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To: Progressive community

From: Stanley Greenberg and Nancy Zdunkewicz, Democracy Corps

## Macomb County in the Age of Trump

*Report from focus groups with Independent & Democratic Trump voters in Macomb County*

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The path for Democrats to take back Trump voters and win down-ballot runs through the nation's working class communities, starting in the formerly industrial states and Upper Midwest. That is why Democracy Corps decided to conduct our first focus groups of 2017 in Macomb County, Michigan, joined by the Roosevelt Institute.<sup>1</sup>

As Greenberg recently wrote for *The American Prospect*, Democrats don't have a *white* working class problem, as so many have suggested. They have a *working class problem* that includes working people in their own base. We can learn an immense amount from listening and talking to the white working class independent and Democratic Trump voters, particularly those who previously supported Obama or failed to turnout in past presidential contests.

What better place to listen to them than Macomb County – a county that Obama carried twice and easily could have delivered Trump his margin in Michigan in 2016? After all, this is the county where [Stan Greenberg first studied Reagan Democrats](#) in 1985 as documented in [Middle Class Dreams](#) and where Democracy Corps conducted a [wave of research in 2008](#) before Macomb voted to elect the first African American president.

These voters have not regretted their vote for Trump. There was no “buyer’s remorse.” None of the 35 participants in the course of the focus group discussion or in their private post-group post-cards to President Trump pulled back from their vote, which is an impressive indication of the strength of Trump's support. They are clear about why they voted for him and pray he keeps his promises and succeeds.

They accept Trump's version of the news and facts, and their reactions to videos of his press conferences and interviews reinforced that point. They say they “want to believe” him and describe his demeanor as “very sincere. Like you could feel it from watching him. You know it makes a difference to him.” They feel hopeful watching their new president: “it's amazing to see

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<sup>11</sup> Democracy Corps conducted focus groups with white non-college educated (anything less than a four-year college degree) men and women from Macomb County, Michigan on February 15 and 16, 2017 in partnership with the Roosevelt Institute. All of the participants were Trump voters who identified as independents, Democratic-leaning independents, or Democrats and who voted for Obama in 2008, 2012 or both. Two groups were among women, one 40 - 65 and one 30 - 60 years old. Two groups were among men, one 35 - 45 and one 40 - 60 years old.



him up there and go, wow, that's my president now, and those things are gonna happen. And he's gonna make things better."

They believe his opponents marching in the streets are "not satisfied with the results" of the election and "now they're trying [by], every means necessary [...] to change the outcome which is not going to happen." With tensions so heightened, some fear growing unrest and some even worry "we're going to end up in a civil war." "If a Democrat won" they argue, "I wouldn't be sitting here doing a million man march because Hillary Clinton was in office, I'd have to deal with it because she's my president and move on." They hope the protestors and the family-members giving them a hard time will chill because if "he gets a chance, if they give him a minute here," they insist, "he'll start doing some good things."

In this maelstrom, these Trump voters will only re-affirm their vote in the short-term. But in time, I believe a significant number of them will fail to turnout or support Republicans in mid-term elections, many will rally to populist Democratic candidates, and some will pull back from Trump. Why do I say most of these voters can move in time?

- Many are put out of reach by their racist sentiment, Islamophobia, and disdain for multiculturalism, as so many op-ed writers have written poignantly, but a great many are not. Most support legal immigration, many are open to a multicultural America, and the great majority has moved on from Detroit's troubled white-and-black history.
- They do not trust the congressional Republicans, particularly on the economy or representing working people.
- One-third assigned only a moderate level of emotional significance to their vote for Trump and for most of them "anything was better than Hillary Clinton." They described her as "a criminal," "a liar," and "a typical crooked politician." One said she voted against corruption and against pay-for-play, and Hillary's big mega-millions background." And another, "I wasn't super excited, and I had to weigh the pros and the cons, and then Hillary just kept getting herself deeper and deeper and deeper."
- Even though they are defending Trump now, many were shaken by some of the doubts we tested. Some became exasperated, when we got to the right "drain the swamp" critique – a critique of his cabinet of "million-dollar campaign donors, [bailed out] bankers from Goldman Sachs and people who used undocumented workers in their homes." Also concerning to them was the prospect of his promised middle class tax going mostly to the top 1 percent, including a \$4 billion break for the Trump family. These doubts make Trump appear a typical politician and say its back to the same "bullshit."
- A majority of these voters were very open to Democrats like Senators Brown, Sanders and Warren who oppose trade deals, want to protect consumers from Wall Street, oppose corporate tax breaks, and will bar secret campaign money so government works for the middle class. That's the kind of change they were hungry for.



