



Date: March 22, 2005

To: Interested Parties

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**RE: THE MESSAGE FROM THE HEARTLAND
THE RURAL VOTE IN 2004**

During the critical last two weeks of the campaign, in the morning hours of October 21st, 2004, four geese met their end in a hunting trip billed as John Kerry's attempt to demonstrate his "regular guy" appeal to rural America. Regardless of how contrived many felt the event was, few could argue that Kerry and his campaign were going to concede rural America to President Bush in these closing days of the campaign. But that same afternoon, Kerry addressed an entirely different audience when he stumped with Dana Reeves, Christopher Reeves widow, to blast the President on stem cell research.¹

That Kerry would invest an entire morning so late in the election cycle to a hunting trip demonstrates his campaign's ongoing commitment to competing for rural voters. That Kerry also divided the day to address an issue far removed from rural voters' agenda and even offensive to some rural voters' religious sensibilities demonstrates the challenges--institutional, ideological and, mostly, cultural--of the Democrats' commitment to contesting the rural vote.

The Kerry campaign never dreamed of winning rural America, but they did hope to improve upon Al Gore's performance in 2000 and invested considerable campaign resources to this goal. It was not just about NASCAR references, hunting apparel and self-conscious efforts to meet rural voters where they are culturally, but about an attempt to sell a comprehensive rural agenda which addressed specific problems in the rural community in terms of jobs, education and health care in the hopes of effectively connecting to rural Americans.

¹ Jodi Wilgoren, "Kerry on Hunting Photo-Op to Help Image." New York Times 22 Oct. 2004.

The Bush campaign understood the threat of an even marginally improved Democratic showing in its rural base and protected this vote with a ferocity that, Democrats suggested, betrayed its own uneasiness about some of the political dynamics in play there. After Kerry's hunting trip, Dick Cheney dryly observed that Kerry's camouflage was likely newly bought. (In fact, it was borrowed.) More than quips, the Bush campaign invested millions of dollars in rural television and other outreach aimed at solidifying Bush as sharing important common ground with this key vote and alternatively alienating Kerry from the conservative values and culture of the rural electorate. The Bush campaign succeeded.

Ultimately, Bush not only matched his 2000 performance, but improved his margin in rural America. That outcome, seemingly inevitable months after Election Day, disguises the competitiveness of this region through much of the campaign, the success Kerry had among rural voters in select states, and the critical importance rural America played in Bush's popular and electoral majority. Moreover, the status quo nature of the rural vote shrouds an electoral choice representing the crystallization of powerful and competing electoral dynamics in 2004. Rural America was, at once, the most economically populist part of the country in 2004 and also the most culturally conservative. That culture would prove the ascendant political variable in October and November was not obvious in June and July.

Of equal importance, voters in rural areas and in the nation itself, were hesitant to change commanders at time of war. Kerry's national salute during the Democratic convention, where he devoted most of his time polishing his martial credentials and drawing implicit contrasts between the two candidates' Vietnam experiences, contributed to at least temporarily leveling the playing field in terms of national security. These efforts did not hold up entirely, however, after the Bush campaign and its allies successfully tagged the Democratic nominee as a flip-flopper and an uncertain potential Commander-in-Chief. However, security concerns do not distinguish the rural vote in 2004 from the rest of the nation. To a higher degree than is the case for other areas of the country, the primacy of cultural politics is responsible for the margin of victory for Bush in rural America.

An analysis of what happened in rural America and why not only informs our understanding of the 2004 decision, but also speaks to the long-term political evolution of an America still divided into Red and Blue camps.² The Republicans won in 2004 by losing the suburbs, while rolling up substantial margins in rural areas. Their standing as a "majority party" depends greatly upon their strength in rural communities. Both the economic trends in rural areas, and the demographic trends in rural areas, with more and more voters leaving their homes in search of work, suggest a precarious long-term political base. Countering this trend is the movement to the new category of geographic areas—the exurbs (not close enough to cities to be suburbs, but also not sparsely populated enough to be considered rural). In any event, for either major party to argue that history favors being the majority party based on current voting trends is problematic, at best.

