

Future of Democrats, Progressive Agenda with Rural Voters



RURAL VOTER INSTITUTE: ANALYSIS OF RURAL VOTERS
IN THE AMERICAN MIDWEST, SUMMER 2020

The Rural Voter Institute (RVI) seeks to help candidates, causes, and other institutions effectively communicate and engage with rural voters. Recent years have seen a widening gulf between America's rural voters and Democrats, including a widening gap between 2012 and 2016.

In May and June 2020, RVI undertook polling of rural Wisconsin voters in addition to focus groups, dyads, triads, and in-depth interviews with rural voters in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota.

This research yielded insights for the recent deficit Democrats have faced with the rural electorate and developing strategies for the immediate and long-term narrowing of that margin. This report, with topline overviews, will be the first in a series of topical studies released in the coming weeks by RVI.

Better Rural Voter Communication

After three years of researching the deficit Democrats and progressives face with the rural electorate, Democratic candidates, and the Democratic Party brand, RVI concluded that the problem was less in what was being communicated than in how it was being communicated. Our work pointed to four foundational elements of effective rural voter communication:

- Narrative
- Localization
- Authenticity
- Values-based communication

Deficit with Rural Voters

As part of our 2020 effort, RVI's qualitative research has identified three areas of reservations rural voters have toward Democrats and progressives in general:

1. Concerns over a concept of "something for nothing." Rural residents perceived a lack of appreciation for hard work and for a perceived work ethic that dominated many of their political attitudes.
2. A sense of both parties – but especially Democrats – as "elites" who are out of touch and don't understand or appreciate rural America.
3. Democrats must do a better job of understanding the situation in rural communities and where rural voters are coming from when they formulate political opinions, including recognition of threats to rural communities and a need to communicate in moral terms – in other words, values-based language.

To address these deficits, RVI formulated both short-term and long-term recommendations and objectives. Utilizing RVI's quantitative research, recommendations were formulated for segmenting and prioritizing the audience for communication and engagement. A combination of polling and focus group data was used to hone examples of the application of this message framework to specific issues and agenda items. Additionally, RVI developed a potential narrative construction for future testing.

Audience & Targeting

As part of our 2020 quantitative research, RVI found soft Republicans in rural Wisconsin 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.

Democrats in rural areas and small towns start more competitive with women than men, especially women under age 50 and women with college degrees. The ability to find "new" Democratic voters trends more toward doing better with women without a four-year degree and men with a four-year degree – both of them trending a bit younger (under 50-55) than 55+.

Affordable health care, small business advocacy, and education are the most convincing agenda item issues among women under 50 and college-educated men – two of the rural voter segments who show the most potential to move towards Democrats in the survey.

In addition to prioritizing jobs, schools, and health care, these voters were frustrated with what they perceived as too much partisan bickering and fighting in government. Focusing on solutions with a cross-partisan approach, showing political independence, and not being afraid to condemn the status quo is a strong place from which Democrats can communicate.

Further, requiring accountability and transparency in the use of taxpayer money is a strong position for Democratic candidates competing in these rural areas; candidates should talk about more money getting into classrooms, local health care, and job training programs. That position, accompanied with muscular assurances of accountability and rooting out waste, looks to be a promising way to address the "something for nothing" concern among rural voters interviewed. Further, the idea of holding politicians accountable resonated well with our target audiences in focus groups.

Rural and small-town voters saw support for small businesses as key to improving the rural economy. Republicans have some overarching branding as being "good for businesses" – but that is based more on a perception that Republicans are looking out for "big business" with a sense that neither party if an advocate for small businesses.

Improving the teacher-to-student ratio was seen as the best way to improve the quality of public schools. Participants also identified the importance of technical education as a secondary but important priority. And as mentioned above, Democrats should not take a backseat to Republicans in rooting out any waste – to ensure taxpayer dollars are being spent wisely.

While Democrats have some important advantages on core issues like education and health care, Republicans' strength on jobs and the economic recovery – as well as the perception that Republicans more broadly represent small-town and rural values – largely superseded those Democratic assets. Democrats must become more competitive in the jobs debate – championing small businesses and job training / vocational-based education offer resonant messaging opportunities for Democrats to articulate a vision of greater economic opportunity.

Recommendations

Democrats are losing rural votes based on a cultural divide and how they choose to communicate. Progressives are never going to win every rural vote, and it may be decades before they can win a majority of rural voters. However, to consistently win statewide elections and hold sizable legislative majorities, Democrats must better compete among rural voters. Achieving this will require both improving in elections in the short term and improving the Democratic brand in the long term.

Short-Term: Improving in Elections

1. Focus on candidate-specific narratives, particularly in regard to overcoming everyday struggles, including personal narrative or utilizing real-people (blue-collar, working-class, rural individuals) narratives to demonstrate that our candidates share basic core values and experiences
2. Appeal to the idea that Democratic policies are meant to empower people to independently reach their full potential, “teaching a person to fish” metaphorically.
3. Illustrate the elite status of the opponents and how he or she seeks something for nothing through their political position. Illustrate how the opposing candidate does not share the predominant values of rural voters.
4. Appeal to rural identity by recognizing uniquely rural distinctions, acknowledging the unique burdens on rural communities (a sense of being under attack), and articulating support for rural communities.
5. Use distinctly values-driven approaches of “right and wrong” based convictions focused on outcomes, independence to stand up for constituents and against political interests – specifically “doing what is right for our area,” and working across party lines / with everyone.

Long-Term: Improving Party Branding

Based on recent election trends, Democrats have lost ground with rural voters over the years. Our focus groups suggested means to regain that ground through long-term party building strategies:

1. WHAT (messaging): Democratic narratives are essential outside of election season – specifically, communicating narratives and messages of overcoming everyday struggles because of Democratic ideals, initiatives, or policies.
2. HOW: Research emphasized the importance of word-of-mouth communication among persuadable rural voters, showing a need to engage existing rural Democrats and empower them with better tools for outreach.
3. WHEN: To rebuild Democratic voting segments within rural communities on a lasting basis, rather than just in political waves, there is a need for more party-building infrastructure in years without statewide or national elections. Off-years should be dedicated to building the Democratic brand within targeted rural voter segments through messaging and outreach.
4. WHO: Social permission strategy has the potential to play a pivotal role in success with community and faith leaders. These trusted individuals can provide rural voters assurance that they do not have to vote straight-ticket Republican.

Rural Voter Institute plans to release further in-depth rural voter research in the weeks ahead leading towards the 2020 General Election. The RVI research team includes principals of [FSSG](#) and [ALG](#). Research partner, Badger State Research. For more information, visit RuralVoterInstitute.com