

DEMOCRACY CORPS
GREENBERG QUINLAN ROSNER RESEARCH

Founders
James Carville
Stanley Greenberg
Robert Shrum

Executive Director
Jim Gerstein

Senior Advisor
Karl Agne

Research Conducted by:
Greenberg Quinlan Rosner

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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner
From: Anna Greenberg and David Walker
Stan Greenberg and James Carville

RE: Opening up the West¹

Introduction

In the 2006 election, Democrats made significant gains throughout the country, primarily in the Northeast and Midwest, but including some seats in the South. Among the most promising developments for Democrats was their ability to encroach on the long-held Republican stronghold in the interior West. These victories include John Tester's win in Montana, two congressional conversions in Arizona and one in Colorado, as well as the on-going political success of Democratic Governors in red states such as Janet Napolitano (AZ), Brian Schweitzer (MT) and Dave Freudenthal (WY).

Is this region of the country evolving? Is it leaving the Republican camp? Are Democratic gains there—like most elsewhere—merely a reaction against Republican governance and the war in Iraq, or do they preview a potential realignment of this part of the country?

In order to find out the answer to some of these questions, Democracy Corps is committing serious resources to research in the interior West over the next two years, leading up to the 2008 presidential election. This memo reports

¹ Survey of 1,207 likely voters in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming conducted by Democracy Corp in March 7-14, 2007, including oversample of 290 Hispanic voters. Memo also reflects focus groups among swing voters in Arizona, Montana and Wyoming in January, 2007. We will write a separate memo analyzing the Hispanic data.

on the first wave of that research conducted in Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Idaho and Montana. In this first round, we profile our nation's Western residents, exploring how they live their lives, their political world views and offer a starting point for this critical battleground.

This analysis finds voters without pretensions. They appreciate straight talk. They believe that a "contract" is a handshake and someone's good word. They work hard, often for lower wages that might be found elsewhere in the country, in part because they value the lifestyle here. Most would not live anywhere else. Their relationship with the land is a defining value of life in the west.

This analysis also shows stark divisions in the northern tier (Montana, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming) and the southern tier (New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Nevada). These divisions not only reflect political preferences, with the North's obvious Republican leanings, but an attachment to "family values" and an anti-government world-view. The south is more libertarian and less focused on conservative culture wars; most important, it is more ethnically diverse. The North is more "traditional," more likely to attend church, more likely to own guns and less open to progressive outreach.

However, to a degree that may distinguish these voters from the rest of the country, western state voters prefer a less ideological, more pragmatic approach to government and politics. This dynamic remains true in the north and south. It reflects both a political culture rooted (still) in rural life and small communities—where people need to work together to prosper, neighbor helping neighbor—and the proximity of national and local issues. The environment may seem an abstract issue for many in this country, but it is something western voters contend with every day, particularly those facing water restrictions. Immigration is not something they read about, but something that crosses their backyards and affects their schools, hospitals and local tax burden. Similarly, one-quarter of this electorate has gone without health insurance in the last five years or currently does not have insurance, and 66 percent know someone serving in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Our analysis shows a region of remarkable political openness and competitiveness, though clearly more in the south than in the north. Overall, the two parties closely and narrowly contest for these voters on most core measures, including a generic preference for president and named trial heat for Congress. To put this outcome in context, George Bush carried the eight states with a combined 57 to 42 percent margin in 2004 and 55 to 40 percent margin in 2000. But in 2006, congressional Democrats carried the region by two points and in this survey, a generic Democratic candidate for president trails by only two points. Independents and moderates prefer Democrats for Congress by a 16 and 23-point margin, respectively. As is the case in much of the country, Democratic success reflects more a response to Republican failure than to Democratic ambition. As we saw in our focus groups, relatively little of what Democrats said before the 2006 elections—or accomplished since—has filtered down to this region of the country.

Movement away from Republicans, of course, is driven by Iraq, but also by the Republicans' inability to address the issues that have such a direct and profound impact on their everyday lives. Importantly, the Republican failure here is not that they ignored issues that mattered to western voters. Their demagoguery on immigration often comprised some of the ugliest moments of the 2006 election cycle. They did not lose two seats in Arizona because they failed to communicate on immigration. Rather, they failed to speak to western voters' sense of pragmatism and their impatience for getting something done now. Equally as important, exploding budget deficits and encroachments on individual liberties (e.g., the Patriot Act) violate some of the core political values western voters hold most dear. Despite their historic dominance, voters now judge the two parties fairly equally on issues that have unique traction in this part of the country.

As we move forward with this research project, it seems clear based on the first wave of research that future success in the interior West depends, at least in part, on a deep understanding of how these voters live their lives and, second, on progressives' ability to deliver a pragmatic plan for making these voters' lives better. Clearly there are important ideological tensions with the current Republican rule, but voters in the West are not looking to trade one ideology for another. They are looking for results.

This is not to say that the progressives should not have a point of view or strong opinions on some issues. Quite the opposite. Rather, that the starting point for the debate is not ideology or politics, but a keen understanding of how families live and what we progressives can do to improve their lives. As this project matures, we will develop specific messaging and frameworks with appeal to voters in this region of the country, but some lessons, however, are already clear.

