

*Rising Concern:
A Report on American Voter Attitudes on
Hunger and Poverty in 2006*

By
Tom Freedman and Jim McLaughlin
With Nicholas Gossen, Ed Gerrish, Chip Mertz and Stuart Polk

*Based on Bipartisan Research
Conducted For The*

ALLIANCE

TO END

HUNGER

With Generous Support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
April 2006

I. INTRODUCTION

Concern about hunger and poverty are on the rise in America. Economic insecurity, political dissatisfaction, and a series of natural disasters have contributed to a substantial increase in the number of voters who consider hunger and poverty to be important issues for the United States to address. Despite the apparent polarization that characterizes the current political discourse, the American public has a surprisingly unified view of the importance of hunger and how it should be reduced. Most Americans believe hunger and poverty are genuine problems, approaching the issues with a mixture of optimism that the problem can be solved and skepticism about the effectiveness of current efforts to do so. In this context, organizations that work on hunger and poverty must be aware of these competing emotions and take advantage of them to create a successful message.

Since 2002, the Alliance to End Hunger has periodically commissioned public opinion polls as part of its Hunger Message Project. While helping the poor and the hungry is considered a moral issue by members of the Alliance and by millions of Americans, the means by which resources are given to help is ultimately a largely political issue. In order to build support for efforts to help the hungry, advocates must be aware of how those policies fit into the current political context. The goal of these polls has been to gauge public opinion about hunger issues and to provide the Alliance's members and the public with helpful research about building a politically compelling message.

This report is divided into four sections: (I) a brief description of the methodology of the poll; (II) a description of the current status of public perceptions of hunger and poverty; (III) an analysis of optimal words, facts and arguments that shape voter attitudes; and (IV) an analysis of public opinion on specific upcoming policies related to poverty and hunger.

II. METHODOLOGY

The project employed a bipartisan set of professional consultants and gave them independence to study the problem and report back whatever findings they discovered. The research team consisted of Jim McLaughlin, who helped conduct the polling for Bob Dole's 1996 presidential race, and has been a leading public opinion researcher for Republican candidates and organizations, including the National Republican Congressional Committee; and Tom Freedman, who served as a senior advisor to President Clinton, was a senior aide for political strategy in President Clinton's 1996 campaign, and currently serves as a consultant to Democratic elected officials. Mr. McLaughlin worked against Mr. Freedman in the 1996 presidential race, and the team analyzed issues from distinctly different partisan viewpoints.

The poll consisted of 1,000 likely general election voters in the United States and was conducted between March 27 and 29, 2006. All interviews were conducted via telephone by professional interviewers. Interview selection was random within predetermined election units – in this case, the fifty states. These units were structured to correlate with actual voter turnout in a general election. This poll of has an accuracy of +/- 3.1% at a 95% confidence interval.

III. WHERE WE STAND

Concern about hunger and poverty are on the rise

Over the past four years American voters have grown more concerned about hunger and more pessimistic about efforts to reduce hunger and poverty in the United States. Between July 2002 and March 2006, the number of Americans citing hunger and poverty as the single most important issue in deciding their vote for Congress or U.S. Senate more than doubled, from 4% to 10%. While hunger and poverty are not commonly considered top-tier political issues, they still perform better than other mainstay issues of political debate, including declining moral values (3%), fighting crime and drugs (2%), and protecting the environment (2%). Indeed, poverty and hunger rank just behind defense and terrorism (13%) in respondents' stated priorities. Furthermore, 85% of voters said that a candidate's position on reducing hunger was "important" in deciding their vote for Congress, up from 74% in 2003. While Republicans are somewhat less likely to consider a candidate's position on hunger to be important than Democrats (76% vs. 90%), concern about hunger transcends party lines and demographic categories.

The increasing political importance of hunger and poverty reflects a sense that the problem is getting worse, rather than better. When asked whether the hunger problem in the United States was getting better or worse, 48% of voters responded it was getting worse, while only 8% said they thought the problem was getting better. Voters are even more negative in their assessment of hunger in the world – 63% said they thought the problem was getting worse and only 7% thought it was getting better.

The government is not doing enough to reduce hunger and poverty

There is strong agreement among American voters that the government currently spends too little to reduce hunger in the United States: 62% of voters say the government spends too little, while only 9% say it spends too much. There are strong partisan differences in responses to this question, however. Democrats are much more likely to believe the U.S. government spends too little (80%) than Republicans (41%), with Independents falling squarely in the middle (62%). Voters are slightly more divided on the issue of U.S. government spending on world hunger: 47% believe the government spends too little to reduce world hunger, while 19% believe it spends too much. Even so, the percentage of voters saying the government spends too little on world hunger has gone up from 27% in 2003 to 47% in 2006, a dramatic increase.

