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U.S. Public Looking for New Vision of Patriotism

To: Interested Parties

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As both major political parties prepare for their political conventions, a new survey¹ shows deep public dissatisfaction with how America's political leaders typically invoke patriotism, and a strong desire for a vision of patriotism that puts more emphasis on the future, constructive change, and progressive civic values.

Fully three quarters of the American public is frustrated that too many political leaders invoke patriotism in an empty and manipulative way. By a 20-point margin, they say patriotism should be more about "actively improving" America than simply honoring its past.

For Senator Barack Obama, the Democratic standard-bearer, the survey shows both a challenge and a significant opportunity. Although a majority of Americans rate both Sen. Obama and his Republican rival, Senator John McCain, as patriotic, significantly more view Sen. McCain this way – 74 percent, compared to 56 percent for Sen. Obama. But when, in a hypothetical head-to-head test, Sen. Obama frames his agenda with a narrative of constructive patriotism, the public opts for his argument over the more traditional patriotic talk of Sen. McCain, by an 11-point margin. This framing of patriotism actually expands the 8-point, 47-39 percent lead that Sen. Obama currently enjoys in a ballot test, with significant movement among Independent voters.

These findings suggest that progressives have an opportunity to reclaim the national dialogue over patriotism. After many years during which conservatives used patriotic language and symbols to put progressives on the defensive – and at a time when great majorities feel the country is on the wrong track and are eager for change – the new findings suggest the public is ready to hear progressive leaders talk about their own agendas as an expression of their patriotic values.

A Patriotic Public is Frustrated by Politicians Using Patriotism in an Empty Way

The new survey confirms the finding of other studies, that America is a profoundly patriotic country. Fully 87 percent of Americans rate themselves as patriotic (assigning themselves a score above the midpoint of 50 on a 0-100 scale, where 100 means very patriotic, and 0 means very unpatriotic), with two thirds of all Americans, 68 percent, rating themselves as *very* patriotic

¹ The results are based on a telephone survey of a random sample of 1,000 adults, conducted August 12-14, 2008. The results are subject to a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.1 percent. The survey was sponsored by Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer, authors of *The True Patriot*.

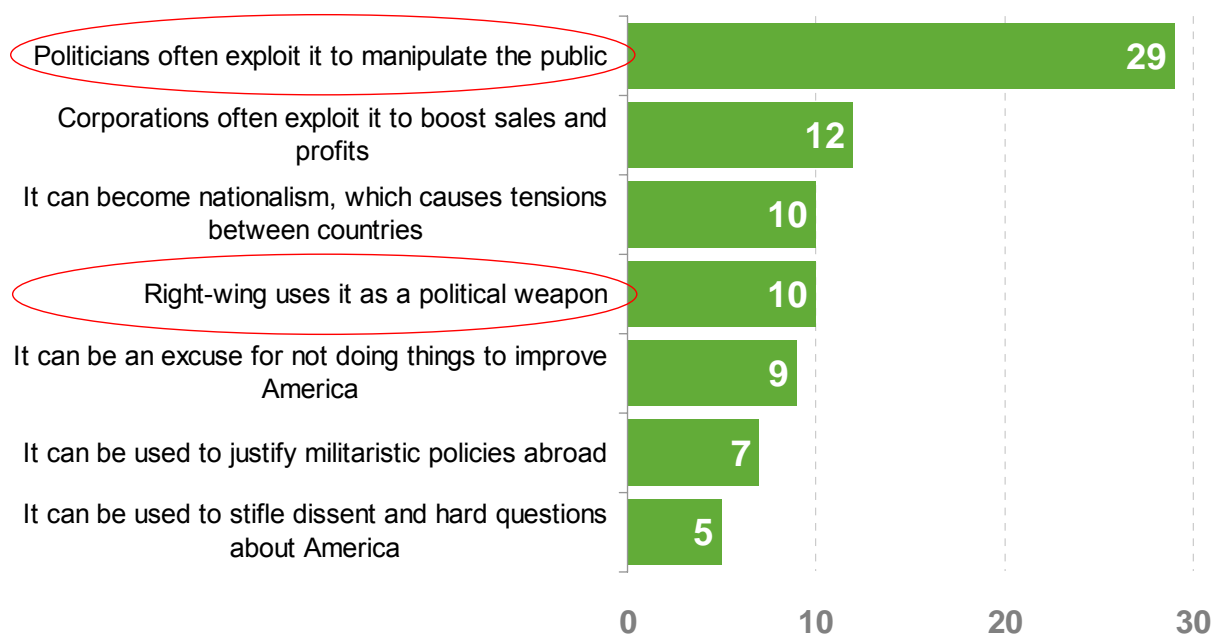
(75-100 on this scale). Indeed, more than two thirds of all Americans – 68 percent – rate themselves as more patriotic than “the average American.”

