record:

- His recent votes against the expansion of the SCHIP program.
- His opposition to the current Medicare prescription drug program on the basis that it gives too many benefits to too many seniors.
- His support for changing the tax treatment of employer-provided health benefits as a component for funding health care for low-income individuals.
- His support for free trade agreements and favorable trade treatment for China.
- His view, stated during the primary campaign, that while today Americans are facing tough economic times the country is better off economically than it was eight years ago.
- His slowness to call for urgent action to deal with the housing finance situation.
- His past admissions of knowing less about the details of economic policy than about national security issues.

Women panelists in the focus groups reacted surprisingly strongly to the fact that Senator McCain opposes requirements for health plans to provide contraceptive coverage and favors abstinence-only sex education. Even among women who described themselves as pro-life, those aspects of Senator McCain's record cast him as someone who is "unrealistic," "out of touch," and "stuck in the past." Many of the women in the groups were resentful when they learned that Senator McCain favors overturning *Roe vs. Wade*, and were disappointed because they expected him to be more moderate on this issue.



Our focus group sessions had several panelists who were ambivalent about what the United States should do next in Iraq, but even these panelists were alarmed by the way Senator McCain has positioned himself on this issue. Specifically, panelists broadly reject Senator McCain's assertion that "the greatest threat this nation faces is radical Islamic extremism." While they certainly see this as a significant question, they certainly do not see it as the greatest threat facing our country today, or even the most important security threat. Focus group panelists throughout these sessions make it clear that they do not want another president like George W. Bush who will put the war in Iraq above all other national priorities. John McCain provides a lot of cues to these voters that he would be very much like President Bush in this respect.

Perhaps the biggest threat to John McCain that emerged from our focus groups is the damage he inflicted on his "independent" image and reputation for "straight talk" by shifting his positions to make them more acceptable to the conservative wing of his party. For example, panelists believe Senator McCain is wrong on the substance to switch from opposing the Bush tax cuts in the past to supporting them now, but they are even more concerned by what this switch says about his core character. On the issue of immigration, Senator McCain now appears to have the worst of all worlds. Nearly all voters find something to dislike about one of his two recent positions on illegal immigration—his original support for comprehensive immigration reform that included a pathway to citizenship, or his more recent rejection of that position for an "enforce the borders first" stand. But the fact that he switched on this, as well as on taxes, closing the gun show loophole, along with other changes of heart, all lead voters in the focus groups to view Senator McCain as just another politician and someone far more "wishy-washy" than the leader they thought he might have been when he ran for president in 2000.

Of course, efforts now by Senator McCain to move back to the middle for the general election are likely to be seen in a more skeptical light by voters, and will become more fuel for the continued erosion of what was once John McCain's main selling point.