- **Get it done:** Western voters have little patience for political or ideological debate. They want action and they want the parties to work together to get things done.
- **Straight talk:** Western voters expect candor and honesty from their elected officials; they expect candidates and their political leaders to tell them exactly what they will do in office.
- **Honor the land:** These voters define western life largely through the land and it sets these voters apart from the rest of the country. It is important, however, to understand environmental concerns throughout this region are diverse, from water to sprawl to difficulty of making a living from the land.
- **Locals rule:** Voters everywhere believe their own, local politicians demonstrate more of their own values than national leaders, and the disconnection between national parties and politicians and local parties and politicians is extreme. This dynamic is particularly striking in the northern tier, where national Democrats struggle, but local Democrats often find heroic standing. For example, the most popular public figure in this survey is Wyoming Governor David Freudenthal.
- **Contesting economics and values:** Progressives can fight and win in both the (more) libertarian southern tier and the more family values-oriented northern tier. Democratic messages pushing back against the region's laissez-faire instincts based on equal opportunity

and populism beat back Republican trickle-down messages. A Democratic message which also focuses on values and economics beats a Republican message based on moral values. The key to all this success, however, is that Democratic messaging appreciates how voters live and does not simply advance a competing ideology.

- **Two critical issues, immigration and guns.** Republicans did not convert this region's concerns over immigration into political gains in 2006, but that does not mean the issue has been resolved. Far more so than we see nationally, in the south, immigration is on the top of voters' minds and progressives need to address this forthrightly. Similarly, we are reluctant to reengage the gun debate in this part of the country. Voters sense a "truce" between the gun control and anti-gun control forces and are satisfied with it; upsetting this status quo seems unnecessary and unproductive in the short term.

Life in the West

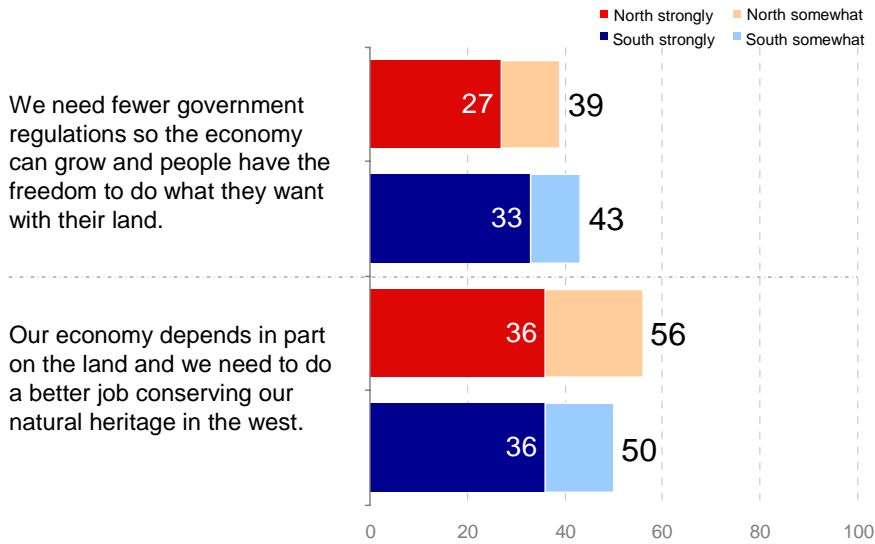
As much as anything else, the lives of people in the West are defined by their relationship with the land. It is their heritage, their recreation, and for some, their livelihood. Even for voters in suburban Denver and Phoenix, the land represents an escape from modernity. This relationship means the environment is a particularly important issue in this part of the country. The Republicans' 1994 "war on the west" campaign against federal environmental overreach seems only a faint echo, as voters have largely come to understand protecting the land is economic, as well as an environmental priority.²

The relationship between the land and the people is a starting point for understanding Western voters. In fast growing areas, it often translates into concerns about sprawl and water. In more rural areas, it is more about achieving a proper balance between necessary economic use of the land and protecting the land and heritage. Indeed, in one of the few examples where voters in the northern states emerge more progressive than voters in the southern states is when it comes to protecting the land and heritage of their immediate environment.

² That said, Western voters – especially Democrats -- are also concerned about national environmental issues such as global warming.

Northern states concerned about land protection

Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements. After I read each pair, please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right?



Little wonder the environment ranks relatively high in the West among voters’ volunteered issue priorities for their “elected leaders”³, with roughly one-in-five mentioning this issue behind the three top concerns of immigration, education and the economy. Overall, the top environmental concerns in these states are air pollution, global warming, sprawl and overdevelopment and lack of water. But if western life can be defined by people’s relationship with the land, more proximate environmental issues also need to be articulated and the diversity of environment concerns needs to be anticipated. Looking at voters’ environmental priorities at the state level, we see a wide range of concerns. Air pollution jumps to 55 percent of the response in Utah, compared to 32 percent everywhere else. Lack of water is not just an issue in Arizona (33 percent) and New Mexico (39 percent), but also in Wyoming (39 percent). The leading environmental concern in Colorado is not global warming or air pollution but sprawl and overdevelopment.

The economic situation in the West depends widely on where you live. Some areas are booming, particularly some parts of the southern tier (e.g., Colorado, Arizona) and around cities like Denver, Phoenix and Salt Lake City. Other areas, more to the north, show improvement in recent years, but remain mired in a low-wage economy and in an economy unable to provide enough opportunities to keep young people home. Overall, western voters are slightly less likely to identify the economy as one of their most important issues than we see in national surveys.

³ The question was written intentionally to leave state and federal jurisdiction ambiguous.

The same middle-class squeeze issues that undercut Republican claims of economic ascendancy in other parts of the country affect perceptions of the economy here too. Nearly a quarter (23 percent) of voters here went without health insurance in the last five years or currently lack insurance. This is not merely a problem among the young (47 percent), but affects voters over 30 as well (24 percent among voters 50-64). Nearly 27 percent of at-home mothers struggled without insurance, compared to 19 percent among working moms.

