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Rural American Battleground

Democratic front-runner faces scrutiny—and opportunities—in the rural battleground

To: Interested Parties
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Just as rural areas were fiercely contested in 2006, rural America will be competitive in the 2008 presidential election. To be sure, Democratic front-runner Barack Obama faces challenges among rural voters, trailing John McCain by 9 points 50 to 41 percent. But the rural battleground is evenly divided, in partisan terms, between Democrats and Republicans and Hillary Clinton and John McCain are tied at 46 percent piece. These dynamics stand in contrast to 2000 and 2004 when Al Gore and John Kerry lost rural America by 16 and 19 points respectively.¹

This competitiveness reflects the on-going national problems facing the Republican brand, as well as the deep economic anxiety large numbers of rural voters feel. Concerns about the cost of living are intense, particularly gas prices in a part of the country where many must drive long distances to work. Moreover, we see real ambivalence about all of the three presidential choices -- each candidate has a genuine opportunity to define the race on his or her own terms. All told, we can expect a real fight for the heartland, because McCain needs a larger margin than he currently enjoys among rural voters to win nationally and Obama needs to find a way to bring Democratic defectors back into the fold.

The following memo reports on the first in a series of surveys tracking the state of the presidential race in the rural battleground. The next installments will be released after the party conventions and in October. This survey was conducted by Democratic polling firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, in consultation with Republican media firm Greener and Hook on behalf of the Center for Rural Strategies. It surveyed 682 respondents between May 13th and 15th, 2008 from rural parts of the battleground states of New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Florida, Virginia, Colorado, Nevada and New Mexico. The survey carries a margin of error of +/- 3.75 at a 95 percent confidence level.

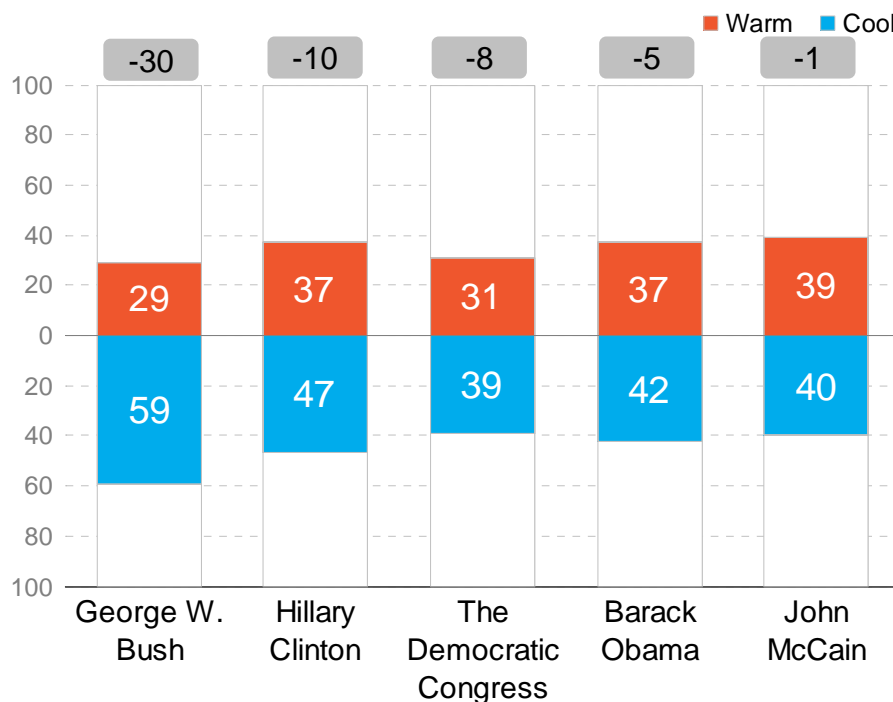
¹ National Election Poll's Exit Polls, conducted by Edison Mitofsky

No Political Heroes in Rural America

It is almost a cliché to say that voters want change, but this could not be more true in rural America. George Bush faces low ratings (29 percent warm, 59 percent cool), a significant decline for a president who won rural America by 19 points, and the Democratic Congress is also not well liked (31 percent warm, 39 percent cool). Few other politicians fare considerably better. The voters are split on McCain (39 percent warm, 40 percent cool) and Obama (37 percent warm, 42 percent cool) with Clinton trailing both her rivals (37 percent warm, 47 percent cool).

