



# **CAN DEMOCRATS SUCCEED IN RURAL AMERICA?**

**PART 2: SUPPLEMENTAL RESEARCH COMPENDIUM**

November 2022

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# Introduction

As a supplement to the best practices gleaned from overperforming rural candidates in recent elections and laid out in [Part 1](#), RUBI has reviewed a number of third party studies and reports that examine many of the same questions we asked our interviewees plus some additional ones. This document presents a synthesis of key findings from the supplemental literature as well as guidance on issues such as inflation and Critical Race Theory that post-date our candidates' races. We also flag uncertainties and areas we believe are in need of further research. And in a few instances, we offer our own untested ideas for your consideration and experimentation.

This document draws on a large volume of research but is not a comprehensive meta-analysis. Please alert us to any additional or contradictory information. (And be sure to [sign up on RUBI's website](#) to receive updates). It takes a village to elect a rural progressive!

# Methodology

Since early 2021, RUBI has been reviewing journalistic and academic literature and collecting data and analyses regarding what moves the needle with rural, working-class voters. This review is wide-ranging but not comprehensive or methodical—it is not what academics would call a “meta-analysis” but it does synthesize a substantial volume of reputable research. Note that the research presented here pre-dates the 2022 midterms and may, in some cases, wind up being challenged or contradicted by 2022 outcomes.

The research summarized in this section comes from the following categories of sources:

- ★ Democratic and independent polling, message-testing and focus groups
- ★ Research-based messaging guidance and creative assets produced by the Winning Jobs Narrative, Galvanize Action, Center for Working-Class Politics, and others
- ★ Voter outreach best practices webinars and memos generated by the Analyst Institute, Working America, AFL-CIO, and other entities whose guidance has an evidentiary basis
- ★ Books and talks by sociologists, political scientists, and journalists, including Jennifer Silva, Stephanie Muravchik, Kristin Lunn-Trujillo, Katherine Cramer, Arlie Hochschild, Farah Stockman, and others
- ★ Books and talks by campaign practitioners Chuck Rocha, Chloe Maxmin, Canyon Woodward and Luke Mayville
- ★ Get-out-the-vote best practices field-tested by groups like The Analyst Institute and Relentless.vote
- ★ Public opinion polling conducted by RuralOrganizing.org, Data for Progress, Echelon Insights, Rust Belt Rising, and others
- ★ Interviews of mid-western legislators conducted by CherPAC
- ★ “The Heartland Study,” an ethnographic study of WI, MN and IA voters conducted by Future Majority, Strategic Victory Fund and Worthy Strategy Group
- ★ Focus groups and surveys of rural North Carolina voters of color conducted by the New Rural Project and Change Research
- ★ Stanford University’s Strengthening Democracy Challenge

## Topline Takeaways

Norms of decency, hard work, frugality, uncomplaining stoicism, self-reliance and common sense form the foundation for rural attitudes toward politics and politicians. Candidates who seem decent, open-minded, reassuring, realistic, locally-rooted, down-to-earth, committed to the well-being of all members of the community, authentically caring without pandering or patronizing, critical but not cynical, willing to call out corporate greed, guided by common sense, are (outside of progressive activist circles) liked. Candidates who come across like career politicians, policy wonks, toxic partisans, doomsayers, naive idealists, out-of-touch global elites, or finger-wagging scolds quick to label wrongthink as bigotry, are (outside of progressive activist circles) shunned. Policy platforms are secondary. Bread-and-butter concerns take precedence. This composite doesn't describe every single rural voter, and there are some gender, class, and race differences.

### **TAKEAWAYS ALL DEMOCRATS CAN WORK WITH**

- ★ Small businesses and family farmers are highly respected
- ★ Pride of place and the desire to protect it
- ★ Freedom is highest value and can be reclaimed from GOP
- ★ Hard work is a virtue, good for the individual, the family and the community
- ★ Helping each other is a community norm, with a strong preference for local, community-based solutions
- ★ Trump and the MAGA faction widely seen as too extreme
- ★ Low cable news viewership (means people's minds are open to new ideas)
- ★ Desire to be respected and have practical, hands-on knowledge honored
- ★ Preference for narratives that honor working people as engines of the economy
- ★ Voters of color are not a monolithic and automatically loyal voting bloc
- ★ Widespread disgust with toxic partisanship—be the candidate who inspires, not the one who demobilizes voters with cynical attacks
- ★ Deep canvassing beats all other voter persuasion tactics

## **TAKEAWAYS PROGRESSIVE POPULIST DEMOCRATS CAN WORK WITH**

- ★ Working and middle class folks are getting squeezed by inflation and taxes (but don't like to complain too much about it)
- ★ Perception that Democrats are for the very poor, and Republicans are for the rich, but no politicians are fighting for them
- ★ Democrats seen as weak on the economy and job creation
- ★ Democrats blamed for NAFTA-related factory jobs loss
- ★ Feeling of being betrayed by party that used to champion working class
- ★ Politicians are out-of-touch and loathed
- ★ Alienation from and distrust in mainstream institutions and the political system run high
- ★ Distrust of scientific and academic “experts” creates an opening for progressive criticism of experts’ actual failures and flaws
- ★ of Belief in almost universal corruption on the part of politicians and lobbyists
- ★ Anger at unchecked corporate profiteering
- ★ Openness to multi-racial progressive populism if they see themselves benefiting
- ★ Preference for populist language over progressive activist social justice rhetoric
- ★ Aversion to grandstanding and zealotry

## **REALITIES THAT MAKE IT HARD FOR DEMOCRATS TO HAVE A CHANCE**

- ★ Feelings of cynicism, powerlessness and betrayal run high, leading to the sense that voting is useless and institutions cannot be trusted
- ★ Feeling of being looked down on (“deplorable”)
- ★ Openness to racial grievance narratives
- ★ Openness to conspiracy theories (fueled by alienation and distrust)
- ★ Whites feel excluded from Democrats’ rainbow coalition while people of color feel Democrats take their vote for granted
- ★ Democrats seen as not valuing hard work and wanting to give everything away for free
- ★ Guns. Any candidate seen as insufficiently pro-gun will be targeted for defeat
- ★ Running as a Democrat is “the kiss of death”

## **SURPRISING OPPORTUNITIES**

- ★ Less than half of rural residents watch Fox News! Try reaching low-trust, low-information and low-propensity young voters on Reddit, Discord, Twitch and YouTube
- ★ Boosted Facebook news content to a targeted demographic is cheap and effective
- ★ Neutral, non-partisan mailers on where candidates stand on the issues are effective
- ★ Local newspapers need content
- ★ Zero-budget homemade video endorsements are effective
- ★ Honoring people's hard work goes a long way
- ★ Showing empathy for people's hardships goes a long way
- ★ Moderately conservative language can be used to sell liberal-left policies
- ★ Anti-establishment populists have an edge over political insiders
- ★ Rural public opinion skews progressive on a number of important issues, including extending the child care tax credit, equal pay and public internet
- ★ There are several easily avoidable unforced errors Democrats often make, such as condescension and a rhetorical style that is more technocratic than empathetic
- ★ Some progressive messaging gurus make their content freely available to campaigns, including breakthroughs on how to communicate around culture war issues
- ★ Simply *showing up* and *listening* in small towns (and not just at election time) builds trust and demonstrates caring

*"What do predominantly white voters in western Pennsylvania or rural Ohio have in common with rural, Southern African American voters? A common belief that no one is fighting for them." —Working America 2019 [North Carolina Ninth Congressional District Analysis](#)*

**A cautionary note about polls:**

We cite a lot of polls in this document, but polls can be inaccurate or misleading. Some polls overrepresent Democrats, liberals and voters (over non-voters). Some predominantly white rural polls might yield very different responses in a “majority-minority” district. Some polls ask questions in ways that are intentionally or unintentionally misleading. Some poll respondents might say they agree with something out of “acquiescence bias” rather than genuine belief. Some respondents might just want to mess with the pollsters. And some might be whipping through an online survey without careful consideration of each question. Lastly, national polls are usually big enough to be statistically meaningful but might have too few rural respondents to draw a separate set of conclusions about rural opinion. We cite nationwide polls in which the rural responses do not, to our knowledge, substantially diverge from the urban and suburban responses.

**A cautionary note about poll-tested messaging:**

We’ve strived to present rigorously poll-tested (or focus-grouped) messaging aimed at rural and working class voters. That said, our overperforming candidates did not make use of poll-tested messaging but, rather, spoke from the heart. This speaks to the power of authentic versus third-party-scripted rhetoric (and, perhaps, to small campaign budgets). Still, campaigns may find that new, freely available poll-tested messages are useful when it comes to creating ads, mailers and social media content. To the extent that any of the messaging guidance we put forth is used by candidates in their speeches or conversations with voters, we encourage them to make it their own, put it in their own voice with their own words and natural intonation. One more “real world” caveat: An individual’s reaction to an ad or meme does not guarantee that, come Election Day, they’ll vote for the candidate who deploys that message—there are too many factors at play to track voter behavior with that degree of granularity.



# Detailed Findings

## TYPES OF VOTERS

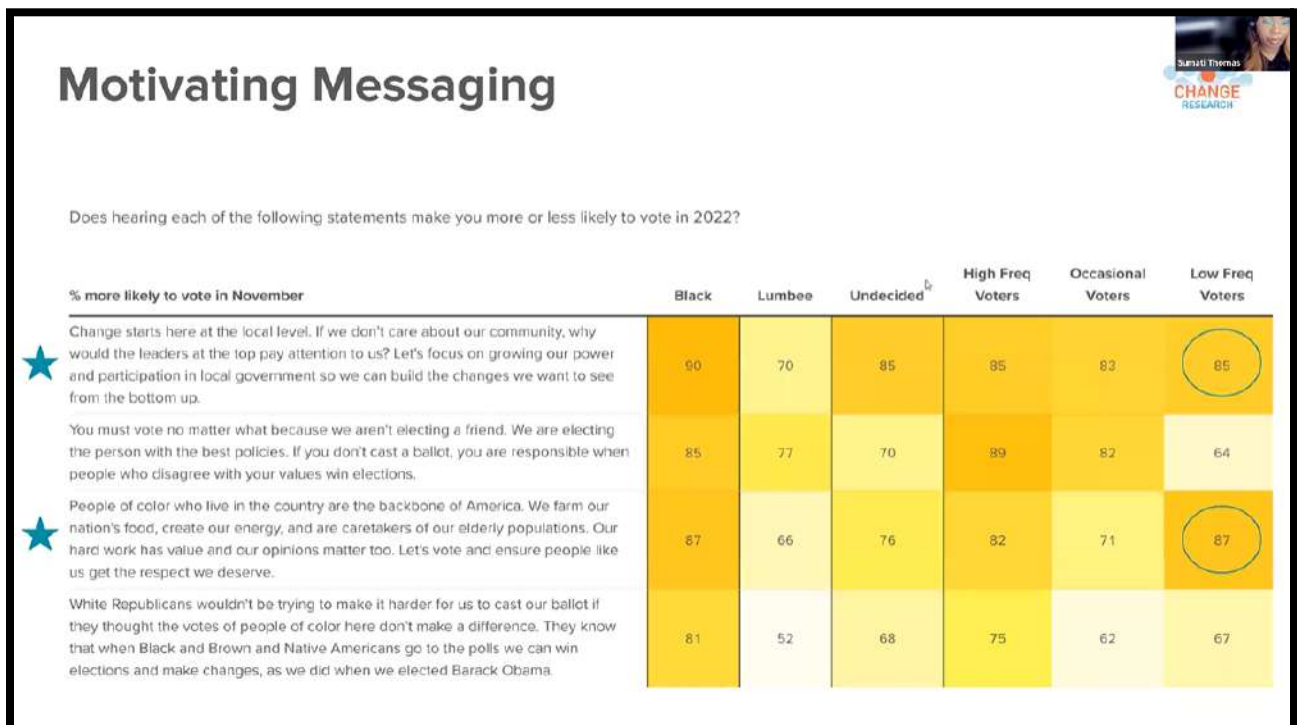
In heavily Republican-leaning districts, base turnout alone obviously cannot get candidates to the finish line. Many of our overperformers (as well as Sen. Jon Tester [in his first campaign for state legislature](#) in an R+10 district and Heartland incumbents [interviewed by CherPAC](#)) did outreach to all residents, including registered Republicans and people not registered to vote. This is an admirable strategy and, at the same time, where resources are constrained, consider the following:

- 1. Dependable Democratic base voters:** Don't ignore them but, by and large, let the Democratic Party turn these folks out for you.
- 2. Right-wing Republican base voters:** Democrats are very unlikely to win any votes from this group of voters who hold extreme right-wing views on economic as well as social/cultural issues. [32% of rural voters](#) consider themselves “strong Republicans.” These are voters who subscribe to one or more of the following:
  - ★ Christian supremacy—Christianity should be official religion
  - ★ Overt white supremacy/hate
  - ★ Anti-abortion is #1 issue
  - ★ Build-the-wall border security is #1 issue
  - ★ Second amendment defense is #1 issue
  - ★ QAnon
  - ★ I'm very rich and want to stay that way and want my taxes cut
  - ★ GOP loyalist who won't split the ticket no matter what
  - ★ Stop-the-steal authoritarians/Jan 6 supporters
- 3. Non-voters and low-propensity voters:** It is [notoriously hard](#) to get low-propensity voters to the polls. Moreover, it is not clear how strongly these folks skew liberal. (A very in-the-weeds discussion of this issue can be found [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Boosting the turnout of this group is a civic virtue, but might, in some districts, yield an equal number of new Democratic and Republican votes. The most productive new voter turnout efforts are those that focus on black voters as they are far more likely than any other demographic to vote Democrat but whose [2020](#)

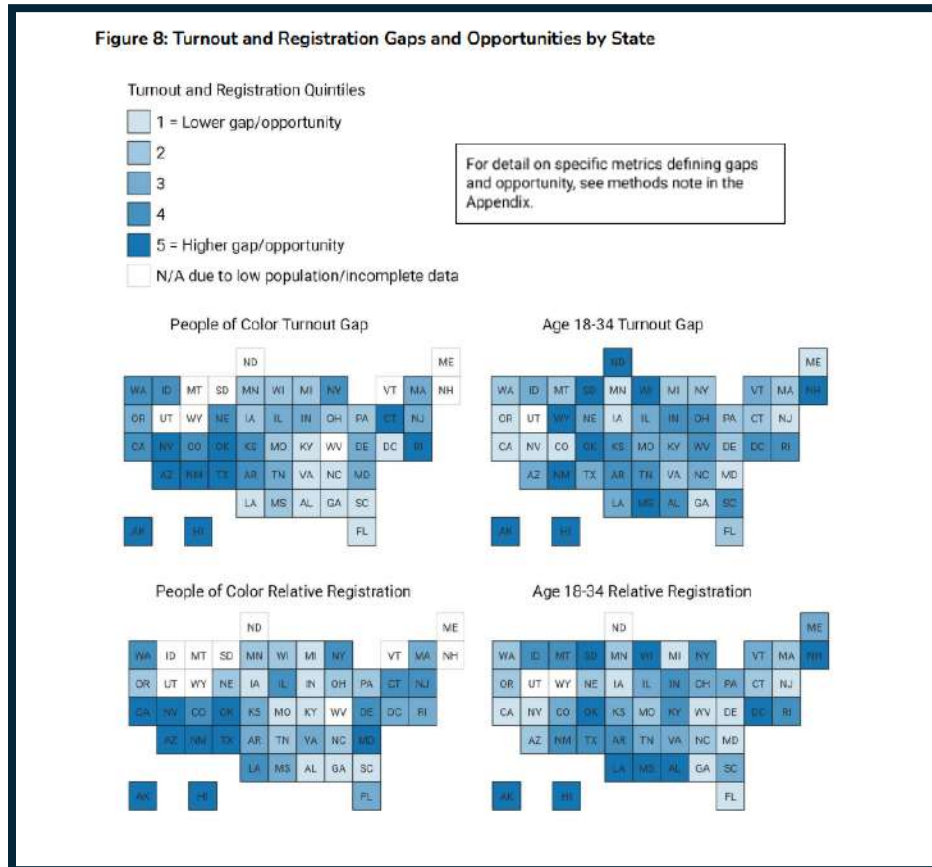
[turnout](#) was 34% lower than whites. Young (under 40) rural black voters [reported being ignored](#) during the 2022 midterms—this suggests an outreach gap that should be addressed, though outreach alone has its limits when [73% of black voters](#) say their lives haven't improved under Biden.. In addition, in the post-Dobbs era, there's evidence of a [wave of young women registering to vote](#).

The New Georgia Project's registration of 800,000 new voters in 2020 in a state that is one-third black is an example of voter registration playing a crucial role. (The [National Democratic Training Committee](#) has a good primer on the legalities and mechanics of running a voter registration drive and/or partnering with outside groups). At the same time, it's unclear as of this writing whether these new voters will turn out, as some [on-the-ground reporting](#) a month out from the mid-terms indicates that many rural black voters feel ignored and demobilized.

The New Rural Project and Change Research have identified some [messages that motivate](#) rural North Carolinians of color to vote:



The [Voter Participation Center](#) has calculated voter registration and turnout gaps between voters of color and white voters and between younger and older voters in each state. The larger the gap, the greater the opportunity to boost registration and turnout with these groups of voters.



**4. Voters of color:** Black, Latino, Native American and AAPI voters have distinctive voting behavior at the group and individual level so there’s no such thing as a one-size-fits-all “Voter of Color” outreach strategy. For example, only a little more than a third of Native American voters lean Democrat (according to a July 2022 proprietary Analyst Institute survey) whereas Black support for Democrats is [close to 90%](#). [Most Latinos](#), meanwhile, don’t even see themselves as “people of color!”

It’s also crucial to recognize that, like white voters, rural voters of color often have different priorities than urban voters. (See the “What to focus on” on page 81). [“Progressive candidates have the potential to earn the majority of each of these groups through listening and persuasion.”](#)

Native American voters, in particular, are seldom contacted by campaigns (according to the Analyst Institute survey cited above), meaning there's huge untapped potential to connect with them.

The support of voters of color cannot be taken for granted, yet the New Rural Project [has found](#) large majorities of rural North Carolina voters of color feel just that way, and that Democrats make promises they don't keep. We suspect this sentiment is widespread.

In his book, *Tio Bernie*, about his experience running Bernie Sanders' very successful 2020 Latino voter outreach program, Chuck Rocha emphasizes the importance of having Latino campaign staff, bilingual mailers, ads on Spanish-language radio and in Spanish-language weeklies. Given that young Latinos [favor Republicans](#) on the economy, outreach to this group is crucial.

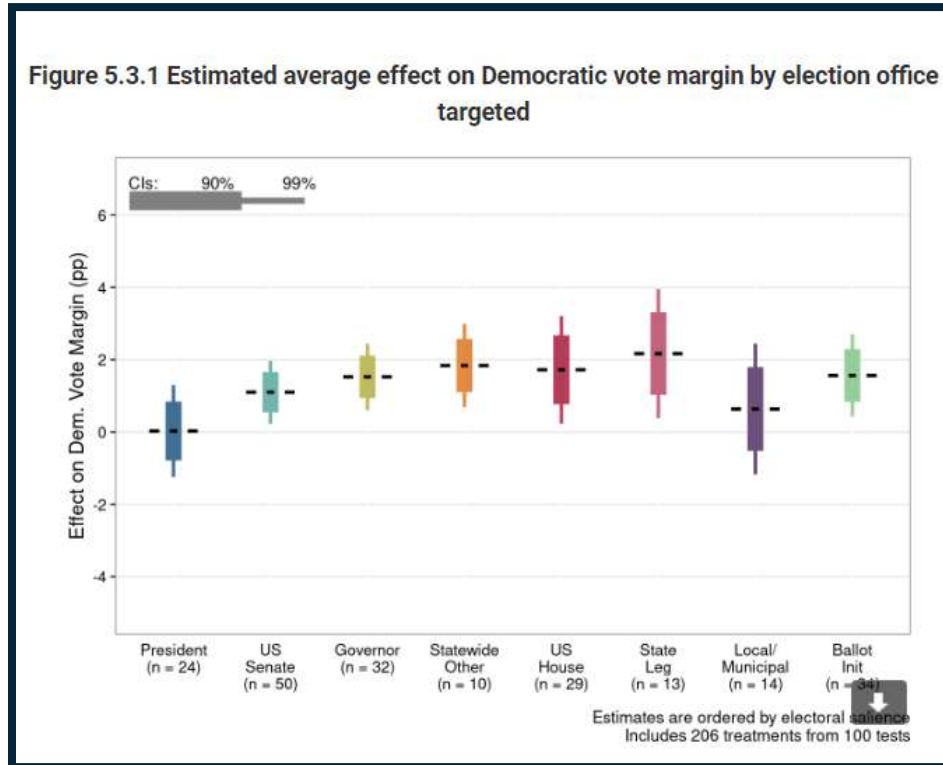
[For reasons explained](#) by Berkeley law professor and author of *Merge Left*, Ian Haney Lopez, be careful to target Latino outreach materials strictly to Latino voters or risk antagonizing whites. And...[be aware that](#) "MOST Latinos resist seeing themselves as a reviled race with their children doomed by racism." [Most still believe](#) in the American Dream, so show them how you will support their ability to achieve it.

Though most of our candidates didn't flag voter suppression as a big problem, it obviously can be. Groups like the [Center for Common Ground](#), [Protect the Vote](#), or your local NAACP chapter may be able to help you determine how severe voter suppression is in your area and give you advice on how to combat it.

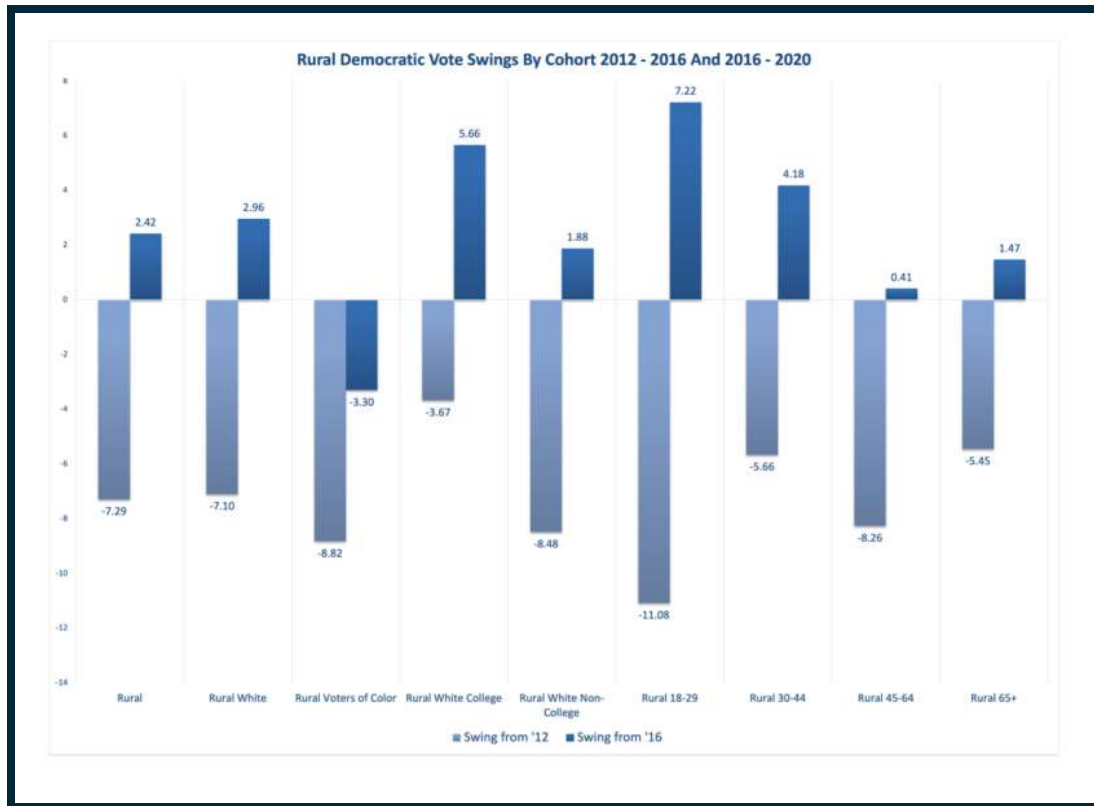
- 5. Persuadables:** These are independents, moderate Republicans who sometimes vote Democrat and soft Democrats who sometimes vote Republican. They are folks like [Greg York](#), the mayor of New Castle, IN, a Democrat who voted for Trump in 2016, Biden in 2020, and is on the lookout for someone new in 2024.

In a [June 2022 poll](#), 16% of rural voters consider themselves "not very strong Republicans," 18% are "independent," and 11% are "not very strong Democrats." That's a lot of persuadables right there.

According to the Analyst Institute’s meta-analysis, persuasion is particularly important and fruitful in down-ballot races. The chart below summarizes the effects that past persuasion programs tested by the Analyst Institute have had in different types of races. (The meta-analysis is available only to members of the Analyst Institute).



Persuading one voter to flip is more productive than registering or turning out one new voter because a flipped Republican>Democratic voter has double the electoral impact of one new Democratic voter. Also, already registered voters are much easier to identify and communicate with than non-voters. In the 2018 midterms, [90% of Democrats’ gains](#) came from voters who switched from voting Republican in 2016 to voting Democrat in 2018 (these figures are hotly contested but litigating the matter is beyond our scope here). Rural voters, in particular, [like to swing](#). The chart below shows the percentages of cohorts of rural voters who switched in 2016 (light blue) and in 2020 (dark blue). A negative swing means they flipped from Democrat to Republican, and a positive swing means they flipped from Republican to Democrat in that electoral cycle.