Another dynamic that makes life in the West somewhat distinct from the rest of the country, at least for some, is their relative isolation. Focus group respondents will often note their nearest neighbor is sometimes several miles away. Rather than keeping them apart, this isolation often draws them together as they are forced to rely on each other. In the North, residents are decidedly more “rural” (35 percent, compared to 18 percent in the South). But, they also have opportunities to connect virtually; 53 percent of voters have high speed internet access compared to 23 percent who are still using dial up. Even in the most rural of states, 38 percent have high-speed access to the information superhighway. Even their media exposure is more “national” in scope, with 42 percent in the North relying on satellite television rather than cable.

“Western Values”

While western voters do not recognize a label such as “western values,” they do advance a distinct set of ideals and way of seeing the world, beginning with their relationship with the land, their notion of the relationship between individuals and government, and their devotion to the family and sense of populism. Clearly these values have political consequences, resulting in both a historical commitment to the Republican Party on one hand and, more recently, some rising tensions between the current direction of the Republican Party and some of the values among right-leaning and center-right voters.

Libertarianism

One-in-five (20 percent) of these voters can be loosely defined as “libertarian.” These are voters who oppose government intervention on both moral values and the economy. As is common with any research effort among these voters, it is important to note that on many measures, these voters do not always “behave” like libertarians. Some support a more activist government on some issues (e.g., health care), some oppose abortion, and other inconsistencies emerge in this group as well. Only 29 percent, notably, describe their approach to the issues as conservative. Regionally, they are somewhat more likely to be men, live in the southern tier and reflect a broad urban bias.

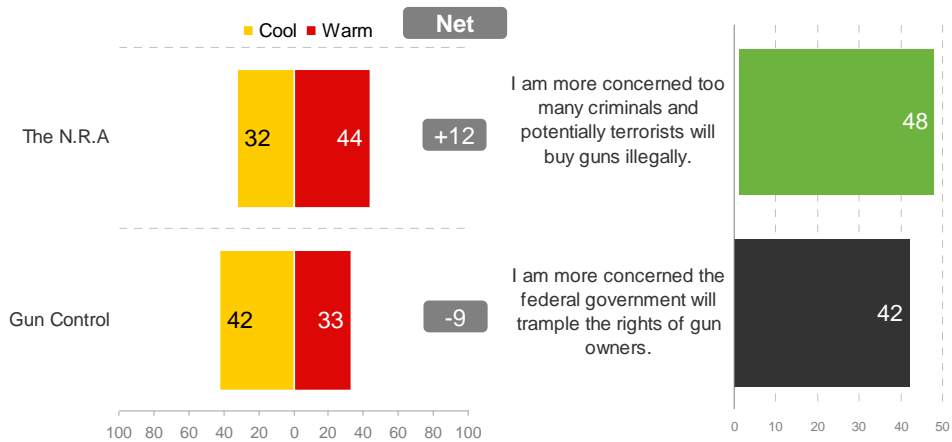
Overall, western voters broadly define their libertarianism more in economic terms than social or cultural issues. Nearly two-thirds do not want the federal government to get more involved in solving economic problems (63 percent) and think things should be left up to businesses and individuals. Conversely, these voters believe government should be more involved in promoting traditional values (54 percent). This contradiction demonstrates the strong pull of the moral values in many parts of the interior West, particularly in the northern states.

Historically, the gun issue drove much of the anti-government sentiment in the West and defined a significant and tangible aspect of western culture and life. Gun ownership runs 6 points higher in the interior West compared to the rest of the country, and 16-points higher in the northern tier where a majority of voters own firearms. Nonetheless, it is striking that the gun issue never spontaneously came up in our focus groups. Voters then assumed—and said as much—no one was pushing gun control currently and they were more than fine with this state of affairs. Furthermore, local Democratic leaders’ defense of the 2nd Amendment plays a significant part in their local appeal. Recall that Tester based his opposition to the Patriot Act in part to its impact on the federal government monitoring gun sales. Leaving this issue off the table provides space for progressives in the interior West to focus on more productive issues.

At the same time, as with many issues, Western voters approach the gun issue with some nuance. The NRA is much more popular than gun control and is more popular here than in the rest of the country. However, voters are split evenly on whether they are more concerned too many criminals and potentially terrorist will buy guns illegally (48 percent) or whether they are more concerned the federal government will trample the rights of gun owners (42 percent). A fair number of liberals and Democrats defend guns on this statement pair; and a fair number of conservatives, Republicans, and even libertarians show more concern about crime and terrorism.

Gun issue probably better left quiet

Now, I'd like to rate your feelings toward some people and organizations, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold.



“Family values”

Compared to other red regions of the country, particularly the South and parts of the Midwest, “family values” issues are less dominant, though the pull of a culturally conservative world view remains politically powerful. Church attendance is only slightly lower than the national average, but higher among the Hispanic Catholic community and, of course, Mormon strongholds in Idaho, Utah and Wyoming. In addition, the growth of mega churches throughout the country has played a role in religious life in suburban and exurban regions in the interior West. Voters who regularly attend mega-churches with over 750 members (7 percent of the total) comprise one of the most conservative blocs in this electorate.

