MEMORANDUM

TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Linda DiVall and Ed Gillespie

DATE: March 22, 2012

RE: Opportunities for both Republicans and Democrats to Garner Support Among Suburban Women Voters

As part of our Target Voter Series, Resurgent Republic sponsored four focus groups among Suburban Women who self-identified as Independents, voted for Obama in 2008 and are undecided today. Conducted by American Viewpoint, the focus groups were split between Wal-Mart Women (no college degree with household incomes under $50,000) and working college graduates and held in Des Moines, Iowa, and Manchester, New Hampshire.

In 2008 President Obama carried women voters by 56 to 43 percent (McCain won 53 percent of the white women vote). The pendulum swung back during the recent midterm elections as congressional Republicans received a slight plurality, 49 to 48 percent (including a strong majority among white women, 58 to 39 percent). Recent public polling shows President Obama has somewhat strengthened his standing among this demographic, an early sign that the women vote this November will be competitive – especially among Suburban Women voters like those in our groups.

Key Findings

As Obama voters, these Suburban Women represent a narrow subset of Independents at large and are most likely Obama’s last line of electoral defense. The Des Moines groups were for the most part soft Democrats and remained favorable toward the President even though they are not yet voting for him. Noticeably different, the Manchester groups left the discussion with their vote intention split between Obama and the eventual Republican nominee. Those who peeled off from Obama reached the conclusion that someone else could do better. Additional key findings include:

• Even in states with relatively low unemployment (below 6 percent), these Suburban Women voters remain disturbed and nervous about the state of the economy.

• While they acknowledge the national unemployment rate is slowly improving, they feel there is a long way to go in terms of quality, family-supporting jobs and believe the underemployment figures more accurately describe the economic climate.
• In evaluating Obama, they are more likely to say he hasn’t had enough time or that the economic problems were more severe than he realized than to solely blame the President.

• The Suburban Women groups expressed their most hesitation with President Obama when considering the totality of economic figures ranging from when he took office to today.

Current State of the Economy

1. Even in states with unemployment well below the national average, concern regarding the economy remains palpable. The state unemployment rates for Iowa and New Hampshire are 5.6 percent and 5.2 percent respectively. Even so, the Wal-Mart Women in both Des Moines and Manchester described the economy as “uphill,” “unbalanced,” “unstable,” “uncertain,” “scary,” “moving at a snail’s pace,” and “slow moving.” The college-educated women split, with those in Des Moines volunteering positive words and phrases like “improving,” “hopeful,” and “moving forward,” while those in Manchester did not offer a single positive descriptor of the economy. One college-educated New Hampshire woman described how any positive economic signs haven’t translated to financial security: “Even if [her husband] has a job or if I have a job, there’s no more feeling that you’re going to have that job. You’re always waiting for the next shoe to drop. It’s a horrific way to live.”

2. Suburban women believed the underemployment figures or “real unemployment” was a more accurate indicator of the economy’s true health and present challenges. After reviewing the national unemployment trend from 2008 to present, many respondents found some degree of relief that things were starting to turn around, albeit slowly. The somewhat optimistic tone was temporary as the discussion shifted to the underemployment figures, those who want work but have stopped searching in this economy and those who are forced to work part-time because they cannot find full-time employment. At over 15 percent, the underemployment or “real unemployment” rate hit home with these Suburban Women, and they largely believed this topic painted a more realistic picture of the ongoing economic hardship.

Interestingly, these women were unfamiliar with any elected official who was talking about the underemployed – including President Obama – and agreed this issue should be more prominent in the national dialogue. Similarly, across all four groups, a majority of these women knew someone who would fit the underemployed category. In addition, the respondents mentioned others who have been forced to accept jobs well below their qualifications and previous salaries, so from some of their perspectives, even the underemployed rate of more than 15 percent was not a realistic assessment of where the economy really is. A Wal-Mart Woman in Des Moines summed up her frustration by saying, “I think you hear about job numbers and the number of jobs that will be created… but it doesn’t talk about the quality of the jobs.”

President Barack Obama

1. Both groups personally liked President Obama and give him credit for trying to turn the country around. For the most part these suburban women – all of whom voted for President Obama in 2008 – are reluctant to say anything negative about him but their
positive descriptors carried a trace of faint praise. Obama is “doing the best he can,” “trying hard,” and “needs more time.” There was an awareness that the unemployment rate was trending up before President Obama took office, underscoring their belief that he is not the cause of the recession, and that others should be brought into the equation, including Congress and the banking industry. These voters were more likely to believe Obama underestimated the severity of the economic crisis or was a bit naïve in his approach than to outright blame him for the current state of the economy. Yet Obama’s good intentions didn’t convince all these voters, including a Wal-Mart Woman in Des Moines who said, “He jumped in and the water is a little too deep. He had really good points to begin with, he had good ideas, knew what he wanted to do. But with everybody else he had to work with and the obstacles he met, it’s almost like it got over his head.”

