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The Very Separate World of Conservative Republicans *Why Republican Leaders will have Trouble Speaking to the Rest of America*

The self-identifying conservative Republicans who make up the base of the Republican Party stand a world apart from the rest of America, according to focus groups conducted by Democracy Corps. These base Republican voters dislike Barack Obama to be sure – which is not very surprising as base Democrats had few positive things to say about George Bush – but these voters identify themselves as part of a ‘mocked’ minority with a set of shared beliefs and knowledge, and commitment to oppose Obama that sets them apart from the majority in the country. They believe Obama is ruthlessly advancing a ‘secret agenda’ to bankrupt the United States and dramatically expand government control to an extent nothing short of socialism. While these voters are disdainful of a Republican Party they view to have failed in its mission, they overwhelmingly view a successful Obama presidency as the destruction of this country’s founding principles and are committed to seeing the president fail.

Instead of focusing on these intense ideological divisions, the press and elites continue to look for a racial element that drives these voters’ beliefs – but they need to get over it. Conducted on the heels of Joe Wilson’s incendiary comments at the president’s joint session address, we gave these groups of older, white Republican base voters in Georgia full opportunity to bring race into their discussion – but it did not ever become a central element, and indeed, was almost beside the point.

The Republican base voters are not part of the continuum leading to the center of the electorate: they truly stand apart. For additional perspective, Democracy Corps conducted a parallel set of groups in suburban Cleveland. These groups, comprised of older, white, non-college independents and weak partisans, represent some of the most conservative swing voters in the electorate,¹ and they demonstrated a wholly different worldview from Republican base voters by

¹ The Cleveland groups comprised of white, non-college weak partisans or independents – defined as self-identifying ‘weak’ Democrats or Republicans, Democratic- or Republican-leaning independents, and non-partisan independents (those who do not affiliate closer with either party). Additionally, we examined combined data from



dismissing the fear of “socialism” and evaluating Obama in very different terms. Most importantly, regardless of their personal feelings toward Obama or how they voted in 2008, they very much want to see him succeed because they believe the country desperately needs the change he promised in his campaign. Though we kept discussion points constant between the two sets of groups, on virtually every point of discussion around President Obama and the major issues facing our country, these two audiences simply saw the world in fundamentally different ways – underscoring the extreme disconnect of the conservative Republican base voters.

Despite this growing disconnect, the base voters remain relevant – particularly for Republican elected officials who must face them at home. The conservative Republican base represents almost one-in-five voters in the electorate, and nearly two out of every three self-identified Republicans. The universe of our focus groups² is representative of this conservative Republican base.³ Ideologically, these voters possess a deeply engrained conservatism. In our favorability exercise, they give the National Rifle Association a 74.3 mean rating on a 100-point scale, and pro-life, anti abortion groups a mean score of 61.8. They have extremely low feelings toward gay marriage, rating it even lower than they rate the state of the economy, and almost all – 90 percent – oppose health care reform out of hand.

These views are more than matched by their views of President Obama: only 12 percent approve of his performance, 75 percent do not like him and 91 percent say the country is off on the wrong track. That is not out of line with how liberal Democrats viewed George W. Bush at a comparable time. But liberal Democrats are outnumbered by moderate Democrats (36 to 61 percent of all Democrats) and their reactions lacked the absolute and apocalyptic character of judgments about Obama.

First and foremost, these conservative Republican voters believe Obama is deliberately and ruthlessly advancing a ‘secret agenda’ to bankrupt our country and dramatically expand government control over all aspects of our daily lives. They view this effort in sweeping terms, and cast a successful Obama presidency as the destruction of the United States as it was conceived by our founders and developed over the past 200 years.

This concern combines with a profound sense of collective identity. In our conversations, it was striking how these voters constantly characterized themselves as part of a group of individuals who share a set of beliefs, a unique knowledge, and a commitment of opposition to Obama that sets them apart from the majority of the country. They readily identify themselves

Democracy Corps surveys conducted over the last four months that show Republicans enjoy a 17-point partisan identification advantage with this group. These voters also self-report to have voted for John McCain by a 20-point margin in the 2008 election.

² These voters are white, “strong” or “weak” Republicans who ideologically self-identify as conservative or moderate and who voted for John McCain AND the Republican congressional candidate in 2008. The groups, conducted in Atlanta, Georgia, were comprised of voters aged 45-60, with one group of women and one of men.

³ Our combined survey data reveals that the Georgia group definition fits more than three-quarters (77 percent) of conservative strong or weak Republicans of the 45-60 age group, and an even higher proportion – 85 percent – of white strong Republicans of the same age.



as a minority in this country – a minority whose values are mocked and attacked by a liberal media and class of elites. They also believe they possess a level of knowledge and understanding when it comes to politics and current events, one gained from a rejection of the mainstream media and an embrace of conservative media and pundits such as Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh, which sets them apart even more. Further, they believe this position leaves them with a responsibility to spread the word, to educate those who do not share their insights, and to take back the country that they love. Their faith in this country and its ideals leave them confident that their numbers will grow, and that they will ultimately defeat Barack Obama and the shadowy forces driving his hidden agenda.

