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Rural American Battleground

McCain-Palin See Real Gains in Rural Battleground, But Do Not Yet Close the Deal

To: Interested Parties
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Since our last look at the rural battleground in May, John McCain sharply improved his profile, achieving a net 16-point gain in favorability and gained on Obama on issues ranging from “being on your side,” “representing your values,” and even “bringing the right kind of change.” His pick for vice president remains controversial in some circles, but is very popular in the rural community. Sarah Palin is the most popular of the four national candidates; these voters believe she represents their rural values, and a majority believe she is qualified. Moreover, Republican identification grows in the rural battleground, reflecting energized Republican enthusiasm for this ticket.

Despite these outcomes, McCain’s electoral movement is almost imperceptible. He led Obama 50 to 41 percent in May; he leads Obama 51 – 41 percent currently. This reflects one important internal dynamic and one broader trend in the rural America. Internally, the Obama campaign at least managed to lock down rural Democrats. We do not see nearly the same defection as we saw in the base four months ago, when the Democratic primary was still in some doubt. More broadly, rural America’s deep economic anxiety peaked with recent events in Wall Street and Washington and may serve as a brake to McCain’s momentum as these voters try to figure out which candidate can best address their most important issue. McCain enjoys an 11 point lead overall in this race; on the economy, however, rural voters divide fairly evenly between these two candidates. McCain has gained on Obama on the economy, as on other traits, but this advantage remains modest.

Historically, the kinds of improvement we see here in McCain’s favorability and his traits relative to Obama sometimes preview a more significant electoral momentum. Importantly, Bush held a 11-point lead over Kerry in the rural battleground in September of 2004 and went on to win the national rural vote by 19 points.¹ This race could move in a similar direction. But if the Obama camp can make a convincing economic case in the next six weeks, an argument that not only holds McCain and Bush accountable for the current economic situation in the country, but also provides a compelling alternative that is specific to rural economic needs, rural America could deliver a more competitive outcome.

The following memo reports on the second in a series of surveys tracking the state of the presidential race in the rural battleground. The last installments will be released in October. This survey was conducted by Democratic polling firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, in consultation with a Republican media firm Greener and Hook on behalf of the Center for Rural

¹ Bush did not, however, improve on this margin in the rural battleground (54-45 percent Bush in the 17-rural battleground states).

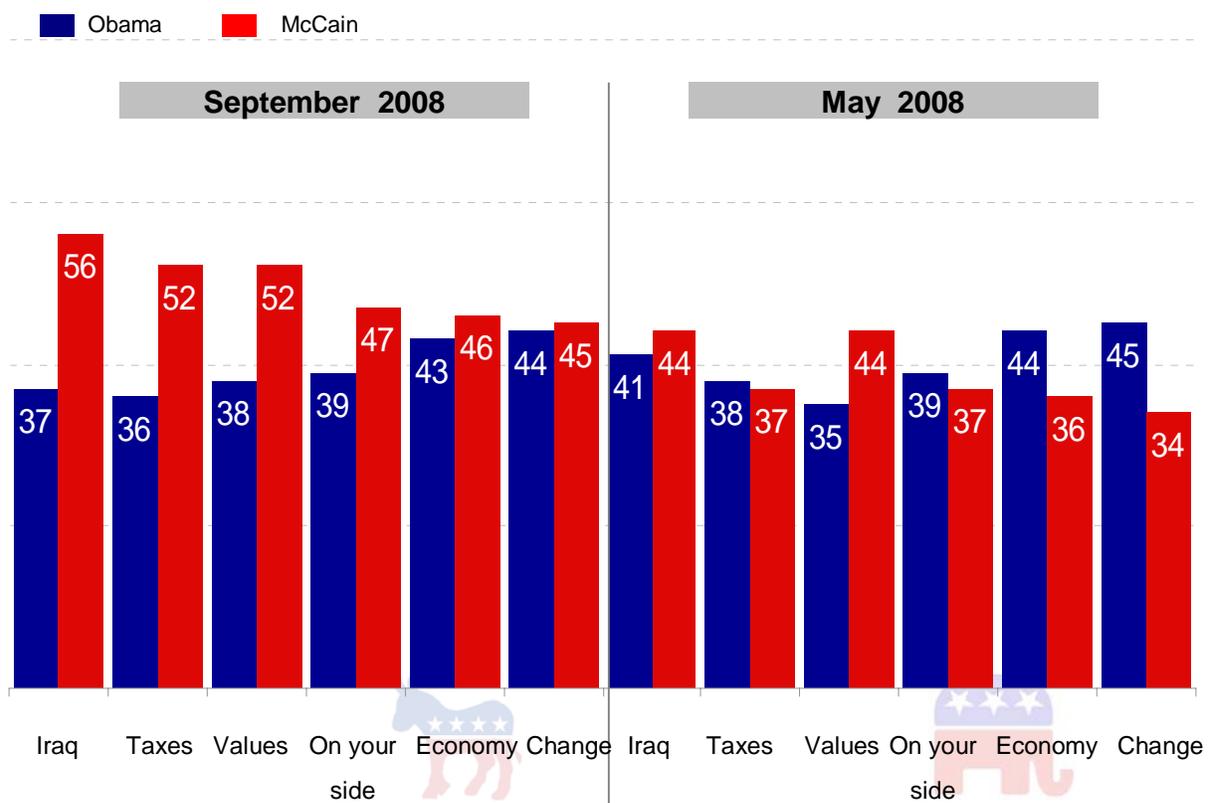
Strategies. It surveyed 742 respondents between September 16th and 18th, 2008 from rural parts of the battleground states of New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Florida, Virginia, Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada. The survey carries a margin of error of +/- 3.75 at a 95 percent confidence level.

