

**PRIVILEGED AND CONFIDENTIAL**

**#1198  
CONGRESSIONAL INSTITUTE FOCUS GROUPS  
NOVEMBER 2004**

**FOCUS GROUPS EXPLORED UNDERSTANDING OF ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS**

In the Fall of 2004, Charlton Research Company conducted two focus groups each in Phoenix, Atlanta, Green Bay, and Alexandria, Virginia for a total of eight groups among Informed Americans. Informed Americans are people who regularly participate in a series of civic activities and, therefore, have a deeper understanding of and can engage in discussions on complex topics more effectively than average Americans. As described in the book *The Influentials*, they also guide the thinking of other citizens.

The groups were designed to explore people's attitudes toward several large challenges facing the nation in the next five to ten years, including:

Technology	Global demographics
Culture and beliefs	Cycles of history (a context for the current period)
Americans face to the world	Preparing government for the upcoming struggle

The discussions revealed that Informed Americans have become very concerned with these challenges. While they may not have previously thought in these specific ways, the participants were comfortable engaging in open dialogue to discuss possible scenarios, though they were hard pressed to offer concrete solutions to these challenges.

Overall findings include:

- The political class is not talking to Informed Americans.
- The top challenges are not being communicated or resolved, and the public wants leadership on these topics.
- Informed Americans are somewhat open to the idea of forming third parties because they view the major parties are excessively partisan and are failing the country.
- The public does not expect immediate answers to these challenging issues. They just want to engage in discussion.
- There is a strong demand for behavioral change among individuals within public institutions, not major institutional change.

## NEAR FUTURE ISSUES ALREADY WEIGH HEAVILY ON INFORMED AMERICAN'S MINDS

When asked to identify key things that are changing the world in the next five to ten years Informed Americans, without suggestions from us, mentioned five top challenges, including:



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**Technology**— Respondents mentioned technological advances in medicine, electronics and communication. They believe that America is a technological leader and that, with technology, we have advanced our society greatly. Many believe that technology has allowed families and friends to stay connected as they have spread across the globe. Finally, though they acknowledge that technology has also caused many challenges, they believe that advancement is preferable and inevitable.

### *Quotes...*

*I think our society just demands technology. (Atlanta)*

*I would take new technology advancements tomorrow even though it would bring new risks. (Phoenix)*

**Global Demographics**—Many Informed Americans are internationally-oriented. They regularly watch foreign newscasts and read foreign newspapers online. Others have traveled extensively or hosted foreign exchange students. They acknowledge that America is not an isolated island and believe that the world power structure will change due to impending demographic changes. Issues such as overpopulation, due to high birth rates and increased immigration rates, are considered very important. As countries such as China and India increase their populations and become more industrialized, Informed Americans believe there will be a shift in global power. Informed Americans also worry about the challenge of limited resources caused by increased demand on commodities. They believe the Western focus on consumption has influenced other cultures and has caused the global population to desire more things. Finally, Informed Americans are worried about the aging population in America and the demands it will put on the younger generation.

***Quotes...***

*There's going to be a change in the world balance in 30 years. There's going to be more 20-50 year old people, which is the primary work ages, in countries that currently are not major work centers. (Alexandria)*

*But it could be a shift in world power in 20 or 30 years, from Europe and the United States, to Latin America and Africa. (Phoenix)*

*So not only are (Americans) going to have a reduction in retirement over the next five years, we're going to have an explosion (of retirement) immediately afterwards. (Atlanta)*

**Culture and Belief**— These participants hold relatively tolerant views of other cultures. In fact, some suggested that tolerance is an essential American value. They feel that through technological advances the world's cultures are blending as more countries continue to import foreign movies, music and products. Informed Americans are wary of the new awareness of American society among Muslim countries. They view many of the Muslim countries as isolated, harsh and rigid in their belief systems. While there is an understanding about the importance of strong faith and belief systems in these countries, there is also a high level of frustration with 'radical believers'—those who do not think any other system can jointly exist—

who use violence to prove their point. They indicate that Americans, like Muslims, are not willing to ignore our core values, including respect for all races and genders, to co-exist with these extremist countries. Finally, Informed Americans acknowledge a growing divide among the world's rich and poor countries which they believe is often exacerbated by the process of industrialization as well as corporate greed.

