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Rural America Competitive

Bush Problems and Economic Stress Put Rural America “in play” in 2008

To: Interested Parties

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In 2004, George Bush carried rural America with a 19-point margin, despite some moments in the election cycle when John Kerry ran competitively. This margin improved on Bush's 2000 victory by 16 points. The 2006 election results showed a deep erosion in the Republican rural base. Reflecting a national anti-Republican tide, rural America split nearly evenly between the parties in congressional races (51 percent for Republican candidates, 48 percent Democratic candidates).¹ As we move into the 2008 presidential season, rural America is poised to be a battleground, particularly as urban areas remain solidly Democratic. This survey sponsored by the Center for Rural Strategies explores the current political mood in rural America, as well as a deeper look at life in rural parts of the country.²

This research shows ongoing problems for the Republican party, propelled by a strongly negative view of the Bush administration, doubts about the war and, arguably as important looking ahead, a broad sense of economic frustration and economic squeeze in this part of the country. Rural America sees the rest of the country prospering; their assessment of “rural America” is less sanguine.

At the same time, this part of the country remains a deeply conservative place. Nearly half (50 percent) are self-ascribed conservatives compared to around 40 percent of the rest of the country and a 55 percent majority own firearms compared to 43 percent in the rest of the country. Values matter here and, in fact, voters prefer to choose a candidate for President committed to family values than a candidate who will end the war in Iraq. Republicans still have an opportunity to revive the conservative instincts of this region and reclaim their lost base.

The outcome likely depends on each party's ability to speak most compellingly and most credibly to some of the every day issues in rural life. Rising costs of living, particularly in terms of fuel costs—a huge issue here where families drive more and drive further for jobs and to meet the needs of daily life—and dwindling economic opportunity drive much of the agenda in rural America. Republicans need to convince these voters they are sensitive to these economic and pocket-book issues and, more critically, can deliver different results from the last seven

¹ VNS exit survey results of self-ascribed rural voters.

² This survey was conducted by Democratic polling firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, in consultation with Republican media firm Greener and Hook. It involved 804 respondents from rural parts of the country and carries a margin of error of +/- 3.46 at a 95 percent confidence level. For the purposes of this poll, “rural” is defined as counties in non-metropolitan statistical areas, as designated by the Census.

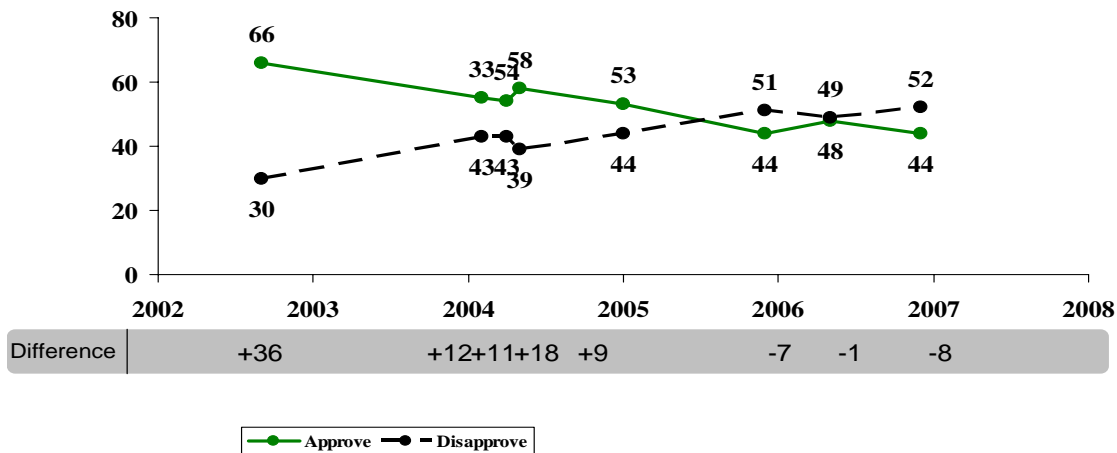
years. Addressing economics will allow the social issues, issues that advantage the conservative party, to play a bigger role in voter decision-making. At the same time, Democrats need to keep economic issues at the forefront, while finding at least some common ground with socially conservative voters. Rural voters will weigh both economics and values in making their decisions in the next year and a half. The degree to which they stress one more than the other could well determine the outcome.

