

The Rural Vote in the 2006 Midterm Election

By Dee Davis

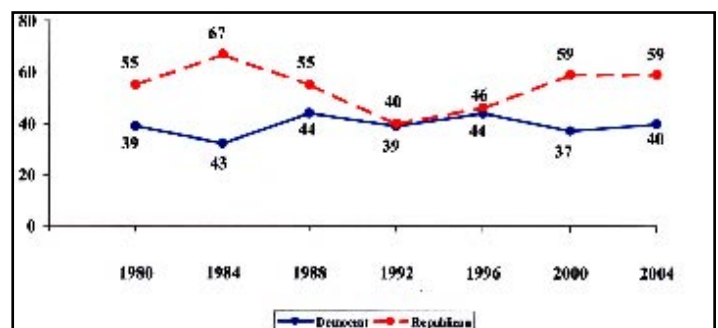
Introduction

The 2006 Democrat takeover of the U.S. House and Senate appears on the surface to be one of those dramatic realigning elections, like 1992, when one party sweeps the other from power with extreme prejudice. The six-seat pick up in the Senate and 30-member shift in the House of Representative foreshadow deep changes in the current national debate and in the political culture of the country. But what is easily lost in the election analysis is that this political reversal of fortunes was not as much a surging Democratic tsunami as it was the result of dozens of close elections, many decided within the pollsters' margins of error.

In that closeness, the rural vote was important, as it was in 2000 and in 2004 when Bush inched to small Electoral College wins with large rural margins. What we saw November 7, 2006, was a slight improvement for Democrats with rural voters, small drops in rural turnout among conservative Christians, and a reprioritizing of issues in the countryside. In an election where control of the U.S. Senate pivoted on a 0.3% victory margin in Virginia, these small movements have large implications.

This perspective reflects the work that Rural Strategies has undertaken in 2004 and 2006 with our Rural Tracker polling of rural voters in battleground districts. It draws on work from a team of project partners and colleagues:

Presidential Vote in Rural Areas Over Time



Source: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner based on National Exit Polls as Reported in the New York Times

- Democrat pollster Anna Greenberg of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research.
- Republican consultant William Greener Jr. of Greener & Hook.
- Howard Berkes of National Public Radio.
- David Yepsen of the Des Moines Register.
- Bill Bishop of the Austin American-Statesman.
- Demographer Robert Cushing of the University of Texas (retired).
- Niel Ritchie of the League of Rural Voters.

This report is organized in two sections: First, how rural Americans voted; second, why rural Americans voted the way they did.

Presidential Votes

In the last two presidential elections, rural voters have favored Republican George W. Bush over his opponents. Some analysts have extrapolated from

