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Developing A Rural Strategy Era of Competition

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Despite the fact that the counties that make up rural America comprise 80 percent of the land mass in this country, rural America's priorities have been overlooked in Washington. Even in some legislatures and governor's mansions in states with significant rural components, the focus typically remains on urban, suburban and (now) ex-urban counties "where the votes are." Particularly in the post-Iowa nomination period, the political attention typically moves away from the concerns of rural caucus-goers to focus on the concerns of suburban primary voters.

And yet, this year may be different; this year may be the time when rural America can claim its rightful share of the nation's agenda. There are elements in place that suggest more opportunity than in recent years to change the debate on rural issues and refocus the nation on the rural agenda.

The antecedents of this opportunity reflect on a number of dynamics:

- A period of intense partisan competition in rural America at the presidential level;
- A significant number of competitive down-ballot races in rural districts and rural states;
- A national agenda that is moving away from foreign policy (terrorism, Iraq) to a more robust domestic focus;
- A national agenda that is aligning with the rural agenda in terms of its focus on the economy, jobs and the economic squeeze;
- An issue agenda that, even after passage of a strong farm bill in the Senate and the White House signing of a new energy bill, can still provide opportunities to advance rural causes.

We believe the current climate may require this nation and its leadership to focus more attention to rural issues and hope this analysis can help rural advocates make the most of those opportunities. This analysis sets out to outline some of these changes in helping to develop a rural strategy.

Rural Political Competition

For most of the last decade, Republicans have dominated politics in rural parts of this country. George Bush owes his election in 2000 and 2004 to the rural vote. Similarly, the Republican congressional takeover of 1994 largely started in rural America, particularly the South and Midwest, and the Republican majority was largely sustained through the rural vote. The lack of real political competition arguably diminished rural America's influence in the national debate; Republicans may have concluded they did not need to really fight for the rural vote and focused solely on turning out the vote, while Democrats may not have seen enough incentive to really contest the conservative margins in rural counties.

This changed in 2006. Fourteen months ago, rural America signaled its displeasure with the current Administration, along with the rest of the country, and split its congressional vote 46 – 44 percent. Democrats picked up 16 seats in the rural areas¹ of Indiana, New York, etc.. This outcome helped restore a Democratic majority in the House and Senate. More important for our purposes, this level of intense political competition continues to this day.

Presidential Politics

George Bush carried the rural vote by 16 points in 2000 and improved to 19 points in 2004.² It is important to note, however, that for much of the 2004 cycle, the rural vote was contested, actively and robustly. In the end, however, Bush put real distance between himself and Kerry on his way to a popular—not just electoral—majority.

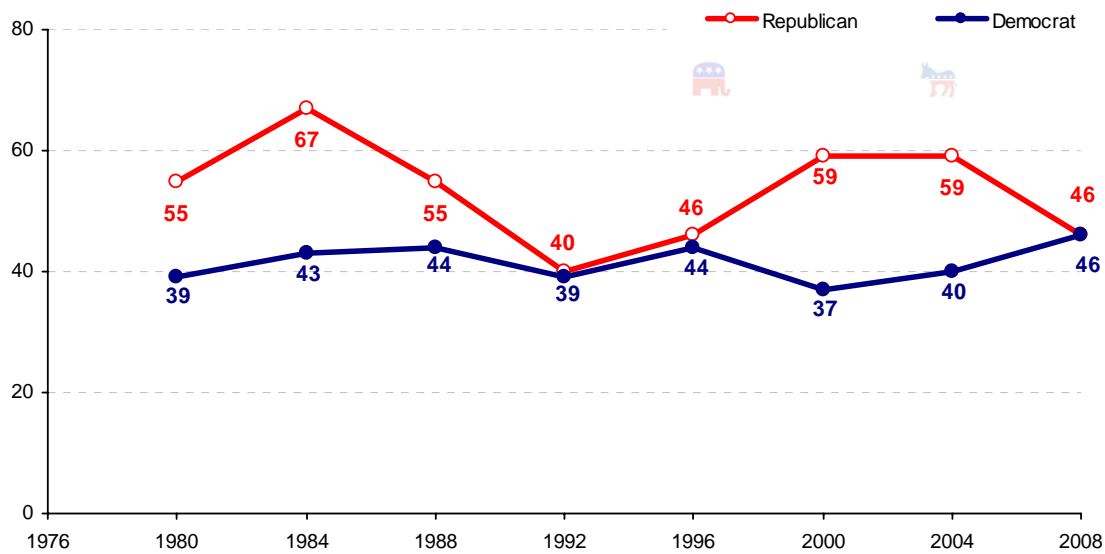
It is possible we see a similar dynamic play out in 2008 as well and much depends on which nominees emerge and how they connect, culturally and ideologically, with rural voters. But at least for now, rural America divides evenly in generic match-ups for President: 46 percent Democratic President, 46 percent Republican candidate.³ If this holds, it will represent a sea-change in presidential politics, not seen since the last time a Clinton ran for president.

