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The '06 Hispanic Vote

A national survey on expanding the Democratic Hispanic vote and preventing erosion

Democrats are poised for a big election in 2006 and Hispanic voters are critical to their success. In this off-year election, Hispanics are base, not swing voters, and Democrats must place a high priority on building a high level of support and turnout. Neither can be assumed. Democratic candidates win by a two-to-one (62 to 29 percent) over their Republican opponents among Hispanics, who are deeply disappointed with President Bush and his policies.¹ Yet despite Hispanics' increasing dissatisfaction with the current direction of the country, their support for Democratic congressional candidates has remained unchanged from last year, while interest in this election is substantially lower than in 2004. In order to maximize gains among Hispanic voters, Democrats will have to energize the base vote, prevent erosion based on cultural issues among weak supporters, and expand their reach to all change voters.

Key findings

- *Democrats are underperforming.* With over two-thirds disapproving Bush's performance in office and wanting a significantly new direction, Democrats are in a position to raise their vote from where it currently stands at 62 percent.

¹ This memo is based on the Democracy Corps national survey of 984 likely Hispanic voters, conducted May 18-June 4, 2006.

- *President Bush and the Republicans' collapse.* Favorable feelings for the Republicans decreased 12 points in the past year, but the President sunk deeper than his party -- from 43 percent warm feelings to just 31 percent.
- *Bush's decline is pushed by the state of the economy and the war in Iraq.* A majority of Hispanic voters say the economy is not doing well and nearly two-thirds have unfavorable feelings toward the war in Iraq.
- *Nationalizing the 2006 election.* Aligning with President Bush -- once an asset for Republican congressional candidates seeking Hispanic support -- is no longer an advantage. In fact, the favorability gap that the President once held over his party has now vanished.
- *Despite the Republican decline, Democratic support remains unchanged.* Although Democrats continue to lead the Congressional race by 62 to 29 percent, that lead could be jeopardized by low turnout, fragmentation to third party candidates, or voters drifting back to the Republicans. A Democratic strategy must:
 - *Prevent* cultural erosion among weak supporters that have conservative views on issues like homosexuality. These voters do not like Republican efforts to legislate morality -- like the Terri Schiavo case, and are more likely to respond to a message about family and economic pressures.
 - *Expand* the reach to winnable voters, who have a strong desire for change. A sharp critique of Bush and the Republicans -- especially on Iraq and the economy -- together with a vision of opportunity for all will encourage the expansion of Democratic support. Democratic messages emphasizing issues like education and economic opportunities test well among these voters.
 - *Mobilize* weak supporters, who are much less interested in this year's election. The key to energize these voters is to provide a broad agenda of opportunity for all and a new direction in Iraq.
- *Best framework for the immigration issue in the Hispanic community combines empathy and accountability.* Hispanic voters view immigration as a complex issue -- they empathize with immigrants looking for a better life for themselves and their families, but they also resent those who don't pay into the system and do not learn English.
- *The immigration issue poses a risk for hard line Republicans.* The current debate hurts Republicans, as 56 percent are less likely to vote for the Republican candidate because of this issue. Hispanic voters reject the two immigration proposals that Bush has championed -- sending the National Guard to assist the Border Patrol and building a fence along the Southern border -- which rank lowest on the list of proposals.
- *Hispanics share the Democratic worldview.* Consistent with findings from previous Democracy Corps Hispanic surveys, Democratic candidates are in a unique position to

capture and claim issue priorities that energize Hispanic voters – jobs and the economy, education, and Iraq.

Nationalizing The '06 Election

Just one year ago, Bush stood out from other Republicans as more accepting of different cultures, which gave him an edge over his party among Hispanics. Today the president is no longer an asset for Republican candidates trying to reach Hispanic voters. In fact, more Hispanic voters have unfavorable feelings toward the President than toward the Republican Party. This deep disillusionment with Bush emphasizes the importance of nationalizing the election around the President to increase the Democratic edge in 2006.

Change Voters. Hispanic voters' desire for change has increased substantially from one year ago. More than two-thirds say that the country is heading in the wrong direction, compared to 57 percent just one year ago. Additionally, Hispanics are more likely than the overall electorate to say they want to change Bush's direction. Three-quarters of Hispanics want to go in a significant different direction than Bush – compared to 60 percent among all voters.²

The Republican Crash. Hispanics' pessimism about the direction of the country directly affects their feelings toward Republicans. Net favorability toward the Republican Party has decreased 15 points in the past year.