Both parties will need to navigate Iraq, which has potential pitfalls for both sides. While rural America, like the rest of the country, has turned against the war, it also remains less hostile than the rest of the country and maintains a very significant connection to the war, with over half saying someone close to them is serving in Iraq. Ultimately, Democrats and Republicans have significant challenges, but the prize could hardly be more attractive. Realistically given the current national climate, Republicans must win rural areas to see success in 2008. Democrats in turn have a historic opportunity to strike deep into the Republican base. For these reasons, rural America may emerge as one of the most heavily contested parts of the country.

Historically Low Approval Ratings for Bush

Nationally, George Bush now posts approval scores that leave him one of the least popular sitting Presidents. While rural voters deliver somewhat better news than the rest of the country, reflecting a more conservative electorate, his drop here has been no less precipitous. Since his reelection in 2004, Bush dropped a net 26 points in job approval.

Bush Job Approval



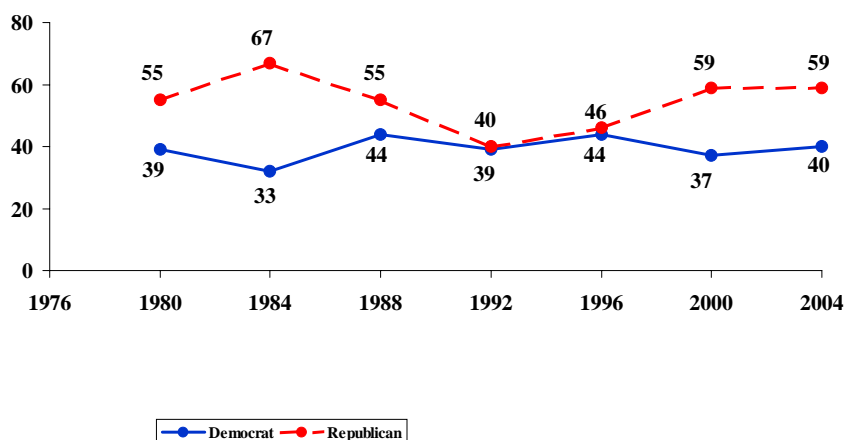
Bush's problems directly impact the entire Republican brand in rural America and usher in a new era of political competition. Thermometer (favorability) scores for the Republican party dropped from 53 percent warm, 29 percent cool just prior to the 2004 elections to 40 percent warm (favorable), 37 percent cool (unfavorable) currently. But Republican losses do not necessarily yield Democratic gains. One of the ongoing and important national dynamics is that while the Republicans struggle, Democrats have only managed to tread water. Thermometer scores for Democrats are only marginally better now (39 percent warm, 38 percent cool) than they were leading into the 2004 election (38 percent warm, 41 percent cool).

The result is a striking political parity in rural regions of the country.

Era of Political Competition

Bill Clinton successfully contested the rural vote in 1992 and in 1996, but in the four election cycles since, rural America has been the heart of the Republican base.

Presidential Vote in Rural Areas over Time
1980 to 2004



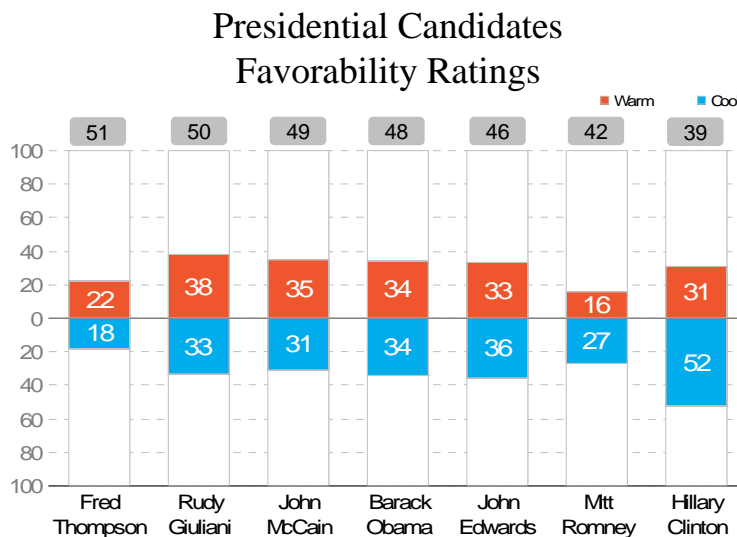
Source: National Exits Polls as reported by New York Times.