Yet the public is starkly dissatisfied with the way politicians cite patriotism today. A strong 76 percent majority say, “I am frustrated that so many U.S. politicians invoke patriotism in a cheap and empty way.” This includes a full 51 percent majority of the public who *strongly* agree with that statement. Agreement is even stronger among Democrats and Independents, suggesting progressives are particularly frustrated with today’s political dialogue about patriotism.

Similarly, a strong plurality says the most negative aspect about patriotism is that “politicians often exploit it to manipulate the public,” with 29 percent saying this is the single most negative thing about patriotism (picking from a list of seven choices), and another 10 percent pointing to the “right wing us[ing] it as a political weapon.” [See Figure 1] This combined 39 percent dwarfs the next strongest reservation Americans have about patriotism – that “corporations often exploit it to boost sales and profits,” picked by just 12 percent. The concern about political misuse of patriotism is even more pronounced among Independents, nearly half of whom – 47 percent – cite one of these two political factors as the most negative aspect of patriotism.

Figure 1: Negative Aspects of Patriotism

Choosing ONE from List

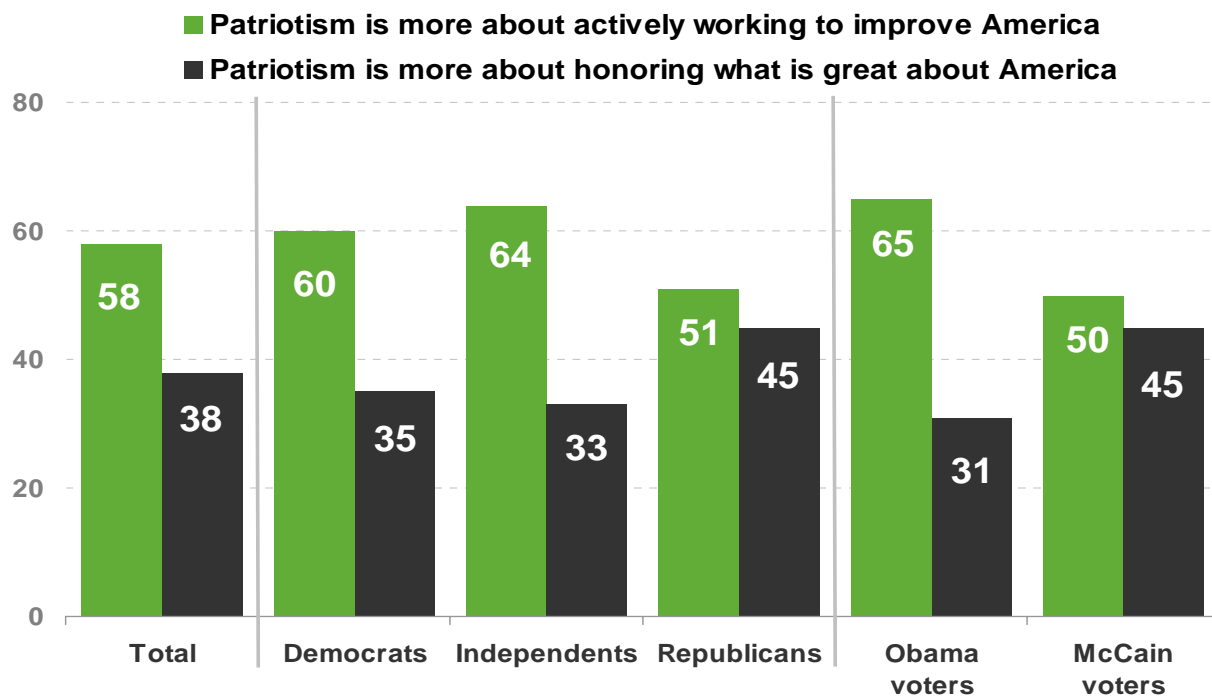


Public Favors More Constructive, Forward-Looking Sense of Patriotism

The survey provides strong evidence that the public is seeking, instead, a vision of patriotism that is more constructive, forward-looking, and rooted in progressive civic values, rather than simply a celebration of the nation’s inherited strengths and inspiring past.