While most American voters agree that the government's response to hunger and poverty is lacking, there is disagreement about whether the problem is lack of effort or lack of success. When asked to evaluate "our government's efforts to reduce hunger," 46% said that "the government is not making a big effort to reduce hunger," while 33% said "the government is making a big effort to reduce hunger, but it is not working." Only 14% thought "the government is making a big effort to reduce hunger, and it is working." Responses to this question showed one of the largest partisan divisions in the poll.

Based on what you know of our government's efforts to reduce hunger, which of the following comes closer to your own personal opinion?

	Republican	Independent	Democrat
Big effort/working	24	14	8
Big effort/not working	40	35	27
Not a big effort	27	47	60

Voters seek multiple approaches against hunger and poverty

American voters have a wide range of opinions about which organizations are most effective at fighting hunger: 48% said they thought government at some level would be most effective (federal 22%, local 15%, state 10%), while 43% said they preferred non-governmental organizations, such as not-for-profits (24%) and religious organizations (19%). This wide spread of responses reflects a broad belief that no one type of organization has the solution to hunger. Instead, voters will likely respond to proposals with coordinated efforts that draw on the strengths of each of these groups.

It is worth noting that there is a substantial generational gap in opinions about which organizations are most effective at fighting hunger, perhaps reflecting differing generational experiences with government hunger programs.

When it comes to fighting the hunger problem here in the United States, who do you think would be the most effective?

	Government	Non-profits
40 or younger	58	33
Older than 40	44	48

Natural disasters have raised awareness

Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters have had a profound affect on public opinion in the past year. When asked an open-ended question about whether there was any major event in the past year that made them think about hunger and poverty, 40% of respondents replied that Hurricane Katrina (or hurricanes generally) brought these issues to their attention. Another 13% mentioned the tsunami and other natural disasters. When asked directly whether “the Hurricane Katrina disaster made you more aware of poverty in America,” 72% agreed. These findings show that voters see the catastrophes of the past year not simply as natural disasters, but as reflections of broader social problems.

IV. MESSAGING

Moral arguments are essential

There are many ways to talk about hunger and to argue for programs that reduce hunger and poverty. In general, the arguments fall into two categories: moral and pragmatic. This survey indicates that both generate substantial support among American voters, but a moral call is essential

for effective messaging on this issue. When asked to identify the best reason for working to reduce hunger and poverty in the United States, the top response was “it is the moral and right thing to do” (29%), with a close second being the more pragmatic “it can help people escape from poverty and get better jobs” (27%). When asked the same question about world hunger, 36% said the best reason was “it is the moral and right thing to do,” while 22% said “it can help people escape poverty and better their lives.”

People who attend church very regularly and those who rarely or never attend both respond well to an explicit moral message (“it is the moral and right thing to do”). A more implicit moral message (“no child in a prosperous country like the United States should ever go hungry”) is more broadly appealing across the board.

	Church/religious service attendance				
	More than once a week	Once a week	Couple of times a month	Once a month	Rarely/ Never
Percent who say the best reason to reduce hunger is “It is the moral and right thing to do”	36	28	22	16	32
Percent who say the best reason to reduce hunger is “No child...should go hungry”	25	27	34	27	27

Old concerns about fraud are dimming

The Reagan-era images of “welfare queens” and food stamp fraud have eased somewhat in public perceptions. Most American voters see recipients of food aid as needy and deserving. For example, only 13% of American voters believe that people who use anti-hunger programs in the U.S. “could really get along without help,” while 79% believe that “most people who use the programs really need the help.” Furthermore, only 25% of voters believe that people are hungry because of lack of effort on their part, versus 64% who believe that people are hungry because of circumstances beyond their control. Indeed, even among people who don’t think government programs make a real difference in helping hungry people, many more people blame government inefficiency (42%) than blame individual fraud (13%).

This acceptance that beneficiaries of hunger programs genuinely need help provides a strong leverage point for discussing benefit increases. For example, 91% of voters agree that “families who get food stamps should be able to afford a nutritious diet” and 65% say they “strongly agree.” Likewise, 94% of Americans – essentially the entire country – agree that “people who work should be able to feed their families.”