Currently, however, voters divide evenly in a generic election for President (46 – 44 percent for a Democratic candidate), reflecting a 21-point swing away from the Republicans. Democrats lead 42 – 31 percent among Independents, 51 - 39 percent among blue collar voters and 46 – 43 percent among voters with family fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan. The Democratic candidate also runs evenly (44 – 46 percent) in counties carried by Bush in 2004.

At the congressional level, Republicans won 2004 with a 10-point margin, but barely held on in 2006, as noted. At present, the Democrats enjoy a 46 – 44 percent margin in named trial

heats.³ Most notably, looking only at districts that switched parties in 2006, the Democratic margin grows to 56 – 34 percent (e.g., Kansas 2, Iowa 2 and North Carolina 11). While the sample size here is fairly small, it appears it will be a severe challenge for Republicans to reclaim these seats.

Obviously, there is a difference between “generic” presidential match-ups and named trial heats. This presidential race, which will surely impact the congressional races as well, is dynamic; the profile of the ultimate nominees will influence the competitiveness of the presidential race regardless of the overall partisan environment. What is striking, however, is how uninspiring these voters find any of the leading Presidential candidates, including Fred Thompson.



The War at Home

Like voters throughout the country, rural voters soured on the war in Iraq. A narrow 50 percent plurality believe the, “current course cannot bring stability and we need to start reducing the number of U.S. troops in Iraq,” over the statement, “we must stay the course to achieve stability and finish the job in Iraq,” (45 percent). These are better numbers for the President than in current national surveys (56 – 41 percent want to start reducing troops) and this issue is not the vote-driving engine we see in other areas, but these results also reflect a notable shift since 2004 (51 – 45 percent in favor of “staying the course”).

What gives this issue unique traction here is that this is the part of the country that, more than others, sends its sons and daughters to do the fighting. Seventy-five percent know someone who is serving and 27 percent have a family member who is serving. Notably, these

³ In these trial heats, we use the name of the incumbent; their opponent is identified as Democratic or Republican opponent.

voters are no more—and no less—likely to oppose the war than others, reflecting a balance between a more conservative political outlook among military families and their obvious desire to see family home safe and sound.

There are risks in the Iraq issue for both parties and both party's eventual nominee. Rural voters' military ties and close connection to the actual fighting will amplify doubts about Democrats on security issues, particularly if Republicans can successfully position the Democratic party as "abandoning" the troops in the field. But the risks seem much higher for the Republican candidates. The rural center opposes the war, but Republican voters remain committed to the President's course, severely limiting options for Republican nominees.

Conservative Revival

The political competition in rural America reflects judgments about conservative governance, not necessary reflections on conservative ideology, at least in terms of social issues. Despite voters' issues with the Iraq war, voters break 56 to 37 percent in favor of a candidate with a commitment to "core family values" over a candidate committed to "changing the direction of the country in Iraq." What is happening is less about an ideological realignment than a reflection on the current governance.

In a split sample experiment, where we asked voters to choose between two descriptions of candidates for President, we painted one Republican candidate as a social conservative and one candidate as a social moderate. The social conservative overcomes voters' problems with the Bush administration and posts numbers similar to the 2004 and 2000 presidential margin. The social moderate does not break out of the current political parity in rural America.

Preference for President

	Total
<i>Candidate A is a Democrat. He believes in fundamentally changing the direction of the country, beginning by bringing our troops home from Iraq. He also says that this economy works well for the rich, but less well for middle class families, and will work to make sure everyone has a chance at the American dream. Although he respects those with different views, he supports a woman's right to choose and supports civil unions for same sex couples.</i>	39
<i>Candidate B is a Republican. He says there are some things he would do differently than George Bush. However, he supports victory in Iraq and does not want to hand the terrorists another win after 9/11. He believes the best thing we can do for the economy is to cut taxes, but will also fight for ways to bring America's prosperity to everyone. He opposes abortion, particularly partial birth abortion, and opposes gay marriage.</i>	54
Democrat – Republican	-15
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<i>Candidate B is a Republican. He says there are some things he would do differently than George Bush. However, he supports victory in Iraq and does not want to hand the terrorists another win after 9/11. He believes the best thing we can do for the economy is to cut taxes, but will also fight for ways to bring America's prosperity to everyone. Unlike other politicians, he does not runaway from his views. He has a history of supporting a women's right to choose and will not change his beliefs because he is running for President.</i>	47
Democrat - Republican	-3