And yet remarkably, these voters had virtually nothing positive to say about the Republican Party. They see their own party as weak, old, and out of touch. They feel it has lost sight of conservative values and conservative voters and is in desperate need of new leadership. They identified a clear disconnect between ‘the people’ and ‘the politicians,’ which poses a growing threat to the party’s ability to challenge Democratic control in Washington. While they continue to defend George W. Bush personally, his presidency is an embarrassment to them and represents the culmination of a creeping betrayal of conservative values that started with the election of his father more than 20 years ago. The lionization of Ronald Reagan in these groups was as strong as we have seen for any political figure, as was the desperate desire for a new Reaganesque figure to lead them out of their current wilderness.

Looking at the current political debate, it was evident in our focus group discussions that the divide between conservative Republicans and even the most conservative-leaning independents remains very, very wide. Independents like those in our suburban Cleveland groups harbor doubts about Obama’s health care reform but are desperate to see some version of health care reform pass this year; the conservative Republicans view any health care reform as a victory for Obama and are militantly opposed. Asked about the issues of greatest importance to them in choosing a candidate for Congress, health care ranked sixth among the Republicans, below issues such as tax cuts, immigration, and a candidate’s personal values and faith; but for the independents, health care was number one.

The language they use further reflects this divide. Conservative Republicans fully embrace the ‘socialism’ attacks on Obama and believe it is the best, most accurate way to describe him and his agenda. Independents largely dismiss these attacks as partisan rhetoric detracting from a legitimate debate about what many of them do see as excessive government control and spending.

Race: Get Over It

In the wake of Rep. Joe Wilson’s outburst during the president’s joint session health care address and other strident personal and political attacks against President Obama, many in the media and Democratic circles advanced an explanation that this virulent opposition is rooted in racism and reactions to President Obama as an African American president. With this possibility in mind, we allowed for extended open-ended discussion on Obama (including visuals of him



speaking) among voters – older, non-college, white, and conservative – who were most race conscious and score highest on scales measuring racial prejudice. Race was barely raised, certainly not what was bothering them about President Obama.

In fact, some of these voters talked about feeling some pride at his election.

They were conscious of the charge that opposition to Obama is racially motivated and that bothered conservative Republicans and independents alike. They basically could not let it go and returned to this issue again and again throughout our conversations across myriad topics.

You can't openly criticize Obama. If you do, you'll be labeled as a racist.

Whatever we say about Obama, no matter what we say about him, it is a racial comment so you know, we can't say anything, we personally do not like him. I don't care if he is purple, but whatever we say we're racist.

As far as a person goes, I don't want to say I hate him. I don't like what he stands for... and I don't like what he is doing and the choices he is making, but I mean I don't know him as a gentleman so... You would be called a racist. You would not like him because he is black. That is what the media is saying.

They see this as a personal rights issue because the racism charge is being used to prevent them from fulfilling their duty to stand up to Obama and his agenda. They see no difference in the opposition Obama faces and the opposition other liberals have faced, because they believe it is based in the same unwavering, bedrock conservative principles that have always led them to oppose liberal policies. The only factor that has changed is the race of the leader being criticized.

The things that we've said have nothing to do with race. They have to do with policy and... an agenda, his agenda... Right... Manipulation.

I think basically we have a lot of the same views of Clinton as we do about Obama but most of us are freer to express it because we are not going to be accused of being racists.

It is important to note, however, that Obama is not personally linked to this effort. It was difficult for these conservative Republicans to say anything positive about Obama, but they freely volunteered without any prompting that he was not a part of this effort to silence and oppress conservative opposition.

Actually that is a good thing that he has done. In all the charges of it being racial he has defended, he has come out and said, no I don't think that comment was meant that way and that was the one thing that I think he has done that you know.

I don't think he thinks it, but I think other people think it. You know the ones that are really supportive of him. If we don't like him, and we have something against him, then we're a racist.



Anger Toward Obama Driven by Doubt and Fear Over his Agenda and Methods

The conservative Republican base is deeply suspicious of Obama's political success and true motivations. These questions were part of the conversation throughout the 2008 election-cycle, but now they feel their greatest fears are being realized, and they do not understand the lack of outcry from the rest of the country. They believe Obama is determined to fundamentally change and weaken our country, taking it away from its founding principles. Four central pillars support their beliefs:

Pillar #1 – Deception and a Hidden Agenda

Their feelings toward Obama are not simply a reflection of intense partisan differences. They are actively rooting for Obama to fail as president because they believe he is not acting in good faith as the leader of our country. Only 6 percent of these conservative Republican base voters say that Obama is on their side, and our groups showed that they explicitly believe he is purposely and ruthlessly executing a hidden agenda to weaken and ultimately destroy the foundations of our country.

