

Rural Voters' Perceptions of Democrats and Republicans



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Rural voters' notions of the political parties and the candidates who run on each ticket highly influence voting patterns, and understanding the presuppositions, as well as how to address them, can help narrow the gap for Democratic candidates. Testing ad concepts proved negative attitudes towards Democrats could be overcome by both Democratic candidates and the Party brand if more effective message constructs are utilized.

Although local Democrats were generically viewed as in step with national Democrats, a Democrat willing to voice independence from political agenda, to prioritize his or her local community, and to emphasize personal narratives and values-driven communications can effectively reach rural voters. The importance of long-term Party building in rural communities to offset false and misleading misinformation that is perceived to be true about the Democratic Party cannot be overstated.

Survey research found soft Republicans in rural communities who are open to voting for the "right Democrat." This group disproportionately includes women, younger voters, those with higher educational attainment, and those who are less dogmatically conservative. But in many instances, focus groups revealed preconceived notions of Party brands that will need to be addressed by Party Committees and progressive organizations over the long-term in order to reach persuadable rural voters.

Although participants almost universally expressed frustration with the two-party system and both parties individually, when they defined the Democratic brand, a noticeable distinction emerged between unaffiliated voters and Republican voters. Unaffiliated voters asserted generally positive attributes related to Democrats. Republicans considered the same attributes (working people prioritized over the wealthy, progressive taxation, social justice, etc.) negatively and asserted negative attributes to Democrats.

Rural voters perceived Democrats largely as policy-driven and Republicans as values-driven. While Democrats have some important advantages on core issues like education and health care, Republicans are perceived to more broadly represent small-town and rural communities / values. Rural voters were more responsive to the concept of values-driven messaging rather than policy-driven messaging.

There was a broadly perceived failure of the two-party system shared by rural voters across partisanship and ideology. That animosity was more sharply expressed toward Democrats. A sense of both parties — but especially Democrats — as "elites" who are out of touch and don't understand or appreciate rural America was pervasive among rural voters. This perception makes the importance of personal narratives by candidates, volunteers who support them, and Party activists all the more important when communicating with rural voters in order to dispel this negative presupposition. Further, concrete examples of the elitist values of Republicans being out of step with mainstream rural America are important to convey.

More rural voters interviewed offered negative than positive descriptors of national Democrats — largely along the lines of the liberal, socialist, “free for all” image. Some also saw Democrats as overly passive and weak. One rural voter described Republicans as “more old-fashioned” and Democrats as “out for themselves.” Virtually everyone saw their local Democrats as largely in sync with the national party — a signal of why it has become increasingly difficult for local Democrats to outpace the top of the ticket in recent cycles.

This view of Democrats as “elites” necessitates Democrats define themselves by individual values, not just default to Party brands if they are to effectively narrow margins with rural voters by being not simply bipartisan, but cross-partisan, stepping across party lines to collaborate for the good of the communities they represent, a philosophy such as “I’m going to work with anyone who has ideas that work.”

As Democratic leaders better define themselves by their values in expressly moral terms (right vs. wrong), the Party brand may benefit. In the immediate future, Democratic Party Committees need to engage a long-term campaign with rural voters. Party Committee campaigns should focus on defining Democratic values and utilize local validators to cut through filters created by preconceived notions of right-wing radio, far-right website propaganda posing as news, and misinformation and disinformation social media campaigns. In addition to Party Committees, this mission could be effectively accomplished, perhaps expedited, by issue advocacy, issue education, and other progressive organizations.

Testing Message and Narrative Constructs

To succeed with rural voters, Democrats must stress (1) personal narratives using distinctly values-driven approaches of “right and wrong” based convictions focused on outcomes; (2) independence to stand up for constituents and against political interests; (3) specifically “doing what is right for our area”; and (4) “working across party lines/with everyone.”

When testing ads with messaging centered on moving rural voters with a values-driven message wrapped in personal narrative, independent and Republican rural voters responded:

“[I] would vote for a Democrat and a Republican [if they were the people] in these ads.”

“If Democrats were like that, I’d join,” a white male Republican panelist said.

The mention of political parties was brought up by five of the six participants in one focus group as they viewed message constructs for potential 30-second communications. In concepts that did not specify if the candidate was a Democrat or Republican, some respondents stated they didn’t like animatics they assumed to be “Democrat,” and others stated they believed a Party label should not be the sole reason of voting for or against a candidate. Party brands create pre-ingrained information filters for voters that should be addressed in individual candidates and by Party Committees for the long-term.

Topline Findings

Rural voters — Republican, Democrat, and Independent — generally considered their communities conservative and often defined themselves in relation to that sense of prevailing culture, as either an enthusiastic participant or a quiet rarity holding their tongue.