### ***Quotes...***

*But the natural order is upset (in Arab countries). A lot of these areas there, which are based on religion, a lot of homogeneous societies, and as they see the world changing too I think that breeds some of this defensive mechanism. The people that are in power do not want to give up that power. They don't want to see religious and racial (change) – they're a hold out. (Atlanta)*

*I think a truth that most Americans believe is the freedom to be who you are. (Atlanta)*

*Don't underestimate the depth of spiritual belief of Americans. (in comparison to Muslim beliefs). (Atlanta)*

*But you know (Muslim countries treatment of women) exposed the fallacy of tolerance as a virtue. Tolerance is not a virtue...You're intolerant of what's wrong and we should be intolerant of the way those women are being treated. You should be intolerant of terrorism. When something is wrong you're intolerant. (Atlanta)*

**Current Historical Context**—Informed Americans regard the country as being in a moment of major crisis, however, there is no real sense of historical context for where we are as a nation today. Though they remember studying certain events in our history, they do not know how to apply that experience to solving current challenges. In addition, they believe that our world has changed so much since 9/11 with a shift in world power, terrorism, and a war with no end in sight that we are in uncharted territory.

***Quotes...***

*There is no justification for terror because it has some beginning, but it has no ending. World War I had a beginning and it had an ending. We knew who the enemy was, we could whoop the enemy. But we don't know who this enemy is because this enemy has many faces. Some of the people from America are involved with the terrorists. They're you're next door neighbor. (Atlanta)*

*Well each (event in history) is a stepping stone, either into déjà vu, or into a new era where we're going to learn new things, such as this terrorism thing. (Phoenix)*

**Role and obligations of political leadership**—The Informed Americans agree that these issues are very complex and acknowledge that America would have a very difficult time solving them. Even though there is a level of frustration with them, optimism about our basic political institutions and the way they are designed exists. Most believe we can work within these institutions to progress change. However, Informed Americans are frustrated with the country's political leadership in dealing with these issues. They believe that politicians at all levels are too concerned about partisan politics and retaining personal power to honestly tackle the issues.

***Quotes...***

*It's all a big game (for politicians to deal with these issues). It's not really always for the good of the world, it's just what's most popular at the time...And that falls back on our leadership. (Alexandria)*

*So we have partisanship. We have this kind of disconnect between reality and the political leadership. (Phoenix—summarization of discussion by moderator)*

*I think the last successful presidency we had, and it ended up being unsuccessful, was Lyndon Johnson. He took responsibility. I've never seen a President since him take responsibility for anything. It's always what the polls say. Lyndon Johnson did a lot of good things for this country. There was a lot of social change in that presidency. Vietnam was his big downfall, but again, who took the blame for it all? Him. That's leadership. (Green Bay)*

Finally, discussing such wide-reaching, often nebulous, challenges allowed Informed Americans to view the country's more specific issues such as crime, healthcare and social security reform, the environment, education, energy and the economy more clearly. They feel these issues are resolvable and have thought about them in more depth. They want these "easy" issues resolved so that we can focus on addressing the more complex future challenges.

### Other Challenges Mentioned

- ™ Healthcare
- ™ Social Security
- ™ Environment
- ™ Education
- ™ Energy
- ™ Economy
- ™ Crime

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### What is Driving These Challenges?

<p><b>The Media</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ They are not giving us the whole, correct, true picture of the news</li> <li>▪ Three left wing media and the cables</li> <li>▪ They are: sensationalists, high profile only, shock value types, only after ratings, skew our perspectives</li> <li>▪ A lot goes on in the world and the media does not tell us about it (you can get it on the internet)</li> <li>▪ News is: Dumbed down, election was horse-race only, ownership is too concentrated—they don't have to be responsible to anyone, lack of objectivity— they don't just gather facts they also interpret them/push a point of view, biased, censored,</li> <li>▪ Foreign news is more truthful</li> </ul>	<p><b>Politics/Politicians</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Expressed disgust at lack of bi-partisanship</li> <li>▪ Elected officials are too partisan</li> <li>▪ Politicians are just in it for themselves, do what helps them instead of what's in the best interest of the nation, driven by power/money</li> <li>▪ When good examples were volunteered, they were those leaders appearing to take a non-partisan stance.</li> <li>▪ We need a third party, a parliamentary system, a Jury system</li> <li>▪ Majority rules and the majority is less educated</li> <li>▪ The candidates for President didn't answer the questions they were asked in the debates and just gave their answers</li> <li>▪ Things are changing too fast, political institutions can't comprehend</li> <li>▪ Huge amount of money/special interests</li> </ul>
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### **POLITICS AND THE MEDIA SEEN AS DRIVING THESE ISSUES**

Politics and the media are seen as the driving forces behind these challenges, though not always in a positive way. Participants frequently complained about both groups and believe there is a serious lack of accountability within these institutions for its people to be truthful and open to solving issues.

