INFORMATION MEMO

PENN BIDEN CENTER

Washington, D.C.

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INFORMATION MEMORANDUM FOR VICE PRESIDENT BIDEN

FROM: Ariana Berengaut (301-717-5074)

SUBJECT: Democracy Project Poll Results

1. SUMMARY

As you know, the Penn Biden Center partnered with Freedom House and the Bush Institute to commission a survey of American attitudes towards democratic principles and institutions at home and support for U.S. policies that advance democracy abroad. The survey was conducted by two firms – Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and North Star – and designed with input from Mike Donilon.

The poll is complete, and we expect to rollout the findings on June 26. Tony will represent us during the rollout, which will include a website launch; congressional staff briefing; press call; and roundtable discussion at Penn Biden. The press release and report will include quotes from YOU and President George W. Bush. We plan to hold related events at Penn and Southern Methodist University in the fall. We will send YOU the final report as soon as it is finalized.

1. CORE FINDINGS
2. A clear majority of Americans consider it important to live in a democracy, but they believe U.S. democracy is weak and getting weaker.

* A full 60 percent of respondents believe that it is “absolutely important” to live in a democracy, rating it at 10 on a 1–10 scale. In total, a large majority of 84 percent rated the importance at between 6 and 10. (This 84 percent of Americans in the current survey who feel it is “important to live in a democracy” is virtually identical to the 85 percent share in the 2011 World Values Survey.)
* Support for democracy cuts across partisan lines, earning ratings of 9.16 among Democrats; 8.89 among Republicans; and 8.50 among independents and nonpartisan respondents.
* 55 percent see American democracy as currently “weak,” and 68 percent believe it is “getting weaker.”
* Responses to these questions partly reflect partisan leanings. Yet the crisis of confidence in American democracy spans the partisan divide. Over two-thirds of Democrats, Republicans, and independents feel very or somewhat concerned about the current state of American democracy.

1. Certain groups that may perceive less benefit from the current system—notably nonwhites—are less convinced of the importance of living in a democracy.

* Demographic gaps indicate that groups historically underserved by American democracy perceive and feel most acutely the shortcomings of our political system. A majority of whites (51 percent) are satisfied with “the way democracy is working in our country,” compared with 42 percent of nonwhites. Minority groups that were less likely to rate living in a democracy as “absolutely important” also had low levels of satisfaction: Only 40 percent of members of minority groups who did not graduate from college, 43 percent of younger members of minority groups, and 38 percent of minority women expressed satisfaction with American democracy.

1. Americans express greatest frustrations with the influence of money in politics and racism and discrimination.

* Survey respondents rate “big money in politics” as the single most concerning thing about American democracy today among 11 possibilities.
* A large majority (80—12 percent) believe that the “influence of money in politics” is getting worse rather than better. 77 percent agree that “the laws enacted by our national government these days mostly reflect what powerful special interests and their lobbyists want.” Only 17 percent chose the alternative statement: “The laws enacted by our national government these days mostly reflect what the people want.”
* Money in politics emerged as the top concern across the focus groups as well, discussed at length in all five cities.
* “Racism and discrimination” is the other leading concern about U.S. democracy today. Unsurprisingly, whites and nonwhites have very different perceptions on this question. Whites selected it less than half as often as nonwhites (18—42 percent).
* There are also meaningful differences across party affiliations. A 68 percent majority of Republicans say “equal rights and protections for racial minorities” in America are getting better rather than worse, while only 23 percent of Democrats hold this view.

1. Most Americans believe that protecting the rights of individuals and small groups should be a priority in our democracy.

