



# CAN DEMOCRATS SUCCEED IN RURAL AMERICA?

A REVIEW OF STRATEGIES & PRACTICES THAT WORK

Executive Summary

November 2022

## Context and Need

In 1992, Bill Clinton won 47% of the rural vote across the United States. Since then, votes for Democrats, in both state and national elections, have been in freefall, with Hillary Clinton receiving just 29% of all rural votes in 2016. Virginia's 2021 gubernatorial election provided further evidence of Democrats' rural problems, with 44 counties—all predominantly rural—voting 70% or more for the Republican candidate, *an eleven-fold increase* from a decade earlier.

Until very recently, the Democratic Party has largely ignored or minimized the significance of this decline. Based mostly on a lack of understanding of rural people and priorities, along with a reflexive dismissal of “low information” people “voting against their own interests,” many leading Democrats have simply written off the countryside.

This is a major problem for at least three reasons. First, Democrats can't win enough state and federal elections to effectively govern while routinely losing seven out of ten rural voters. Second, the Democratic abandonment of rural, and its championing of disastrous policies such as NAFTA, have resulted in de facto one-party rule across the vast majority of legislative districts, obstructing progress and prosperity across much of the countryside. And third, we all depend upon functioning, productive rural places for our food, fiber, energy, and sustenance. We can ignore and dismiss all we want, but our towns and cities cannot exist without healthy rural places.

**“Can Democrats Succeed in Rural America?”** represents a key tool in the effort to restore competitiveness and end one-party rule in rural America. Democrats must face that we've lost the trust of tens of millions of our fellow Americans. Without trust there is no hope of changing minds and winning hearts. We believe this report will help candidates, local committees and rank and file Democrats begin to rebuild that trust.

## Methodology and Structure of Report

The Report has two parts: Part 1, our Candidate Assessment, distills lessons learned from in-depth interviews with 50 Democratic candidates and elected officials who ran in rural districts between 2016 and 2020, including state legislative, federal and gubernatorial races, from 25 different states. Most of these candidates overperformed the partisan lean of their district by at least seven points.

Part 2 provides a synopsis of a wide body of research into the values and mindset common to rural voters and the best strategies to persuade swing voters and turn out low-propensity Democratic voters. Since early 2021, the [Rural Urban Bridge Initiative \(RUBI\)](#) has been reviewing the literature and collecting data and analysis regarding what moves the needle with rural, working-class voters.

# Summary of Findings

The findings summarized in the Executive Summary provide a small sample of the key takeaways that emerged from both our candidate interviews and the wider research assessment. The full report includes our complete set of findings, with far more explanation as well as examples and corroborating data.

## **FINDINGS ABOUT CANDIDATES**

The nationalization of politics presents a strong headwind against rural, progressive candidates. We found our rural candidates to be more successful in overcoming this challenge when they presented as authentically rural in terms of their upbringing and their knowledge of and focus on local issues.

- 1. Successful candidates were generally known and well regarded in their districts.** Name recognition is an important factor in electoral success but, more than that, our successful candidates were well-respected by people in their communities, usually across ideological lines. Whether a school teacher, a business person, or a community leader, people build name recognition and local respect through persistent, long term constructive involvement. *Longevity in the district and a history of contributing to the community lead to a sense that the candidate is rooted there and understands and cares about the community.*

RUBI's supplemental research review indicates that helping each other is a rural community norm, with a strong preference for local, community-based solutions over "Big Government" and top-down prescriptions. With a strong sense of pride in and attachment to place, small town and rural people are thus more open to candidates with roots in the community and/or a history of working to solve community problems.

- 2. Successful candidates prioritize listening ahead of attempts to instruct or persuade.** Listening is an inclination that does not come naturally to many of us and is certainly not the top priority in electoral

campaign circles. Yet it was one of the most important ingredients of successful candidates and campaigns. This is particularly true when trying to restore trust and dialogue with people who believe, rightly so, that they are rarely heard by politicians and elites. *By putting aside their own policy ideas and “listening” at the outset, candidates give themselves a chance to find common ground before addressing larger differences.*

Research demonstrates that simply *showing up* and *listening* in small towns (and not just at election time) builds trust and demonstrates caring. This is reinforced by empathizing with people’s struggles, as well as showing interest in and respect for their experience and hands-on knowledge. Given that many people believe that Democrats have betrayed or abandoned the working class, listening and showing respect are essential.

