



March 27, 2019

## Future Majority PAC March 2019 Focus Groups

### Key Findings

**To:** Future Majority PAC

**From:** GQR

A series of focus groups GQR conducted in the Midwest among swing voters and party switchers showed frustration with Trump, but Democrats currently lack a party brand and a message compelling enough to win them over just yet.

Democratic messages centered on investing in workers and making sure everyone plays by the same rules resonated with voters. Voters in the key states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin also expressed interest in some of the leading candidates for the Democratic nomination for president. There is an opening to defeat Trump with the right candidate and the right message, but Democrats must rehabilitate their image in these states first.

Below are our key findings and strategic recommendations based on the focus groups conducted on March 5 through 7, 2019, in Allegheny County, PA, Macomb County, MI, and Rock County, WI.

### Current Views of the Democrats and the Republicans

- **Democrats are the party of “the little guy” and diversity, but also the party of handouts.** Participants focused their positive impressions of the Democrats on standing up for the middle class and centering diversity. At the same time, they said Democrats are the party of handouts and disregard personal accountability. Democrats are viewed as “giving” benefits to people without requiring any investment from recipients of their largesse. These impressions are not new – participants in focus groups have been saying much of this for years – but there is a real sense that these views are hardening.
  - **Voters do not view Democrats as connected to the economy and job growth.** The near-total absence of linking Democrats to the economy and jobs was striking; almost no one offered the economy as a strength for the Democrats.
- **The socialism brand may hurt Democrats more so than in the past.** Participants in every group connected Democrats to socialism negatively, more so than we observed just a few years ago, both in frequency and intensity. Notably, they do not connect the socialist brand to specific issues organically, suggesting the brand may be more damaging than any agenda attached to it. Many participants also entered the group with negative impressions of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, but

offered more positive than negative impressions of what she had to say after watching a clip of her discussing increasing marginal tax rate during an interview.

- **Republicans suffer from some serious weaknesses.** Voters see them as out of touch, for the wealthy, and lacking diversity. They also say that Republicans are too greedy and too rigid.
- **Participants see Republicans as the party of freedom, opportunity, and economic growth.** Voters connect Republicans to freedom, opportunity, and personal responsibility. This connection enables Republicans to enjoy a level of trust on economic and financial growth.
  - **Participants assigned “fairness” to Republicans more often than Democrats.** In most of the groups, participants described Republicans as fair more often than Democrats. They view fairness as Republicans rewarding hard work, while Democrats reward people who do not work for what they get from the government.
- **Voters’ views of Trump are complicated.** Nearly all of the participants were Trump voters or voters who are open to voting for Trump in the future. Nearly all of them offer negative impressions of Trump personally; they say his behavior “is not the best moment in history” and “is embarrassing.” Still, they say Trump is largely doing a decent job as president. Specifically, participants give him credit for a strong economy.
  - **Trump’s trade record is a mixed bag.** Few participants held well-formed views of Trump’s record on trade. Participants’ impressions were largely mixed, with some supporting his record and some opposing, but most not being sure. They did, however, support efforts to stop outsourcing jobs.
- **There is an appetite for a solid alternative to Trump; participants want to see more from the Democratic presidential candidates.** Trump is certainly not beloved, and his standing is built as much out of the weakness of the Democratic brand as out of his own actions. After viewing clips of Kamala Harris, Beto O’Rourke, and Joe Biden, participants generally said they wanted to hear more from them, though feelings toward O’Rourke were more mixed than toward Biden and Harris.

## The Message

- **“America is built, not bought” resonates.** This concept elicited a positive reaction throughout the groups. The notion of everyone working together and everyone playing by the same rules to ensure freedom and opportunity, to make a good wage, and to have a good standard of living is powerful for people. The strength of this message comes from building up everyone who works hard because everyone who works hard should get a shot at a good life, regardless of who you are, where you come from, your age, your gender, or your race. [Click here for the video.](#)
  - **Participants did not view “everyone working together” through a partisan lens.** Participants noted the partisan divisions in the political leadership, but they see divisions going much deeper into society. Many believe it has permeated throughout the fabric of American society, with people more divided now than at any time since the 1960s. Given this

sentiment, it is unsurprising that voters viewed “everyone working together” through a societal lens, rather than a political one. When asked about what it meant to them, they said things like “police, doctors, teachers, nurses,” rather than Democrats and Republicans.

- **Participants read “regular Americans” as themselves.** Almost unanimously, participants say that the term “regular Americans” means themselves, their neighbors, and their family. This is a term that is more meaningful than “the middle class,” which has become more political in tone.
- **Freedom and opportunity are core American values.** When asked to describe America, the first concepts participants offered are freedom and opportunity in a way that is unique to America. They also are more likely to assign these values to the Republicans. Democrats have ceded the ground, unfortunately, and need to center their brand and agenda on these concepts in order to reach people in the middle, to show them that Democrats will ensure they have the freedom and the opportunity to live the life they want to live.
- **Voters are looking for a few priorities – the laundry list does not work for them.** Democrats are not earning high marks for their agenda because it is simply too large. With a laundry list of 20 proposals, everything gets lost in the shuffle and voters conclude it adds up to a ton of money from taxpayers. People believe you cannot have everything and “nothing is free.” Democrats are better off focusing on the largest priorities, namely, driving down the cost of health care and prescription drugs, expanding educational opportunity and accessibility after high school including college, career, and skills training, and rooting out government corruption. If people concluded Democrats are fighting for these three priorities, they would be in much better shape.
- **Frame spending as investments.** Linking investments from government spending – on health care, education, and infrastructure to name a few – to a return on that investment also resonated with voters. When we talk about programs that cost money, we should always tie it to what that means for the future so voters can see that their tax money is being put to good use.