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Date: August 10, 2006

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RE: BATTLING FOR WHITE RURAL AMERICA Denying Republicans Their Base

A recent Democracy Corps poll¹ shows that white rural America—one of the cornerstones of the Republican base—is up for grabs. Disenchanted with Bush, squeezed by rising costs and stagnant incomes, and embittered by the on-going conflict in Iraq, white rural voters are ready to vote for change.

Democrats poll even with or ahead of Republicans in key swing districts and states, and the Republican thermometer reading continues to fall. Democrats are in a position to make big strides in the American heartland if they define the election principally in terms of showing their commitment to family and a new direction in Iraq. Thus a candidate who pledges no Congressional pay raise until the income of average Americans begins to rise creates an opening for the message and the candidate. These voters want a new direction in Iraq but not a precipitous withdrawal of troops that would destabilize the region or dishonor sacrifices already made.

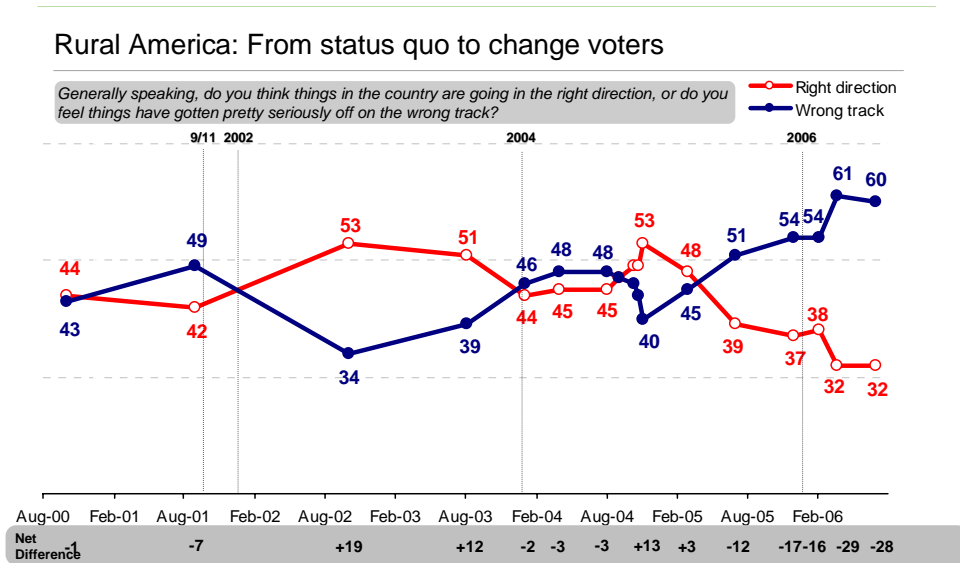
Coupling an economic and Iraq narrative with reassurances on moral values and spending paves a pathway to success for Democrats in this formerly Republican territory.

¹ This memo is based on a Democracy Corps survey of 1,003 white rural likely voters, conducted July 5-12, 2006. The margin of error was +/- 3.1 percent.

From Republican Base Voters to Change Voters

White rural America forms the cornerstone of the Republican base. In 2004, 64 percent of these voters voted for Bush, and white rural voters broke for Republican Congressional candidates by a margin of 17 points. In the 2004 election, more than 60 percent of white rural voters approved of the job Bush was doing as president, and Republicans had a 22-point advantage in party identification. Only 34 percent gave the Democratic Party a warm thermometer rating, while 57 percent gave the Republican Party a warm thermometer rating.

But since 2004, the tide has changed: the loyalty of white rural America is up for grabs. White rural Americans are *evenly divided* on whether they approve or disapprove of the job Bush is doing as president. *Sixty percent* think the country is moving in the wrong direction. In the Congressional vote, the Republicans now hold a *mere 9-point lead*, down from 17 points in 2004. The parallel for Democrats would be Democrats having only a 9-point lead among union households. The quintessential cornerstone of the Republican base is showing signs of crumbling.



A closer look at the data only makes the story look worse and worse for the Republicans. In competitive Senate races, Democrats have a 9-point *lead*, and among Midwest Senate races, the Democrats' lead jumps to 18 points. In competitive Congressional races, Democrats have a 14-point *lead*. White rural voters have gone from status quo voters to change voters.

