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Democrats Gain When They Engage ***Test Case of Connecticut's 5th District***

We want to get this alert out to Democrats and progressives, as they are looking at the unfolding 2006 campaign. Republican incumbents and outside conservative groups have launched attacks on Democratic challengers and other ads promoting the virtues of the incumbent.¹ That may give the Republicans a short-term lift in these districts. But Democrats more than offset those gains, our research shows, when they engage these attacks, even when responding on so-called 'Republican' themes. Based on a special survey and focus groups in Connecticut's 5th CD, we urge candidates to engage on Iraq, national security and even taxes.²

Connecticut's fifth Congressional district is a good place to start. Even after waves of advertising, the Republican incumbent remains endangered. Nancy Johnson is winning 49 percent of the vote – short of a majority and only 5 points ahead of Chris Murphy. Just 43 percent want to re-elect Johnson and she is fighting for re-election in a very negative environment for Republicans (36

¹ 'Thank You' ad sponsored by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce thanking the Republican members for supporting the new prescription drug benefit.

² Democracy Corps conducted a poll of 650 likely voters in CT-5 on August 13-15, 2006 and two focus groups in Danbury, CT on August 2, 2006 among younger college educated men (30-45 yrs) and older college educated women (45-60 yrs) with household incomes above \$50,000 who were undecided in their vote between Chris Murphy and Nancy Johnson. Participants were a mixture of Bush and Kerry voters, including people who indicated that they split their tickets. Democracy Corps has also conducted focus groups in 4 other competitive Congressional districts this month, and will issue a comprehensive analysis of the media wars taking place across the country.

percent warm feelings for Republicans and just 35 percent job approval for President Bush).

Key Lessons from CT-5

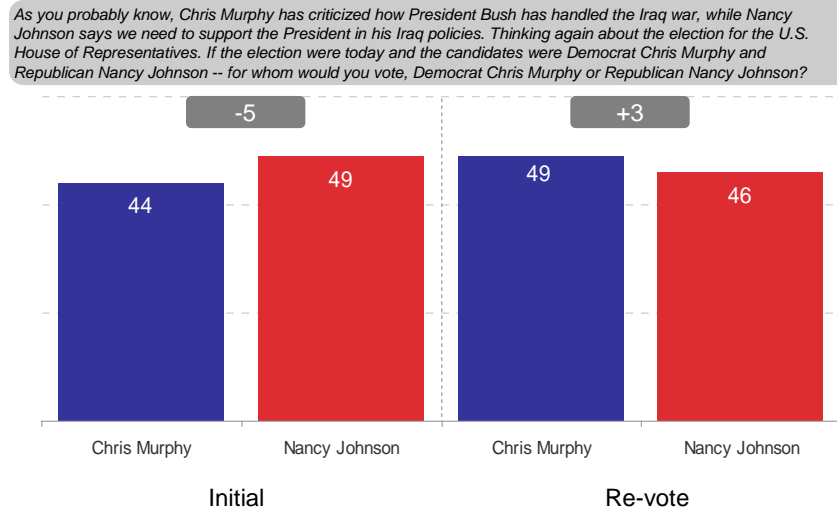
1. **Democrats benefit from an engaged Iraq debate.** The president says we should stay the course with him, but we found that a debate on Iraq – using the actual language of Nancy Johnson and the challenger on the issue – takes the Democrat from a 5-point deficit to a 3-point lead in the race. Johnson calls for continuing support of President Bush’s policies in Iraq and embeds that support in the war on terrorism while Chris Murphy states his criticism of Bush and seeks a new course that brings home troops as soon as other nations agree to help stabilize a democratic Iraq.³ When the Democratic candidate challenges the current Republican-Bush framework for continuing the Iraq war with a Democratic alternative that is careful about avoiding instability in Iraq, the race moves dramatically against the incumbent. Democrats have no reason to fear a debate over continuing the current course in Iraq. Democrats want the Iraq issue.

