

New Attitudes About Poverty and Hunger:

The Rise of the “Do Right” Voter and
Other Lessons from Recent Research

A Report on Recent Polling By
Thomas Z. Freedman and Jim McLaughlin
With Nicholas Gossen, Matt Lindsey, Chip Mertz and Stuart Polk

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Based on bipartisan research conducted for

the **alliance**



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OVERVIEW & SUMMARY

Since 2002 we have been conducting regular surveys for the Alliance to End Hunger and Bread for the World to better understand American attitudes about issues of hunger and poverty and how best to communicate with voters. The goal of this report is to provide a comprehensive account of key public opinion trends that the Hunger Message Project has identified over the past five years, and to describe what those trends mean for politics in 2007 and 2008.

This report focuses on an emerging voter type – voters who urgently want policy action taken to help solve problems like poverty and hunger. We call these voters the “Do Right” voters. They can be in either political party and are often open to different solutions to the problem. What they share is a sense that the time has come to roll up our collective sleeves and get something done. Along with the “Do Right Voter,” we also identify a second attitude type on issues of poverty and hunger, an approach we describe as the “Fed Up Voter.” These voters may care strongly about issues of helping the least fortunate, but are skeptical of government’s ability to actually solve the problem. In truth, many “Do Right Voters” share a sense of skepticism about government’s ability to get things done. Effective leaders and advocates will see opportunities outlined in this report which speak to overlapping attitudes in both groups: a large number of voters want action taken and solutions found, and are willing to include a variety of means to achieve their ends. This is the political opportunity we describe in the paper.

In 14 lessons, we describe research that shows the issues of hunger and poverty are at a political crossroads in America today. Over the past five years, Americans have grown significantly more concerned about these two issues in the United States and around the world. An increasing number of Americans consider these issues to be important in deciding which presidential and congressional candidates to vote for, and most say they

are willing to spend significantly more money on a variety of programs to address the problem. This trend represents a significant opportunity for advocates to turn evolving public sentiments into lasting and effective political change. Among key findings are:

- Public concern about poverty and hunger is rising.
- The emergence of “Do Right Voters.”
- Voters are unsatisfied with the government’s efforts to reduce hunger.
- Voters are willing to spend more on hunger programs.
- Voters seek multiple approaches against poverty and hunger.
- Domestic hunger is attracting increased attention and support for international aid remains strong.
- There is an opening for a real debate on trade policy.
- Voters see significant room for improvement in the Farm Bill.
- Poverty and hunger are key and undervalued moral issues.
- Moral and practical arguments must be paired together by advocates.
- Fraud is not the major concern, government effectiveness is.
- A message of self-sufficiency is essential.
- There are important ways to discuss waste and inefficiency.
- Voters are ultimately optimistic that problems can be solved.

Finally, while voters are increasingly attuned to the issue in recent years, they have not seen positive action from the government to address the problem. Public opinion about the effectiveness of government efforts to reduce hunger has worsened significantly in recent years. If action is not taken soon, there is a risk that American voters’ concern may turn into apathy born of disillusionment. On the other hand, if policies can show results, the opinion data indicate that voters are ready to commit substantial energy and resources to the fight against hunger and poverty.

METHODOLOGY

The project employed a bipartisan set of political consultants and gave them independence to study the problem and report back whatever conclusions they found. The research team consists of Jim McLaughlin, who helped conduct the polling for Bob Dole's 1996 presidential race, and has worked as a pollster for the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) and the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) among others; 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. They have been working together on this research since 2002. They were initially assisted by Marco Grimaldo, Bill Knapp, and others. The Hunger Message Project has been generously supported by Terry Meehan, the Sodexo Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Each poll conducted for the Hunger Message Project has consisted of more than 1,000 likely general election voters in the United States. The most recent poll was conducted between June 1 and 3, 2007. Previous polls were conducted in: March 2007, November 2006, March 2006, February 2006, June 2005, July 2004, May 2003, and July 2002. 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 weighted to correlate with actual voter turnout in a general election in a presidential year. All the polls have an accuracy of +/- 3.1% at a 95% confidence interval.