At any rate, the interior West does not distinguish itself from the rest of the country on values issues. Gay marriage is no less unpopular here than in the rest of the nation.⁴ These voters’ approach to the abortion issue also reflects current national averages. A slight majority of voters believe the government should promote good moral values, though this number is higher in the northern states (64 percent). In fact, part of the challenge for Democrats in the northern states is the voters’ more socially conservative posture. Nonetheless, the Republican message on values can be contested. A purely libertarian argument against a conservative cultural message proves less successful than the progressive argument that uses, at its starting point, *an appreciation for how these voters live their lives.*

Contesting values

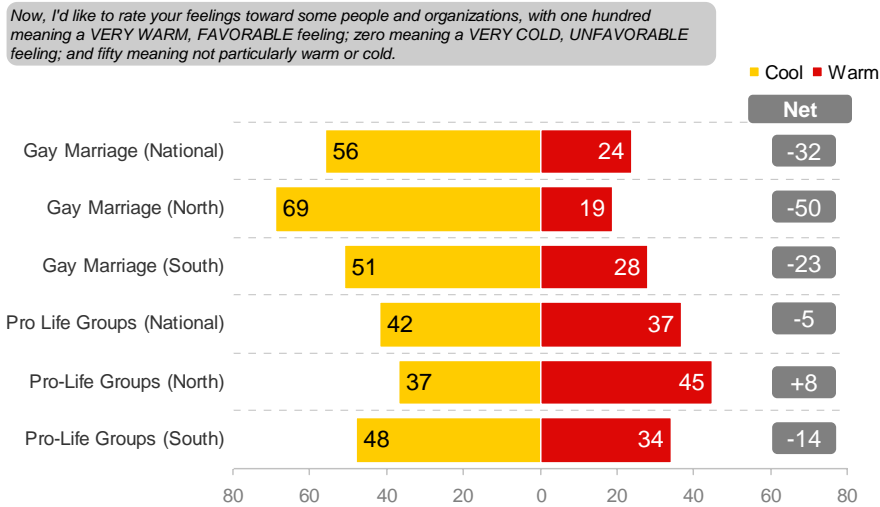
<i>Now I am going to read you some things two candidates said in their campaign for Congress. After I read these descriptions, please tell me which one you would support.</i>	Support strongly	Total
<i>Candidate A is a Democrat who says parents are working harder to keep up with the cost of living, taking them away from home and family. The government must ensure the economy works for all, giving parents the time to raise kids with the right values.</i>	41	50
<i>Candidate B is a Republican who believes in good, old fashioned values. He says that belief in God and the protection of the family are the foundations of this country.</i>	31	39
Candidate A - Candidate B	+10	+11
<i>Candidate A is a Democrat who says that churches and families, not government, should address issues of morality. People should have the freedom, within the law, to make their own decisions about their personal lives.</i>	38	47
<i>Candidate B is a Republican who believes in good, old fashioned values. He says that belief in God and the protection of the family are the foundations of this country.</i>	36	45
Candidate A - Candidate B	+2	+2

⁴ The defeat of the 2006 anti-gay marriage referendum in Arizona notwithstanding.

The key is not simply assuming that economics trump values. They most certainly do not. The long history of Republican success here and in economically depressed rural areas throughout the country should put to rest that tactical canard. Rather, it is about framing economic issues such as wages and middle class squeeze around values. It is also about articulating an understanding of how voters live.

A Democrat who links “values” with economic constraints and frames his or her argument in terms of how average people live their lives wins better than a two-to-one margin among independents, moderates, as well as working women and non-college voters.

Social issues challenging for Democrats



Populism

Despite a nominal anti-government streak, as an economic approach, populism is equally matched with laissez faire libertarianism (48 percent to 44 percent). This outcome reflects another example of real life trumping ideology, albeit marginally. There are deep concerns about economic issues like health care costs in this region. Families in this part of the country work hard, often make less money, and, as focus group responses make plain, struggle with the rising cost of living. Sixty percent (60 percent) of married couples are two income households. The level of household debt—not including home mortgages—has increased among one-quarter of this electorate. For these same reasons, an economic approach focused on equal opportunity also competes with the region’s reported libertarian bias.

Contesting economics

Now I am going to read you some things two candidates said in their campaign for Congress. After I read these descriptions, please tell me which one you would support.

	Total	North	South
<i>Candidate A is a Democrat who believes that right now the economy works only for those at the very top. He will fight to represent the interests of working and middle class families, instead of the interests of big corporations.</i>	48	47	49
<i>Candidate B is a Republican who believes in freedom. He says the economy grows and more people can succeed when the government stands out of the way and individuals are allowed to the freedom to make their own way.</i>	45	50	44
Candidate A - Candidate B	+2	-4	+5
<i>Candidate A is a Democrat who believes that everyone in the country should have an equal opportunity to succeed. He says we should work to make sure that more middle and working families who work hard and play by the rules can achieve economic security.</i>	49	43	52
<i>Candidate B is a Republican who believes in freedom. He says the economy grows and more people can succeed when the government stands out of the way and individuals are allowed the freedom to make their own way.</i>	44	52	40
Candidate A - Candidate B	+6	-9	+13

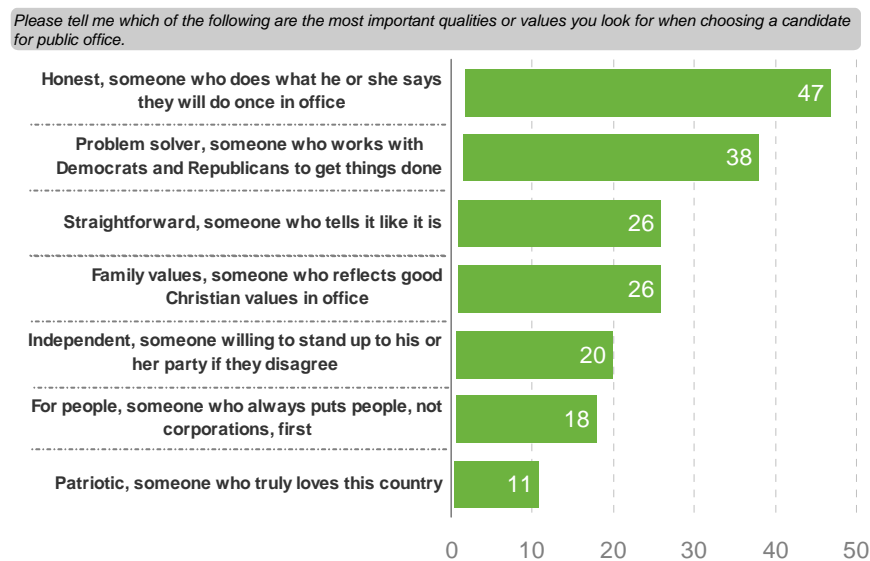
Bottom line, there is a role for populist politics in this part of the country, particularly in states like Montana, and especially among older women and less educated voters where populist instincts burn a bit brighter.

