

DEMOCRACY CORPS

CARVILLE ♦ GREENBERG

10 G STREET, NE ♦ SUITE 400 ♦ WASHINGTON, DC 20002

202-478-8330 (TEL) ♦ 202-289-8648 (FAX)

WWW.DEMOCRACYCORPS.COM

Founders

James Carville
Stanley Greenberg
Robert Shrum

Executive Director
Jim Gerstein

Senior Advisor
Karl Agne

Research Conducted by:
Greenberg Quinlan Rosner

Date: August 30, 2006
To: Friends of Democracy Corps
From: Stan Greenberg
Matt Hogan

IMPORTANT LESSONS FROM VIRGINIA FOR 2006 Innovative Panel Survey of Voters and Non-Voters in the Virginia Gubernatorial Election

With President Bush's low poll ratings and Republicans' demoralization, there are important opportunities in 2006 to impact turnout. In this, we should not lose track of the ability of Republicans to contact voters to overcome base-enthusiasm problems and not underestimate the importance of positive messages for swing voters.

Last fall, Democracy Corps conducted a post-election survey for the Virginia gubernatorial election consisting of over 2,300 voters and nearly 600 registered voters who did not turn out to vote on election day. This memo on the results of the post-election survey highlights important lessons for 2006, particularly for those who are focused on turnout modeling, messaging and determining targets for mobilization and turnout.

While Warner's popularity and voter satisfaction with the current direction of the state were the major factors contributing to Kaine's victory, they will not be the focus of this report. Rather than analyze how the political climate in Virginia produced the result it did, the results from this survey reveal some important developments that we wanted to underscore in order to improve progressive's prospects in 2006.

Key Findings

- Failure to mobilize the Republican base doomed Kilgore. The demoralization of Bush voters and lack of enthusiasm for Kilgore seriously hindered the Republican candidate's chances, underscoring the dangers of taking the base for granted.
- Non-voters were disillusioned with Bush, unimpressed by Kilgore. Those who voted in 2004 but not in 2005 overwhelmingly supported Bush over

Kerry, but mounting frustration with Bush and a lack of fondness for Kilgore prevented them from turning out. While many incumbents will be better received by voters than Kilgore, the impact of the disillusionment with Bush highlights why it is so important for progressives to tie incumbents to Bush.

- Positive agenda was crucial to winning over swing voters. While Kilgore alienated voters with his attacks on Kaine's position on the death penalty, Kaine reaped the benefits by focusing on education, an issue that was of particular importance to both his base and swing voters.
- Republicans voter outreach program is not to be underestimated. Although Kilgore's turnout effort came up short, his campaign was much more effective at contacting both base and swing voters, as well as those who were still undecided in the final days of the campaign.
- Essential to have sufficient resources for the final few weeks of the campaign. Nearly one in five voters did not to decide who to vote for until the last few days of the campaign and 40 percent held off until October.
- TV, mail pieces, and phone calls remain the primary sources that voters get their information from. The internet still has a long way to go in terms of its utility for wide-scale voter contact.

Failure to mobilize doomed Kilgore

In 2002 and 2004, Republicans benefited from an energized base that helped propel them to victories. However, by November of 2005, as the country's mood worsened, Republican enthusiasm dissipated and Kilgore found himself in a race where the left held the advantage in enthusiasm. Among Democrats, 59 percent viewed Kaine very favorably while just 43 percent of Republicans felt the same way about Kilgore.

This lack of enthusiasm for Kilgore combined with conservatives' increasing dissatisfaction with the country's Republican leadership caused many of those who supported the President in 2004 to stay home in 2005. The lack of turnout among these voters was a serious loss for Kilgore as these non-voters favored Bush by a 24-point margin in 2004, nearly double the margin of those who actually turned out to vote.

Since last November, disillusionment has increased among both Republicans and Democrats and neither group appears to be energized for the upcoming elections. Because mid-term elections are typically decided by which party has the more enthusiastic base, it is critical for progressives to ensure that they have the levers in place to energize their base and maximize voter turnout.

