

Center for Rural Strategies

PRESS RELEASE

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Rural battleground shifts toward Democrats

The rural vote has shifted in favor of Democratic congressional candidates in the last month, indicating Republicans are losing ground with a key constituency, according to the Center for Rural Strategies Poll.

The poll of rural voters in 41 contested congressional districts found that likely voters preferred Democratic candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives by a margin of 13 points, 52 percent to 39 percent. In mid-September, the same population of voters was evenly split between the two parties at 45 percent each.

In contested Senate races in states with significant rural populations, rural voters preferred Democrats by 4 points, 47 to 43 percent, reversing the 4-point lead Republican Senate candidates held among rural voters in mid-September. But those results fall within the poll's margin of error.

"We're seeing a real erosion in Republican support among rural voters, and that could determine who controls Congress," said Democrat Anna Greenberg, one of the poll's analysts. "There has been a perfect storm of issues that have led rural voters toward Democratic candidates -- the war in Iraq, economic struggle in rural communities and a muddling of 'moral values' because of the Mark Foley scandal."

"The numbers in this poll have to be disturbing to any Republican involved in the upcoming election," said Bill Greener, a Republican strategist and consultant on the poll. "Republican success has relied on strong support from rural voters, and this survey indicates we don't have that support today. We have to do better if we are going to reach our objectives on Election Day."

The war in Iraq was the top issue on voters' minds, cited by 38 percent of the respondents. Concern about the war has risen significantly since mid-September, when 28 percent of rural voters cited it as a top issue.

Jobs and the economy were cited as a top issue by 25 percent of the people polled.

Concern about terrorism and national security declined in the past month. That issue

was cited by 21 percent of the respondents, down from 26 percent in September.

Three-quarters of respondents said the congressional page scandal involving former Representative Mark Foley was not a major factor in their votes. More than half said it didn't matter which party's candidate they voted for when it came to moral issues.

President Bush's job approval remained higher among rural voters than the nation as a whole, although it dropped by 2 percentage points since September from 47 to 45 percent.

The poll was commissioned by the Center for Rural Strategies, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization whose mission is to encourage attention to concerns of rural communities.

"The rural vote will likely determine who controls Congress in January, just as it determined the last two presidential elections," said Dee Davis, president of Rural Strategies. "This election may come down to which candidates can articulate a national policy that includes a fair shake for rural people."

The poll was conducted Oct. 22-24 among 500 likely voters living in rural parts of 41 contested congressional districts and six states with competitive Senate races. The margin of error is 4.4 percent at a 95 percent confidence level. The sample size is smaller for House and Senate preference questions (293 and 314 respectively), resulting in a margin of error for those questions of 5.7 and 5.5 percent respectively.

For a list of districts and states polled, along with other analysis and poll data, visit the Center for Rural Strategies' website at www.ruralstrategies.org.

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NOTE: Anna Greenberg, Bill Greener and Dee Davis welcome interviews. To arrange one, contact Tim Marema (865/494-7980 or [HYPERLINK "mailto:tim@ruralstrategies.org"](mailto:tim@ruralstrategies.org) tim@ruralstrategies.org).