Political Values

In projecting some of these values onto political candidates, we readily see the pull of a “family values” candidate and the more limited appeal of a populist. But western voters mostly prefer less ideological charged worldviews, which is not to say voters seek candidates without a point of view; rather they look for candidates who are more focused on honesty and problem-solving. Honesty is defined as straight talk and politicians telling voters exactly what they will do in office. Problem solving is the ability to move past partisanship to get things done.

There are clearly some limits to a political message built entirely around pragmatism, particularly as it can fall emotionally flat. Nonetheless, outside of “honest,” a problem-solver emerges as the most appealing value for a public office-holder. Much more so than being “independent,” a more celebrated western political trait, “problem solving” finds traction in this study. Among independents and other centrists and swing voters, problem solving falls only a point or two below “honesty” and is the leading trait for progressives in the interior West. In every focus group conducted, when asked about red state Democratic governors, respondents noted his or her ability to work both sides of the aisle to get things accomplished. Dave Freudenthal, the most popular governor tested, was singled out for picking a Republican ticket-mate.

Honesty and problem solving most important political values



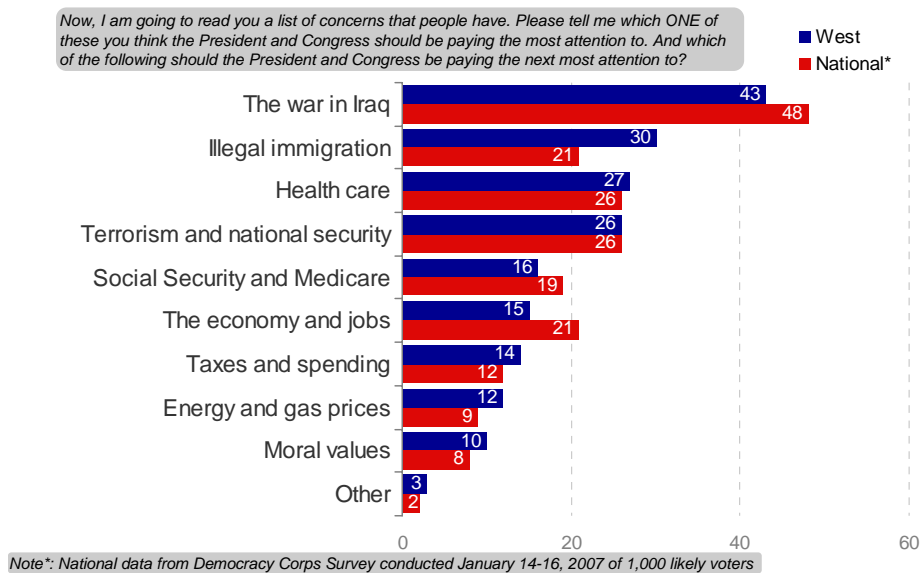
These findings are not an excuse for political obfuscation; western voters will not forgive a candidate for failing to take a stand. Being straightforward is a distinguishing western preference. Rather, these findings are a call to action and purpose. More narrowly, these results are an implicit indictment of the way western voters see politics played out in Washington.

Western Agenda

On many issues, like Iraq and health care, western voters' issue priorities match the rest of the country, but the West distinguishes itself on three critical issues—immigration, the environment and guns—distinctions which speak to the unique geography and way of life of this part of the country and their unique set of values.

Given a list of issues to choose from, voters identify Iraq as the leading issue (same as we see in national surveys), followed by illegal immigration (30 percent, 9 points higher than the national average). These voters' interest in health care and terrorism and national security match the rest of the country. The immigration issue remains both a key challenge for the progressive community and a telling test of these voters' internal political pragmatism as we shall see below.

Western agenda: Iraq and immigration lead list of national priorities



Asked in an open-ended fashion for issues that they want their elected officials to address, a more textured—more western—picture emerges. The leading issue is “immigration” and “border control.”