One big group of persuadables is [white working class moderates](#). These folks have a “live and let live” ethic, see increasing diversity as positive or

neutral, and are concerned about growing selfishness and lack of compassion...so far so good but... they’ve got mixed views on economic issues, understanding that the economy is rigged, wary of government spending and the party of big spending (Dems), and resentful that, as they see it, Democrats help the richest and the poorest while working/middle people get squeezed. [“The left cares about the poor, the right cares about the rich. Nobody cares about us.”](#) After conducting a bunch of focus groups with these voters, [Guy Molyneaux concluded](#) that many would support a big-spending Democrat if they believed the spending would

*“It’s a Democratic area [Southeast Ohio] but Trump has blown a hole through it. They feel like this is a forgotten area that’s suffering, that has been forgotten by Columbus and Washington and then they hear someone say, we can turn this place around, they feel it viscerally...To write them off is reckless.”*

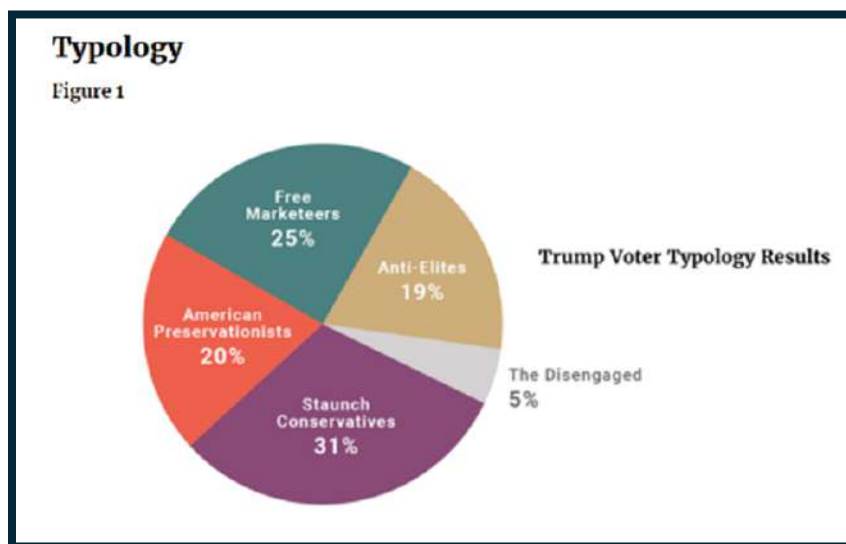
—[Taylor Sappington](#), Democrat, Nelsonville OH City Auditor

benefit people like them (and if the spending is *not* characterized as a handout).

Many persuadable voters of all races are [not very ideological](#) and are not typically interested in getting into the policy weeds of 10-point plans. This is particularly so for [rural voters](#).

Recent Democrats-turned-Trump-voters are a key winnable segment, particularly in [mid-western factory towns](#). Many blue collar workers felt betrayed by Democrats who supported NAFTA and, since then, haven't acknowledged much less addressed the devastation it has caused in factory towns. (See eg., Farah Stockman's *American Made*). Some voted for Trump; some stayed home. ([Nine percent of Obama voters voted for Trump in 2016, and of this cohort, only 45% were Republican-leaningers post-2016](#)...this suggests that up to 55% of Obama-to-Trump voters are persuadable). Unless these voters are white nationalists or hold extremely hard core positions on abortion or guns, Democrats can win them back.

Many of these voters are what the [Democracy Fund Voters Study Group](#) calls "Anti-Elite" Trump voters. In contrast with other types of Trump voters, Anti-Elites are economically progressive, take relatively moderate positions on immigration and race and favor compromise. And they are 19% of Trump voters!



These voters sound an awful lot like the cultural moderates described in this [Democratic Strategist memo](#), which outlines the difference between (persuadable) cultural moderates and (unreachable) cultural extremists. Likewise, they resemble “Trump’s Democrats” as described by Stephanie Muravchik in her book by that name. In Muravchik’s study, Trump’s Democrats were lifelong Democrat voters in Kentucky, Rhode Island and Iowa, staggering numbers of whom broke for Trump in 2016. Their honor culture, pride of place and anti-elitism led them to approve of Trump’s confrontational style, plain-spokenness, and his promise to take care of them in the style of old-school political bosses. [Three percent](#) of Trump’s 2016 white working class abandoned him for Biden in 2020, a small shift but enough to have cost Trump the election. This is an important voting group.

These voters are at risk of becoming low-propensity or non-voters. If despair and frustration with the status quo led them to Trump and they were then disillusioned by Trump’s presidency, they may give up for good. The creeping despair and demobilization of poor and working-class rural voters is described in *Trump’s Democrats* and in

*We’re Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America*. It’s further documented by a [YouGov study](#) of rural voters that found that nearly half are alienated from the political system and place little trust in it.

“They only see me when they want my vote.” —Todd, Iowa

Another important subset of voters has been identified by [Working America’s voter outreach program](#)—non-college voters who don’t follow the news closely, vote on or close to Election Day and are highly persuaded by campaigns that focus on wages and health care. Working America’s success here comports with a (proprietary) 2010 study that found that voters with low political knowledge are more persuadable than those high in political knowledge. (Apply for Analyst Institute membership to access the study entitled “High or Low Political Knowledge”).

What does *not* necessarily endear these voters, as Hillary Clinton learned, is an attempt to portray the Democratic candidate as more



competent than the Republican. [One study](#) found that “priming” rural and non-college white urban and suburban voters about the importance of competence made them more likely to vote for Trump. The researchers theorized that anti-elitist voters disdain political competence as a way of protecting themselves from betrayal—if they elect a competent politician and then that politician, like most politicians, sells out, the people will feel betrayed. By contrast, they don’t expect much from an incompetent actor like Trump and so can elect him without fear of betrayal. We don’t know whether these findings are generalizable or unique to the Clinton-Trump contest, but caution rural candidates against putting too much stock in their comparative competence.

### **The composite persuadable rural voter:**

- ★ Working or middle class ([42% blue collar, 14% service sector, 41% white collar](#))
- ★ Feeling squeezed and/or have family or friends in trouble
- ★ Upset by demise of community prosperity, trust, civility and social bonds
- ★ Sees corporate greed, materialism and hyper-onlinism as bad for kids and society
- ★ Cares about and supports family and community, less so people in other communities
- ★ Values freedom and liberty ([#1 value for plurality of Americans](#))
- ★ Has “live and let live” ethic but not up on cutting-edge social justice concepts
- ★ Takes pride in being both open-minded and grounded in common sense
- ★ Feels judged negatively by liberals for not being socially liberal enough but isn’t constantly raging about “wokeness”
- ★ Sees civility and compromise as virtues
- ★ Sees honesty and integrity as virtues
- ★ Feels positive or neutral about increasing racial and ethnic diversity and equates colorblindness with anti-racism
- ★ Abhors racial discrimination and violence
- ★ (If white) Doesn’t think about “white privilege” and resents being made to feel guilty
- ★ Believes in equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome

- ★ Negative or neutral on transgender rights but open to persuasion, not hateful
- ★ Accepting of gay marriage
- ★ Moderately pro-choice but abortion not a priority issue
- ★ Sees a role for government in providing opportunities for people to help themselves but wary that direct government benefits indulge laziness
- ★ Takes pride in hard work and self-reliance
- ★ Feels pride of place and strong connection to farm/land/town/community
- ★ Feels sense of loss over community's economic decline, population loss and/or deaths of despair
- ★ Sees manual labor as equally if not more important and respectable than intellectual labor
- ★ Sees small businesses and family farms as backbone of economy and is wary of large corporations pushing them out
- ★ Sees a positive role for government *theoretically* but perceives government giving hard-earned taxpayer money to everyone but them
- ★ Gets news from local news and/or local newspaper and/or Facebook but is not a news junkie
- ★ Church-going *and* accepting of other faiths
- ★ Honors military and veterans but wary of endless war
- ★ Patriotic, proud of America but open to doing a better job at living up to our nation's ideals
- ★ Correctly sees politicians disproportionately representing the interests of the rich and being out-of-touch with ordinary folks
- ★ If working or middle class, sees Republicans helping very rich and Democrats helping very poor (a sentiment poor people don't necessarily agree with) and no one has their back
- ★ Toward rich, mixed feelings of admiration and resentment toward those who profit off their backs and/or look down on rural and working folks
- ★ If AAPI, white or Latino, sees GOP as better on the economy; if black or unmarried woman, sees Democrats as better on the economy

**What do we mean by out-of-touch?** We keep saying voters dislike politicians who are out-of-touch, but what do we mean by that?

- ★ Doesn't know how much it costs to fill their gas tank
- ★ Talks like a college professor
- ★ Isn't attached to any particular place
- ★ Condescending or judgmental
- ★ Lacks common sense
- ★ Has never done manual labor
- ★ Has never worried about making ends meet
- ★ Trusts book-smart experts over hands-on experience
- ★ Cares more about college than trade school
- ★ Thinks they know more than you do about what's best for you
- ★ Fights over symbols and language instead of bread & butter
- ★ Rarely visits small towns

## **PUBLIC OPINION**

Public opinion polls suggest reason for optimism regarding rural voters' positions on some key issues. However, an unfortunate caveat to bear in mind is [the possibility that Democrats and activists are significantly overrepresented](#) in polling.

[Polling done by RuralOrganizing.org in 2020](#) showed strong majorities of rural residents agreeing with the following mix of conservative and progressive positions:

- ★ Equal pay for equal work
- ★ Corporate lobbyists have too much control
- ★ End DC corruption
- ★ Fighting for the small town and rural way of life
- ★ Pride in being an American
- ★ Can't let racism divide and distract from real source of our problems
- ★ Government has a responsibility to address climate change

- ★ Too much spending on military and not enough helping people here at home
- ★ Health care should be “freely available” (whatever that means) to all Americans
- ★ USDA programs too often benefit Big Ag

[This 2018 poll](#) found support for the following:

- ★ Ending cash bail
- ★ Marijuana legalization
- ★ Green New Deal
- ★ Public generic pharmaceuticals
- ★ Public internet

Here are some other things a majority of rural people support:

- ★ Raising the minimum age to 21 and universal background checks on [gun purchases](#)
- ★ [Making it easier to join a union](#) (poll includes rural, urban and suburban voters—rural-specific polling needed)
- ★ [Build Back Better](#) (but there’s concern with price tag)
- ★ [Extending the child care tax credit](#)

In his book *Rural Rebellion*, Ross Benes shows how Kansas voters, though overwhelmingly Republican, have welcomed more refugees per capita than any other state and passed ballot measures raising the minimum wage, expanding Medicaid, and curbing payday loan abuse. But when it comes to candidates, they vote for Republicans who are far to the right of public opinion.

Speaking of Kansas, though we haven’t seen any recent polling, we strongly suspect that rural folks highly value their public K-12 schools and, [like Kansas voters in 2018](#), will act to protect them at the ballot box from defunding and consolidation.

Rural support for Medicare for All was [weak in 2020](#), but a [June 2022 poll](#) found 51% saying it’s the federal government’s responsibility to make sure everyone has health care. Updated polling is needed to gauge rural voters’

support for Medicare for All or other universal health care proposals. Seniors (who are overrepresented in rural America) express concern that a huge Medicare for All program could swamp Medicare, resulting in diminished care for themselves.

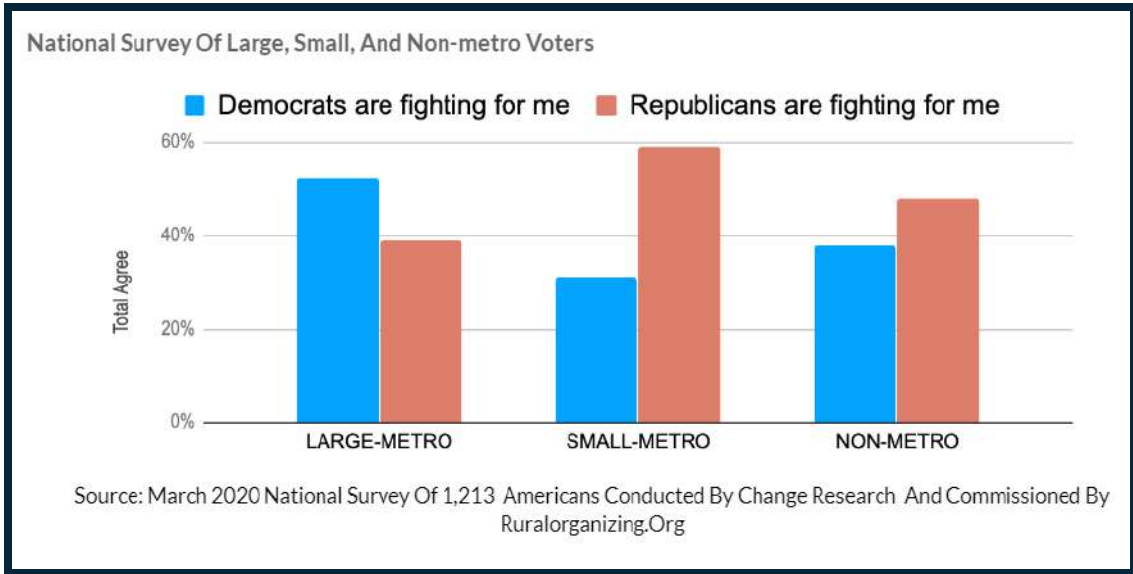
Many rural moderates and conservatives have generic opposition to “free stuff” from the government. [54% agreed with the following statement](#): “The fact that some people in the U.S. are rich and others are poor is an acceptable part of our economic system” while only 36% agreed that “The fact that some people in the U.S. are rich and others are poor is a problem that needs to be fixed.”

There is also a strong streak of [regulatory aversion](#) and a concern that environmental regulations hurt the economy and cost jobs. Anti-regulatory resentment is exacerbated by the experience of having urban policymakers impose new regulations without local input and in disregard of local knowledge and experience.

More research is needed around how to talk about the need for laws that protect people and the environment. In the meantime, make sure your voters know that you’re not interested in trying to run their lives and that you seek their input in regulatory matters.

48% of rural Americans [describe themselves](#) as conservative, 23% as liberal and 25% as moderate. [A third watch Fox News, 42% watch local TV news and 21% get their news from Facebook](#). Talk radio, most of it right-wing, has a large rural audience, though we couldn’t find any statistics. YouTube and Facebook are by far the most commonly used social media, with Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest and TikTok distant seconds. Many young rural folks, especially gamers, [spend a lot of time on Discord, Twitch and Reddit](#).

When asked which party is “fighting for me”, more [named the GOP](#). Likewise, a staggering 59% of non-college white voters and 54% of rural voters [named the GOP](#) as “the party of the working class.”



**COMMUNICATION BEST PRACTICES**

**1. Listen:** Multiple polls and books like *Dirt Road Revival*, *We're Still Here* and *The Left Behind* reflect voters (and non-voters!) feeling unseen, unheard, misunderstood, deplored, and left behind. Though we're not aware of hard evidence of the electoral benefits of taking an interest in voters' lives, hopes and dreams, common sense suggests that listening is good practice with no downside. Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT) [emphasizes the importance of listening](#) everywhere he goes, noting that we have two ears and one mouth for a reason. Most people will not listen until they've been heard.

*"Listen to the folks, hear what they have to say, and then talk about solutions...talk about what you can do to move the ball forward and help them out."*  
—Sen. Jon Tester

*"If you listen to voters long enough, you can find something we agree on."* —Wisconsin State Senator Jeff Smith

**2. Be respectful:** [Heartland incumbents say](#) they work to overcome their constituents' perception of the Democratic Party as intolerant and condescending. [Says Dee Davis](#), founder of the progressive Center for Rural Strategies, "A lot of us in rural areas, our ears are tuned to intonation. We think people are talking down to us."

What ends up happening is that we don't focus on the policy—we focus on the tones, the references, the culture.”

Hillary Clinton's campaign consultant, Diane Hesson, concluded that Clinton's "deplorables" gaffe [tipped the balance](#) among Pennsylvania swing voters. And, indeed, the

gaffe was featured in a Trump campaign that blared incessantly in battleground states. Likewise, JD Vance is running an [ad](#) defending pro-border security Ohioans against charges of racism. Democrats have big enough hurdles in rural America without painting themselves as insufferably sanctimonious.



Trump even managed to make hay out of Clinton's relatively innocuous "I'm with her" slogan, pointing out that *his* pledge, by contrast, was "[I'm with you.](#)" His [biggest applause line](#) at rallies was when he lauded "the deplorables" as the best, smartest people on earth. Trump formed an us versus them bond with fellow victims of elite disdain and pledged to turn the tables on the elites. During the 2016 primary, he [told a Nevada audience](#) he "loved them" ("them" being "the poorly educated") 16 times.

*"People in rural areas always tell me that they feel left behind and talked down to by Democrats so when we meet them where they are and demonstrate we're listening, we're more likely to earn their trust."—Elissa Slotkin (MI-08)*

Don't blame or insult voters. They're operating in the context of a deeply flawed political and economic system that is not of their making. Demeaning them reinforces the image of scornful liberal elites.

**3. Keep it simple:** [Heartland incumbents](#) avoid getting into policy weeds and connect at the gut level, giving voters a "why" [we need xyz] not a "how" we'll implement xyz. As Anat Shenker-Osario of ASO Communications says, "Sell them the brownie, not the recipe." Tell them that paid family leave means they'll be there to see their baby smile

for the first time, not that research shows that access to paid family and medical leave is associated with physical and mental health benefits for new parents, improved maternal and infant health, decreased child and family poverty, and long term career development pathways for women and non-maternal caregivers.

*"Many rural voters expressed significant feelings of concern about saying the wrong thing and being "jumped on" by the progressive community."*  
—RuralOrganizing.org  
Progressive Strategies for Rural Engagement

Clinton campaign advisor Jake Sullivan [advised her](#) to dial back on policy prescriptions and focus more on the problem and the pain it causes people. Clinton insisted that voters wanted to hear about her policies.

Candidates who want to share some of their policy ideas with voters might want to pick a couple of locally salient ones. JD Scholten, currently running for Iowa State House, skillfully lays out a handful of positions on his campaign website. (The screenshot below is from 7/27/22):

**Meet J.D.**  
**Connect with Us**  
**Issues**  
**Get Involved**  
**Donate**

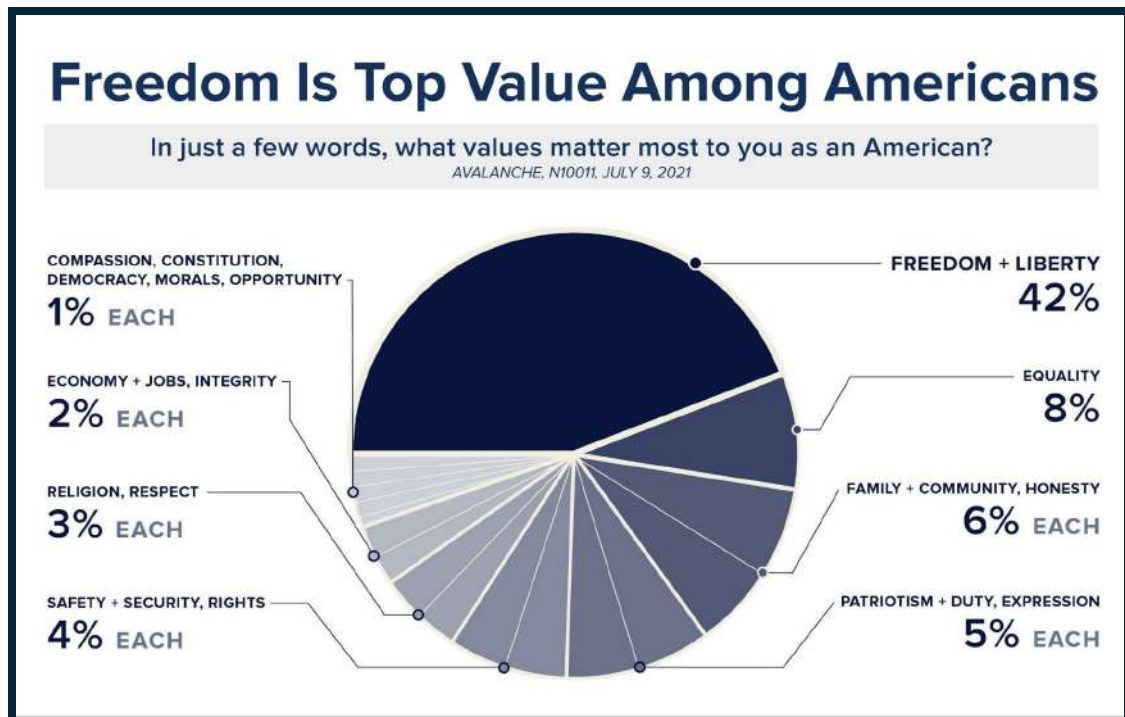
**CLIMATE CHANGE**  
In 2019, the Missouri River floods caused climate refugees in Iowa. In 2020, the derecho cost over \$7.5 billion in damages, the costliest thunderstorm in U.S. history. In 2021, we had tornadoes in December. We need to combat climate change now!

**CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM**  
Currently, a person can write the Governor a half million dollar check (or more). As a result, we have seen "no bid" contracts going to donors. We need to have limits so this state doesn't just go to the highest bidder.

**TAXES**  
For far too long, hardworking Iowans have been paying a higher tax rate than billionaires and corporations. We shouldn't be taxing educators, truckers and taxidermists more than the super wealthy and huge corporations. We need to have a fair tax system for all.



**4. Freedom (and other values) vs. Rights:** Rural people value work, family, self-reliance, nature, community, patriotism, integrity, duty, frugality, common sense, stoicism, fairness, and equality but above all else...freedom and liberty. “Rights” are for lawyers, “freedom” is for regular people. Freedom to join a union, freedom to make private decisions about having children, freedom to marry, freedom from want.



In 2019, sociologists did [an experiment](#) where they presented voters with a fictitious progressive candidate named Scott Miller. Half the voters read that Miller’s “vision for our country is based on principles of economic justice, fairness and compassion” and that he stands for “economic policies that are based on justice and care, policies that will stop corporations from exploiting working people and pocketing huge profits while offering their workers substandard wages and benefits.” The other half read that Miller’s “vision for America is based on respect for the values and traditions that were handed down to us: hard work, loyalty to our country and the freedom to forge your own path,” and that Miller believes “it is patriotic to put American families ahead of big money donors and special interests.” The conservative frame gave Miller a 5-point boost with moderates and a 13-point boost with conservatives

and did not elicit a backlash among liberals. Way to go fictitious Scott Miller!

Making a values-laden pitch to moderate voters is especially important in light of the authoritarian, ethno-nationalist bill of goods most Republican candidates proffer. The Trumpist worldview is simplistic and harmful, but it appeals to people's desire to restore order during tumultuous and precarious times. Democrats need to tell a story of what they stand for and how their vision will reverse national declines in trust, health and well-being, and bring about prosperity, security and social cohesion.

**5. Acknowledge the good:** Have you ever seen the slogan “Don’t mess with Texas”? When this slogan was deployed on highway signs throughout the state, highway litter was reduced by 72%. Why? Because it tapped Texan pride, Texan spirit, and the communal vigilance needed to keep Texas beautiful.



Local candidates know that there are plenty of wonderful things going on in their communities to be proud of and that people's rural identity is rooted in the love of the place they call home. Praise what's working, honor the labors of local people who created a (once) thriving community, and voice respect for customs and traditions that don't run afoul of your creed. Your community is filled with the kind of people who can come together and revitalize the economy and you've got a few ideas how to do that.

Likewise, steer clear of negative broadsides against the country. ([94% of rural voters](#) see America as a great or “the greatest” country in the world). One of Bill Clinton's best lines was, “There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America.” This stance allowed Clinton to acknowledge flaws without antagonizing the vast majority of ordinary folks who love their country and take

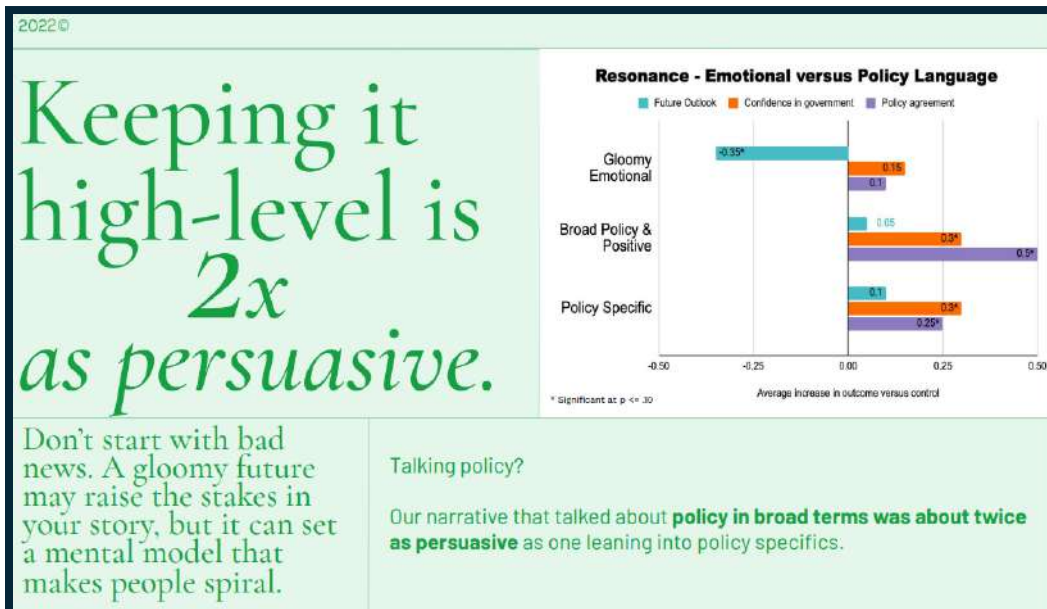
*"It's important to celebrate what is right and what is good about our country and rural communities. When we are too quick to point out what is going wrong or broken about current policy without first building trust, we risk coming across as agitators instead of helpers." —RuralOrganizing.org Progressive Strategies for Rural Engagement*

personally condemnations of America. When Democrats fail to acknowledge the positives, they leave voters receptive to slogans like “America First” and “Make America Great Again.”

Critiques of problems such as racism and low vaccination rates receive a warmer reception when they’re a form of tough love in the context of deep compassion for the community (and receive a chilly or hostile reception when they come packaged as

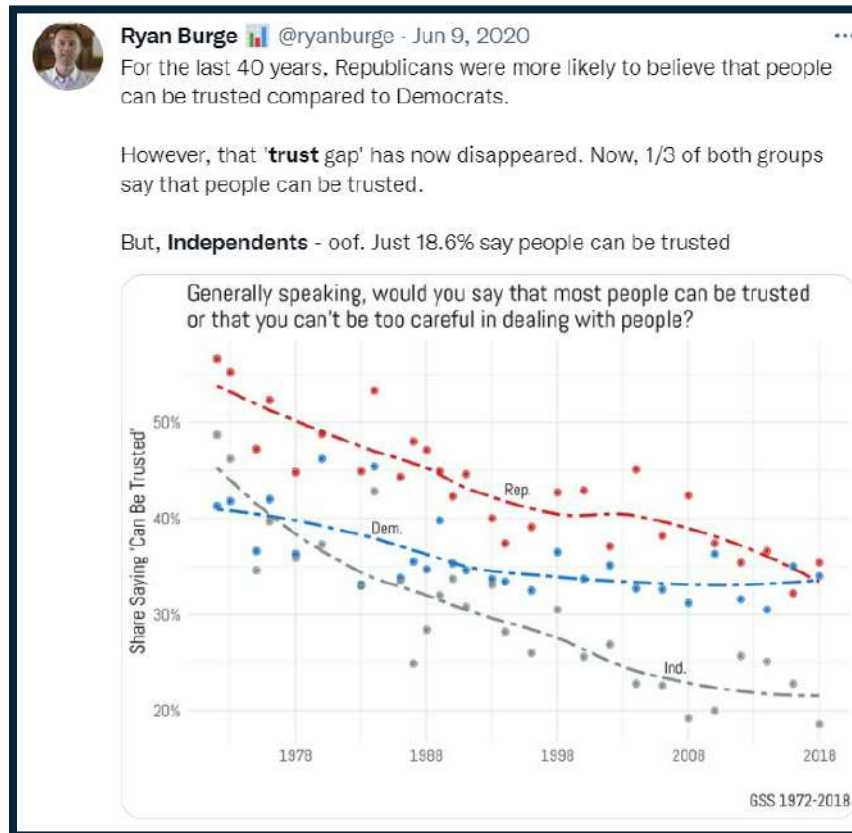
self-righteous liberal talking points). “We are the kind of people who take care of everyone in our community” is inspiring, whereas “We have a huge problem with racism and white people need to check their privilege” is antagonizing.