McCain Improves On Multiple Fronts

John McCain has made impressive gains since May. His overall favorability jumps from 39 percent warm (positive), 40 percent cool (negative) to 52 percent warm, 38 percent cool currently. Much of this reflects base consolidation, as we see a 30 point net improvement in McCain's scores among Republicans, but we also see the most improvement among Independent voters. Barack Obama still faces significant challenges here (41 percent warm, 46 percent cool, largely unchanged from last time), though like McCain, he has rallied his base (now 81 percent positive among Democrats).

As worrisome for the Obama camp, McCain has moved on every issue and trait tested. This includes Obama's branded "change" message, as well as "being on your side". The fact that rural America picks no winner on the economy and dealing with issues facing rural areas leaves open the possibility of a more competitive outcome in rural America than we saw four years ago.

■ **Figure 1:** Traits



Palin An Asset in Rural Battleground

The rural battleground likes Sarah Palin. She draws the fewest negatives of any of the four national candidates and easily outperforms Joe Biden in favorability: 48 percent warm, 33 percent cool, compared to 30 – 41 percent for the Delaware Senator. By a 50 to 31 percent margin, voters say they are more likely to support McCain as a result of this pick.² Nonetheless, the data in rural America helps underscore some common misperceptions of the public's reaction to Palin.

- She may have energized some women, but on balance, she has had a greater impact among men than among women; she did not steal Hillary Clinton's base.
- Voters generally like her personally, but that affinity does not translate entirely into a belief that she is qualified to be vice president.