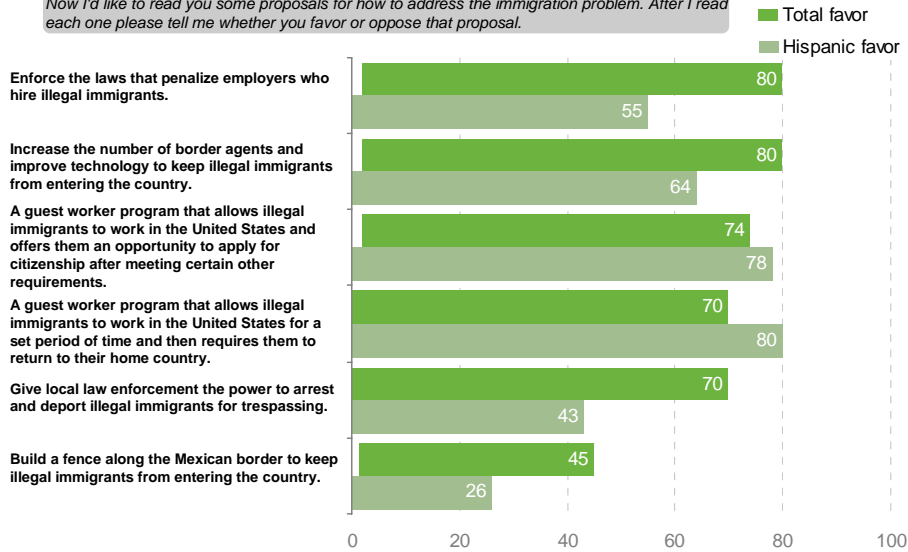
Immigration

Immigration, of course, holds a special place here. Fully a third (33 percent) identify immigration as their leading issue on an open-ended query; only education is competitive with this issue. Immigrants themselves are less popular among Anglo voters than we see in other parts of the country. Focus group respondents offer offensive comments about how someone’s grandfather came from Ireland and somehow managed to pick up the English language are ubiquitous. Nonetheless, this issue stands as a prime example of how western voters’ inherent pragmatism overcomes their otherwise conservative political ideology and, for a handful of voters, nativist instincts.

Voters oppose building a fence, the primary symbol of Republican efforts to demagogue this issue, primarily because it simply is not practical. As focus group participants will tell you, this fence can easily be overcome with tunnels or ladders. More telling, in both the North and South, voters also *prefer* comprehensive solutions that involve a guest worker program and a path to citizenship because with 11 million illegal immigrants already here, anything less would not be practical.

Immigration: voters reject a fence, support path to citizenship

Now I'd like to read you some proposals for how to address the immigration problem. After I read each one please tell me whether you favor or oppose that proposal.



These data help illustrate why the Republican immigration offensive failed to fend off the Democratic gains in the 2006 cycle. Voters did not want to hear about ideologies and slogans; they wanted solutions. Nonetheless, immigration clearly did not die as an issue in 2006 and the anger apparent in both these data and in focus group comments remains politically powerful.

They still want solutions.

Iraq

Recall that this region delivered all of its electoral votes to George Bush in 2004. To find voters split on the question of pulling out of Iraq in this part of the country speaks volumes about how disconnected the Bush policy has become. All that said, these voters' patience with the President and the Iraq war in general seems a bit more forbearing than we see in *current* national data. A narrow majority of Anglo voters would give the President's plan a chance to succeed; voters divide evenly on whether we need to start reducing troops now or "stay the course."⁵

⁵ In January, white voters nationally divided evenly on reductions versus stay the course, but currently they break 53 to 43 percent in favor of reducing troops. We did not ask Hispanic voters some of the Iraq questions, as we needed the time on this survey for more probing issues on language spoken at home and generational status.

In a split-form exercise, we tested a Democratic message arguing for change and including a cut-off of funding for troops, and a Democratic message arguing for change without the funding issue. The Democrat who argues for “bringing our troops home as soon as they can be responsibly withdrawn,” wins by a 10-point margin. The Democrat who would go so far as to cut off funding cedes some points to the Republican. Nonetheless, there is a significant regional split where voters prefer the Democratic message (without language about funding cuts) by a 54 to 37 percent gap in the South, but prefer the Republican message 43 – 50 percent in the North.

For now, Democratic message more effective without funding cutoff

<i>Now I am going to read you some things two candidates said in their campaign for Congress. After I read these descriptions, please tell me which one you would support.</i>	Total	North	South
<i>Candidate A is a Democrat who says that we can no longer wait while more and more Americans die in a religious civil war in Iraq. He will support changes that bring our troops home as soon as they can responsibly withdraw.</i>	51	43	54
<i>Candidate B is a Republican who supports changes to make victory in Iraq possible. He believes Iraq is the front line in the war on terrorism and opposes measures that leave our troops vulnerable by taking away their funding.</i>	41	50	37
Candidate A - Candidate B	+9	-7	+17
<i>Candidate A is a Democrat says that we can no longer wait while more and more Americans die in a religious civil war in Iraq. He will support changes that bring our soldiers home as soon as possible, including cutting off funding for the President's escalation of troops in Iraq.</i>	45	41	47
<i>Candidate B is a Republican who supports changes to make victory in Iraq possible. He believes Iraq is the front line in the war on terrorism and opposes measures that leave our troops vulnerable by taking away their funding.</i>	48	55	45
Candidate A - Candidate B	-3	-14	+1

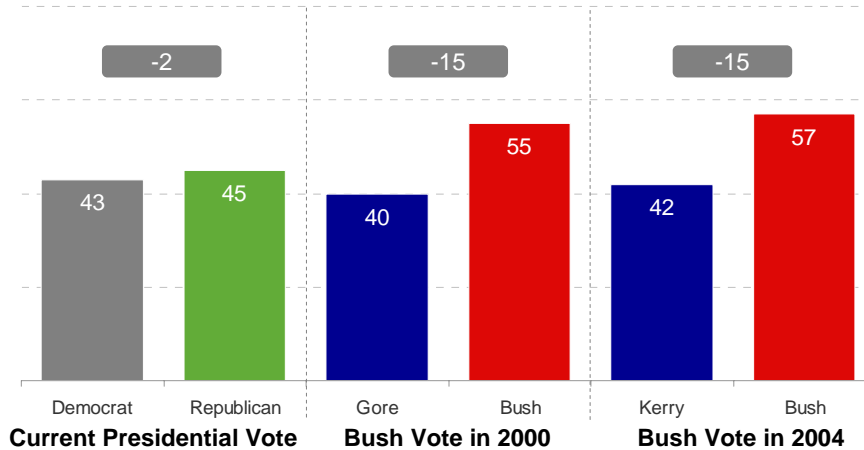
A Democratic position—cutting off funding—once considered so “extreme” Democrats would not even touch it now competes fairly evenly. The patience of these voters and their relative confidence in the President’s escalation is a notable caution in a part of the country where 66 percent of voters know someone serving in the war, but these findings should not detract from the intense frustration with this war.