² By convention, Red states refer to Republican states or states Bush carried decisively in 2000; blue states are strongly Democratic states or states that Gore carried easily. The rest of the country is competitive. Termed the "battleground," it includes Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

A Critical Battleground

In 2000, rural³ voters delivered the White House, if not a popular majority, to George Bush. Bush lost the suburban vote four years ago and, of course, the urban vote broke for Al Gore. Without a substantial margin in rural parts of the country, the Electoral College would have picked a different President. Both sides knew that without a similar margin in 2004 in rural areas, Bush would likely fail to secure another term.

Both campaigns stoutly contested the rural vote.

The Kerry effort involved creating a rural agenda, including a five-point plan to improve the rural economy, the “Greater Rural Opportunity and Work” Initiative. This proposal included investments in small businesses and expanding the Manufacturing Extension Partnership (which Kerry portrayed Bush as trying to cut by 90 percent) among other jobs-driven ideas involving roads and infrastructure. By devoting time and attention to issues impacting rural America, the Kerry campaign hoped to achieve a real connection that would allow it to successfully appeal for their votes.

If this plan seems a bit inaccessible to average voters (rural or suburban), the Kerry campaign also signed on an appreciable number of consultants and aids to help him reach rural voters, including John Norris of Iowa, his national field director. The Kerry campaign also invested millions of dollars in campaign advertising in rural markets, a level that did not exceed the Bush effort, but at least stayed competitive. From March to June, for example, the Democratic campaign treated voters in the Appleton, Wisconsin media market to 79 pro-Kerry commercials, compared to 101 for Bush. However, additional advertising by progressive groups such as the AFL-CIO, the Media Fund and MoveOn.org gave the Democrats a net advantage in this market.⁴

Even in choosing a vice president, the Kerry campaign sought another weapon in breaking the Republicans’ hold on the rural vote. John Edwards, a mill worker’s son with a comforting accent, was said to appeal to rural voters and the North Carolina Senator would ultimately spend 40 percent of his schedule in rural America.

Kerry launched the rural campaign over the July 4th weekend, prime-time for any national campaign, where the nominee spent a three-day bus tour talking with farmers and blue collar voters throughout the upper Midwest. A 14 million dollar ad campaign backed up this effort.

The Bush campaign enjoyed the advantage of three years, rather than three months, to organize its own courtship of the rural vote. It would invest in one of the most comprehensive, bottom-up political strategies ever conceived by the Republican party, where a White House

³ Unfortunately, the polling industry has yet to find consensus on the definition of rural counties. For the purposes of this article, we use the National Committee for an Effective Congress definition unless otherwise specified. This defines any county with a population density of less than 100 people per square miles as rural. Exit surveys commissioned by VCR use a less sophisticated definition of any county with less than 10,000 population. Both definitions yield roughly the same electoral result, so while they are not interchangeable, they are comparable.

⁴Neilson Monitor Plus and the Wisconsin Advertising Project.

director would lead conferences with county-level, even precinct-level, Republican captains every week. Rather than using the traditional model of relying on campaign workers or volunteers, Republicans recruited neighbors to contact neighbors and were far more active in rural precincts than the Democrats and their allies. On a national basis, this grassroots effort involved 1.4 million volunteers, 9.1 million volunteer door knocks, 27.2 million volunteer phone calls, 411,989 letters to the editor and 102,000 calls into talk radio.⁵

The political director for the campaign, Terry Nelson, was an Iowa native, steeped in rural history and culture. Daily, the campaign connected to thousands of activists through the Internet, reminding them of all the things that allowed rural Americans to feel a natural kinship with George Bush and a tendency to feel an alienation to John Kerry.

Focus groups, and other research, clearly revealed that rural voters simply felt an affinity for George Bush. That an upper class Bostonian encountered difficulty in connecting at the human level with every day, largely more conservative, rural voters ought not to surprise. It is both a strong reality and common sense.