- 6. **Avoid doom and gloom:** Compared to broad, positive policy language, gloomy rhetoric is not persuasive and can make people tune out.



(Source: AB Partners. The Future of Investing in Our Future. 2022)

Like pessimism, cynicism is demobilizing. Across the political spectrum, but especially among Independents, Americans' trust in one another is at an historic low.



Cynicism reinforces low social trust, which erodes faith in the progressive agenda and can demobilize the very voters we need to engage—young, low-income, non-college, black, moderate and non-religious—who were found in a 2021 [Fellow Americans research paper](#) to be among the lowest in social trust. Whatever the topic at hand, candidates should avoid rhetoric that deepens cynicism and distrust. Multiple messaging experiments have found that talk of a “rigged political system” discourages voters from turning out.

- 7. Strike the right tone:** [Research shows](#) that high-intensity language tends to resonate during periods of crisis but that during relatively good times, voters prefer a low-key pitch. This finding contradicts our observation that our overperforming candidates were consistently even-keeled, even during tumultuous times. Moreover, candidates who

try to project a sense of anger or urgency that they don't authentically feel, will likely come across as phony.

As political psychologist [Drew Westen explains](#), Democrats must simultaneously blunt anxiety and restore hope among voters who feel the sting of inflation every time they go to the grocery store. Doing so requires speaking the truth in ways that resonate with people's everyday experiences while at the same time projecting some degree of assurance that their plight can be ameliorated.

**8. Be optimistic, but acknowledge that change is hard:** Voters are extremely fed up with politicians who talk big but don't deliver. Heading into the 2022 midterms, Avalanche Institute created very sound [messaging guidance](#) tailored to the mood of the electorate. The goal here is to inspire while acknowledging that things are hard, and to tell a positive story about your candidacy rather than trashing Republicans and stoking cynicism.

The graphic is a teal-colored box with a white border. At the top, the title "Strategic Recommendations" is written in white, bold, sans-serif font. Below the title, there are four columns, each representing a recommendation. Each column has a large white number (1, 2, 3, or 4) at the top left. The text in each column is white and includes a bolded headline, a sub-headline, and several paragraphs of smaller text. At the bottom left of the teal box, there is a small white logo consisting of a stylized 'A' shape.

## Strategic Recommendations

- 1**  
**Say what you're FOR, not just what you're against.**  
**Lead with the values of freedom, fairness, and care.**  
A majority of Americans say they are voting for their candidates, not against the opposing party.  
"Fair and just for all" and "Cares and fights for us" were the highest performing statements for Dems, and "protecting/defending our freedoms" is breaking through and coming up in qualitative responses organically.
- 2**  
**Get real. Level with voters.**  
**Then present the choice in clear terms. Inspire "fight."**  
Be real with voters. They are sick of empty promises and politicians who don't produce results.  
They want leaders who give a damn.  
Say what you're for, and what you believe can be done *if we fight for it*.  
Focus on your "why" and then contrast with your opponent's.
- 3**  
**Focus on lived experience: it's "rising costs of living," not inflation.**  
Cost of living is the #1 concern across all segments of voters. Republicans want us to call it "inflation" because inflation is abstract, is easily lied to the Dem administration, and evokes the question of who is better on the economy.  
"Cost of living" (with examples) shows you understand the lived experience voters are having. In other research, we've seen this language make a difference in receptivity to Dem messaging.
- 4**  
**Take people on a journey from despair to determination.**  
Many of the topics that voters are concerned about put them in an inhibited emotional state, because they are hard topics: the struggle to make ends meet, gun violence, women's reproductive freedom being taken away, etc.  
To be effective, we need to inspire determination. We need to tell voters a story about how we will keep fighting, and provide proof points to strengthen credibility (we've done it before, we'll do it again).

**9. Recognize the power of loss aversion:** Human beings tend to be more motivated by the prospect of losing than gaining something, and are willing to take more risks, even objectively irrational risks, to avoid loss. Loss aversion tends to be [stronger in conservatives](#) than in liberals. This

is why Trump so frequently bemoaned the loss of America's supposed greatness and the implicit threat of further deterioration if the Democrats have their way. It behooves a candidate to understand what people fear losing, to empathize with that fear and, where possible, to offer reassurances that further loss can be averted. Likewise, one can show voters how the GOP's policies are causing the very losses of freedoms and financial security (eg. Social Security!) voters dread. Absent an explanation for why people are experiencing loss, right-wing explanations, sometimes of a racist or conspiratorial variety, fill the vacuum.

**10. Speak plainly and succinctly:** Ronald Reagan said, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'" Jimmy Carter said, "'Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants. People have the right to expect that these wants will be provided for by this wisdom."

Talk like a neighbor, not an activist or a politician. Progressive activist jargon like "BIPOC" and "centering" is alienating outside of progressive circles. Abstract discourse is boring. Instead of saying that pronouns should be trans-inclusive, say that it's polite to call people what they want to be called, just like it's polite to refrain from cursing if it offends someone. Instead of saying that Trump is an authoritarian demagogue who threatens democratic norms, say he's a sore loser.

Even mainstream policy terminology can be confusing. For example, some rural residents [misinterpret "Rural Development"](#) to mean urbanization of their communities. Others, we were told by one of the candidates we interviewed, didn't know what Medicaid expansion was, even as Democrats spoke frequently in favor of it.

**Reclaim Idaho ran a successful Medicaid expansion campaign in 2018. Here's how their canvassers explained it:**

- ★ Currently, over 62,000 Idahoans fall into the “Medicaid gap,” meaning that their jobs are keeping them from qualifying for Medicaid but they don’t make enough for private insurance. That means that someone making more than \$283 per month is considered “too rich” for Medicaid and they can’t afford healthcare.
- ★ We are already paying for the cost of Medicaid. Expanding Medicaid would extend healthcare to these people who desperately need it and bring our tax dollars back into the state.

If they encountered pushback or uncertainty, they said:

“I hear that—there’s a lot of views from both sides. I’m supporting this because I’m tired of sending my tax dollars out of state while my family, friends, and neighbors go without healthcare. There is a real healthcare crisis here in Idaho; over 62,000 people and working families are going without basic healthcare. And that’s not just a problem for them, it puts strains on our entire system.”

Remember, 99% of the electorate are “normies,” not political junkies, as this breakdown from We Make The Future attests:

<b>ACTIVISTS &amp; ADVOCATES</b> (<1% of voters)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spend time digging deep on political issues</li> <li>• Work or volunteer regularly in progressive field</li> </ul>
<b>This is all of us in the workshop.</b>	
<b>BASE</b> (25% of voters)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly believe government should create opportunity</li> <li>• View wealth as largely product of circumstances</li> <li>• Believe people of color face greater barriers than whites</li> <li>• Support our policy agenda</li> </ul>
<b>More likely to be Democratic, under 50, and African American.</b>	
<b>PERSUADABLE</b> (50% of voters)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of mixed minds on role of government, origins of wealth, benefits of talking about race</li> <li>• Support our policies yet also lured by opposition on questions of race, gender and government</li> </ul>
<b>More likely to be women while other demographics mirror those of state residents</b>	
<b>OPPOSITION</b> (25% of voters)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly believe government should get out of the way</li> <li>• Think wealth is product of individual effort</li> <li>• Reject need to tackle racism and believe things have “shifted too far” on gender equity</li> </ul>
<b>More likely to be men, over 50, Republican or Independent.</b>	

Progressives use different language and hold passionate but [minority opinions](#) on a number of issues, including the prevalence of racism, police funding, immigration and transgenderism. This is not to say progressive candidates should pander to conservative views they themselves do not hold, but to suggest being mindful when it comes to communicating their positions. Simply asserting an opinion as though it’s the obvious truth held by all sensible people is likely to antagonize.

## **MESSAGING AND FRAMING**

Progressives and Democrats are painfully aware that Republicans, going at least as far back as Ronald Reagan, tend to be better at projecting their vision and activating (or manipulating) people’s emotions and values. The good news is, Democrats are finally doing better on the messaging front so read on for some fresh ideas. As we pored through dozens of poll-tested and focus



group-tested messages, what struck us was how different they sounded from what we typically hear from establishment candidates.

## 1. Progressive Populism

[51% of the rural population](#) has some college education compared to 63% of the urban population, and rural per capita income is [\\$13,600 below the American average](#). The [Common Sense Solidarity study](#) suggests populist sentiments are widespread across geographies and race. For Stan Greenberg's September, 2022 [focus group](#) participants, resentment of elites ran high, and progressive populist statements resonated strongly with working class voters of all races. The belief that the system is rigged for the wealthy and powerful [runs very high](#), but making hay out of that sentiment can be tricky.

*[[I]t's not just the political system that's rigged. It's the whole economy. It's rigged by big donors who want to keep down wages. It's rigged by big businesses who want to leave our country, fire our workers, and sell their products back into the U.S. with absolutely no consequences for them. It's rigged by bureaucrats who are trapping kids in failing schools. It's rigged against you, the American people."*

—Donald Trump  
June 22, 2016

*"Tonight, we served notice to the political and economic establishment of this country that the American people will not continue to accept a corrupt campaign finance system that is undermining American democracy, and we will not accept a rigged economy in which ordinary Americans work longer hours for lower wages, while almost all new income and wealth goes to the top 1%."*

—Bernie Sanders  
February 10, 2016

Numerous studies have found denunciations of corporate profiteers to be effective ([American Voices](#), [Race Class Narrative](#), [Common Sense Solidarity](#)). Others have found that kind of rhetoric to be ineffective or even to backfire ([Galvanize](#), [Winning Jobs Narrative](#), [Expedition Strategies](#)). It may be that corporate villain narratives resonate more strongly in deindustrialized factory towns reeling from corporate offshoring, vulture capital asset-stripping and opioid addiction. Further study with geographic segmentation is needed.

The safest bet seems to be progressive populist rhetoric that is descriptive of the harm being done to working people, mentions a broad policy solution, and is not gratuitously divisive or grandstanding. As our friends at the Winning Jobs Narrative have put it: Focus on what corporate villains do, not who they are.

For example, the following [polled well](#) with white mid-western swing voters:

*Too many of us, our families, and our friends know what it's like to suffer from a disability, chronic health condition, or addiction, and not be able to afford the care we need. Nobody should have to choose between essential health care and food, rent, or bills for their family. I'm fighting for quality, affordable health care for all.*

*For decades wealthy corporations and CEOs have been profiting at our expense by moving jobs overseas with no consequences while our communities suffer. We need policies that bring our manufacturing jobs back home, toughen our trade laws, and encourage buying American, so our communities here at home have good jobs that pay good wages.*

*For decades wealthy corporations and CEOs have been profiting at our expense by moving jobs overseas with no consequences while our communities suffer. We need a fair tax system that requires wealthy corporations and CEOs to pay what they owe, and to provide our communities with more support for our small businesses, good jobs, and good wages.*

(Source: Lake Research Partners, May 2022 Research Findings)

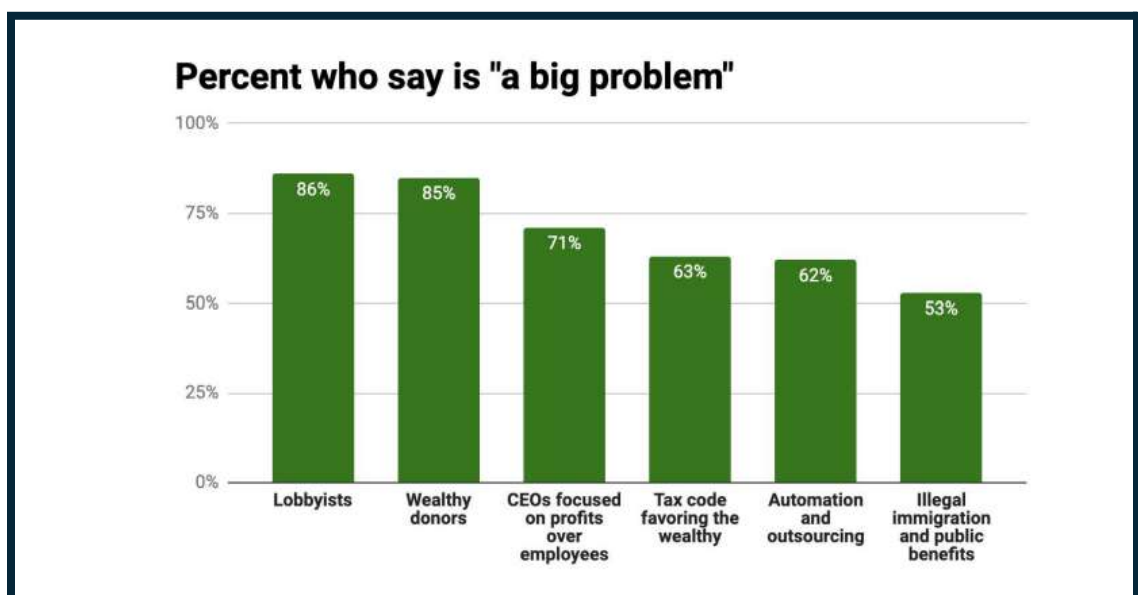
Likewise, [63% of voters](#) said they'd be more likely to vote for a candidate who said this:

“Family farmers and ranchers are facing a perfect storm that’s hurting their families and destroying rural communities. Sinking commodity prices, monopoly power, trade wars, environmental disasters, and chronic oversupply are devastating family farmers. Short-term bailouts are not enough: we need real solutions that tilt the scales back in favor of family farmers to restore the dignity of hard work, open up fair markets, and keep profits in rural communities, not to monopoly corporations or to foreign corporations.”

[76% agreed with this](#): “Instead of delivering for working people, politicians hand kickbacks to their donors who send jobs overseas. Then they turn around and blame new immigrants or people of color, to divide and distract us from the real source of our problems.”

The two statements above come out strongly for people over profiteers but without the demonizing language that some voters find off-putting.

[Voters in MI, WI, OH and PA](#) see corporate greed, lobbyists and corruption as major problems. They reserve a special place in hell for Big Pharma CEOs and lobbyists.



The feeling that elites are out-of-touch with ordinary people's problems is overwhelmingly held across lines of class, race, and party affiliation. Though their specific complaints about elites no doubt differ, this across-the-board alienation is noteworthy. A candidate who acknowledges this sentiment and presents as an ordinary, relatable person may be very appealing.

Congressmember Ro Khanna represents a safe blue district in California, but [look how he talks to small-town mid-western voters](#) in what is being viewed as a signal of his presidential ambitions. Khanna, an Indian-American, skillfully weaves his personal immigrant family story into a narrative of patriotism and optimism that acknowledges racism without slipping into blame or despair:

“People love this country. They want America to win. They want us to lead because we’re a great nation. And they know we’re a great nation because of stories like mine,” Khanna said. He acknowledged sometimes it was hard growing up with immigrant parents and brown skin and the name Rohit. “But that’s not what I remember about growing up in Bucks County, Pa.,” he said. “I remember Little League coaches who believed in me. I remember the local paper, the Bucks County Courier Times, that published my letters to the editor in a community that was 95 percent white. I grew up believing I could do anything in this country. That’s the story of America. That’s the essence of America, whether in Bucks County, Pa., or New Castle, Ind.”

47F. Please tell us whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. — Agree/Disagree - American society – Elites in this country don't understand the problems I am facing. - 2020Nov

	Age - 4					Race - 4			
	Total	18-29	30-44	45-64	65+	White	Black	Hispanic	Other
Strongly agree	48%	43%	49%	51%	49%	50%	48%	42%	48%
Somewhat agree	36%	37%	36%	35%	38%	35%	34%	41%	33%
Somewhat disagree	11%	14%	11%	10%	10%	11%	12%	13%	12%
Strongly disagree	4%	6%	4%	4%	3%	3%	6%	4%	7%
Totals	99%	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%	100%	100%	100%
Unweighted N	(4,943)	(657)	(979)	(2,068)	(1,239)	(3,504)	(523)	(539)	(377)

	Gender - 2			Education - 4			
	Total	Male	Female	HS or Less	Some College	College Grad	Post Grad
Strongly agree	48%	49%	48%	48%	52%	48%	41%
Somewhat agree	36%	34%	37%	37%	35%	36%	35%
Somewhat disagree	11%	12%	11%	11%	9%	13%	18%
Strongly disagree	4%	5%	4%	4%	4%	3%	6%
Totals	99%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Unweighted N	(4,943)	(2,380)	(2,563)	(1,424)	(1,716)	(1,119)	(684)

	Party ID				
	Total	Democrat	Republican	Independent	Other/Not sure
Strongly agree	48%	46%	47%	53%	47%
Somewhat agree	36%	38%	37%	34%	33%
Somewhat disagree	11%	11%	11%	10%	16%
Strongly disagree	4%	5%	4%	3%	4%
Totals	99%	100%	99%	100%	100%

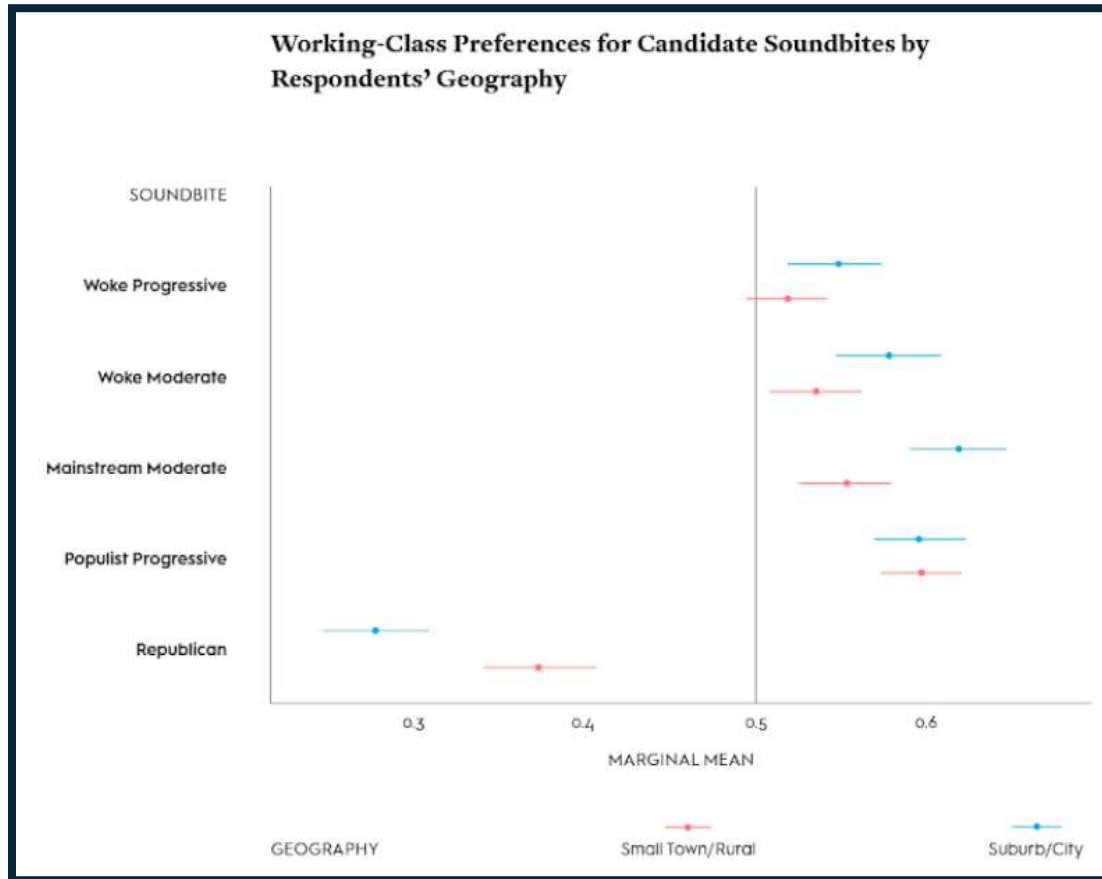
(Source: Democracy Fund Voter Study Group. VIEWS OF THE ELECTORATE RESEARCH SURVEY, Nov 2020, Washington, D.C. <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/>)

Progressive populist rhetoric is different from standard progressive activist rhetoric in some subtle but important ways. Whereas progressive activists tend to center the suffering of marginalized communities and describe how their policy or candidate will alleviate such suffering, progressive populists put working people front and center and pit them against elites.

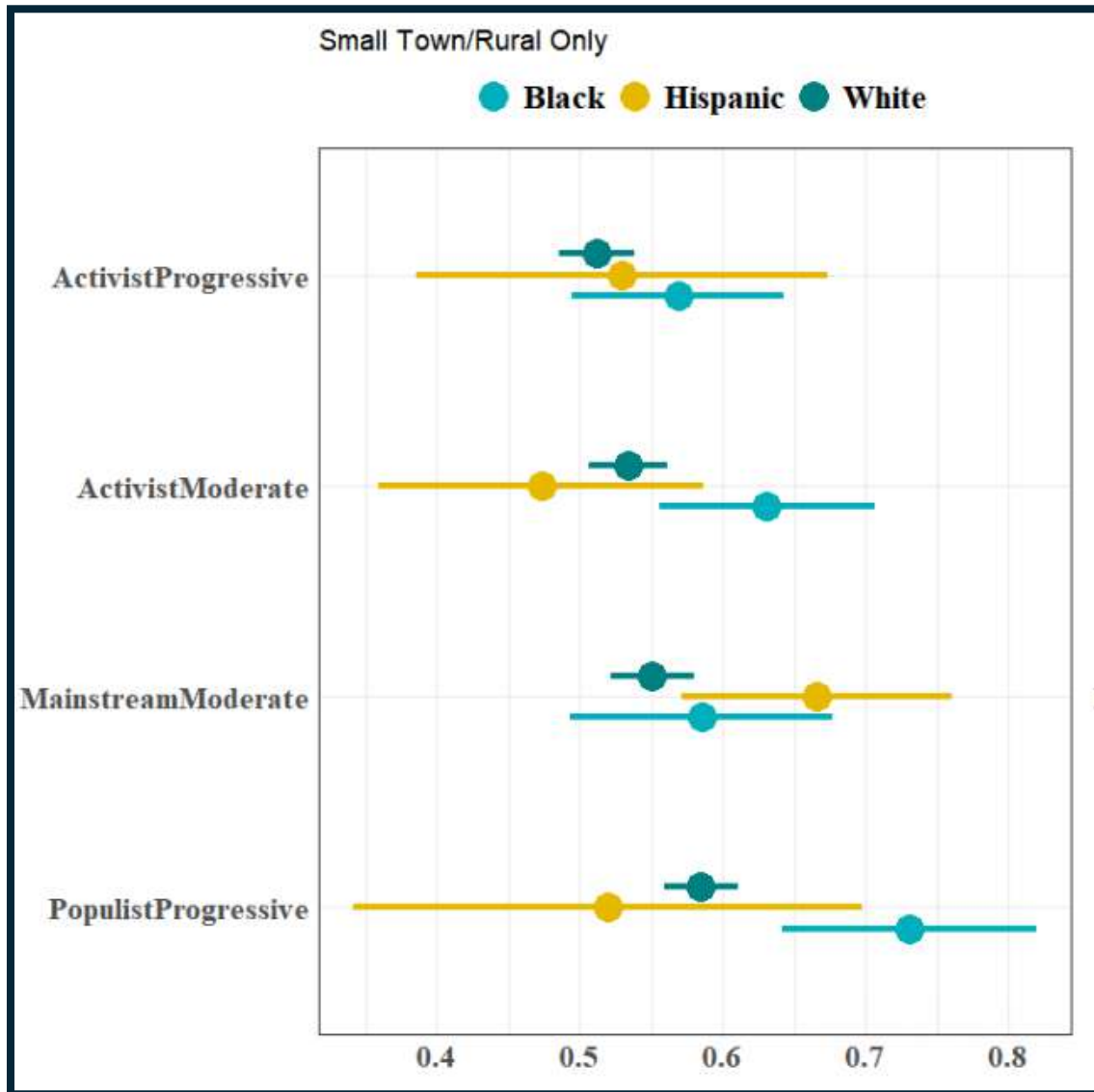
The [Common Sense Solidarity](#) study (below) showed the following hypothetical candidate statements to non-college voters:

CANDIDATE SOUNDBITES	
<p>“This country belongs to all of us, not just the superrich. But for years, politicians in Washington have turned their backs on people who work for a living. We need tough leaders who won't give in to the millionaires and the lobbyists, but will fight for good jobs, good wages, and guaranteed health care for every single American.”</p>	Progressive Populist
<p>“The people closest to pain should be the people closest to power. In Washington, the wealthy and the privileged make the rules, but if you're poor, or an immigrant, or a person of color in America, then you know how hard it is just to survive in this country. We need courageous leaders who will protect the most vulnerable, fight for justice, and make transformative change.”</p>	Woke Progressive
<p>“Our unity is our strength, and our diversity is our power. But for too long, special interests have blocked critical progress in addressing systemic racism, climate change, and access to affordable health care. We need creative leaders who will fight for our values, listen to the experts, and make real change happen.”</p>	Woke Moderate
<p>“America is better than this. We have to stop demonizing each other based on which party we support, how much money we make, or the color of our skin – it's time to heal. We need common-sense leaders who will stick up for working people, listen to the experts, reach across the aisle, and get things done.”</p>	Mainstream Moderate

The chart below shows how these four different styles of rhetoric landed with rural voters. The horizontal axis reflects marginal mean, with anything to the right of 0.5 signifying a positive reaction to that type or rhetoric:



The chart below (prepared by the Center for Working-Class Politics at RUBI's request) breaks down the results for rural voters by race/ethnicity. (Note that "activist progressive" and "woke progressive" are used interchangeably, as are "woke moderate" and "activist moderate"):



Though there's no way to measure it, we suspect that one of the most devastatingly effective populist statements was made by Trump, at [a 2016 Ohio rally](#): "Ohio has lost one in four manufacturing jobs since NAFTA, a deal signed by Bill Clinton and supported strongly by Hillary Clinton. Remember, every time you see a closed factory or a wiped-out community in Ohio, it was essentially caused by the Clintons."