Rural voters have grown disenchanted with the GOP: the average thermometer rating for the Republican Party has dropped to 51 since 2004. But views of the Democratic Party have remained virtually unchanged, with the thermometer rating for the Democratic Party holding

steady. Rural Americans have become discontented with the GOP, but this doesn't mean they are enamored with the Democratic Party.

Potential for Democrats to Take Larger Lead

Not all of white rural voters' discontent with the current direction translates into large gains for Democrats. Democrats are in a position to make even greater strides with these voters if they can translate more of rural America's discontent into Democratic votes. Democrats can do this by reassuring on moral values, Iraq, and spending; by highlighting how out of touch the Republicans are with average Americans, and by driving home critiques of the Republicans on rising gas and health care costs, Social Security, and American jobs.

- ***Reassuring on Moral Values and Expanding the Values Debate.*** Moral values are the traditional ties that have bound white rural America to the Republicans. But Democrats can win the moral values debate in rural America both by reassuring their stance on gay marriage where appropriate, and expanding the values debate to encompass a broader narrative about family.

In 2004, white rural voters gave Ralph Nader a higher thermometer rating than they gave gay marriage, and the gay marriage thermometer reading remains unchanged in our recent poll. In the recent survey, only one-third of white rural voters say that homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society.

If a candidate believes marriage is a union between a man and a woman, reassurances on this point are important to winning and not losing these votes. Six-in-ten rural voters are reassured by the statement that the Democratic candidate opposes gay marriage, and that number rises to 71 percent among seniors.

Democrats, however, should expand the moral values debate to a larger narrative about family life, economic pressures, and family values. A Democratic narrative that emphasizes these themes dominates a conservative values narrative. In fact, the broader Democratic values narrative wins the votes of white rural seniors by more than 20 points. With this family narrative, Democrats win by *more than 30 points* among mainline Protestant voters, even when paired with a strong Republican message centered on concerns about taxes, the traditional family, and religion.

Democrats can win the family-values debate

Now I would like to read you a pair of statements from candidates for Congress. After I read them, please tell me which statement comes closest to your own views, even if neither is exactly right.

| | Strongly | Total |
|---|----------|-------|
| The Democrat 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 and the resources to raise kids with the right values. That means tax cuts for the middle class, support for good education and affordable health care. We need a Congress that is on the side of the average family | 40 | 53 |
| OR | | |
| The Republican says, good people work hard and try do the best for their families, but the big government in Washington is raising their taxes and is out of touch with their values. We must keep taxes low so that businesses and families can prosper. We need more help for the traditional family and religious traditions, not a government that thinks homosexual marriage is okay. We need a Congress that is on the side of the average family | 32 | 44 |

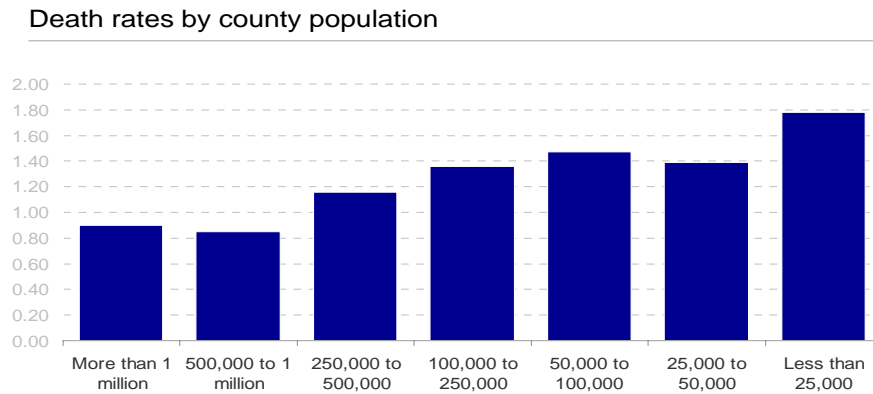
Winning the votes of rural America on moral values is about more than just mentioning church and faith: Democrats need to expand the debate to talk about the Democrats as the party on the side of the average family. Taking the otherwise effective message which intertwined economic concerns and family values, and adding a phrase about the church does nothing to support for the Democratic narrative.

- **Reassuring on Iraq While Calling for a New Direction.** Perhaps nowhere else is Iraq a more potent issue than in rural America. In rural areas, Democrats can win the Iraq vote by calling for a new direction in Iraq while simultaneously reassuring voters that they will not abandon the troops by any precipitous withdrawal.

