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Informing Women on Their Own Getting Women the Information They Need to Turn Out in 2006

To: Women's Voices. Women Vote.

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Executive Summary

In 2004, motivated by a close, high stakes Presidential election, unmarried women turned out in record numbers. Even so, unmarried women were underrepresented in the electorate. The challenge for 2006 remains how to continue to involve unmarried women in the electoral process and how to expand their presence in the electorate. We find that with efforts to educate them about the candidates and the issues, these women have the potential to make a substantial impact on the outcome of a midterm election traditionally characterized by low voter turnout.¹

As we found in our national survey of unmarried Americans, unmarried women hunger for information about candidates and elections, and they commonly cite lack of information as the major reason why they do not vote. The goal of this current research is to better understand what kind of information will help motivate unmarried women to turn out at the polls. Given that unmarried women are less engaged than married women in politics and have obstacles to acquiring political information, we seek to understand what kind of information they want, the manner in which they want it presented, and the message framework that works best for presenting it.

We find that providing unmarried women with information about the elections and the issues that affect them most removes a key barrier to voting. While women often rely on friends and family for political information, they will trust a non-partisan organization if the information is unbiased and fact based. The information should be verifiable,

¹ The following memo is based on four focus groups conducted in Phoenix, Arizona and Cleveland, Ohio. The first Arizona group consisted of Hispanic unmarried women, and the second consisted of white unmarried women, 45 years and older. The first Ohio group consisted of white unmarried women, ages 18-29 and the second group consisted of white unmarried women, ages 30-44. All groups were registered voters, had voted in 2004, but half were likely 2006 voters and half were unlikely 2006 voters. Focus groups are qualitative; though indicative of social attitudes, they are not drawn from a representative sample and thus cannot be generalized to the population at large.

even if by simply including a website with the source of information. It helps, moreover, to provide unmarried women with information about the process of casting their ballot such as the date of the election and the site of their polling place. Finally, women on their own respond to messages that tap their sense of civic responsibility, using images and language that they can connect to emotionally.

Key Findings

- Unmarried women often do not vote because they lack interest in elections or do not have the time or opportunity to learn about the candidates and issues.
- Family and friends and the Internet are key information sources about politics and elections for unmarried women.
- Non-partisan organizations can be an important source of political information if the information is objective and unbiased.
- Issue information must be balanced. Unmarried women want to see side-by-side comparisons of candidate positions on the issues.
- Citations (such as websites) for statements made about the candidates make the information verifiable and thus more believable.
- Women value information both about the issues in elections and the process of casting their ballot. Younger women, in particular, seek information about the process of voting.
- If unmarried women connect emotionally to images and language in direct mail, they are more likely to read it and find it motivating.
- In this research, women respond to information about voting that is framed by a message that evokes civic responsibility to cast their vote.

What We Tested

In these groups, we discussed what political issues matter most to them and what they think of the current state of affairs in the country and in their state. We then queried these women about where they get their political information and how much they trust the various sources they use.

To learn about how to present information to these women, we tested several different mailers. We wanted to identify what information these women want—information about the candidates or information about the political process—as well as how to frame the message and what type of design is most eye-catching and intriguing for these women. Most mailers contained information about the candidates, while one contained information about the process of voting. The covers included: a “Woman’s Guide to the 2006 Elections”, a picture of a flag, a picture of a child holding a flag, photos of the candidates, “Election Guide for Dummies,” and “Voting: It’s easy as 1-2-3.” The backs of all the mailers except the “process of voting” mailer contained a side-by-side comparison of the candidates’ positions on a few key issues, but varied in terms of their look and feel. The “Woman’s Guide,” for instance, was entirely in black and white, while some of the other backs were in colors such as pink or yellow. The “process of voting” piece was done all in bright colors and was targeted towards a younger audience.

Using Information to Bring Unmarried Women into the Political Process

Despite immense dissatisfaction with direction of the country, unmarried women still under-participate in elections, particularly in off-year issues.² Many women on their own see politics as irrelevant to their lives as political leaders simply do not address their issues, while others lack the time to learn about the issues and candidates; both contribute to depressed turnout among unmarried women. Many unmarried women have told us in our research over the past three years that they do not feel informed enough to vote. In this research, we focused specifically on the role of information in motivating unmarried women to vote. We found that being informed about the issues or candidates and strong feelings of civic responsibility can help motivate women in the groups and help overcome their aversion or indifference to politics.