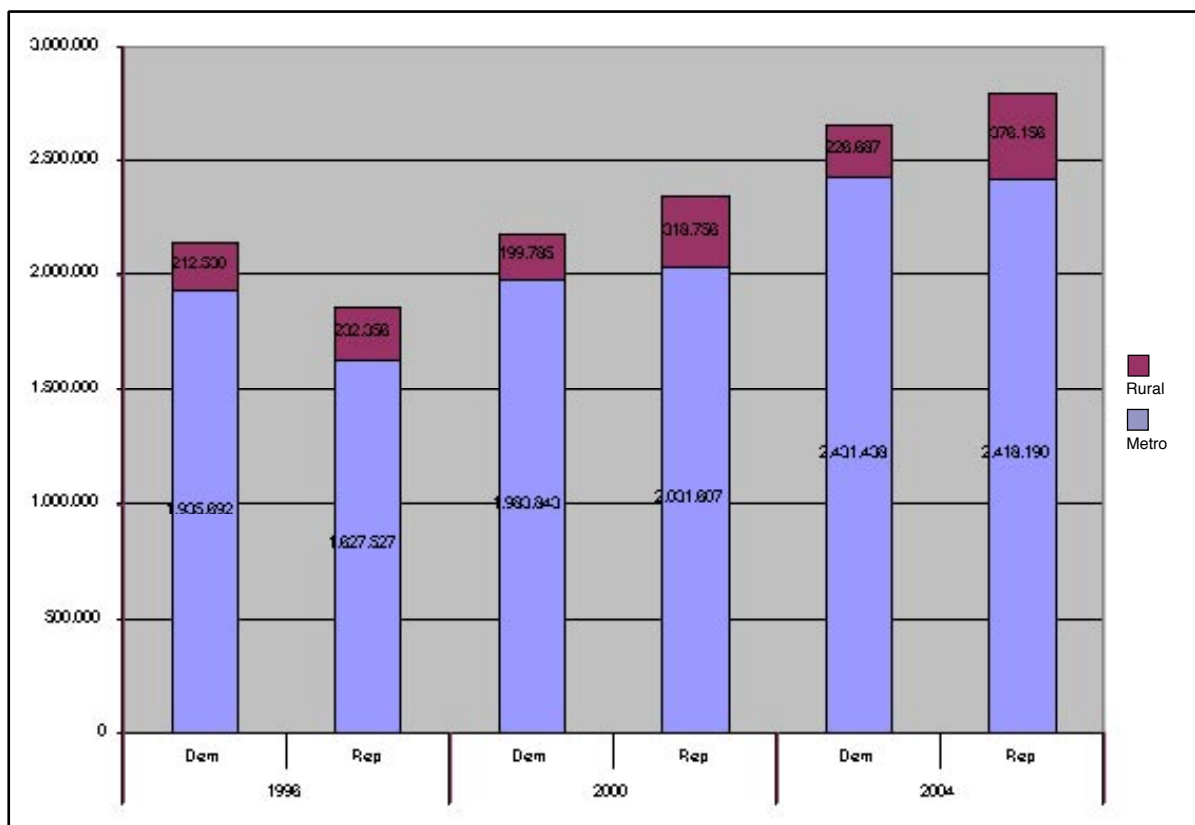
this trend that rural voters are a reliably Republican stronghold. While the rural shift toward Republican candidates has been evident in the last eight years, it remains to be seen whether this reflects a long-lasting realignment. Recent presidential election history is less than persuasive. Bill Clinton won the presidency with a solid base of rural voters. Jimmy Carter did the same.

Whatever the long-term patterns, it is true that rural voters who once formed the foundation of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal coalition in recent elections have been tracking more conservative and clearly more Republican. Bush won the rural vote in 2000 by 22 points; in critical battleground states he won rural voters by 16 points. In 2004 Bush won the national rural vote by 19 points, and he took the rural vote in battleground states by a whopping 29%. Had either Gore or Kerry mustered Clinton's level of rural support, either would have been elected president.



The clearest example of the critical nature of the rural vote in recent presidential elections comes from Ohio. In 1996, Clinton lost among rural Ohio voters by the relatively narrow margin of 4 points, or about 20,000 votes. His urban margin of 300,000 votes gave him a comfortable victory. In 2000 Gore lost rural Ohio by 22 points, or about 117,000 votes. Although he won among metropolitan voters, his margin of about 48,000 votes wasn't enough to overcome his rural defeat. The same thing happened in 2004.

Ohio Presidential Votes, 1996-2004



Source: County Election Data

Kerry’s campaign benefited from unprecedented voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives in the state’s urban districts (up 22%). But those urban margins were offset by even more dramatic Republican turnout in less populated rural districts (up 37%). The result was that Kerry won among metropolitan voters by about 13,000 votes, but lost the rural race (and therefore the presidency) by about 150,000 votes.

Since the Monica Lewinsky affair, rural voters have shifted away from Democrats and toward a moral values agenda that has included a conservative focus on gay marriage, abortion, gun ownership, and Christian identity. The events of this period obviously had an impact. But this period of political transition corresponded not just with such events but with a change in the way rural communities receive their news and information.

Over the past decade metropolitan daily newspapers have pulled back from both rural reporting and rural circulation. A preponderance of local radio broadcasters have turned to satellite programming, and rural communities have seen a dramatic increase in the number of Christian radio broadcasters with conservative news packages (now more than 2,000 stations). Additionally a political alliance has been formed between local churches and national evangelists who work closely with the Republicans. For example, the Rev. James Dobson sends out one hundred thousand sample sermons weekly. The influence of politically active conservative evangelicals such as the Rev. Dobson has a decidedly rural emphasis. Dobson’s flagship radio program, “Focus on the Family,” airs on about 2,100 radio station nationwide. Of these stations, 70% are in rural counties. As mainstream media service to rural areas declines, organizations such as Dobson’s Focus on the Family radio network are positioned to play a greater role in serving rural communities.