Some analysts refer to Iraq as “The Rural War,”² and it’s no wonder: young people in rural areas enlist in the military at much greater rates than their urban and suburban counterparts. Thus, casualties in Iraq have come disproportionately from rural America, as the chart below shows.³

² Robert Cushing and Bill Bishop, *New York Times* Op-Ed, July 19, 2005.

³ Source: Robert Cushing and Bill Bishop. *New York Times*. July 19, 2005. Chart shows death rates per 100,000 soldiers ages 18-54 by county population size.



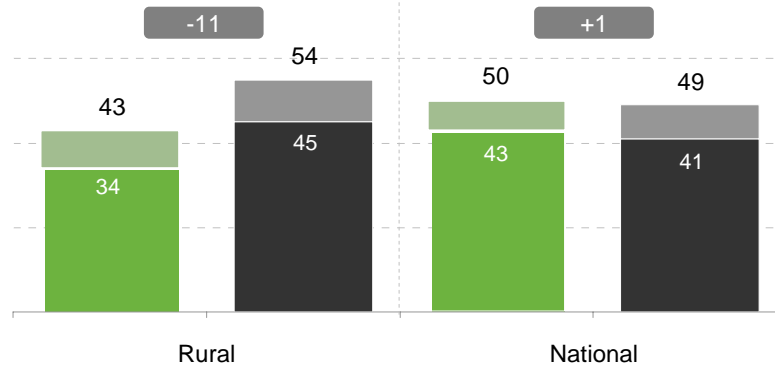
Young rural Americans' disproportionately high military enrollment—especially of late—reflects limited opportunities for the future, financial pressures, and a tradition of service. Unsurprisingly, rural voters rank the economy and jobs and the war in Iraq as the two most important issues, and in fact, the two issues are almost certainly linked.

Rural Americans' disproportionate sacrifices in Iraq have complicated their opinion about the Iraq war. A large majority says the war was *not* worth the cost of lives and dollars (55 percent), compared to 42 percent who say the war *was* worth the cost of lives and dollars. And yet a disproportionate number of rural Americans favor staying the course in Iraq—a far greater percentage than their urban and suburban counterparts. Rural Americans also worry more than other Americans about Democrats' eagerness to withdraw from Iraq.

Large majority say “stay course”

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

- The current course cannot bring stability and we need to start reducing the number of U.S. troops in Iraq
 - OR
 - We must stay the course to achieve stability and finish the job in Iraq
- Stay the course not so strongly
 ■ Stay the course strongly
 ■ Change direction not so strongly
 ■ Change direction strongly



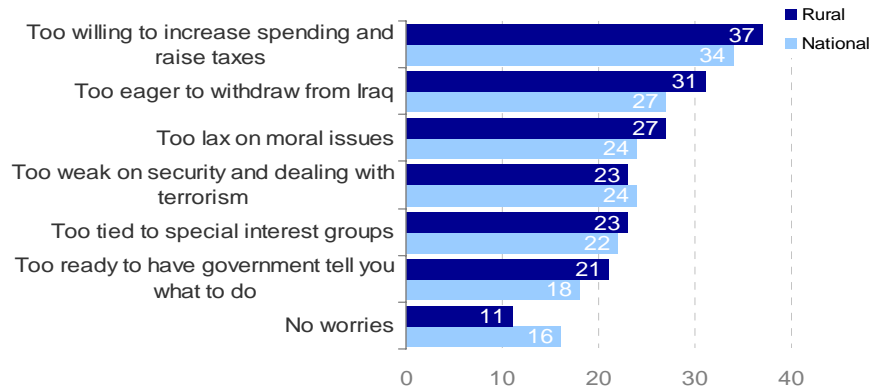
Winning the Iraq vote in rural America requires a nuanced approach: a new direction while opposing any sudden withdrawal of troops. One of the most important reassurances a Democratic candidate can offer rural voters is that the candidate is opposed to any sudden and rapid withdrawal of troops from Iraq. Rural voters do not want to believe that the military casualties in Iraq were in vain, so while a majority—53 percent—favor a new direction in Iraq, a majority are also opposed to “cutting and running.”

- **Reassuring on Spending.** White rural voters’ biggest fear about a Democratically-controlled Congress is that Democrats will increase spending and raise taxes, and they are more concerned about this possibility than their urban and suburban counterparts. Thus reassuring on spending and taxes is an important part of the Democratic message.