By a strong 20-point margin, a 58-38 percent majority say “patriotism is more about actively working to improve America,” rejecting the alternative statement, “patriotism is more about honoring what is great about America.” [Figure 2] Fully 47 percent favor the first statement *strongly*. This preference – for concerted action to live up to America’s ideals rather than complacency about how far America has come already – cuts across the political spectrum, drawing agreement from outright majorities of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans (although Independents and Democrats show the strongest preference for this position) and among both Obama and McCain voters.

Figure 2: Patriotism More About Improving America



There is real resonance in the idea of a vision of patriotism that is forward-looking; 91 percent find the following argument very or somewhat convincing, including a full 58 percent who find it *very* convincing: “Patriotism must be about the future, not just honoring our past or celebrating what exists today; we are most patriotic when we are actively improving things in America so we leave a better country for our children.”

Moreover, Americans are more inclined to define America’s greatness in terms of its progressive civic values than simply its material stature. A strong 60-35 percent majority says “America’s greatness is more about its belief in fair play and second chances,” rejecting the alternative statement, “America’s greatness is more about its strength, size, and prosperity.”

The public also reveals their preference for an active, constructive vision of patriotism when they identify the kinds of actions they consider most patriotic or unpatriotic.

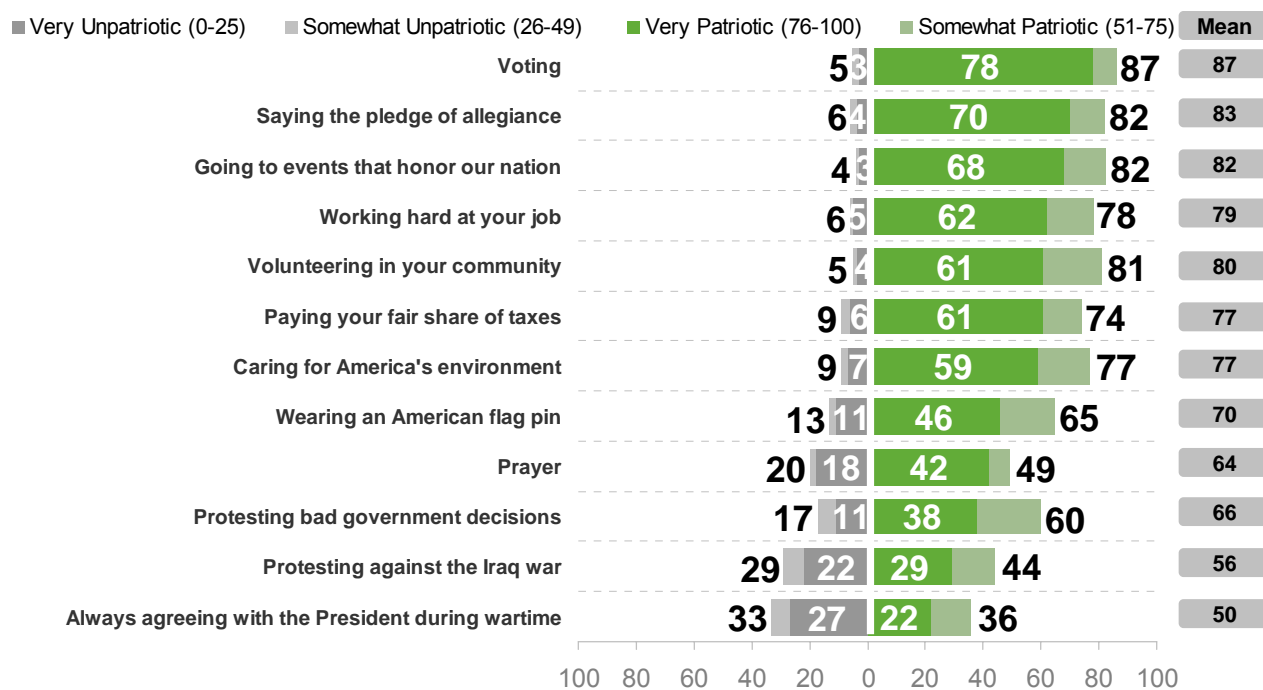
- While 70 percent rate “saying the pledge of allegiance” as very patriotic, and 68 percent say this about “going to events on Memorial Day or the 4th of July that honor our nation,” an even higher share, 78 percent, rate the act of voting as very