¹ That is, pick-up seats with at least 25% of constituents residing in rural areas.

² Reflects county-by-county results as reported by each state; "rural" in this calculation means any county with a population density of less than 100 people per square mile.

³ Survey results reflect a combined data set of Democracy Corps data reflecting surveys taken from April – December, 2007 and a total rural sample of 1,065; rural is defined here as counties not in a Metropolitan Statistical Area, as defined by U.S. Census.

■ **Figure 1 : Rural Presidential Vote Over Time**



*2008 figures reflect a combined data set of Democracy Corps data reflecting surveys taken from April – December, 2007 and a total rural sample of 1,065; rural is defined here as counties not in a Metropolitan Statistical Area, as defined by U.S. Census.

The Democratic candidate does particularly well among women and younger voters, echoing trends in the rest of the country, but also among blue collars (51 – 41 percent Democratic among white voters with at most a high school diploma), reflecting a core economic anxiety that is central to the new competition here. (More on this to come).

It should be noted, however, that neither Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama does nearly as well in named trial heats as the unnamed Democrat in the generic trial heat. Both likely have their work cut out for them connecting culturally with rural voters. If Giuliani or Romney win the primary, they might face similar difficulties. Either way, it seems unlikely the Republican nominee can “bank” the rural vote.

It will need to be courted by both sides.

Congressional Politics

We see the same pattern emerge at the congressional level, as a decade or more of Republican dominance gave way to a very close election. Republican congressional candidates carried rural counties by 14 points in 2002 and 10 points in 2004. They only garnered a 2 point margin in 2006. Rural America remains very competitive at the congressional level. In named trial heats in surveys taken in the later half of 2007, rural voters divide 47 – 46 percent Democratic. In seats that switched to the Democrats in 2006, the new Democratic incumbent leads 54 – 39 percent.⁴

⁴ Survey results reflect a combined data set of Democracy Corps data reflecting surveys taken from April – December, 2007 and a total rural sample of 1,065; rural is defined here as counties not in a Metropolitan Statistical Area, as defined by U.S. Census.

A district by district look at the battleground reveals no fewer than 30 competitive or potentially competitive congressional races with a significant rural percentage.⁵