But progressives will only get an audience with these voters if they listen to them and understand why they were desperate for sweeping changes, why they voted for Trump and what message they were sending to the elites about putting ‘us’ and America first. They support Trump for understandable reasons, including concerns about controlling immigration and health care costs, and frustrations with President Obama’s light and elite footprint on the economy. Acknowledging those concerns and the effects of Democratic governance on their lives is the first step to making headway with these voters.

To learn from these Macomb voters, they had to be able to speak freely. They feel they are under attack – from younger generations in their own families but also in their communities. Some have been ostracized by close family members criticizing them for their vote, others confess they have been “called racist, a xenophobe, homophobe, whatever phobe they could come up with.” One woman’s son was bullied after his 1<sup>st</sup> grade class held a mock election: “my son hears us and he says, ‘I’m going to vote for Trump,’ and two of the kids in his class started yelling. Like, ‘You’re going to vote Trump? Are you crazy?’ And just started yelling at him.” This is personal.

These groups were designed for the participants to be as comfortable as possible: they were all Trump voters, all white and all working class; each group included only participants of the same sex and of a similar age. They were so relieved to discover they could express themselves freely without fear of attack. Nobody criticized them when they said something unflattering about immigrants, blacks or Muslims. With guidance from Robb Willer at Stanford, we included a values exercise that allowed them to talk comfortably about the importance of patriotism, respecting elders, obedience, faith, loyalty, and duty. While we tested doubts about Trump at the end, we were careful not to make any effort to revisit their vote unless they volunteered it.

With that being said, here is what Macomb is telling us.

## What they like about Trump

Before discussing as a group, we asked these voters to write down their positive and negative feelings about Donald Trump, so they would feel free to express themselves and not be biased by the interventions of others. Their views of Trump were further embellished by discussion of the principles and values that guide his behavior. It is clear from these exercises how strongly they feel about Trump. Their doubts are sparse, while their positives are developed and powerful. Here is what stands out:

**1. He is a strong leader.** These voters “feel like he will be a strong leader.” They can tell because “he’s confident,” “he has a really strong voice,” “he doesn’t take bologna,” and he “never quit, against the odds.” That is important for a community that believes we should all be guided by obedience to traditional forms of authority like elders, god and the law. That strength means “that he’s probably going to accomplish more in four years than our last president did” – who they thought was weak.



**2. He is not afraid to say what he thinks and be unpopular: he's not a double-talking, promise-breaking politician.** Donald Trump is “blunt” and “outspoken” and “not afraid to speak his mind.” “He doesn't seem to care what other politicians think.” In other words, he is “not your standard double-talking politician.” They believe this means he “stands up for what he feels is right” and is secure in his beliefs about what is best for the country.

Because he doesn't mind being unpopular, they know he is “planning on keeping his promises” and will push to get his agenda done no matter what. This is extremely important to them as keeping your promises and fulfilling your duties was one of the most important principles to these voters in our values exercise. Already he is showing them that through hell or high water he will fight to keep his promises: “he's showing us that these weren't just promises and he's following through. Regardless of the fallout, he's following through.”

**3. He will change everything in Washington.** For those who felt most strongly about their vote, they believed he would change the status quo, challenge politics as usual and sideline the career politicians. They wanted to send the message “that we as Americans are not okay with the same old story.”

“I felt like it was – it's time for a change, not just a suit to change, it's time for everything to change. Status quo's not good enough anymore.”

“Just a lot of change, no more politics as usual. Maybe something can be changed.”

“I was tired of politics as usual, and I thought if we had somebody in there that wasn't a Clinton or wasn't a Bush that would shake things up, which he obviously has, and maybe get rid of the people who are just milking the office and not doing their job. I'm hoping that he's going to hold people more accountable for the job that they're doing for us.”

**4. He is business-minded and knows how to get things done.** They say he is “a successful businessman” and “a knowledgeable businessman.” They do believe that “the country is like a business” and that his experiences will be an asset to the country when it comes to “financially getting back in better shape.” “He's got budget experience. He was millions in debt and he turned that round” and “he'll use his negotiation skills which have proven – have – his good for success as a businessman, I think he'll be able to negotiate good deals, especially between different countries. Maybe some trade deals to improve trade imbalances– and the hemorrhaging of the deficit over the past eight years.”

**5. He doesn't need their money and will challenge the political corruption in Washington.** When asked what the meaning of their vote, they said it “was a vote against corruption and pay to play” and “for change and no more political corruption.”; “It was a vote against corruption and pay to play.” Voters understand that “big companies, they're wining and dining these senators and congressmen up the wazoo” so government works for them, not the people. They say “The career politicians have to go because they're not helping the American citizen, all they're doing is helping themselves.”



But Donald is “so financially secure, he doesn’t need to buy anybody...He can be real because he doesn’t need you for this and I don’t need to buy this from you. He has it.” That means he is free to challenge the way politics and Washington work. They appreciate that he is “calling out the ones that are corrupt” like in the primary when he pointed to his opponents, saying “you guys all cash my check, I wrote you the check, you cashed it.”