patriotic. The very high ratings on patriotism that respondents give to the military and veterans throughout the survey (for example, 92 percent rate people who serve as patriotic, including 84 percent very patriotic) similarly derive in part from the active, constructive, and sacrificing nature of military service.

- More Americans see a string of constructive actions as very patriotic – “working hard at your job” (62 percent), “paying your fair share of taxes” (61 percent), “volunteering in your community” (61 percent), or “taking action to care for America’s environment” (59 percent) – than say this about “wearing an American flag pin,” which only 46 percent rate as “very patriotic.” [Figure 3]

Figure 3: Net Patriotic Actions

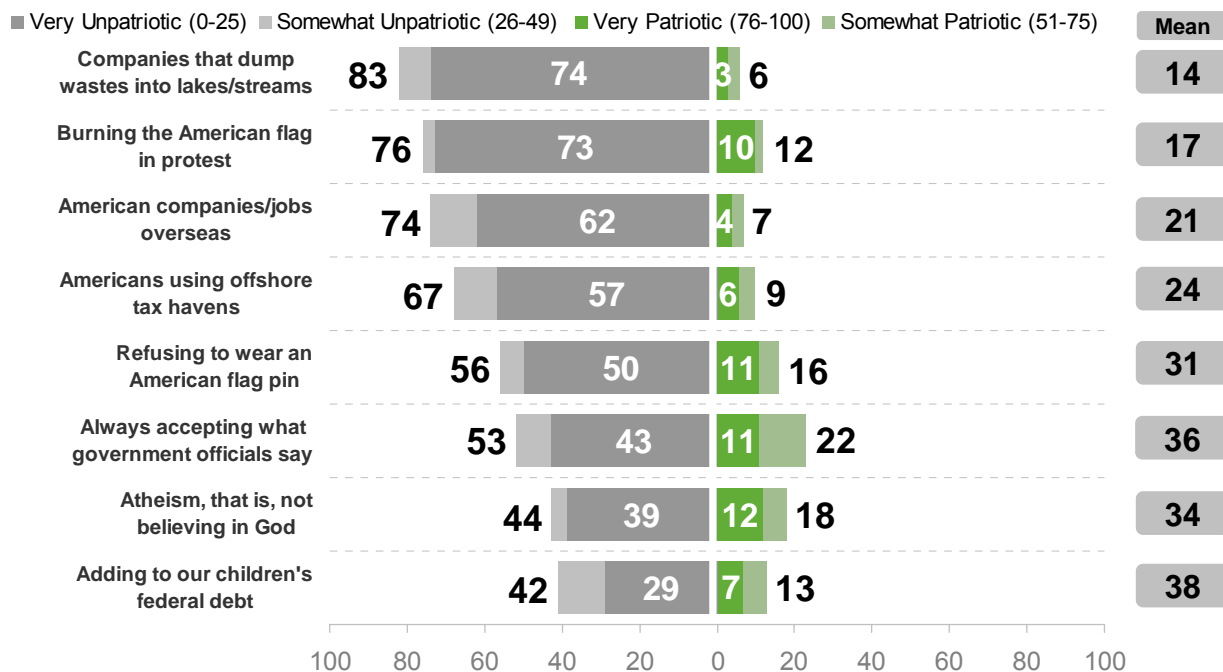
Now I'm going to read you some things people do in America. For each one, please rate how patriotic a thing it is with one hundred meaning that thing is VERY PATRIOTIC, zero meaning VERY UNPATRIOTIC, and fifty meaning NEITHER VERY PATRIOTIC OR VERY UNPATRIOTIC.