Frustration with the two Parties was widespread. As one respondent put it, “They’re both two different parties, but I think they’re made up of people that look out for themselves more or less, than anything else. You don’t see them having to worry about—about if their insurance is gonna lapse or how their retirement’s gonna be. They don’t have to worry about that at all. They have to worry about how big their check’s gonna get. So, I think they’re defined as people of more or less greed than anything.”

Perceptions of hard work and which Party is more associated with “hard work” or a “something for nothing culture” were more prominent in rural voters’ priorities and decision making. Two panelists segued into a criticism of a “something for nothing” culture they believed to be pervasive in America today in addition to a dearth of hard work. They then turned to a partisan commentary that Republicans are trying to get Americans to work and Democrats want to make them more reliant on the government.

Opinions of Democrats

The state and local-level Democratic brand was not necessarily viewed more positively than federal, national Democrats, and in some instances was viewed worse by the rural respondents. Public education was one public policy issue on which conservative and Republican participants praised Democrats, and Democrats were generally perceived as better on health care as well.

Most panelists voluntarily associated Democrats with higher taxes on the wealthy and lower taxes on lower-income Americans. The seemingly most persuadable identified Republican in the group considered Democrats as more likely to cut taxes for working and poor families and increase taxes on large corporations and “the richest 1 percent.” However, he viewed those attributes negatively.

Democrats were generally perceived as distant and unrelated to local rural communities, but some independent voters identified with what they perceived as Democratic priorities. One panelist described Democrats broadly saying, “They’re more for the people. You know, like the smaller businesses. The smaller community people. Republicans, I would just say, tend to be your white-collar conservatives.”

One rural voter said, “Today’s Democratic Party is not the Democratic Party that I grew up with. I don’t even recognize them as the Democratic Party that I grew up with, and that concerns me. They have gone so far left. It worries me that there are so many people in favor of a socialistic government.”

Another panelist, critical of Democrats, said they are for the environment, higher taxes, labor unions, and public education. He described them as both liberal and entitled. Still another said, “That’s become the mantra of the people that are taking over the Democratic Party, apparently, is that we’ve gotta have a universal basic income.”

Another panelist asserted that Democratic candidates and officeholders never had a “real job.”

“I really can’t think of anything off the top of my head that I agree with them [the Democrats] on. They care about the people. I get that. That’s where their whole socialism thing comes into it, but I think the way they go about it is wrong.”

Perceptions of Republicans

A majority of respondents defined Republicans and conservatives in terms of gun rights, abortion, and tax policy. But alarmingly, Republicans had a strong lead on “represents your values” with rural voters.

One rural panelist defined Republicans as “hardworking” with “decent morals.” Another panelist described Republicans in general as supporting balanced budgets and for standing up to foreign countries that he feels would otherwise take advantage of America.

Republicans generally seemed to be perceived as strong, almost defiant, and that paralleled a sentiment of defiance of larger national trends in rural communities by some participants.

Republicans generally were associated with faith — specifically Christian faith — and that appeared to be an advantage with a number of rural voters.

By contrast, many rural voters in focus groups directly or indirectly described the left as secular and even anti-Christian, but quantitative research found a clear path for Democrats with rural faith voters.

As previously reported by RVI:

“Nearly 50 percent of rural voters surveyed who attend church services on a weekly basis either vote for Democratic candidates or are open to voting for them. Survey research in Wisconsin over the summer found that among weekly church attenders in rural and small towns, 24% generally lean toward Democrats and another 24% say they ‘mostly vote Republican but will sometimes vote for a Democrat or two.’ Only 36% of weekly church attenders in these areas say they ‘usually vote a straight Republican ticket.’”

“Grounding Democratic candidates in language that expresses their values, particularly representing small-town rural values, is imperative for narrowing margins with rural voters. Republicans hold a double-digit lead over Democrats on the question of ‘sharing your values’ (49 to 36) among rural voters surveyed. Among weekly church attenders, the ‘shares your values’ margin is +39 GOP (25 to 64), but there is room for Democrats to reach the nearly half of rural faith voters willing to consider and vote for a Democrat.”

Focus group panelists conversation would suggest that the Republican brand as perceived by rural voters has been constructed over time by intentional communication through multiple channels dedicated to defining both Parties with a strong preference for the Republican Party. Little challenge from the left to these generic Party brands is evident.

Recommendations

- Democratic candidates or progressive causes communicating with rural voters should understand the pre-conceived stereotypes of both Parties that are common, but not universal, within rural communities.
- Party Committees and progressive organizations should work to proactively define the Democratic brand and progressive label with rural voters in the off-year and during election season, but last-minute appeals late in an election cycle will seem hollow if not preceded by a long-term commitment to such communication.
- Local validators can be key to overcoming preconceived filters some voters may hold from the intentional or unintentional consumption of right-wing media and online information or misinformation.

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.