**6. He will protect us and keep us safe.** Donald Trump “is trying to protect us,” and “keep this country safe,” these voters say. “He’s already pushing the borders, protecting our country and protecting our citizens” and “he wants to increase our military, which has needed it for so long” and “he will use our military to the fullest extent if necessary.” Even when we show them video of Donald Trump claiming terrorism attacks are under-reported and a much greater threat, they say “he was just drawing a line in the sand.”

**7. He will secure the border and control immigration.** Many people in these groups said that “My biggest hope is that he settles with the immigration system and gets it resolved.” They would like to see him “take control of the borders” and get illegal immigration under control. They also want “Stricter guidelines about refugees coming into our country” so we “make sure people are here for the right reasons.” They already say “he seems to be tightening immigration” and “think it’s good that he locked down the country for four months.”

**8. He is fighting for us and putting Americans first.** These voters are certain that “he’s going to focus on what’s going on here, be more concerned about our people.” Trump is a “voice” saying: “I’m on your side, you first,” you “the American worker.” They say “that’s why you [saw] those long lines at the polls” because “that’s what the people wanted.”

That is the meaning of “America First” for many of them. They believe that for too long our government has been putting the interests of other countries and foreigners before the interests of the American people struggling through recession and protracted recovery. Fighting for them means investing in America first and solving our problems before helping the rest of the world:

“I like that he's putting America first, I don't think we need to take care of anybody else, we can't take care of ourselves let alone run around taking care of half the world.”

“He’s putting America first. It’s – that’s one of the main issues that I’ve always had is how all this help goes outside the USA when we had struggling here.”

**9. He will hold companies accountable and bring *back* our jobs.** These voters have great faith that Donald Trump will bring back jobs that have left the United States. This was one of their greatest hopes for the Trump presidency:

“Bring the jobs back, bring the jobs back to the states.”

“He's trying to create jobs, trying to keep jobs in the United States.”

“I just like the talk about bringing the jobs back.”



“To me, it’s going to get us our jobs back, he’s going to boost our economy, boost their economic growth for families, to bring our future generations up.”

They appreciate “The fact that he is going to hold companies accountable for taking jobs out of our country” by “charging them if they want to continue making their products in other countries, they’re going to have to pay a fee per item.” They “like how he just threatens” these companies because “him saying it makes *Ford*, *Carrier*, all of them have second guesses and think maybe it would be a good idea that next plant we build it will be here and not over there.”

The high profile deal with Carrier and credit for decisions from Ford and others show them that he is already making good on this promise: “I think the biggest things that he’s done so far is with the car companies. Getting *Ford* to build over here in Flat Rock. *GM* to put more money into the plants that they already have. Keep more jobs, open more jobs here.”

**10. He will fix health care.** The cost of health care dominated the discussion in these focus groups. They say Trump “promised within the first hundred days to get rid of Obamacare” and fixing the health care system is one of their great hopes for his presidency. They speak of the impossibly high costs and hope Trump will bring “affordable healthcare” which will “help [us] raise our families and make us be prosperous.”

**11. He loves America.** In a values exercise, the most often cited principle that should guide how people act was “loving supporting and defending your country” and in follow up conversation about Trump’s values, they felt that this is one of the main values that he lives by.

“I think a lot of us, that we truly believe that he loves this country and he wants to return it to the way it used to be.”

“He says God and country so I take him at his word.”

“I think he loves his country and he's willing to defend it.”

“Yes I firmly believe he loves his country, he really, really does.”

They know that Donald Trump is a true patriot because he has given up a glamorous life as a billionaire to become a public servant: “Yes but he's a billionaire, you don't have to take a pay cut to be the president if he didn't really want to, if he didn't really care about it.” They imagine him sitting at home, watching the news with dismay, and standing up to do his patriotic duty to make America great again.

### **Immigration: take care of home first**

Immigration is a powerful issue for these Trump voters, representing a demand that citizens come before non-citizens, Americans before foreigners, and that we take care of home first before abroad. They believe that we have “opened up our borders, they pretty much made it a free



for all” which means fewer jobs and greater demands on government services and more concerns about safety.

That is why one-in-four participants said that Trump’s commitment on the border, immigration and refugees was one of the best things about him and fulfilling that commitment is one of their greatest hopes for his presidency. Some say “I don’t really care about the wall, as long as we can get a grip on the illegal immigrant problem.”

The majority felt that there are too many American citizens struggling here for us to allow more people in and not concentrate on Americans first.

“Well I mean we’re all talking about illegals, I made a straight up post that in America we have hungry, we have veterans, we have mental illness, we have so many problems in our own country that we at this point in time just can’t be concerned with, I feel bad but...our country’s in dire straits financially.”