- The public also sees action as more important than symbolism when it comes to defining what is *not* patriotic. Out of all the items tested, the public identifies “companies that dump wastes into lakes or streams” as the most unpatriotic idea (74 percent rating it as very unpatriotic), slightly more so than “burning the American flag to protest U.S. policies” (73 percent). [Figure 4]

Figure 4: Net Unpatriotic Actions

Now I'm going to read you some things people do in America. For each one, please rate how patriotic a thing it is with one hundred meaning that thing is VERY PATRIOTIC, zero meaning VERY UNPATRIOTIC, and fifty meaning NEITHER VERY PATRIOTIC OR VERY UNPATRIOTIC.



All of this supports the proposition that the American public is drawn to a new and more progressive vision of patriotism than many politicians currently espouse, with more of an emphasis on the future, constructive action, and strong civic values.

New Vision of Patriotism Proves Politically Potent

This more constructive and future-oriented vision of patriotism provides a politically compelling frame for describing a progressive agenda. The survey suggests that progressive leaders have an opportunity to harness their policy prescriptions to a set of civic values that both motivates and reassures.

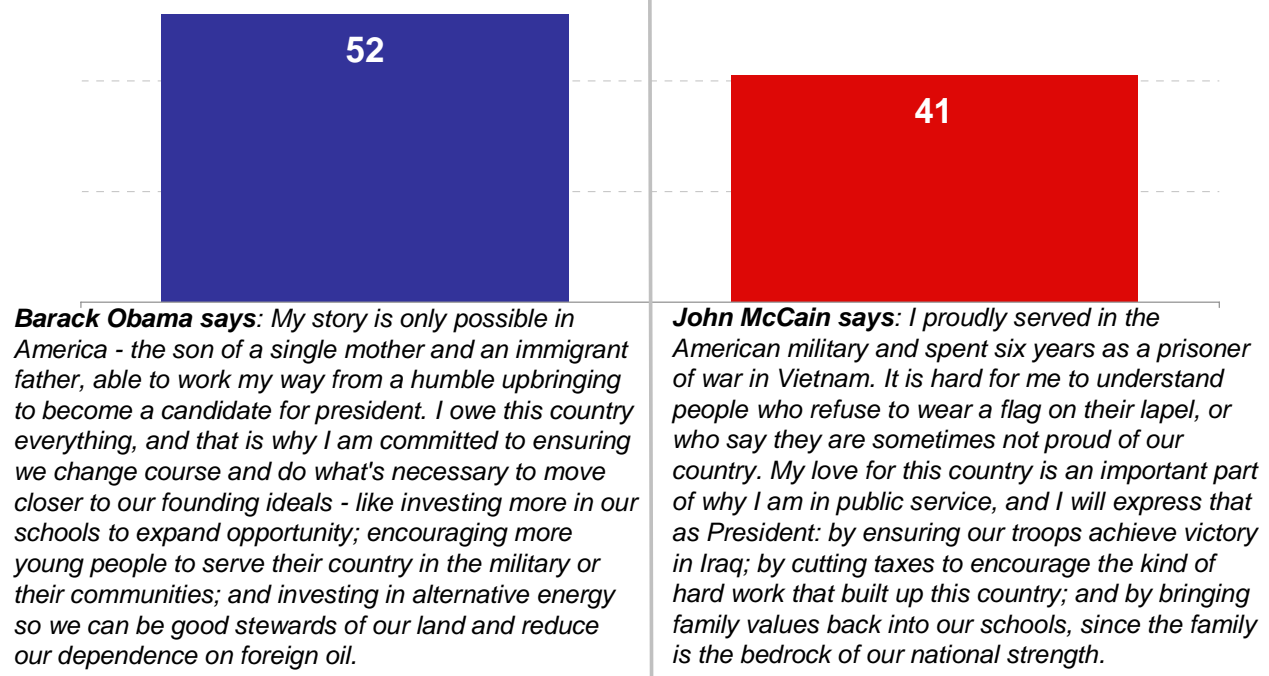
Consider this year's presidential contest. Republican standard-bearer Sen. John McCain approaches the general election with a significant 18-point advantage over his Democratic rival, Sen. Barack Obama, in terms of the share of Americans who rate each candidate as patriotic – with 74 percent rating Sen. McCain this way, compared to 56 percent for Sen. Obama. The survey suggests this is driven much more by awareness of Sen. McCain's war and prisoner-of-war record than any doubts (many of them based on false rumors) about Sen. Obama. Sen. Obama's rating on patriotism is about the same as that for the Democratic Party (56 and 59 percent, respectively), while Sen. McCain's rating, at 74 percent, is fully 14 points above that for his own party.