FINDINGS

1. Public concern about poverty and hunger is rising.

Over the past five years, our work has found a trend of rising concern about poverty and hunger among American voters. Today, half of likely voters (50%) believe that “the hunger problem in the United States is getting worse,” up from 38% in 2002. On the issue of world hunger, 63% of voters believe that it is getting worse, up from 44% in 2002. This rise in concern has been coupled with a corresponding rise in the political importance that voters attach to fighting poverty and hunger. Between May 2003 and June 2007, the percentage of likely voters who said that “a candidate’s position on reducing the hunger problem” was important when deciding their vote for Congress increased from 74% to 88%, and the percentage saying it was “very important” nearly doubled from 23% to 44%. A majority of Americans (54%) do not believe that “political candidates have spent an adequate amount of time discussing hunger and poverty issues.”

2. Who are the “Do Right Voters”?

Do Right Voters have several important attributes. When asked to rank the most important issue to them in deciding their Congressional vote – including topics such as the Iraq War, health care, and tax cuts – reducing hunger and poverty is the most important issue for them.

Table 1 - "Thinking about the next time you vote for Congress or U.S. Senate, what one issue do you view as the most important to you in deciding your vote?"

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Issue</i>	
1	Health care	18%
2	Tax relief	15%
3	Create jobs/economy	12%
4	Education	11%
5	Fight terrorism	10%
6	Reduce hunger/poverty (7%)	7%
7	Strong military	6%
8	Environment	5%
9	Decline in moral values	4%
10	Fight crime/drugs	3%
11	Immigration	2%
12	End war in Iraq	1%

On this metric they account for 7.4% of likely voters, a significant segment of the population that is much greater than those choosing to vote on crime, immigration, or declining moral values. A plurality of these Do Right Voters identify themselves as Democrats (46%), but Republicans also constitute a significant portion of this group (27%), and Independents make up 16% of them. These voters also range widely in their political ideology: 37% identify as liberals, 31% as moderates and 23% as conservatives.

Do Right Voters are less likely to be married and less likely to have children in elementary or high school than the general population of likely voters. While 64% of the sample population is married, only 46% of Do Right Voters are married. Widows, who constitute only 11% of likely voters, make up 23% of Do Right Voters. In addition, 78% of people in the general population have no children in school, but 88% of Do Right Voters are in this category. These figures indicate that when families have young children, the parents may shift their voting priorities away from broad social issues like poverty and toward issues that affect them directly. Indeed, people who indicated that reducing hunger and poverty was the most important issue in deciding their vote were the single group most heavily skewed away from voters with school-age children.

Do Right Voters are far more likely to belong to households with lower income levels. Three out of five (61%) of Do Right Voters report household incomes of less than \$60,000 per year, while only 12% report having household incomes of more than \$60,000 per year (among the general population these figures are 46% and 19%, respectively).¹ Furthermore, of the twelve options for “most important issue” in deciding their Congressional vote, people who chose “fighting hunger and poverty” had the lowest average incomes. This does not mean that voters with higher household incomes do not care about poverty and hunger; indeed, many other figures in this report show that this is not the case.

¹ It should be noted that 27% of Do Right Voters (and 24% of respondents as a whole) refused to report their household income to interviewers. While this is a typical refusal rate for a personally sensitive question such as this one, the reported figures should be interpreted with this refusal rate in mind.

However, these figures indicate that these issues are more politically motivating among voters who have a greater likelihood of facing them personally.

