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TO: Jaime Harrison

FR: Diane Feldman
Ian Huff

RE: South Carolina Poll¹

The presidential race in South Carolina is extremely competitive. Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump tie with 39 percent each in a four-way vote that includes Libertarian Gary Johnson and Green Party candidate Jill Stein. In the two-way vote, Trump (45 percent) leads Clinton (43 percent) by 2-points, while 12 percent of voters are undecided.

Several progressive policy positions draw support from South Carolina voters. Majorities support expanding background checks before gun purchases, requiring equal pay for equal work, reducing college loan costs, and increasing state funding for education.

Clinton could win South Carolina this year if her campaign chooses to contest the state. Regardless of the outcome this year, South Carolina is certainly part of a changing South, with more progressive politics. The combination of a strong base in the African American community, generational change, and an influx of newcomers and retirees is changing the political face of the state and a Democratic majority should emerge there in the near term.

The Political Context

South Carolina voters have positive views of elected officials of both political parties. A majority of voters rate Governor Nikki Haley favorably (55 percent total favorable). Almost half (49 percent) rate President Barack Obama favorably, and Vice President Joe Biden follows closely behind (48 percent). Pluralities also respond favorably to both Senator Tim Scott and Congressman Jim Clyburn (who garners a 58 percent favorable rating in his district). Senator Lindsey Graham is not popular (48 percent unfavorable) and both Presidential candidates have majority unfavorable ratings, as is true in most states. South Carolina, however, shows less polarization in partisan terms than many places.

President Obama's relative popularity is also reflected in his job performance figures (45 percent rate his performance as excellent or good, 14 percent just fair, and 40 percent poor). Most voters also approve of Governor Haley's performance (46 percent excellent or good, 34 percent just fair, and 17 percent poor). Voters have a less positive view of the state legislature's performance (27 percent excellent or good, 39 percent just fair, 22 percent poor).

¹ Sample size of 600 likely voters contacted by professional interviewers August 18-21.

Voters divide in their engagement with the 2016 election. A 34 percent plurality rate their enthusiasm as a seven on a scale of one to seven, where a one indicates that a voter is not enthusiastic at all. African-Americans voters are much more engaged than white voters – 46 percent of African Americans rate their enthusiasm for voting as a seven, compared to 30 percent of white voters. On the other end of the spectrum, 20 percent of voters rate their enthusiasm as a 1, including 23 percent of white voters and 13 percent of African-American voters. White independents are the least enthusiastic demographic group (32 percent rate as a one).

The 2016 Election

In the initial four-way presidential vote including minor party candidates Gary Johnson and Jill Stein, Clinton and Trump divide the vote at 39 percent each, with 16 percent undecided. In the two-way vote, Trump pulls ahead by 2-points (45 percent to Clinton’s 43 percent) and 12 percent remain undecided. Clinton wins majorities among African-Americans (91 percent), white Democrats (83 percent), voters who rate their enthusiasm at a six or seven (53 percent), and voters in the Columbia media market (50 percent). Table 1 shows the presidential race broken down by demographic groups.

In generic down-ballot races, voters narrowly prefer Republican candidates for both Congress (37 percent to 34 percent) and the state legislature (36 percent to 33 percent). In each case, 26 percent say that the candidate’s party makes no difference to them. Notably, voters in the 5th CD, which has a contested race this year, prefer a Democratic congressional candidate by 38 percent to 33 percent.

Those who say they are indifferent to party become important to a near-term Democratic majority. Using the generic congressional, those to whom party does not matter include 28 percent of white voters and 30 percent of all voters who are new to the state.

Winning in South Carolina at the presidential level will require successfully reaching out to several key target groups: white independents who are more likely to be undecided, African-Americans under age 55 who support Clinton but are still more likely than average to be undecided, and voters in the Lowcountry who tilt toward Clinton but are still disproportionately undecided.