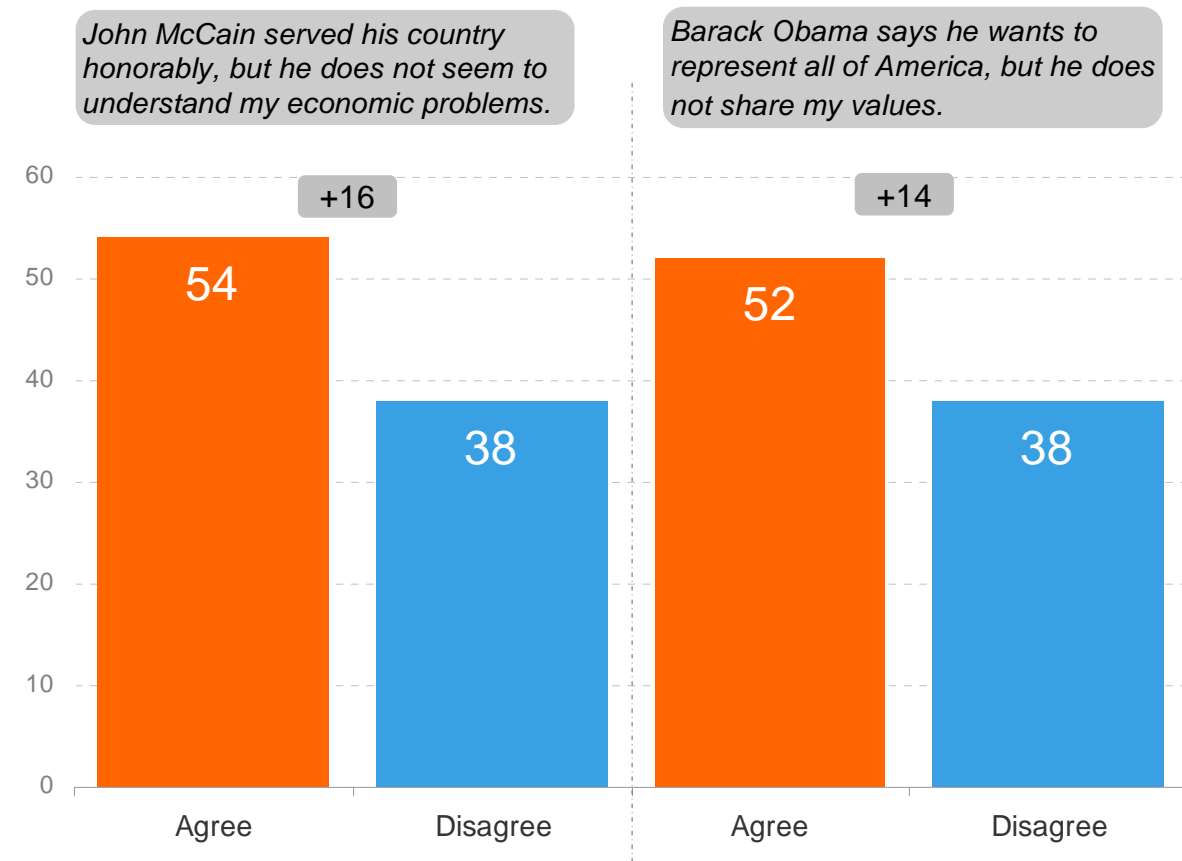
Figure 1: Thermometer Ratings

Now, I'd like to rate your feelings toward some people and organizations, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold.



A majority, moreover, express doubts about both McCain and Obama. Fifty-four percent agree that while McCain has served the country honorably, he does not understand their economic problems, while 52 percent agree that Obama says he wants to represent everybody, but he does not share their values. These signal real challenges for both candidates. For example, 60 percent of women without a college education believe that McCain does not understand their economic challenges; 48 percent of white Democrats either agree (39 percent) that Obama does not share their values or say they do not know (9 percent).

