

Communicating with Rural Voters of Faith: Values-Based Communication



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Overview

The correlation between religiosity and rurality in the United States emphasizes the importance of communicating with rural voters of faith ahead of the 2020 elections. The Rural Voter Institute's quantitative research found a path for successful dialogue with rural faith voters: 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.

Top Line Recommendations

Putting arguments in the context of faith traditions moves rural voters. RVI tested the idea of a progressive argument on the environment framed in faith and found it moved rural voters overall by seven points in the direction of Democrats. "... Democrats believe we must protect God's creation, including our rivers, lakes, and streams - and that everyone has the right to enjoy our natural resources. This means cracking down on corporations that pollute our air and drinking water and making sure public lands are accessible so families can pass on the legacy of hunting, fishing, and enjoying our natural areas."

The effectiveness of the "creation" message that infuses religious responsibility is a sign that building our values-centric language can raise the potency of a message, even if the underlying content is not quite as compelling.

Values and faith tradition influence rural voters' world view and political views, specifically values identification, and must be acknowledged and discussed. Voters cited their faith traditions and spirituality as strongly influential in their view of the world around them, their political views, and specifically in identifying their values as distinctive, including the perception of values as a defining difference between

rural and non-rural communities across the country. Multiple faith voters expressed concerns their values or faith were threatened. Focus group panelists described a desire to see a candidate who learned his or her values from being raised in a working-class family and understanding the struggles working people face.

Self-Identified Values Commonly Cited by Rural Respondents:

- Hard work
 - A belief that personal responsibility and hard work are the keys to getting ahead
- Resentment of a sense of people receiving something for nothing
- Distrust and skepticism of institutions
- Freedom and self-determination of personal will
- Self-reliance
- Independence
- Community / communal spirit on a local level
- A desire for some concept of economic equity (although the definition varied greatly by political ideology).

Values-based communication must be in moral terms – right versus wrong – and may or may not be explicitly faith-based but must be authentic. Values-based communication does not have to be framed by faith in general or any one faith tradition. However, when authentic to a candidate, a campaign, a validator, or a cause, the argument can be explicitly faith-based. Authenticity is paramount. For some candidates and progressive groups or committees, an explicitly faith-based communication frame is natural and authentic, but it is not the only means to effectively dialogue with faith and values rural voters. Moral context – the idea that an agenda or position is explicitly right or wrong – is an effective, and necessary, frame for rural voter communication. Respondents described Democrats in terms of policy priorities, Republicans in terms of values. “I think of the Republican party as more in tune with people like me...the values I hold and support those values...because I believe in God, family and country,” one respondent said.

Diversity of belief among rural voters must be respected. As rural America continues to grow more diverse, so do the faith traditions prevalent in the rural communities. Whether spiritual, Christian Catholic, Christian Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, or non-Christian faith traditions are relevant to a rural community, a commonality of faith in a higher power was prevalent in RVI’s focus groups. One focus group panelist explicitly said her ideal candidate for office would need to be religious, regardless of what kind of religion. Yet when describing a candidate, a “person of faith who believes in the power of prayer” was among the lower priorities for respondents. Rural voters, including Evangelicals, desired a candidate who was a person of faith or generally believed in a higher power, but largely affirmed a desire for a separation of church and state.

Findings

The Moral Terms – Right and Wrong – of Values-Based Communication

There were strong moral frameworks of right and wrong and associations with personal faith articulated by many panelists.

One panelist described himself as a non-denominational Christian, but attends a congregation affiliated with a conservative Evangelical denomination. “I do believe in the Bible. I believe there’s a heaven and a hell. ... The only way to get to heaven is to believe in Him [Jesus] and ask Him into your heart. ... It does impact my politics, but I do, at the same, believe they separated church and state for a reason. ... It impacts me to a degree.” Another panelist asserted, “I don’t put spiritual with governing. But there’s a right and wrong, and there’s a devil and a God, for sure. And I definitely think that we need to stand up to the evil and call it out and fix it before it gets worse.”

Many respondents identified, indirectly or directly, the influence of faith on their values system or political world view. Rural voters interviewed who identified as people of faith or with a specific faith tradition often interpreted the news and world events through the lens of their faith, and their faith highly influenced their public policy views and voting decisions. A female panelist noted that her faith has a “huge impact on my political views.”

“It’s important to be kind all of the time,” she said and hopes that people will be kind and learn to take care of each other. This sentiment was echoed in comments by other female unaffiliated voters.

Participants noted the difference between their perceptions of rural and metropolitan America in both explicit and subtle terms. The values-based assessments of right and wrong seemed prevalent as respondents discussed politics. Panelists often described their political views in expressly religious terms. “My faith and my belief system pretty much lines up with the majority of what the Republicans’ faith and belief system is,” a female panelist said.

Multiple focus group panelists indicated they increasingly have come to see Democrats as out-of-step with their values. This perception can, in part, be remedied by speaking in explicitly moral terms of right and wrong and using values-based messaging. Panelists directly or indirectly described the left as secular and even anti-Christian.