Informed Americans are very media savvy. They do not rely solely on the network news outlets to receive their information because they believe those outlets are biased. They seek out alternate opinions on cable networks and the Internet. The media as a whole are viewed as sensationalists

who offer a distorted picture of the world as they chase the stories that will improve their ratings. They believe the news is oversimplified for the masses and lacks objectivity. They do not feel that newscasters should offer interpretations of the news, but instead should just present facts. Many offered examples of foreign news sources as being more objective and in-depth. On the flip side, they acknowledge that while the Internet provides a great deal of news information—sometimes too much information—it can be unreliable.

### ***Quotes...***

*If you're looking at (the media) to educate you, no (they can't do that). If you're looking to inform, that's what they're here to do is inform you. To educate you need to go and get a complete understanding of all aspects of (an issue). There's just not enough time in a news broadcast to do that. So if they plop something on the table, they've informed you of it, and then if that interests you, it's up to you then to go further and educate yourself on it.*  
(Phoenix)

*People who rely on the networks (for news), well, they're not getting much.* (Alexandria)

*Media I think has really gone downhill. They'll be the harbor of special interest people.*  
(Atlanta)

*The media...used to be this ideological monopoly with three networks that all gave you the same left wing opinion and then CNN came along with their left wing opinion, so then we had four to choose from. And now people have access to the radio shows, the Internet, Fox News.* (Atlanta)

*I think you're right. I think it's dumbed down. I read today where the three major network heads got together for an open forum to discuss their failure in providing something beyond just the sensational headline. I think it seemed like the entire election coverage was built on making this a horse race, on keeping that contest aspect of it alive. If they had to emphasize one thing over another, one side over another, on any given day to keep that contest – I think they created a situation and then obviously they can choose what they wish to cover in the news.* (Green Bay)

Informed Americans hold equally negative views of politicians. They express disgust at the lack of bi-partisanship among politicians, though they acknowledge that it reflects the current divided tone of the country. When examples of respected politicians were volunteered, they included leaders who appeared to take a non-partisan stance to solve an issue. Many mentioned the fact

that we need a new party system—perhaps in the form of a third party or parliamentary system—that balances the needs of all citizens.

They also mentioned the fact that our short election cycle often does not allow politicians to formulate or support long-term solutions to issues. They specifically mentioned the fact that the 2004 presidential and congressional candidates refused to tackle difficult long-term issues such as Social Security or healthcare reform. Politicians are viewed as driven primarily by re-election, power and money. This narrow focus does not allow politicians to represent the majority, but instead gives extremist special interest groups more power.

Finally, Informed Americans agree that the world is changing faster than our political institutions. While some changes need to be made in order to keep up with our changing world, Informed Americans are optimistic that our core institutions are able to respond to the country's challenges. However, a frustration exists that our politicians choose not to solve our most complex issues because of special interests and partisanship. They believe the example of America's response to 9/11 proves that we can get things done within our institutions when needed. They are frustrated that it takes a crisis to make our institutions take a problem seriously and point to challenges like Social Security reform as a problem that is languishing in political bureaucracy and waiting for the real crisis to begin once the Baby Boomers retire.

### ***Quotes...***

*I was going to come back to bi-partisanship. It just seems like they don't do what's right for the majority of the people. Everybody's not going to be the same – that's society in general. You're going to have rich people and you're always going to have poor people. But, when it comes to the big issues like protection, education and stuff like that, they need to work together to get that – available health care for everybody – and put those issues aside... You're always going to have differences and you're always going to have people that are not on your same page. Just like in our work, if something happens it's majority rules and who cares if you don't like it or not, you've got to play by it. (Atlanta)*

*Special interest groups – you've got every kind of side group putting pressure on the legislature, or on the Congressional people, from the drug industry to the ecology people, so that they're getting an inordinate amount of attention to their particular point of view rather than what is a common sense and correct view. (Atlanta)*

*Things are just all so myopic. (Politicians are) all concerned about their own party line and they're concerned about keeping their job and I think that they give in to the people that can help them get the next job and that would be the people with the money. (Phoenix)*

*I think Congress is wonderfully inefficient. (Alexandria)*

*I think things are so partisan that you can't possibly vote on things or deal with them on the merit of the issue so much as whether or not we're aligning the way we need to, to get the votes that we need. (Green Bay)*

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

The media and politics are considered the major drivers impacting the issues which affect America's place in the world. Technology and global demographics are largely seen as uncontrollable realities which need to continually be addressed. The issues surrounding Culture and Belief, Current Historical Cycle, and Role of Government and The Political Leadership are items which need to be further discussed. Finally, with all of these challenges, Congress must engage Informed Americans in new and innovative intelligent ways.