The difference in patriotism perceptions between the two candidates, by itself, is likely not an electorally determinative factor. Indeed, among eight attributes tested, Americans say that being “patriotic,” in the abstract, is not near the top of the list in terms of the most important qualities in a candidate for president.

Yet the survey suggests that a progressive candidate such as Sen. Obama can actually strengthen his position by affirmatively framing his agenda as a manifestation of an active, forward-looking patriotism. In a head-to-head debate, framed by differing ideas about patriotism, the public opts for the kind of progressive version that Sen. Obama has sometimes offered by 11 points, 52-41 percent. [Figure 5]

Figure 5: Obama Patriotism Statement Prevails

Now I'm going to read you a pair of statements from the two leading presidential candidates. Regardless of who you would vote for, please tell me which statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right.



This is a notable result, given the 18-point advantage Sen. McCain holds at the outset on perceptions of how patriotic the two candidates are. Indeed, this 11-point advantage is even larger than the 8-point, 47-39 percent margin Sen. Obama holds over Sen. McCain among all adults in a ballot test at the start of the survey.

This frame of progressive patriotism proves especially compelling for many of the kinds of swing voters who are likely to decide the 2008 presidential election. For example, self-identified Independent voters pick Sen. Obama by a 43-35 percent margin at the outset of the survey; but in this head-to-head debate, framed by different visions of patriotism, they opt for Sen. Obama's statement by a far more decisive 55-35 percent margin. This shift is also particularly large among younger men, a difficult demographic for progressive candidates.

The survey suggests that it is precisely the constructive nature of the Obama patriotism frame that proves so compelling. Looking only at those adults who show more support for Sen.

Obama in this head-to-head debate than in the initial vote test, these respondents tend to be more responsive than average to arguments that patriotism should be linked to ideas of community service, environmental stewardship, and giving back to one's community. All this reinforces the sense that there is a significant audience for a vision of patriotism that places more stress on these progressive civic values.

Ultimately, Americans' feelings about patriotism are diverse and rich, and the survey reflects that. The public sees patriotism in the work of both soldiers and teachers. A majority says it is patriotic to protest bad government decisions, but a majority also subscribes to the idea of "my country, right or wrong." Yet amid all these impulses, one stands out from this survey: a particularly strong public desire for a vision of patriotism that is more forward-looking, more geared toward constructive change, and more demanding of civic involvement. This is a vision of patriotism that progressives should welcome and embrace.