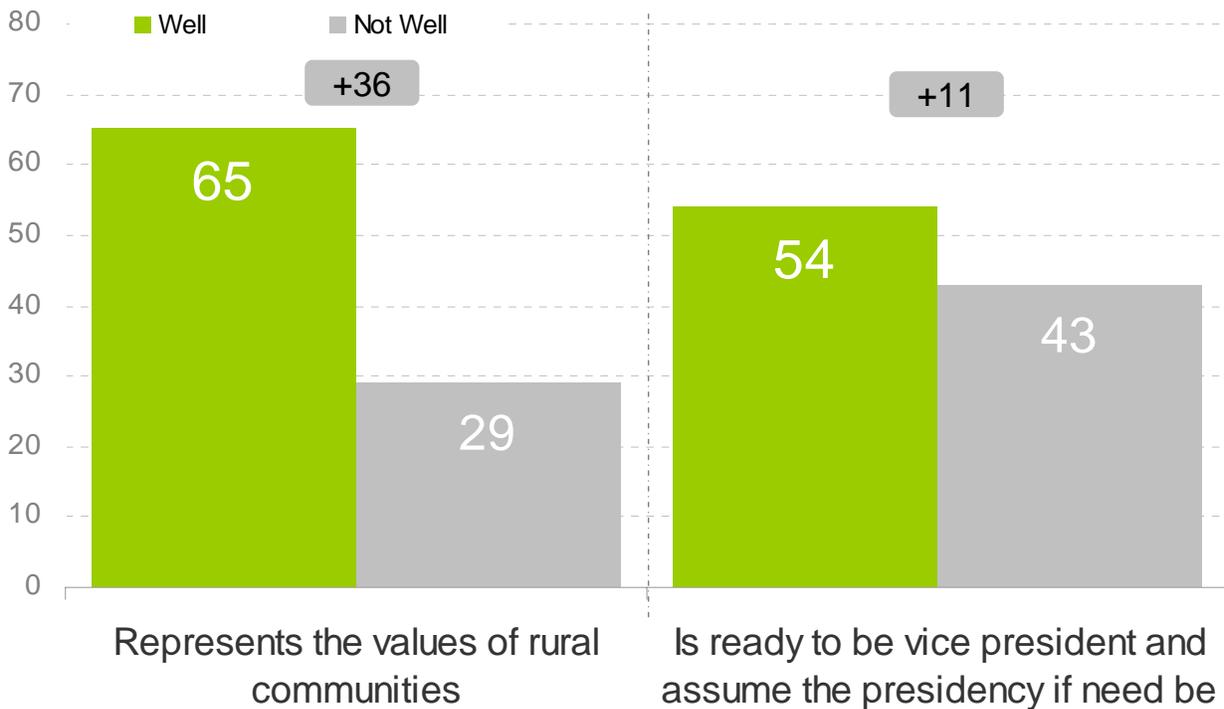
Overall, she enjoys a 46 percent warm, 34 percent cool score among rural women. Among rural men, however, she improves to 52 – 32 percent warm. Notably, she does measurably better among blue collar (non-college) women than among college educated women in the battleground. However, among voters who describe their feelings toward Hillary in favorable terms, she drops to 21 percent favorable, 59 percent unfavorable. These are, of course, mostly Democrats, but she does no better among these voters than John McCain.

Her appeal in rural areas stems in great measure from her identification with rural values. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of rural voters believe the phrase "represents the values of rural communities" describes Palin well. This number is well beyond her political support in this region of the country. A majority, albeit a smaller majority, also believe she is ready for high office.

² McCain wins 51 percent of the vote share, so the added value of this pick needs to be understood in this context.

Figure 2: Palin Identifies with Rural Voters

For each phrase please tell me whether that describes Sarah Palin very well, well, not too well, or not well at all