The Role of Information

It is not surprising that unmarried women say that they rely most heavily on friends and family for political information, and they trust friends and family to give them information without “spin.” These women are less news aware than married women and they tend to work in jobs that lack politically relevant social networks. Friends and families – even just causal conversation – are often their only source of information about politics. Moreover, unmarried women are so cynical about politics and political candidates, in particular, they are loathe to believe or rely on any political ad they see in passing on television. They tend to dismiss this information as biased or confusing. These feelings are only confirmed when they see that politicians do not follow through with their promises or leave them out of the conversation.

When the women we spoke to do actively seek out information, many of them rely on the Internet – particularly if they are younger or have a job where they are online. The notion is that they can collect information from many sources, weigh the competing views and come to their own decision about a particular issue or political choice. While it is not clear if this research process actually occurs, it is important to note that the primary issue is that these women do not believe they can trust the media – the primary source of political information in our current political environment – to tell the truth about much of anything.

The Characteristics of Trusted Sources of Information

Friends and family are the most trusted sources of information for these unmarried women. In the absence of the help of loved ones, they might search the Internet or read the newspaper. But clearly there is a role for “non-partisan” organizations in this process. We learned from this

² While the proportion of unmarried women who voted in 2004 was a substantial increase from the turnout in 2002 and 2000, more work can still be done to increase their electoral presence. In 2004, 20 million unmarried women still did not vote. By providing these women with information about candidates, issues, and the process of voting, we can motivate and empower these women to turn out in greater numbers in 2006.

research that there are some clear parameters for this information. These women want clear, concise information and a reason to believe that their issues could be important in November. They desire brief, easily digestible information about where the candidates stand on the issues, and above all, in order to be credible to these women, political information must be objective, balanced, and verifiable.

- **Objectivity**

All participants examined mail pieces with information about the candidates' positions on a few key issues; the mail pieces featured a disclaimer stating that WVWV—a non-partisan organization that does not endorse candidates—was the source the mailer. Across these groups, the disclaimer stating WVWV's non-partisan status proved critical to winning their trust. Nearly all participants commented about the legitimacy that such a disclaimer lent the entire mail piece. The fact that WVWV does not endorse candidates also provided evidence of objective for a number of these women.

- **Balance**

Presenting information about the candidates in a way that is balanced is also critical to credibility. Presenting information side-by-side permits women to compare the candidates and issues against each other and evaluate for themselves which candidate they prefer. When presenting the candidates' issue positions, it is even important to use the words "favor" and "oppose" in equal numbers when describing the issue positions of the candidates, so as not to suggest bias toward one candidate or another.

- **Verifiability**

Women want to be able to verify the accuracy of informational statements for instance by citing votes taken by a current elected official or a website where they can find more information. Votes and statements of candidates positions can be verified by checking on votes on government websites or candidate websites. Moreover, websites provide readers the opportunity to learn more about each candidate or issue and then draw their own conclusions. They may not choose to visit the website, but they want to at least have the ability to verify the accuracy of the information for themselves if they desire.

In the mailers we tested, participants read a brief statement about a candidate's position on a particular issue, which was followed by a website where the reader could go to verify the information. Citations like this dramatically improved the credibility of the mailer. By including links to websites, participants felt the information was more likely to be accurate, and they had the opportunity to learn more about an issue or candidate on their own.

What Should We Say to Unmarried Women

The unmarried women in our focus groups wanted clear, concise information about where the candidates stand on a few key issues. They also expressed an interest in knowing about the candidate's personal background, including the credentials they bring to office. But unmarried women are not interested in just any issue, they are interested in the concerns that matter to them most. Keep in mind that one of the reasons unmarried women do not participate in politics is they believe that politicians do not talk about the issues they care about most such as healthcare and retirement. Information does not just need to focus on candidate positions and issues, it can concern the political process itself. Young unmarried women in particular often lack basic knowledge about how to register and how to vote...

- **Issues and Process**

Mail pieces with easily digestible side-by-side comparison of candidates' positions on the issues were quite effective with these women; they are useful for women who lack the time to learn about the candidates and issues or simply would not seek it out on their own. But women also like to learn about the political process; they might be reluctant to say they do not know how to vote, but the younger women in our groups found information about registering to vote and the process of casting their ballot very useful. This information also helped convince them that voting really is less time-consuming and complicated than they previously thought. Despite having more political experience than the younger women, our older women also noted that including information on dates and location makes the voting process easier by putting all the information in one convenient place.

- **Issue Content Critical**

It is critical for mailers to feature issues that resonate with unmarried women; as we learned in our survey work, unmarried women are consumed with their economic insecurity including healthcare, retirement, jobs and gas prices. A number of participants said that they would vote in November only if they felt strongly about one of the candidates or their approach to issues. If it seems that candidates and parties are not addressing their issues, what is the point of voting? Please note that these issues were not framed as "women's issues," per se, even if the visuals of the mail pieces invoked images of women who looked like them.