**A note about “wokeness”:** The term “woke” is used in different ways by different political factions. Rather than attempting to define, defend or contest the term, we simply use it as it is used by the entity whose research we are reporting.

Like the Center for Working-Class Politics, the [Breakthrough Institute](#) has also found that many working class Latino voters are put off by “justice” language. When asked which approach they preferred our countries’ leaders take, working-class Latinos, by a wide margin, preferred the pro-working people message (below on the left) to the “justice” message (below on the right), as did rural people but by a smaller margin.

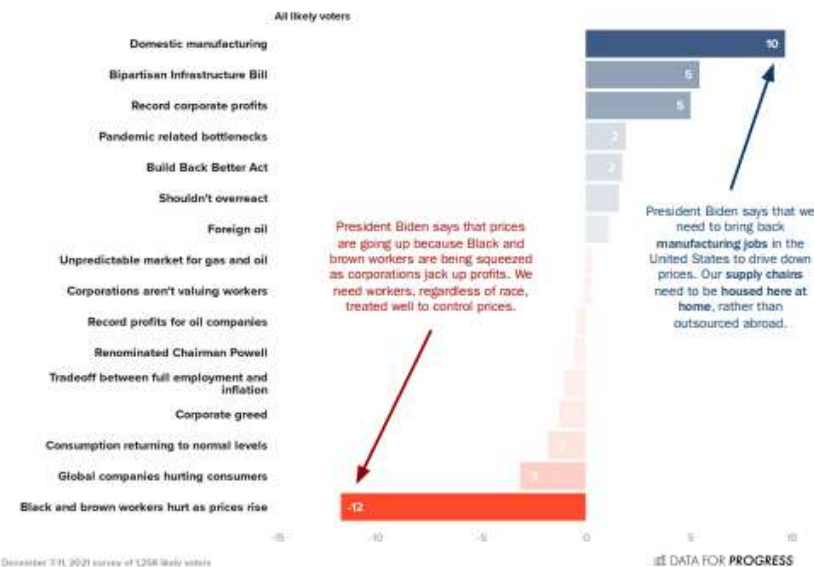
<p><b>WHAT WORKING PEOPLE NEED – CONTRIBUTION VERSION:</b> Build an economy that respects working people – with quality jobs and education, affordable healthcare and childcare – so people can work, take care of their families, and contribute to their communities.</p>	<p><b>JUSTICE FOCUS:</b> Make government work for the people, not the wealthy and powerful, and build a more equitable economy by investing in workers, ending systemic injustice, and creating millions of jobs.</p>
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A recent [New York Times survey](#) of Latino voters found them split on “wokeness,” with 40% saying Democrats have gone too far on race and gender and 37% saying they haven’t gone far enough. Among young working class Latinos, particularly but not exclusively men, the percentage who are critical of “wokeness” is [much higher](#) and higher still if they’re rural. (Among rural voters, 58% said Democrats have gone too far. Among black voters, only 19% share that view). Latinos, particularly young working class men are, in a word, “pocketbook” voters who could go either way depending on their perceptions of each party’s economic program.

Further evidence of the failure of social justice rhetoric to resonate was found by a December, 2021 [Data for Progress survey](#) of likely voters. The survey compared different ways of talking about the impact of inflation and what to do about it and found that the least preferred message, among voters of all races, genders and political persuasions, was the one that focused on the impacts on black and brown workers. (We don't have rural segmentation for this survey but have no reason to think that rural voters would be more amenable to social justice framing).

## Messages Most Preferred Among Likely Voters

Below is a list of statements from President Biden about inflation, or increasing consumer and household prices. For each set of statements you see, say which argument is **most convincing**, and which is **least convincing**.  
The values below are utility scores which measure the average preference level for a message relative to the others (e.g. higher scores mean more preferred).



The most preferred message is **Domestic manufacturing**, with a utility score of more than twice the next two most preferred messages.

The **Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill** and **Record Corporate Profits** are the second two most preferred messages.

From there we see that four messages—**Pandemic-related bottlenecks**, **Build Back Better Act**, **Shouldn't overreact**, and **foreign oil**—all have positive utility scores.

The top two most preferred messages stress *policy solutions* to inflation. They emphasize that America should create domestic manufacturing jobs or that Democrats and Republicans have already taken bipartisan action to shore up the country's supply chains.

The **Record corporate profit** message stresses that to defeat inflation, we need a fairer economy, one that rebalances the ledger so that corporate success doesn't come at the expense of high prices for consumers.

The Average Feature Utility is the average calculation across respondents' individual utility scores for each feature. The higher a feature's average utility is, the more it was preferred by customers. The more negative the average utility, the more likely it was that the feature was indicated as least preferred. This measure communicates preference intensity.

## 2. Valuing hard work

[Study](#) after [study](#) after [study](#) has shown working class people, especially working class people of color, deeply value hard work and resent those who do not respect their contributions to the community and economy. At the same time, some working class voters complain of being overworked and express a desire for work-life balance.

The [Winning Jobs Narrative Project](#) found that working class voters respond favorably to rhetoric that respects their role as drivers of the economy, acknowledges their struggles and honors their hard work. Notably, one of their findings is that the word “dignity” (eg. “the dignity of hard work”) tends to be perceived as patronizing, whereas “respect” for workers resonates.

**Rural voters are much like other voters, but even more responsive to valuing work and contributions.**

The highest rated of 4 economic themes in our national survey, best across race and geography:  
**Passages Highlighted by Voters as Most Appealing**

■ 30% - 39% ■ 40% - 49% ■ 50% or more

The **middle** and **working class** are the **engine of our economy**. **Our skills, labor, contributions**, and purchases make the American economy run. So, when millions of people working full-time still **struggle to afford healthcare and housing costs**, and when parents can't afford to work because **quality childcare is too expensive**, it holds back our entire economy. We need solutions that **support workers and recognize our hard work**. Leaders need to **respect the contributions** of **families, communities**, and **small businesses** because they all **make the economy grow**.

Breakthrough Campaigns national survey n=2449 registered voters, Mar 3-13, 2022

**What Works in the Message with rural voters in particular**

In addition to middle out economics and affordability:

Even more emphasis on valuing work and contributions.

The [Rural Voters Institute found](#) that persuadable rural voters look for candidates who embody the meaning and value of hard work. They spoke of hard work in terms of personal sacrifice and pride in a job well done and see the erosion of the work ethic as bad for individuals and society as a whole. Whether you're an elite who doesn't have to work or a welfare recipient, they see getting “something for nothing” as undermining the upward mobility of people who *do* work hard.

Congressmember Ro Khanna has been speaking to mid-western voters in a way that merits attention, especially his ability to show that the federal government can and should play a role in job creation. Khanna speaks often of “economic patriotism” and [explains it like this](#):

“With interest-free loans, with financing, with capital ... I think we’ve got to have the government back in the process of building things in America. I think with the pandemic people say, ‘We aren’t making our masks in this country? We’re not making our PPE in this country? We’re not making antibiotics in this country? We’re not making the chips that are in our cars in this country? We aren’t making baby formula enough in this country?’ People say, ‘What the hell’s going on?’”

### **3. Handouts and Handups**

Working-class people’s attitudes toward social welfare programs are complex (see [Heartland Report](#) and [Winning Jobs Narrative](#))—they resent people who they think are capable of working but choose not to out of laziness and worry that the government is coddling and enabling these people (this perception is sometimes but [not always racialized](#) and often reflects what they see in their own (white) families and peer groups; they know that shit happens and sometimes people really do need help due to circumstances beyond their control; in keeping with their rural stoicism, some put on a brave face and claim to be keeping up with inflation when the facts tell another story. [Many will support candidates](#) who they believe will fight for government programs—even big ones—that help people like them, not with a handout, but with a handup (i.e. the opportunity and tools to build a good life).

## Tools Beats “Help”

We have extensively tested that exact phrase in A/B testing, compared to messages that describe “helping” people. Opportunity and tools is the winning message every time.

### **Opportunity & Tools**

Democrats say you should support their economic plan, known as Build Back Better, because it **would make sure working people, small businesses, and family farmers have the tools to build a good life**—like affordable health care, child care, education, and energy.

### v. **“Help”**

Democrats say you should support their economic plan, known as Build Back Better, because it **would help working people, small businesses and family farmers** by making health care, child care, education, and energy more affordable.

(Source: Winning Jobs Narrative)

Notice the phrasing, “make sure working people...*have the tools* to build a good life.” This works better than saying that “the government should provide the tools”. The latter smacks of a handout whereas the former leans into individual effort.

The role of availability bias in working class antipathy toward “handouts” is worth further exploration here. People see folks at the grocery store spending \$50 in food stamps, but they don’t see the billions in tax breaks and subsidies corporations are getting...unless someone tells them. Messaging connecting these dots should be developed and tested.

In a [2020 poll](#), over 70% of rural voters strongly agreed with the statement “We all want what’s best for our loved ones. And helping our neighbors—regardless of their background—is an important part of the rural way of life. That’s why we need a President who cares about all groups in my community.”

One untested idea is for a candidate, confronted with fear that government programs incentivize sloth, to say something like this:

“I get what you’re saying about how some people might need a kick in the pants more than a welfare check. I’ve known people like that and it sounds like you have too. At the same time, I’ve seen even more examples of people who are trying hard but can’t catch a break and whose families won’t help them or can’t help them because they’re struggling too—like I think about the folks who lost their jobs at the mine when it shut down. *[A candidate with a personal story of overcoming financial hardship with the help of government benefits can and should tell that story]*. I mean, when so many people are struggling, when one in four kids goes to bed hungry, it makes me think the problem lies with the system, not with the individual.

“What I want to be careful about is making sure that people who really need help don’t get left out in the cold. I think there’s always gonna be some folks who take advantage and, human nature being what it is, we kind of focus on the negative and get frustrated by them. But I think the vast majority of people getting government benefits of one sort or another really do need them, and I don’t think it’s right for them to pay the consequences for the actions of a few so I’d rather err on the side of generosity.”

A voter might then press the candidate on whether they’d support work requirements for welfare recipients...

I get where you’re coming from...you’re working hard for your paycheck and you don’t want your tax dollars subsidizing someone who’s sitting around for a living. Theoretically, I could get behind some kind of work requirement but, where the rubber meets the road, what I’ve seen happen with work requirements is that the government winds up spending a ton of money trying to enforce it and, at the end of the day, there’s not much to show for it. I’ve also seen where a lot of people are trying to meet the work requirement but there’s so much red tape to go through that they wind up getting kicked off of welfare even though they were trying to comply.

So at the end of the day, what I want to do is give people every opportunity to get trained, get educated, find a job, make sure there's day care for their kids while they're at work. Because I'm pretty sure most people would rather put in an honest days' work than live in poverty on welfare. But I wouldn't want to impose a hard-and-fast rule because I think the downsides there are too heavy, especially when there are kids involved.

Another response to the handouts objection could be this:

The way I see it—what makes us strong is that we all take turns helping and being helped. One day, I might be the one doing the helping someone who got laid off at the sawmill, and another day I might be the one who needs help. That's one of the things I love about the country way of life, the way we take care of each other.

When it comes to neutralizing the racial stereotypes that can exacerbate anti-welfare hostility, the Race-Class Narrative comes to the rescue. For example, [89% of rural folks agreed with this](#): “In small towns and rural communities we believe in looking out for each other, whether we're white, Black or brown, tenth generation or newcomer.”

Note that this rhetoric is quite different from what we often hear from the liberal Left—that xyz program will lift up black and brown people who have been hit the hardest by abc. This race-centric approach appeals to the progressive left but [backfires with voters](#) who are used to hearing dog whistles from people like Ronald “welfare queen” Reagan and Rush Limbaugh, who said, for example, “This [Obamacare] is a civil rights bill, this is reparations, whatever you want to call it.” [This strategic racism](#) is designed to turn white people (and, it turns out, [many people of color as well](#)) against programs they otherwise might have supported by suggesting that it will benefit undeserving non-white people while hard-working folks like the foot the bill.

Another set of approaches to countering Republican scapegoating of “lazy” people is shown below. Whereas the “greedy corporate villain” frame failed to compete with the conservative message, statements

that kept the focus on working people as the backbone of their communities performed better.



One final insight about antipathy toward handouts comes from Robert Wuthnow in *The Left Behind*: Most rural folks support local, private, often church-based charitable efforts to help members of their community in need. They see private charity as superior to government programs. Candidates may need to get creative about building on people's charitable impulses and directing government aid to support locally-run and respected charities.

#### 4. Touting Democratic Achievements

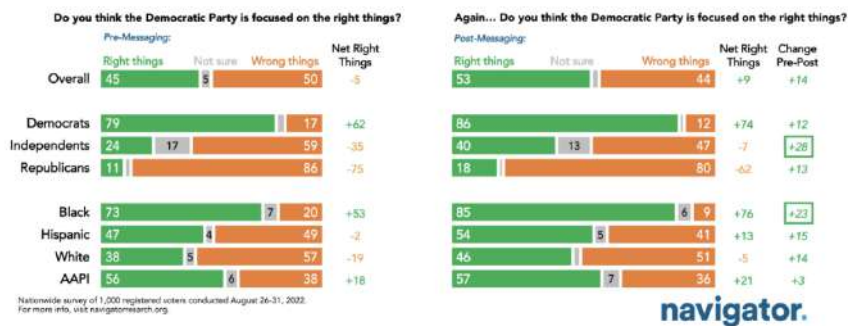
It is unclear whether or not playing up Democratic accomplishments moves the needle with voters. In rural areas, where candidates running as Democrats pay a huge price for their partisan affiliation (see #4 and #5 of [this poll](#)), we believe that touting Democratic greatness risks backfiring. Moreover, if inflation is raging under a Democratic White House, we predict that self-congratulatory talk will land badly. A more [nuanced approach](#) is for a candidate to say that they want the Democratic Party to live up to its roots as the party of working people.




That said, with inflation beginning to ebb and Democrats having racked up some achievements, a [late summer poll](#) (below) suggests that voters, particularly Independents, respond well to such messaging. (Rural segmentation of this data is sorely needed). At the end of the day, the viability of such messaging seems to ebb and flow with shifting economic conditions. It's one thing to tell voters how much Democratic policies will benefit them and quite another for voters to *experience* actual benefits (as have, for example, the thousands of farmers whose [debts were forgiven](#) under the Inflation Reduction Act).

### Reminding Americans of Accomplishment Increases Belief That Democrats Are Focused on Right Things

After messaging about Biden and Democrats' accomplishments, the share of independents who say the Democratic Party is focused on the right things increases by net 28 points (from -35 to +7) and the share of Black Americans increases by net 23 points (from +53 to +76).



The [Winning Jobs Narrative](#) tested several variations of an ad affirming Democrats' commitment to taking action to improve the economy for working families. All were at least moderately effective, but the **third one on the chart below**, which paid homage to hard working Americans in addition to making Democrats' good deeds explicit, did best.

TESTED MESSAGES | VARIATIONS 

House Majority PAC	Democrats say their plan for jobs and the economy is pointing our country in the right direction, with the biggest single-year jobs gain on record—7.9 million new jobs—and a record drop in unemployment. Now Democrats are working to lower costs. They're tackling gas prices by releasing 1 million barrels of oil per day from our reserves, and they just passed a \$35-per-month cap on insulin. Democrats rescued the economy, and they're getting things done by creating good-paying jobs and lowering costs.
House Majority PAC + WJN Opportunities/Tools	Democrats say their plan for jobs and the economy is pointing our country in the right direction, with the biggest single-year jobs gain on record—7.9 million new jobs—and a record drop in unemployment. Now Democrats are working to lower costs <b>and ensure hardworking people have the opportunities and tools we need to build a good life.</b> They're tackling gas prices by releasing 1 million barrels of oil per day from our reserves, and they just passed a \$35-per-month cap on insulin. Democrats rescued the economy, and they're getting things done by creating good-paying jobs and lowering costs.
House Majority PAC + WJN Opportunities/Tools + Center Working People	Democrats say their plan for jobs and the economy is pointing our country in the right direction, with the biggest single-year jobs gain on record—7.9 million new jobs—and a record drop in unemployment. Now Democrats are working to lower costs <b>and ensure hardworking people have the opportunities and tools we need to build a good life.</b> They're tackling gas prices by releasing 1 million barrels of oil per day from our reserves, and they just passed a \$35-per-month cap on insulin. <b>Hardworking Americans are bringing us back from the pandemic—and Democrats are getting things done for them</b> by creating good-paying jobs and lowering costs.

Along similar lines, [Democracy Corps](#) found the following message to be highly effective with moderates and liberals and even with some Trump supporters in a July, 2022 national survey carefully calibrated to capture the views of voters of color and working class voters:

Democrats say people are living paycheck to paycheck and working people haven't seen a real pay increase in years. Those in Washington don't get it. The big corporations, billionaires, oil companies, big tech monopolies and their lobbyists are calling the shots. Democrats gave tax relief to the poor, working families, and the middle class, reduced health care premiums on exchanges, and are negotiating lower prescription drug costs. With inflation killing people, they are going after the monopolies and price gouging. Republicans get their money from big oil and the drug companies, and they oppose tax relief for working people and raising taxes on big corporations. Democrats are working for safe communities where workers get a break, and we grow the middle class again.

Candidates who want to highlight American Rescue Plan projects in their district can make use of [this database](#). Another [database](#) exists for Inflation Reduction Act job creation. More research is needed on this messaging strategy but, at present, it seems that it can be effective when framed in populist terms as shown in the examples above.

The California Democratic Party put up bilingual billboards in the Central Valley heralding the delivery of internet to this long-neglected region. We don't know what impact this may have had on Central Valley voters.

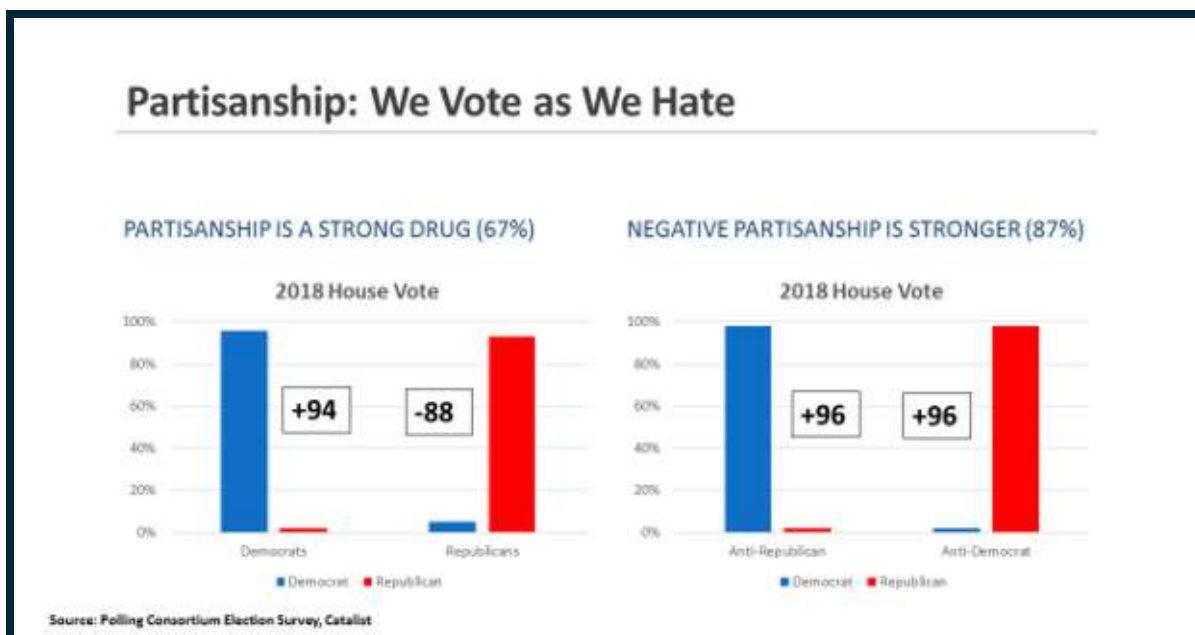


Alternatively and, perhaps, more effectively...[new research shows](#) that thanking Democratic voters, instead of thanking politicians, lands well. But we're not sure if these findings apply to rural swing voters who might feel dissed by an ad thanking Democratic voters for their wonderfulness, so tread carefully here.

## 5. Unity vs. Hard Partisanship

67% of Americans represent the ["exhausted majority"](#) who are fed up with polarization and say they want politicians who will work across the aisle and find common ground. Surprisingly, the desire for candidates willing to compromise is especially pronounced among voters between the ages of 18-34, with [72% preferring a compromiser](#) to a fighter. However, messages that lean into unity and common ground [fare poorly](#) (from what we've seen, which is not a very big pool). We believe that such messages should be re-tested in areas of the country where "being nice" and "compromising" are strong values and distaste for divisiveness runs strong (eg. [rural mid-west](#) and rural south).

What also fares poorly outside of the base are aggressively angry attacks against Republicans. We have consistently seen that inspirational messages [like this one](#) can mobilize voters while hard partisanship often causes a backlash.



[Inspirational themes](#) include the power of collective action, making possible the impossible, resilience, and creating a better future for our kids. Demobilizing themes include powerlessness, shame, sadness, hopelessness and isolation.

There is a difference between partisanship and negative partisanship. Partisanship is more about party loyalty whereas negative partisanship reflects hatred of the other party. Negative partisanship in the US is a bigger predictor of voting behavior.

This unfortunately reality leads many Democrats to campaign around “I’m not that guy” instead of making an affirmative case for what they stand for. Reasonable minds may differ as to the wisdom of such a strategy, but there’s a very practical reason why it does not and cannot work in most rural races: The Republican partisan lean in most rural areas means that negative partisanship works to the GOP’s advantage. The more Democrats stoke partisan animus, the more rural Republicans will defensively hate them right back and flock to the polls.

The alternative is to try to defuse or do an end-run around negative partisanship by focusing on substance. The [Winning Jobs Narrative](#) tested eight variations of an ad affirming Democrats’ commitment to taking action to improve the economy for working families. Seven

variations of the ad moved the needle at least a tiny bit, but this one **backfired**:

<p>... Republican politicians in Washington want a future where our addiction to dirty energy sources keeps us dependent on the whims of oil companies and dictators like Putin in Russia. Democrats' plan will take away tax cuts from the wealthy and use that money to invest in clean energy and provide relief checks to Americans getting gouged at the gas pump.</p>	<p>-0.5%</p>
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Likewise, the following call for taxing windfall oil profits **backfired** when it was introduced with a hard partisan frame:

<p><b>Extreme Republicans Trying to Divide Us</b></p>	<p>Democrats say their plan for jobs and the economy is pointing our country in the right direction and gets the balance right: fighting COVID and, with the American Rescue Plan, helping ensure that working people have the opportunities and tools we need to build a good life. But some extreme Republicans have tried to divide us: They're trying to overturn election results with violence, pitting parents against teachers, limiting our freedom to vote - even burning books. Americans rejected chaos and division in 2020, we can do it again.</p>
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Even where partisan attacks don't outright backfire, they still underperform a more positive message. Below is a Winning Jobs Narrative split-test between a "pro-Democrats" and anti-"extreme Republicans" frame. The pro-Dems message was significantly more likely to lead rural voters to embrace Democratic policies and candidates than the anti-GOP.

<p><b>WF/SB/FF First + Opportunity &amp; Tools + IRA</b></p>	<p>That means putting working families, small businesses, and family farmers first. Democrats are working to lower costs and ensure hardworking people have the opportunities and tools we need to build a good life. By making <b>giant corporations pay the taxes they owe</b>, Democrats are bringing down costs for healthcare, medicine, and energy bills—without raising taxes on anyone making less than \$400,000 a year.</p>
<p><b>WF/SB/FF First + Opportunity &amp; Tools + Extreme GOP Contrast</b></p>	<p>That means putting working families, small businesses, and family farmers first. Democrats are working to lower costs and ensure hardworking people have the opportunities and tools we need to build a good life. But <b>extreme Republican leaders oppose Democrats' plans to bring down costs for health care, medicine, and energy bills and make giant corporations pay the taxes they owe.</b></p>

Another depolarizing tactic is to describe oneself as a moderate. *Anyone* can do this, so long as they define a moderate as a problem-solver who stands up for the interests of ordinary working people. What's *not* moderate is putting personal power and the interests of rich donors ahead of the common good, or refusing to take

clear, strong positions on issues in the name of bipartisanship. (Many voters are fickle in that they say they hate toxic partisanship but they also criticize Democrats who don't play hard-ball with Republican obstructionists, a [frustration voiced](#) by voters of color in rural North Carolina). Far-left Democratic voters will likely forgive a rural Democrat who calls themselves a moderate, but Republican voters will not trust a Democrat who calls themselves a progressive or socialist.

Stanford's [Strengthening Democracy Challenge](#) (SDS) tested dozens of interventions designed to reduce partisan animus. [This video](#), for example, was found to significantly decrease partisan animus. Descriptions of the 25 winning interventions are [here](#). RUBI recommends deploying depolarizing interventions year-round so as to defuse partisan animus before campaign season even begins. Groups like Braver Angels provide structured dialogue formats that can be used to engage in political conversation across lines of difference.

Even just getting people talking about what constitutes the “good life” for them or what the ideal community looks like to them can break the ice and create a platform for discovering shared values. A candidate might utilize Town Halls for such a purpose and also might consider convening a “problem solvers caucus” comprised of residents of all political stripes who come together to discuss local problems and make recommendations to the candidate once they're (hopefully) in office—even if they don't come to a consensus, they can present a menu of options and feel heard.

A notable benefit of depolarization [discovered by SDS](#) is that, when rival party hatred decreases, so too does support for in-party candidates who (cough cough) engage in undemocratic practices. This could lead Republicans to vote Democrat or stay home. Another potential benefit of depolarization, though this hasn't been studied, is that straight-GOP-ticket voters might be willing to split their ticket if they have less hostility toward Democrats. Given that partisan prejudice in the US is [stronger even than racial polarization](#) (with partisans less trusting of cross-partisans than they are of other racial groups), there's no shortage of good reasons to undertake depolarizing initiatives. It's hard to hate someone up close.