I think he's got a hidden agenda... and I'm worried that we won't be able to undo what he has done in such a short time.

I mean that is when you start questioning, what is the agenda? Because they are weakening us as a country to where we cannot afford so we are going to cry out or we are going to take what has been offered to us.

Closely related to this well-established notion of a secret agenda is a hidden set of liberal elites or power brokers who have guided and directed Obama as a puppet, helping him to reach the highest office in the land. It is simply implausible to them that Obama has reached this position on his own without some greater force at work.

I just think that Obama was molded and I think that he is being fed what he can and cannot do and what to do next and it seems like he is a puppet in this whole game. I don't know who the people are behind him really but I don't think it is him. I think it is somebody, I think he is just the figurehead... I think it is George Soros... I do too... Is he the guy with money?... Yes... They say follow the money.

I think he has a money person behind him that has planned this long before because he has gotten pushed into a position that is unbelievable for a community organizer...I come from Chicago so I know how he got there and I don't like his tentacles into ACORN and everything else that are subsidiaries and it all goes back... He couldn't do it by himself.

These conservative Republican base voters were not just shooting off half-cocked theories about conspiracies. They actively believe President Obama is purposely lying about his plans for the country and what his policies would do, and that he is exaggerating the threats America faces in order to create support for his policies. A key component to this deception is a pattern of always telling people what they want to hear, regardless of the truth.



I think that he is deliberately misleading people... if he is not deliberately trying to do harm to the country, which is my view, he doesn't understand anything about how the economy works.

You can't trust which way he wants to go. He knows which way he wants to go; he'll tell you what you want to hear.

A lot of it we don't really know because they are over here in the dark and they are keeping it a secret and it is like we can see it happening but we can't get in there and have an effect on it.

The word scary just keeps coming up. That is why I can't watch him. He scares me to death.

They believe this strategy has been particularly successful in seducing younger voters, who they believe swung the election to Obama because they were taken in by his charisma and idealistic appeals to 'change' and 'hope.'

We find further evidence of this pattern of deception in questions they believe have not been adequately answered or investigated about Obama's background, including his place of birth, his education, the authorship of his books, the degree of his associations with controversial figures including William Ayers and Jeremiah Wright, his work as a community organizer, his links to ACORN, and his service in the Illinois legislature. Again, they see a unique pattern of secrecy and subterfuge, abetted by either incompetence or willful neglect by the mainstream media.

That is why everything is closed, because he didn't want you to know these things.

He has closed his college records. You can't go through there... The records from the hospital in Kenya and I think there are some areas in Hawaii and also something to do with his involvement in government in Illinois, but in every place that he has gone there have been areas that he has closed files.

Every other president has allowed their background and who they are to be exposed, to be investigated except for this president... And why is that?... Just everything. I mean where you were born, where you went to school, what are your school records... And how dare you ask... I mean it goes on and on and on.

When the level of the current political rhetoric in the country was raised and they were asked whether there was any fear that it could escalate into violence, they rejected the suggestion out of hand and cited it as an example of a coordinated media campaign of deception to discredit attacks on Obama.

I think it is another media attack on people who have views other than their own... It almost makes you think they are trying to create some kind of a divide... Tearing us up. Getting us against each other.



Fabrication to prove the point that they want to prove that may or may not be truth. It is relative to their need to get a headline and they are stupid if they think we're not seeing this stuff. They're stupid if they think we're so stupid.

Pillar #2 – Speed

A key piece of the hidden agenda identified and detailed by conservative Republican voters in our focus groups was speed, which was linked to the larger pattern of deception detailed above. They believe Obama is pushing his agenda at record pace because he does not want the American people to know what he is doing. The decision to tackle so many major issues at once early in his term is born not out of necessity, but out of secrecy and political calculation. And the media is once again a key part of this strategy, refusing to expose information that might slow down his legislative march.

But he scares me because of how smart and smooth he is. I think the package he presents combined with the media running interference for him he could do a lot of things fast, which he's trying to do, which worries me.

I think the whole basis is let's ram it through while we have the numbers, while we have the popularity and while maybe people don't know what's going on... Once it's through it's awful hard to repeal... Yeah, that's right; government programs never go away and time is not on his side.

I heard Obama say that the debating time was over with; we need to act. Well, what happened to the debating time? Every time that we tried to debate it, it was shut down. There was nothing allowed. Any information that was tried to be brought out either it was shut down by one media or another and I guess you should be aware of that. If you're not I'm sorry.