Bush's Collapse. The President has sunk deeper than his party among Hispanic voters – from 43 percent with warm feelings to just 31 percent.

Our qualitative research among Hispanic voters indicates that negative feelings toward the President are mostly driven by his lack of competence, the war in Iraq and his connections to big businesses.³

- **Incompetence.** The general impression Bush has given voters, reflected by his general demeanor and particularly his speech, is one of incompetence.

² Comparison to the overall electorate is based on the Democracy Corps national survey of 1,000 likely voters, conducted April 20-24, 2006.

³ Democracy Corps conducted two focus groups in Orange County, CA on April 27, 2006, two focus groups in Orlando, FL on May 1, 2006, and two focus groups in Phoenix, Arizona on May 23, 2006. All participants were likely Hispanic voters who considered themselves weak partisans or independents, and were split among Kerry voters and Bush voters. In Orange County, one group consisted of senior citizens (over 64) and the other group consisted of young voters (under 30). In Orlando, one group was college educated women with household incomes over \$50,000 and the other group was non-college educated men with household incomes below \$50,000. In Phoenix, one group was college educated men with household incomes over \$50,000 and the other group was non-college educated women with household incomes below \$50,000.

His intelligence level is always a question. Because with his lack of understanding allows for others to influence his decisions too easily. [Male, Orange County, California]

I don't think that he is a good president or a good model. He doesn't speak too well. Looks like he doesn't know where his county is going. [Female, Orlando, Florida]

- *The war in Iraq.* The President led us into this war on false pretenses and has no plan for getting out.

A lot of people think that he's lost the credibility because of what he said about the war. That they had weapons of mass destruction and we went over there and didn't find anything. So what was it? Just a personal thing that you wanted to get over? [Female, Orlando, Florida]

I'm just afraid that the war is going to turn into Viet Nam war. How many more casualties are we going to actually lose? Are we going to lose 10,000 people? There is no need for it. We have no business to be in there. They don't want us in there. We did what we could. And he just needs to pull out. [Female, Phoenix, Arizona]

I was told there were weapons of mass destructions. There wasn't. I was told we were treated like liberators. We weren't. Somebody in the White House didn't figure that out. (...)They lost credibility. [Male, Phoenix, Arizona]

- *Big businesses.* Bush is closely connected to big oil, which prevents him from taking action to counter gas prices and distinguish himself from other Republicans who are connected more broadly to big business.

Bush's signature policies on Iraq and the economy have led Hispanics to disapprove of his overall performance in office. Disapproval of Bush's job performance has increased to a 2 to 1 ratio -- with nearly two-thirds saying they disapprove Bush's job performance, compared to 54 percent a year ago. The decline in Bush's job approval is largely driven by the state of the economy and Iraq.⁴

- *The Economy.* A majority say the economy is not doing well. People are feeling the pinch of gas costs that pile onto an already challenging economic situation, as incomes are failing to keep up with everyday expenses. With costs rising and incomes staying the same, these voters do not feel like they are getting ahead; rather they are having trouble keeping afloat.

⁴ A regression analysis shows that views on both the direction of the economy and the war in Iraq are statistically significant predictors of Bush's job approval.

When I raised my family, I did it with one job. My wife didn't have to work. I don't think that that's necessary any more. Now it takes two people earning a living and many people still can't afford a home. So that part of the economy is going wrong. The rich are getting richer and the poor, poorer. [Senior, Orange County, California]
There is no job you can think, I'll get this job and I am going to retire here. It's not that way any more. There is no security. When I came here, it wasn't this way. [Female, Orlando Florida]

Hispanic voters have grown increasingly anti-corporate and resent that big corporations are making huge profits while workers' wages are stagnant. Warm feelings toward big corporations dropped 10 points in the past year -- from one-third of Hispanic voters having favorable feelings toward big corporations to less than a quarter now. In fact, Hispanic voters' top concern about Republicans is that they passed 70 billion dollars in tax cuts for the wealthy and big corporations while employees have seen no wage increases in five years.

- *Iraq.* Hispanic voters have turned dramatically against the war in Iraq in the past year -- nearly two-thirds of Hispanic voters have unfavorable feelings toward the war in Iraq. Whether it is the lives lost, the questionable reasons for going to war, the financial cost while we fail to address problems at home, or the lack of good options moving forward, voters are fed up with the war.