In addition to partisan depolarization, building bridges between rural and urban Americans is equally important. The Race-Class Narrative rhetorical formula can be adapted to link the fates of rural and urban communities and show that ordinary folks have more in common than what divides them. The following rural-urban bridge message is untested:

Whether you live in New York City or right here in \_\_\_\_, every one of us wants and deserves to live in a thriving community where our kids will want to stay and carry on our traditions. But a handful of Big Ag monopolies are price-gouging New Yorkers on their hamburgers [at the same time that they're putting our family ranchers out of business](#), all so they can jack up their profits. Then they try to make us point the finger at each other instead of at them. What I want is for all of us to come together—country and city folk alike—and stand up to the Big Ag cartels that are profiting off our backs. And that's what I intend to do if you send me to Washington. Congresswoman \_\_\_\_ (from New York) and I have already discussed how we're going to work together to get this done because her constituents are just as fed up as we are.

One more depolarizing tactic is the dissemination of purely factual information about each candidate's position on the issues and/or voting record. (This can be found in the discussion of "The Opponent" on page 93). There's an important distinction here between "bipartisan" and "non-partisan." Whereas bipartisan "I will work across the aisle" platitudes often fall as flat as other empty campaign promises, non-partisan information can get through to voters who are fed up with inflammatory partisan sniping.

## 6. Experts and regulation

Many rural sociologists have observed a strong current of distrust against professional-class "experts", government bureaucrats and political insiders. (See eg. [this talk](#) by Kristin Lunz Trujillo and the books *The Left Behind*, by Robert Wuthnow, and *We're Still Here* by Jennifer Silva). Candidates who cite institutional authorities such as the CDC or Harvard professors in support of their positions may discover a backfire

effect. Likewise, reflexive extolling of regulations designed by distant bureaucrats goes over like a lead balloon.

It isn't just the elite pedigree of experts that engenders skepticism among rural people. In fact, sometimes "the experts" are spectacularly wrong. At the September 14th, 1993 signing ceremony for the North American Free Trade Agreement, President Bill Clinton said, "I believe that NAFTA will create a million jobs in the first five years of its impact." While one might debate the overall impacts of NAFTA and other trade deals signed during Clinton's era, there is no question that the impacts on many small towns and rural areas were devastating, as nearly [60,000 US manufacturing facilities closed](#) in the two decades following NAFTA and the admission of China to the World Trade Organization.

From the point of view of the millions of workers who lost manufacturing jobs during this period, skepticism of experts seems well-founded. Likewise, consider the assurances, given by health authorities, that oxycontin was safe and non-addictive, only to have opioids devastate scores of rural communities.

Like economists and medical authorities, experts employed by centralized government bureaucracies sometimes enact regulations that make it hard for small business owners and farmers. We advise candidates to acknowledge this and to solicit locals' advice and experience about how the government can protect people and wildlife from getting hurt without creating unnecessary red tape. Empathizing with the burden of regulations doesn't mean agreeing that they should be rescinded. This is particularly the case with federal regulations that take a "one size fits all" approach. Understanding how such regulations can advantage big corporations over family farms, community banks and small businesses is essential to understanding the concerns of rural people. It could also lead to regulatory policy that is fairer and more effective.

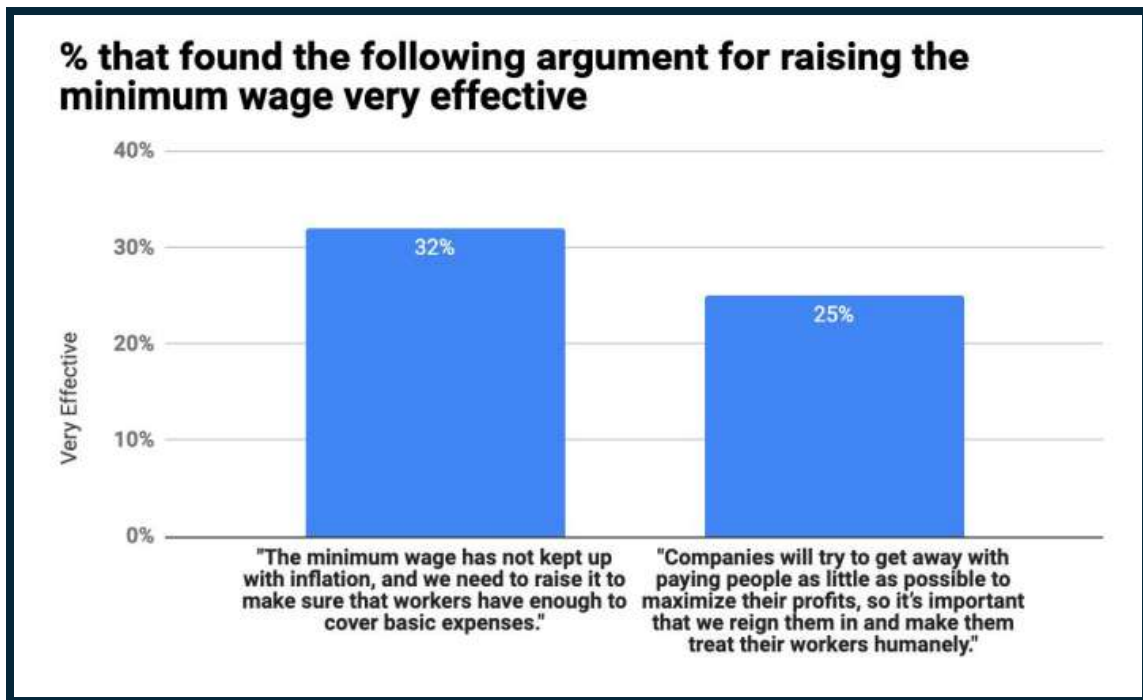
## **HANDLING SPECIFIC ISSUES**

- 1. Minimum wage:** Rural voters hold mixed views on whether the minimum wage should be increased to \$15/hour, probably based on



concern about the impact on small businesses. [One recent poll](#) showed 53% in support of raising the minimum wage to \$15. Voters in MI, WI, OH and PA [responded somewhat favorably](#) to these statements.

More research is needed, especially now that inflation is eroding the value of a \$15 wage.



- 2. Taxes:** [64% favor raising taxes](#) on people making over \$200,000 a year. Many also want to [stop giving tax breaks](#) to corporations who offshore their operations.

Look at how much more positively rural voters respond to a call for populist taxation than to a fiscal conservative tax cut. What you see below is a comparison test where rural voters were shown (on the left-hand side) a conservative statement about keeping taxes low for “everyone” and (on the upper right-hand side) a statement calling for a tax code that’s fair for the working and middle class. By 12 points, rural voters favored “fair for the working and middle class” to “keep taxes low for everyone.”



(Source: Winning Jobs Narrative)

The above might be even more effective if it replaced “tax code” with “tax relief,” but that remains to be tested.

- 3. Climate, energy and environment:** There is strong support for clean energy due to its job-creating potential. There is likewise a strong commitment to public land stewardship, particularly in regions where hunting and tourism are big.

Hillary Clinton’s second-most catastrophic gaffe (after “the basket of deplorables”) was the following statement at a [2016 CNN Town Hall](#).

“We’re going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business, right Tim? And we’re going to make it clear that we don’t want to forget those people. Those people labored in those mines for generations, losing their health, often losing their lives to turn on our lights and power our factories. Now we’ve got to move away from coal and all the other fossil fuels, but I don’t want

to move away from the people who did the best they could to produce the energy that we relied on.”

Clinton’s concern for the well-being of laid-off miners came across as a wooden afterthought. The fallout rained down all across Appalachia, [from Ohio to Virginia](#).

A few months later, Trump held a rally in a Virginia coal region and empathized with coal miners who wanted to follow in the family trade, just like he followed in his father’s footsteps in the real estate industry. [He then said](#): “They want to be miners, but their jobs have been taken away. And we’re going to bring them back, folks.”

Trump’s demeanor during this speech is a master-class in political empathy. [Watch it](#) and see for yourself, then [watch Clinton’s](#) for comparison. It’s a surprising performance on the part of a man better known for his narcissistic demagoguery.

The [Winning Jobs Narrative](#) found that environmental messages that explicitly focused on the benefits for working families not only increased support for a climate plan but also increased trust in Democrats to deliver on jobs and the economy by a small but statistically meaningful percentage whereas an environmental justice message backfired.

### **What worked:**

✓ “Democrats say you should support their plan to invest \$600 billion in clean energy because it will cut energy costs for families by an average of \$500 per year by transforming our economy to run on reliable clean energy. And it’s part of a plan that’s creating millions of good jobs by bringing manufacturing jobs back to America, replacing poisonous lead pipes, and upgrading roads, bridges, and ports to withstand the devastating effects of climate change.”

✓ “Democrats say you should support their plan to invest \$600 billion in clean energy because every family in America—no matter where we live—should have the opportunity and tools to

build a good life. But rising costs of basic things we need to work and take care of families, like gas and other energy, hold us back. Speeding up investments in cheaper clean energy like wind and solar would save families money and create quality local jobs that can't be outsourced. That makes good economic sense.”

### **What backfired:**

❌ “Democrats say you should support their plan to invest \$600 billion in clean energy because every community deserves an opportunity to thrive. But low-income communities, be they white or communities of color, suffer most from our dependence on dirty energy sources. Clean energy benefits everyone as long as low-income communities receive the investment and jobs to clean up the air and water pollution causing greater levels of asthma, cancer, and birth defects.”

Climate Power created and tested a bunch of short videos aimed at increasing viewers' support for clean energy. They found that having workers as the clean energy advocates was more effective than small business owners. All of the following videos were **effective** with a nationwide audience:

▶ TGAB — Sarah

▶ TGAB — Haley

▶ TGAB — Brett Isaac

▶ TGAB — Jennifer

▶ TGAB - Jaime & Mike

It would be helpful to know if any of these videos were more or less effective with rural audiences specifically. We would also like to see the development of messaging that uses the concept of rural places being [“sacrifice zones”](#) or “resource colonies” for corporate raiders. Such messages could have a populist flavor, leaning into people's love of place and anger at how it has been stripped for parts, its wealth extracted while the people have nothing to show for it but pollution and shuttered factories.

Another approach was taken by Maine State Senator Chloe Maxmin, who said: “I’m running for State Senate knowing that if we fail in the future, we are certain to lose what we cherish of the past.” Like Trump, Maxmin leaned into nostalgic yearnings but flipped the script to suggest that what will make Maine great again is taking action to protect the place Mainers love.

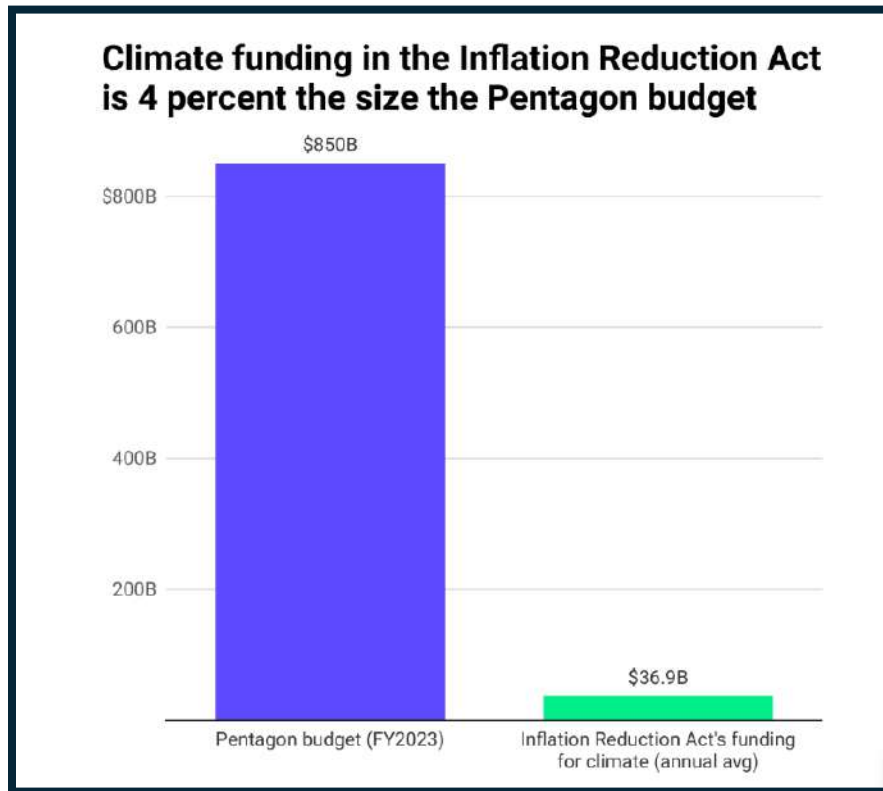
The Duke University Nicholas Institute created an [infographic](#) with some useful tips for rural environmental advocacy, including engaging rural communities as stakeholders with moral responsibilities as well as personal self-interest in clean water and conservation. Their focus groups with rural voters found that overall, rural people value the environment as much as urban and suburban voters, with two important differences. First, rural environmental priorities tend to be “closer to home” and immediately apparent, leading to much higher levels of concern over farmland protection, land use and clean water over climate change. Secondly, rural voters prefer locally-based solutions wherever possible, over “big government” interventions.

Mainstream environmentalists often directly or impliedly blame people who work in rural industries like farming, mining and forestry and rural lifestyle choices such as driving a pickup. Such blame has been shown to [heighten rural skepticism of climate change](#)—not surprising that, when people feel attacked, they get defensive and reject whatever the attacker is saying. Moreover, rural people perceive that they are being asked to make a bigger sacrifice (i.e. their livelihoods) than their urban counterparts who can easily switch to mass transit, bicycling, and telecommuting.

Finally, two common mistakes with easy fixes:

- ★ Express climate change impacts in fahrenheit, not celsius. Two degrees celsius sounds like a nothingburger. Better yet, ask people what changes they’ve noticed in local weather patterns and how it’s affected them and their farms and gardens. And share what you’ve personally experienced or observed.

- ★ Express climate program spending (or any large government spending) in annual cost, not ten-year cost. This helps mitigate sticker shock. And provide context for spending like this:



(Source: [Speaking Security Substack](#))

- 4. Police accountability:** [Heartlanders](#) have a nuanced perspective that recognizes the humanity and stressful working conditions of police and, at the same time, are distressed by police brutality and the militarization of police forces and want to see more training around deescalation. We'd like to see a candidate try to thread the needle with rhetoric around police accountability that avoids vilifying cops.
- 5. Covid:** As discussed above with respect to "handouts and handups," racially prejudiced Americans tend to turn against programs and policies that are touted as lifting up racial minorities. A recent study [found that](#) racially prejudiced whites were more likely to blow off masking and social distancing when they were informed of racial disparities in Covid mortality. This finding suggests that progressives' tendency to emphasize the racial disparities of the pandemic is counterproductive. Though it hasn't been tested to our knowledge, we

believe that focusing on protection of members of the local community, whether they're white, black or brown, would be a more effective way to activate rural people's compassion and willingness to make sacrifices for the greater good. That said, the personal liberty mindset, combined with distrust of public health experts, runs strong in rural areas, making advocating for strict Covid measures a huge uphill battle.

The following (outdated) message was tested by Galvanize Action with rural white women:

	Moved voters to support mandated vaccines for adults	Moved voters to have an unfavorable opinion of Governors who do not require people to wear masks in schools
<i>The Delta variant is raging and Pediatric ICU's are filling up. We know that if everyone who can, gets vaccinated and we require masks indoors, we'll have a much better chance of keeping our kids safe. This is no time to play politics. The Government needs to act now to keep our kids in school and safe.</i>	<b>+14 points</b> (39% to 53%)	<b>+26 points</b> (36% to 62%)

New messages focused on the Omicron variant, pandemic fatigue, and distrust of public health experts, are needed.

**6. Political corruption:** When asked what they would fix if they could wave a magic wand, [Heartlanders](#) named getting money out of politics and health care. This tracks with [national polling in 2020](#) that found corruption to be a top issue (though we note that this poll pre-dates Covid, inflation and the murder of George Floyd) and with [polls of rural battleground state voters](#) in the summer of 2020. Rural voters, low-propensity voters and Trump voters are [more likely than others](#) to see politicians as corrupt.

**7. Immigration:** A subtle but important aspect of rural (as opposed to urban) nativism is that it is an extension of rural pride of place and interdependence. Stephanie Muravchik explains in *Trump's Democrats* that, in many small towns, an “outsider” is someone from a neighboring county. Rural people want ultra-local people filling local jobs and accessing local amenities. *Municipal* borders matter to them, and longtime residents have “seniority” over newcomers. If their town is

economically distressed, they may draw an incorrect inference about the causal relationship between increased ethnic diversity and increased unemployment, crime and drug abuse.

This is not to deny the existence of xenophobic prejudice but to lend nuance to it as another layer that must be addressed. Policies and rhetoric that speak to the importance of belonging, loyalty and “taking care of our own” in rural communities are a must. Candidates who dismiss immigration concerns as racist, or who make soaring statements about the virtues of immigration without empathizing with perceived downsides, come across as out-of-touch elites.

One pervasive myth is that immigrants bring crime to otherwise low-crime communities. Year-round efforts must be made to shatter that myth. If possible, local law enforcement are the best messengers on this topic, as exemplified by the [police chief of Storm Lake, Iowa](#) who shared with the community his data on ethnicity and crime rates.

These three messages developed by [Galvanize](#) performed extremely well with rural white moderate women. Notice how different they sound from the rhetoric deployed by educated urban immigration advocates.

IMMIGRATION	
<i>Messages aimed at centering voters' in-group care and speaking to their patriotism, purity, and belief in hard work.</i>	
<i>Moved voters to disagree that immigration is changing US culture for the worse</i>	
<i>Having immigrants move in next door to me took some getting used to. They talk different and eat different. But you know what's the same? They work hard. Go to church. Raise respectful kids. And keep their yard clean. And if you asked, they'd give you the shirt off their back. I don't think of them as immigrants anymore, I think of them as good neighbors.</i>	<b>+27 points</b> (27% to 54%)
<i>Three quarters of agricultural work is done by immigrants and during COVID they helped to support our economy and put food on our tables. Without immigrants, our agriculture industry and our economy would struggle.</i>	+18 points (27% to 45%)
<i>America is awesome. It's no wonder so many people want to come here. I would too if I wasn't lucky enough to be born here. I think it's pretty cool that people are brave enough to pack up everything to make their own luck here in America. That grit and determination to work hard is part of what makes us great.</i>	+17 points (27% to 44%)

Here's one more from [RuralOrganizing.org](#) that garnered a 58% favorability boost among non-large-metro Independents:

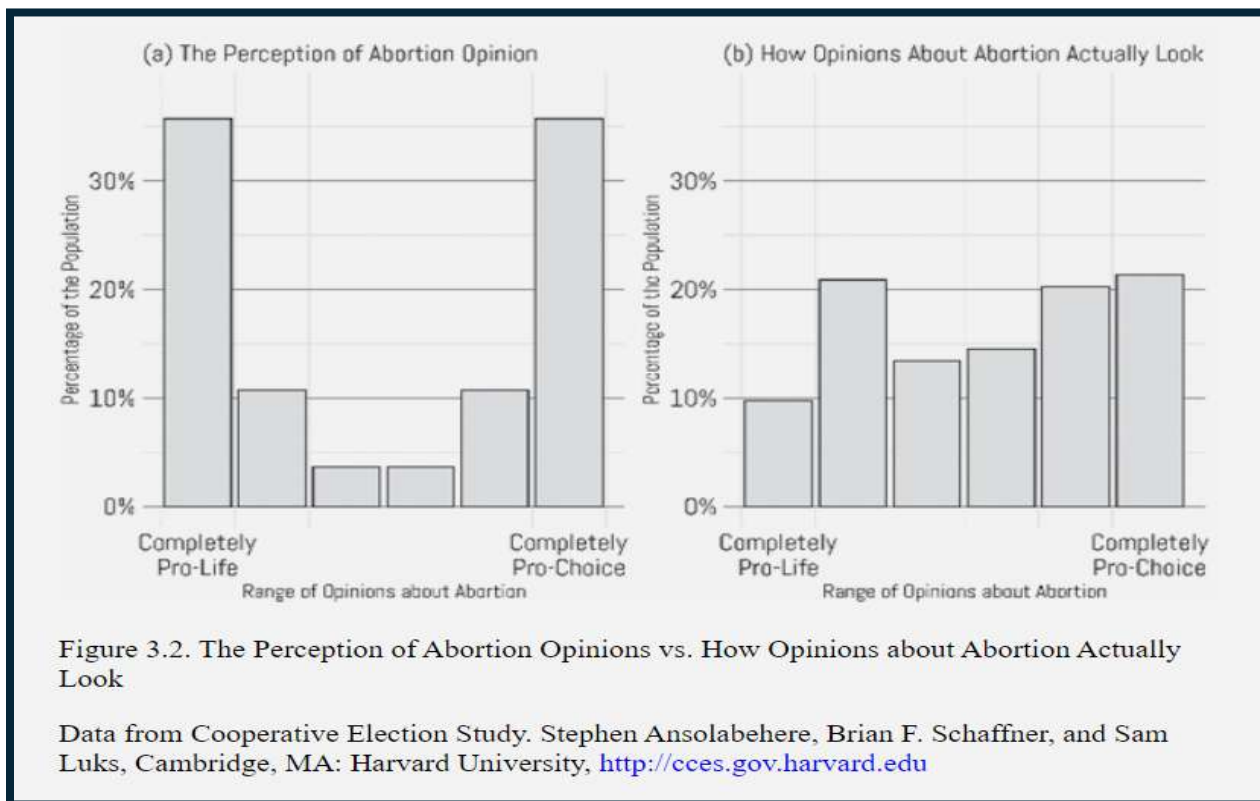
“Keeping undocumented immigrants off the books and in the shadows hurts US workers and only benefits shady employers,



but legalizing immigrants currently working in our communities would benefit all workers.”

Last but not least, a [fascinating study](#) found that, in areas with low unemployment, white residents were less likely to feel threatened by increased racial diversity and less likely to vote for Trump. Conversely, high unemployment combined with racial diversity *increased* whites’ feelings of racial threat and support for Trump. Local prosperity is a powerful inoculant against xenophobia.

**8. Abortion:** 54% of rural and 45% of small-town residents [approve of the reversal of Roe](#). [Nationally](#), ambivalence predominates, with only 32% who believe abortion should be legal “under any circumstance” and 28% in support of legal second trimester abortions. A fascinating wrinkle to the abortion debate is the gulf between *perceptions* of public opinion and *actual* opinion, as plotted on the chart below from *20 Myths about Religion and Politics in America*, by Ryan Burge.



Candidates with an appreciation of this nuance will be better equipped to stake out a principled position and explain it in ways that resonate

with those who hold moderate views. A candidate might make a nuanced statement like this (but note that this is untested):

“It makes sense to me that abortion is an issue many people have strong feelings about and I respect that. I’m one of the people who finds the issue to be very complex and painful. Like so many of you, I love my kids more than anything in this world, and watching them be born and grow up was the most incredible experience in my life.

At the same time, there are many heartbreaking reasons for having an abortion. Some women and girls are pregnant because they were raped. Or parents who find out that the fetus isn’t viable or can barely feed children they already have.

From what I understand, in countries that ban abortions, women still get them, they’re just less safe. I believe there are better ways to bring down the number of abortions more than a government ban would. For example, there’s a lot more we can do to educate adults and teens on avoiding unwanted pregnancy, including teaching teenagers about the level of responsibility involved in becoming a parent.

One thing I see a lot of here in Minnesota is that we care deeply about babies and mothers, but so many families are trying to figure out ‘How do I go to work and pay the bills and take care of my kids all at the same time?’ Another major problem is not having enough obstetricians and hospitals around here, and that needs to change. What I want is for people on all sides to come together and address these problems that usually get forgotten when we’re so polarized. That could go a long way toward bringing down the number of accidental pregnancies and help to make every child a wanted and healthy child.

My goal is for us is to work together to reduce the number of abortions and to make sure each person has the freedom to decide for themselves rather than having it be dictated by the government.”

The following message was tested by Galvanize Action with rural white women:

	Moved voters to agree that Roe v. Wade should not be overturned
<b>Most women who need abortions also need someone to listen to them. They don't need to be lectured. The best thing any one of us can do if a friend comes to us with this type of problem is listen and support them. It is her life, not ours. That's why I support upholding Roe v. Wade.</b>	<b>+18 points</b> (50% to 68%)

The [following ad](#) performed well with Latinos:



**Faith.**

Yes, I am a believer — always have been. And I tell my granddaughters: take care of yourselves — you never know.

But it takes all sorts to make a world. And it's not my place to tell a woman if she can have an abortion or not. That is a decision between her, her doctor, and God.

And that is why I am voting for Democrats.

**Ad Type: Political.** *Also available in Spanish*

LATINO VOTER SAMPLE	
GENERIC BALLOT	+3.8
DIFFERENTIAL TURNOUT METRICS	+0 def voting; +4 check reg
DEM FAVORABILITY	+4.2

Way to Win Midterm Messag...

[Kansans for Freedom](#) successfully defeated a constitutional amendment that would have allowed the state legislature to ban abortion, with rhetoric like this:

“They call it a constitutional amendment. The truth? It’s a strict government mandate designed to interfere with private medical decisions, a slippery slope that could put more of your individual and personal rights at risk.”

[Click here](#) for a close look at Kansans’ for Freedoms’ ads and why they worked. Rust Belt Rising proffers another (untested) type of pro-choice message that leverages freedom and anti-elitism:

“You need to be in control of your own life. Extreme Republican judges and elites are using government to take away your rights. Patriotism means when Americans’ rights are being threatened, we protect them. You should be in control. Not radical politicians. They don’t trust you, but I believe you should have the freedom to decide what’s best for you and your family.”

Candidates may also wish to speak to abortion-adjacent issues where there might be common ground even with abortion foes:

- ★ Maternal health care. [Many rural areas](#) have a shortage of obstetricians (some have none!) and suffer some of the worst child and maternal health outcomes.
- ★ Family planning. Equipping young folks to make responsible choices will reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies.
- ★ Paid parental leave (supported by 69% of white evangelical Republicans—see *20 Myths about Religion and Politics in America*, p. 63)
- ★ Family support. Assisting families in need with universal day care, pre-school and health care will allow low-income couples to choose to bring a baby into the world
- ★ Adoption reform. Improvements to the chaotic adoption system will make this option more viable

One final note, just as this report was being finalized, RuralOrganizing.org released a September, 2022, [poll of rural voters](#) in battleground states that, to our surprise, found them to be favorably moved toward a hypothetical candidate with an endorsement from Planned Parenthood. For these voters, reproductive rights was sixth on their list of priorities. What's more, most Republican voters in [four mid-western states](#) say they are open to voting for a candidate who disagrees with them on abortion.