“I mean we need to take care of home first. We need to take care of the veterans, we need to take care of the elderly, we need to take care of the mentally ill, we need to take care everyone instead of us worrying about other people in other countries, we need to take care of our house first. Get our house in order then you know what, you need this and this and then we’ll help you.”

One of the women was really “hoping that [Trump will] fix our healthcare situation, but that comes back to the immigrants,” she explained:

“I went and finally signed up for Medicaid, and I’m standing in the damn welfare office, and I’m looking around at all of these people that can’t even say hello to me in English. But they’re all there with appointments for their workers, which means they have the healthcare, they have the food stamps...If you can come from somewhere else, why can’t we all get it?”

They feel getting to the American dream is hard enough and they should be at the front of the line: “I’m all for everybody having the American dream, but I feel that it’s being taken away from a lot of people by people coming and taking advantage.”

Many tried to make a distinction between those here legally and those who are not. As one man said:

“I believe in immigration but I believe immigration is one of the biggest problems not because I’m against immigration, not because I’m racist. It’s because there are too many immigrants that are in this country illegally that it’s taking work away from the working man.”

One woman living in a majority Chaldean and Albanian neighborhood noted “there’s a difference between legal immigration and illegal immigration” and “most of my neighbors voted for Donald Trump because they came here legally, they did it the way they were supposed to do it.”



They recalled their Polish, Iraqi and Albanian history in America, 40 or even 100 years ago, and these reflections on their families' own immigrant pasts led them even more to highlight the distinction between legal and illegal immigration and the need for new immigrants to assimilate and learn English.

Macomb's Trump voters were sending a message to the elites, professional classes, large corporations and big cities comfortable with the growing immigrant and foreign-born population that they pay a price from the current course. These voters want to be first in line again. Though it is not "politically correct" to say it, they should be heard too.

### **White minority: checked the wrong box**

Running through their attitudes on immigration are some pretty powerful feelings about race, foreignness, and Islam that lead them to see white people as victims in a country feeling increasingly foreign to many of them.

They are living with a growing number of Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and Dearborn is home to one of the biggest Muslim communities in the United States. That changing demography emerged powerfully in discussions of immigration among the working class women:<sup>2</sup>

**Gina:** You know, my husband used to always say, "Why would you want to bring children into this crazy world? Why would you want to do that to them?" And I always said, "Well, why would you deprive yourself of one of the greatest joys of life?" I'm really afraid of the Muslim religion and I feel like – this is going to sound awful and I'm not a prejudiced person, but I feel like we, like I, as a white person, is the one who is –

**Rosa:** We're the minority.

**Moderator:** *What do you think about, you know, they say that in a few years America is going to be a majority minority country? How do you feel about that?*

**Mary:** Well, it's scary because it's not like it used to be when people would come here. Because they wanted a better life, they assimilated, and people don't do that anymore. They come here – if I went, if I moved to another country, I would expect if I went there I'd have to learn their language and follow their [customs and live] under their laws. I would never think I was going to move to Saudi Arabia and go walking around in a sleeveless shirt and shorts – just, I wouldn't do that. So, it's frustrating. It's very frustrating.

**Cathy:** Although we're all different. You know, we all have groups, but it does seem as though like there's still separation – Instead of a community, that this isn't happening.

**Mary:** But we should all be Americans.

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<sup>2</sup> The participants' real names have been changed to protect their identities.





**Lisa:** I just, I mean we do it to ourselves, like Dearborn. I mean, we've got up all their churches and the bells go off and the chanting and all that kind of stuff. I mean, we allowed that to happen. So, we need to break it all down again and put some rules up behind it.

You can have mistaken it for an identical exchange about refugees in the other group of white working women:

**Anne:** Maybe they don't have the resources... Personally, I – I mean – I don't have a problem with it, personally. They're human beings. But there should be some rules and regulations before letting them in. How about speaking English, for one?

**Freda:** I'm with her. My grandson's school, I went to as a child, there are hardly any – I'll just say American families there now. It's mostly Middle Eastern and people all standing outside waiting for their kid, to pick them up at the end of the day, and nobody's speaking English. Everyone's speaking other languages, which, there's nothing wrong with other languages.

**Karen:** I think it's rude.

**Stacy:** But you know what, like where I'm working, at Kroger, how many Spanish people I wait on. The universal language – I don't care, if you smile – hello, I don't care what country you're from, but some of these people, they act like they can't do that, even. It's like, "You know what? You're in America. Get with either – you can learn to say hello, goodbye, thank you, in our language. This is America.

That "how about speaking English" comment and the discussion that followed lead you to consider if the anger about immigrants not speaking English is more deeply rooted.

