



# Perceptions of Rurality and the Role of Government Among Rural Voters



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For Democrats to better reach rural voters, they must better understand views of rurality and the perceived rural-urban divide among rural residents as well as the prevailing attitudes toward the role of government among rural voters. The Rural Voter Institute’s research explored these notions with rural voters in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota.

Consistent themes expressed among rural panelists in focus groups included a sense that rural America, and rural values, are threatened. Panelists described a sense of being forgotten by politicians at the state and federal level and in general policy discussions in the public forum. One Republican panelist described a frustration with being left behind by state politics and a politician at the Capitol saying, “He doesn’t even know we exist up here.”

Rural voters expressed a sense of safety in their community even as they expressed concerns for the viability of those communities. One respondent referred to “being able to stay in your home community without having to move to a big city.”

Panelists were generally suspect of government and believed it failed to recognize or address the unique challenges facing rural America or generally overlooked it placing more emphasis on urban and suburban America.

Quantitative data found effective value in an argument focused specifically on (1) making sure rural communities receive their fair share of state dollars, instead of “almost all” state dollars going to “big cities” and (2) articulating an agenda that includes a “plan [that] improves local roads and bridges, supports small businesses, ensures hospitals and schools get their fair share of state dollars, and expands access to reliable, high-speed internet and cell phone service.”

That argument moved key rural demographics of women under 50 and college-educated rural men each in the direction of a generic Democrat by 3 points.

Paid media concepts that referenced rurality provide a positive context of authenticity for Democrats, but references to rurality did not make criticisms of Republicans or contrasts universally more palatable.

## Top Lines

- Rural voters interviewed in RVI focus groups perceived a strong divide between their communities and metro America, sometimes bordering on animosity.
- Rural voters described a perceived values gap between their communities and metropolitan America. One rural panelist described the ideal political ad as including, “Eye contact and a strong handshake ... because that is the epitome of rural community, that looking in the eye and handshake is more solid than contract.” Values frequently mentioned also referenced independence and self-sufficiency.
- Multiple panelists associated their rural communities with the outdoors - farming, hunting, wildlife, scenic views, and nature with less pollution than the city. They associated their rural communities with an intentional way of life.
- Rural voters interviewed felt a greater sense of community and believed an intentional way of life was pervasive in rural communities and absent in metropolitan America. This divide included a perceived loss of value for hard work in metro America and a pervasive “something-for-nothing” culture.
- A tension existed for some respondents between the concept of safety within their rural communities and a lack of “excitement” and activities to engage with in their communities.
- There was a feeling among rural voters that rural communities were threatened and under attack by outside forces (socio-economic, political, cultural) and resulting concern for the long-term viability of their communities. Panelists expressed a sense of wanting to feel confident that one could stay in his or her community and maintain or improve quality of life.
- Acknowledging the unique burdens on rural communities (a sense of being under attack) and articulating support for rural communities, rural voters expressed a sense of being forgotten by those in government and public policy.
- Panelists were skeptical about the potential positive impact of government. “Our government. I feel like they have evil powers and evil capabilities, for sure. There is too much power there, for sure,” one male independent voter said.
- Cynicism with government and political parties was frequently mentioned among participants. As one panelist noted, “I really don’t even think that I could develop a plan for the government to pull all the crap out that needs to be fixed right now.”
- Some panelists went so far as to say they believed public schools were no longer teaching American history or not teaching it accurately.

Democrats should intentionally connect with the rural identity by recognizing uniquely rural distinctions, acknowledging the unique burdens on rural communities (a sense of being under attack), and articulating specific and distinct support for rural communities.

## Findings

As previously noted in RVI findings, rural residents perceived a lack of appreciation for hard work and for a perceived work ethic in the nation as a whole and considered that as a distinguishing factor between rural and non-rural communities. Individual panelists asserted that suburban and urban Americans place less value on independence and self-sufficiency.

“Farm kids know how to work and how to fix things,” one panelist noted.

“As a farmer, I don’t get to stop working. And those that are still working are the ones that should be getting that extra money every week, honestly,” one rural panelist noted.

Another respondent noted the difference in sense of community: “When you’re in a small town, I don’t know, people are a little more apt to talk to you and a little more open. Where I feel like in a bigger area, it’s not quite that way. It’s a little different. They’re – I don’t know – more to themselves. But yet at the same time, I feel like those bigger areas are a little more open-minded about – like, people over here, it’s more conservative.”

A common undercurrent among our panelists was a sense of distinction, sometimes bordering on animosity, perceived between their rural communities and metro communities.

For multiple panelists, this distinction extended into perceptions of the public policy arena and even the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. “[We] need to have different COVID pandemic solutions for rural areas than for urban areas.”

Although many participants described the world around them as “less exciting” than other areas, there seems to be a consistent feeling of safety within their rural communities. This feeling extends to a feeling of safety from exposure to COVID-19.

Rural voters were critical of government and the two-party system. They were eager to see accountability brought to both the political process and politicians of both parties.

Rural voters interviewed consistently described a sense of being forgotten by politicians, state government, and federal government: “I rarely if ever see state officials helping or looking out for the small towns and small business owners. It seems they are all focused on bigger cities and large corporations.”

## Background

The Rural Voter Institute spent the summer engaged in research with swing state rural voters in Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota. Polling and focus groups presented a path for Democrats up and down the ballot to improve their margins with rural voters by changing how Democrats communicate with rural voters. A rural-voter-only poll of 400 rural and small-town Wisconsin voters collected dramatically more rural interviews than would be included in a traditional statewide survey. A 600-sample statewide survey would yield fewer than 150 rural interviews – and would require a sample size of over 1600 voters to secure the 400 rural interviews completed in this project