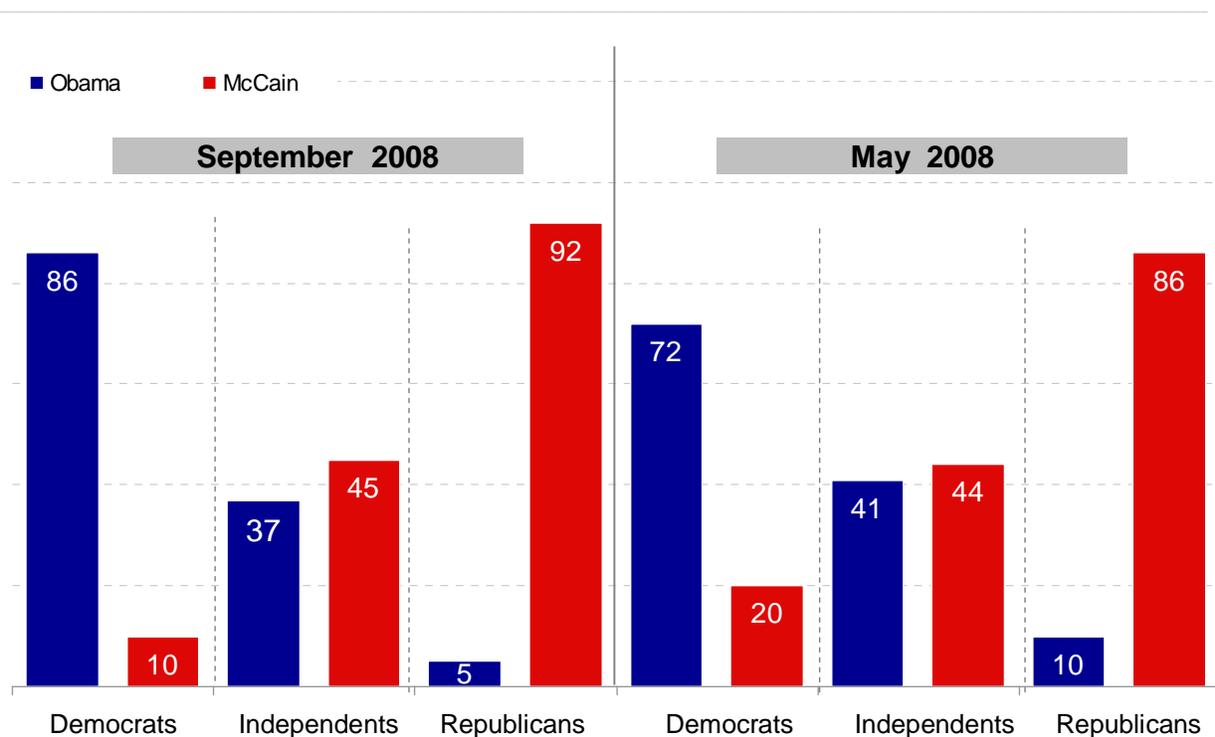


Nonetheless, the rural battlegrounds assessment of Palin’s qualifications is more generous than in other parts of the country. In a national CBS News/New York Times survey taken August 10-11, 45 percent of voters said Palin was qualified to step in as president if she had to, 46 percent disagreed.

No Movement in the Trial Heat

Despite a much stronger profile, Palin’s appeal in rural communities and even a more Republican sample in this survey, John McCain has not gained much ground on Obama since May. Some of this is an artifact of what was going on then. In May, Obama was still struggling with the primary and, at the time, losing rural America badly to Hillary Clinton. Since then, he has picked up 30 points in the margin among Democrats and nearly unified the Democratic base. McCain also improved in his Republican support, but did not have the same room to grow. Independents in the rural battleground have not moved toward McCain, though we see some bleeding in Obama’s support.

■ **Figure 3:** Vote by Party ID



In addition, McCain consolidated regular church-goers (+7 to 60 percent McCain) and gained among non-college women, where Obama ceded a four point lead in May to face a 9 point (51 – 42 percent) deficit currently. However, among voters who describe the economy and jobs as one of their most important issues, Obama holds a 53 – 39 percent lead over McCain. Importantly, this is a Democratic leaning group (42 percent Democratic or lean Democratic), but it also represents half the rural electorate. In hold of these voters, Obama has helped stave off a much more significant erosion in his electoral support.