I am not happy about the war. It just started for the wrong reasons. I never thought we should have gone in the first place. The idea of all our young men dying over there for things that we didn't really expect... [Senior, Orange County, California]

The war, it's never ending. There it seems to be no solution to it and people keep dying. [Female, Orlando, Florida]

I support our troops. It's just that there is a lot in the United States that we should be looking at and making better. And worry about ourselves first. We have a lot of people without homes, food, and stuff like that. We should take care of people first. [Young adult, Orange County, CA]

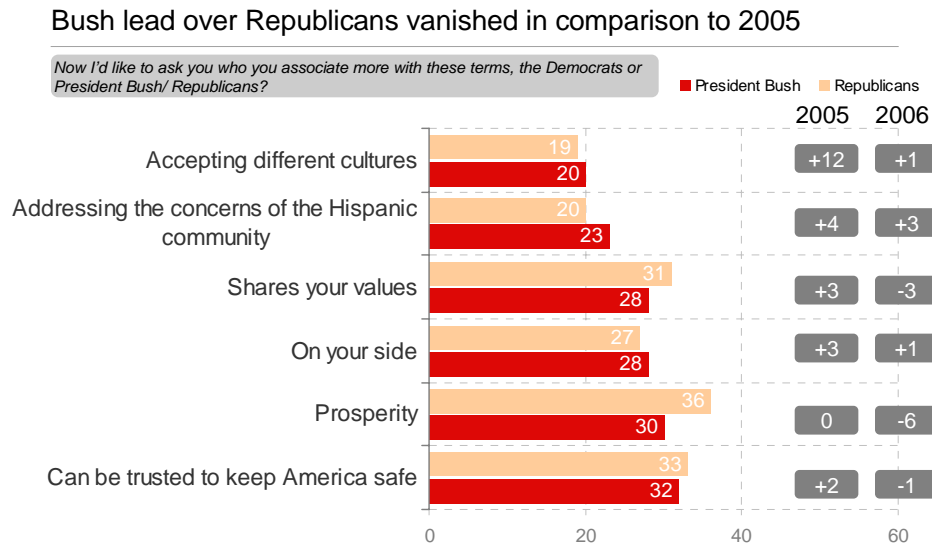
Hispanic voters are clearly frustrated with the current situation in Iraq. They want to see an improvement that brings an end to the war, but cannot articulate what is the best solution to the conflict. Nearly six-in-ten Hispanic voters support reducing the number of troops in Iraq over continuing in the same direction, compared to 47 percent among the overall electorate. Yet, the level of support for withdrawal is lower than the actual Democratic vote -- which indicates that not all Democratic supporters concur that withdrawal is the best plan.

Candidates will need to be more nuanced when it comes to talking about Iraq in order to reflect Hispanics' mixed views on the best solution to the conflict. Republicans' "cut and run" attack, which over simplifies Democrats' position, proves to be effective ammunition to create doubts about Democrats. Nearly half of Hispanic voters say that their biggest concern about Democrats is that they favor a cut and run policy in Iraq that puts the security of our troops at

risk. Democrats will oppose any precipitous withdrawal, even as they advocate a very new direction.