- 3. Successful candidates are both very familiar with their district and strongly focused on rural issues of local importance.** *Successful candidates tend to have a deep understanding of the lives of their constituents and intimate knowledge of the history and critical challenges of the areas they desire to represent. This “local fluency” is stronger when it includes an understanding of the strengths of the area, including local success stories, alongside an understanding of the problems. Local fluency and a focus on locally relevant issues does not require ignoring critical, difficult national issues. Rather, it is a matter of both elevating the importance of local concerns while also learning to connect these with broader state and national issues.*

Studies point to negative perceptions of Democrats that are widespread in rural areas: that Democrats are weak on the economy and job creation; that they are blamed for NAFTA-related loss of factories and jobs; and that politicians look down on them and are out-of-touch with everyday concerns like inflation and taxes. To challenge these perceptions, Democrats should focus on the value of work and the pride people take in their work, including many blue-collar occupations. Strong support for small businesses and family farms is one way of demonstrating this, and of undoing the perception that Democrats are for the poor, Republicans are for the rich, and no one cares about working and middle-class people.

## **FINDINGS ABOUT CAMPAIGNS**

Among Democratic pundits and strategists, there is seemingly endless debate about whether to focus on “persuasion” or “mobilization.” Most of our successful candidates managed to do *both*, finding means of persuasion that also enhanced their ability to motivate and mobilize their base (for example, by focusing on key local issues or by building a reputation for getting things done). *Most candidates recognized that, in predominantly rural districts, the base simply is not big enough to win, requiring them to both motivate liberal-leaning non-voters while also persuading independents and some soft Republicans.*

- 1. To every extent possible, personal contact with voters remains essential.** Personal contact involves door-knocking, along with other means of direct engagement with voters. In smaller districts, successful candidates tend to knock every door at least once, ignoring party preference and voting propensity. Even in statewide and congressional districts, door-knocking received a relatively high priority, primarily via networks of well-trained volunteers. Given the impossibility of reaching every door in these districts however, other efforts were made to meet voters in person, on their home turf, including town halls and participation in community events, fairs, festivals, etc.

Of all approaches to canvassing and voter outreach, studies identify “deep canvassing” as by far the most effective means of voter persuasion. This approach, which emphasizes listening first, then seeking to find common ground, provides an antidote to voters’ widespread disgust with toxic partisanship.

- 2. Campaigns favored consultants with strong local knowledge and made greater use of local media.** Successful candidates crafted both campaign and messaging strategy themselves or with local advisors and consultants. Few utilized “Beltway consultants” or others with strong campaign experience but no local knowledge, finding them to be a poor fit for the districts in which they were running. Similarly, candidates tended to focus on local media outlets, including radio and small-town newspapers, both for earned media and paid ads. Rural

radio in particular tends to be highly affordable and relatively effective at reaching beyond the base.

Research shows that fewer than half of rural residents watch Fox News or similar cable outlets, and that local media, including radio and newspapers remain influential with rural voters. There is a significant opportunity, therefore, for Democratic candidates to make much better use of radio, print media and boosted Facebook ads to counter the image of being out-of-touch and uncaring about everyday concerns. Studies show additional cost-effective opportunities to reach disaffected voters through homespun videos as well as use of lesser-known social media sites popular with young people.

Mailers that clearly compare and contrast candidates' positions in non-partisan, non-inflammatory ways can serve to defuse partisan animus, creating a depolarized environment in which soft Republicans are more inclined to cross party lines.

- 3. Most successful campaigns focused on issues of particular relevance to their district, rather than putting forward elaborate policy platforms.** Successful candidates prioritized issues of relevance to their district, especially those impacting jobs, livelihoods and the economy, along with health care, education and other “bread and butter” issues. Some candidates were able to make wider state and national issues more relevant to their constituents by utilizing local examples or otherwise grounding the question in the local context. *Candidates and campaigns who focus on practical problem-solving, even as a step towards larger progressive change, seem best able to reach beyond the choir, or to energize non-voters.*

Extensive research depicts alienation from and distrust in mainstream institutions and the political system among rural people and low-propensity voters. This alienation, combined with a high degree of cynicism and feelings of powerlessness, drive people to withdraw from politics, or to vote for candidates seen as radically anti-status quo. Democratic candidates thus fare better by focusing on bread-and-butter issues, as part of a progressive populist, anti-establishment campaign message. This populist frame can include progressive policies like extension of the child tax care credit, expansion

of broadband access, and many other positions that the majority of rural voters supports.

