



September 21, 2006

Tracking Rural Voters in Competitive Districts and Senate Races

To: The Center for Rural Strategies
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Rural voters are highly contested this election year in the most competitive Senate and House races across the country. In this unique look at rural voters in swing races, we find that Democrats and Republicans are splitting rural voters evenly.¹

This year, the war in Iraq, the economy and the war on terrorism dominate the issue landscape in rural America. Nearly three-quarters of rural voters know someone serving or who has served in Iraq and a majority rural voters favor a plan to pull out of Iraq in the next year. They also, by a significant margin, believe the country economy is improving mainly for the wealthy. Democrats edge out Republicans among the voters most concerned about Iraq and economy.

At the same time, while President Bush's approval ratings continue to be low among Americans as a whole, his standing among rural voters is somewhat better. Republicans are strongly advantaged among voters who are most concerned about the war on terrorism, one of the three dominant issues in rural areas. Just as rural voters shifted late in the election cycle towards Bush, away from Kerry, it is still possible that Republicans can regain their traditional advantage among rural voters.

¹ The survey reached 529 adults living in rural areas 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 September 17-19, 2006 with a margin of error of +/-4.3%. (See appendix for districts and states).

The Political Environment

There is no doubt that rural America stands in some contrast to the rest of America in their approval ratings of the President. He garners higher job approval ratings here and most rural voters say they are satisfied with their 2004 vote choice (52 percent very satisfied, 82 percent satisfied, 85 percent of Bush voters satisfied). Moreover, rural voters appear to be a less anti-incumbent mood with a majority (52 percent) suggesting that their member of Congress is “better than most” and deserves re-election.

■ **Table 1:** Country Direction and Bush Approval

	Rural	National*
Right Direction	35	32
Wrong track	56	59
Bush approval	47	44
Bush disapproval	48	52

**From Democracy Corps survey of 1006 likely voters conducted Sept 17-19, 2006*

However, as is the case elsewhere, the President’s numbers show significant erosion from a similar point in the 2004 election cycle, opening the door, perhaps, to alternatives and a more fluid rural political environment.

■ **Table 1:** Bush Approval Among Rural Swing

	September, 2004*	September, 2006
Strongly approve	40	27
Somewhat approve	13	20
Somewhat disapprove	8	12
Strongly disapprove	36	37
Approve-disapprove	+9	-2

**Reflects combined data set in Democracy Corps survey for September, 2004 among rural swing voters in*

The Candidates' Standing

The Republicans and Democrats are essentially tied in competitive rural districts and states. They are currently even in the congressional match up and Democrats are trailing by 4 points in Senate races. The vote looks remarkably close to the congressional vote during the same period in 2004 (48 percent generic Democrat v. 45 percent generic Republican) and suggests that a number of issues (terrorism, Iraq, specific candidate appeal, etc.) may be informing the vote, beyond the President's standing. Recall that rural voters shifted late against John Kerry in 2004, and our earlier tracking polling had rural voters more competitive than later polling in the presidential election.² Of course, a more apt comparison might be the 2002 contest, where Republicans won rural voters by 24 points according to the exit polls.³ While this swing district and senate race sample is strictly not comparable to the overall electorate, it is at least indicative of a much more competitive year for Democrats than the last off-year election.

■ **Table 2:** Vote in rural areas of competitive congressional districts

	September 2006	September/ October 2004	November* 2002
Democratic Congressional candidate	45	48	36
Republican Congressional candidate	45	45	60

National rural congressional vote

Overall, Republicans do not seem to have a problem with their base in rural areas – they are winning over 80 percent of their own voters, as are Democrats. And, there are more Republicans than Democrats in these rural districts. But Democrats are winning among Independents by 5 points in House races and 20 points in Senate races, which is neutralizing the partisan advantage Republicans hold among rural voters.

² 2004 numbers are based on a combined dataset of Democracy Corps surveys conducted between Sept 9 and Oct 18, 2004 of 611 rural voters in competitive Congressional districts. Rural voters live in counties defined by the Census as any county not in a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA).

³ Our 2002 report was based on two post-election surveys conducted by Public Opinion Strategies with a combined sample of 1,600 2002 voters and two Greenberg Quinlan Rosner national post-election surveys with a combined sample of 1,763 2002 voters. All four surveys were conducted from Nov. 5-6, 2002. Also based on a POS Pfizer RGA national post-election survey with a sample size of 800 2002 or 2000 voters conducted Nov. 12-14, 2002. Finally, based on an NPR/POS/GQR study of 890 2002 voters conducted Nov. 5-6, 2002.