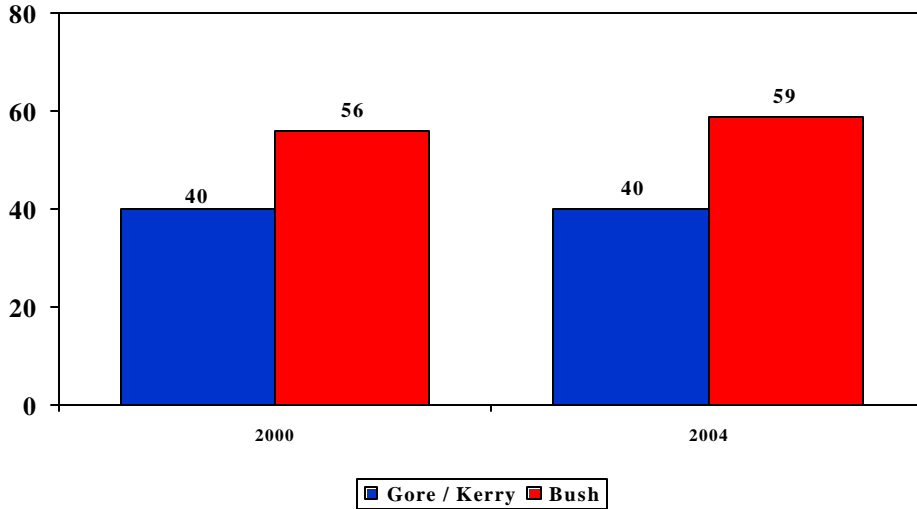
Of course, the Bush effort did not rely entirely on grass roots in 2004; the tree-tops were covered as well. Bush outspent Kerry in rural television, using positive messages about the President coupled with an ongoing assault on John Kerry. The goal: divorce Kerry from the conservative values that define rural America.

In the end, the Republican campaign succeeded.

On Election Day, Bush not only held the rural vote, but also increased his rural margin relative to 2000. Moreover, Democrats still invested most of their grassroots and Get Out the Vote efforts in increasing urban turnout and this effort helped boost urban turnout by 14.6 percent. However, the Bush campaign answered this challenge by increasing rural turnout by 14.9 percent. As a proportion of the total electorate, then, the rural vote did not change (21 percent in both 2000 and 2004). In rural America, the Republicans checked Democratic efforts to boost urban turnout.

⁵ Ken Mehlman, "Republicans and the Future," The Washington Times 25 Jan. 2005. Ken Mehlman, now the Chairman of the Republican National Committee, served as Bush's pollster. Note the precision with which the Bush team tracked letters to the editor.

Change in Rural Vote (Percent Responding)



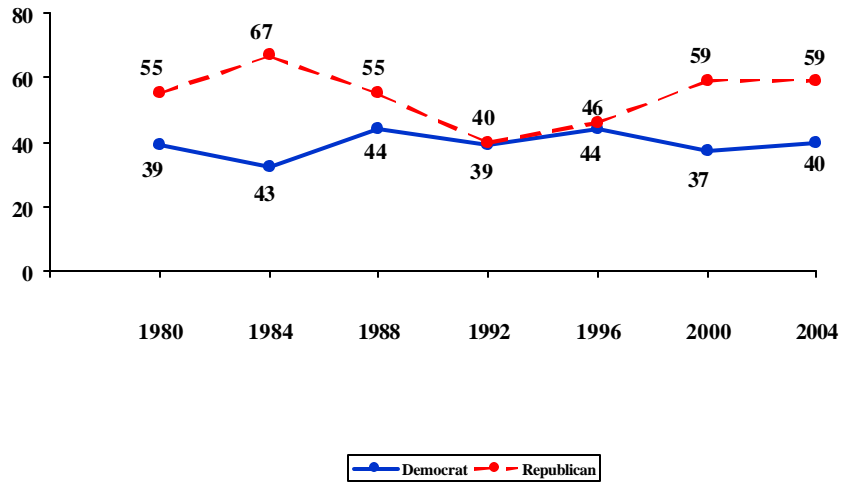
Source: County-by-county results as reported by each state elections board. Calculated rural total based on NCEC definitions.

