

# DEMOCRACY CORPS

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## WINNING SENIORS IN THE FINAL MONTH

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Seniors are the most volatile and persuadable group in this off-year electorate and certain to turn out in large numbers and thus the number one target for campaigns in the final month. Although seniors favored Bush by a 5-point margin in the last presidential election, Democracy Corps' recent senior poll indicates that Democrats are winning the seniors' vote by 4 points, 45 to 41 percent.<sup>1</sup> Keeping and building that margin will determine how many seats Democrats win.

These findings are based on a special survey of 1,200 seniors conducted right after Labor Day who will be re-interviewed two weeks before the election.

Winning the seniors' vote will be a challenge, as Republicans, desperate to try to hold on to the Congress, attack Democrats on issues such as gay marriage, immigration, taxes and national security. But Democrats are well positioned to win the seniors vote if they turn the attacks on security against the Republicans and make the most of Iraq, the corrupt mess in Washington and the financial pressures on seniors.

- Democrats hold a 4-point edge over Republicans among seniors, but their vote has slipped in the last three months. The race is even with white seniors – confirmed in our most recent Democracy Corps poll.
- Democrats need to put the spotlight on 'seniors' issues,' as they were doing earlier in the election cycle, particularly on the financial pressures facing seniors. The strongest definition of the election stresses

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<sup>1</sup> Democracy Corps survey of 1,200 likely voters over the age of 64 conducted September 7-12, 2006

Republican plans to privatize Social Security and Democrats working for a secure retirement.

- Democratic candidates should run against the Congress in Washington, with a populist edge. Above all, they should fight members who raise their own pay, while opposing bonuses and health care benefits for our soldiers.
- Democrats should make veterans the decisive issue against the Republican Congress: critique the Republicans for taking care of themselves and the special interests, not veterans.
- Make financial issues central, including drug costs and nursing care as well as gas prices and taxes.
- Elevate the Iraq war, the top issue for many seniors, particularly the Democrats and independents. Seniors are nervous about 'cut and run' attacks, but they are very open to Democratic arguments on Iraq and security and want to support a Democrat who will hold Republicans accountable for the wasted money and corruption in Iraq.

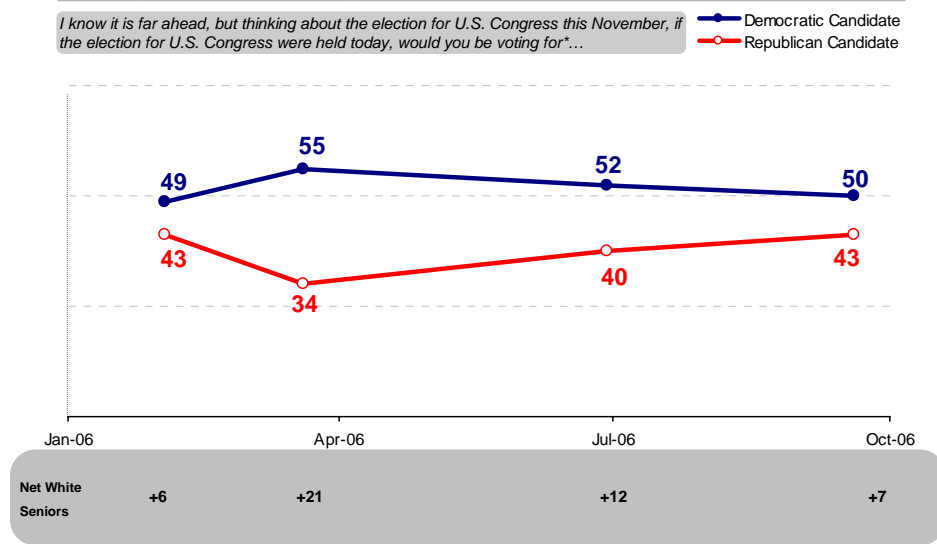
### **The 2006 Election**

Democrats are today at a much better place with seniors than they were in 2004, but the seniors' vote is very volatile and the Democratic margin has slipped in the last three months. Two years ago, Bush beat Kerry by 5 points among seniors, but today Democrats have a 4-point edge in the congressional vote, 45 to 41 percent. Still, Democratic candidates should not take this advantage for granted. Democrats are losing ground among seniors and the Democratic margin in the named congressional vote has drastically declined from a 21-point advantage in the first quarter of 2006 to a 7-point lead in the past 3 months and a 4-point edge in Democracy Corps' latest national survey.<sup>2</sup>