A few even expressed their fears of Islam and what its adherents are taught that may make them worry they will turn to terrorism once here:

"It's not necessarily the people. It's the religion and what they were taught. They were taught evil, evil things... it's that they know any better. So, when you're taught that, it's embedded in your mind. Just like I'm Catholic and I believe in, you know, the Virgin Mary and God and everything else. But, they're not telling me to rape 9-year-olds or to kill, you know, bomb citizens. And it's what they were taught. So, why, if they would do it there, why wouldn't they do it here?"

Adding to the brew is the recent movement of African Americans into Warren, Sterling Heights and Shelby townships in Macomb. One exchange in the more blue-collar men's group could have taken you back to Macomb County in 1985, with the full panoply of Reagan-era allusions to black and white America and "checking the wrong box":

**Steve:** Five years ago, five, six years ago I had a really great job, was working at *Coca-Cola*, making really good money and blew out my back. My wife's a nurse, I lost my job and they denied me unemployment. We're struggling. We tried to apply for a BRIDGE card, we get denied because she's a nurse. Her income. And it just – at the time, it just irritated me because we'd be at the grocery store, just looking at each other. How are we going to pay for all this and I'll see somebody with a basket full of stuff, loaded with – just overloaded, use a BRIDGE card wearing



top of the line stuff, \$500 purse and then they walk to an Escalade. What is wrong with this system, we get denied –

**Matt:** The Escalade's usually parked in the handicapped spot.

**Steve:** Exactly.

**Tom:** Pull the card out, they got wad of cash –

**William:** It was funny, the backlash that we got over the EBT cards, people could use them at gas station to buy dog food –

**Chris:** Cash withdrawals.

**William:** Cash withdrawals, and here I'm struggling to get my kid hot dogs and you're buying a porterhouse and I'm being told that I'm wrong or I'm racist or I'm not the – I'm privileged and that's what's wrong.

**Chris:** It's almost like you wonder how are they working the system that you're not. There's some way they're working the system I sometimes think that to qualify for something like you said, how'd they qualify when you didn't and you – and you put side by side, you would think that you would qualify.

**William:** And I've paid so much into it.

**Matt:** It's kind of off color, [but] I think we're checking the wrong box when we're filling out paperwork.

**Roy:** Well the people that are working the system, that's their full time job is to work the system. There's people out there like that, that's what they're doing.

## Multicultural America

A majority of the Trump voters in our groups joined in the exchanges lamenting the growing foreignness, concerns about Islam and whether immigrants assimilate in ways that suggested a deeper set of attitudes on diversity, foreignness, and comfort with change. Some joined the exchanges around African Americans and the black community.

But despite all that, Macomb has changed. Immigrants and religion were central to the deep feelings about how America was changing, but black-white relations were just barely part of the discussion. Detroit was once a flash point for the discussion of racial conflict, black political leaders and government spending. Today, Detroit did not come up in conversation until we introduced it and Macomb residents see a city “turning around for the good” and “on an upswing” and many say they like to visit downtown. Even the majority African American city of Flint provokes only sympathetic responses. They describe the area as “downscale” and “poor” and lament the water crisis and the suffering it caused.



Let us remind you that these voters had voted for Obama at least once. In fact, as we discovered when the moderator stepped out of the room and some of the women began to talk amongst themselves, many faced backlash for supporting him. “People are less judgmental about voting for Trump than they were about Obama...I’ve had some pretty harsh things said to me,” one woman confessed. “I’ve had people condemn me to hell for voting for Obama,” shared another. One woman’s niece wanted nothing to do with her because of her vote for Obama.

These Trump voters had positive things to say about Barack Obama as a man, politician, and Commander in Chief. They believe very strongly that “he’s been loyal [and] he’s good to his kids and his family” and “he was a good family man that showed what a family should be about.” This is high praise from a group that ranks loyalty to family and friends among the most important principles that should guide how people act. They say that “he had good values.” They described him as “well spoken, polite and courteous” and “a people person” who “wasn’t rude like Trump” because he was respectful of other opinions. No matter his politics, they think that “he had good intentions” and “he’s a wonderful man.” As a Commander in Chief, many people mentioned that he took out Osama bin Laden.

Their problems with the first African American president are rooted in a fairly complicated, but not particularly racial or racist framework. Very many of them were “proud that we finally had a minority president” and they were quite proud of their vote for him. They were hopeful that this meant “we can break that tension, the prejudice and everything, because it wasn’t just the Black people that voted for him.”

However, that is also one of their great disappointments because “race issues were never as bad as his last four years.” The voters in every group believed that “racial tensions are at an all-time high” and that we are more conflicted and polarized as a country than ever. “I feel like he didn’t do anything to bring different minorities together. I feel like he just let it go and everything just spread apart,” one woman lamented, and ultimately “he was more of a divider than a uniter,” one man expressed with dismay. “Oh boy. We never expected that!” Several suggested that when white police were killed, they were disappointed that he did not publicly console their families and bring the black community together to support the police.