Figure 2 : Rural Battleground Districts

STATE	DISTRICT	INCUMBENT	INCUMBENT PTY	RURAL PCT	VOTE '06 PCT
ALASKA	1	Young	REPUBLICAN	34.3%	57%
ARIZONA	1	Renzi	REPUBLICAN	44.5%	51%
CALIFORNIA	4	Doolittle	REPUBLICAN	32.6%	49%
COLORADO	4	Musgrave	REPUBLICAN	24.9%	46%
GEORGIA	8	Marshall	DEMOCRATIC	43.4%	51%
GEORGIA	12	Barrow	DEMOCRATIC	40.1%	50%
IDAHO	1	Sali	REPUBLICAN	34.2%	50%
ILLINOIS	18	LaHood	REPUBLICAN	32.0%	67%
INDIANA	2	Donnelly	DEMOCRATIC	27.2%	54%
INDIANA	8	Ellsworth	DEMOCRATIC	41.9%	61%
INDIANA	9	Hill	DEMOCRATIC	47.7%	50%
IOWA	3	Boswell	DEMOCRATIC	26.9%	52%
KANSAS	2	Boyda	DEMOCRATIC	40.2%	51%
MICHIGAN	7	Walberg	REPUBLICAN	46.0%	51%
MINNESOTA	1	Walz	DEMOCRATIC	43.5%	53%
MISSOURI	6	Graves	REPUBLICAN	33.7%	61%
NEW HAMPSHIRE	1	Shea-Porter	DEMOCRATIC	33.4%	52%
NEW MEXICO	2	Pearce	REPUBLICAN	29.0%	60%
NEW YORK	20	Gillibrand	DEMOCRATIC	55.1%	53%
NEW YORK	26	Walsh	REPUBLICAN	28.8%	51%
NEW YORK	29	Kuhl	REPUBLICAN	41.6%	52%
NORTH CAROLINA	8	Hayes	REPUBLICAN	30.6%	50%
OHIO	2	Schmidt	REPUBLICAN	27.0%	51%
OHIO	14	LaTourette	REPUBLICAN	25.9%	58%
OHIO	16	Regula	REPUBLICAN	26.4%	59%
OHIO	18	Space	DEMOCRATIC	56.7%	62%
PENNSYLVANIA	10	Carney	DEMOCRATIC	55.4%	53%
TEXAS	17	Edwards	DEMOCRATIC	35.8%	58%
WEST VIRGINIA	2	Capito	REPUBLICAN	53.8%	57%
WISCONSIN	8	Kagen	DEMOCRATIC	44.0%	51%
WYOMING	1	Cubin	REPUBLICAN	34.8%	48%

Statewide Races

At the statewide level, several interesting races emerge where rural interests are more likely to play a role. This list is not comprehensive, but reflects a number of states with both a significant rural population and a high profile and competitive statewide election.

⁵ This list has been compiled through an independent analysis by Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, defining these districts (among other, less rural districts) as swing districts.

Indiana Governor. Indiana and Missouri represent the only two gubernatorial elections this cycle identified by the Rothenberg report as competitive and both states boast a significant rural population. In Indiana, Republican incumbent Mitch Daniels won a fairly competitive election in 2004 (53 – 46 percent), in a year George Bush carried the state by 21-points. As Governor, he took several unpopular stands including privatizing the northern Indiana Toll Road and moving the state to observe Daylight Saving Time. But the reason he is in trouble is because of his move to restructure the property tax system in the state, resulting in a 24 percent average increase to property taxes statewide.

Two Democrats are challenging Daniels, former Congresswoman Jill Long Thompson and Indianapolis architect Jim Schellinger. Thomson also served in the Department of Agriculture under the Clinton administration. A number of local observers believe the current legislative session (January through March) will make or break the Governor. Daniels has proposed a cap on property taxes and hopes to use this session to prove he made the “tough choices” Indiana needed. Property taxes typically are a major issue in rural communities and clearly will be a defining issue of this session.

Missouri Governor. Republican Matt Blunt is the nation’s most vulnerable governor, achieving this status after Ernie Fletcher was unseated in Kentucky in 2007. The latest publicly available numbers show him with a 41 percent approve – 54 percent disapprove approval rating. What is interesting is that his numbers are even worse in the more rural Central region (30 – 68 percent disapprove), than in the more urban-suburban St. Louis region.⁶ This may reflect the Governor’s budget cuts which left thousands of families without health insurance; rural families, of course, are typically more likely to struggle with Insurance.

Blunt will be challenged by Missouri’s long-serving Attorney General Jay Nixon. Even this early, both candidates have traded ethical barbs and nasty attacks; both candidates have also been forced to return millions of dollars in campaign contributions due to a court ruling. Missourians are braced for a long and ugly campaign. It is also a campaign where rural Missouri can play a role. Historically, the swing parts of the state have been suburban precincts, particularly in St. Louis County, but in Jackson County as well. Democrats have counted on St. Louis and Kansas City to deliver big margins, while Republicans have rolled up strong numbers in rural areas in between. The economics of the Governor’s budget cuts, however, seem to have put rural Missouri in play and the dynamic there might reflect a smaller version of the national race where, Republicans need to repair their base in the face of a difficult economic situation and Democratic focus on health care reform.