Pillar #3 – Driving Government to the Brink and Total Control

Conservative Republicans do not oppose Obama's policies simply because they think they are misguided or out of partisan fervor. Rather, they believe his policies are purposely designed to fail. When they look at the totality of his agenda, they see a deliberate effort to drive our country so deep into debt, to make the majority of Americans so dependent on the government, and to strip away so many basic constitutional rights that we are too weak to fight back and have to accept whatever solution he proposes. The numbers from our database also demonstrate this belief – 92 percent of these voters believe Obama is a “big spender” and only 17 percent believe he has good plans for the economy.

There's a school of thought that if you overload the system with programs and bailouts and all that, that it will create an opportunity, some people believe it started in the 60's with welfare and Medicare and Medicaid; if you load the system down enough till it totally collapses it, I mean, I know it sounds kind of like a conspiracy theory, but it opens the door for this whole new way of governing. I'm not saying he's a sleeper or anything



like that, but it is something to think about... I think your statement's correct. I think it's intentional.

Fear of government control is at the heart of virtually all of the concerns raised by these voters about Obama's agenda, and it is literally a fear of two things – government and control. They see government as inefficient, ineffective, and corrupt and believe it preys on the middle class and 'hard-working Americans.'

I don't want the government to own banks. I don't want them to own the car companies. I don't want them to own Wall Street. I don't want them to tell you how much money you can make. If you work hard they'll take it, they'll take it.

When you look at the things that the government is involved in already, when you look at our Social Security system, when you look at our Medicaid, Medicare programs, various local programs that we have that the government gives out money to... some of the worst run organizations that we have in this country are ones that are run by the government.

Even more concerning than the waste and corruption of government for these voters is the inexorable movement of government toward controlling an ever increasing share of our economic marketplace, as well as our individual lives.

They go from coming into these car companies, banks, credit card companies and then some of the banks wanted to repay the loans and they're not taking money back yet. They want to keep their hand in... It's just control.

I'm sure there are a lot of well-intended people in Washington, but I don't really believe that they care about our health. I think that this is a control issue... It is absolutely.

Pillar #4 – The Ultimate Goal: Socialism and End to Liberties

There is no doubt in their minds that the ultimate goal of this strategy is to change our country to a socialist nation. In their minds, this is the key to truly understanding the Obama presidency and what is happening in our country today. Everything goes back to government control and Obama (aided by Democrats in Congress and the liberal media) seeking to systematically strip away individual rights and insert government into every aspect of our daily lives.

Well, like the fact that he is rushing everything through so quickly, it is so that they didn't have time to read the health plan... and they don't have time to address because he is running from one thing to the other and he is barreling through, which there are books written about this for socialism and how these are all plans on how you take over a government and things that you do and it is happening and you can see it happening through the different things that he is plotting, taking over with the banks and now he is talking about the kids being in school... and you know just the way he is going to regulate everything and the government will have their hands in everything.



Well the guy is very smart and it's like he's trying to say the right things while he's just going right along barreling towards his, what he's shooting for, which is a socialist nation.

They exhaustively cite examples of this strategy at work, starting with the bank bailouts, the takeovers of Chrysler and GM, and foreclosure assistance making homeowners dependent on government for their homes. Another example repeatedly raised by conservative Republicans that undoubtedly reflects the power of FOX News and conservative commentators among these voters was their concern over President Obama's policy 'czars' wielding power over every issue with no accountability.

We are talking about people that he is surrounding himself with and I feel like many of them are corrupt. They are not approved by anybody. They are there and they are given more and more power with no approval... if the people that we elect aren't doing what we are asking them to do, I really have doubts that the people who are put in without being elected by the people are doing what the people want.

Everybody he appointed couldn't make it onto whatever post it was because they had dirt in their background. I mean you are who you hang out with, which is what I tell the kids.

The final, and in many ways most important, piece of evidence they cite is the planned government takeover of health care. The notion that Obama's health care reforms represent a government takeover of all aspects of health care is an article of faith; they reject as laughable the suggestion that it might not, pointing to his arguments to the contrary as further proof of his determination to lie and deceive to fulfill his ultimate agenda. Even after a description of the health care reform plan in our recent polling, these conservative Republican base voters reject it by a 59-point margin, with nearly two-thirds (64 percent) strongly opposed to reform (77 percent total opposed).

I don't want the government involved in any decision making when it comes to my family and I think most people feel that way and when you start to talk about government getting involved in those decisions it is reminiscent to me of Soylent Green, if you have ever seen that movie, but that is not an option.

He is appealing to a small percentage of the population because most of the people have insurance and are very happy with what they have and he is going to disrupt the whole system just so that he can have government control... So it is like socializing... Exactly. That is what he is doing. He has another piece of the pie.