Clearly, there are opportunities for Republicans to see the same kinds of margins they have grown accustomed to in this part of the country. However, informed trial heats like those above are projective, not predictive. They do not take into account the credibility of a candidate, or a party, making each argument. To succeed here, both parties not only need to contend with Iraq, the Bush legacy and the values, but with reality of every day life in rural America.

Life in Rural America

A 54 percent majority believe rural America is off on the wrong track, a number only marginally less cynical than voters' assessment of the direction of the country. Moreover, if Iraq and frustration with Bush drive much of the wrong track numbers in the country, wrong track numbers in rural America expose a significant economic anxiety, driven not only by diminished economic opportunity, but more prominently, by a rising cost of living.

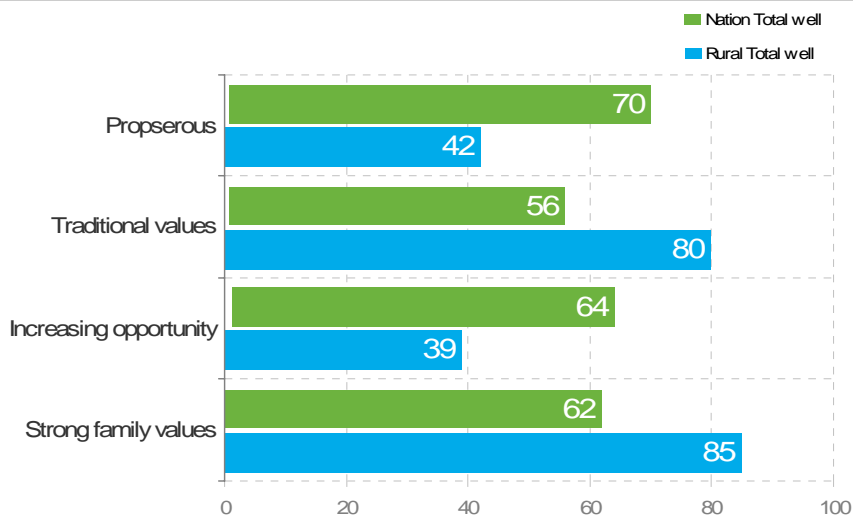
This dynamic colors almost all measures of rural life in the survey. As noted above, while a candidate committed to changing course in Iraq loses to a candidate committed to family values, a candidate committed to changing course economically runs very competitively against the family values candidate (47 – 46 in favor of the family values candidate). The two most serious problems in rural America are the cost of fuel (77 percent very serious problem, 11 points higher

than any other problem) and the cost of health care (66 percent very serious problem). Lack of good paying jobs ranks third on this list (52 percent).

Rural voters' agenda is also dominated by issues reflecting the economic squeeze, including health care, lower taxes and investments in alternative fuels—a boon to the rural economy. The dramatic illustration of the sense of economic frustration emerges when we ask voters how well certain words apply to the country as a whole and ask voters how well certain words apply to rural America. On many of these measures, voters see rural America more or less in step with the rest of the country. There are four exceptions where the difference exceeds twenty points, reflecting the push and pull of values and the economy. Rural voters see themselves as richer in values, but poorer in opportunity and prosperity.

Rural vs. All of America

Now, I am going to read you a list of words and phrases which people might use to describe America on the whole/Rural America. Thinking about your view of America, for each word or phrase, please tell me whether it describes America very well, well, not too well, or not well at all.



Conclusion

The Center for Rural Strategies will continue to monitor developments in rural America in the 2008 cycle and, as important, will continue to explore realities of rural life as well. This survey shows a very competitive political environment, the kind of environment that will likely attract the interest of politicians and policy-makers throughout the country. Our look at life in rural America suggests, however, that more attention needs to be paid. These communities are struggling, even in the face of national growth. The party or candidate that can most credibly speak to that reality will likely succeed in 2008 and beyond.