Largely a result of Bush's success in rural America, the President won another term, holding states like Ohio and Florida and flipping states like New Mexico and Iowa. For example, in Iowa, Bush increased his rural margin by a modest 1.7 points (from +9.7 percent over Gore to +11.4 over Kerry), but this was enough to flip the state and award Iowa's electoral votes to the Republican. Bush also won much of his popular mandate in rural America. Bush moved from a margin of losing the popular vote by half a million to winning it by three million. In rural America, he won the popular vote by 3.4 million votes in 2000 and by 4.9 million votes in 2004.

The Rural Vote Remained Fluid

In 1992, Democrats split the rural vote. In 1994, however, in a campaign where the Republicans exploited the perceived ideological and cultural excesses of the new Clinton Administration, where some of the same themes we saw in 2004 (gay rights, guns, abortion) would play a huge role, the Republicans broke the rural vote wide open. With one exception (1996), the Democrats have not really been competitive in rural areas since.

Presidential Vote in Rural Areas over Time
1980 to 2004



Source: National Exits Polls as reported by New York Times.

[The small disparity in the rural vote in the above two charts reflects different definitions of rural. The National Exit Polls defines rural as total county population. The National Committee for Effective Congress defines rural as a matter of population density within a county.]

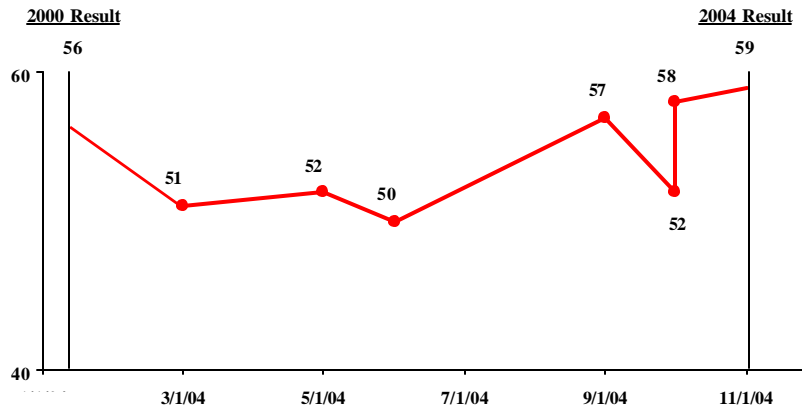
And yet in much of the tracking polling throughout the year, Bush often underperformed in rural areas, at least relative to his standing in the 2000 presidential election. The President’s vulnerability there reflected the same dynamics that invited such a competitive race nationally: frustration with the slow pace of economic recovery and with the incomplete victory in Iraq. Indeed, as late as October, voters in a tracking survey of a plurality of rural voters in the battleground states⁶ described the country as off on the wrong track (49 percent); while just 41 percent believed things were headed in the right direction. Bush managed only an 11 point lead in the rural battleground two weeks out. In examining these numbers, it is also important to note that, as was the case with the rest of America, significant numbers did not hold President Bush entirely or even primarily culpable for these conditions and continued to reward him with high personal approval ratings.

Though he never trailed, Bush’s margin in rural areas ebbed and flowed with the vagaries of the campaign. Like voters nationally, rural voters’ level of uncertainty about the incumbent’s stewardship of the nation seemingly afforded the challenger a real opportunity. Like voters nationally, the attack on Kerry’s character and values, especially the Swift Boat offensive, cost Kerry dearly in the late summer. Kerry bounced back, nationally and in rural areas, after the

⁶ Based on a survey of 513 likely voters from the rural battleground completed between October 17th and October 20th, 2004 with a margin of error of +/-4.4 percent. The sample was pulled from 17 battleground states: Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

debates. But in framing voters' choice over values and security in the last two weeks of the campaign, Bush rolled up the score late in the election in rural America.