He uses a lot of phrases and buzz words that people would pick up on so that they think it is something good like pre-existing conditions in there so he will gather all those people that had ever had a problem and then long term cap, he'll put that in there so you hear that... So he can draw in a bigger circle. A lot of circles that are all sort of smoke and mirrors. You don't really hear specifics in anything that he ever says.

By comparison, the independent voters expressed clear concerns about Obama - especially that he is doing 'too much, too fast,' that he is spending too much, that they do not under-



stand his health care reforms, and that he does not have a clear plan for bringing jobs back to the US – some of which certainly touched on the conservative Republicans’ concerns. But they still fundamentally like and respect him on several levels and are very clearly rooting for him to succeed. 57 percent of these voters believe that Obama is willing to work with both parties, and 45 percent see him as a strong leader. This stands in strong contrast to the conservative Republican base voters, among whom less than a quarter (24 percent) sees him as such.

He’s inspiring because, you know, he’s dealing with a lot of crap that he got handed to him and I think he’s doing it fairly well how he’s dealing with it and trying to get everybody in a positive position moving forward on everything.

He’s trying to do stuff, he really is. He’s gotten a lot of opposition from the other side and they are trying to compromise and get people to understand where he’s coming from. This is what I surmise from all the times I heard him.

He’s done a lot. He’s done a lot compared to what Bush did in eight years. He did a lot in eight months. More than, I think, Bush did.

They see him as hard-working and committed to helping people, especially the ‘little people,’ and give him credit for tackling issues that were ignored for too long and for doing what he feels is best for the U.S. – a sharp contrast to the conservative Republicans who see him actively working against the interests of our country.

One of the most telling differences between the partisan Republican groups and the independent groups was the language they used. Conservative Republicans fully embrace the ‘socialism’ attacks on Obama and believe it is the best, most accurate framework for describing him and his agenda. Independents largely dismiss these attacks as the kind of overblown partisan rhetoric that obscures the facts and only serves to cheapen the political discourse.

I don’t like this... That word comes up a lot lately... Yeah, why? Who is pushing socialism? It’s not really socialism... I think it’s the Republicans... Yeah, exactly.

He’s doing what he has to do right now... Well, the banks started it, bailing out the banks started with George Bush, you know, that’s a Republican, you know.

A Sense of Shared Identity

The other dominant lesson that emerged from our focus groups and provides critical insight into the thinking of today’s partisan Republican voters is their clear sense of shared identity. In our focus group discussions, we quickly noted how they routinely used plural first-person pronouns to describe a group of individuals (including all those in the room but extending far beyond those walls) who share a set of beliefs, knowledge, and commitment to oppose Obama that sets them apart from the majority of the country. Democrats may joke that Republicans seem to live on a different planet sometimes, but in some important ways, these Republicans would happily agree.



Our conversations revealed three critical pieces to this sense of shared identity, starting with a core sense of values and beliefs that sets them apart from much of our society.

An Oppressed, Mocked Minority

Conservative Republicans passionately believe that they represent a group of people who have been targeted by a popular culture and set of liberal elites – embodied in the liberal mainstream media – that mock their values and are actively working to advance the downfall of the things that matter most to them in their lives – their faith, their families, their country, and their freedom.

The media will not give anyone a fair chance that is a conservative.

Well, the media has always been liberal. They never ever did the conservative side. If you always look, you know they never do... Yeah, but it is to the point of embarrassment. I think I would be embarrassed if I was a newscaster.

The notion of a liberal media using its reach and power to advance a radical agenda is a given for these voters. If you do not see and understand this reality, you are not a part of their collective group and you cannot possibly understand the current political environment in our country. This creates an almost siege-like mentality, in which these conservative Republicans are always on the defensive, at all times looking for any slight against them and their beliefs and seeking to link it back to a broader effort rooted in the liberal media.

The flip side of exposing the fallacies of the liberal media, of course, is knowing where to find the truth.

Special Knowledge

A central part of the collective identity built by conservative Republicans in the current political environment is their belief that they possess knowledge and insight that the majority of Americans – whether too lazy or too misguided to find it for themselves – do not possess. A combination of conservative media outlets are the means by which they have gained this knowledge, led by FOX News (“the truth tellers”), and to a lesser degree conservative talk radio. Their antipathy and distrust toward the mainstream media could not be stronger, and they fiercely defend FOX as the only truly objective news outlet.

Media, mainstream media is basically in the back pocket of the Democrats... There's only one FOX ... There's only one FOX.

It has been publicized on FOX News and the mainstream media is not reporting on such vital issues that people should know about and that is why people that don't follow...

I have to confess when I'm in an establishment and they have, I feel a little differently if they have CNN on the TV up in the corner or if they have FOX News. I think people think



FOX News is right wing when actually everything is so left it appears that FOX News is right wing. When FOX is actually, if you take out their commentators, they are very middle of the road. CNN, I just can't even watch it.