An Evangelical Republican (white male) noted that he wanted a separation between the state and any one religious group. But that separation is different than understanding the candidate, which voters overwhelmingly wanted to do. We need to honor the separation of Church and state but not be afraid to authentically talk about values convictions or faith when applicable. We found persuadable faith voters were more interested in understanding the candidate’s motivations, character, and convictions as it related to values and/ or faith.

Participants largely felt their faith and value systems were under assault. They connected their faith directly with their hopes and fears. One panelist even referred to the coronavirus pandemic as a “test of our faith” in God. There was an overall pessimism among panelists, largely linked to the pandemic, but at least one panelist linked it directly to her faith. She called for the country to return to what she interpreted as biblical values. “God says it’s gonna get worse before it gets better, and this is getting pretty darn worse.” Another panelist blamed societal problems on people who “don’t have that stability [of religion] anymore.” Panelists directly or indirectly described the left as secular and even anti-Christian. When asked whether he feels like his faith and values are under attack, a male panelist answered, “You

bet.” Another panelist said, “It’s horrible that the world we live in right now is so far away from morals and values. Anything goes. If you are correct and you’ve got morals and values, then you’re the one who lives the wrong life.” A female panelist said that her own faith and values are not under attack because she is a “strong, moral person,” but the faith and values around her are under attack.

A Black male panelist described himself as “putting my trust and my faith [in] God more than ever now,” and referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as a test of our faith in God. He said that as a Christian he feels as though he is always under a microscope being judged.

One panelist compared her sense of communal cooperation in her care of a neighbor, saying the same sentiment was lacking across the country. She believed the absence of that communal spirit in our politics was holding the country back and specifically holding back recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. “People do need to come together,” she said. “The only way that we’re going to get over this whole pandemic thing is if the politicians quit arguing and saying, ‘Well, no, you’re wrong; we shouldn’t do it that way.’ How about you all just put a piece of every one of your ideas together and make one big one. ... Everybody pitch in and make it better.” Candidates should talk about their commitment to their communities, listening to all voices, and bringing people together to solve the health, economic and social problems we face.

Diversity of Belief Among Rural Voters

The RVI findings also reinforce the diversity within the faith communities of rural America and even within individual congregations. The most moderate Republican panelist attended an Evangelical church, while one of the most conservative Republicans boasted of confronting her Methodist [Mainline Protestant] pastor about being too “liberal” politically and walked out of a service over this view.

Some panelists described themselves as more spiritual than religious, for example saying they practiced daily prayer but did not attend religious services, and some were more explicit about their religious devotion in their view of the world.

Another panelist asserted, “I believe in the Bible and ... I really think in my lifetime that I’m gonna see the return of Jesus. So, I guess my fear would be that we don’t accomplish what we need to before that happens.”

One panelist expressed her support of Trump as directly intertwined with her faith. “In the Bible there’s things that have to happen before this final act, and I see a lot of it coming to fruition. Especially, it says that the earth is gonna have pains, like birth pains. You know, earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, just with what the weather’s doing. ... I watched a prophet, and he said that- before Trump was even elected; this was when Obama was in office- and he had prophesied that a man of the trumpet would become president and he would come into office not knowing God and he would leave as a praying man and that gave me goosebumps because now he’s, like, making national days for prayer. When he came into office, he wasn’t- I don’t think he was- that person, but now he knows the power of prayer and the power of God.” Her “end times” world view was clear: “[Before Jesus comes back] us as a nation, I think that we need to come together more. We don’t all have to agree ... but we need to understand that we’re all different and accept that. I think that we really just need to come together more, be kinder to each other. Everybody’s got a bucket list. ... Everybody gets done what they need to do before the ‘final act,’ I call it,” referring to a divine second coming and an end to the world. Another panelist concurred, saying, “God destroyed the whole world once before because of sin. How much longer will he wait before he does it again?”

Conclusion

Rural voters were hungry to hear values-based narratives. These narratives need to be personal and authentic. Values-based assessments of right and wrong were prevalent as respondents discussed politics. Panelists frequently described their political views in expressly religious terms. Democrats need to speak in moral terms - right vs. wrong and not just policy.

Rural voters expressed strong moral frameworks of right and wrong and associations with individual faith traditions articulated in personal ways. Democratic candidates should be intentional to express their authentic care about rural communities, stress their support for everyone's individual success and be clear that their agendas are moral statements meant to empower people to independently reach their full potential. Messages about public education, increasing access to health care in rural communities, ensuring small businesses are able to succeed, and supporting farmers should fall into the frame of valuing hard work, self-reliance, independence, freedom, and community spirit. Practical language for application when explaining a candidate's values might include "My faith teaches me...", "Our faith teaches us...", "I learned important lessons growing up in church like...", "Our values mean..." or similar language that frames the moral right and wrong convictions of the candidate's agenda in personal experience.

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.