■ **Table 3:** Vote by party

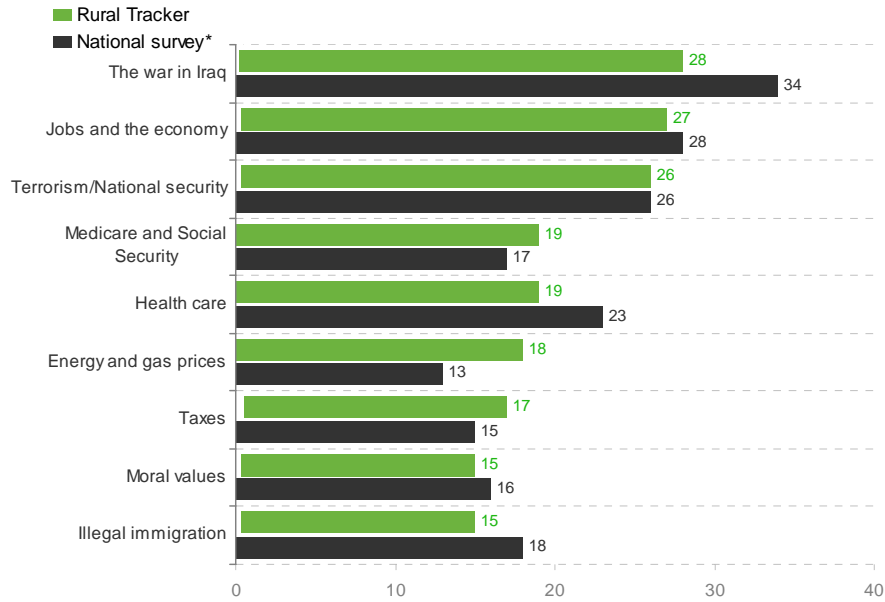
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Congressional Race			
Democratic candidate	82	43	12
Republican candidate	11	37	82
Senate Race			
Democratic candidate	80	50	12
Republican candidate	14	29	83

Republicans are having slightly more trouble with their weak supporters, especially in the Senate race, where a third are voting Democratic. Not surprisingly, Republican voters tend to be more male, younger, college educated men, religious, middle income, in the South and West. Democratic voters are more female, older, college educated women, Catholics, low to moderate income and in the Northeast and Central regions.

The Issue Landscape

The issue landscape is dominated by the war in Iraq, jobs and the economy and terrorism and national security (just as we see nationally). Immigration is low on the list of concerns and rural voters are evenly divided over the issue of citizenship for illegal immigrants.

Figure 1: Top Issues

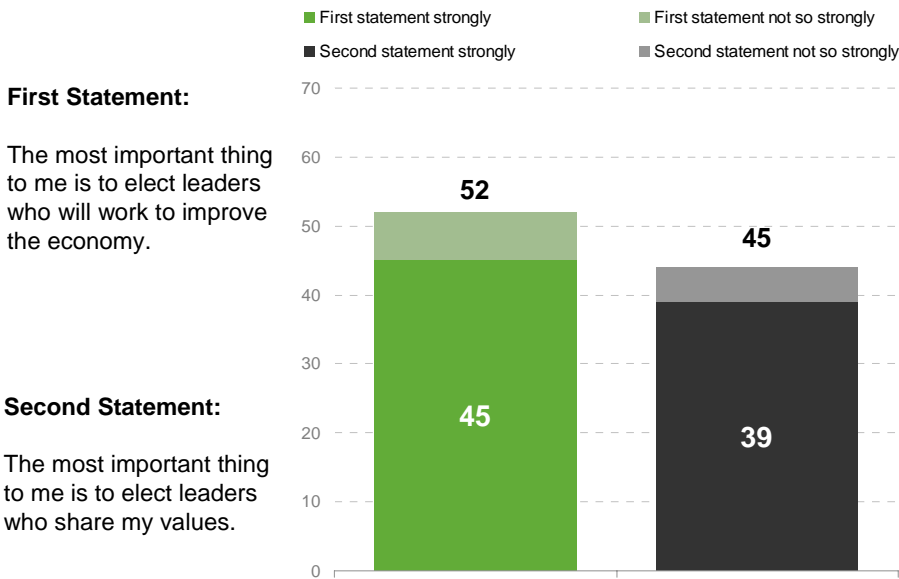


In deciding how to vote for Congress, which ONE of the following issues is MOST important to you? Is it... (Top two issues)