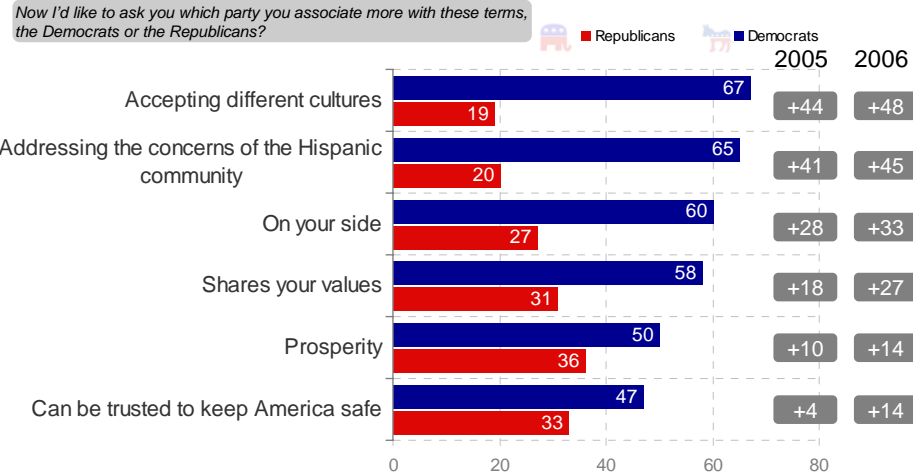
Bush now same as party

The advantage that President Bush held over his party has now vanished among the Hispanic population. Just one year ago, Bush scored better than his party in terms of favorability as well as accepting different cultures, giving him an edge with Hispanic voters. But today, Bush no longer outperforms his party. In fact, Bush lost his advantage on accepting different cultures and has dropped significantly on sharing the values of voters, being trusted to keep America safe, and prosperity.



In contrast, Democrats are widening the gap with Republicans -- especially on being trusted to keep America safe, sharing voters' values and being on your side.

Democrats widen the gap over Republicans on every measure



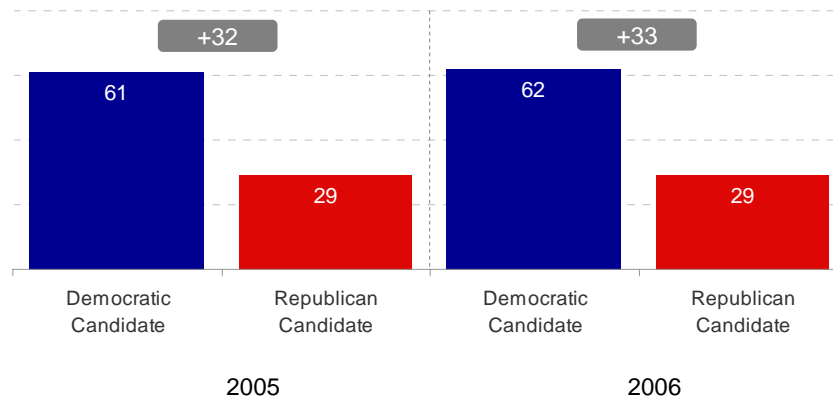
This party dynamic reinforces the benefits of a nationalized election focused on Bush. Democratic challengers can strengthen their position by running against the direction in which Bush and the Republicans are heading, especially on Iraq and the economy.

The 2006 Vote

Despite the striking crash of the Republican party, the Congressional vote remains virtually unchanged. Democrats lead the Congressional race by a 2 to 1 ratio while Republicans seem to be stuck at a 29 percent that mirrors Bush's job approval and favorability ratings. With nearly two-thirds disapproving Bush's performance, Democrats are in a position to raise their 62 percent support in the 2006 races.

Vote same as 2005, but Republicans at only 29 percent

I know it is far ahead, but thinking about the election for U.S. Congress this November, if the election for U.S. Congress were held today, would you be voting for...



Yet, the growing pessimism about the Republicans and President Bush has not translated into large Democratic gains. Come November, Hispanic change voters could stay away from the polls, fragment to small parties, or drift back to the Republicans. We need to engage Hispanic voters with a three-fold strategy that will take Democrats to a new level.

- *Prevention of cultural erosion:* Republicans will likely attack Democratic candidates on cultural issues, such as gay marriage, to erode Hispanic support. It is important for Democratic candidates to offer a clear reassurance to Hispanic voters, especially weak Democratic supporters, of where they stand on values.
 - A cultural attack on homosexual acceptance and gay marriage could resonate among weak Democratic supporters: 41 percent say homosexuality should be discouraged as a way of life.
 - In addition, a Republican message on values resonates among weak Democratic supporters -- 42 percent are much more likely to support a Republican candidate that attacks Democrats for undermining American values and promotes morality, a culture of life and the sanctity of the family.
 - While we did not directly test this message among Hispanic voters, our strongest values message in recent polls draws on a Democratic narrative emphasizing the ending of government legislation of morality, and economic policies to alleviate financial pressures from parents so that they have the time and resources to teach the right values to their children.