Bush Vote in Rural Areas over Time 1980 to 2004



Source: Results for 2000 and 2004 based on county data nationwide, data or points in between based on Democracy Corps surveys completed between March 21st and November 2nd, 2004.

Bush's 19-point national margin in rural America was not inevitable, but the end-product of an exceptionally disciplined campaign effort from the Bush team, executed at precisely the right time, which exploited the long-standing cultural alienation of rural voters from the Democratic party.

Contours of the Rural Vote

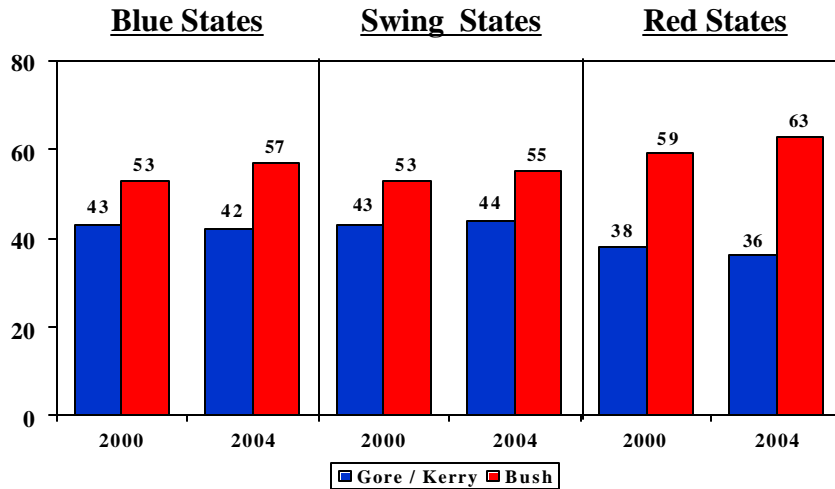
Of course, rural areas are not monolithic. Gaps emerge, regionally and among different groups of voters, where Kerry either did a better job contesting the President's support or won outright. In rural New Hampshire, a battleground state, Kerry improved upon the Democratic performance to the degree that he flipped the state and converted Republican electoral votes in 2000 to Democratic electoral voters in 2004. In rural Minnesota, Bush fared less well in 2004 than in 2000. Indeed, in the battleground states overall, Bush did not increase his rural percentage appreciably over his 2000 performance. This is an important point. Where the election was truly contested—with advertising dollars, field work, campaign visits and all the trappings of a modern presidential campaign—the Democrats managed not only to stay in the game, but, from their perspective, to keep the score reasonable in the end.

At the same time, the political dynamics at work in rural America do not stop at the borders of the red-blue divide. Bush's increase in his rural margin in blue states (states easily

won by Gore in 2000) nearly matches his increase in red states (states easily won by Bush in 2000). Bush owes his rural victory and popular majority not only to red states growing redder, but also to rural voters in blue states voting differently than voters in the cities and suburbs.

2004 Presidential Rural Vote by Competitiveness

(Percent Responding)



Source: County-by-county results as reported by each state elections board. Calculated rural total based on NCEC definitions.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the East. Democrats' margin, compared to 2000, dropped 10 points total in New Jersey, 9 points in Rhode Island, 7 points in both New York and Connecticut. Much of this—most of this—reflects problems Kerry experienced holding older, blue collar and Catholic voters. It also reflects a general decline in the smaller rural enclaves in these Eastern states.

At the subgroup level, trends in rural America tend to mirror those in the rest of the country, but in an amplified fashion. Democrats enjoyed at least a 10-point advantage among women throughout the 1990's, the so-called gender-gap. Nationally, Bush narrowed this gender gap among women, moving from -11 in 2000 to -3 in 2004.