**From Democracy Corps survey of 1006 likely voters conducted Sept 17-19, 2006*

“Values” also are low on the list of concerns and rural voters report that they are slightly more likely to vote for leaders who will work to improve the economy (52 percent) than leaders that share their values (45 percent). Of course, partisan fights about “values” issues are often fought under the radar screen and it is difficult to measure the impact of them in surveys. When we combine terrorism, moral values and illegal immigration, there is no doubt that there is a “values voter” bloc that remains significant in rural areas.

Figure 2: Values vs. the Economy



Now I'm going to read you a pair of statements. Please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right.

- Iraq: By 15 points, rural voters in competitive Senate and House races believe we need to have a responsible plan to get us out by next year (55 percent), with 41 percent agreeing that we can win the war and should stay the course until we do. Iraq concerned voters favor the Democrats by 23 percent in the House and 27 percent in the Senate. A startling percentage of rural voters know someone serving in Iraq (73 percent), with 26 percent reporting a family serving or recently served in Iraq. Interestingly, rural voters who know someone serving or who has served in Iraq are no more likely to cite Iraq as their most important issue and they are no more likely to say we should bring the troops home. This stems, in part, from the fact that military families are more Republican in their partisan leanings. Republicans, however, are underperforming with these voters. In other words, they give the Republicans a net 10-point advantage on partisan identification, but support House candidates by 4 points and are evenly divided in the Senate race.

- **Economy:** Rural voters are pretty sour about the economy; by a 28 points margin they say that the economy has improved mainly for the wealthy (62 percent) rather than most people (34 percent). Economy concerned voters support a Democratic candidate by 13 points in the House race and 10 points in the Senate race. The economy is the number one issue for Independent voters (31 percent, followed by healthcare at 22 percent, terrorism at 21 percent and the war in Iraq at 20 percent).
- **Terrorism:** This is the one major issue area where the GOP racks up a significant advantage. They win terrorism concerned voters by 39 points in the House race and 42 points in the Senate race. It is likely that the Republican edge here balances rural voters' concerns about the war in Iraq and may preclude broad electoral gains.

Broadly speaking, the current issue debate does not seem to provide any particular advantages to the incumbent party, or incumbents in particular. Republicans would do very well to take the concerns of rural voters, their base for the last three election cycles seriously. In terms of messaging, Democrats enjoy a significant advantage on both the economy and the Iraq war, while most voters say they will focus more on economic issues, rather than values. This is the dynamic Democrats desperately fought to create in 2004 and failed in the last month. Terrorism, of course, is a single and large exception and could be a potential roadblock against Democratic gains in rural districts.

Moving the Rural Vote

The rural vote trended in a Republican direction at the end of the 2004 Presidential campaign and leaned heavily Republican in 2002. It is not obvious yet what will happen in 2006, but it is clear that Republicans will have to fight to regain their usual advantage. It is interesting to note that Democrats have a slight edge on "caring about rural issues" 42 to 36 percent. This margin grows among Independent voters (16 points) and economy concerned voters (20 points).

If Democrats are going to keep the rural vote competitive, they will need to maintain their margins among older voters – the most reliable voters in off year elections – while containing the attacks that will come on terrorism and immigration. This will likely require a strong focus on economic issues including Medicare and Social Security, while aggressively supporting middle class taxes.

If Republicans are going to move the rural vote in their direction, they will need to overcome voters' concerns about Iraq and the economy and peel voters away based on some combination of terrorism, moral values and immigration. But is also important to remember as well that individual incumbents face different challenges and opportunities in different races. In recent weeks, some Republicans have moved in the direction of trying to demonstrate an independence from Washington in general, and the Administration, in specific. Other Republican candidates will attempt to focus the debate on local issues, where the power of incumbency brings natural advantages, particularly in rural communities more likely to notice and appreciate local accomplishments (e.g. a bridge, a hospital, a grant, farm support, etc.). In the last mid-term election where large numbers of votes turned on a nationalized basis (1994), many Democrats pursued these same sorts of approaches. It remains to be seen what the political climate will be on Election Day, as well as how various strategic and tactical approaches succeed or fail.

Appendix

The survey reached 529 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 September 17-19, 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