Contesting the West

Like all regions in the country, the interior West boasts a number of successful local Democratic politicians and competitive local elections over the last ten years. Federal and presidential elections have been a different story. Democrats contested a number of states in this region in both 2000 and 2004, but with a single exception (New Mexico in 2000), Republicans pitched a shutout. In 2006, however, Democrats won the congressional vote by a two-point margin, picked up two congressional seats, unseated one long-term Republican Senator and re-elected Democratic governors in New Mexico and Arizona. A region once painted solid red turned purple. The competitiveness in this region continues to this day.

Competition in the Interior West

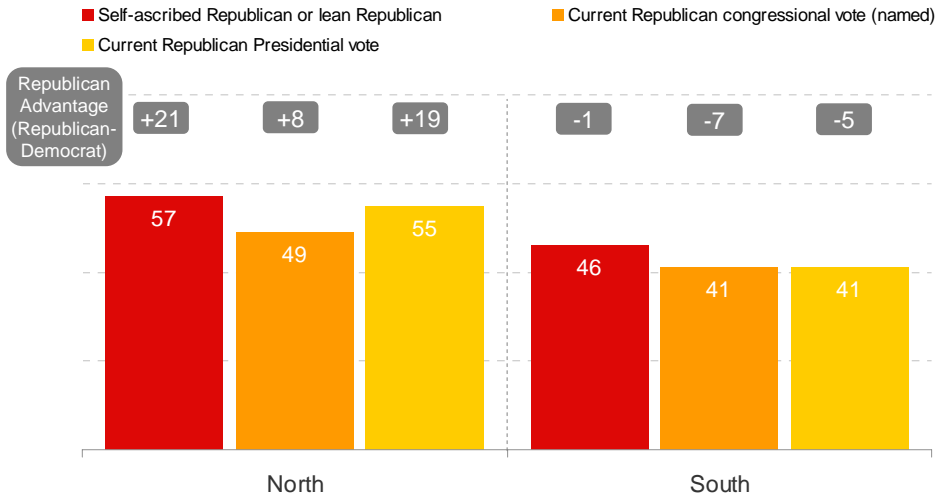
I know it is a long way off, but thinking about the election in 2008, if the election for President were held today, for whom would you vote – the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate?



From a presidential perspective, it is difficult to make the case for contesting the states in the northern half of the interior West (Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, and Utah). Not only is a win in most of these states—Montana possibly excepted—extremely unlikely, but the electoral college payoff is modest. In the North, voters adhere much closer to the “family values” message of the Republican Party than in the south, where we see more libertarian sentiments at play and the Hispanic population delivers a built-in Democratic base.

However, it is in the north where current Republican electoral performance at the congressional level falls well below their historic norms and partisan expectations. Fully 57 percent of the vote in the North is either self-ascribed Republican or independent lean-Republican, yielding a 21-point Republican margin. And yet currently Republicans only enjoy an 8-point margin in a named congressional ballot. There are congressional opportunities throughout this region.

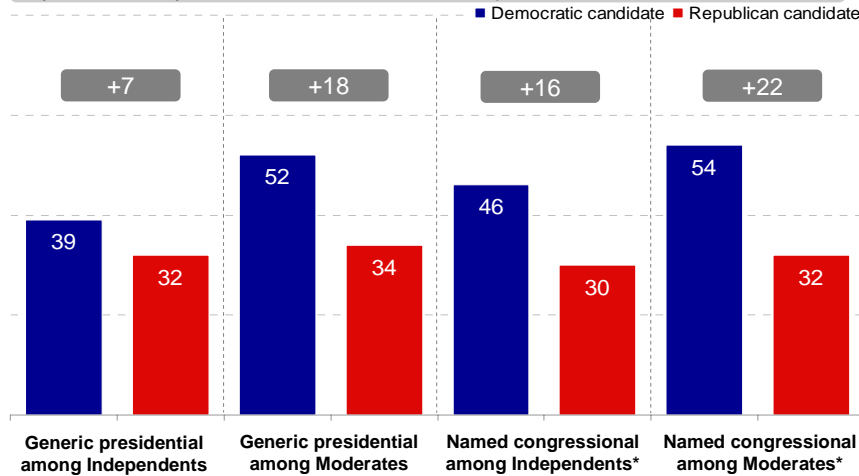
North-South divide: Congress still competitive in North



As in the nation as a whole, the Republicans have lost the center in these eight states. Independents and moderates both prefer the Democrats on core measures and, in the congressional vote in particular, Democrats enjoy a 16-point margin among independent voters. The same dynamics that led the Republican minority status in the nation led the Republicans to a point of political parity in the interior West, specifically, frustration with Republican governance, beginning with the quagmire in Iraq.

Republicans still lose the center

I know it is a long way off, but thinking about the election in 2008, if the election for president/Congress were held today, for whom would you vote, the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate?