Worries about Democrats: spending, tax and withdrawal

■ Top worries are increasing spending and withdrawal from Iraq

Now I'd like you to imagine that the Democrats take control of Congress next November. Which ONE of these worries you the most when thinking about the Democrats being in control of Congress next year? And which one is your second biggest worry when thinking about the Democrats being in control of Congress next year? (COMBINED)



- Critiquing Republicans on Being Out of Touch with the Average American.** Bush can put on a folksy accent and claim to be for the average American, but rural America is not buying the act: 58 percent thinks he is for big business, while less than half think he cares about people like them and the same proportion think that he is on their side. The story for Republicans is actually worse: 67 percent of rural voters believe Republicans are for big business, 55 percent say that the Republican Party is out of touch and 44 percent say the Republicans are corrupt.⁴

A message that tangibly shows that Democrats are for the average American, not the biggest corporations, resonates strongly with these voters: 75 percent say they would be reassured by a Democratic candidate who says no member of Congress should get a pay raise until the incomes of average Americans start to rise again, making this by far the most important reassurance Democrats can offer rural voters.

- Critiquing Republicans on rising costs of gas and health care and on Social Security.** More than 40 percent of rural voters cite health care, Medicare, or Social Security as the most important or second most important issue in their vote for Congress. Democratic messages, centered on costs, with a focus on health care, Medicare, or Social Security test well with these voters.

⁴ Results are for the subset of white rural voters from the latest Democracy Corps national survey of 1,000 likely voters, conducted July 16-18, 2006. The margin of error was +/- 3.1 percent.

Rural voters—especially older women—are concerned about Social Security; as they see costs continue to rise, their retirement incomes take on new importance. In our latest poll, we find that the Social Security issue has reached new levels of potency: rural voters are as likely or more likely to vote for a Democratic candidate who pledges to protect Social Security than for a candidate who promises *anything* on the Republican agenda, from opposing gay marriage and abortion to staying the course in Iraq to cutting taxes.

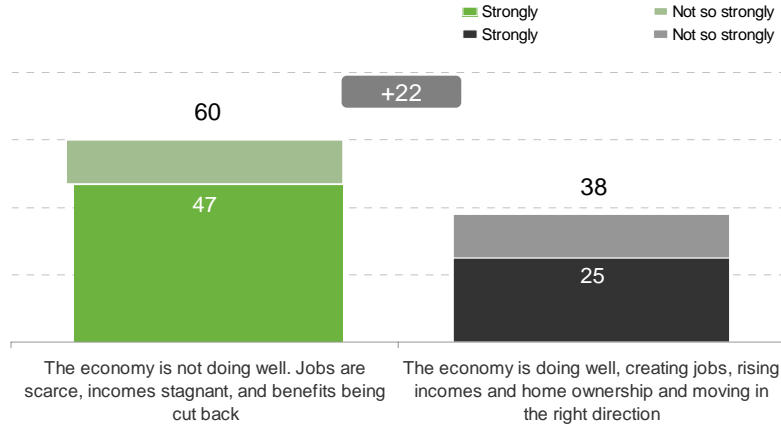
Health care and Medicare also take center stage with rural voters, especially older women, and particularly among those who are separated, divorced or widowed, and lack a college education. *Any* Democratic narrative mentioning lowering health care costs won support from a majority of all rural voters, even when paired with a strong Republican narrative focused on tax cuts and homeownership. These narratives are especially potent, however, with women on their own, without much education or income, who worry about how to pay rising health care costs in an economy where wages are stagnant.

- ***Resentment on the Economy.*** Jobs and the economy are the number one concern among rural voters, with 28 percent citing it as the most important or second most important issue in deciding how to vote for Congress; among rural independents, the number increases to 31 percent.

We need not be surprised: today's stagnant incomes produce an outcry about gas and health care costs in rural areas. Most rural voters think the economy is not doing well: American jobs are being sent overseas, costs are rising and incomes are stagnant. Republicans claim the economy is doing great, which only fuels resentment among rural voters.

