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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Women's Voices Women Vote Action Fund

From: Stan Greenberg, James Carville, Erica Seifert, and Scott Tiell

State of the Union 2014: At critical juncture, President makes major gains

Dial testing and follow-up focus groups with 44 swing voters in Denver, Colorado show that President Obama's agenda for a "year of action"—expressed through new policies for energy, pay equity, jobs, and education—was well-received by voters.¹ The President made impressive gains on his personal favorability, improving from net -2 (48 percent warm, 50 percent cool) to net +27 (64 percent warm, 37 percent cool.) On this key metric—voters' personal feelings toward the President—he clearly won our audience in Denver.

There is much here to commend the President's performance. He made major gains on having good plans for the economy, looking out for the middle class, and looking out for the interest of women. And in focus groups following the speech, voters gave him high marks on his push for paycheck fairness, minimum wage, education, student loans, and job training. Even Republicans in our audience responded positively to Obama's plan for paycheck fairness.

As voters told us in follow-up focus groups, they were skeptical of the President heading into this speech. But his heavy emphasis on improving the economy at the pocketbook level—especially for women—won these voters over. The president made major gains on these key economic metrics and on looking out for the interests of women.

¹ Based on dial testing focus group research on January 28, 2014, by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps and Women's Voices Women Vote Action Fund. Research was among 44 swing voters in Denver, Colorado, using Perception Analyzer by Dialsmith. Additional methodology information can be found at the conclusion of this memo.



Measures (Among Total)	Pre-Speech	Post-Speech	Shift (Post – Pre-Speech)
Has Good Plans for the Economy: Total Describes Well	29	57	+28
Looks out for the Interests of Women: Total Describes Well	45	71	+26
Issues Facing Working Women and Working Families: More Confident in Obama than Republicans	52	73	+21
Looks out for the Middle Class: Total Describes Well	44	64	+20
Obama Thermometer Rating: Total Warm	48	64	+16
Has Realistic Solutions to the Country's Problems: Total Describes Well	37	53	+16
New Ways to Get to Better Jobs that Pay More: More Confident in Obama than Republicans	46	61	+15
Women's Issues: More Confident in Obama than Republicans	59	68	+9
Barack Obama Job Approval: Total Approve	50	59	+9
Strong leader: Total Describes Well	53	59	+6



The President did what he needed to do on the most important measure—these voters in Denver left the speech feeling much more optimistic about President Obama’s direction than they were a few short months ago. As always, they remain concerned about Washington’s ability to get things done.

The President also appealed to the voters he most needed to bring back—unmarried women. This critical group—who were a quarter of the electorate in 2012 and gave two thirds of their votes to the President—have held back from supporting the President and Democrats recently. Democrats will need their votes—and strong turnout—in 2014. The President’s rousing call for paycheck fairness was one of the highlights of the night, driving unmarried women in the group off the charts on the dial meter.

The Middle Class and the Economy

It is clear that the President hit many of the right notes on the economy in this speech. He made major gains on “having good plans for the economy” and “looking out for the middle class.” At the outset, just 29 percent said the President had good plans for the economy—two thirds said he did not. After the speech 57 percent said he had good plans for the economy—a net 28 point shift. At the outset of the speech, just 44 percent in our group believed he was looking out for the middle class. Following the speech, 64 percent said he is looking out for the middle class. In addition, Obama gained 15 points on “new ways to get to better jobs that pay more.”

Voters responded most positively to the President’s calls to raise the minimum wage. Participants from all parties reacted favorably to the President’s statement, “no one who works full time should ever have to raise a family in poverty.” Lines among Democrats and unmarried women spiked to 80 and Republican lines jumped to 60. And when the President said, that he would raise the minimum wage among federal employees, Democrats and unmarried women spiked over 80 on our dial meter.



Americans understand that some people will earn more than others, and we don't resent those who, by virtue of their efforts, achieve incredible success. **But Americans overwhelmingly agree that no one who works full time should ever have to raise a family in poverty.**

In the post-speech focus groups, participants said,

He genuinely cares.

He did address people like me—those of us who have kids, own homes, pay taxes and are in bad economic situation.

If it happens in more states and just a few companies, we won't see as many children struggle – at least make some ends meet instead of bugging mom and dad.