Interestingly, there are no significant differences along party or ideological lines when it comes to assessing the effectiveness of hunger programs. Republicans, Democrats and Independents all see

eye to eye on how much waste there is in hunger programs, how effective they are, and how realistic plans to cut hunger are.

Public is already convinced that hunger is a real problem

In general, people will only consider arguments if they consider the underlying facts to be credible. In order to determine which statistics about hunger were most believable to American voters, our research tested a number of commonly used statistics that illustrate the magnitude of the hunger problem. The American voter is almost universally willing to believe that hunger is a major problem in the U.S. and throughout the world.

Please tell me how believable you think each of the following statements are. Would you say very believable, somewhat believable, or not believable at all?

	Total believable	Not believable
In developing countries, six million children die every year from illnesses related to hunger and malnutrition.	90	3
Everyday, about 30,000 children die in developing countries from preventable causes, half of them from hunger.	90	5
More than 800 million people in the world go hungry.	89	6
Thirty-eight million Americans live in households that struggle to put food on the table.	87	7
One in four American children under the age of six live in households that struggle to put food on the table.	86	10

Long-term solutions are essential

While people acknowledge the importance of anti-hunger programs, they are also keenly aware of the need for long-term solutions to the problem. In general, voters strongly favor messages that include the importance of self-sufficiency. For example, when asked which is most important when it comes to fighting hunger in the United States, 64% chose “creating a strong economy so that people can get better jobs” versus 30% who chose “supporting programs that directly help hungry and poor people.” Similarly, voters prefer raising the minimum wage to increasing food stamps as a way to reduce hunger by a margin of 69% to 22%. This is not to suggest that voters are not supportive of anti-hunger programs, only that they must be coupled with other initiatives that work towards a comprehensive and sustainable solution. In the international arena, a plurality of voters (38%) said that the most effective way to fight hunger in other countries was to “help farmers in poor countries produce more food.” In other words, sustainability and self-sufficiency are central to voters’ views of how hunger programs should work.

Concerns about sustainability are also evident in questions that test the best way to describe hunger programs. While “programs that feed hungry people” and “programs that improve nutrition” do passably well (about 12% each), 54% of voters believe that the top priority should be given to

“programs that reduce hunger and poverty.” While hunger is seen as a more pressing need, voters understand that there can be no long-term solution to hunger without a solution to poverty.

Personal responsibility is also an important component of self-sufficiency and it lies at the heart of American public opinion on hunger and poverty issues. When asked who should take the most responsibility to improve a poor and hungry person’s situation, 47% said “the person themselves,” followed distantly by “the federal government” at 14%. Clearly personal responsibility must be a component of any message about hunger, along with the resources needed to succeed.

Messaging on waste and inefficiency

The American public is neither naïve nor cynical about anti-hunger programs. On the one hand, when asked what percentage of the money spent on hunger programs in poor countries ends up in the hands of corrupt officials, the mean response is that nearly 50% is wasted. On the other hand, a strong majority of 63% believe that “government programs actually make a real difference in helping hungry people.” When presented with two competing views about whether to provide funding for hunger programs that might have mismanagement and waste, 65% of voters agreed with the statement “We can’t afford to wait until hunger programs clean up any mismanagement and wasteful spending problems. It is our moral obligation to try and help those who are in need now while addressing the issues of mismanagement and wasteful spending at the same time.” In comparison, only 27% said they agree with the opposing statement: “We shouldn’t give any money to hunger programs unless mismanagement and wasteful spending problems are cleaned up and we know for sure that most of the money is going to the people who need it.”

Arguing that waste is not a problem is unlikely to be effective – even when reminded of efforts to improve the quality of federal nutrition programs, only 19% of voters said they believed there was less waste than there used to be, while 36% thought there was more waste than there used to be. Voters believe there is a certain amount of waste involved in any government program, but are willing to accept that and press ahead with morally compelling programs as long as they feel efforts to improve efficiency and accountability are underway.

The need for optimism

Despite perceptions that hunger is worsening, voters are very receptive to optimistic messages about the United States’ ability to help hungry people. For example, 70% of American voters agree that “it is possible to significantly reduce world hunger over the next decade” – a finding that holds across partisan and demographic lines. On the domestic front, 76% of voters believe that we could “dramatically reduce the hunger problem if we really made it a national priority.” When asked how long they thought such a program might take, the average response was that it could be accomplished in about 10 years.