Non-voters disillusioned with Bush, unimpressed with Kilgore

When we examine those who voted in 2004 but not in 2005, we see that Kilgore's inability to replicate the base support that Bush had earned in 2004 was primarily due to two factors: dissatisfaction with Bush's leadership and virtually no enthusiasm for Jerry Kilgore.

Although these non-voters were nearly twice as likely to vote for Bush as those who voted, by November of 2005 both groups gave Bush the same approval rating – just 44 percent. The intensity of support for Bush had also vanished, as the percentage strongly disapproving of his job performance was nearly double the share of those who strongly approved of his job in office. In addition to their declining views of Bush, these non-voters were also more dissatisfied with the direction of the country and much less fervent in their support of Warner than those who voted.

The impact of Bush's falling support on turnout highlights why it is essential for progressives to tie Bush to the incumbent. By convincing voters that the Republican incumbent will continue Bush's policies, progressives can increase the likelihood that disillusioned Bush voters will stay home on election day.

In addition to the growing dissatisfaction with Bush's policies, the other main factor that caused so many Bush voters to stay home was Jerry Kilgore's inability to appeal to them. These non-voters were certainly open to voting for a Republican as 52 percent viewed the party favorably, but just 42 percent felt the same about Kilgore. Views toward Kilgore also fell significantly below those for Kaine and the Democratic party, as a majority of these non-voters rated each positively.

Kilgore's failure to win over these non-voters is also noteworthy given that they tended to be more conservative on social issues than those who voted. The non-voters were significantly more supportive of the NRA, more opposed to gay marriage and more concerned about the level of immigration into the country than the 2005 voters.

That Kilgore was unable to turn out more of these voters, despite heavy voter contact and a campaign that emphasized character and social issues, represents a serious failing of his campaign and message strategy. These voters were looking for answers on the economy as they overwhelmingly indicated that it was the most important issue to their vote and were much more critical of the state of the economy and NAFTA than those who voted. Kilgore's decision to focus on the death penalty and cultural attacks rather than offering a conservative, pro-growth economic agenda certainly hindered his chances of turning out these voters.

Importance of a positive agenda

The opportunity lost by Kilgore by not offering solutions on the economy coupled with Kaine's successful use of the education issue underscores the importance of offering a positive agenda, particularly in its effect on swing voters. While Kilgore's largely negative campaign failed to generate much support with moderate voters, Kaine waged a more positive campaign that resulted in him winning moderate and independent voters by overwhelming margins.

To measure shifts, we compared the gubernatorial vote with both the reported 2004 vote and exit poll data. The only real compelling shift that emerged was Kaine's gains with independents and moderates. Shifts in the exurbs were no greater than in other areas. Beyond Kaine's gains with moderates and independents, his biggest improvement on Kerry appeared to be in metro areas, not the suburbs, exurbs or rural areas.

Unlike Kilgore who attempted to shift the debate towards Kaine's character by attacking his position on the death penalty, Kaine addressed issues that voters were most focused on – such as education, which was a top issue among both Democrats and independents. The result was that Kaine won moderates by a more than two-to-one margin and won independents by 22 points. It was with these voters that Kaine posted his biggest improvements over Kerry, as his performance with moderates was 11 points higher than Kerry's, and among independents, he outperformed the 2004 Presidential candidate by a remarkable 16 points.

While issue focus among partisans differed sharply (Democrats were most concerned with education and the economy while Republicans were primarily concerned with taxes, followed by immigration, abortion and the economy) independents and moderates aligned closely with Democrats' issue priorities, creating an opportunity for Kaine.

These swing voters overwhelmingly sided with Kaine's position that Virginia's top priority should be greater investment in school's over Kilgore's position of more tax relief, so when they became alienated by Kilgore's attack ads, Kaine was the logical choice to turn to. With over half of independents still undecided at the beginning of October, the candidate's issue focus at this point of the campaign proved crucial. Education was cited as a very or extremely important issue by over 60 percent of independents and "waverers" – higher than any other issue – and Kaine used the issue to win over strong majorities of these swing voters.