They ask the questions that the other news medias won't... And that's what makes them seem a little bit to the right.

Several of the women particularly talked about becoming a sort of truth police, spending a great deal of their personal time and energy watching FOX to get the real stories, then turning to CNN, MSNBC, and the networks to document their failure to cover the “real truth.” It was unclear what they did with this information once gathered, other than share it with others within this group.

I don't just watch FOX News. I'll watch CNN, I'll watch regular you know prime time news just to get the comparison of the story and kind of figure out where the truth lies and facts don't lie, and I think FOX News is reporting the facts... The other news stations aren't picking this up and running with it tells you that, you know, I mean it tells you something.

I often watch all of them to see what, okay, if a big story comes out I turn on the other channels to see are they covering those conservative conversations that are going on FOX and I rarely see them on the other channels... I also like to hear their spin on it. I like to hear how they are reporting on something. If I've heard it here and I want to see what they're saying and then I might even watch a regular TV channel to hear what they are saying.

I turned them on because it was two hours on FOX and I turned on every other station to see were they covering it. There was no coverage.

Beyond FOX News in general, they have mixed feelings about conservative media figures, but they are grateful for talk radio as the only major outlet, other than FOX, where conservative voices can be heard. Rush Limbaugh, in particular, was greeted with mixed reviews. On the one hand, they recognize his role as a pioneer of sorts and view him as a principled conservative who is willing to speak his mind regardless of the consequences.

He speaks his mind... I'm glad that he has a platform... I'm glad a lot of conservatives have platforms on the radio or television.

On the other hand, they believe his sensationalism and arrogance can obscure the power of the ideas he champions. They clearly embrace the message more than the messenger.

Well, he is conservative and he speaks for a lot of people, but I think his personality can be abrasive at times.

Anyone who talks unscripted for three hours at some point is going to say something that's controversial and may have not come out like he wanted to come out. I think he's



a brilliant man. He's got phenomenal points and I rarely do I disagree with him... Yeah, I would second that; very smart man... his predictions are always on line.

Glenn Beck, however, received nothing short of adulation from these voters, particularly the women. They believe he embodies the best of conservative media – determination to unearth the stories the liberal media tries to bury, love of country, and refusal to be intimidated, even as the liberal media unleashes waves of attacks on his past and his credibility.

I think he's a patriot... I think he's passionate. You know they make jokes about him crying and all this kind of stuff; I think the man, I think the man feels it. I think he's genuine.

I think the guy's brilliant. No one goes after him because he does his homework. He checks, double checks, triple checks and he says he refuses to put it on the air unless it's been checked a hundred different times. So when you can't get at him, you start calling him names and start digging into his past.

He is a firecracker... He tells the truth... He is also a person who says what he thinks... He gets emotional, but if you can past the emotion and follow his logic, he makes some really good points.

I get angry when I watch his show because I get angry that no one is listening to this and how come regular media is not airing it.

Two aspects of the discussion on Beck among conservative Republicans were particularly noteworthy. One was a common fear among the women for his personal safety, a belief that his willingness to stand up to powerful liberal interests was putting his life, as well as the lives of those working with him, in danger. Of course, his willingness to face this danger head on only adds to his legend.

I fear for his life... He is heavily secured believe me.

Glenn Beck is the type of man that he has put his personal finances on the line to protect everyone of his employees. They all have... bodyguards, security, high security. He said I don't care if my business goes down or I am put out of business, this is my family, my family and, he has twelve employees in his business. That is the kind of man he is.

The other is the commitment these voters have made to Beck and his show. More than half of the respondents in our conservative Republicans groups indicated that they try to watch or listen to Beck on a daily basis, with some going to great lengths to ensure they (and their families) do not miss a thing.

I listen to him every morning. I try if I get home at 5:00 I try to watch him on TV. If not, I'll watch him on the internet the next day.

Watch and listen. Well I don't watch anymore because we are unemployed and I had to cancel cable but I listen to him on the radio... I catch the last half hour of his show eve-



ryday because I get home from work... I record it... My 16-year-old watches Beck. She says, is it recorded? I hope you didn't delete it yet. There's hope.

Building an Underground Movement

The final aspect of the collective identity shared by conservative Republicans is the call to action. The attacks they suffer for their values and the special knowledge they share as a result of their devotion to conservative media and active rejection of mainstream media are ultimately meaningless if it does not help defeat Obama and his hidden agenda. This is where the sense of collective purpose is greatest. They see a nascent movement building, still not fully realized or activated but with a growing number of people watching and listening, growing increasingly frustrated, and looking for ways to stop the growing threat they perceive.

We don't feel like we have a place to stand, a lot of us, so we just keep quiet and they are just louder and we haven't got that platform.