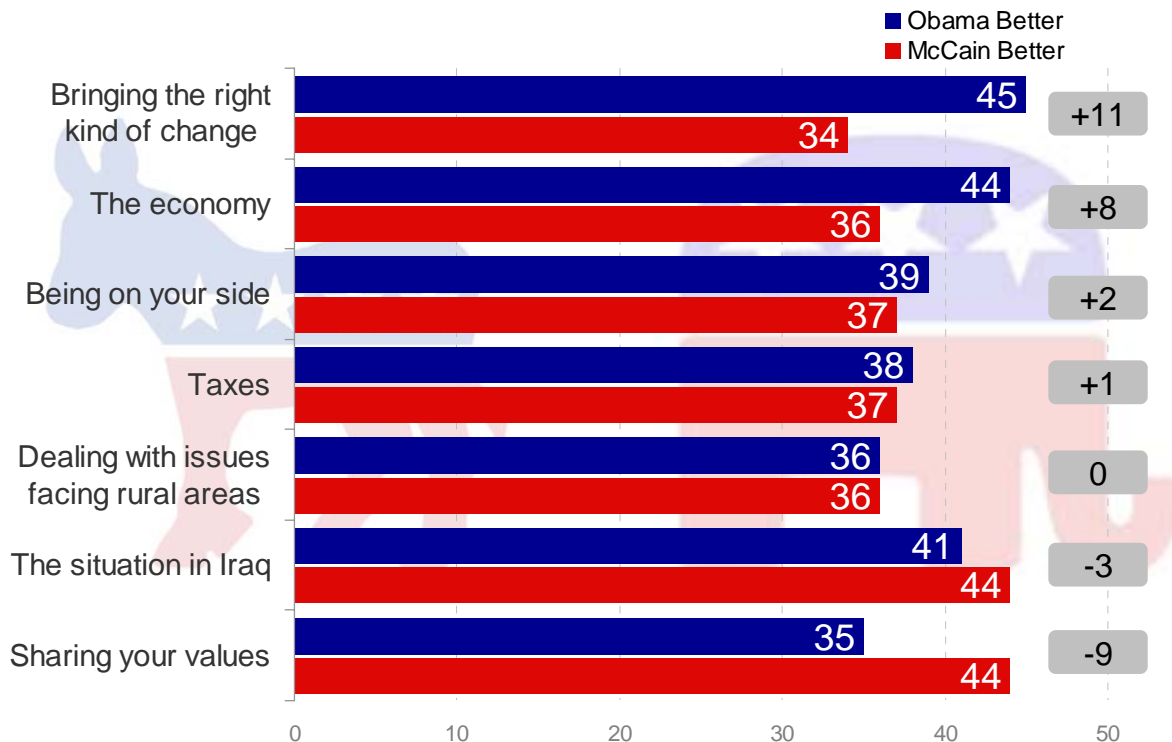
Figure 2: Candidate Doubts



These doubts reflect a real struggle between the competing narratives the presumptive Republican nominee and the Democratic frontrunner bring to the race. McCain holds a 9-point advantage on doing a better job “sharing the values” of rural voters while Obama holds a nearly identical advantage on the economy (8-point advantage) and change (10-point advantage). The outcome of this election could hinge on which of these narratives is ascendant. In addition, voters can expect each candidate to strongly attempt to gain ground where they currently are at a disadvantage (McCain on the economy and Obama on values).

Figure 3: Better Job

Now I am going to ask you something different. I am going to read a list of issues and I want you to tell me whether, overall, you think Barack Obama or John McCain would do a better job with this issue. If you do not know, just tell me and we will move on to the next item.



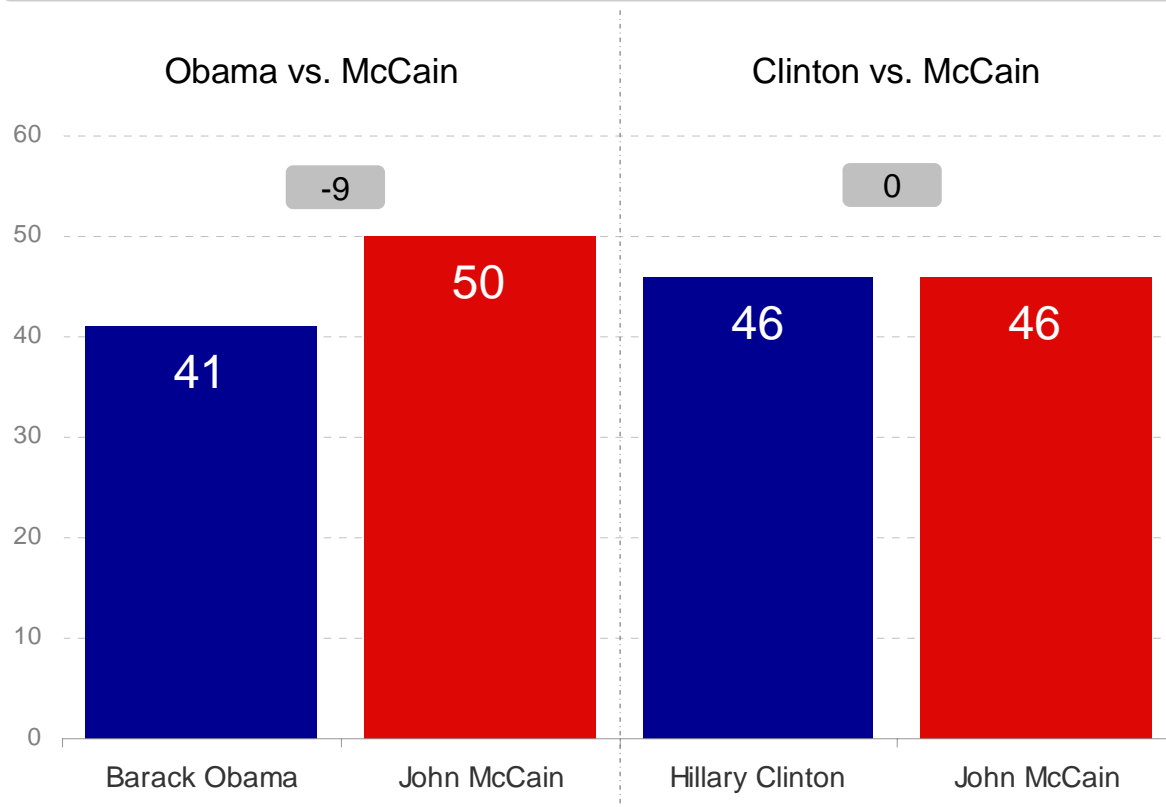
At the same time, strikingly, there is fierce competition in other important issues of the day; rural voters divide evenly on which candidate would do a better job on taxes, Iraq, and dealing with the issues facing rural areas. The candidates should note that nearly a fifth (18 percent) do not know which candidate would do a better job solving rural America’s problems.