We asked these groups explicitly who they believe Barack Obama governed for and how did whites and blacks do during his presidency. Stunningly, just two people across the groups volunteered that he prioritized people of color. That is impressive considering our [2008 research](#) found Macomb’s biggest worry before Obama became president was that he would govern for black people, not for all Americans. In fact they were quick to say that Barack Obama “didn’t do anything for our inner cities”:

“That is who he pitched the most, was the inner cities and – I mean look at Detroit, look at Flint, they’re a wreck. He promised these people the world and he didn’t deliver on anybody.”

“But then he really wasn’t there for them, because he didn’t focus on Chicago and stuff, where it’s really bad.”



We also found that not everyone in these groups was closed to the demographic changes creating a multicultural America. During the group, we paused to play [Coca Cola's Super Bowl ad](#), featuring “America the Beautiful” sung in six languages with imagery of a multicultural America. About half said “I just don’t know why they can’t all sing it in English, since its America,” and a few even said it “aggravates the hell of me,” as you would expect.

But another half responded with a different tone. Some stopped to suggest immigrants should learn English, but then said of the ad: “I didn’t get upset about that, I mean that’s what makes America great, to be honest with you.” “That’s the way America should be,” said one man, “Multicultural is a good thing, it really is.” Another woman appreciated that it was “trying to show us unity, like we can all come together and get along and enjoy a *Coke*.”

### Obamacare and health care costs

We know from Democracy Corps’ [election night polling](#) and [polling of the GOP-Trump coalition](#) how important was anger about the Affordable Care Act or Obamacare to people who voted for Trump. That is less of a mystery now, given how much discussion of health care dominated all these Macomb groups. Trump’s promise to fix the health care system dominated written positions about him and the great hopes they have for his presidency.

White working class voters are among those who were most opposed to the health care reform law – and that is centered on their struggle with medical costs. They all see the ACA as central to the affordability problem, with all the “price hikes” and reduced coverage and fees “punishing people that can’t afford it.” Only a few complained about the expanded subsidies for the poor and minorities.

Nearly every person in our groups was struggling with how to afford their plans, co-pays, and medications. One complained the cost of health care is “cutting into a lot of peoples’ income that’s not growing nearly as fast as premiums.” Another admitted he feels “kind of like taken advantage of” by the price hikes:

“My insurance for the last three years went up, went up, went up. Started out for a family of four, I was paying \$117 a week out of my paycheck. Three years later I’m paying \$152 a week out of my paycheck. I don’t even go to the doctor for one. I don’t take medicine.”

For others, it is the co-pays that are so expensive:

“I got an 11-year-old and an eight-year-old, they’re both sick right now and it’s like do I take them in to the doctor right now, because if I do that’s at least \$125 each just for that one trip to the doctor to tell me it’s a virus, it’s going to pass so that’s 250 bucks to take them in and I mean it’s just so hard.”

The rising cost has led some to change their life plans. One man lamented, “I’d retire if it wasn’t for the issue of paying for healthcare.”



Some in our groups were on the exchanges and paying “outrageous” sums for coverage, some lost their coverage or were foregoing coverage because they could not afford it, and another was not satisfied with his plan:

“They cut my insurance at work...My doctor, because my back is bad, said, ‘Well, cut your hours. You can only work so many hours.’ Now I have to work more hours, take more pain pills, to get my insurance back, and now they’re telling me I can’t get it back for another year.”

“Insurance is very very expensive. For me, my family, we were on that Obamacare portal – affordable care act, whatever you want to call it but it got very expensive. You know, family of three and we were spending out of pocket about ... 700 dollars a month and it was going to go up again for ’17, my wife got a job late last year and her company gives her benefits so we’re not having as much as we would have if she didn’t have an employer health with benefits this year.”

“The only thing I can see is Obamacare because that really screwed up my insurance... Used to have really good healthcare than the Obama administration came in and I have pretty much nothing.”

“I mean, I have a 23-year-old who’s trying to go to college and he’s trying to work part-time and pay his college, and then he’s being taxed because he doesn’t have health insurance. It’s awful.”

We asked who benefited from the Affordable Care Act and a couple of the participants mentioned they were unable to afford healthcare while subsidizing care for those without jobs:

“There’s a lot of things that irritate me about – like when I look at my check every single week and I see Affordable Care Act fee and that – I think that annoys the hell out of me because I’m paying for somebody else to get health insurance is the way I feel and I’m struggling myself to pay my health insurance and pay for my kids to go to the doctor ... basically it would probably be better for me if I didn’t work at all.”