9. **Guns:** [72% of rural adults](#) grew up in a household with a gun, and 58% currently live in a household with a gun. For them, guns are a normal part of everyday life. [For some](#), their fear and/or anger that gun rights are under attack is intertwined with fear and anger that their entire way of life is under attack or, at least, held in contempt and their resentment of government meddling in their lives. Guns are part of their rural identity, and the same politicians and activists who have never cared to try to understand their rural way of life are the ones trying to take their guns away. People want to feel in control of their lives, and don't like it when urban dwellers who don't use guns try to force rural gun owners to make sacrifices that accommodate urban people's fears or that make responsible gun owners pay the price for other people's reckless or criminal use of guns. (Likewise, urban dwellers don't want to

accommodate rural gun owners' fears of losing their guns. Both sides are by and large [unwilling to acknowledge](#) that what they want has a negative impact on others).

That said, [strong majorities support](#) universal background checks, mandatory safety trainings, suicide prevention, and other “common sense” reforms. However, strong organizing on the part of the gun rights groups gives the minority of Second Amendment absolutists an outsize voice in the matter, and candidates who are deemed insufficiently pro-gun have an uphill battle.

We're unaware of any useful message-testing around guns, gun control, or gun safety. However, we're confident that candidates must reassure gun owners that they're not coming for their guns, that they don't see guns—or gun owners—as intrinsically bad. We also encourage candidates to engage in dialogue with gun control advocates and gun owners with the goal of fostering curiosity and empathy on both sides and clarifying common ground. (A number of gun violence reduction interventions that don't infringe on gun rights are [outlined here](#)).

**10. CRT (Critical Race Theory):** This new culture war attack is an attempt to stir up racial animosity, turn public opinion against anti-racist organizing, and present children with a sanitized history of the US. It can be understood in the context of a broader backlash on the part of white Americans fearful of losing their status in the racial hierarchy and/or feeling attacked for being white. One person's celebration of racial and ethnic diversity is another person's feeling that the rainbow coalition doesn't include—or like—them.

Despite Glenn Youngkin's success using CRT as a wedge issue in the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial race, [there's evidence](#) the GOP may be overplaying this strategy in the runup to the 2022 midterms.

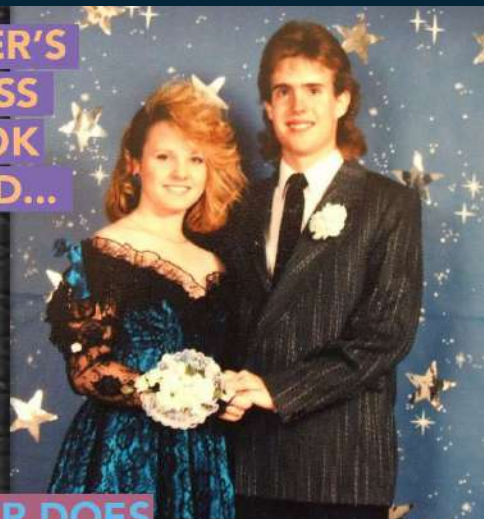
[Galvanize Action](#) uses gentle humor to defuse anti-CRT attacks. Here are some examples that have been successful with moderate white rural women. Check out the [full deck here](#).

**IGNORING A PROBLEM DOESN'T FIX IT**



**SCHOOLS NEED TO TALK OPENLY  
ABOUT RACE AND DISCRIMINATION**

**MY DAUGHTER'S  
HISTORY CLASS  
DOESN'T LOOK  
LIKE MINE DID...**



**...BUT NEITHER DOES  
HER PROM DRESS.**



**TIMES CHANGE.  
THAT'S WHY I SUPPORT TALKING  
ABOUT RACE IN SCHOOLS.**

**11. Transgenderism.** It is [unlikely](#) that this will be a priority issue in rural races. However, candidates must be prepared to answer the following questions during debates or interviews:

- ★ What is a woman?
- ★ Should transgender women be allowed to play on women's sports teams?
- ★ Should minors be allowed to get puberty blockers without their parents' knowledge or consent?
- ★ Why are so many teenagers all of a sudden saying they're trans or nonbinary? What's going on here?
- ★ Should transgender women be allowed in women's bathrooms and locker rooms?

Given the current reality of public opinion, with most people wanting to protect transgender individuals from discrimination but also not approving of transgender women competing on women's sports teams nor of medical transitioning of minors without parental consent (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) and, on the issues of gender self-id and the teaching of gender identity in grades 1-5, see [here](#)), these questions are all minefields that right-wing media would love for Democratic candidates to blow themselves up in. We're not aware of any useful guidance on how to respond and so what we offer below is speculative and untested:

- ★ Say "not trans" instead of "cis" unless the questioner uses the word cis.
- ★ Affirm the humanity of trans people and that they, like everyone, have a right to be safe and healthy and have a job and health care and a community that accepts them.
- ★ Share a story of a trans person you know, what they want out of life and what their struggles are. Or if you're trans, of course, share your own story to whatever extent you feel comfortable.
- ★ Share your journey of coming to accept gay marriage and how you see transgender equality as the next step. Acknowledge that it can be hard when culture change happens so fast and no one seems to care what you think about it.
- ★ Say that you might not understand yourself what it's like to feel like you're in the wrong body but you figure it must be hard and



that if someone's going to go to all the trouble and all the medical procedures to change their gender, you figure it must be really really important to them, not a decision taken lightly.

- ★ Say that ideas of masculinity and femininity change over time—a century ago it was thought women couldn't be doctors and men couldn't be nurses—but that things change and that you're okay with having more flexible definitions of gender.
- ★ Live and let live—that's my credo and I don't make exceptions to that. I think the trans issue gets brought up a lot because it's divisive, it gets us fighting with each other instead of working together to solve big problems.
- ★ I don't have answers to a lot of these questions. These are new issues that, since I'm not trans, I haven't thought about a lot yet. I think these questions are important for trans people and that they also have an effect on people who aren't trans—like female athletes for example, so I don't want to rush into a half-baked opinion. I'm keeping an open mind and I figure most of the people in this community are too.
- ★ Say that you want everyone to have a good life, including trans people, and that trans people, like a lot of folks, have a whole lot of everyday problems paying the bills and that you're more focused on those problems than on these other questions.

**12. Freedom of speech and “cancel culture”:** Outside of Democratic base voters, there is a [widespread perception](#) that liberals and progressives (often referred to as the “woke left”) have become intolerant of conservative viewpoints and more inclined to censor than debate. Many of the “cancel culture” stories that people hear about are incredibly complicated to unpack. If asked during a debate or town hall about cancel culture, a candidate might say something like this:

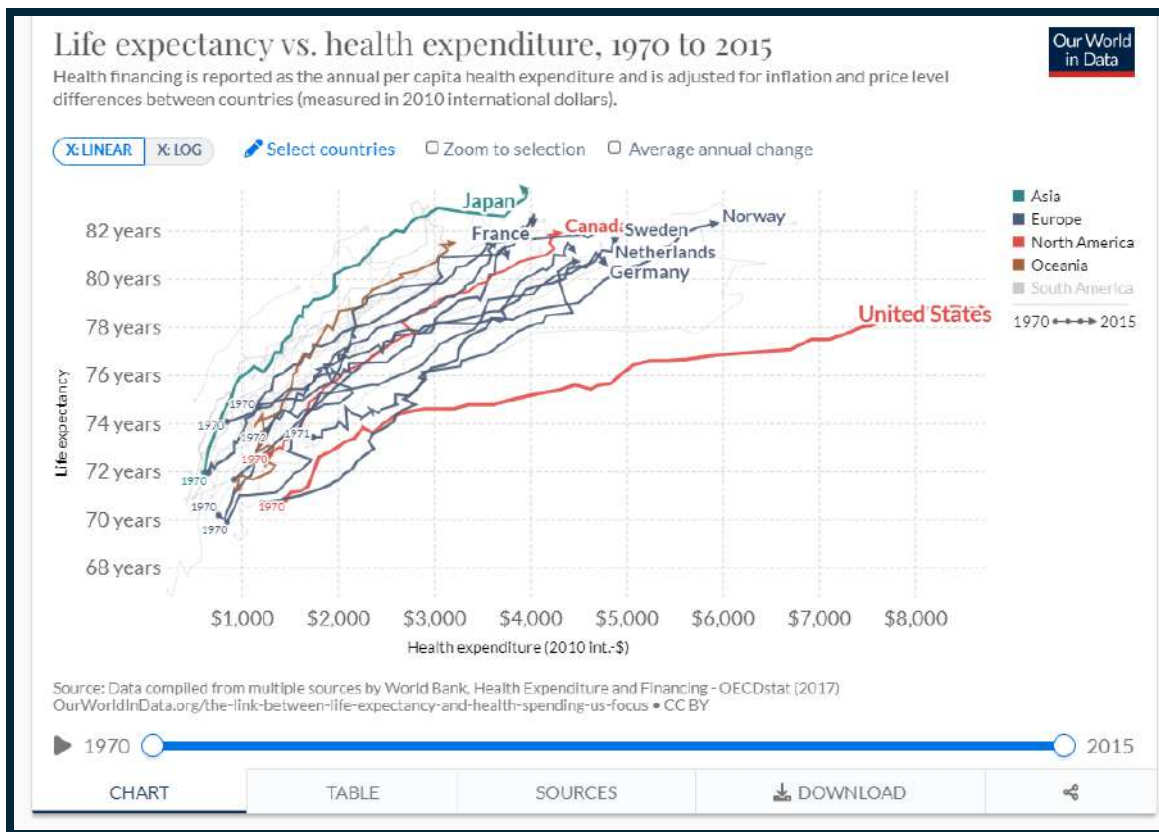
“I'm a firm believer in the First Amendment, and what that means to me is that every person in this country, no matter what they believe, where they're from, or what they look like, has the right to speak their mind. Sometimes, I don't like what I hear. Sometimes, I hear things that really tick me off or that I just know are wrong or even dangerously wrong. But I know that I have to respect their freedom of speech if I want them to respect mine. It's a hard bargain, but I hate to think where we'd be as a country without it.

I look at what's going on right now with companies like Amazon firing workers who are trying to talk to their fellow co-workers about organizing a union—that's what I call cancel culture. Whether it's a corporate union buster or a bunch of people on Twitter trying to get someone fired for saying the wrong thing, I'm against that."

**13. Crime:** Homicide rates [rose 25%](#) in rural America in 2020, and crime stories [receive more coverage](#) by rural media outlets than any other type of news. [74% of rural residents](#) consider crime a major problem, though few tag it as their top issue. People of color are [equally if not more concerned](#) with crime than are whites (though we don't know if this disparity holds true in rural areas). Messaging around rural crime—the causes and solutions and people's legitimate need to feel safe—is needed. Likewise, messaging that expands the discourse around crime to include white collar and corporate crime, price gouging, phone scams, and wage theft should be explored.

It may also be helpful to link the rise in crime—in cities and the countryside—to the broader loss of trust and civic bonds that have resulted from the hollowing out of communities and neighborhoods by extractive economic policies, opioids and other forces. Failure to articulate causes and solutions to crime leaves a vacuum Republicans are happy to fill. Leftists complain about the Right's stellar ability to organize and stoke discontent without recognizing that the Right can only fan the flames where there are already embers. Our time would be better spent empathizing with the discontent and offering an alternative remedy, even (or especially) when the discontent concerns issues leftists don't typically focus on.

**14. Universal health care:** Though it hasn't been tested, we'd like to see a rural candidate make the case for universal health care by leaning into the strong rural value of frugality. We generally advise steering clear of charts and graphs but this one is easy to read and not produced by a suspiciously liberal outlet and could make for an impactful social media meme.



“[This chart](#) popped into my Facebook feed and really made my jaw drop. Why is the United States spending so much more on health care than all these other countries and we have a lower life expectancy to show for it? Take a look for yourself...Canada, Germany, Sweden, Japan, they’re all living into their 80s and we’re barely making it to 78. So I asked myself, what do all those countries have in common that we don’t? Universal health care. That’s the difference. We’re paying through our noses for health insurance so that private companies can make a killing and what do we get for our money? We get to die earlier. I don’t know about you, but I want to live as long as the people in Japan and Germany do and not go broke trying.”

The other rural-specific element in this debate is the closure of hospitals in many rural communities. Studies, including [this one](#) from the Chartis Center for Rural Health, have linked state decisions not to expand Medicaid to a major increase in rural hospital closures, compared to states that expanded Medicaid.

**15. Democracy:** At the time of this writing, a number of electoral subversion schemes are in motion. We don't know what exactly will be happening in 2024, but it may turn into a referendum on democracy itself.

It's not clear (at the time of this writing, pre-2022 midterms) whether hammering on Jan 6 and MAGA's democracy-threatening transgressions will be a fruitful avenue for Democratic candidates. As of August, 2022, in the wake of the Congressional hearings, it was top of mind for 59% of voters according to [this NBC poll](#), with cost of living and jobs and the economy tied for second place. And proprietary polling found 70% of Independents saying they would not vote for candidates who knowingly spread false claims about the 2020 election. As usual, we'd love to see rural segmentation of such polling.

However, an August, 2022 [Avalanche Insights poll](#) tested the following message with undecided midterm voters:

"We have a choice to make: We can allow Trump Republicans to take us backwards, or we can vote for Democrats who are actually working to create a better future for the next generation."

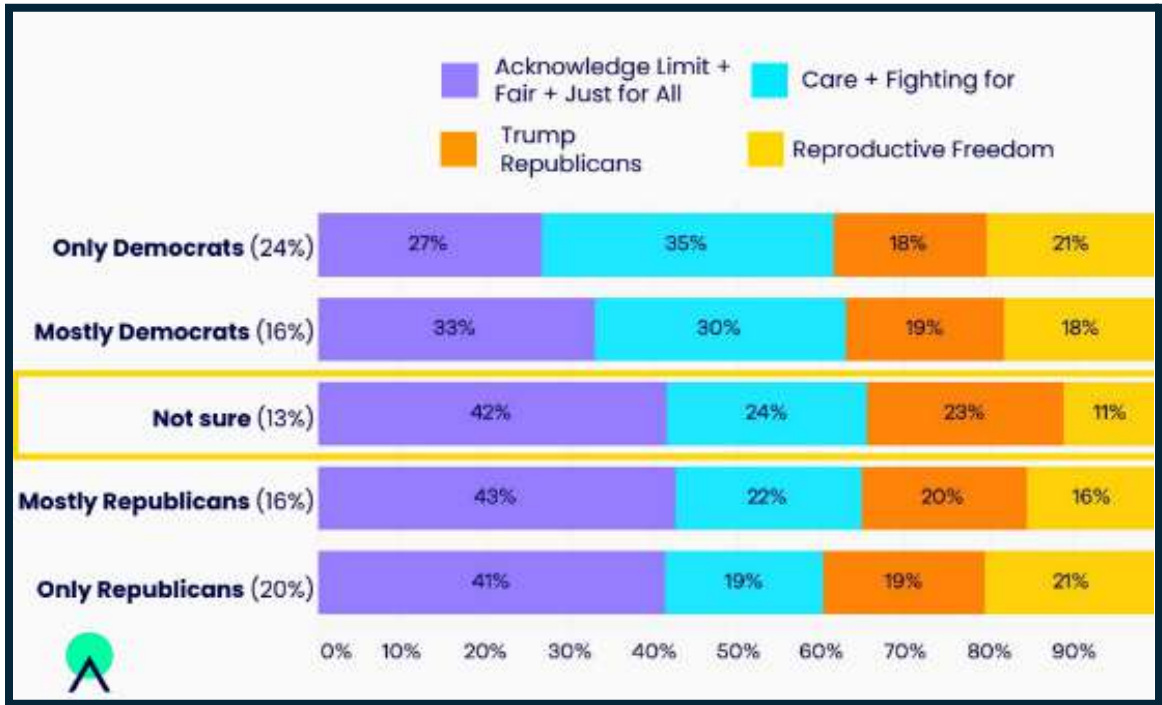
The results in the [orange bar](#) below show that undecided voters found this anti-Trump message to be relatively unconvincing compared to the following message (reflected in the [purple bar](#)) of realism + justice for all:

"Voting in this election isn't going to solve all of our problems, but if we are going to have any chance at making our country more fair and just for everyone—regardless of their color, background, or social class—the choice is clear: only Democrats will work toward this goal."

(The rows in the chart indicate who the voters in that row plan to vote for in midterms. Look at the "not sure" row to see how this crucial group responds to four messages, including the anti-Trump and "realism+justice for all").

**Among Americans who are unsure which party they will vote for in November, the 'Fair + Just' argument for Dems is selected the most.**

**[Arguments]** Regardless of who you plan to vote for personally, which do you think makes the best argument for why a person should vote for [Democrats/Republicans]? (Closed)



Moreover, the “oppose Trump” message was found to backfire with soft-Trump voters, a key group of voters for any rural candidate. (Look at fourth column, third row, which shows soft-Trump voters being “activated” by the “oppose Trump” message, which is understood to mean they are being mobilized to go vote Republican). By contrast, when we see Biden voters being “activated”, it’s understood to mean that they are being mobilized to vote Democrat. What we want is the sweet spot where Biden voters are mobilized without a backlash among soft-Trump voters.

**Among Biden voters, the 'Fair + Just' and 'Care' cases are more activating, evoking hope.**

**Soft Trump voters are most activated by the 'Oppose Trump' case (likely backlash).**



**[Dem Argument Emotion]** What emotion best describes how you feel about that statement? (Open)



[There is evidence](#) that anti-Trump/MAGA rhetoric may be effective at turning out disaffected voters who might otherwise stay home. (Note that [certain types of messaging](#) to disaffected voters around threats to democracy are mobilizing while others are demobilizing). And a consortium of strategists put together a hard-hitting [anti-Republican ad campaign](#) that they found to be effective, and with minimal backlash, in focus groups. (The strategists point out that the campaign is called “Republican Rule” not “Republicans Rule” which is more likely to trigger defensiveness among Republicans made to feel “otherized” and blamed). We are wary of polarizing approaches such as this, but are open to learning more about the short-term benefits even as we wring our hands as to the long term consequences. We will likely know more about the efficacy of anti-Trump/MAGA rhetoric after dust settles on the 2022 midterms.

The Research Collaborative does ongoing research into messaging around Jan 6 and other issues though we must caution that they do not usually include soft Republicans (though they do include Soft Democrats and Independents) in their messaging strategy, which makes it less useful in rural races that cannot be won without this cohort. [Sign up here](#) to access their monthly briefings.

We also recommend tuning in to [Winning Jobs Narrative](#) briefings and materials as they too continually test and hone message variants in order to strike the optimal balance between discrediting Republican extremism and uplifting positive gains for working people. Notably, the Winning Jobs Narrative consistently includes a large rural sample in its surveys.

One last tip for dealing with the new normal of GOP electoral subversion, including baseless claims of electoral fraud, demands for recounts, etc. In the 2020 presidential election, preemptive [media work](#) was done long before Election Day. [New research](#) is discovering that the best way to deal with disinformation is to inoculate people ahead of time by teaching them how to spot false, exaggerated and emotionally manipulative content. Non-partisan disinformation inoculation campaigns in rural communities at the outset of election season could be helpful.

## **CANDIDATE'S PERSONALITY AND STYLE**

Two 2020 focus group studies ([here](#) and [here](#)) by the Rural Voter Institute's found that rural voters in WI, MI and MN prefer candidates with the following attributes:

- ★ Strong personal connection to the area
- ★ Shares their personal story in a way that dispels liberal elite stereotype
- ★ Focus on—and knowledge of—non—partisan local and state issues
- ★ Shows up and is willing to engage with Republicans
- ★ Working class background and strong work ethic
- ★ Non-divisive, willing to compromise and work across the aisle
- ★ Even-keeled (*not* obnoxious and erratic like Trump)
- ★ Appreciation of outdoors
- ★ Strong moral convictions
- ★ Belief in a higher power (not necessarily religious)
- ★ Cares about small businesses over corporations
- ★ Stands up for ordinary folks against special interests
- ★ Does “what is right” for their area

## **IDEAL LEADER** **WANTED**

**Someone who puts the people first over party, corporations, or talking points. Someone who acknowledges, appreciates, and respects the people and their hard work. Someone who is protective and sacrificial and cares for the people. Works well with others and is willing to compromise - not too far left or too far right and works for everyone. Is transparent in their dealings and willing to admit when they are wrong. Focuses on bread and butter issues (e.g. cost of living, clean air and water) over culture war talking points. Focuses on what really matters.**

Source: Future Majority, "The Heartland Study"

The [composite "ideal leader"](#) according to rural and small-town voters in WI, MN and IA bears a striking resemblance to RUBI's overperformers (and, though it's too early to know whether he will overperform, to PA Senate candidate [John Fetterman](#) who, as Lt. Gov., declined to live in the mansion and, instead, opened up its swimming pool to the public).

This list of attributes conjures up a candidate who comes across as a "normie" and, hence, appeal to "normies." Normies are ordinary people who look at the world not through an ideological lens but

through the lens of common sense and basic decency. Normies are increasingly wary and resentful of political establishment insiders, not because they believe these elites are performing Satanic rituals in pizza parlors, but because they have seen over and over how out-of-touch and beholden to elite interests they truly are.

Working class voters [often tell pollsters](#) that they are looking for candidates who care about people like them, candidates who will fight for people like them. Most are not paying close attention to policy platforms though there are, of course, exceptions that candidates should be prepared to engage with at the policy level. They get a gut feel for the candidates—is this someone who takes an interest in people like me or someone who condescendingly wants to know, "Why do these people vote against their own interests?"

Look at [some of the things](#) Trump disingenuously said at his rallies:

- ★ "The political class in Washington has betrayed you. They have uprooted your jobs, your communities, and [t]hey put up new skyscrapers in Beijing while your factories in Michigan were crumbling. These are our politicians...The political establishment has brought about the destruction of our factories, and our jobs, as they flee to Mexico, China and other countries all around the world. Our just-announced job numbers are anemic ...Take a look at what's going on. [Politicians] stripped away these towns bare and raided the wealth for themselves."



- ★ “[My election] is going to be a victory for the people, a *victory for the wage-earner*, the factory worker. Remember this, a big, big victory for the factory worker. They haven’t had those victories for a long time. A victory for every citizen and for all of the people whose *voices have not been heard* for many, many years. They’re going to be heard again. While my opponent slanders you as *deplorable* and *irredeemable*, I call you *hard-working American patriots* who love your country and want a better future for all of our people. You are mothers and fathers, soldiers and sailors, carpenters and welders.” [emphasis added]
- ★ “[The working people, electricians, the plumbers, the sheet-rockers, the concrete guys and gals, they’re all—they’re with us. And I like them better than the rich people that I know...I like them better.
- ★ "The hedge fund guys didn't build this country. These are guys that shift paper around and they get lucky...They're paying nothing [in taxes] and it's ridiculous. I want to save the middle class."

We like people who act like they like us, and we dislike people who show little regard for our welfare. Trump understands this better than most politicians. It was a major reason he flipped rural voters from [Luzerne County, PA](#) to [Grand Junction, CO](#) to [Elliott County, KY](#).

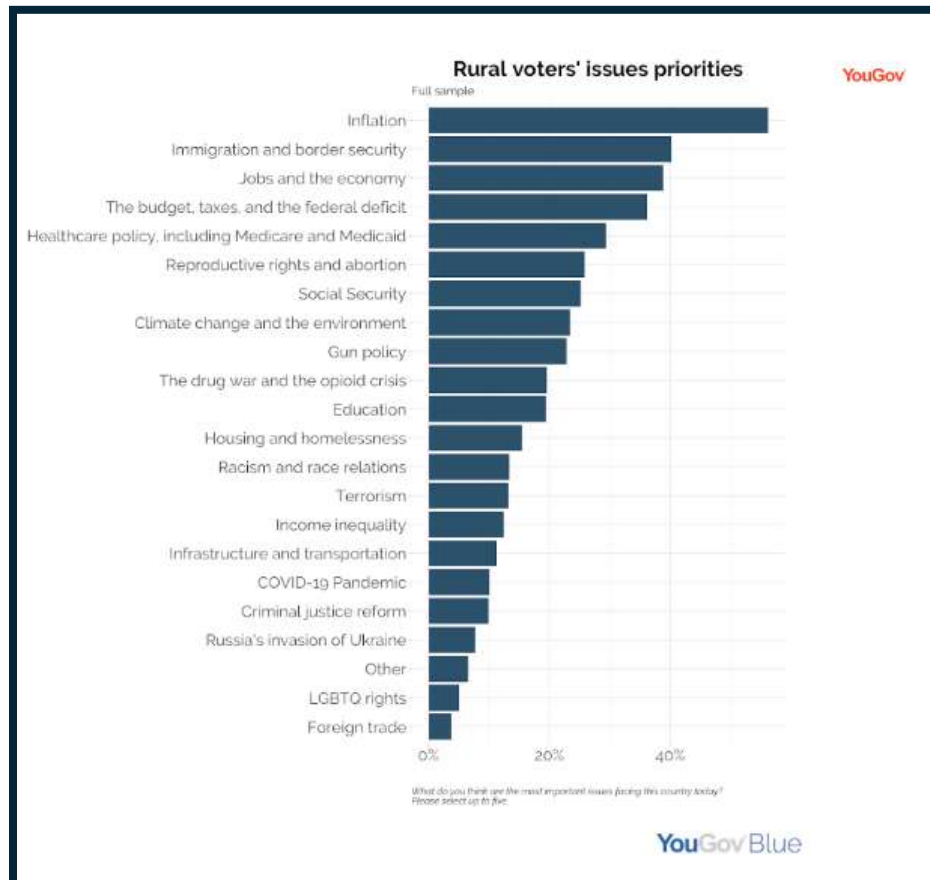
## **CAMPAIGNING**

### **1. What to Focus On**

Given rural voters’ widespread feelings of being ignored and disrespected, focusing on *their* concerns, not the progressive Left’s or MSNBC’s concerns, is essential. This will look different in different parts of the country, with industrial areas more focused on factory closures, farming areas more focused on agriculture, etc. A good candidate will listen, make it clear that they’ve heard, affirm that local residents’ well-being *matters*, and commit to working hard to solve the problems they’ve heard flagged.

[Political scientists have found](#) that the demise of local media has contributed greatly to the nationalization of politics and that this trend has disadvantaged Democrats. But even in a local news desert, rural voters still care most about local issues. Candidates can't fix the local news crisis, but they can mitigate it by focusing on issues of local concern that aren't tainted by partisan polarization.