2006 Congressional Races

Coming into the 2006 midterm elections, the Republicans enjoyed real advantages in rural America:

The Rural Vote in 2006 Key Senate Races

	Democrat	Republican
Missouri	<i>(McCaskill)</i>	<i>(Talent)</i>
Urban	68	28
Suburban	46	52
Rural	39	56
Tennessee	<i>(Ford)</i>	<i>(Corker)</i>
Urban	54	45
Suburban	39	60
Rural	47	52
Virginia	<i>(Webb)</i>	<i>(Allen)</i>
Urban	61	39
Suburban	45	55
Rural	48	52
Montana	<i>(Tester)</i>	<i>(Burns)</i>
Urban	58	40
Suburban	52	48
Rural	45	52
Pennsylvania	<i>(Casey)</i>	<i>(Santorum)</i>
Urban	86	14
Suburban	57	43
Rural	47	53
Ohio	<i>(Brown)</i>	<i>(DeWine)</i>
Urban	71	29
Suburban	51	49
Rural	47	53

Source: CNN/Leah Polls



photo by Shawna Poynter

an emerging sympathetic information infrastructure, an electorate motivated by a values (not economic) agenda, and a longstanding Democratic focus on urban America. Even though the aggregate vote for the current U.S. Senate favored Democrats by more than a million votes, Republicans enjoyed a 10-vote majority largely because of GOP success in more rural Red States.

But even with these advantages, the GOP suffered the loss of both houses of Congress in 2006. The role of rural voters is not as clear cut at the results of the 2004 presidential race in Ohio, but trends do emerge.

The first clear trend is that 2006 was a better year for Democratic candidates among rural voters than 2004 and was about on par with 2002. Journalist Bill Bishop tracked actual votes in four close Senate races and compared them to 2004 presidential and 2002 off-year races. What he found is that Democrats generally fared better among rural voters than Kerry had in 2004. In fact, had Democrats such as McCaskill of Missouri and Tester of Montana performed as abysmally as Kerry did among rural voters in those states, the Senate would have remained in Republican hands.

But Bishop found that Democratic victories were also the result of strong metropolitan turnout for Democrats. In Montana, for example, Democrat Tester lost the rural vote by about 9 percentage points. One way of looking at these numbers is that the urban

vote put Tester over the top. “John Tester may have a flattop and a farm,” Bishop wrote. “But he’s the new senator from Montana because of the urban vote.”

Republican consultant Bill Greener saw the role of the rural vote differently. “I would argue that Tester probably thought he had died and gone to heaven when he only lost the rural vote by [9 percentage points],” wrote Greener. By comparison, Kerry lost rural Montana by 30 percentage points.

Democratic pollster Anna Greenberg defined Democratic success in rural areas as making rural areas more competitive, not necessarily generating Democratic majorities among rural voters. “I think we always made the argument that Democrats need to do better in rural areas than they have in the past [to win],” she wrote. “I don’t think anyone believes the partisan divide is going to go away. ... I see evidence that these Democrats improved their performance over Kerry and there was lower turnout.”

Given this Republican head start in rural areas, how did Democrats make any progress among rural voters? Several factors kept Republicans from consolidating their rural advantages. The first had to do with the administration’s decision to nationalize the election. Conventional wisdom is that all politics is local. The party in power chooses to nationalize an election

Support for the War:

Percentage of Respondents Who Agreed with These Statements

	Sept. 19, 2006	Oct. 24, 2006
We have done as much as we can to stabilize Iraq and need to have a responsible plan that tries to get our troops home by next year.	55%	60%
We can win the war in Iraq and need to stay the course until we do.	41	36



photo by Shawn Poynter

Source: Rural Tester Poll

only when the popularity of the president and his policy encourages voters. Similarly the opposition chooses to nationalize an election when the president and policy are vulnerable. In the previous midterm election of 2002, the administration was able to counter expected losses by making the congressional races about national security following the terrorist attacks of 2001. A similar approach served the administration in framing the 2004 elections around the war and security. In 2006 the assumption from the administration, though not necessarily the Republican members running for reelection, was that the war and national security were a proven frame in which to play out the election.



photo by Kainaz Amara

Rural Voters' Top Two Issues

	9/19/06	10/24/06
War in Iraq	28	38
Jobs and Economy	27	25
Medicare/Social Security	19	21
Terrorism/National Security	26	21
Health Care	19	20
Illegal Immigration	15	17
Moral Values	15	16
Taxes and Spending	17	15
Energy/Gas Prices	18	10
Don't Know/Refused	6	6
None of These	3	3