2. **Beyond their personal affinity for Obama, these Suburban Women found it difficult to cite reasons why they approve of the President, especially regarding the economy.** The most common references of support dealt with national security: the killing of Osama Bin Laden, ending the War in Iraq and bringing troops home. Yet when discussing their pressing concern of the economy, there was hardly any positive reference to policies implemented by the President. Another New Hampshire college-educated women described her feelings this way, “I don’t see any improvement. I don’t think America is back. I think it’s going down…what has he [Obama] done to make this a place to be proud of?” The promise of hope and change has not been realized in the minds of these women, but few directly blamed the President for that realization. However, their expectation of what can really be done is lower than it was four years ago.

3. **The Suburban Women groups expressed their most hesitation with President Obama when considering the totality of economic figures ranging from when he took office to today.** After reviewing the “Obama by the Numbers” chart, serious concerns were raised, even in the more Democrat-leaning Des Moines groups. Words like “scary,” “worrisome” and “disheartening” were used, while others said they were speechless. As a college educated woman in Manchester said, it “makes you not want to live in America anymore.”

While they didn't fix the blame solely on the President for these numbers, the totality of the data created significant hesitations in how they view the direction of the country and ultimately Obama’s leadership. One of the most significant takeaways from the Manchester groups is when prompted half of the women thought someone else could do better.

**Obamacare: the Religious Mandate and Contraception Coverage**

1. Nearly all of the Suburban Women voters were familiar with the religious mandate debate, although they largely perceived the issue in terms of women’s health. When this topic was raised, their immediate response was to defend contraception coverage and women’s rights. It is also worth noting that some thought the Administration’s self-labeled compromise assuaged the Catholic Church’s objections.

2. More concerns were voiced when the policy was discussed in light of the religious mandate. Particularly in the more Catholic New Hampshire groups, the respondents were split on the issue when discussed in terms of freedom of religion and whether or not the
federal government should compel a religious organization to do something contrary to their beliefs.

3. **Overall, Obamacare was not on the top of their minds.** The debate that dominated the first two years of Obama’s presidency has largely faded to the backburner among these voters. They largely struggled to describe what the law does, outside of offering coverage for pre-existing conditions and for those under the age of 26. There was also sentiment that Obama should get credit for trying to get something done on health care, but belief that the new law will increase health care costs and place a new burden on individuals, small businesses and job creation.

One Wal-Mart Woman in Des Moines said, “But what about, if you’re a company that is already struggling, and you have to offer this insurance, what’s that going to do to [them]. And if you’re already struggling financially to take care of your family, what is that going to do when you get fined or have to pay for this insurance that your company can’t afford and you can’t afford?”

**Federal Spending, Deficits, and Debt**

1. **The size of both the deficit and national debt were seen as significant problems that remain unaddressed by Washington.** The debt owed per person was described as "shocking" by one Des Moines respondent. In the college graduate groups especially, there was a real concern of how the ever-increasing national debt would be a detriment to the their children’s opportunities and an "anchor" to future growth. Several women said that America is heading closer toward Greece and expressed dismay that the country is becoming more beholden to China. Respondents across the board were unable to name any politicians who had offered real solutions to solve this problem.

2. **Talking about the debt in personal terms remains the best strategy in connecting with these voters.** Consistent with previous focus groups we have conducted on this topic, the actual size of the debt was difficult to grasp. Aggregate figures are too theoretical to comprehend, yet personalizing the debt – per individual or household – makes the topic more real. In addition, respondents in each group compared the debt to their family budget, stating they have to keep their spending in check and didn't understand why those in Washington played by a different set of rules.

3. **These women voters widely believed that increasing taxes would be a catalyst toward more federal spending, rather than deficit reduction.** Across all four groups there was a noticeable lack of faith that any of the President Obama’s tax proposals would actually go toward deficit reduction if they were enacted. They judged President Obama’s call for deficit reduction against the backdrop of wasteful stimulus spending. These voters also agreed that the President failed to keep his promise of cutting the deficit in half by the end of his first term, but they feel some of the fault centers on the systemic problems of Washington.
SUBURBAN WOMEN FOCUS GROUPS

The Target Voter Series is a project of 24 focus groups among Obama Independents who are undecided on the generic presidential ballot. The focus groups are taking place in 11 battleground states among six key demographic groups (Suburban Women, Younger Voters, Seniors, Independents, Hispanics, and Blue Collar Catholics). This is the first of six memos to be released in the series.

Des Moines, Iowa
February 23, 2012
Wal-Mart Women / Working College Graduates
Conducted by American Viewpoint

Manchester, New Hampshire
March 8, 2012
Wal-Mart Women / Working College Graduates
Conducted by American Viewpoint

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1 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 2011 (most recent data at the time).
2 All four groups were conducted prior to the release of the February jobs numbers on March 9, 2012.