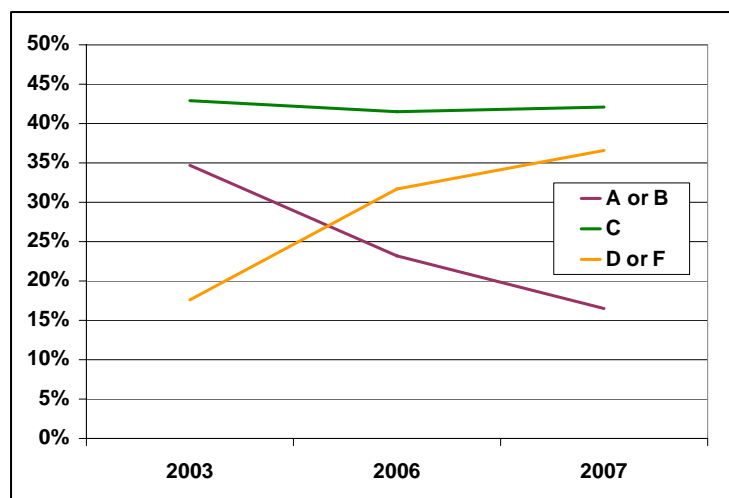
People from all religions show roughly the same likelihood of being Do Right Voters; likewise, there is no correlation between the frequency of attending church services and the likelihood of being a hunger voter. Religious belief and practice seem to have little direct impact on whether people base their congressional vote first and foremost on poverty and hunger issues. Women are more likely to be Do Right Voters than men: 61% of Do Right Voters are women, while only 39% are men.

3. Voters are increasingly unhappy with the government's efforts to reduce hunger.

Voters' assessment of government programs to reduce hunger has grown substantially worse over the past four years. We call this trend the rise of the "Fed Up Voter." In 2003, when asked to give a letter grade to "the government's effectiveness in reducing hunger," 35% of voters gave the government an A or a B. By June 2007, this figure has fallen to only 16%. Meanwhile, the percentage of voters giving the government a D or an F has increased from 18% to 37%. This decline in voters' opinions of government hunger efforts presents a challenge to hunger advocates who wish to increase government anti-hunger programs.

Even voters who strongly believe in the importance of helping the poor and the hungry will balk at increasing spending on programs they view to be ineffective. Messages that address this issue are discussed in detail in Section 4.

Figure 1 - "What letter grade would you give the government's effectiveness in reducing hunger?"



Polling in previous years has shown that there is disagreement among American voters about whether the problem with government hunger programs is lack of effort or lack of success. When asked in March 2006 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:

Table 2 - "Based on what you know of our government's efforts to reduce hunger, which of the following comes closer to your own personal opinion?" (March 2006)

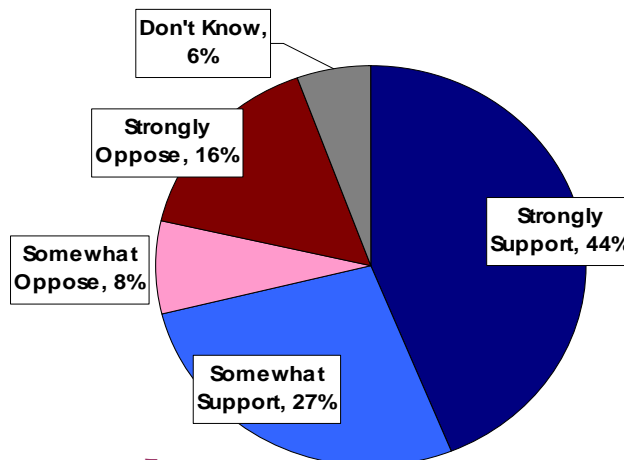
	Republican	Independent	Democrat
Big effort/working	24%	14%	8%
Big effort/not working	40%	35%	27%
Not a big effort	27%	47%	60%

4. *Despite these reservations, voters are willing to spend more on hunger programs.*

Voters are skeptical about the effectiveness of government hunger programs, but at the same time a strong and growing majority of voters say they would be willing to spend more money on such programs.

Seventy-one percent of voters say they would support the United States spending an additional 1% of the federal budget on international aid programs.

Figure 2 - Would you support or oppose the United States dedicating an additional 1% of the federal budget to the needs of the world’s poorest people, including aid for education, hunger, poverty, clean water, children’s health and AIDS treatment?”



This includes 44% who say they would “strongly support” such an effort. In a similar vein, likely voters were asked if they would support “a program to make sure every hungry child in the world has at least one meal a day available at school even if it costs the United States \$3 billion,” and 68% said they would support the program.