“There are people that can’t work for a living that collects welfare, gets the insurance paid for them 100 percent including prescriptions, dental and everything and you got me that works for 25, 30 years straight, I get hurt on the job and then I have to pay for my healthcare insurance, I have to pay for my prescriptions and everything else while we got all these other people that can work that’s sitting back and collecting it all for free.”

But it was clear to them that the law was not benefitting them and their families, and Democrats should take that seriously.

Still, they are no longer talking about “repealing” Obamacare. In fact, the word repeal was not uttered once over the two evenings. They “don’t know what the alternative is, but something had to be changed” and they are totally focused on bringing down costs. They are hopeful that Trump will mean better and more affordable health insurance and health care costs.



Of course, Trump and Republicans will own the replacement – and almost certain increases in deductibles and out-of-pocket costs.

### **Obama’s light, elite economic footprint and the heavier one available to progressives**

President Obama represents the Democrats’ national vision and identity, but he was invisible on the economy for working people. Elites, op-ed writers and voters with college degrees appreciated what the president accomplished, but not those in working class America who were struggling with a different world. A majority of voters in the country said the economy was the single most important issue and 54 percent wanted to see a bold change in direction.

The president brought the country to a macro recovery by the end of his term, but not a single person in these groups mentioned any economic improvements under his presidency, even after the president closed the 2016 campaign in Detroit making the case for building on his economic progress. They have strong feelings about him, but in the written comments only one mentioned anything about the economy in positive impressions – specifically that he saved GM and Chrysler from bankruptcy – and just five mentioned anything economic when elaborating their doubts.

Some described him as a steward for the status quo: “I think he just maintained. He didn’t really do much for the country. And he let a lot of jobs go.” Some did recall the bailout of the banks even though the crisis “affected millions of people,” leading them to think he favored the elites – “the wealthy,” “the richer people,” “the big wigs,” and “the lobbyists.” They know he “didn’t help the lower class, he didn’t help the middle class” people like them, they insisted over and over.

The President’s light footprint on the economy missed these Macomb County Trump voters, but not a more populist economic positioning, associated with Democratic Senators Sherrod Brown, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Two-thirds of the participants in our groups found this Democratic profile more appealing than a moderate one focused on helping businesses be more competitive globally so they create more jobs or a work and family profile focused on helping workers and creating middle class jobs.

These are Democrats who support American jobs and strongly opposed NAFTA and Obama’s trade deal, support policies to protect consumers from Wall Street and reckless banks, want to get corporations to invest in their own workers and this country, want to end tax breaks for companies sending jobs overseas, and want to bar secret corporate campaign money so our government works for the middle class again.

These Trump voters thought this was a party that must care about the working-class guy because:



- **It is serious about good American jobs.** This was “all about jobs” they said. By opposing NAFTA and encouraging corporations to invest in their workers, these Democrats signal “they want to keep the jobs here and have the companies make their employees stronger.” This is an agenda “about the middle class and working for the middle class to bring us back.”
- **It puts us before the elites.** Taking on the reckless banks told them who you are really for. Some said they were “really irritated about the reckless banks” and “protecting consumers from Wall Street and reckless banks... was very important.” They recalled that “we lost our home because of that” and “with the bailout all the money went to the banks and it affected millions of people. And, then, a short time later, the banks were back to these huge bonuses” and “there’s never really punishment for them.”
- **It takes on secret campaign money, which means they are real.** For others, “talking about barring secret corporate campaign money” was a major draw. With Trump’s talk of self-funding, taking secret corporate money was “what Democrats did” and “they should probably end it themselves.”

Some mentioned that these were the ideas that they associated with Sanders’ campaign and that they were open to his candidacy. “I think Bernie would have won,” said one man, and “everything that’s in here that he stood for I feel would be great for the country.”

Ironically, a few of these Trump said immediately, it “sounded like Trump” – to the amusement of those watching from behind the one-way glass. That says a lot about their expectations for Trump and should give hope to Democrats.

### **Donald Trump and the Republican Congress: how will this turn out?**

While these Trump voters are protecting Trump and their own vote choice, both under attack, there is every reason to believe there is trouble on the horizon – perhaps as soon as the off-year elections. These independent and Democratic Trump voters are very likely to blame the Republicans in Congress for failure to achieve Trump’s campaign promises as well as for the harm to working people done by the administration or Republican policies. Trump too may be exposed before end of year.

We showed these voters pictures of Speaker Paul Ryan and Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, and by their responses it was clear they do not trust them. They describe them as “shifty,” “only look out for themselves,” and “like the CEOs.” In contrast with Trump, they believe Republicans have “always been for the upper class” and “do what they have to do for what used to be the middle class and lower class things, I think, just to... keep you satisfied.”