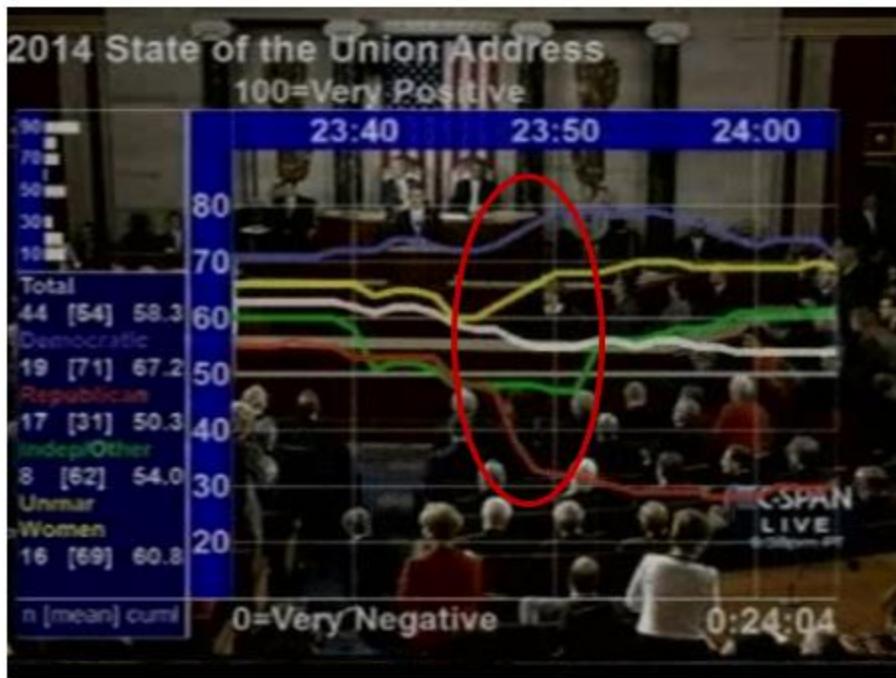
One woman mentioned that she took one of these low wage jobs at Toys-R-Us for the holiday season to help her family get by and to save money on gifts for her children.

They understand that it is difficult for the President to put his agenda in action—and worry deeply about dysfunction in Washington. However, they appreciated that the President sounded willing to fight for them tonight—despite the odds.

He knows that's [minimum wage] going to be a fight.

[He wants to] *do something. Lead. That was his promise...to me there's so many things he could do to see dramatic and tangible change.*

They are looking for that leadership as Washington struggles to restore unemployment insurance for the 1.6 million whose benefits expired at the end of last year. On our dial meter, the lines for Democrats, unmarried women, and independents rose with the President's demand that Congress restore these benefits. The only lines to fall during this portion of the speech were among Republicans in our audience.



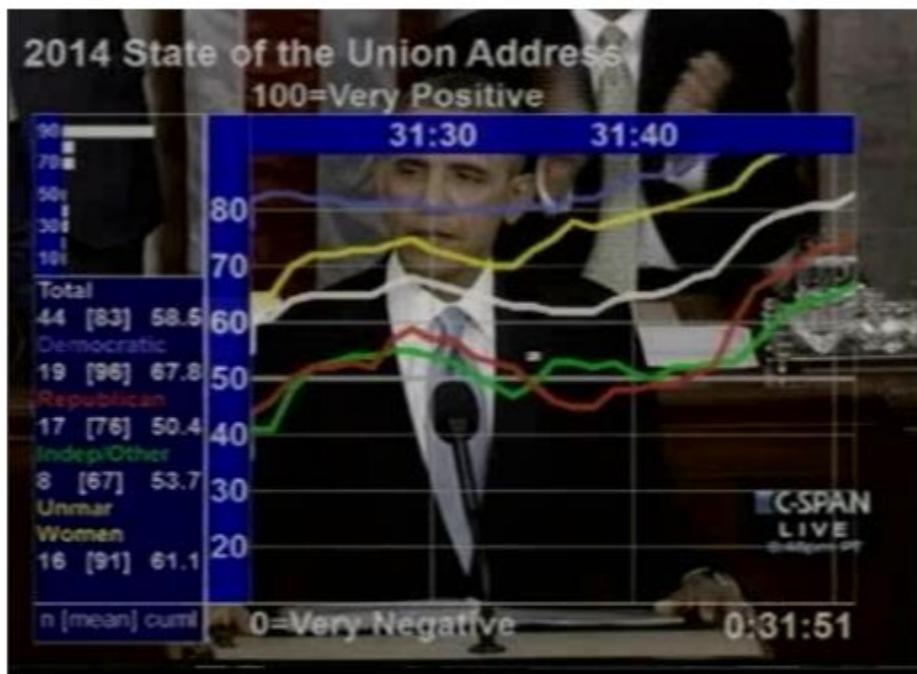
I'm also convinced we can help Americans return to the workforce faster by reforming unemployment insurance so that it's more effective in today's economy. But first, this Congress needs to restore the unemployment insurance you just let expire for 1.6 million people.

In follow up focus groups, this issue hit very close home for some participants. One woman was thankful that her husband found a job just when his unemployment benefits were about to expire. Another said that if the President could demand one thing and make it happen right away, it should be to "override the decision to take away emergency unemployment benefits." One woman said, "We're not asking for a lot of money. If we don't do something immediately, more people will end up on welfare." As the President said, Congress should "give these hardworking, responsible Americans a chance."



Paycheck Fairness

Paycheck fairness was another high note for these respondents. The President's strong support for paycheck fairness was met with intense and near universal approval. The Democrats' line (blue) and unmarried women's line (yellow) spiked off the chart, ending up near 100 on our scale. Even Republicans (red line) reached well over 75.



Today, women make up about half our workforce. But they still make 77 cents for every dollar a man earns. That is wrong, and in 2014, it's an embarrassment. A woman deserves equal pay for equal work.

