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Tracking Rural Voters in Competitive Districts and Senate Races

To: The Center for Rural Strategies

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Over the past two decades, voters in rural America contributed much to the Republican ascendancy. In 2002, rural America broke heavily for Republican candidates. In 2004, George Bush carried rural America by 19 points, up from 16 points in 2000. In 2006, however, rural America emerges as key battleground in the fight for control over the House and Senate. Moreover, comparing a survey of rural voters in contested campaigns this month to a survey taken last month, this is a fight Republicans may be losing, at least for now.

Over the last month, voters in rural areas moved toward the Democrats in key contested congressional and Republican seats across the country. This movement reflects several dynamics, ranging from Iraq, to perceptions of an uneven economic recovery, to the difficulty Republicans are having energizing the “values voter” in the post-Foley environment.

Needless to say, many of these incumbents will hold their seats and old loyalties still apply. Despite the desire for change apparent in these data, most voters believe their own representative deserves reelection. However, the rural vote cannot be assumed by the Republicans this year; it is contested ground.

This analysis reflects a survey of 500 likely rural voters in forty-one contested House races and six competitive Senate races around the country. It was conducted October 22-24, 2006 with a margin of error of +/-4.3%. (See appendix for districts and states).¹ It was sponsored by the Center for Rural Strategies, a nonpartisan,

¹ Because we used a split sample design to look at the House and Senate vote margin of error is higher for these two data points, +/- 6.2 for the House sub sample and +/-5.5 for the Senate subample.

nonprofit organization whose mission is to encourage attention to the concerns of rural communities.

Key Findings Include:

- Rural voters appear to be moving towards Democrats. Since the survey in September, rural voters moved in the competitive Senate races from a 4 point advantage for Republicans to a 4 point advantage for Democrats. In the competitive House races, rural voters moved from being evenly divided to a 13 point advantage for the Democrats. Overall, we see an increase in Democrats strong support, moving from 32 to 37 percent while Republicans remain stable at 31 percent strong support (30 percent in previous survey).²

■ **Table 1:** Vote in rural areas of competitive congressional districts and senate seats

	Swing House Races		Swing Senate Races	
	Sept.	Oct.	Sept.	Oct.
Democratic candidate	45	52	43	47
Republican candidate	45	39	47	43
(Democratic-Republican)	--	+13	-4	+4

**Actual candidate names were used in ballot tests.*

- Despite this movement in the vote, a slight majority still says that they believe their own representative deserves re-election and a slight plurality believes that the corruption in Congress represents business as usual.

² The house margin is beyond margin of error, the shift is not. But this trend is confirmed by other surveys of competitive races around the country, including a recent Democracy Corps survey of 50 Republican held seats.

http://www.democracycorps.com/reports/analyses/Democracy_Corps_October_25_2006_Memo.pdf

■ **Table 2:** Incumbent loyalty

	Sept.	Oct.
First statement	34	37
Second statement	52	51
(First statement-second statement)	-18	-13

*(IF INCUMBENT CONGRESSMAN RUNNING) I am so angry at the way things are going in this country, I will vote for change and new leadership beginning by voting against (incumbent).

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Things in the country could be going better, but (incumbent) is different than most and deserves reelection.

- The movement towards Democrats comes largely from Independent and moderate voters. Republican support for Republican candidates is weaker than Democratic support for Democratic candidates. We also see an enthusiasm gap – the most interested voters give Democrats much wider margins than voters overall; in fact, Republicans lead among the least interested voters.
- While we see a slight decline in Bush's job approval (now 45 percent approve, 49 percent disapprove) and a slight worsening of the mood (now 58 percent wrong track), there was a dramatic increase in the number of rural voters who said that the war in Iraq was driving their vote – from 28 to 38 percent, concurrent with a 5 point drop in the number citing the war on terrorism. Despite dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq (60 percent say we need to get the troops home by next year), when we ask rural voters where they most want to see change, they cite economic issues. A plurality (38 percent) says that they want “an economy that works for ordinary people, not just the rich.”

■ **Table 3:** Change and the Rural Voter

	Total
An economy that works for ordinary people, not just the rich	38
Leaders who best represent my values on issues like gay marriage and abortion	15
Less corruption in government	12
A new direction in Iraq	11
Lower taxes	9
No waffling on war on terrorism	6
More focus on rural issues	5

* Which of the following statements best describes the kind of changes you would like to see after this election?

- Moral values, which in the past have been so important to rural voters, appear to be playing a diminished role in this election. Only 16 percent say that moral values are the one or two most important issues to their vote. While most say the Foley scandal will not make a difference in their vote, it clearly muddied the waters for the Republicans' ownership of "values" issues among rural voters. In a paired statement, 52 percent agreed that when it comes to moral values, it doesn't matter if they vote Democrat or Republican, while 40 percent agree that it is still important to support Republicans on values.

Appendix

The survey reached 500 adults living in rural areas (all counties outside of a Census defined Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)) of 41 competitive house districts and six competitive Senate states, 18 years or older, who indicated they voted or were ineligible to vote in either 2002 or 2004, and are almost certain to or will probably vote in the 2006 election for Congress. The survey was conducted October 22-24, 2006 with a margin of error of +/-4.3%.

■ **Table 4:** Competitive Senate Seats

	Senator	State
1	Santorum	PA
2	Burns	MT
3	DeWine	OH
4	Talent	MO
5	Dayton	MN
6	Frist	TN

■ **Table 5:** Competitive Congressional Districts –Ranked by Competitiveness

Representative	Incumbent Party	State	District
Ney, Robert W. (R)	R	OH	18
Davis, Geoff (R)	R	KY	4
Simmons, Rob (R)	R	CT	2
Sodrel, Michael E. (R)	R	IN	9
Hostettler, John N. (R)	R	IN	8
Nussle, Jim (R)	R	IA	1
Kolbe, Jim (R)	R	AZ	8
Taylor, Charles H. (R)	R	NC	11
Boehlert, Sherwood (R)	R	NY	24
Gerlach, Jim (R)	R	PA	6
Kennedy, Mark R. (R)	R	MN	6
Chocola, Chris (R)	R	IN	2
Sherwood, Don (R)	R	PA	10
Johnson, Nancy L. (R)	R	CT	5
Sweeney, John E. (R)	R	NY	20
Mollohan, Alan B. (D)	D	WV	1
Green, Mark (R)	R	WI	8
Bonilla, Henry (R)	R	TX	23
Reichert, David G. (R)	R	WA	8
Sanders, Bernard (I)	I	VT	AL
Edwards, Chet (D)	D	TX	17
Melancon, Charlie (D)	D	LA	3
Harris, Katherine (R)	R	FL	13
Spratt, John M. Jr. (D)	D	SC	5
Kuhl, John R. ``Randy'' Jr. (R)	R	NY	29
Musgrave, Marilyn N. (R)	R	CO	4
Strickland, Ted (D)	D	OH	6
Bass, Charles F. (R)	R	NH	2

Walsh, James T. (R)	R	NY	25
Evans, Lane (D)	D	IL	17
Gibbons, Jim (R)	R	NV	2
Pombo, Richard W. (R)	R	CA	11
Lewis, Ron (R)	R	KY	2
Gutknecht, Gil (R)	R	MN	1
Salazar, John T. (D)	D	CO	3
Cubin, Barbara (R)	R	WY	AL
Bradley, Jeb (R)	R	NH	1
Larsen, Rick (D)	D	WA	2
Schmidt, Jean (R)	R	OH	2
Kelly, Sue W. (R)	R	NY	19
Foley, Mark (R)	R	FL	16