New Mexico Senate. It is been a long time since such a small, largely rural state played such a dominant role in the outcome of a national general election. New Mexico not only represents a key presidential battleground state (narrowly supporting Gore in 2000 with a 500 vote margin, narrowly supporting Bush in 2004 with a 6,000 vote margin), but will host an open Senate seat and three open congressional contests. The Senate seat opened late last year when Pete Domenici (first elected in 1972) announced his retirement. This decision attracted all three New Mexico Representatives, including Democrat Tom Udall and Republicans Heather Wilson and Steve Pearce.

As we have seen in previous elections, the rural vote in eastern, southern and northwest New Mexico often provides a decisive swing in statewide elections. Economic issues, land protection, water scarcity, and health care will likely play a large role in the rural parts of a state that suffers a disproportionate share of social ills such as poverty, methamphetamine use and high rates of uninsured people.

⁶ Results reflect a SurveyUSA poll taken in January, 2007 of 600 adults.

Minnesota Senate: The outcome of this race may, ironically, depend on the ability of a New York native Republican incumbent and a former New York-based comedian to compete for the voters in rural Minnesota. Incumbent Republican Norm Coleman, born in Brooklyn, has served one term in the Senate after switching parties while Mayor of St. Paul. He was recruited to run six years ago by George Bush, a history that currently represents a significant political burden. He will be challenged by former Saturday Night Live star Al Franken who, while being raised in Albert Lea, Minnesota, spent most of his adult life in New York City. Franken is also involved in a primary challenge by Minnesota native Mike Ciresi, but so far, Ciresi has attracted little political or financial support.

Minnesota represents one of the few states where the Democratic rural percentage increased from the 2000 to 2004 election cycles and rural Minnesota supported Democratic Senate candidate Amy Klobuchar heavily in 2006. Nonetheless, careful observers of Minnesota politics believe that Franken, if he survives the primary process, will face a cultural disconnect in rural parts of the state. Contextually, the economy in Minnesota is doing fairly well and Minnesota has one of the highest health insurance coverage rates in the country. Nonetheless, Minnesota also carries a long-standing populist tradition that continues to dominate politics in this state. We can expect the rural vote to play a significant role in the outcome of this election.

Louisiana Senate: Incumbent Mary Landrieu is one of the few Democrats on the “watch list,” an outcome reflecting the conservative trend in the Deep South, the recent election of a Republican Governor without a runoff, narrow election efforts heretofore, and, as important, a demographically changed population after Hurricane Katrina. She is being challenged by John Kennedy, a former Democratic Governor, now running as a Republican. Rural issues have played a key role in politics in this state, from coastal restoration, to support for the domestic sugar industry. Adding to the already volatile mix of the politics around the cleanup effort and whether New Orleans has enjoyed a disproportionate share of federal relief relative to surrounding, rural parishes, and we can see where rural issues will play a real role—if also potentially a more divisive role—in the 2008 campaign.

Other Races to Watch: There are a number of other Senate seats that could potentially become competitive and where rural issues might play a significant role. **Virginia** Senator John Warner’s decision to retire leaves Democrat Mark Warner (no relation) the prohibitive front-runner. Mark Warner is a former governor whose 2001 campaign strategy involved a long-courtship of rural voters. He may be opposed by another Governor, Republican Jim Gilmore, but polling shows Warner up by 30 points. **Nebraska** Senator Chuck Hagel will also leave the Senate. Two major Republican candidates have entered, Attorney General Jon Bruning and former Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns. Democrats were looking at Omaha Mayor Mike Fahey, but he opted against running, leaving Democrats without a “name” candidate at this point. Ethics problems for the incumbent in **Alaska** could also create a difficult reelection effort—or retirement—for Ted Stevens and **North Carolina** can, potentially, be more of a problem to hold for Elizabeth Dole if Democrats can recruit a front-line candidate.

Leveraging Political Competition

This level of political competition, where just a point or two separates the two major parties, should invite more attention to rural communities, just like the outcomes of the 2000 and 2004 elections created so much interest in Florida and Ohio, respectively. Republicans, no doubt, recognize the problem in their base; the 2006 result cannot be ignored. Democrats are similarly aware of the opportunities in rural areas and the need, particularly at the congressional level, to protect recent gains.