A majority of white independents break for Trump (59 percent), but 22 percent support Clinton and 19 percent remain undecided. White independents are unenthusiastic about the election (41 percent rate their enthusiasm as one or two). Twenty (20) percent of white independents sometimes support a Democrat across either the presidential vote, the generic congressional vote,

Table 1: Presidential Vote With Leaners				
	Clinton	Trump	Undec	Diff
Total	43	45	12	-2
White	25	63	13	-38
AfAm	91	1	7	90
Upstate	36	58	6	-23
Midlands	46	42	12	5
Pee Dee	47	42	11	5
Lowcountry	44	37	19	7
Men	39	49	12	-10
Women	46	42	12	4
White Dem men	75	22	3	53
White Dem women	88	7	5	81
White Ind	22	59	19	-37
AfAm under 55	87	2	11	85
AfAm 55+	99	0	1	99

or the state legislature vote. Six (6) percent consistently support a Democrat. Independent white women (23 percent sometimes Democrat) are somewhat more likely than independent white men (17 percent) to sometimes support a Democrat in any of the three votes.

Eleven (11) percent of African-Americans under age 55 are also undecided. Clinton wins 87 percent among the group indicating that reaching out to these heavily Democratic, but still undecided voters can swing them into Clinton’s camp and narrow or eliminate the gap with Trump. These voters are somewhat less enthusiastic about the election than their older peers (mean of 4.98 for under 55, and 5.31 for 55+), but gaining ground here will boost Clinton.

Voters in the Lowcountry region of the state support Clinton (44 percent, compared to 37 percent for Trump), but a disproportionate 19 percent remain undecided. Thirty-two (32) percent of these voters consistently support Democrats across the three votes, and 15 percent sometimes support a Democrat. Raising the minimum wage is an especially appealing policy position for Lowcountry voters (52 percent much more likely).

Issue Positions

The greatest promise of change in South Carolina derives from voters’ issue agenda. Majorities say that they would be more likely to support a candidate who took progressive stances on an array of issues, as shown in Table 2.

As the table shows, voters overwhelmingly support equal pay laws, background checks, and efforts to reduce college loan costs. Majorities also support populist economic policies, universal pre-kindergarten, Medicaid expansion and providing birth control to teenagers.

Support for these policies extends to white independents – a key swing voter group. Majorities of white independents say they are *much* more likely to support candidates who favor background checks (58 percent) and equal pay (57 percent) so their support has breadth as well as depth. Voters in the

	Total	White Ind	AfAm under 55	Low country
Supports a law requiring equal pay	82	78	87	78
Favors universal background checks and no-fly-no-buy	81	77	84	82
Favors increasing state education funding	81	70	94	79
Favors reducing college loan costs	79	72	94	77
Favors raising minimum wage	69	54	97	72
Tax cuts for middle class and hikes on wealthy	67	57	87	69
Favors universal pre-kindergarten	62	48	84	59
Expanding Social Security even if payroll taxes increase	61	48	77	62
Favors providing birth control to teenagers and low-income women	60	54	74	60
Favors expanding Medicaid	55	42	84	56
Increasing funding for infrastructure even if the deficit increases	49	43	68	53
Cutting taxes for everyone but more for the wealthy	42	33	48	42
Endorses Clinton	40	19	74	42
Endorses Trump	38	43	3	31
Supports raising the retirement age	26	28	16	31
Refuses to endorse for president	22	14	23	24

Lowcountry also show intensity on these issues, and majorities there are also *much* more likely to support candidates who will address college loan costs (53 percent) and who favor increasing state education funding (also 53 percent).

Neither Presidential candidate appears to have coattails, as less than half are more likely to support a candidate that endorses either of them. Indeed, 51 percent say they are less likely to support a candidate who endorses Trump and 50 percent are less likely to support a candidate who endorses Clinton. Still, candidates will have trouble ducking the question as 41 percent are less likely to support a candidate who refuses to say whom they support.

Half the electorate also oppose cutting taxes more for the wealthy than for everyone else (49 percent). Voters are also less likely to support a candidate who favors raising the retirement age (64 percent) including 47 percent who are *much* less likely to support such a candidate.

Clinton's lead among young people and support for a range of progressive policies indicates a potentially bright future for Democratic success in the state. As the share of younger voters increases, Democratic support will continue to grow. Clinton holds a 9-point lead among voters under age 45 (46 percent to 37 percent), which makes up much of the 17-point deficit she faces among voters over 65 (36 percent to 54 percent for Trump). Expanded background checks, equal pay, reducing student loan costs, and increasing state funding all reach majority of voters who say that a candidate who takes that position would make them much more likely to support them. The South Carolina Democratic Party has a real opportunity to frame an economic and social agenda that forges a majority.

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