When it comes to national issues, [rural voters prioritize](#) jobs, the economy and the cost of living. Though partisans constantly inject issues like abortion, guns, and transgender athletes, these issues don't seem to determine the voting behavior of most rural voters. The salience of immigration ebbs and flows and, unfortunately, appears to be moving up on the list according to a September, 2022 [YouGovBlue/RuralOrganizing.org poll](#) of rural battleground voters.



According to a September, 2022 [New York Times survey](#), only 28% of rural voters said that "issues such as abortion, guns or democracy" were most important in deciding whether to vote for a Democrat or

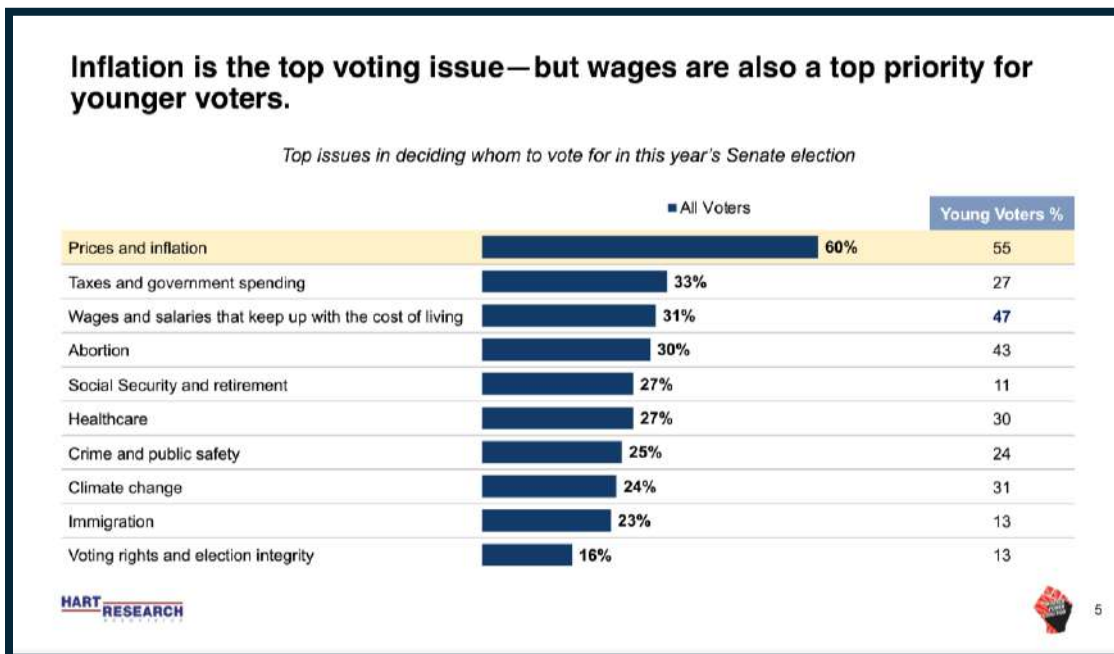
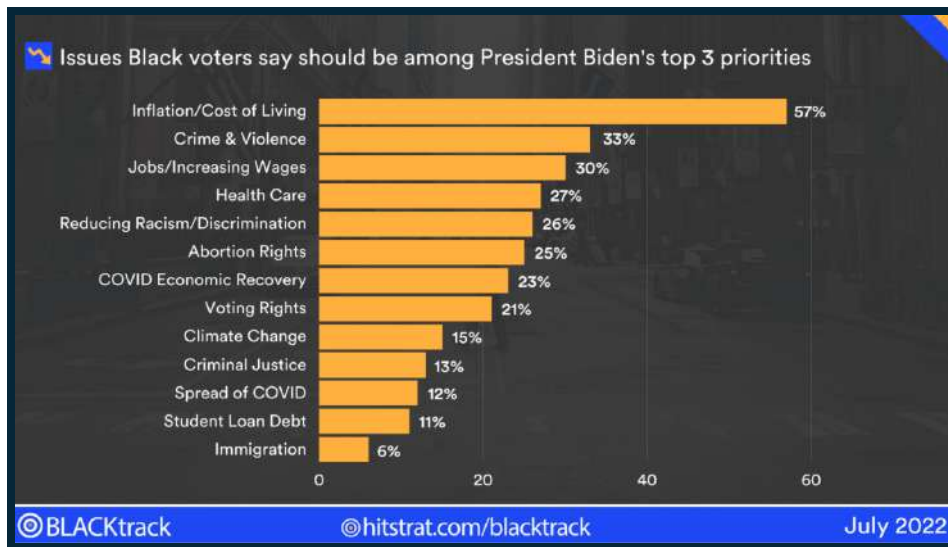
Republican in the upcoming congressional election. By contrast, 49% selected "economic issues, such as jobs, taxes or the cost of living" as most important. Even among rural voters of color, racial justice often ranks below most other issues (see [nationwide](#) and [NC survey](#)).

Thinking about whether to vote for Democrats or Republicans for Congress this November, what types of issues are most important in deciding your vote: [IF NEEDED: If you had to choose one ...]	REGISTERED VOTERS	AGE				GENDER		EDUCATION		RACE			RACE + EDUCATION		REGION				CITYTYPE		
		18-29	30-44	45-64	65+	MALE	FEMALE	B.A.+	NO B.A.	WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	WHITE, COLLEGE	WHITE, NO COLLEGE	MW	NE	S	W	CITY	SUBURB	RURAL
		Societal issues such as abortion, guns or democracy	31%	39%	40%	26%	26%	29%	33%	39%	27%	33%	30%	25%	41%	28%	30%	32%	29%	34%	36%
Economic issues such as jobs, taxes or the cost of living	49%	48%	49%	48%	52%	53%	46%	44%	52%	50%	46%	54%	46%	53%	55%	45%	50%	47%	49%	50%	49%
[VOL] Both equal	16%	13%	9%	21%	17%	14%	18%	15%	17%	14%	17%	19%	11%	16%	13%	15%	19%	16%	12%	16%	19%
[VOL] Neither	1%	-	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	4%	1%	<.5%	1%	1%	2%	<.5%	1%	<.5%	1%	1%
[VOL] DK/REF	3%	-	1%	3%	4%	2%	2%	1%	3%	2%	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%	5%	1%	3%	2%	3%	2%
n	1399	194	319	461	341	702	682	620	765	683	93	522	350	329	239	276	501	383	367	622	410
Percent of total electorate	100%	15%	22%	31%	25%	48%	51%	36%	63%	66%	11%	12%	26%	40%	22%	20%	36%	22%	22%	43%	35%

(Source: [New York Times/Siena Poll](#), September 2022)

The *New York Times* poll aligns with a June, 2022, nationwide [HIT Strategies poll](#) (below) of black voters putting racial justice fifth on the list of priorities they want Biden to address. It's also in line with a Fall 2022 [Hart Research poll](#) (below) of young voters in battleground states and with a nationwide [September 2022 survey](#) conducted by Stan Greenberg showing cost-of-living, the economy and jobs, and crime and violence topping the list by a wide margin. (Greenberg's survey is notable for its efforts to oversample for frequently undersampled groups of voters).

When interpreting all these nationwide polls, keep in mind that voter priorities may vary at the local level, and what voters expect out of POTUS may be different than what they expect from governors or state legislators. Candidates should, accordingly, *be attuned to local sensibilities*. The [New Rural Project found](#), for example, that black voters in rural North Carolina named racial discrimination as their number three issue and voiced very specific complaints, for example, seeing the lighting for basketball courts turned off while tennis court lights stayed on.



Two standouts in the [Hart Research poll](#): (1) Young voters are worried about taxes and government spending, a concern that can be overridden by a candidate whose priority is raising wages; and (2) Improving wages, benefits, workplace health & safety, and union protections is substantially more compelling than student debt cancellation.

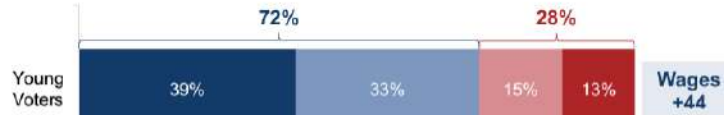
## Young voters care much more about raising wages than reducing government spending.

Which candidate would you be more likely to support?

Candidate whose priority is improving wages and salaries for working people (A)

Candidate whose priority is reducing federal government spending (B)

■ Definitely support A ■ Probably support A ■ Probably support B ■ Definitely support B



	Raise Wage Advantage
All young voters	+44
Dem Voter	+70
Rep Voter	-3
Swing voters	+36
White	+38
Black	+58
Latino	+50
Turnout targets	+44
Moderates	+54
White non-college	+37
Urban	+50
Suburban	+45
Rural/sm. town	+36
Men	+33
Women	+53

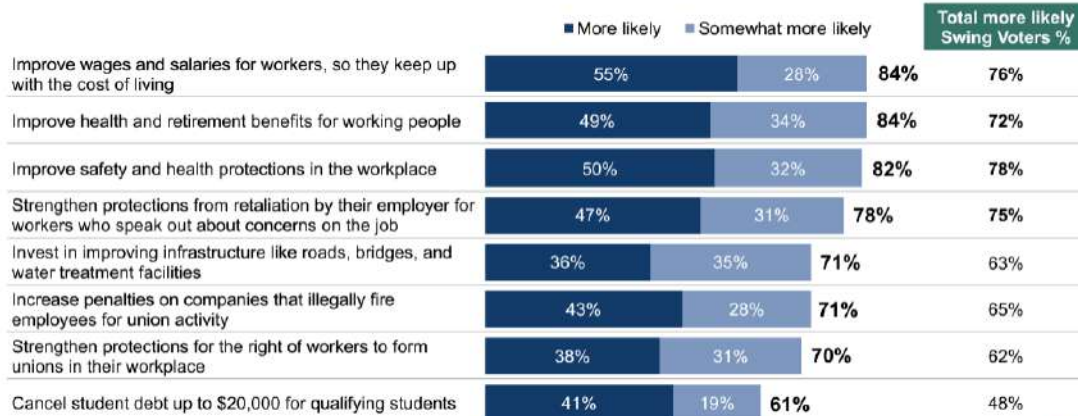
HART RESEARCH



16

## Strong Democratic Issue Positions

Proportion more likely to vote for Democratic candidate with this position.



HART RESEARCH



18

There are a lot of evangelical voters in rural America, so let's take a look at their inclinations. The chart below reflects the percentage of white evangelicals who, in 2016, said an issue had "very high importance" to them. (42% of Americans and 45% of rural Americans [consider themselves evangelicals](#)):

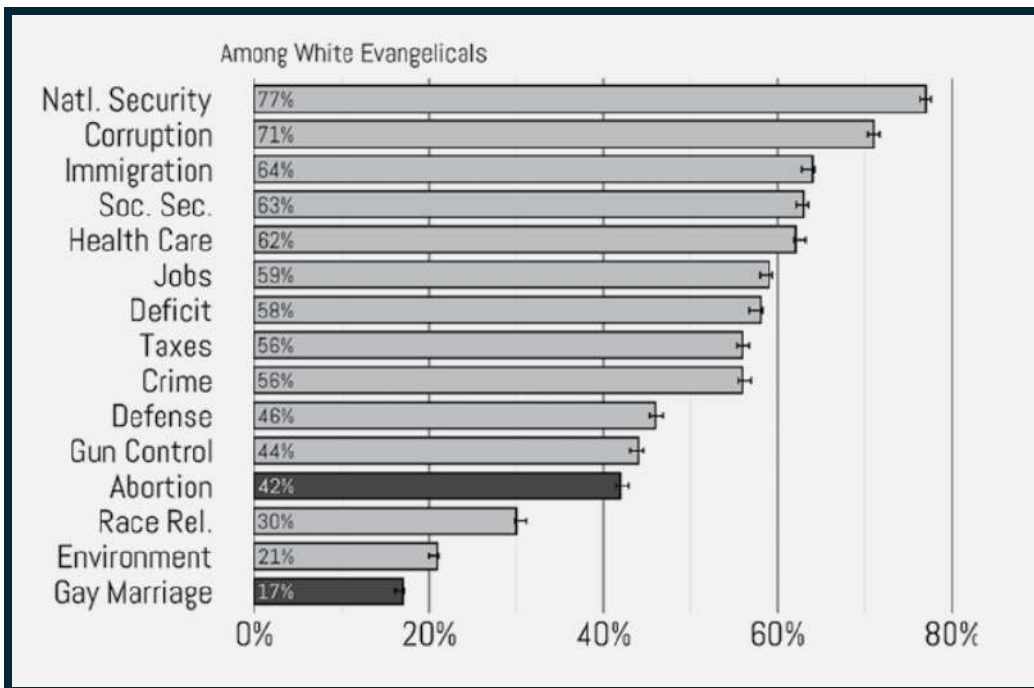


Figure 11.1. Share Saying Issue Is of Very High Importance among White Evangelicals  
 Data from Cooperative Election Study. Stephen Ansolabehere, Brian F. Schaffner, and Sam Luks, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, <http://cces.gov.harvard.edu>

(Source: Burge, Ryan. *20 Myths and Religion and Politics in America*)

With the exception of single-issue anti-abortion and pro-gun voters (who Democrats will likely never reach), most people are not terribly interested in culture war issues which strike them as abstractions that exist outside of the daily grind they live in.

Look at this July 2022 [New York Times poll](#) conducted a month after the Uvalde school shooting, a week after Roe was overturned, and smack in the middle of the January 6 hearings: Inflation and the economy were top of mind though, when asked, voters also said other issues were important to them, just not their number one priorities. Candidates will always have to talk about

*“Abortion isn’t a hot topic in southwest Georgia. I never get asked about it...Rural voters care more about “kitchen table issues.”*  
 —State Sen. Freddie Powell Sims, GA-12 (63% black, 30% white)

*"You ask people, 'what do you care about?,' and they will tell you, from their hearts, that they want to work, they want jobs, they want to be able to take care of their kids, they want to be able to pay to go on vacation. They do not want things handed to them. They do not like big omnibus spending bills. They do not like the way Democrats approach the world of policy by saying, 'we're going to push more money into this and more money into this.'" —Sarah Longwell, The Bulwark 2022 Focus Group of swing voters*

more than a single topline issue, but emphasis should track priorities.

There is a difference between centering kitchen table issues and avoiding culture war issues. Likewise, there is a difference between avoiding discussion of culture war issues and taking reactionary positions in order to appease cultural conservatives, a tactic RUBI does not endorse. Both [centering economics and avoiding wedge issues seem to be effective](#), and [research is](#)

[ongoing](#). That said, when a candidate is up against an opponent who is leaning hard into transphobia or race-baiting, failure to respond will leave voters susceptible to divide-and-conquer rhetoric. The [Race-Class Narrative](#) approach is particularly useful for counteracting GOP dog whistles. Likewise, the [Winning Jobs Narrative](#) has found ways of incorporating social issues into an overarching frame featuring the benefits of a specific policy for working people.

Candidates can express their views on non-priority issues so long as they lead with things like jobs, roads, and schools or whatever they're hearing about when they door-knock. And so long as they avoid the social justice rhetoric that leaves cold many voters of all races (see discussion on pp 56-60). Once in office, candidates can vote their conscience and champion even unpopular causes; but we've yet to see someone get elected in more socially conservative districts by running a campaign that emphasizes issues that enjoy only a tiny minority of support. Some issues, as worthy as they are, may simply not be "ripe" enough to serve as a political platform and, rather, are more effectively brought to ripeness via public education and grassroots organizing.

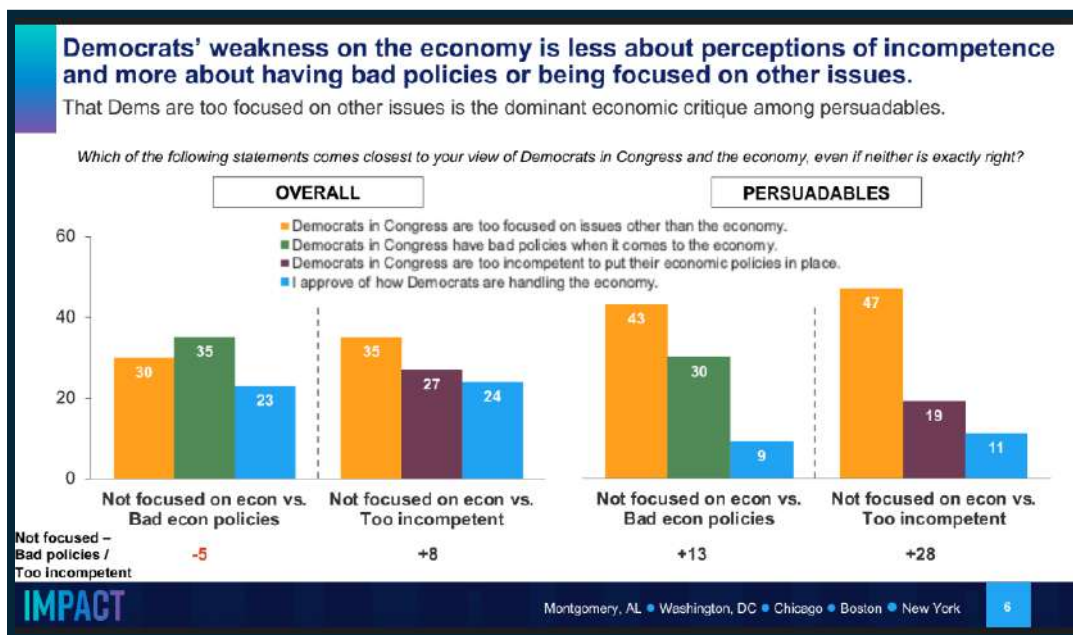
Candidates should look beyond the tired set of divisive issues covered to the exclusion of all else by mainstream media. For example, Blue Rose Research found that AOC's and Bernie Sanders's Loan Shark Prevention

Act, which would have capped credit card interest rates at 15%, was [extremely popular](#) across party lines, yet most mainstream media consumers never even heard of it. Don't allow the corporate media or the national Democratic Party establishment to set or constrain the agenda.

*"I can't fight for transgender issues if I'm not in office."  
—Former Michigan State Rep. Collene Lamonte*

Many rural [incumbents](#) focus on issues that are most important locally, regardless of what the national party is focused on. However, we've seen certain issues crop up frequently across the country:

- ★ **Bread and butter.** A stunning [73% of rural battleground voters](#) say the economy is not working for them personally. Heartland incumbents usually [emphasize pocketbook issues](#), acknowledge that working and middle class voters feel squeezed, and counter public perceptions that the GOP will put more money in their wallets. When Wisconsin voters who disapproved of Democratic Governor Tony Evers were asked what their beef was, [they cited inflation, taxes, health care costs and wages](#). In a June, 2022 nationwide poll by Impact Research, "persuadable" voters criticized Democrats' lack of focus on economic issues.





★ **Inflation**, at a 40-year high, [hits rural households hardest](#) and vastly outpaces the increase in rural earnings. The main culprits are gas, health insurance, propane and electricity. Soaring costs also [devastate small businesses](#) still reeling from the pandemic. As of [October, 2022](#), inflation was the top issue for 45% of rural voters in battleground states.

It's almost impossible to imagine a successful candidate *not* addressing inflation. While the causes of inflation are complex, we suggest candidates focus on such measures as capping prices on commonly used prescription drugs, allowing Medicare to negotiate for lower drug prices, enforcing rules against price gouging by large corporations, and over the long term, rebuilding regional and national supply chains to reduce the likelihood of bare shelves and lack of essential parts for manufacturers. As the impacts of the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 start getting measured, there will hopefully be a positive story to tell.

There's (proprietary) evidence that swing voters in Southfield MI, Green Bay, WI, Cleveland, OH and Mercer, PA reacted favorably to prescription drug price caps and Insurance premium price caps, as did a whopping 72% in a [2020 battleground state poll](#). Likewise, in a [late summer poll](#), Independents reacted very positively to news that the Inflation Reduction Act had capped drug prices.

There's also [some evidence](#) that harping on price gouging polls well—note that while workers have been losing ground on wages for 40 years, corporate profits are at a 70-year high and that corporations are paying a lower tax rate than working people who are living paycheck-to-paycheck. Why are corporations freeloading off hard-working taxpayers?

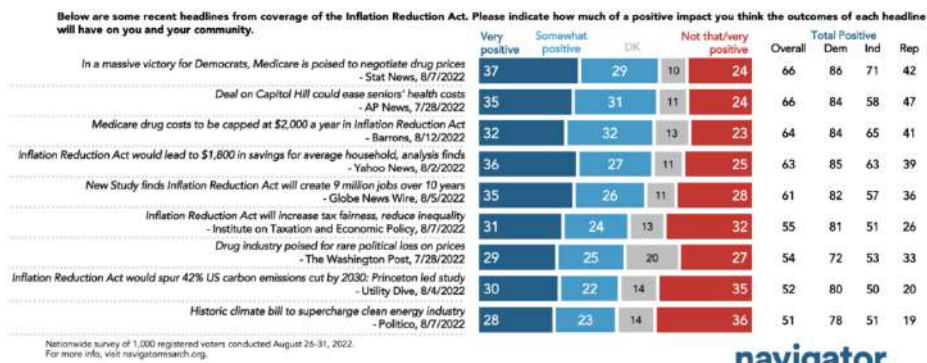
One untested idea is to simply empathize and level with voters:

“I gotta say, I don't know all the things we need to do to get control of inflation but what I do know is that most Americans haven't seen a real pay increase in 40 years and it's getting harder and harder to pay the bills no matter how hard they work. One thing we *can* do is take the pressure off seniors on a fixed income and working families by capping prescription drug prices and health insurance premiums so that those savings offset the extra

you're having to spend on food and gas. And we gotta help our small businesses stay afloat—this inflation crisis on the heels of the pandemic is like a one-two punch. The big box stores can ride it out, but the mom-and-pop stores are hurting and I want to hear from small business owners what would help them the most.”

### Most Positive Headlines About Inflation Reduction Act Mention Medicare Negotiation and Easing Health Care Costs

Among independents, headlines detailing drug costs capped at \$2,000 a year and leading to \$1,800 in savings are also seen as most positive impacts of the Inflation Reduction Act.



Another (to our knowledge) untested idea is to say that part of what's caused inflation are supply chain shortages and our dependence on imported goods made far away. If we bring the supply chain home, we'll have more control and can make sure we ramp up production when there are shortages.

Most voters won't get into the policy weeds of the Fed raising interest rates but, if they do...be aware that interest rate hikes increase the monthly payments people make on things like cars and mortgages. Be clear that these are unacceptable outcomes.

- ★ **Health care.** With [rural hospitals and clinics closing](#) and insurance premiums soaring, affordable and accessible health care is a top priority (as reflected [here](#) and [here](#)). Candidates should make it clear that no one should have to die or go bankrupt and should not be afraid to acknowledge flaws in the current system, including the [woeful inaccessibility of opioid addiction treatment](#).

- ★ **Medicaid expansion.** Twelve states have still not expanded Medicaid, [leaving 2.2 million](#) too “rich” to qualify for Medicaid and too poor to afford private insurance or even to be eligible for Affordable Care Act tax subsidies. In 2018, [Reclaim Idaho](#) led a successful Medicaid expansion statewide ballot initiative campaign, showing that rural voters who understand the issue—and the fact that the federal government pays for 90% of the program—will support it. Many voters, however, don’t even know what Medicaid expansion is, meaning that candidates and campaigners must give a streamlined explanation of an ultra-wonky issue. It also bears mentioning that Medicaid expansion can help [prevent the closure](#) of rural hospitals.
- ★ **Technical college.** Many [working class rural folks value vocational ed](#) as much as or more than higher education. Candidates should never talk about college as the only path to the good life and should be clear in their [support for technical colleges and apprenticeship programs](#). This also ties in with our guidance that Democrats should put much greater emphasis on respect for work and workers, and on how essential so many blue collar jobs are to the economy and nation.
- ★ **Protecting public lands** for hunting, fishing and recreation is [popular](#), though it is equally important to recognize the challenges and trade-offs communities often face when large swaths of land are off-limits or substantially restricted in their use.
- ★ **Supporting family farms,** including fighting against [Big Ag consolidation and monopolization](#), which raises their input costs while low-balling them on prices for their products. Candidates need to understand that candidate Obama made this a key part of his campaign, and his administration held multiple public hearings, raising the hopes and expectations of thousands of farmers. But these were dashed when the administration scrapped its commitment under pressure from the Big Ag lobby. This intensified farmers’ skepticism about government, something Democratic candidates will have to overcome. Other issues that are strongly supported by most farmers and people in farm communities include [“right-to-repair”](#) legislation, which protects people who fix their own tractors and machines from penalties manufacturers want to impose; and “working landscape”

programs that incentivize and reward farmers (and in some cases, forest landowners) for ecologically sustainable practices that help sequester carbon in the soil. Several states have now passed such bills, and federal legislation has begun to gain some traction. Any policy that rewards farmers for the good work they do, rather than regulating or penalizing them will be far more popular.

- ★ **Small businesses** and, in some areas, family farms, are the backbone of many small towns. Policies that help them prosper have ripple effects into the broader community, and residents are highly aware of this. Here are some messages that [RuralOrganizing.org](https://www.ruralorganizing.org) found to resonate:

**Recommendations: Embrace Small, Local Businesses and Oppose Corporate Corruption**

Rural respondents, both in our qualitative and quantitative research, demonstrated significant support for candidates who expressed anti-corporation and pro-small business sentiment both related to agriculture and tax incentives.

Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who said each of the following statements?

Candidate Messages	non-large-metro Young People	non-large-metro Independents
A handful of corporate monopolies now run our entire food system. We need a moratorium on factory farms and corporate monopolies in food and agriculture.	88% more likely to support	82% more likely to support
Every person, whether you live in the city or a small town, should have access to a good grocery store and pharmacy.	85% more likely to support	87% more likely to support
Tax incentives should prioritize small local businesses over major corporations.	79% more likely to support	91% more likely to support

## 2. The Opponent

Factual information about GOP voting records on issues of importance to voters is effective so long as the voter doesn't feel that they are being intentionally polarized. [A good example](#): "The Republican candidate for Congress supported a plan to end Medicare as we know it, replacing it with a voucher system and forcing seniors to pay thousands more in out-of-pocket insurance costs." (It's probably better to simply name one's opponent rather than referring to them as a Republican). In the best case scenario, the opponent's verbatim words, without any gratuitous inflammatory packaging, would be used against him/her/them.

If the opponent's vote helped enact a bad bill or helped prevent a good bill from passing, the ways in which the bad vote impacted ordinary people should be spelled out. For example, was the opponent among the Republicans who (successfully) voted down an [insulin price cap](#) for people with private insurance? Have some folks with diabetes start posting videos where they talk about how much the price cap would have helped them and how much they suffer every month having to choose between insulin and other essentials. Or, [as Rust Belt Rising recommends](#), point out that Republicans "played politics" in trying to block prescription price caps while Democrats made sure it got passed so that families won't have to worry, when their kids get sick, if they can afford medicine for them.