* A 54–39 percent majority of Americans believe that “in our democracy, it is more important that the majority does not trample on the rights of individuals and small groups,” over the alternative statement that “in our democracy, it is more important that the will of the majority prevails.” This finding is especially important in light of the illiberal turn taken by some other democracies, such as Hungary and Poland, where political parties in power have implemented changes that infringe on individual rights.
* Similarly, there is a good deal of agreement about the importance of “equal rights, regardless of race, gender, or beliefs.” Given a list of 10 components of democracy, 38 percent of respondents selected this as one of the two most important to them personally. This placed it first among the 10 options overall, above traditional democratic freedoms such as free elections, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion.
* In 2017, the Pew Research Center found that Americans seemed to put more value on the structural elements of democracy, such as “open and fair elections” and the “system of checks and balances.” But the current survey, which asks respondents to name the elements that are “most important to you personally,” suggests that equal rights may be a more powerful selling-point for democracy when Americans focus on their own lives rather than how government works in the abstract.

1. Americans support the idea that democracy and human rights should play a role in U.S. foreign policy.

* Overall, 71 percent of respondents favor “the U.S. government taking steps to support democracy and human rights in other countries.” When presented with arguments in favor of and against U.S. support for democracy and human rights abroad, respondents signaled much stronger agreement with the former than the latter. The moral argument seems to resonate the most. A 91 percent majority agrees that “we can’t control what happens in the world, but we have a moral obligation to speak up and do what we can when people are victims of genocide, violence, and severe human rights abuses.”
* This poll did not ask respondents to rank democracy support among other budget priorities. Participants in several of the focus groups felt strongly that support for democracy abroad should only come after we have solved problems at home. As a focus group participant in Charlotte put it, “America has a bad habit of getting in everybody else's business. Fix your own house before you try to go and help your neighbor.”

1. Poll results show which messaging strategies about democracy resonant most with the public.

* Our research tested over a dozen messaging frames aimed at generating increased support for American democracy. This message resonates the most: “Some say: Today, there is a great need for us all to act as responsible citizens—things like voting, volunteering, taking time to stay informed, and standing up for what’s right—so that the freedoms and rights we cherish don’t get whittled away.” When this message was read, 86 percent of respondents reported feeling more favorable about America’s system of democratic government.
* There are two elements to highlight in this message. First, it stresses the risk of losing what people value in their democracy: their rights and freedoms. Behavioral psychologists have long noted the phenomenon of “loss aversion,” or people’s tendency to place more value on things they might lose than on things they might obtain. Second, the message features a call to civic engagement and activism. Among poll respondents, 59 percent report that engagement in civic and political issues is getting better, not worse. Similarly, in the focus groups, many participants applauded the increased activism that they say they have witnessed in recent months.

1. Methodology

Our three organizations began this project in 2017 with a broad review and discussion of existing opinion research regarding American attitudes toward democracy in the United States, and toward U.S. actions to support democracy and human rights abroad. The two polling companies involved in this project, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and North Star, produced a paper summarizing more than a half-century of such opinion research. That document became the basis for a half-day discussion among a wide range of bipartisan experts and activists on these issues, held at Freedom House on September 19, 2017. The paper and the discussion concluded that new opinion research could be useful in filling a series of gaps in the published data about U.S. democracy and could also update many earlier findings.

With input from the sponsoring organizations, the polling firms designed and carried out a set of 10 focus groups, with two each in five different locations; each group consisted of a specific segment of the public that remains important to understanding how Americans perceive their democracy.

In all, the 10 groups included 92 participants. Most featured a mix of individuals across lines of gender and race. Except for those focused on conservative and progressive voters, the groups also generally included a mix of partisan identities.

The final stage of the study was a nationwide survey, based on 1,700 telephone interviews, conducted from April 28 to May 8, 2018. Roughly half of the interviews were conducted by mobile phone, to ensure greater representativeness and accuracy. The interviews included a “base sample” of 1,400 adults, plus an “oversample” of 300 “opinion elites”—individuals with a four-year college degree who follow global and national news “very” or “somewhat closely” and who vote “always” or “nearly always.” The margin of sampling error on a random survey of 1,400 respondents is +/-2.6 percent; the margin of sampling error on the 795 opinion elites is +/-3.5 percent.