Nonetheless, in leveraging this competition, we need to continue to make the point that rural America represents a key part of the national battleground. This is true among insiders, who will obviously have access to polling, but who will also weigh the importance of the rural vote against other competing priorities (the youth vote, electoral college implications, energizing evangelicals, etc.). It is also important to keep the media focused on rural competition.

As important, however, leveraging political competition means changing the debate. Too many in Washington, particularly in the media, believe rural issues begin and end with the Farm Bill and ethanol subsidies. As our research into these communities have made plain, the real rural agenda is much broader than agriculture. The advantage we have is that, in recent months, there has a certain convergence of the rural and national agenda.

The Economy and Merging of the National and Rural Agendas

Last summer, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner completed a survey of likely rural voters for the Center for Rural Strategies exploring the rural agenda, among other issues. This research confirmed a long-standing primacy of the economy in the rural agenda. What is also notable is that, as Iraq and terrorism have faded somewhat, the economy has also grown in importance on the national stage. This means that the national debate in 2008 will almost certainly focus on the most important rural issue, its economic situation.

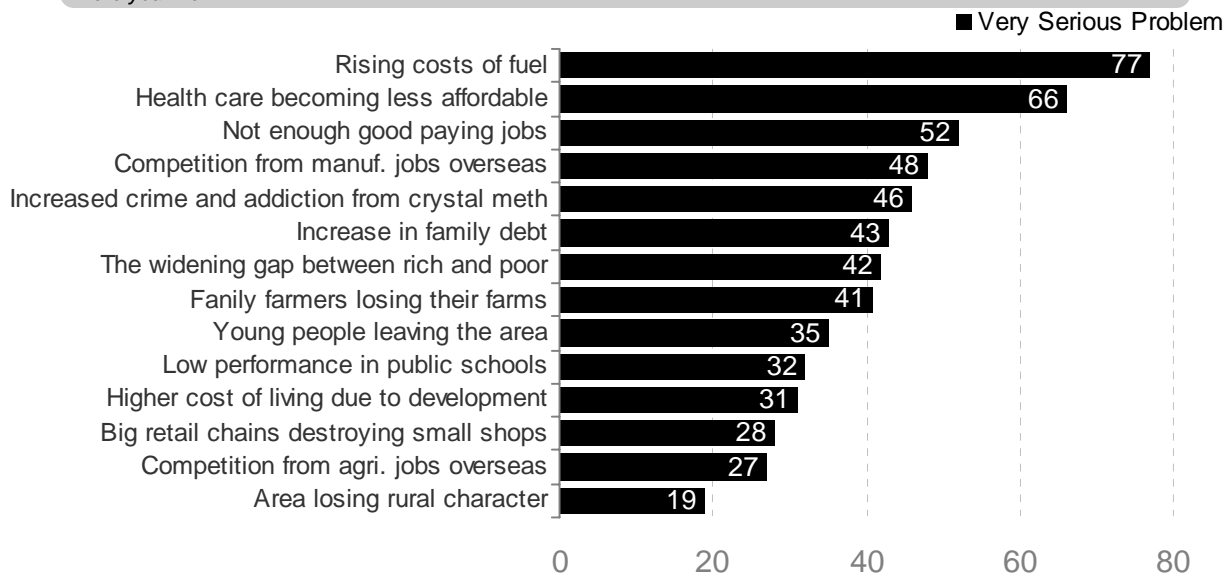
Our survey for the Center for Rural Strategies asked rural voters to calibrate the seriousness of a number of issues facing their community. Economic issues, of course, dominate this list; more specifically issues of economic squeeze—the cost of health care and fuel and the inability of rural paychecks to keep pace—define the rural economic agenda.⁷

⁷ Survey results reflect of survey of 804 likely voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and Greener and Hook for the Center for Rural Strategies, taken May 31 – June 5, 2007.

Figure 3 : Rural Issues

Economic Squeeze Issues More Serious

I am going to read you a list of issues or problems that may face your community. Please tell me for each one whether you believe it is a very serious problem, an important problem, a small problem or not a problem in the community where you live.