Today's stagnant economy has hit rural areas hard

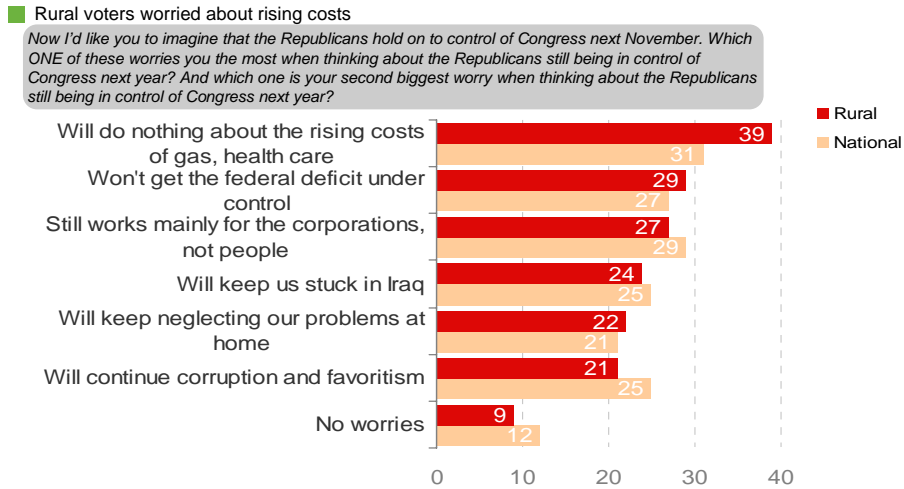
Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements. As I read each pair, please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right.



Defining the Election: The Economy

Democrats can win the heart of the American heartland if they define the election in terms of stagnant incomes, rising prices, and American jobs being sent overseas. When thinking about Republicans in Congress, rural America worries more about rising gas prices and health care costs than about any other issue, and they think Republicans will do nothing about it. And no wonder: Republicans continue to say that the economy is strong, that there are millions of new jobs, and that their tax cuts have invigorated the economy.

Worries about Republicans: do nothing on gas and health care prices



Democrats can win the economic debate. The Democrats’ economic narrative, which emphasizes working to cut health care and gas prices, a middle class tax cut, and rewards for companies that create American jobs, commands a 5-point lead over the Republican narrative trumpeting a fast growing economy, the creation of new jobs, and high levels of homeownership. The Democrats’ lead increases to 10 points when the economic narrative takes on a populist frame, emphasizing Bush’s tax cuts for the wealthy and Republican alliances with drug companies and Big Oil.

The outsourcing of jobs overseas disproportionately hurts rural America, making them more anti-trade than other segments of the electorate. In fact, on the eve of the 2002 election, rural America felt warmer towards labor unions than they did towards NAFTA. Since 2002, as more American jobs have gone overseas, they have grown even more strongly anti-trade, with 45 percent having cool feelings towards NAFTA, up from 39 percent in 2002. Rural voters who are strongly anti-trade now outnumber those who are strongly pro-trade by 10 points.

The concerns about trade and stagnant incomes come together when Democrats frame the election in terms of outsourcing American jobs. In fact, 71 percent of white rural voters say they would be more likely to vote for a Democratic candidate who decries President Bush’s support for outsourcing and highlights his or her own priority: creating jobs in America. Framing the election as a choice between creating jobs at home and outsourcing jobs overseas is by far the strongest message. In fact, this message not only dominates all other Democratic messages, *but it also dominates all other Republican messages*. Outsourcing jobs is a more potent issue to white rural voters than Social Security, corruption, foreign policy, Iraq, or any other issue.

While Bush heralds the “growing economy,” rural voters are watching their jobs go overseas and they are seeing a Republican government that is not standing up for the American worker. They are seeking a new direction and a Congress that will work to create jobs at home instead of lauding economic successes that are not felt in rural America.

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The heart of the American heartland is up for grabs. White rural voters are ready for reform and change, and if Democrats can show that they will lead America in a new direction, they will win votes from the Republican base.

To do this, Democrats first need to reassure rural voters on moral values and expand the moral values debate to a broader framework that is winnable for Democrats. It is also critical for Democrats to emphasize that they will not abandon the troops or support a precipitous withdrawal in Iraq, even while moving in a new direction in Iraq. Then Democrats can define the election in terms of an America run by Republicans, out of touch with the average American, woefully unaware of the fact that while they are trumpeting a booming economy, prices are on the rise and incomes are stagnant. Rural America is feeling the economic pinch, and they think the Republican government in Washington does not notice or care. If Democrats can show that they will fight for jobs and rising incomes for average Americans and their families, Democrats can take back rural America.