When calling out an incumbent's voting record, it's helpful if the callout looks homespun, not like it was produced by a DCCC consultant. These handmade signs in Rep. Elise Stefanik's district are a good example although we won't know until November, 2022 whether they contributed to her being ousted.



(Source: [RuralOrganizing.org](https://www.ruralorganizing.org))

The [Center for Voter Information](https://www.centerforvoterinformation.org) has found that non-partisan, no-frills candidate comparison mailers like the one below yielded a net increase in votes for the Democratic candidate in down-ballot races. The New Rural Project [also heard](#) from rural North Carolinian low-propensity voters that the main thing that would make it easier for them to vote is more information about the candidates. Comparison mailers are an excellent means of using opponents' positions against them in a completely fair and understated manner.

## Information-Only Creative


**BANNING BOOKS**

Do the candidates support allowing politicians to ban books they do not like from public schools, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Captain Underpants*?

Gretchen Whitmer (D)  NO  YES  
Source: MichiganDems.com/Structure

Tudor Dixon (R)  NO  YES  
Source: Twitter.com, @TudorDixon, 03/12/22

Focuses on providing voters with information they do not already know about candidate issue positions in a neutral manner.



Dear <name>:

The Center for Voter Information provides important election information to voters like you across the country. This year, we asked voters in Michigan what they would like to know about the candidates for Governor, Democrat Gretchen Whitmer and Republican Tudor Dixon, ahead of the upcoming general election.

**BANNING BOOKS**

Do the candidates support allowing politicians to ban books they do not like from public schools, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Captain Underpants*?

Gretchen Whitmer (D)  NO  YES  
Source: MichiganDems.com/Structure

Tudor Dixon (R)  NO  YES  
Source: Twitter.com, @TudorDixon, 03/12/22

**RETURNING MONEY TO MICHIGANDERS**

Do the candidates support giving Michiganders money back from the state's budget surplus?

Gretchen Whitmer (D)  YES  NO  
Source: Fox Business/MI4ings, 05/19/21

Tudor Dixon (R)  YES  NO  
Source: Fox Business/MI4ings, 05/19/21

**REPAIRING AGING ROADS AND BRIDGES**


Do the candidates support repairing and rebuilding 1,176 miles of road and 503 bridges, supporting nearly 82,000 jobs in Michigan?

Gretchen Whitmer (D)  YES  NO  
Source: Hill News, 12/20/21

Tudor Dixon (R)  YES  NO  
Source: Twitter.com, @TudorDixon, 11/05/21

A candidate's position is sometimes more complicated than a "yes" or "no." We have done our best to represent each candidate in a fair and reasonable way. But if you want additional detailed information on these issues, you can visit the candidates' websites at: GretchenWhitmer.com or TudorDixon.com. We hope this information is useful.

Sincerely,



Tom Lepach, President  
Center for Voter Information

Don't allow the opponent to drag you into culture war debates you will likely lose. Use the [Race-Class Narrative](#) to make brief, principled position statements and then wonder aloud why your opponent is spending so much time on divisive issues instead of focusing on keeping the local hospital open or making sure the mom-and-pop stores on Main Street can compete against Amazon.

Negative ads that attack Trump and other politicians [often backfire](#). A 4/8/22 Analyst Institute email advised candidates challenging Republicans to “steer clear of Trump” based on their analysis of ads that sought to mobilize voters by leaning into their hatred and fear of Trump. Likewise, an [Indiana University researcher](#) who tracks ads concluded that voters have become less and less enamored by attack ads, especially when they are run by candidates who are moderate and for whom attacking is “off-brand.”

During the 2022 cycle, Way to Win is running [a series of poll-tested ads](#) aimed at driving a wedge between “Trump/MAGA Republicans” and ordinary voters, as are other groups (see the “Democracy” section on page 76) . Along the same lines, Rust Belt Rising created the following message for the 2022 midterms (but note that it has not been tested):

“We are facing opponents who do the bidding of the rich, who don’t understand how hard-working people struggle, and who will do anything for power. MAGA Republicans try to turn community members against each other. I want to get back to a civil discourse, where people have their voices heard and respected. We can elect leaders with heart who will bring people together to help our community thrive.”

Negative ads might have short-term persuasion effects with certain audiences but they come at a steep cost—[further eroding people’s trust](#) that individuals and institutions can work together for the common good and causing the [“exhausted majority”](#) to tune out of politics and even stop voting. At the end of the day, every minute spent trash-talking the opponent is a minute spent playing the losing game of stoking fear and distrust of the “other” and a minute lost talking about the key issues voters care about.

A [2021 body of research](#) by Breakthrough Campaigns and Wide Angle Research reveals some of the reasons that trashing Republicans doesn’t land well with swing voters. They tend to think Democrats commit the same sins and/or to want to defend principled Republicans (i.e. #notallRepublicans). The end result is that they weren’t persuaded by the negative ads to vote Democrat.



## The Truth Sandwich

What if your opponent lies? Rebutting the lie amplifies it. Ignoring it suggests it could be true. Linguist George Lakoff created the Truth Sandwich, which gets assembled like this:

- State the truth
- State that your opponent is saying X (avoid using the opponent's inflammatory language)
- Restate the truth

Example: Our state elections department is top notch. There hasn't been a proven case of voter fraud in this state since 1990. My opponent says thousands of people are voting illegally or voting twice. I'm not sure why she's saying that, maybe it's to scare people off of voting. The Heritage Foundation keeps a voter fraud database and it has only a thousand instances of fraud since the 1980s, out of billions of votes cast over that period of time.

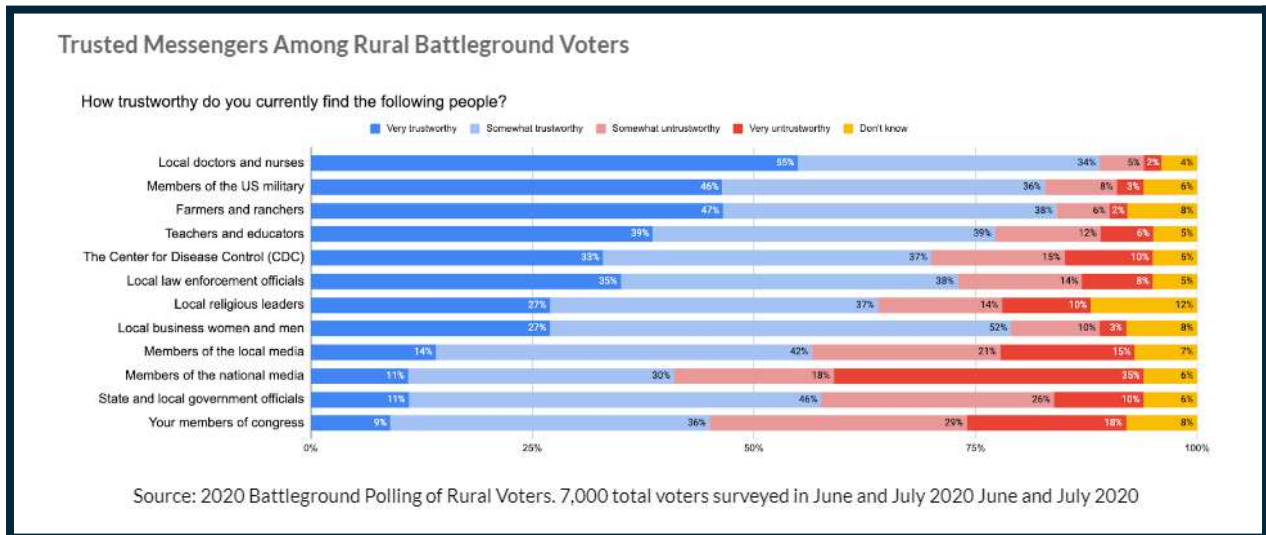
### 3. Endorsements

Given the distrust of mainstream media, it's unclear whether having a newspaper endorsement is a help or hindrance. Candidates should be mindful of local attitudes toward any media outlet whose endorsement they seek and keep in mind the possibility that, when the media denounces populist candidates who call out corporate corruption, such attacks [have been known to help](#), not hurt, the candidate.

[Locally-known and liked campaign endorsers](#), including ordinary people from the church, are more valuable than prominent national figures or groups, some of which might hurt more than they help.

Whether endorsements from members of the "credentialed" class (politicians, professors, entertainers) are more or less influential than endorsements from ordinary members of the community (small

business owners, farmers, construction workers, teachers) is a worthy subject of study.



(Source: RuralOrganizing.org, “Running Campaigns in Small Towns and Rural Communities”)

[Homemade videos created by real people on shaky cell phones with bad lighting did better than slick ads.](#) (We do NOT know whether this will hold true post-pandemic). Likewise, Community Change Action has been recruiting TikTok micro-influencers (mostly young people of color) to produce creative videos urging their followers to vote. This campaign has driven a great deal of engagement and increased followers’ positive feelings toward the Child Care Tax Credit. [Contact Community Change Action](#) to learn more about this campaign.

## 4. Voter Outreach

- ★ **Deep Canvassing and Year-Round Voter Contact.** [Many Heartland incumbents](#) try to knock doors every year, not just election years. [Sen. Jon Tester advises](#) rural candidates to start knocking before primary season with a goal of knocking every door.

Not all door-knocking campaigns are equally effective. Working America's deep-canvassing campaign is [consistently effective](#) at identifying the most persuadable working class voters and swinging them to vote for the (relatively) pro-worker candidate.

The secret to their success involves year-round organizing, conversations that focus on issues that are top of mind for the voter, and strategic follow-up communications, including personalized letters and postcards, digital ads and phone calls.

When canvassing for getting out the vote (as opposed to persuasion), the Analyst Institute recommends engaging in a conversation that prompts the voters to make a concrete voting plan. Canvassers should ask when, where and how questions and remind them of any ID requirements. It's also been shown to be effective to ask the voter, on a scale of 1-10, how likely they are to vote and then, no matter how they answer, ask a follow-up

question like "What made you say 8? What's the burning issue for you in this election?" or "What made you say 2 instead of zero?" (This technique is known as "motivational interviewing").

(When using VAN, note that voter scores are lower if they own a gun or go to church).

*"I can beat a Facebook ad if I'm at your door." —State Representative Tip McGuire, Kenosha, Wisconsin*

*"When talking to voters at the door, just listen to their stories and tell your own, don't talk politics." —Charlie McConkey (IA-15)*

Happily, [recent research](#) has found that the race and gender of the two people engaged in a political conversation do not have an impact on persuasion effects.

★ **Relational Organizing (aka “Vote Tripling”).** In a Relational Organizing (RO) campaign, volunteers create lists of their friends and family on a google spreadsheet or using an app such as Empower or Impactive that links to voter files. Volunteers are then prompted to regularly engage their peeps through conversations, texts and house parties. Volunteers ask their peeps if they’re registered to vote, if they need any information about how to register, what they think of a candidate, what their top issues are, whether and when they plan to vote, etc. (A “super-volunteer” prompts the volunteers to keep their peeps engaged). A volunteer can also mark up their sample ballot and share a picture or photocopies with their peeps as a homespun alternative to glossy Democratic voter slates. Where permitted, a volunteer might also collect their peeps’ completed mail-in ballots and deposit them in the mail.

RO can be used for persuasion, turnout of base and low propensity voters and voter registration. The Analyst Institute examined the RO campaign (aimed at turning out low-propensity voters) for Jon Ossof’s 2021 GA runoff and determined that it [boosted turnout by 3.8%](#). In the 2018 midterms, friend-to-friend non-partisan GOTV texting [proved to be ten times more effective](#) than centralized automated texting by a stranger.

### What is relational organizing?

Relational organizing means using the power of your relationships to get the people you know to take action -- in this case, to vote. To put it simply: instead of having a stranger call or text your friends about voting in the January 5th runoff, you do it instead. This is proven to work better than any other kind of voter contact.

### Our strategy:

We need to contact every potential Democratic voter in Georgia. A unique and critical group of these voters are people you know. And evidence shows that if *you* contact them about the election -- rather than having a stranger call or text them -- they will be significantly more likely to actually vote. So that's what we're doing!

Here's how it works:

1. You identify every voter you know in Reach
2. Instead of getting a call or text from a stranger, *you* have conversations with the people in your network to get them out to vote
3. You ask your network to join Reach and contact the people *they* know
4. The campaign uses traditional calls and texts to fill the gaps

It's as simple as that.

Excerpt from "Guide to Reach and Relational Organizing", Jon Ossoff for Senate

Instructions for running volunteer and paid RO campaigns can be found at <https://www.relentless.vote/>.

- ★ **Get-out-the-vote mailers.** These plain vanilla non-partisan reminders to vote are important. One (proprietary) study by the Analyst Institute found that [this GOTV ad](#) was the most effective and [this one](#) the second most effective. (Apply for Analyst Institute membership to access the study). Analyst Institute has also found that mailers that apply soft social pressure reminding voters that voting is the norm in their community and that they themselves have complied with the norm (i.e. "thank you for being a past voter" and "your community is counting on you to vote again") are motivating.
- ★ **Get-out-the-vote texting.** The Analyst Institute's data suggests that GOTV texting be done in the final two weeks before Election Day or early voting begins, with the bulk done in the final two days. Also, it's best to provide text recipients with all the voting information they need without them having to engage. In other

words, don't structure the SMS campaign in a way that requires recipients to answer a question in order to be told when, where and how to vote.

- ★ **Ballot chasing.** With so many voters voting by mail, it's worthwhile to contact voters who received but have not yet returned a mail-in ballot. In a proprietary experiment run by the Analyst Institute in Florida, they found it was effective to send voters a mailer with information about voting deadlines and signature requirements and soft social pressure to turn in their ballot. (This was more effective than mailers *without* soft social pressure and more effective than anti-Trump mailers).
- ★ **Local media.** Some incumbents (eg. [Cindy Axne, IA-03](#)) appear regularly on local radio shows and/or have a [regular column in the local newspaper](#). Where local newspapers still exist, they are [widely read and trusted and in desperate need of content](#). Some campaigns have also promoted and even helped organize extensive letter-to-the-editor campaigns, beginning many months before the election. While the utility of this has not been assessed, it is a way to meaningfully deploy volunteers, so long as each letter is authored by the writer rather than coming from a campaign-provided template. For new or lesser known candidates, this can be another means to build name recognition, while also getting hundreds of 'endorsements' from everyday people in the district.
- ★ **Progressive news article mailers.** In the five weeks before the 2021 gubernatorial election, four mailers were sent to "soft Dem" women in Virginia who were open to voting for either Terry McAuliffe or Glenn Youngkin. The mailers contained a newsletter called "The American Independent" which had articles, with a progressive slant, about Biden, Virginia politics and how and when to vote. Receipt of the mailers boosted McAuliffe's vote margin by 6.3 points. (To see this study, you must be a member of the Analyst Institute).
- ★ **Social media.** [As of 2020](#), Facebook was the leading news source for rural residents, followed by local TV news and Fox. Updated

information is needed regarding uptake of newer social media platforms such as Instagram. While social media can never take the place of in-person interactions, there are opportunities for candidates to make use of Facebook.

Working America does [targeted Facebook advertising](#) to boost straightforward, non-inflammatory news articles that affirm voters' interest in the kitchen table issues Working America organizes around. They find that these boosted stories prime the Facebook users to respond positively to downstream information about a pro-worker candidate's commitment to addressing these issues and yield one new vote for every hundred voters exposed to the ad (three new votes if the voters are Working America members)!

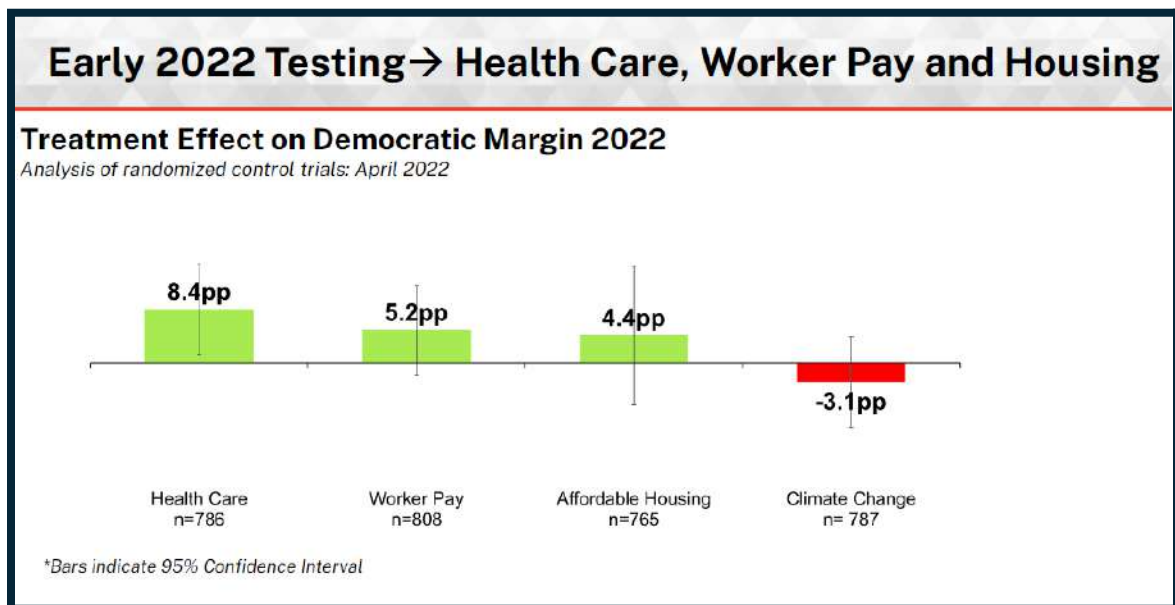
Using social media to troll one's opponent, rather than responding to voters' concerns, is a poor use of time. It will delight your ardent supporters at the same time that it erodes your integrity, disgusts fence-sitters and inflames partisan animus. Twitter brings out the worst in just about everyone, and using a #hashtag has been shown to be ultra-polarizing.

★ **Postcards and letters to voters.** The 2022 [Rural Indivisible Summit](#) offered the following best practices for postcarding:

- ★ Mail from within state/district
- ★ Use attractive image so that recipients will want to keep the postcard
- ★ Use images of a local project initiated/funded/supported by Dems
- ★ Include a QR code that links to content in other languages
- ★ Content should be below-8th grade reading level
- ★ Handwrite the address and handwrite the body but okay to use a pre-printed sticker with detailed polling information

The [Center for Common Ground](#) also has tried and true techniques for postcarding with some special tips around Deep South etiquette.

Working America runs a unique letter-writing operation in which thousands of volunteers write letters to non-college voters who don't watch cable news. The hand-addressed, non-political letters that share a personal story related to health care or worker pay. A worker-pay themed letter might, for example, ask the recipient what they would do with an extra \$6000 in their pocket and invites them to text their reply to Working America. Early randomized control trials show great promise:



- ★ **Yard signs.** [Take it from rural candidates](#), they're important. At a minimum, they demonstrate to neighbors that liberals and progressives exist. RuralOrganizing.org has a [toolkit](#) on how to make good use of yard signs.
- ★ **Showing Up.** There's no substitute for a candidate showing up in person. Trump visited Wisconsin six times in 2016, Clinton zero. [Gov. Andy Beshear showed up often](#) in Muhlenberg County, KY and came within 500 votes of winning that county (74% of which went for Trump).





Incumbents interviewed by [CherPAC](#) hold regular Town Halls and meet-and-greet events and spontaneously show up at Rotary Club, high school football games and other events.



Reagan Republican voter at [Beto O'Rourke town hall](#) in Hemphill, TX: "We've never had a governor here in my 32 years here..I do appreciate his visit here more than I can tell you..I wish him the best and I think he will probably get a lot of good votes here in Sabine County."

### ★ Advertising

- ★ [Drive-time radio ads and ads in local newspapers](#) provide a lot of bang for the buck
- ★ Boosted Facebook news stories and geo- targeted ads are relatively economical
- ★ Many rural candidates [run ads featuring local residents](#).
- ★ Rural Power Labs is experimenting with having local residents record intentionally amateur video endorsements on their phones. For example, a retired Wisconsin teacher wearing a Green Bay Packers sweatshirt tells a one-minute story of why she

*"Just my presence there and showing my face goes a long way with [Republican] voters." —IL State Sen. Andy Manar*

values public schools and why she's voting Democrat to make sure schools are adequately funded. We're keeping an eye on this novel experiment.

- ★ Whether or not professionally-produced TV ads are effective at persuasion and/or turnout is an ongoing debate. The [body of research](#) suggests that, to the extent that TV ads have an effect, it is extremely small and that the exorbitant amount of money could be better spent elsewhere. However, the Analyst Institute's data suggests that TV ads are an effective (though costly) get-out-the-vote tactic.

## 5. Polls

Candidates should be aware that polls of districts that have a lot of Latino or white non-college voters [often overstate support for Democrats](#). When using nationwide polls, look for polls that segment out geographically.

## 6. National Democratic Party Involvement

- ★ RuralOrganizing's [2020 poll](#) showed candidates running as Democrats at a distinct disadvantage.
- ★ [YouGov found](#) that when hypothetical identical candidates had a D or an R next to their name, the Republican had a 35-point advantage.
- ★ Many [Heartland incumbents](#) eschew DC-based consultants in favor of local campaign staff and creative services.
- ★ National Democratic Party leadership should not place its thumb on the scales during primaries. Let local Democrats choose their candidate and then back them in the general election to whatever extent the candidate wishes.
- ★ Democratic strategist Andrew Levison [makes a strong case](#) that GOP demonization of Democrats has reached such an extreme that Democrats in competitive races must overtly distance themselves from the national Democratic Party by forming a distinct wing called, for example, "Traditional Common Sense Democrats" that speaks to multi-racial working-class values, priorities, and culture.

## 7. Constituent Services

Many incumbents interviewed by [CherPAC](#) emphasized the importance of providing excellent services to their constituents. For example, at the beginning of every Town Hall, Matt Cartwright (PA-08) does a twenty minute slide show featuring constituent services stories that involve standing up to a federal agency on behalf of small businesses or individuals. Virginia Delegate Sam Rasoul has a particularly robust, year-round, volunteer-staffed, [constituent services outreach program](#).

## 8. Year-Round Organizing

[Candidates benefit greatly](#) when they campaign in the context of pre-existing voter registration efforts and [organizing around issues of local concern](#). For 50 years, right-wing forces have been painstakingly building political, religious, social and cultural institutions in small town America, from the NRA to the Koch-funded Libre Initiative and Americans for Prosperity. These efforts have paid huge dividends, divorcing many working and middle class people from their historic fondness for the New Deal and creating a hospitable environment for Republican candidates. If leftists don't invest in the same way, right-wing influence will go unchecked.

## 9. Supporting organized labor and other civil rights movements

[40% of union households](#) voted for Trump in 2020 and, in Ohio and PA, Trump won the majority of the union vote. There's no "blue wall" without blue collar voters.

Even in red states like [West Virginia](#) and [Oklahoma](#), public support for teachers' strikes was strong, as was support for Blackjewel coal miners in Kentucky who [militantly protested wage theft](#) when Blackjewel went bankrupt. Visibly and vocally supporting strikes and walkouts is not only the decent thing to do, it demonstrates authentic commitment to working people and, in the case of private employers, a willingness to stand up to abusive bosses. Don't just issue a public statement—get out on the front lines as much as you can and, when you're not there, talk about it, write letters to the editor about it, send pizzas to the picket

line. And Democrats should absolutely push to get the [Employee Free Choice Act](#) passed 14 years after Obama promised to. Public approval of unions (71%) is the [highest it's been since 1965](#), presenting a golden opportunity for Democrats to reverse class dealignment.

A late-breaking caveat: As this report was being finalized, a September, 2022 YouGovBlue/RuralOrganizing.org [poll of rural battleground voters](#) found them to be unimpressed by an AFL-CIO endorsement of a hypothetical candidate. We speculate that these voters might not know what the AFL-CIO is or might not see it doing concrete things for local workers the way they see local unions doing.

Reversing this trend is of utmost importance. When rural people had union jobs in factories, union-sponsored political education fostered working class solidarity and Democratic allegiance. In the absence of a unionized workforce, alongside other forces, a cascade of adverse social and economic events can unfold: Plants shut down, wages fall, residents must bargain-shop at Walmart, small businesses shutter, people move away, diseases of despair multiply, municipal tax revenue craters, government services are slashed and privatized, and industries are deregulated and/or bailed out for the benefit of monopolies, banks, and investors. It's a vicious downward spiral of wealth extraction and social devastation perpetrated by largely invisible culprits who turn rural communities into "[sacrifice zones](#)" vulnerable to scapegoating charlatans and corporate servants. A spiral that is supercharged by free trade agreements that erode union bargaining power.

Rural attitudes toward other types of civil rights movements are a mixed bag. Amidst all the Democratic infighting about whether "wokeism" burnishes or damages the brand, we see anecdotes that support one side or the other but no real evidence. We strongly urge candidates who participate in civil rights movements to communicate their views using progressive populist and Race-Class Narrative language and to emphasize ideas with universal populist appeal. Doing so will help insulate against the perception that the candidate is "only" for a specific marginalized group and doesn't care about the well-being of others.

# Additional Resources

Many nuts and bolts campaign tutorials and trainings are available. Here are a few:

- ★ [Arena](#)
- ★ [Run For Something](#)
- ★ [National Democratic Training Committee](#)
- ★ [Best Practices Institute Victory Vault](#)
- ★ [Rust Belt Rising Leader Resources](#) (for access, contact [paul@rustbeltrising.com](mailto:paul@rustbeltrising.com))
- ★ [Analyst Institute GOTV recommendations](#) (apply for membership to access)

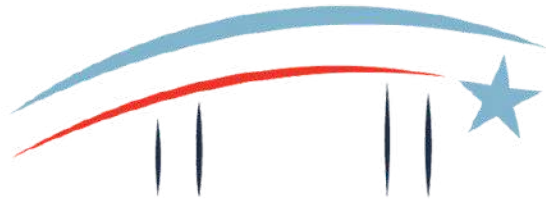
Polling and messaging consultants are expensive, but some of the best pollsters and messaging gurus offer regular, free briefings on their latest findings:

- ★ Research Collaborative (contact [info@researchcollaborative.org](mailto:info@researchcollaborative.org) for access)
- ★ [Winning Jobs Narrative](#)
- ★ [We Make the Future](#)
- ★ [RuralOrganizing.org](#)

RUBI will disseminate useful new materials as we become aware of them. [Sign up on our website](#) to receive this information.

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