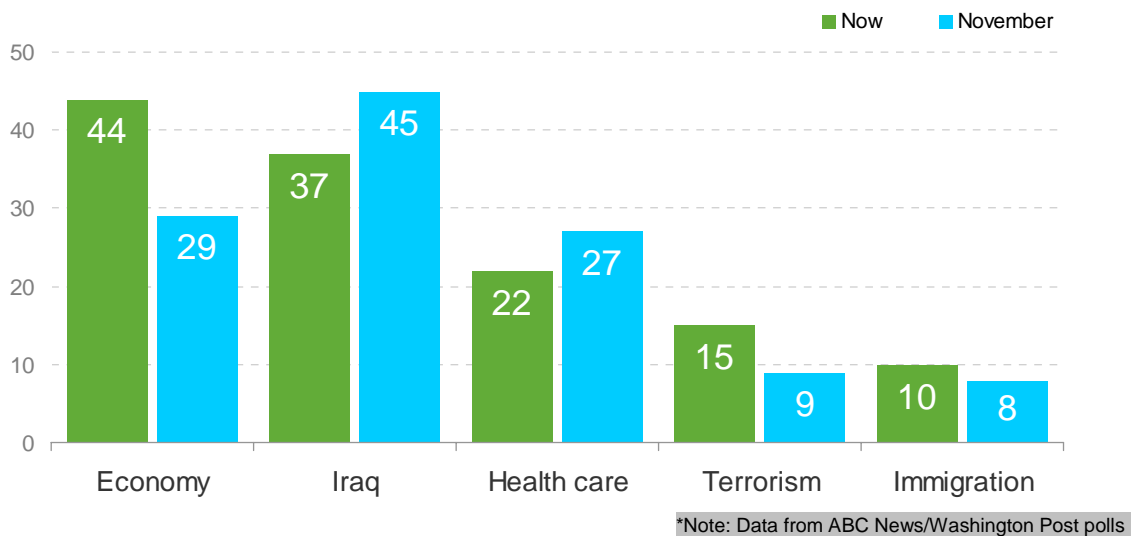


*Results reflect a survey of 804 likely voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and Greener and Hook for the Center for Rural Strategies, taken May 31 – June 5, 2007.

Rural America’s focus on the economy preceded the rise of the economy in national polling. A recent (December, 2007) Washington Post – ABC News survey shows a dramatic turnaround even over the last few months, where voters identify the economy, not Iraq, as leading issue in the nation.

■ **Figure 4: Leading Issue (Nationally)**

Top Two Election Issues



Moving outside of polling, President Bush has talked recently about a stimulus package, the Fed is moving to lower interest rates, Hillary Clinton released an economic plan focused on downscale, “lunch bucket” families, Mike Huckabee’s economic message is similarly focused more on downscale voters and other candidates will likely soon amplify their exposure on this issue.

The broad point being, this represents one of the best opportunities rural advocates are likely to see to participate substantively in a national debate addressing the leading issue in rural America. Moreover, there are specific nuances in the current economic debate—from the focus on debt and housing, to the cost of health care, to the cost of energy and fuel, to reviving the blue collar, manufacturing base of this country and revisiting trade—that have even more resonance in rural America.

Other Issue Opportunities

The national elections, of course, will bring other opportunities as well. While this list is not exhaustive, it does represent some of the more obvious intersections of rural interests and political debate.

Energy: This issue did not end with the passage of the energy bill. While this bill was, arguably, sensitive to rural issues and generous with ethanol and other rural “clean” energy subsidies, it will not satisfy voters struggling with high fuel prices, nor will it diminish concerns about our dependence on foreign oil. As important, on the Democratic side, the issue of global warming will keep energy on the center of the political stage, particularly in the courtship of younger voters. Outside of the economy, energy represents the most powerful domestic issue.

Health care: The Democratic primary has put real pressure on Democratic nominees to advocate for universal coverage. Given the fact that fully a quarter (25 percent) of rural voters in the Center for Rural Strategies survey either lacked health insurance presently or had lost their insurance in the last five years, this issue has obvious implications for rural communities. Moreover, there are other issues of unique interests to rural communities that can help amplify an health care reform plan, including the paucity of specialists in rural communities and the difficulty of attracting rural doctors.