While Kaine was able to attract independents and significantly expand his support in October, Kilgore's failure to broaden his appeal was evident even among Republican partisans. Kaine won 27 percent of liberal-to-moderate Republicans, while Kilgore's attempts to define his opponent as a liberal failed to help him make any inroads among moderate to conservative Democrats.

Kilgore's inability to win over moderate voters should serve as a cautionary tale to candidates who fail to offer a positive agenda. His decision to focus on attacking Kaine on the death penalty alienated independents and moderate Republicans and did little to energize conservatives or disillusioned Bush voters.

Given the hostile views towards Washington in the current environment, progressives should certainly make their opposition to the leadership of Bush and the Republicans in Congress a focal point of their campaign, but they should not neglect to offer a positive agenda as well.

Many voters tuned in late

With most congressional races low on the public's radar, it is important to note that 40 percent of Virginia voters did not decide who to vote for until October and one in five did not make their decision until the last days before the election.

Public polls showed the race even heading into October but when these "waverers" (predominantly moderate and independent voters as noted above) started coming down off the fence early in the month they gave Kaine a lead he would not relinquish. Had the "waverers" reverted to their 2004 partisan alignment, Kilgore might now be Governor, but the campaign's respective issue focuses prevented that from happening. The voters who waited until the last days before election to make a decision had voted for Bush in 2004 by a two-to-one margin, but Kaine was able to break even with them and preserve the lead he had built up over the course of October.

Kaine's ability to win over these voters at the end of the campaign - in the face of an intense voter outreach campaign conducted by Kilgore - was critical to preserving his advantage. This should serve as a lesson to progressive candidates to make sure they have enough funds in the bank to make a final push over final weeks of the campaign when many persuadable voters start to tune in.

Strong Kilgore turnout effort was not enough

The demoralization of Republicans would have had an even greater impact on Kilgore's performance had it not been for a strong turnout effort that clearly bested the Kaine campaign in terms of voter outreach. Kilgore enjoyed a 14-point edge on which campaign voters said contacted them more, and voters were almost twice as likely to say that they were contacted "a lot more" by the Kilgore campaign than by Kaine's. Among Kilgore's own voters, his outreach advantage expanded to 34 points and Kaine's own supporters acknowledged being contacted as often by Kilgore's campaign as they were by Kaine's.

Not only was Kilgore's campaign much more effective at contacting his base than Kaine's was, it also outperformed the Democrat's efforts with independents, weak Kaine supporters and had an overwhelming advantage among those who were still undecided in the final days of the campaign. Voters who did not decide who to vote for in the final days were twice as likely to be contacted by Kilgore's campaign. Kaine was able to perform well with these voters in spite of this, but other Democratic candidates should not expect to be so fortunate.

Although Kilgore's impressive outreach program was not enough to offset the lack of energy among former Bush supporters, it demonstrates that Republicans' ability to turn out their supporters should not be underestimated. That Republicans were able to contact more voters in a state with an extremely popular Democratic incumbent governor and where Democrats were more energized, combined with their likely funding advantage next November, should send a clear warning of what they are capable of this fall.

Internet still has a long way to go

Television, mail pieces and phone calls remain the dominant means through which voters get their campaign information. This is true of every demographic and whether voters live in cities, the suburbs or rural areas. Radio is also a popular method for receiving information, particularly with middle-aged and younger voters.

The internet, however, still has a long way to go before it catches up with other methods of voter outreach. Less than a quarter of all voters received any information about the campaign from the internet, below the percentage who had gotten information from someone at their door or through friends or family. Even the more internet-savvy under-30 voters were less likely to get their information from the internet than other sources, with just 36 percent reading anything about the campaign online.

The internet's influence on campaigns will surely continue to expand but for now voter outreach is still dominated by more traditional methods of conveying information.