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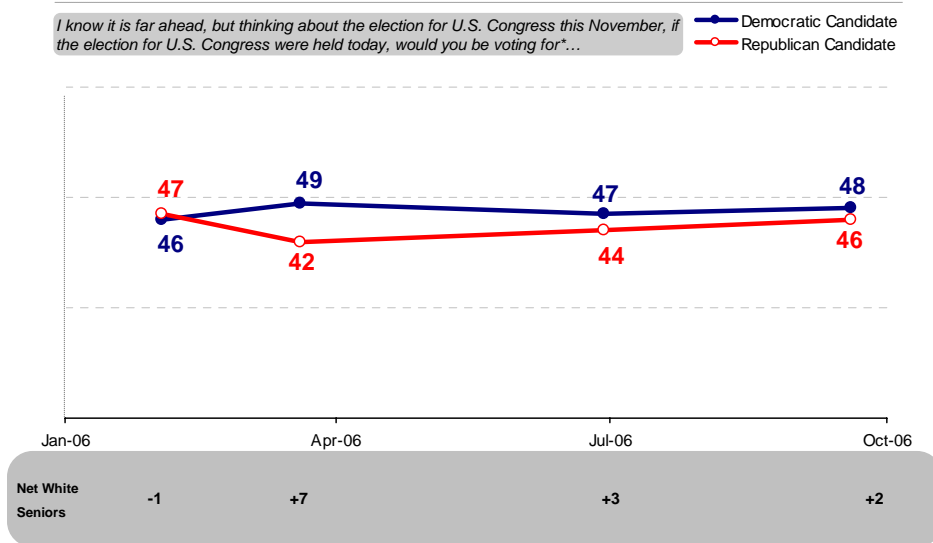
<sup>2</sup> National survey of 1,000 likely voters conducted by Democracy Corps on October 1-3, 2006

Congressional vote among seniors – combined database



The same pattern is true for *white seniors*, among which the Democratic margin declined from a 7-point margin in the first quarter of 2006 to a statistical tie in the past 3 months and a 1-point disadvantage in Democracy Corps' latest poll. .

Congressional vote among white seniors – combined database



The senior vote is critical as nearly two-thirds (63 percent) are expected to turn out in this off-year election.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, seniors are significantly more likely than the overall electorate to say they are interested in this year's election -- nearly seven-in-ten seniors rate their interest as '10' on a 1-to-10 scale, compared to 58 percent of the overall electorate.

Seniors are Democrats' most important target.

### **How to Consolidate and Expand the Senior Vote**

There is every reason to believe that Democrats can expand their vote – as Democratic definitions of the election test much more strongly than Republican ones among seniors.

#### **1. Speak to seniors about their lives, Social Security and issues that impact them financially**

Earlier in this election cycle, the policy debate was about seniors – either privatization or the Bush prescription drug plan. But the focus on seniors has ceased and, in the process, Republicans have made gains. We want seniors to be in the center-stage again. The strongest definition of the election for seniors involves this choice:

The Republicans have a plan to privatize Social Security if they get the chance again. The Democrats say, we must protect Social Security and people's retirement

A majority of seniors (61 percent) say they are more likely to support the Democrats because of that choice, with 51 percent much more likely. Democrats hold a 16-point edge over Republicans with seniors as doing a better job on Social Security – 12 points stronger than their actual vote margin.

Democratic messages focused on seniors' issues such as long-term care and drug prices resonate strongly. Nearly seven-in-ten seniors are more likely to support reforming the Medicare prescription drug plan so that it benefits seniors rather than drug companies and allows seniors to control their long term care.

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<sup>3</sup> Turnout percentage among citizens aged 65 or over in 2002 according to the U.S. census.

	Much More Likely	Total More Likely
For decades, the elderly have been forced into nursing homes. Instead, we should expedite Medicaid funding for home and community care programs so that seniors can stay in their own homes and control their long term care	55	70
Prescription drug prices are skyrocketing, and the new prescription drug plan creates billions in profits for drug companies, but bars Medicare from negotiating lower drug prices for seniors. We need to reform the plan so that it controls costs and benefits seniors rather than drug companies	54	67

**2. Run an outsider campaign against the Congress, with a populist edge.**

This is a bad year to be an incumbent. With nearly six-in-ten seniors saying the country is heading in the wrong direction and a majority disapproving of Bush’s job performance, it is not surprising that seniors want to vote differently in 2006.

Congress is at the center of seniors’ disillusionment with the state of affairs in Washington. Less than a quarter have warm feelings toward the Congress, which leaves the legislative body’s favorability at a net -23 degrees. That is lower than for all other age groups. Seniors are at the center of the revolt against Congress.