Presidential Race Competitive, though Obama Faces Challenges with Democrats

This year, the presidential election looks considerably more competitive in the rural battleground with John McCain leading Barack Obama by 9 points and breaking even versus Hillary Clinton. The dynamics of the race, however, are different depending on whether McCain faces Obama or Clinton. Clinton performs up to partisan expectations; in other words, 46 percent of rural battleground voters identify as Democrats or lean Democratic and she received 46 percent of the vote. Obama, on the other hand, wins only 72 percent of self-identified Democrats (compared to 88 percent for Clinton). Stated another way, McCain is attracting 20 percent of Democrats against Obama, while only garnering 7 percent against Clinton. John McCain faces no such partisan underperformance, winning 90 percent of Republicans against Clinton and 86 percent against Obama.

Figure 3: General Election Matchups

I know it is a long way off, but if the election for president were held today and the candidates were Democrat Barack Obama/Hillary Clinton and Republican John McCain, for whom would you vote?



On the other hand, in a sign of how competitive the rural battleground will be, Obama and Clinton are splitting the independent vote against McCain relatively evenly. Moreover, there are real geographic dynamics to the rural vote. Obama fares considerably worse in the eastern portion of the Midwest and the South, while performing better in the West and Northeast.

The Pocketbook Recession

At present, the unemployment rate in this country stands at 5 percent. In Bill Clinton’s best years as President, the unemployment rate stood at 4 percent. And yet, the economy has emerged as the leading issue of the cycle, in rural America and elsewhere. In a May 13-15 Gallup tracking survey, 41 percent of Americans describe the economy as “poor” and 84 percent believe the economy is getting worse.

The main cause for voters’ economic anxiety is the higher cost of living, more specifically gas prices and, recently, the cost of food as well. The economic cost of the Iraq war and the cost of health care also play a major role here. Despite the conservative leanings of rural Americans, government spending and taxes play a very small role in driving their perceptions of what is wrong economically with America.

■ **Figure 4: Economic Problems**

I am going to read you a list of problems relating to the economy. After I read the list, please tell me which TWO are the most important problems facing our economy.

High energy and gas prices	50
Too much money spent on Iraq	25
The high cost of health care	23
Jobs moving to foreign countries	22
Prices of necessities like groceries rising faster than wages	22
Government spending and the federal deficit	16
The growing gap between the rich and everybody else	11
Lack of good-paying jobs	10
Taxes are too high	9
No opportunities for young people in this area	4
Other/Don't know/Refused	6

Contrary to popular belief, a relatively small fraction of rural voters earn their living from the land and are directly involved in food production -- just 15 percent in this survey. Nonetheless, we explored the issue of rising food costs, given accounts linking it to ethanol production and renewable fuel standards. By far, rural voters are more likely to blame rising fuel costs than ethanol production.

■ **Figure 5: Reason for Rising Food Prices**

Which of the following do you blame the most for the rising cost of food in this country and the world?

	Total	Farming Income
Increased cost of gasoline and fuel	52	39
Increased use of grain for ethanol	24	28
Increased demand in China and India	18	26
Corporate takeover of food production	15	11
Fewer farmers and farms	10	18
Increased use of grain for animal feed	3	2
None	2	3
All	2	1
Don't know/Refused	6	4

Rural America faces long-term economic problems, from a dwindling manufacturing base to generations of rural youth seeking opportunities elsewhere. Despite record prices for some grain-based commodities, relatively little of this new “wealth” finds its way to average rural families. This is the economy that McCain would do well to address and where Obama can potentially increase these voters’ desire for change.