The President's recognition that "when women succeed, America succeeds" felt important and personal, especially to the unmarried women in our group. Following the speech, unmarried women said this was one of the most important moments in the speech and made them feel like the President "got it."

[He 'gets it' because] he has daughters who could be in a position of having student loans and lower pay. They're women and I think he recognizes those issues.

I think he had good ideas, he's just now getting them to work, I like the fact that he brought out women. We women need to be empowered.



I liked that he touched on the issue of women as well, the difference in pay grade. That's a huge issue and I was pleased he brought it up.

[The most important thing he said was] That if a woman does the same work we should get the same pay.

I grew up an only child...single mother...and you know like my dad didn't help as much. She was paying the majority of the stuff. So she should make as much as a man.

It seems like [the economy] is taking a lot longer [to recover] for women.

Education

Voters across the spectrum agreed with the President's assertion that one of the best investments we can make is in high quality education for kids. "The problem is we're still not reaching enough kids, and we're not reaching them in time. That has to change." In response to this, dials spiked to 75 overall and 90 among Democrats, with both independents and Republicans above 60. Reaction to the President's specific proposal for universal early childhood education, however, was more split along partisan lines.

In the focus groups after the speech, voters broadly agreed with the President on emphasizing job training, especially aligning education programs with skills companies are looking for. As one participant put it, "that seems like an immediate way to strengthen the economy." Indeed, Obama's pledge to connect more than 15,000 schools and 20 million students to high-speed broadband internet over the next two years through a public-private partnership with companies like Apple, Microsoft, Sprint and Verizon – without adding a dime to the deficit – was greeted with bipartisan support, with all dials reaching 70.

Energy

The President spoke much about American's innovative and entrepreneurial spirit. Part of that is investing in new, cleaner technologies and reducing our dependence on foreign oil. Voters were broadly supportive of such measures. One participant in the follow up focus groups noted, "It's about time a car got more than 25 miles to the gallon. We have the technology. Let's do it."

In many ways, voters associate American ingenuity and keeping American jobs here together. Voters across partisan lines were extremely supportive of proposals to close corporate tax loopholes, end incentives for companies to ship jobs overseas, and lower tax rates for businesses that create jobs at home. Dials for all voters exceeded 80, with Republicans up past 90. One man in the follow up focus group agreed, "He said we're going to invest in America, which I believe is the way to do it. Let's stop the outsourcing... Let's grow us before we grow others."



The President's discussion of climate change was more polarizing, proclaiming it a fact. The lines split along partisan lines, with Democrats' dials hovering over 80, while Republicans tracked at 35. Independents were largely in the middle.

Conclusion

While our participants ended the night feeling much more positively about the President than they had earlier today, two lingering concerns remain.

1. The first is that the President's continued celebration of economic gains does not ring true to them. While the dial lines did not plummet when the President highlighted economic progress, as they did in past years, all but his most ardent supporters dropped or remained flat. In follow-up focus groups, participants explained that they were not yet feeling this progress.

That's nice but big deal. He talked about 3 million people but you're talking about 1 percent; it doesn't affect majority of people.

Its improving from where it was three four years ago. But is it a drastic improvement? No. The jobs being created are minimum wage jobs and aren't for people with college degrees and master's degrees.

It might be improving but it is not trickling down to us.

His statistics sounded good but as far as me looking for a job I got one that was enough to pay for the holidays but not much more.

2. Their reception of the President's speech—especially the issues on which they believe the country needs to move with great urgency—is weighed down by their perception that Washington will not be able to act. They say, “he made a lot of promises that he's never going to get to fulfill” because of the opposition of the Republican Congress. Participants were less disappointed in the President for making empty promises than they were angry at the Republican Congress and Washington in general. In the unmarried women's group, there was universal agreement that what is stopping the President is “the Republicans.” And in follow-up focus groups, participants across the board bemoaned:

I'm not expecting a lot to happen with this Congress.

It's their way or it's their way.

We don't really believe that massive change is going to happen. And that sucks. Because we don't think that our representatives are representing us.



They're not doing anything for the country.

There's still going to be gridlock in congress and not a lot of change.

This means that the President's call for a "year of action" is more critical than ever before. These voters are looking to Washington to move on these important issues that affect them at a pocketbook level every day. Republicans should not believe that these voters blame both parties equally. They do not. However, these voters *are* looking to the President for real leadership and real action. They like what he had to say. Now they want him to follow through.



Methodology

Research was conducted on January 28, 2014 by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Democracy Corps and Women's Voices Women Vote Action Fund. Participants were 44 swing voters from the Denver, Colorado metro-area who split their votes fairly evenly between Democratic and Republican candidates over the past several Presidential and Congressional elections, though there were slightly more Obama voters than Romney voters. The group included 23 women and 21 men, including 16 unmarried women.

Dial testing focus group research was conducted using the Perception Analyzer powered by Dialsmith. Moment-to-moment data collection powered by [Perception Analyzer®](#) by Dialsmith. Researchers using the Perception Analyzer have the ability to add critical, real-time quantitative feedback that complements qualitative analysis and results in clearer, more focused intel for their clients. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Researchers measured and examined several participant subsets including political identification, candidate preference and many demographic variables to aid analysis.