Much of this outcome he owes to rural women. Two surveys, Democracy Corps and the National Election Poll survey⁷, show Bush with a margin among rural women comparable or even exceeding his margin among men. Among rural white married women in the Democracy Corps survey, Bush rolled up a 48-point margin. In the National Election Poll survey, Bush posted a 64 – 34 percent margin among rural white married women. (Recall these surveys employ different definitions of rural.) Among white non-college women in rural areas, Bush rolled up a 70 percent to 30 percent margin. It is not only among male, 2nd Amendment enthusiasts where the cultural divide cost the Kerry campaign badly in rural America, but among women and families as well. The loss of women, particularly blue-collar women, all but destroyed the Democrats' hopes of running a competitive margin in rural America.

Rural America further exaggerates national trends when we look at the overall vote among married voters (58 percent Bush nationally, 65 Bush rurally), at the vote among devout evangelicals (89 percent Bush nationally, 92 percent Bush rurally), among multiple gun-owners (66 percent and 73 percent), high school graduates (53 percent and 57 percent) and seniors (54 percent and 59 percent).⁸ In each of these cases, the problems Kerry suffered nationally were amplified in rural areas. Moreover, rural America boasts more married families as a proportion of the total electorate than the rest of the country, more gun owners and more evangelicals as well, further augmenting the President's popular margin.

Kerry efforts did produce some tactical successes. As noted, Kerry staunched the bleeding in the battleground states, even improving in some key battleground states such as Maine, Washington, Colorado, Minnesota and Nevada. Kerry also carried moderates and union voters and was competitive among Mainline Protestants, younger voters and single voters.

⁷ ABC, AP, CBS, CNN, Fox, and NBC, created the National Election Pool to provide tabulated vote counts and exit poll surveys for the 2004 major presidential primaries and the November general election. These six major news organizations used Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International as the provider of exit polls.

⁸ Democracy Corps and Institute for America's Future post election survey conducted of 2000 voters between November 2nd and 3rd, 2004 with a margin of error of +/- 2.2 percent. The rural sample is 735 cases with a margin of error of +/- 3.6 percent.

| VOTE MARGINS IN RURAL AREAS OF KEY STATES | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|---------------|-------|-------|-------|---------------|--------------------|
| | Kerry | Bush | Nader | 04 Margin | Gore | Bush | Nader | 00 Margin | 2004 - 2000 Margin |
| NH | 52.3% | 46.7% | 0.8% | 5.6% | 44.8% | 49.4% | 4.4% | -4.5% | 10.1% |
| VT | 57.4% | 40.4% | 1.4% | 17.0% | 49.4% | 42.1% | 6.6% | 7.3% | 9.7% |
| ME | 53.4% | 44.7% | 1.1% | 8.7% | 46.1% | 46.7% | 5.8% | -0.5% | 9.3% |
| MT | 38.6% | 59.1% | 1.4% | -20.5% | 33.4% | 58.4% | 5.9% | -25.1% | 4.6% |
| WA | 42.5% | 55.7% | 0.9% | -13.2% | 39.2% | 55.5% | 3.9% | -16.3% | 3.2% |
| CO | 41.9% | 56.7% | 0.7% | -14.7% | 37.5% | 55.2% | 5.6% | -17.6% | 2.9% |
| OR | 44.0% | 54.4% | 0.0% | -10.3% | 40.1% | 53.3% | 4.9% | -13.1% | 2.8% |
| SD | 37.6% | 60.7% | 1.1% | -23.0% | 36.0% | 61.7% | 0.0% | -25.7% | 2.7% |
| MN | 47.6% | 50.9% | 0.8% | -3.3% | 44.5% | 48.7% | 4.8% | -4.2% | 0.9% |
| ID | 28.2% | 70.4% | 0.2% | -42.3% | 26.1% | 69.0% | 2.0% | -42.9% | 0.7% |
| NV | 30.5% | 67.3% | 0.7% | -36.8% | 28.7% | 65.8% | 2.6% | -37.0% | 0.3% |

Source: County-by-county results as reported by each state elections board. Calculated rural total based on NCEC definitions.