On domestic hunger, 66% of voters said they would be willing to spend \$18 billion a year in order to “cut hunger and food insecurity in half in the United States by improving and expanding nutrition programs like food stamps and school breakfast programs for children.” This is up slightly from March 2003, when 62% said they would favor such a program. Support for these proposed initiatives crosses political and ideological boundaries, earning majority support from Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.

Voter support for major government programs such as the ones proposed above usually softens when hard choices need to be made about where the money to fund the programs will come from. However, all of the proposed programs elicit strong majority support, even when accompanied by fairly hefty price tags. This shows that voters believe hunger is an important enough issue that they are willing to spend on programs to reduce it, a crucial prerequisite for building support for actual legislative initiatives.

5. Voters seek multiple approaches against poverty and hunger.

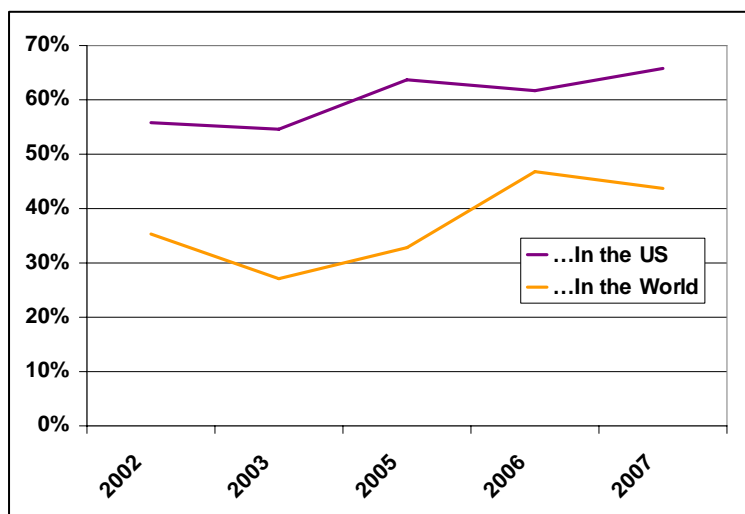
American voters have a wide range of opinions about which organizations are most effective at fighting hunger. In 2006, 48% said they thought government at some level would be most effective (federal 22%, local 15%, state 10%), while 43% said they preferred non-governmental organizations, such as not-for-profits (24%) and religious organizations (19%). **This wide spread of responses likely reflects a belief that no one type of organization has the solution to hunger.** Instead, voters may respond to proposals with coordinated efforts that draw on the strengths of each of these approaches.

6. Domestic hunger is attracting increased attention and support for international aid remains strong.

While there has been a broad trend of increasing concern and interest in poverty and hunger issues among American voters over the past four years, particularly on global hunger, there are some indications that voters continue to place priority on domestic concerns.

For example, between March 2006 and June 2007, the number of voters saying that “the United States spends too little money to reduce the hunger problem in the United States” rose from 62% to 66%, a small but statistically significant increase, and a real increase over the 55% recorded in May 2003. Those who said the U.S. spent too little to reduce world hunger increased dramatically from 2003 to

Figure 3 - Percent of likely voters who believe the U.S. spends too little on reducing the hunger problem.



2006 (from 27% to 47%). In June 2007, the number of voters saying that “the United States spends too little money to reduce the hunger problem in the world” remained higher than the beginning of the decade but fell slightly, down to 44%.

This does not discount the fact that despite the small recent downturn, support for addressing global poverty has increased substantially over the past five years and still remains high. For instance, when asked “would you support or oppose the United States dedicating an additional 1% of the federal budget to the needs of the world’s poorest people, including aid for education, hunger, poverty, clean water, children’s health and AIDS treatment?” the percentage of voters saying they would support the

additional spending increased from 67% to 71% over the course of the past year. An additional 1% of the federal budget would represent an unprecedented expansion of international aid programs in the United States.