- *Expand support beyond the base.* The desire to go in a different direction than Bush's expands beyond the Democratic camp -- more than three-quarters of winnable voters want to go in a different direction than Bush. Democrats must offer a sharp contrast with Republicans and a vision that will engage these voters and retain them on the Democratic side.
- *Mobilization to increase turnout.* Since 2006 is a midterm election year, interest in the election is understandably lower than in 2004, which could potentially affect the Democratic margin.
 - Nearly six-in-ten Hispanics say they are very interested in this year's election, which lags the 70 percent recorded in 2004.
 - Interest in this year's election is lower among weak Democratic supporters, when a low turnout could reduce the Democratic vote.

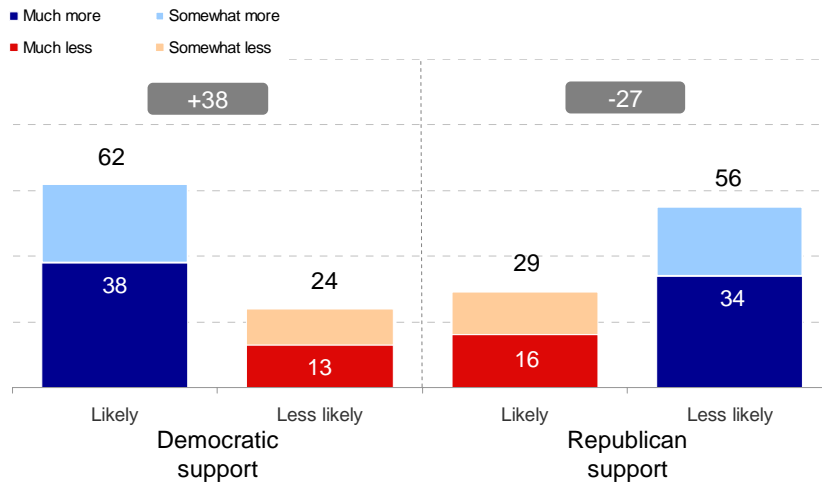
Immigration

The jury is still out on how large a role the current debate on immigration will play in motivating the Hispanic electorate. Immigration ranks low on the list of priorities for Hispanics, with only 19 percent saying it is the first or second most important issue determining their vote for Congress. Immigration also fell short on participants' priority list in our focus groups. Attention and passions focused on the issues highlighted earlier -- Iraq, the economy, and education -- and even when someone finally raised immigration, others often moved back to other issues instead of engaging on immigration.

Although immigration is not the number one issue priority for Hispanic voters, they see the issue as a direct attack against Hispanics and immigrants, which generates problems for Republicans. The current debate favors Democrats more than Republicans, as 62 percent say they are more likely to vote for the Democratic congressional candidate because of immigration, while 56 percent are less likely to vote for the Republican candidate because of this issue.

Immigration issue helping Democrats; hurting Republicans

And thinking about the immigration issue, does it make you more likely or less likely to vote for a Democrat/Republican for Congress?



Hispanics' direct experience with immigration has been vital in shaping their attitudes toward the issue. Hispanic voters view immigration as a complex issue -- they sympathize with immigrants looking for a better life for themselves and their families, but they also resent those who do not pay into the system.

- *Empathy.* Hispanics are more understanding of the plight of immigrants in the U.S. than the overall electorate and their positive feelings toward immigration became stronger with the force of the demonstrations. Half of Hispanic voters have warm feelings toward immigration, compared to one-quarter in the overall electorate; and 42 percent of Hispanics have warm feelings toward undocumented immigrants, compared to 16 percent of the overall electorate. In fact, net favorability toward undocumented immigrants increased 4 points in the past year.

A large majority of Hispanics view immigration as a positive contribution to the country:

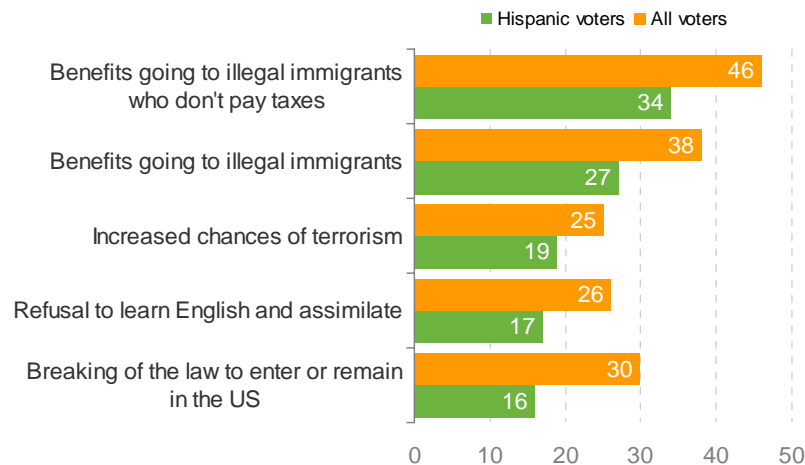
- *Immigration helps the U.S.* By a 20-point margin, Hispanics favor the argument that immigration helps rather than hurts the U.S., up from an 11-point edge in 2005.
- *Immigrants aid the economy.* While the overall electorate is torn about the effects of immigration on American jobs, two-thirds of Hispanics say immigrants help the economy by taking jobs other Americans aren't willing to do.
- *Benefits of diversity.* Hispanics are more appreciative of the benefits that the diversity of immigration brings to our nation than the overall electorate -- 54 percent of Hispanic voters say we benefit from the diversity of immigration while a majority of

the overall electorate says immigration has gone too far and today's immigrants are not assimilating and learning our culture.

- *Play by the rules and learn English.* Hispanic voters are critical of those immigrants that do not play by the rules and take advantage of the system. Time after time, respondents in our focus groups remind us that while they welcome immigrants to the country, they should also abide by the law and share in the responsibilities of our society. Indeed, benefits going to immigrants who don't pay taxes is the top concern about illegal immigration.

Benefits going to illegal immigrants is biggest concern about illegal immigration

Thinking about illegal immigration, which TWO of the following are your biggest concerns about illegal immigration?



In this context, immigration proposals that fit the sympathy and fairness frame rank highest. Hispanic voters favor practical solutions that encourage advancement and responsibility.

- Acculturation is by and large the best universal position to immigration -- 64 percent of Hispanic voters strongly favor this proposal. Indeed, Hispanics view assimilation, and more significantly, learning English, as essential to succeeding in America. *As you get educated and you go up to the financial district and international business, it's all English. The whole world speaks English. [Male, Orlando, Florida]*

I think that they should learn English. If you're going to live somewhere, you should be able to communicate with everybody that lives here. [Senior, Orange County, California]

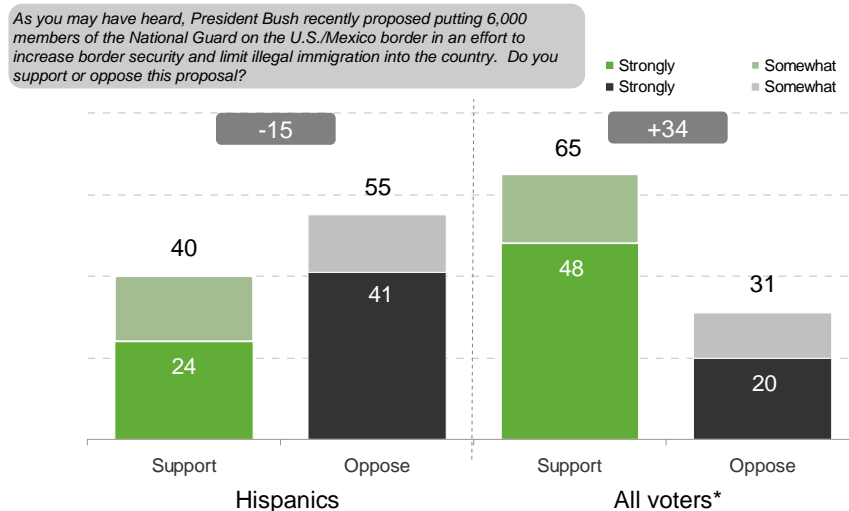
- A majority strongly favors a proposal to provide immigrants with a path for citizenship if they pay a fine and back taxes. Hispanic voters think accountability should be at the core of any solution to this problem.

If they want to be a citizen, they should be doing what we do. Pay taxes and everything. [Male, Orlando, Florida]

It shows that you're serious, that you're here to do your part for the country that you want to be a part of. [Young adult, Orange County, California]

Proposals exclusively focused on securing the borders get much less support because they are seen as impractical uses of resources. The two immigration proposals that the Republicans championed rank lowest on the list of proposals, and are also the only ones that do not receive majority support. Only 30 percent favor building a fence along the southern border and 36 percent sending the National Guard to assist border patrol. Moreover, only four-in-ten Hispanics support Bush's immigration proposal to send the National Guard to the border in order to reduce illegal immigration, compared to nearly two-thirds of the overall electorate.