## **FINDINGS ABOUT COMMUNICATION AND MESSAGING**

Successful candidates adapt their messaging to both their region and the specific audience they're addressing, while maintaining their own authenticity. From talking about abortion and guns differently than most Democrats, to emphasizing principles and values over policy, the candidates we interviewed were careful but genuine about how they communicated with voters. There is no question that some issues are very difficult for Democrats running in rural districts. However, candidates who both listen well and candidly respond, rather than “pivoting” away from the tough issues are likely to earn respect from a wider swath of voters.

- 1. Our overperformers tend to be plainspoken and avoid political jargon or polarizing rhetoric.** Many candidates expressed frustration with “talking points” that flowed from the DNC, state parties or consultants, both the language itself and the lack of rural-focused material. Some preferred to be unscripted, while others had more polished stump speeches and pitches. To our knowledge, none of our overperformers tested messages with polls or focus groups. Some candidates shared how “plain talking” reached more people, what RUBI describes as “talking like a neighbor, not an activist.”

Research has found that distrust of scientific and academic “experts,” many of whom use complex or technocratic language, is high among rural people. Rather than insisting that people should “listen to the experts,” Democrats can build trust by acknowledging that the experts are not always right (consider the predictions of job creation from NAFTA, or the assurances that oxycontin was safe and non-addictive), and further distinguish themselves through down-to-earth language.



**2. Successful candidates communicate with far fewer words, both in writing and speaking.** As our top candidates know, people in the countryside strongly prefer clear, concise communication over verbosity and ambiguity. In fact, for many, a lot of words signals that the person either doesn't know what they're talking about, or is attempting to pull the wool over their eyes. Hence, effective rural candidates have learned to shut up – and listen. And when they do speak, they are concise, direct and more concrete than abstract. This way of communicating carries over to written materials as well.

Research confirms that candidates who come across like career politicians, policy wonks, or finger-wagging scolds strongly alienate rural people. Overcoming this image of Democrats requires brevity, a complete avoidance of lecturing and condescension, and an ability to speak to people's kitchen-table concerns.

In addition, speaking to the common interests of working-class voters of all races—whether through use of the Race-Class Narrative or other effective messaging approaches—is a productive means of building an electoral coalition that transcends racial and red-blue divisions. When candidates honor working-class contributions, values and needs, voters are more likely to see the candidate as someone who has their backs.

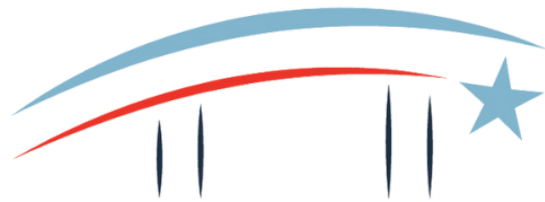
**3. Overperforming candidates focus on whatever issues local people care about; there is no formula other than that.** Nationally, Democrats debate whether they should focus on “kitchen table” issues or the hot-button social issues of the day. We think this debate largely misses the point. The focus of overperforming candidates reflects local voters' top concerns, whether those concerns are cultural, social or, as is most often the case, economic. A strong understanding of how bigger issues and policy questions play out in the local district is critical, as is the candidate's fluency with local issues.

Among the bigger national issues, guns and abortion generally cannot be avoided on the campaign trail but must be discussed with respect for different points of view. As with most everything else, this begins with listening. In some instances, “agreeing to disagree” is the best outcome achievable. This generally earns the candidate more respect

than either a dogmatic insistence on their position, or avoidance of the issue by pivoting to more comfortable issues.

***In sum, our interviews of 50 rural candidates and our examination of a wide body of recent research suggest Democratic candidates will perform significantly better when they:***

- ★ ***listen first, talk less, and respect the experience and knowledge of local people***
- ★ ***are locally rooted with a strong history in and understanding of the district***
- ★ ***truly respect people across ideology and party and refrain from scolding or lecturing***
- ★ ***are mission-driven and humble, not ego-driven***
- ★ ***prioritize needs and issues of local working and middle-class voters***
- ★ ***are candid and plain-spoken about their beliefs, even on contentious issues***
- ★ ***present themselves as non-dogmatic problem solvers***
- ★ ***present themselves as progressive populists without slipping into grandstanding or zealotry***
- ★ ***run campaigns where community activity and personal contact is central***
- ★ ***treat voters of color as individuals, not monolithic voting blocs whose support is presumed, and***
- ★ ***neither pander to racism nor gratuitously antagonize white voters***



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I N I T I A T I V E

[RuralUrbanBridge.org](http://RuralUrbanBridge.org)