- **Candidate Background**

The truth is, voters care about candidates' backgrounds. They want to know where they come from, what kind of experience and values they would bring to public office. Unmarried women are no different. Women like personal information about the candidate because it gives them a sense of the values and background of the candidate. The women in the groups say this information

helps them make inferences about the beliefs of the candidate. These women also want a sense of the occupational background and political experience of the candidate because these are relevant considerations in their vote choice.

Appearance and Framing of Direct Communication to Unmarried Women

The appearance and framing of the mail pieces is critical. Women respond most strongly to images that make an emotional connection with them in some way. They also pay careful attention to the language choice, voicing particular distaste for the term “unmarried.” Overall, women in the groups responded positively to a framing of candidate positions, issues and process that were framed in terms of civic responsibility and empowerment.

- **Image Selection Crucial**

In order for the mailer to be motivating, women need to connect emotionally to the image on the front of the mailer. Our groups were drawn to test pieces that featured pictures of women on the front covers of the mail pieces, rather than pictures of two (white male) candidates.

These women also preferred pictures of women that “looked like them,” in terms of race and age. They prefer photos of a woman or women that aren’t idealized images of women, but regular women who remind them of themselves and their friends.

These women also were attracted to covers with patriotic images, which tapped into their sense that voting is a civic duty and a key part of caring about America.

- **Language Matters**

Women in the groups had a strong, negative reaction to the term “unmarried” and some did not even want to be referred to as “women.” Unmarried – as we have learned in previous research – has a negative connotation for many women, particularly if they are single and feel judged for not being married. It really is not necessary to label these women or target them specifically, it is more important to address their substantive concerns and provide them the right kind of information, rather than trying to tap into a sense of collective identity..

- **Framing Voting**

We also continued to test the kinds of messages that are most motivating to women as a reason to vote in elections. We continue to find that invoking civic responsibility, as a reason to vote, tests very powerfully. These unmarried women connect to the notion that voting is patriotic – it is a right fought for by their ancestors and a privilege of citizenship. As we mentioned above, flag and patriotic imagery evokes a strong reaction with these women.

We also find that messages that empower women to enact change are very motivating for these women. “You can’t change America if you don’t vote,” for instance, is a powerful message, as is “Make a choice. Make a difference. Vote.” Both of these messages resonate with women on their own because they make politics seem less far-removed from their lives, and show them that through the simple act of voting they can have an impact on politics and policy.

Another message framed in terms of empowerment also tested well: “In 2004, 20 million women on their own were not registered or didn’t vote. If all unmarried women voted, we would have the power to bring change on issues that matter to us most: health care, jobs, and education.” The message shows these women that they are part of a larger movement that can create change.

Conclusions:

For unmarried women, information can remove a key barrier to voting and help increase turnout in 2006. These women trust non-partisan organizations such as WVWV to provide them with this information if the message appears unbiased. These women seek information about issues and candidates as well as the process of voting, and respond best to messages that both evoke an emotional connection and are framed in terms of civic duty.

1. Non-partisan organizations can be a trusted source. Although these women most trust friends and family and the Internet to provide them with political information, they are willing to trust non-partisan organizations if the information appears objective, balanced, and verifiable. A disclaimer stating that WVWV does not endorse candidates for office proves important for winning their trust.

2. Unmarried women seek information about political issues and about the process of voting. Women prefer an easily digestible, side-by-side comparison of where the candidates stand on key issues that matter to unmarried women. Younger women, who are much less experienced with the political process, also appreciate learning about the electoral process..

3. Women on their own respond to a message that they connect with emotionally and also evokes a sense of civic responsibility. Unmarried women are most motivated by messages that they can connect to emotionally, either because of the images used or because of a strong affinity for one of the issues. These women are also activated by messages which remind them that voting is a civic duty and empower them to enact political change.

Appendix A: Methodology

The following memo is based on four focus groups conducted in Phoenix, Arizona and Cleveland, Ohio, by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc. The first Arizona group consisted of Hispanic unmarried women, and the second consisted of white unmarried women, 45 years and older. The first Ohio group consisted of white unmarried women, ages 18-29 and the second group consisted of white unmarried women, ages 30-44. All groups were registered voters, had voted in 2004, but half were likely 2006 voters and half were unlikely 2006 voters. Focus groups are qualitative; though indicative of social attitudes, they are not drawn from a representative sample and thus cannot be generalized to the population at large.

Appendix B: Author Biographies



Anna Greenberg

Anna Greenberg is Vice President of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. Greenberg has been called “one of the smartest of the younger Democratic consultants” and is a leading polling expert. She advises campaigns, advocacy organizations and foundations in the United States.

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