7. There is an opening for debate on trade policy.

Trade policy is a critical political issue in the United States, primarily for domestic economic reasons. However, voters take seriously the argument that trade policy offers the possibility of promoting economic development in poor countries. When presented with two arguments – one advocating lifting trade barriers to promote self-sufficiency in poor countries and the other advocating maintaining trade barriers to protect American jobs – voters were almost evenly divided in their response. A plurality, 40%, of voters say the United States should lower trade barriers and 37% say they should not give other countries greater access to American markets. Tellingly, 22% of voters said they did not know which choice they preferred, indicating that many people see the issue as complicated and difficult to assess. This debate is an unresolved issue for the American public, so advocacy efforts have the potential to affect public opinion in either direction.

Other polling mirrors these findings. A December 2006 study by Mark Penn and Tom Freedman found that Americans are not of a single mind about the future of trade. When asked, nearly equal numbers of likely voters said the U.S. should negotiate more new trade agreements (30%) as said the U.S. should repeal existing trade agreements (29%) or maintain the current trade agreements we have right now (31%). Adding an explanation of the benefits of trade to the poor may be a useful argument for trade advocates, given the public's belief that more should be done to address poverty and hunger.

8. Voters see much room for improvement in the Farm Bill.

The Farm Bill is a notoriously complex piece of legislation, but this survey tried to gauge voters' priorities among the different objectives of the Farm Bill in general terms.

A plurality of likely voters (37%) believes that “providing food assistance for hungry Americans” should be Congress’ top priority as they debate the Farm Bill. This compares with 19% who say that “providing money for American farmers to be sure that they are not harmed by low crop prices” should be the top priority, 15% who say “providing incentives for ethanol and renewable energy,” 14% who say “protecting croplands by encouraging conservation,” and 6% who say “providing food for hungry people in developing countries.” These priorities hold across party and ideological lines.

In addition, a strong majority of voters believe that the amount of assistance provided by government hunger programs is insufficient. When informed that “the food stamp program provides \$3 a day per person to eat,” 71% said they believed this was too little to give people who need food assistance.

Voters are also dissatisfied with how farm subsidies are distributed. Asked if they believed that subsidies could “be invested in ways that would do more to help struggling families and struggling communities in rural America,” 77% said they agreed, and 52% said they strongly agreed. This demonstrates broad dissatisfaction with the current system of agricultural subsidies.

9. Poverty and hunger are key moral issues.

Voters consider fighting poverty and hunger to be a crucial moral issue – more important than a number of mainstays of the American political debate in recent years.

A plurality of 42% of voters consider “fighting hunger and poverty” to be the biggest moral issue of the options offered, compared with 23% who say “protecting the environment,” 17% who say “abortion,” and 13% who say

Table 3 - “Which one of the following do you think is the biggest moral issue?” (June 2007)

	Total	Republican	Democrat
Fight hunger/poverty	41.8%	29.9%	48.4%
Protect the environment	23.1%	14.9%	29.6%
Abortion	16.7%	30.5%	8.9%
Gay marriage	12.8%	17.5%	9.7%

“gay marriage.” Even among Republican voters, hunger statistically ties abortion as the “biggest moral issue,” at 30% and 31%, respectively, and substantially exceeds gay marriage, which 18% of Republican voters say is the biggest moral issue. Democratic leaders, on the other hand, have devoted substantial attention to environmental issues in recent years yet more Democratic voters (48%) choose fighting poverty and hunger to be the bigger moral issue than choose protecting the environment (30%).

10. Moral and practical arguments must be paired together.

In five years of polling on these issues, a consistent finding has been that the strongest arguments for fighting poverty and hunger are moral in nature, but an array of practical arguments collectively are the most persuasive to a majority of voters. This is illustrated in the chart below:

Table 4 - "Which of the following is the best reason for working to reduce hunger in the United States?" (June 2007)

It is the moral and right thing to do	31%	} Total Practical: 65%
Hunger can have long-term impacts on children’s learning and development	22%	
Reducing hunger and poverty will help reduce crime and violence	15%	
It can help people escape poverty and get better jobs	15%	
Elderly who are hungry have more health problems	13%	
It is an important part of my religion	1%	

Voters believe that fighting hunger has pragmatic benefits both for hungry individuals and for society in general, but a moral call to action is the strongest reason to support hunger programs. 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” (31%). The second response was the more pragmatic “hunger can have long-term impacts on children’s learning and development” (22%).