Close to the top definition of the election, senior voters support a definition stressing that:

Bush and the Republicans are working for the CEOs and most privileged. The Democrats say, America should work for everyone

A striking 58 percent say they are more likely to vote for the Democrat because of that definition of the election.

Running against the Congress substantially increases the Democratic edge. Banning congressional pay raises until our soldiers and their families have a fair salary is the strongest theme tested – with nearly six-in-ten much more likely to support the Democratic candidate.

**3. Make veterans the decisive issue against the Congressional Republicans**

With 29 percent of seniors actually being veterans, these attacks reverberate across the senior electorate. Nearly seven-in-ten senior veterans are more likely to support a Democratic candidate when they hit Republicans for voting themselves pay raises but not bonuses for veterans and not health care for returning veterans.

	Much More Likely	Total More Likely
The Republicans voted against a \$1,500 bonus for our troops in Iraq, but voted yes for a pay raise for themselves. No member of Congress should get a pay raise until our soldiers and their families have a fair salary	57	70
We must honor those who serve our country by taking care of them when they come back home. We must prevent the Republicans' plan to cut 10 billion dollars in funding for veterans' health care over the next 5 years	56	69

**4. Pick a theme centered on the financial pressures of seniors, including taxes**

By focusing on the financial pressures of seniors, Democrats have the opportunity to shift the debate to the issue that is most beneficial to them. By a 19-point margin, Democrats edge Republicans as doing a better job ‘dealing with the high costs and the financial pressures of people.’

Democrats are in a strong position to construct a strong economic message addressed directly at seniors. A message that includes elements that are especially relevant to seniors -- such as strengthening seniors’ retirement, making prescription drugs more affordable and providing tax breaks for care giving expenses, gives Democrats a 10-point edge over Republicans.

Democrats win final vote with seniors

*Now let me read you statements. Please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right.*

	Strongly	Total
<b>The Democratic candidate says, seniors are struggling to keep up with the skyrocketing costs of gas and health care. We should repeal tax giveaways to companies that send jobs overseas and millionaires who don't need relief, and instead work to strengthen seniors' retirement, make the new prescription drug program simpler and cheaper for seniors and give tax breaks for caregiving expenses on behalf of an ill parent</b>	43	48
<b>OR</b>		
<b>The Republican candidate says, we have made progress for seniors in the past six years but there is still more to do. We passed the Medicare prescription drug plan to offer seniors more choices and better benefits and we made tax cuts necessary to help those with fixed incomes keep up with the cost of living. But we must still work to fix Social Security for future generations by increasing protection of pensions and investments</b>	30	38

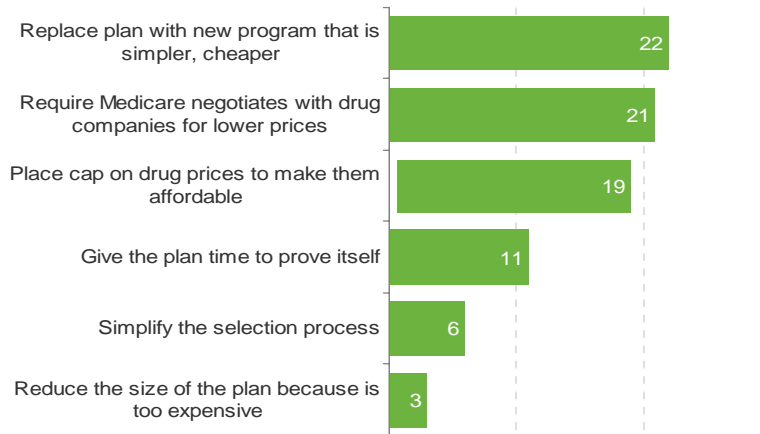
When seniors' issues are at play in the election, older voters are more likely to participate. Indeed, seniors who hear the parties' narratives focused on seniors' issues are more likely to report a higher interest in this year's election at the end of the survey than they did at the outset of the poll.

A Democratic message is more powerful among seniors when it attempts to alleviate their financial pressures. Nearly two-thirds are more likely to support a Democratic candidate who wants to cut drug and gas prices as well as middle class taxes so that seniors can have a dignified retirement. Indeed, seniors are more concerned about Republicans doing nothing about middle class taxes than Democrats raising taxes.

Seniors are evenly split on their evaluation of the new Medicare prescription drug program, but are certainly eager to improve it. Changes that attempt to reduce prescription drug costs for seniors resonate strongly among older voters.