Nevertheless, they are hopeful that having a Republican majority “will be easier to get the Trump stuff through. Redoing the Affordable Care Act and different things like that, it’ll make a little easier path for him to get different things through to help the country.”



They are very conscious that this party “isn’t completely united.” They know Paul Ryan “flip-flopped” on his support for Trump, and they remember how in the past, “Instead of trying to work together they, you know, cross their feet like an obstinate child and refuse to let anything happen.” So these voters have a simple message: the Trump supporters in Congress need to tell their colleagues to “get on the same page and get it done.” “I want them to pass all of Trump’s ideas in the next hundred days,” said one man. “I want all these things, and they have the power. ... They should have their replacement for Obamacare right now, they’ve had eight years to do it.” Several warn: “They better get together or they’re going to end up getting beat out again too if they don’t do something and work with Trump. And we have the Congress and we have the Senate. Let’s get something done.”

These voters are not aware how ready Congress is to pass things Trump promised would not happen and how poised Trump is to do the opposite of what he promised.

Nobody in their post cards to Trump at the end of the group doubted their vote, so they mostly rationalize away their doubts at the moment. Of course he wants rich and successful people in his cabinet and of course he has the last word, not his cabinet secretary. “He’s a businessman,” so it makes sense “he wants his other business buddies in there with him.” They are fine with him bringing all his wealthy friends in government “if they can help him” and if they are also “straight-shooters.” They also defended the ongoing work of the Trump Organization and were not bothered by his refusal to release his tax returns.

But some of the items on the list of potential criticisms raised strong enough concerns even at this early point that one could imagine these voters becoming disaffected or demoralized or uninterested in defending him or the GOP majorities in future elections. A significant number said they were concerned to hear these things, some extremely concerned:

He pledged not to cut Medicare and Social Security but his cabinet favors changing Medicare into a voucher to buy private insurance and raising the Social Security retirement age.

When voters learned about the position of Trump’s cabinet secretaries on Medicare and Social Security, alarm bells went off. Many are upset by the prospect of working later in life. Others are skeptical about vouchers: “The voucher to buy private insurance is kind of a joke, because if you can’t buy insurance on your own, then the voucher is not going to do you any good whatsoever.”

They want to trust him to tell his cabinet no, but they “feel like it’s not a worry for Donald Trump to have to rely on that money to retire on” and “so, I feel like the decision doesn’t affect him, so what does it matter to him?” This suggestion undermines their strong belief that Donald Trump is truly for the people: “he’s not thinking thoroughly on what he’s trying to do. Sure, he might have billions of dollars but he’s not thinking about what if that was him and he’d be stuck on that after he retired.” They say a betrayal like this would be along the lines of what the banks did to them: “we’ve all invested into this retirement system and to see something happen there in





any kind of a negative manner would be kind of along the lines of the banks defaulting on us and all that fiasco that went on.”

You have to wonder if one can make the same case against the proposed plan to replace the Affordable Care Act – which will almost certainly mean a tax credit to go shop for insurance with much higher deductibles.

He pledged he would “drain the swamp” in D.C. Instead his cabinet is jammed with million-dollar campaign donors, bankers from Goldman Sachs and people who used undocumented workers in their homes.

He said he will cut middle class taxes, but half the cuts of his proposed tax plan go to the richest 1 percent alone. His family is expected to get a tax break of 4 billion dollars.

These critiques successfully raised questions on whether Trump is a working class warrior. It aligned him with the economic and cultural elite who won’t bring the promised change.

When his cabinet is described as full of campaign donors, Goldman Sachs bankers (bailed out by the taxpayers) and people who use undocumented workers in their homes, they question whether this is the Donald Trump they voted for. “That right there seems to be two-faced,” and Trump is not “just the puppet” doing what Goldman Sachs want. Most important, this means they won’t get the changes they wanted and it’s possible “we’re in for another four or possibly eight years of the same old same old.”

“That’s just more of the same, it’s not – you’re not going to see the change, you just – same people, you’re going to get the same results.”

“It’s going to be a lot of the same old garbage that we’ve been putting up with for the last – most of us have been alive for about 40 – 30 or 40 years so at least that long if not longer.”

They are now open to the possibility that Trump is just a typical politician who will “Tell you what you want to hear and then nothing changes.”

The reaction to Trump’s tax cut proposal is also powerful. They ask why on earth are we cutting the taxes for the rich: “Do we really need that? The rich people don’t need anymore – they don’t need help. They’re already there. It’s the middle class that needed them.” What does it say about Donald Trump? It “says that he’s a standard politician along with everything else.” It means Donald Trump “sounds like more of the same. Billionaires, millionaires getting cuts and middle class [is] getting the finger.” It says, “He’s going to earn four billion dollars – and they’re going to keep getting rich and he’s just going to be another lie to us middle class people that we get the shaft and get the runaround.”