He underestimated the American people that he just spread so much stuff, have so much going on that nobody could put their finger on it, but it's just awakened people. He's being watched very carefully, every move he makes.

I think people are listening... It is the underground movement going on... I think people are listening to what he is saying, but to others as well. And he may plant a seed and then it takes other people to get things rolling. He is not out there organizing for different tea parties or things to be going on. Somebody is saying you know maybe I can do that.

The religious undertones to this language – planting a seed, a people awakening – are unmistakable and speak to the fervor of these partisans. This is about an attack on their most closely held beliefs and values, and they will not simply turn the other cheek. They passionately believe that, through their hard work and determination, Obama and his agenda will ultimately be defeated.

They celebrated the tea parties as early signs of this movement coming together, talking about the tea parties in first person despite not having attended any events themselves.

The tea party things, their point of view is, you are all crazy. You know, you are all nut-jobs out there holding these tea parties, but at least they were showing that something was going on where other people just totally ignored, I mean we are ignored... I didn't attend a tea party but we, the people, were non-existent according to some of the news stations.

The symbolism of the tea parties reflects one of the key findings of this research. Asked what it is that they want out of this movement, aside from defeating Obama and his agenda, conservative Republicans constantly returned to a common refrain – returning our country to its founding principles. While they do not necessarily agree on what this means, they can agree that



the country has wandered dangerously far from the vision of our founding fathers and that Obama wants to take us even further from that foundation.

I think it goes back to the basic founding principles. We need to get back to the Constitution and what the founding fathers wanted this nation to be, what freedom really means, "Of the People and By the People" and smaller government.

I don't want big government. I want the people to have the say-so. Go back to the original intent of the Constitution... and that is not what this administration stands for I believe.

I want to get back to the principles on which we were founded, the principles that say, In God We Trust, which is written above in that, in the House, what do you call it, the Speaker's House, is that where it is. I forget where it is. Anyway, In God We Trust.

Not surprisingly given our previous research into the centrality of faith to the politics of conservative Republicans, there are clear religious overtones to this nostalgia for the founding fathers. With little specificity to their history or its implications for today, they express an unshakable belief that our country was founded on Judeo-Christian values and must return to those values to get back on the right track.

People may disagree, but I believe that our country is built on Judeo and Christian values and it's been said that a Democratic country cannot exist unless people have, take personal responsibility and they have certain values and I think our forefathers saw that... and of course I'm talking about a particular type of values, which would be Judeo-Christian.

Well our country was started, founded on Judeo-Christian values and they have the same belief system and our founding fathers believed in, I mean they appeal to a higher power in times of trouble... they knew that there was a power greater than themselves that they had to seek in order to have guidance and find what was the greater good rather than what can I get.

Republican Party Failing Its Base Voters

Conservative Republicans in our groups could not have been more negative in discussing their own party. They see the Republican Party as ineffective and rudderless, controlled by a class of political professionals who have lost touch with not only the people but the conservative values that should guide them.

It is old and out of touch...Weak.

When Republicans try to be like Democrat-lite they're, number one they're not going to convert any Democrats to them and they're just going to lose conservatives.

I believe this is a center-right nation. When the Republicans start veering off their path, which is what they've done lately, bad things start happening... Yeah, I believe Bush tried



to reach across the aisle a little bit too much and he came across as being weak and... He compromised.

The disconnect these partisans see between the party leadership and the party faithful is at the root of their discontent. They have no intention of leaving the party per se – they still believe it is the best and only means of opposing Obama and the Democratic Congress – but they also have little confidence in its current direction or leadership, and there is an emotional distance that can be damaging.

I think the Republican representatives think government. They don't think people, they think government and they got to get to the people.

They've swayed from their base and they're saying it's changed; it hasn't changed.

They're so worried about pandering to the Hispanic vote that they're going to alienate their base.

This crisis within the Republican Party is nothing new from the point of view of its most ardent supporters. As strong believers in the power of leadership and symbolism, this is a trend that they believe started with the end of the Reagan presidency and the election of George H.W. Bush and his subsequent tax increase. Of course, the Clinton administration was a nightmare for these voters, although the Obama experience has created some revisionist history in their minds.

I didn't know how good we had it when he was in office. He seems conservative.

He wasn't the 'me' man like Obama is. Everything is about him. Clinton wasn't as much like that... I'm not so sure that Clinton had such a radical forum. I don't know, maybe he did but it didn't seem to be... I mean he at least has some patriotism at times. He didn't badmouth as much the U.S.A. and stuff.

There seemed to be more bipartisanship. He's kind of a likable rogue... Yeah, he kept us entertained and I liked the period of time during his Presidency... Yeah, he just cracks me up. Of all the people to go into North Korea and rescue two women... I just had a feeling it was going to be Bill.