Source: Rural Tracker Poll

But the decision to nationalize the election in 2006 worked against Republican candidates, unlike in 2002 and 2004. The Center for Rural Strategies 2006 Rural Tracker poll showed that in mid-September the war was the number one issue for rural voters, but not in the manner that the Bush Administration would have hoped. Fifty-five percent of the respondents wanted U.S. military involvement in Iraq to end, and only 41% thought the war was winnable. These concerns were amplified by the fact that nearly three quarters of rural voters knew someone who had served in Iraq or Afghanistan. On the positive side for the Republicans, rural voters did see a close tie between the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism.

By mid-October, however, the war weighed even more heavily on the minds of rural voters. The percentage of voters who listed the war as a top issue in determining their vote climbed to 38% (up from 28% in September). Negative associations with the war also increased, with 60% of the respondents wanting U.S. troops out of Iraq within a year. So while President Bush succeeded in linking House and Senate races to the national agenda, he did so at a time when the popularity of that agenda was in decline and the news dispatches from Iraq grew bleaker.

In 2004 the strong reliance on values issues like banning gay marriage gave Republicans a clear advantage in rural states, especially those like Ohio and Missouri, where gay marriage was on the ballot in the form of a constitutional prohibition. No such issue gained traction to bring rural voters out in 2006. In reality a steady stream of news cycles dominated by

Who Is Benefiting from the Economy?

Percentage of Respondents Who Agreed with These Statements

	Sept. 19, 2006
The economy has improved for most people in this country.	34 %
The economy has improved mostly for the wealthy.	62

Source: Rural Tracker Poll

gay sex scandals involving GOP members of Congress and later a prominent national conservative evangelist inoculated the Democrats from the effective attacks they received on gay issues in 2004. In Virginia James Webb won even though he opposed a popular ballot initiative to ban gay marriage. The Rural Tracker Poll showed that moral values were not high on rural voters' agenda, and among those who did focus on moral values, respondents were equally divided as to whether Republicans or Democrats would do the better job on this issue.

After the war, the most important issue for rural voters in contested districts was the economy. The frame in which they saw the issue reflected an old-style populism that slightly favored Democrats. Irrespective of their own economic prospects, rural voters who focused on the economy by a good majority said that the economy works for wealthy folks and "not people like me." This was a filter that favored community over individuality. And the power of economic populism as a rural issue can be seen in this year's elections where raising the minimum wage was prominent. In Missouri a minimum wage ballot measure garnered 76% of the vote. In Minnesota, which passed a minimum wage increase in the 2005 legislative session, 11 Republican House members (five rural) and seven Republican senators (three rural) who voted against raising the minimum wage lost their bids for re-election. By contrast, 11 of 12 Republican House members and eight Republican senators who voted for the minimum wage increase won their elections.

Most surprisingly the political issue that did not gain traction, the dog that did not bark, was immigration. After protracted fights in the Congress, massive protest rallies, and a continuing drumbeat from the media that the debate on illegal immigration was likely to be what drove the 2006 election, our polling found only limited interest. Respondents ranked illegal immigration at or near the bottom in both polls. Moreover, half of the rural voters thought "illegal immigrants" should have the right to remain in their adopted U.S. communities. With the demonstrable



photo by Kananz Amara

Immigration

Percentage of Respondents Who Agreed with These Statements

	Sept. 19, 2006
Illegal immigrants should be given the opportunity to eventually become citizens.	47 %
Illegal immigrants should not be given the opportunity to become citizens.	46

Source: Rural Tracker Poll



photo by Shawn Poynter

increases in rural Hispanic population and no clear electoral advantage in exploiting the political division, the issue of immigration faded from view.

Though the Republicans had difficulty in building on advantages they had secured over recent elections, Democrats may have consolidated recent progress in some northern regions, especially in portions of Blue States that had been considered bipartisan. As GOP consultant Bill Greener pointed out, no Republican in a place where it gets cold in April felt safe. In the Northeast, Midwest, and Northwest, Democrats made headway in districts with substantial rural populations. This is not to say that the winning advantages came from the rural voters, but again the diminishing rural margins for Republicans made a difference in places like New York, Rhode Island, and even in Bush states like Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky.