Rural Culture

Over the July 4th holiday, during the Democratic campaign’s official offensive in rural areas, Kerry argued without apparent irony that he “actually represents the conservative values they (rural voters) feel.”⁹ Conservatives worked very hard the rest of the campaign to challenge this assertion. This conservative campaign to separate the nominee from the cultural values of rural voters succeeded despite Kerry’s attempt to portray himself as a war hero (tremendously undermined by the Swift Boat veterans), despite the campaign’s investments in rural outreach, despite the blue-collar pedigree of the Democrats’ vice-presidential nominee and despite Kerry’s announced program for rural America.

The Bush campaign succeeded largely because, on most cultural measures and culturally driven issues, the differences between Kerry and the rural majority were too glaring to gloss over with barbeque suppers and policy papers.

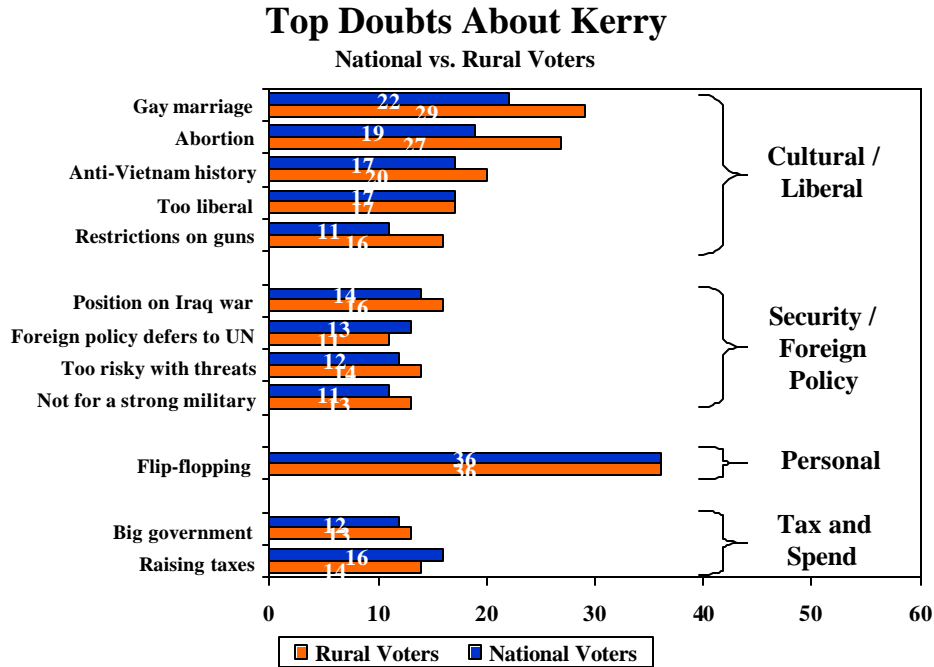
Nearly half (48 percent) of voters in rural areas describe themselves as conservatives, compared to 39 percent among voters in the nation as a whole. Rural areas boast appreciably larger numbers of evangelicals (28 percent and 21 percent, respectively) and represent the only areas in the country where a majority of households own guns (57 percent, compared to 40 percent nationally).¹⁰

In a survey of 2000 respondents who voted in the 2004 election conducted by Democracy Corps, 71 percent of rural voters identified cultural or liberal doubts about Kerry as

⁹ Robin Toner, “Kerry, in Midwest, Laments Lost Jobs.” *New York Times*, 22 Oct. 2004.

¹⁰ Democratic Corps and Institute for America’s Future post-election survey.

one of their main reasons for opposing him, compared to 61 percent nationally. These doubts include gay marriage (29 percent among rural voters, 22 percent among all voters), abortion (27 percent among rural voters, 19 percent among all voters), anti-Vietnam history (20 percent; 17 percent) and restrictions on guns (16 percent, versus 11 percent). Rural voters also place an appreciably higher priority on moral values than the rest of the country.



Source: Democracy Corps / Institute for America's Future Post-election survey.