The eight years of George W. Bush's presidency created a great deal of dissonance for these voters. Overall, they are embarrassed by his presidency. They are most likely to cite the prescription drug benefit and his failure to rein in spending or the size of government, although his public speaking and blunders also play a role in their overall disappointment. Nonetheless, they will passionately defend him on a personal level and praise him for his conviction and devotion to doing what he felt was best for the country.

I think he was extremely patriotic and he loved America and he really thought that he was doing what was best for America. I think he was very sincere.

You knew where he stood though. His convictions, if he said I'm doing this and he never changed his mind. He was, and whether you liked it or not what he said is what you got.



But in the end, defend him and make excuses though they may, they cannot view his presidency as a success or get around the fact that it set the stage for an Obama victory in 2008.

You know, I think he made bad decisions down the line... but I don't know that anyone could have done any better under those circumstances.

The media, they hammer him; they hated him. They hammered him. Even if you were a die-hard conservative, which he wasn't and I am... well he did some good things and he did some bad things.

Asked what their party needs to reinvigorate itself and close the gap between its leaders and its rank and file, these conservative Republicans are almost unanimous in their solution – new leadership. And although they expressed some hope for a variety of names (Gingrich, Romney, Huckabee, Jindal), there was only one figure who truly excited them and created real passion – Sarah Palin. They see in her the uncompromising personal conviction and integrity that they admired in Bush, but with an authentic conservatism that reflects her personal background.

You betcha... Spicy... Honest... Go girl... Forthright. Right up there... Says what she feels.

I just hope that Sarah Palin has Hillary's backbone because she is going to need it and that is the thing. I would vote for her in a heartbeat. I love Sarah Palin.

I also admired Sarah Palin for being a professional woman and a great mom. She sacrificed and she was you know an Alaskan woman... She was a real woman... You know strong, courageous, almost like the pioneer women.

I think that she has the moral fiber. I believe she's unselfish, really... I don't think that she's a person who lies or, you know, she's probably not going to be perfect, but I think she's got the moral fiber.

They very specifically point out her record of taking on corruption in both parties as part of what excites them about her and makes her a unique figure to reinvigorate a moribund and complacent party.

Because she went in and she dealt with the corruption and that is why they are afraid of her... They are still not wanting her to come out and be popular because she will do what she says and there is corruption across the board, Democrat, Republican.

She has scruples. She's, I mean, she took down Republicans and Democrats. If they were wrong and corrupt, she took them down.

They disagree on her viability as a candidate for national office, but they do not disagree on her ability to lead. Some say she needs to get more experience or take on responsibilities that will burnish her credentials and reassure uncertain swing voters while others maintain she has nothing to prove and is already more experienced and qualified than the current incumbent.



I think the experience she had in Alaska with offshore drilling and things like that that would have really helped us now, you know, and I think, I think her experience was a lot, I mean, far greater than what Obama had.

The one point they all agree on is that Palin was a victim of an unprecedented smear campaign. Reflecting in many ways their feelings about themselves as a group, they say Palin was targeted by the liberal media like no other figure in modern history because they both feared her and hated her for her unwavering values and beliefs.

Everybody went after her with big, the guns loaded. I mean that poor lady didn't have a chance. Between the media and they were digging up every single piece of dirt. They just, she was the threat. I really think she was a threat to them and they did her dirty. I really think they did her dirty.

I think that the media is totally, I think she's been totaled, I don't know how to say this, the media has just piled on her like I've never seen. Talking about being made fun of...

There was a concerted effort to take her down through financial means.

The independent voters in our groups clearly viewed these issues very, very differently. They share the conservative Republicans' disdain for the current Republican Party, but their critique is not that the party has abandoned its conservative principles but instead that it advances the interests of the rich and big businesses at the expense of the middle class. They worry about the Democratic Party's proclivity to spend tax dollars and provide 'freebies' to those who do not do their fair share, but they appreciate the Democrats' focus on 'the little people' (among which they included themselves) and the fact that 'it's not all about the money.'

They view FOX News as another media outlet, decidedly conservative in its point of view but no more or less biased than any other media outlet; their assumption is that every outlet has a bias that reflects the interests of its own bottom line. FOX is no different, and certainly not a source of special insight and information that cannot be gained elsewhere. They generally laugh at conservative commentators such as Limbaugh ('overbearing,' 'egotistical,' 'idiot') and Beck (one man called him a 'crybaby'). When it comes to Sarah Palin, there was almost universal agreement that she could never be elected president, with most citing her inexperience and baggage as obstacles too great to overcome. But even more important to them, most felt she was ultimately driven by greed and ambition more than anything else and would rather use her new-found fame to enrich herself than improve the country.

All of which underscores how much the conservative Republicans are a world apart – with big consequences for the Republican Party.