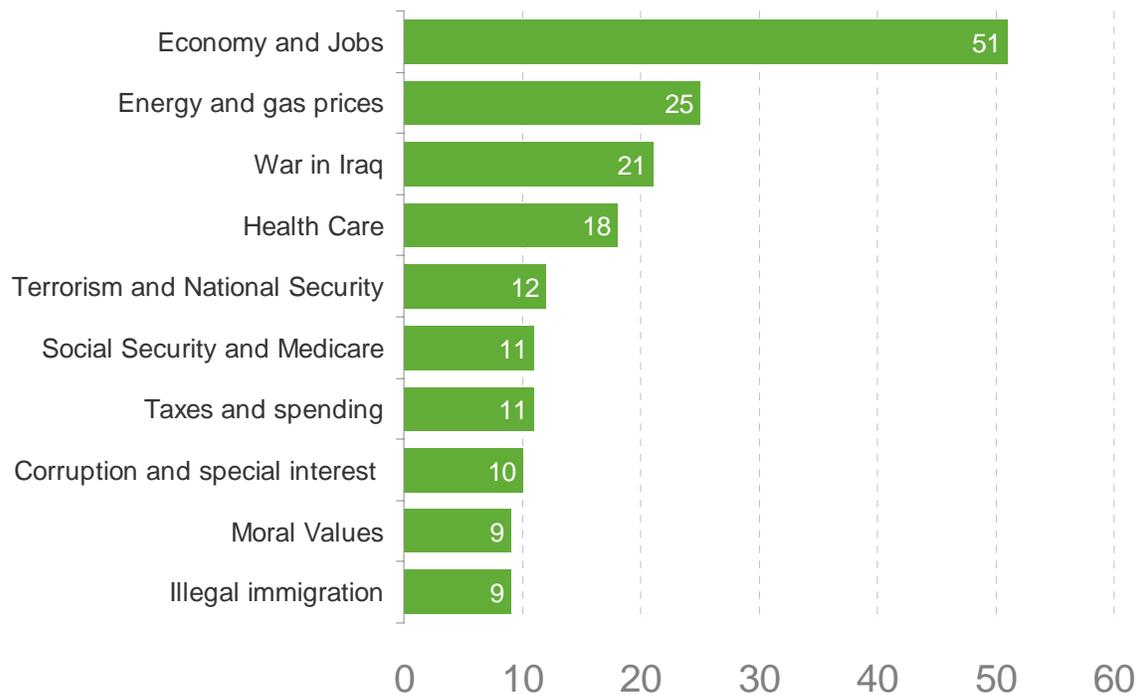
Economic Determinism

Many analysts of rural voting patterns often argue that the vote in rural areas comes down to whether voters vote “for Republican values” or “Democratic economic policy.” This analysis assumes that, in these voters’ eyes, Republicans have a monopoly on values and Democrats are the only party speaking to these voters’ economic concerns. Neither is true. But it also is clear that values concerned voters tend to vote more Republican and economy concerned voters tend to vote more Democratic. In 2008, economic concerned voters outnumber values concerned voters by a considerable margin.

A majority of voters identify the economy and jobs as one of the most important issues for the President and for Congress. Economic squeeze issues also dominate these voters’ concerns (25 percent mention energy and gas prices, 18 percent mention health care). Only 9 percent mention moral values.

■ **Figure 4: Issue Concerns**

Please tell me which ONE or TWO of these concerns you think the President and Congress should be paying the most attention to



More revealing, voters prefer “a candidate for President who will improve the economy,” over a “a candidate for president who reflects my values,” by a 61 to 36 margin. In 2006, rural voters in a national survey divided more evenly between leaders who will improve the economy (52 percent) and leaders who share my values (45 percent).

More voters trust McCain over Obama to work on the economy than was the case in May, but his margin on this issue (just 46 percent to 43 percent) is the most important issue of the election, and is modest at best. Moreover, voters prefer him over a candidate from Chicago by just one point on “dealing with the issues facing rural areas.” Besides “change” these are McCain’s two worst traits, relative to Obama.

Conclusion

It is very possible that this survey caught rural voters at moment in time when they are poised to break for John McCain in a big way, potentially exceeding Bush’s margin in 2004 (19 points nationally, 11 points in the battleground). An energized Republican base, the first truly “rural” national candidate these voters have seen since Carter ran, his movement on a number of measures in this survey could easily suggest as much. However, his inability to really crack these voters’ economic concerns has likely held him back.

Rural Survey Findings

Obama, of course, faces a significant challenge here as well. On paper, Obama should own the economy, as he provides a Democratic alternative to the Republican status quo. Yet he only manages a tie against a candidate who admitted a limited skill-set when it comes to economics.

These candidates have six weeks to make their economic case to these voters. How well each succeeds will likely determine how competitive the end result is in the rural battleground.