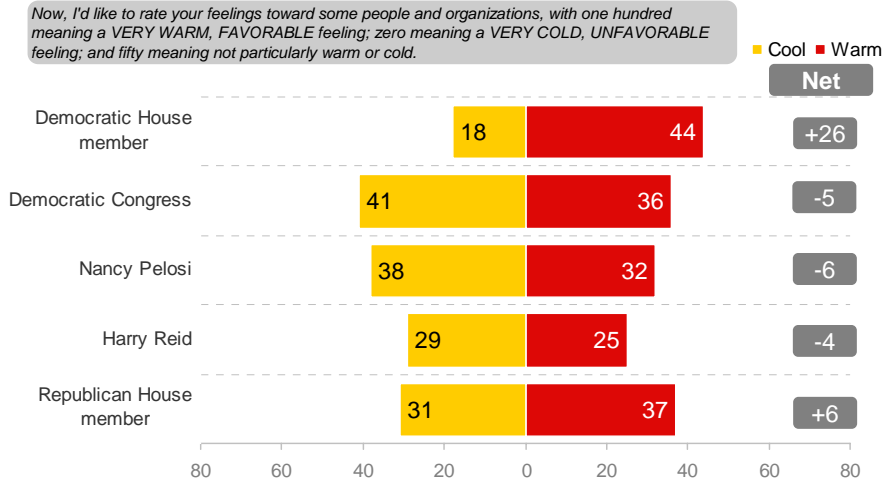


Note: Actual candidate names inserted into named congressional and paired with generic candidate for opposing party*

Younger white women are very competitive here (46 – 40 percent Democratic in the congressional), as are blue collars (46 – 45 percent among white non-college voters). Unmarried voters, both men and women, break solidly for the Democrats (54 – 30 percent among unmarried women; 52 – 35 percent among unmarried men) and outside of the Hispanic vote (63 – 30 percent), represent the most reliable voters in the Democratic world in this region.

And as is the case in much of the country, Democrats have not necessarily filled the vacuum of leadership. Perceptions of the Democratic Congress are worse here than nationally, reflecting a more Republican (still) electorate. Perceptions of Democratic leadership in Congress are also mixed. However, individual Democratic congressional incumbents do very well.

Early Democratic reviews mixed, though individual Democratic incumbents strong

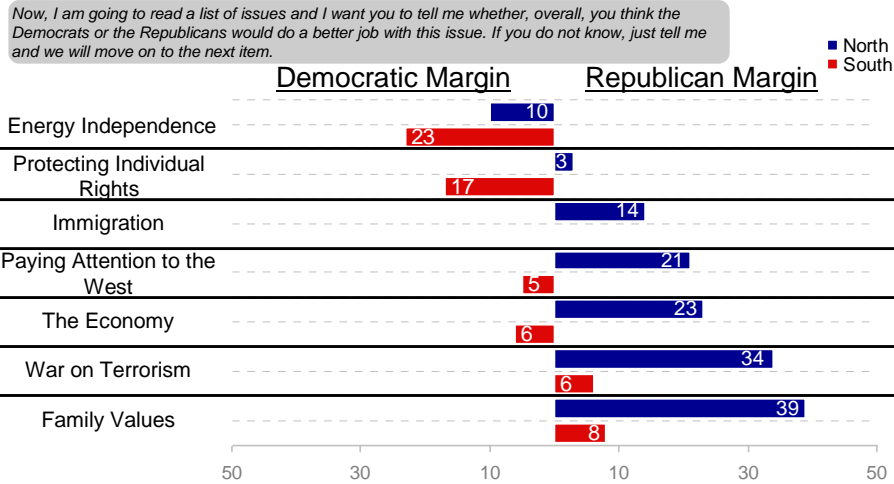


More striking is the difference these voters evince in comparing the national party leadership to their own local state organizations. Utah is—and remains—one of the most Republican states in the country and yet Democrats in Utah enjoy a 49 percent warm, 18 percent cool thermometer rating. This compares unfavorably, of course, to Republicans in Utah (57 – 28 percent warm), but compared to Republicans in Congress (36 – 43 percent cool), local Democrats post heroic numbers.

Local Democrats are not only closer to the voters, of course, but also—by necessity—need to work with the Republican majority to get anything done. Moreover, as focus group comments make plain, local Democrats have more freedom to differ from party norms on some divisive social issues.

Democratic success at the local level also reflects, in part, these voters’ interest in some “Democratic” issues. Democrats enjoy broad support over the Republicans on such “branded” issues as health care and retirement, as well as the environment. The environment represents a critical opportunity for the party in this region. On issues of particular focus in the West—immigration, helping farmers and ranchers and paying attention to issues that affect the western part of the country—Democrats remain notably competitive, despite historic Republican dominance of this region. Importantly, however, on issues that are more ideologically charged—moral values, the war on terrorism, protecting individual rights—we see more polarization in the North and South. Note also Democrats face a 23-point deficit in the North on the economy. Clearly, we have a lot of work to do there. Given the Republican advantage on values, Democratic gains will be difficult to maintain absent a stronger economic contrast.

Party associations by North and South



Conclusion

It is too early to tell if this part of the country, even the southern tier, is realigning. While frustrated with Republicans generally, some of the more conservative views of the interior West will continue to give the more conservative party opportunities. However, it is clear that Democratic success in 2006 was not a fluke, a reflection of poor Republican recruitment or a one-time occurrence in a historically bad Republican year. It was not entirely about Iraq either.

It was also about the failure of the ruling party to pay sufficient attention to the lives of average people, to work toward solutions for key issues in the western agenda, and their betrayal of some of the core values of the West. In terms of these issues, the current majority faces some of the same challenges in this region the last majority faced two and four years ago. Democrats' ability to deliver on some key issues, to articulate some of their values and to move past partisanship in many parts of the district will determine whether the 2006 election was the beginning of a trend in the interior West or a momentary pause in long-term Republican dominance.

As this project develops, we will at look some of the “western” issues more directly, including developments on immigration reform, region-specific issues around the environment, wage and trade issues, and the like. We will also look at messaging that reflects some of the lessons of this first phase of research.