Taxes: Both Democratic and Republican candidates for Presidents are pushing tax cuts in some fashion or the other, some focused on “middle class relief,” others aimed at economic stimulus. More radical approaches have been broached by New York Congressman Charles Rangel, who recently introduced a controversial restructuring of the tax system and Republican Presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, who favors a national sales tax to replace the current income tax. Rural voters tend to be more tax sensitive than most, particularly when it comes to property taxes. If there is a tax fight coming, particularly if there is serious movement toward fundamentally restructuring our tax system, the interests of the rural community needs to be a part of it.

Debt: President Bush recently unveiled a debt relief plan, condemned by both sides for being either inadequate or insufficiently attentive to market forces, but his foray into this issue underscores its growing importance. Notably, 26 percent of voters in our rural survey complained their debt—not including home debt—has increased in the last five years.

Immigration: There is no doubt that the pressure brought on by captains in some agricultural industries helped push the national immigration reform pushed by George Bush and Democrats in the Congress. There is also no doubt that many rural voters helped lead the grassroots revolt that helped destroy this effort. Electoral politics, however, will not likely allow the issue to stay quiet for long and we fully expect a rigorous debate over immigration over the course of the year. The question is, however, whether the impact of immigration reform in rural communities is part of that debate.

Agriculture: John McCain’s ongoing opposition to farm subsidies could play a bigger role in the national debate if he is nominated, but in the near-term, much depends on the President’s veto threat of the current bill. While we are not experts on this bill or its impact, what is interesting is that much of what rural voters—including the farm community—wanted in the 2007 farm bill seems to have ended up in the Senate version.

■ **Figure 5 : Reaction to 2007 Farm Bill**

The 2007 Farm Bill

As you may know, Congress is taking up a new Agricultural Farm Bill this year, that is in 2007. I'm going to read you some suggestions some people have made to improve the Farm Bill. Please tell me which TWO suggestions you like the most

	Total	More than half agricultural income	Less than half agricultural income	Any agricultural income
Invest in renewable energy sources such as ethanol	37	25	37	32
Make healthy food more accessible by rewarding farmers for producing healthier crops	33	15	15	15
Give new farmers greater access to the land and credit for small-scale operations	29	41	30	34
Place caps on federal government subsidies to farms worth more than three million dollars	23	28	28	28
Expand conservation programs that protect millions of acres from development	21	14	28	23
Stop the corporate concentration of agricultural markets by stronger enforcement of anti-trust law	19	17	27	23
Provide stronger labor laws for workers in the farm and food industry	13	12	12	12

*Results reflect a survey of 804 likely voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and Greener and Hook for the Center for Rural Strategies, taken May 31 – June 5, 2007.

Iraq: Rural voters in general are more likely to support the war than voters elsewhere, though, it should said, that even here, most voters want their Congressman to support measures to force the President's to start moving troops out of Iraq. However this plays out nationally, it is also clear that a disproportionate share of the fighting has been borne by rural soldiers and Guardsman. In our rural survey, 57 percent had a friend or family member serving or recently served in Iraq or Afghanistan. As these men and women come home, politicians will look for opportunities to "honor their service," with things like new G.I. scholarships, business loans and other assistance. This potential effort could have a disproportionate impact in rural communities.

Conclusion

There will be several narratives written about the 2008 cycle, some very powerful given the historic nature of voters' choices. There is, however, the opportunity to make sure rural America is part of this story. On a substantive level, the leading issue of the election, at least for now, dovetails with the leading issue in rural America, the economy. On a political level, the election remains very close in rural counties, an outcome which will invite more interest and attention from both sides. On a cultural level, there will be also be a debate over family values and immigration, both of which play a big role in rural politics.

In taking advantage of these opportunities, we need to continue to advance the story of political competition in rural counties. This is not longer just a matter of polling—although current polling continues to reinforce it—but also a very obvious outcome of the 2006 elections. However, there is probably no greater priority right now than engaging political elites and grass roots rural advocates on the issue of the economy. As some think about palliative efforts to stimulate the economy to temporarily defeat recessionary pressure, others are thinking about the kind of fundamental restructuring of the economy that is likely necessary to really change things in rural areas. This is, perhaps, the best opportunity we have seen in some time to really speak to the issue most important to rural areas.