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## A New Energy Future The Role of Energy in the 2006 Election

**To:** LCV

**From:** Greenberg Quinlan Rosner

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In choosing the Democrats in 2006, voters unquestionably sounded a call for change, voicing their frustration with President Bush and Congress' failure to set the country on a course towards national and economic security. In many ways, Iraq stood at the center of this story; voters renounced the Republican "stay the course" policy in Iraq. They cited Iraq as the most important issue in their vote decisions and those who cited Iraq voted overwhelmingly Democratic, 75 – 23 percent.

Yet, this election tells a story that goes beyond Iraq and speaks to voter frustrations with a self-serving Congress. On election day, voters gave the Congress an abysmal 29 percent job approval rating in the Democracy Corps/Campaign for America's Future post-election survey. Voters expressed frustration with a Republican Congress that catered to corporate special interests, most notably the oil industry.

At the same time, alternative energy allowed Democrats to offer a positive, future-oriented vision for the country. Without question, this election represented more of a repudiation of Republicans than an embrace of Democrats, but Democrats made significant gains on having new ideas and a future-oriented approach.

As the following points illustrate, energy played an important role in this election and it should play a key part in crossing the partisan polarization that voters rejected in this election. Its centrality to the key issues of our time – national security and economic prosperity – is unmistakable to voters.

### Lessons from the 2006 Election

- **Campaign ads highlighted energy issues in a prominent and unprecedented way this election cycle and had a huge impact on the campaigns.** Never before have we seen so many ads challenging candidates who sided with oil interests, who took campaign money from them and voted for taxpayer handouts to oil companies and against tough anti-price gouging laws. We saw these ads make profound impacts on races, as the issue was used to tie the incumbents to a Congress voters viewed as self-serving. In an important

departure from the past, candidates also used alternative energy as a positive issue in this year's campaigns, which will be discussed in further detail below.

- **Candidates elevated energy in a broader narrative about building a strong, secure economy with good jobs.** Candidates recognized that energy can be a big part of the debate over how America advances economically, in both micro and macro terms: how we develop good American jobs, how America leads the world technologically and economically, and how we help Americans save money and maintain their standard of living. From Governor Ed Rendell in Pennsylvania to Governor-elect Chet Culver in Iowa to Congressman-elect Jerry McNerney in California's 11<sup>th</sup> congressional district as well as dozens of others, successful candidates made clean energy a core element of their vision for America leading in the new economy.
- **Alternative energy played a critical role in helping Democrats improve voters' perceptions of them on having new ideas and looking out for the future.** By the end of the election, Democrats enjoyed a 23-point advantage, 53 – 30 percent, on which party has new ideas for addressing the country's problems, a dramatic shift from January 2005 when Democrats had a slight 43 – 40 percent advantage. Similarly, the Democrats enjoyed an 8-point advantage on election day on which party is future-oriented, 46 – 38 percent, a 9-point shift from January 2005. Democrats' support for investing in alternative energy helped foster this change. It allowed candidates to not only be against the status quo, but in favor of a hopeful, optimistic vision for the country, one that will lead to energy security, job creation, and environmental protection.
- **On election day, swing voters who voted Democratic were most concerned about Republicans' failure on energy and gas prices.** Not only did the candidates talk about energy more than ever before, but voters heard the message and voted on it. Overall, 28 percent of voters cited Republicans' failure to do anything about oil companies and gas prices as their top concern about Republicans, the top concern along with Republicans' support for the Iraq War (29 percent). *Importantly, voters who voted Democrat in the election for Congress, but considered voting Republican, pointed to Republicans' failure on energy and gas prices as their clear top concern about Republicans.* Forty-eight percent of these swing voters cited this issue as their top concern about Republicans, 20 points higher than any other issue. Energy and gas prices were particularly salient for key electoral groups who moved towards the Democrats this year:
  - *Independents.* Republicans lost the center in this year's election with Independents favoring Democrats by 18 points this year according to the exit polls, whereas they split evenly in 2002 and 2004. Thirty-four percent of Independents cited Republicans' failure on oil companies and gas prices as their top concern about Republicans, exceeding any other issue.
  - *Voters under 30.* Voters under 30 not only increased their proportion of the electorate compared to the last mid-term election, but they also moved heavily towards Democrats. Democrats won the youth vote by 22 points according to the exit polls, compared to just 9 points in 2004 and 2 points in 2002. Forty-seven percent of them pointed to Republicans' failure on energy and gas prices as their top worry about Republicans, 10 points higher than any other issue.
  - *Hispanics.* Hispanics swung heavily towards the Democrats, favoring them by

40 points this year. The Republican focus on illegal immigration and the way in which they attacked the issue likely deserve the most credit for returning Democratic support among Hispanics to Clinton-era levels. However, 48 percent of Hispanics cited oil companies and gas prices as their biggest doubt about Republicans this year.

- *Late deciders.* Finally, 38 percent of voters who made their congressional vote decision in the final week cited oil companies and gas prices as their top concern about Republicans, again higher than any other issue.
- **A new energy future.** Alternative energy not only emerged as an important campaign issue that helped tell a narrative about the change voters want, it also has the potential to generate bipartisan solutions. As we stated in Democracy Corps memos in August and September, voters point to energy independence as their top national security concern and they overwhelmingly favor proposals that invest in alternative energy as their preferred solution. Moreover, the post-election survey shows voters overwhelmingly support government taking the lead in promoting alternative energy rather than allowing businesses to make major energy investment decisions (66 – 29 percent).

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## Appendix A: Methodology

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc. designed and administered a post-election telephone survey conducted by professional interviewers. The survey included a sample of 2020 voters including 1170 from 50 Republican held swing districts. This analysis is based on that survey, previous Democracy Corps surveys and exit polls from this year's and prior elections.