This poll also tested more explicitly religious arguments (as opposed to the more general “it is the moral and right thing to do”). The sample of likely voters was split into two groups that were read the same options for the question: “Which one of the following is the best reason for working to reduce hunger in the United States?” The only difference was that half of the respondents were given the option “it is an important part of my religion,” while the other half were given the option “it is what God wants us to do.” People who identified as liberals or moderates were slightly more likely to choose the former option, and conservatives were far more likely to choose the latter. Only 2% of conservatives said that the best reason for working to reduce hunger was “it is an important part of my religion,” while 20% of conservatives in the second sample chose “it is what God wants us to do.” Clearly the more specific reference to religious obligation is a more powerful message for conservatives. Further, for people who attend church more than once a week, “it is what God wants us to do” is the single most compelling reason for working to reduce hunger.

11. Fraud is not the major concern, government effectiveness is.

While not included in this year’s poll, previous surveys have found that most American voters see recipients of food assistance as needy and deserving. For example, the March 2006 poll found that 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 news may be heartening to advocates, but it comes at a time when public perceptions of the effectiveness of government programs are on the decline. As discussed above, only 16% of voters give the government an A or a B when rating its effectiveness at reducing hunger, down 19% over four years. **A key challenge to advocates has therefore shifted somewhat over recent years. In years past, a challenge was to convince people that programs to reduce poverty and hunger were capable of making a difference in people's lives. Increasingly, that message has been accepted by voters and they now agree that programs *can* make a difference, but they want to be convinced that those programs actually *will* do so.**

12. Message of self-sufficiency is essential.

While voters acknowledge the importance of assistance to hungry people, they are also keenly aware that the ultimate goal is for such programs to be unnecessary. The March 2006 poll found that 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 assistance 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.” Thus, sustainability and self-sufficiency are central to voters’ views of how hunger programs should work.

Concerns about sustainability and economic prosperity 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 poverty and hunger 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 should be a component of any message about hunger, along with the resources needed to succeed.

Table 5 - "Which of the following should take the most responsibility to improve a poor and hungry person's situation?" (March 2006)

The person themselves	47%
The person’s family	9%
The person’s local town or community	9%
The person’s church or religious community	5%
The person’s state	5%
Local and national charities	6%
The federal government	14%

13. Messaging on waste and inefficiency is important.

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 in 2006 was that nearly 50% is wasted. On the other hand, a strong majority of 63% believed 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.

14. Despite the many obstacles to reducing hunger, voters are optimistic.

Despite perceptions that hunger is worsening and government programs have much room for improvement, voters are very receptive to optimistic messages about the United States’ ability to help hungry people. For example, in 2006, 70% of American voters agreed that “it is possible to significantly reduce world hunger over the next decade” – a finding that held across partisan and demographic lines. On the domestic front, 76% of voters believed 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 ten years.

Voters also responded 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 poverty and hunger programs cost too much.

CONCLUSION

The trends outlined in this report show many positive signs for poverty and hunger advocates. Most American voters believe that poor and hungry people deserve help and that the government has a moral responsibility to provide it and a substantial number are willing to vote at least in part on the poverty and hunger efforts proposed by political candidates. Additionally, they are increasingly willing to spend money on those programs, especially in the domestic context. However, they are also more skeptical of the government's effectiveness at addressing these problems.

Public views of hunger and poverty, like those of any political issue, are influenced by a wide variety of other political events. Advocates will not be able to change these perceptions by themselves, but they can build off the strong foundation of awareness and moral commitment that has developed over the past five years to build support for programs. The country is missing an opportunity to turn an emerging consensus about poverty and hunger into political action. Now is the time to act.

the **alliance**



to **endhunger**

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

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