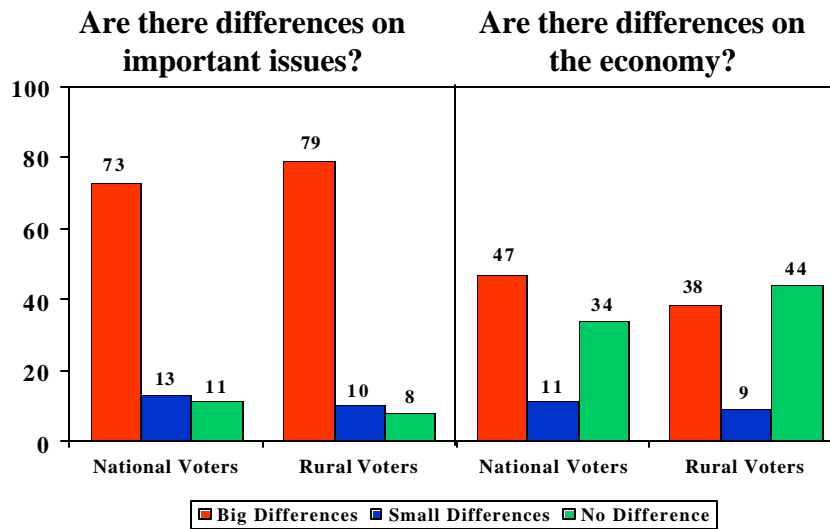
Importantly, culture and values did not constitute the only campaign dynamics working in the President's favor on Election Day. Security and 9/11 played an instrumental role in Bush's rural margin as well. A region of the country that contributes a disproportionate share of its sons and daughters to national defense would be loathe to give up on its Commander-and-Chief in a time of war and while the war in Iraq created problems for Bush among some rural voters, the war remained more popular there than anywhere else in the country. The lack of clear support for the effort and seeming shifting of positions by Kerry on this issue only served to help President Bush among rural voters.

Most notably, the tracking polls make it clear that, despite these cultural differences, this election year did present Kerry opportunities to cut into the incumbent's margin. A more populist vote would have cost Bush. Fully half (50 percent) of rural voters identify either Bush's "tax cuts for the wealthy" or his "corporate interests" as serious Bush doubts, compared to 43 percent nationally. *The part of the country that largely delivered the White House to this President simultaneously lodged the loudest objection to the economic direction of the Bush administration.*

Ultimately, and late in the election cycle, rural voters' cultural reservations about Kerry (coupled with concerns about security) swamped their economic and anti-corporate reservations about Bush. This happened less as much because voters concluded what they perceived to be Kerry's views on gay marriage and other important cultural were intolerable as because Kerry and the Democrats failed to give rural voters a compelling economic alternative. This dynamic also helps to explain Kerry's disappointing showing among union families, blue collar women and other key groups of voters, not only in rural areas, but nationally as well.

Differences in the Candidates

(Thermometer Ratings)



Source: Democracy Corps / Institute for America's Future Post-election survey.

Conclusions

The electoral stakes will be just as high in 2006 and 2008 and both parties will likely look at the trends, short-term and long-term, in rural America and see both opportunity and risk. In 2006, the rural vote will make a critical difference in Senate races not only in swing states like Wisconsin and Minnesota, but red states like Nebraska and Louisiana.

Republicans will need to hold their rural margin to continue as the majority party. In this effort, they will be aided by a cultural divide between the Democratic Party and most rural voters that is unlikely to close dramatically over the next four years. Whatever the cultural background of the 2008 Democratic nominee is, bourbon or blue collar, he or she will not likely change the party's position on abortion, guns or other issues, nor are rural voters soon likely to accept a new definition of marriage.

At the same time, the economic problems in rural America will likely persist and this will continue to give the Democrats an opening, so long as these voters believe Republicans are

responsible and/or Democrats are offering superior ideas and policies—either hardly a guarantee. Given the Democratic performance in suburban and urban parts of the country, this opening could be all they need to change the outcome of a national election.

As a result, Rural America will remain a key political battleground and prize for many years to come.