Others saw a change in rural voting changing the face of state politics. As Niel Ritchie of the League of Rural Voters points out, “the shift in rural voters helped create new Democratic majorities in a number of Midwestern and Western state legislatures including Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Colorado, and Montana. Even in North and South Dakota, Republican majorities in the state senates were dramatically reduced due to shifts in the rural vote.”

But another way to look at the Democratic victory is to consider how slim their wins were in a season where the events in Iraq, the plummeting standing of the President, and cascading news of scandals all broke in their favor. One could make the case that the Republicans were facing a perfect storm, and it took a perfect storm to unseat them.

In rural America we may be seeing small but significant shifts in party support. When compared to the last midterm elections in 2002, pollster Anna Greenberg reports that Democrats improved from a 12% deficit to 3%. (This was aided by a decline in rural turnout from 21% to 18% of the electorate.) Whether those rural Democratic gains are real or illusory is the overarching question.



photo by Shawn Poynter

Republican political consultant Bill Greener suggests that rural America is the “emerging political battleground.” He says that the Democratic gains in the inner suburbs (especially in the Northeast), their strength in the cities, and the Republican consolidation of the exurbs, all point to the rural vote as where the fight is headed. “You have the combination of religious faith and ‘we can’ independence working for the Republicans,” Greener wrote. “You have populism and ‘we share a bond’ community working for the Democrats.”

A two-party battle for rural voters could mean an honest opening for a rural agenda that includes more than the farm bill and centers on building a rural economy that fits into a national quest for innovation and sustainability. But just as easily, a high stakes contest for rural voters could devolve into invective and cultural wedge issues that have more to do with splitting off votes than building community. The political challenge may well be in framing the debate so that both parties see more advantages in good policy than in a good fight.

Epilogue

In looking for trends and portents emerging from the 2006 elections, perhaps the most intriguing race was the Texas 23rd. The vast district stretches from the El Paso suburbs eastward along the Mexican border to

Laredo and north to San Antonio, giving it a diverse mix of rural, urban, and suburban voters.

It is a district that was reconfigured when the federal courts examined Tom DeLay's mid-decade redistricting plan. Because of a slight majority of Hispanic adults in the region, the federal courts redrew the district lines to include 60% Hispanic voters. This decision weakened the position of long-term incumbent Henry Bonilla, one of a small number of Latino Republicans in Congress.

Bonilla's chief opponent was a former congressman, Democrat Ciro Rodriguez. Bonilla had served in the House since 1997 and enjoyed a broad advantage in fundraising. On election night running in a blanket primary, Rep. Bonilla looked like the odds-on favorite to keep his seat. He emerged with 49% of the vote. Rodriguez was the closest competitor with just 22%. Since he could not claim a simple majority, Bonilla was forced into a run off.

And here the Democrats may draw encouragement about upcoming election cycles. Rodriguez won the runoff with a surprising 55% of the vote. Having neither the advantage of incumbency nor of deeper pockets, Mr. Rodriguez won in no small part because he was a Democrat and that his party was suddenly seen as winners.

Consistently, voter polls show that people are likely to vote for the candidates they think will win. When Rep. Bonilla went to the polls November 7 he was part of the governing majority. And the Republicans were by definition the winners. Just before Christmas at the time that the Texas runoff was held, the national Democrats were basking in the glow of the party's largest congressional victory since Watergate. A victorious Rodriguez would be in a position to deliver more for his district as part of the party in power. And Bonilla, who had a formidable track record in bringing home the bacon, was now nonetheless a prominent member of a minority party.

What this means for Democrats is that their prospects

in rural states are better. There were 30 seats won by Republicans with majorities of 5% or smaller. (Almost all of these states had sizable rural populations.) Without the power of incumbency, those GOP seats become more vulnerable. Further according to Anna Greenberg, Democrats have begun to target the Red States west of the Mississippi as the next fertile ground for picking up statehouses and governorships. (After the election Denver was chosen over New York as host city for the 2008 Democratic National Convention.) States in the mountain West have been tough going for Democrats since the Lyndon Johnson victory in 1964. But at this point, two years out, the signs are pointing at more contested races in rural regions than the nation has seen in decades.

Dee Davis is president of the Center for Rural Strategies. Tim Marema, vice president, also contributed to this report.

The Center for
Rural Strategies

*Strategic communication in
support of rural communities.*

46 East Main Street, Whitesburg, KY 41858
(606) 632 - 3244 / www.RuralStrategies.org

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