Seniors support replacing plan, negotiations, price caps

And when thinking about the new prescription drug benefit, which of the following should happen now?



5. Iraq is central to seniors’ discontent

Seniors are very hostile to war, indeed, more hostile than their younger counterparts. Independent seniors are particularly hostile, suggesting the chance to shift votes on this issue.

Seniors, however, are highly concerned about Democrats being too eager to withdraw from Iraq if they take control of Congress in November. Thus, it is imperative to reassure older voters that Democrats are for a responsible redeployment of troops.

The messages we tested on this poll are very effective to reassure seniors about Democrats’ position on Iraq and perform better than the Republican messages tested. A solid majority of seniors are more likely to support a Democratic candidate that will use Congress’ investigative powers to oversee the use of money in Iraq. Indeed, a strong Democratic message centered on accountability beats the Republican ‘cut and run’ attack – which only reassures 47 percent of this older electorate about the Republican candidate for Congress.

The Republican Opportunity in the Final Phase

As the campaign intensifies, Republicans will allocate more resources to persuade seniors, and Democrats will face a challenge of erosion with older voters – especially white seniors. Indeed, Republicans are already attacking Democrats on different fronts.

- **Gay marriage.** In the last election, Republicans used gay marriage as a wedge issue to drive seniors away from the Democratic Party. Given that two-thirds of seniors have unfavorable feelings toward gay marriage, it is expected that Republicans will attempt to use this issue again.

- **Immigration.** Seniors are very anti-immigration. In fact, warm feelings toward immigration into the country are as low as favorable feelings toward gay marriage – 15 percent favorability - and one-quarter of seniors choose illegal immigration as one of their top two concerns about Democrats taking control of Congress in November. Despite anti-immigration feelings, Democrats hold an edge over Republicans, suggesting the ability to neutralize the issue. Many voters are cynical that either party will do anything about immigration.
- **Taxes and the finances.** Pressed by fixed incomes, seniors are very worried about taxes and finances. Republicans have a small edge over Democrats on ‘taxes’ and two-in-ten seniors are worried that Democrats will be ‘too ready to raise taxes’ if they gain control of Congress in November.
- **National security.** A majority of seniors are worried that if Democrats take control of Congress in November, they will be ‘too eager to withdraw from Iraq’ (31 percent) or ‘too weak on security and dealing with terrorism’ (21 percent). Republicans’ ‘cut and run’ frame poses a challenge for Democrats, especially among veterans -- 29 percent of older voters-- who chose staying the course in Iraq over reducing the troops by a 6-point margin.

### Persuasion Targets

Democrats need to persuade key voting groups of seniors that are under-performing compared to older voters overall, especially independents and unmarried women.

Democrats have a huge opportunity to win the vote of independent seniors in November. While Democrats trail Republicans by a couple of points in the Congressional vote among independent seniors, these voters overwhelmingly want change. Indeed, nearly two-thirds of independent seniors say the country is heading in the wrong direction and a solid majority disapproves of Bush’s job performance.

Democratic messages are very powerful with independent seniors – especially when focused on Iraq and building an America that works for all and deals with the financial pressures of seniors.

- Independent seniors are more critical of Iraq than seniors overall and are twice more likely to favor reducing the troops over staying the course. Indeed, 69 percent of independent seniors are much more likely to support a Democratic candidate that bans congressional pay raises until soldiers have a fair salary.
- Democrats virtually break even with independent seniors at the outset of this poll, but receive a 17-point edge when they offer older voters specific proposals to improve their economic situation such as: cutting drug and gas prices for seniors, middle class tax cuts, reforming the Medicare prescription so that it benefits seniors rather than drug companies, and long-term care options for ill parents.

Senior unmarried women are close to a base Democratic group, as Democrats win their support by 13 points. However, the margin is much slimmer among white unmarried women who are very responsive to Democratic messages. In fact, strong support for all Democratic messages is higher than the initial vote for the Democratic candidate among white unmarried women.

It is important to note that Democrats have a sizeable lead with the following seniors' groups: both the oldest and youngest seniors – holding a 10-point edge among the GI generation and a 6-point margin with new retirees. Democrats also have a strong lead with seniors earning less than \$50,000.

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Just 5 weeks before the election, Democrats are leading the senior vote by 4 points. Democrats' main task for the next week is to protect their edge from Republican attacks and persuade independent seniors and older unmarried women to increase their Democratic support. By implementing this two-fold strategy, Democrats are poised to win this high turnout bloc of voters in November. Democrats are well positioned to offer seniors a choice between an America that works for the wealthy and an America that works for seniors.