Voters also respond favorably to messages that present anti-hunger programs as an investment to reduce further social spending down the road. A remarkable 83% agreed with the following statement: “Over time, spending money to reduce hunger in America is a good investment. It more than pays for itself because it reduces long-term social costs such as the problems hungry children have in school and the health problems of people who don’t eat properly.” This line of argument can be a powerful rebuttal to concerns that hunger and poverty programs cost too much.

V. POLICIES

President Bush's proposed increases in African aid

Public support for policies that combat hunger directly is quite high. For example, 78% of voters responded that it is “important” for Congress to approve funding for President Bush’s proposed increases in aid to Africa and other poor countries in the world. This also provides an important political lesson in discussing specific policies. While Republicans are broadly supportive of efforts to reduce hunger, they tend to be roughly 10 percentage points less likely than Democrats to support a particular policy. By specifically mentioning President Bush’s support for this policy, this question raised the level of Republican support to the level of Democratic support.

Hunger-Free Communities Act

The public is strongly supportive of the Hunger Free Communities Act when it is described in the following manner: “Food banks and church groups are working to have Congress approve the Hunger-Free Communities Act. This legislation would commit Congress to the goal of reducing hunger in America and provide funding for grassroots groups to overcome hunger in our communities.” Nearly four out of five voters (79%) say they favor this legislation. This strong support holds across demographic and political lines.

Increased funding for foreign aid

When asked whether they favor or oppose spending “an additional one percent of the federal budget on effective programs to reduce hunger, poverty and disease in Africa and other poor parts of the world,” 67% said they would favor such a program. Interestingly, this number is somewhat higher than the number of voters who said they would support “a \$5 billion increase in U.S. funding for effective programs to reduce hunger, poverty and disease in Africa and other poor parts of the world?” Only 60% said they would favor that program, indicating that specific dollar figures tend to cost the support of a small, but significant portion of votes, particularly among Republicans and Independents. There is also a significant age gap in support for efforts to increase foreign aid. Voters under the age of 55 are 13 percentage points more likely to support spending an extra \$5 billion on helping developing countries.

Trade and poor countries

Voters are ambivalent about the benefits of trade. When asked about negotiating new trade agreements, 34% agreed with the statement “we should lower trade barriers because it will help small farmers in poor countries make more money to feed their families.” This number was outweighed by the 45% who agree with the statement “we shouldn’t lower trade barriers because more trade hurts the United States and loses us jobs.” While this shows fairly strong anti-trade sentiment, a plurality of voters believe that trade can be a win-win proposition. When asked if “trade can be good for the United States and poor countries if the agreements are fair,” 46% agreed, while 38% said they thought that “someone always loses in trade agreements.”

The Farm Bill

The Farm Bill that Congress will debate in the coming year will seek to balance a number of different priorities, including many of the United States' nutrition programs. When asked what Congress should make the top priority of the Farm Bill, 25% of voters said that "providing food assistance for hungry Americans" should be the top priority, followed closely by "helping U.S. farmers grow more food so food prices are low in the U.S." at 24%. "Providing money for American farmers to be sure they are not harmed by low crop prices" is the top priority in the Farm Bill for 18% of the public and a further 12% choose "protecting crop lands by encouraging conservation." Only 7% say they think "providing food for hungry people in developing countries" should be the top priority.

Voters also express dissatisfaction with two major agriculture policies. First, when informed that "farm subsidies go mainly to rich and corporate farmers," 75% of Americans agree that "this money could be invested in ways that would do more to help struggling families and struggling communities in rural America" and only 13% disagreed. Second, when informed that about half of the money the U.S. spends on food aid goes to buying American food and shipping on American ship, 57% say "the current system is a shame because so little money is actually used to feed the hungry." These figures show there is substantial opportunity to build public support for changing these policies in ways that will bring greater benefit to hungry and poor people.

VI. CONCLUSION

This report shows a crucial trend – American voters are increasingly concerned with the problems of hunger and poverty. Unlike the political stalemate in Washington, voters are open to legislation that has the components of a real solution: more resources; reforms to make programs work better; more coordination between the public, private, and non-profit sectors; and greater opportunities for work and self-sufficiency. Crafting proposals using these basic values will generate support for new anti-hunger and poverty initiatives and reach voters eager to hear new approaches to a problem they feel increasingly needs attention.

ALLIANCE

TO END

HUNGER

50 F Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20001
1-800-822-7323 or (202) 639-9400
www.alliancetoendhunger.org

For more information, please contact:
Max Finberg
mfinberg@alliancetoendhunger.org