Majority agrees with Murphy on Iraq

<i>Now, let me read you some statements about the election for U.S. Congress. After I read them, please tell me which statement comes closest to your own views, even if neither is exactly right.</i>	Strongly	Total
Chris Murphy says that the American people were deeply misled about the severity of the threat posed by Iraq and Saddam Hussein, and were coerced into supporting a war that has been mismanaged at almost every step. We must leave Iraq as soon as possible but only when other nations agree to help stabilize a democratic Iraq	41	51
OR		
Nancy Johnson says that we must support Bush's policies in Iraq. At no time in recent American history has the state of our national defense and protection of our citizens against a terrorist attack been more challenging or important. I will continue to fight to protect the people of Connecticut and the rest of the nation	35	44

³ We could have opted for other language to describe the Republican’s position, but we think that President Bush is nationalizing the issue around continuing the same course in Iraq.

Re-vote among those who heard the Iraq debate



2. ***The tax issue is very important and it is important for Democrats to engage when Republicans attack.*** There is some evidence in this poll that Nancy Johnson improved her position over where she stood after the MoveOn advertising campaign against her.⁴ Part of that improvement stems from her attack on the Democratic challenger for voting to raise taxes. Murphy did not initially respond to the tax attack and our focus groups suggest that engaging the issue and turning it against the Republicans can move the Democratic candidate ahead.

Republicans are using similar attacks in other districts across the country. The CT-5 survey and focus groups in other competitive districts offer guidance for challengers' engagement.

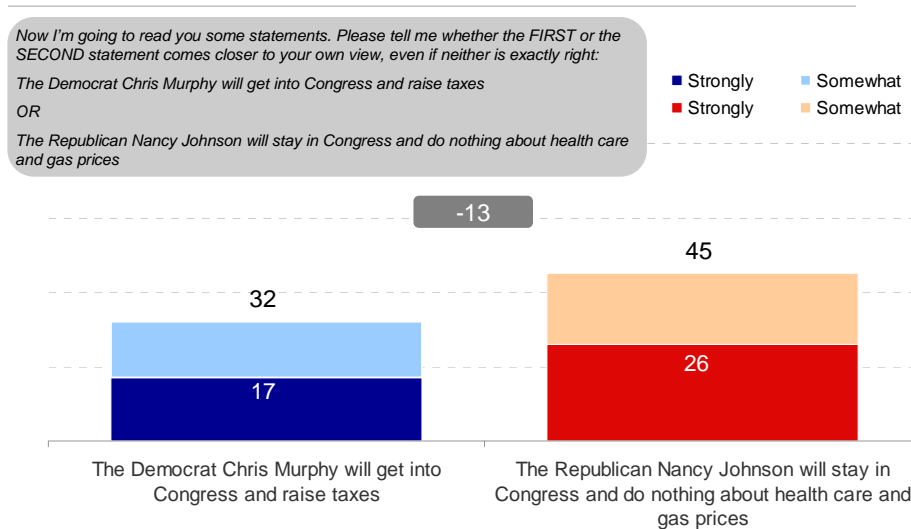
- *Address the attacks head-on.* Murphy's response to Johnson's 'tax and spend attack' is more reassuring when voters hear the candidate address the actual attack, as seen in Murphy's current ad
- *Utilize facts to support the defense.* Voters are skeptical of all politicians, and need credible evidence to overcome their doubts that "all of them are lying to me"

⁴ Survey of 500 likely voters conducted by MoveOn.org on June 20-22, 2006.

- *Talk directly to camera.* By talking directly to camera, voters felt like they got to know the ‘unknown Murphy’ and his defense is more credible when coming directly from him instead of some third party voiceover
- *State the candidate’s beliefs about taxes and offer achievable middle class tax cuts.* A proposal to “repeal tax giveaways to companies that send jobs overseas and millionaires who don’t need relief, and instead pass fiscally responsible middle class tax cuts: making college tuition tax deductible, tax credits for first-time homebuyers, and tax breaks for caregiving expenses on behalf of an aging parent” resonated significantly stronger than any other Democratic message to defend against the tax attack

3. **Engaging taxes, prices and the economy.** The Republicans are coming at Democratic candidates on taxes, and challengers should answer any attacks by focusing on the financial pressure facing people. The Democratic choice on the economy wins dramatically over a Republican running on taxes. We also compared the Johnson tax cut position with the attack that Johnson did nothing on gas and health care prices, and Murphy wins that debate by 13 points, 45 to 32 percent.

Nearly half believe Johnson won’t take action if stay in Congress



If Republicans raise the tax issue, Democrats should use it to create a big choice around finances and prices, underscoring that Republicans have done nothing on gas prices, health care and other issues impacting people’s finances.