Opposition to Bush's immigration proposal stronger among Hispanics



Our qualitative research also found that the 700-mile fence along the border was seen as a laughable solution, because people viewed it as the easiest obstacle to overcome after a long journey to America. Focus group participants also noted the irony that such a fence would likely be built, in fact, by illegal immigrants.

Demonstrations

The immigration demonstrations recently held across the nation had a deeper effect on Hispanics than they did on the overall electorate, and have raised the importance of Hispanics coming together to exert their influence. More than four-in-ten Hispanic voters say they participated in the demonstrations or know someone who did. In addition, the demonstrations

made a majority of Hispanics feel more sympathetic toward the position of both legal and illegal immigrants in the U.S. (62 and 59 percent, respectively). In contrast, the demonstrations had a negative effect among Anglos -- a majority of which feel less sympathetic to the position of immigrants because of the demonstrations.

The demonstrations have the potential to engage and energize base voters, young adults, and lesser assimilated Hispanics.

- Half of loyalist Democratic voters and 44 percent of supporters say they participated in demonstrations or know someone who did, while nearly three-quarters of each group are more sympathetic to the position of immigrants because of the demonstrations.
- Six-in-ten of those aged 18 to 29 years old participated in the demonstrations or know someone who did, and nearly three-quarters are more sympathetic to the position of immigrants because of the demonstrations.
- Similarly, half of those who have lived in the country 20 years or less participated in the demonstrations or know someone who did, and 78 percent are more sympathetic to the position of immigrants because of the demonstrations.

Hispanics at the Center of the Democratic World

Consistent with our findings in 2005, Democratic candidates are in a unique position to capture and claim issue priorities that energize Hispanic voters -- jobs and the economy, education, and Iraq. In each of these issues, Hispanics favor Democratic messages by large margins. A bold progressive agenda that clearly states what Democrats stand for will demonstrate to Hispanic voters that the Democratic worldview is the same as their own.

The American dream is a fundamental reason why Hispanic voters (or their ancestors) immigrated to the U.S. Thus, nearly three-in-ten Hispanic voters choose education or jobs and the economy as the issues that will determine their vote for Congress in November. Another quarter of voters pick the war in Iraq as the main issue that will determine their vote for Congress, which is consistent with the deep hostility toward the war recorded among these voters.

Opportunity messages garner the strongest support among Hispanic voters. Three-quarters of Hispanics say they are "much more likely" to vote for a candidate proposing universal education and two-thirds are much more likely to support a candidate that supports restoring economic security, raising the minimum wage and creating good paying jobs for working families.

Social Tolerance. Hispanics' tolerance toward social acceptance of homosexuality as a way of life has increased in the past year. A strong majority (57 percent) favors accepting homosexuality as a way of life over social discouragement. In fact, the margin of support for acceptance has increased 7 points in the past twelve months.

Despite their social tolerance, Hispanics are still more conservative than Democrats overall when it comes to gay marriage. While more than one-third of Democrats have warm feelings toward gay marriage, less than a quarter of Hispanics support it.⁵

It is imperative that Democrats define their standing on values among Hispanic voters before Republicans have a chance to erode Democratic support among weak supporters. According to our findings, Democrats are able to establish a credible position on values among Hispanic voters. In fact, 62 percent of Hispanics say they are “much more likely” to support a Democratic candidate that proposes to leave values and religion as a private matter, and have the government focus on economic policies to alleviate financial pressures from parents so that they have the time and resources to teach the right values to their children.

Hispanic voters’ strong desire for change is conducive for a large Democratic victory in November. In order to maximize their gains among Hispanic voters, Democrats will have to run a bold campaign. The Democratic strategy has to: 1) stimulate base voters with bold proposals on education, jobs and the economy, and the war in Iraq, 2) prevent a cultural erosion among vulnerable voters by reinforcing Democrats’ standing on values and 3) expand support beyond base voters by offering a sharp critique of President Bush’s direction and a Democratic agenda of opportunity for all.

A large victory is possible in 2006 among Hispanic voters - if candidates run bold and focused campaigns.

⁵ Democracy Corps national survey of 1,000 likely voters, conducted April 20-24, 2006.