

Attributes Rural Voters Seek in a Candidate

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The Rural Voter Institute's research found a plurality (41%) of rural voters were more inclined to think state government has the most impact on their life (compared to the federal government), underscoring both the importance of Democratic candidates at a national level emphasizing localization in their campaigns and the opportunity for local and state level Democrats to improve margins with rural voters.

We examined key attributes rural voters look for in a candidate. Given a blank slate for an ideal legislative candidate, these voters lasered in on a bipartisan, independent profile and someone with working-class roots.

Rural Voters' Desired Candidate Attributes

- A candidate who is localized – through personal biography, issue agenda, values, or validators; rural voters interviewed saw politicians of both parties as “elites” and out of touch with rural priorities, although the concern was more strongly felt toward Democrats. Yet, persuadable rural voters felt that state and local government had a greater impact on their lives and preferred a candidate who prioritized regional agendas over political (partisan) agendas.
- A candidate who “shows up” and makes an intentional effort to communicate with rural voters; despite most participants self-identifying as Republicans or Independents, most indicated they would be likely to back the Democrats if they just heard from them – or would at least be willing to hear them out.
- A candidate who was raised in a working-class family and understands the struggles families who work for a living face.
 - A candidate who is personally familiar with and has performed hard work and who prioritizes hard work as a value; a candidate who believes personal responsibility and hard work are the keys to getting ahead.
 - “Hard work” and “personal responsibility” are critically important. Stories of working at an early age to support their family, working to put themselves through college, and whose lives speak to a commitment to hard work can go a long way in grounding Democratic candidates in the values of rural areas.
- A candidate who acknowledges and addresses the unique threats and challenges that face rural communities. For example, health care cost is critical in rural communities just like in other areas – but rural communities also face the struggle of having to drive hours to find specialists or

hospitals. Weaving in these localized components to Democratic messaging is a way to show shared values and also not sound like a standard-issue candidate.

- A candidate who puts local needs ahead of a political agenda, is fiercely independent from political establishment (including partisan) and works across party lines; persuadable rural voters were more likely to prefer a candidate who would reach out and build compromise, compared to less persuadable voters who dogmatically opposed compromise and were distinctly ideologically driven.
- A candidate who is responsible for or dedicated to tangible outcomes and not associated with a perceived political bickering.
- A candidate who can bring people together rather than be divisive.
- A candidate who has a connection to, appreciation of, and prioritization of the outdoors – whether it be agricultural, sporting, or of another nature.
- A candidate who has overcome the kind of daily struggles faced by families who work for a living or has overcome adversity.
- A values-driven candidate who speaks in moral terms (right and wrong) and states clearly his or her values as convictions driving his or her agenda.
- A candidate who believes in a “higher power” – rural voters tended to gravitate to candidates who believed in a higher power, although specific faith tradition was a much lesser priority.
- A candidate who is in touch with kitchen-table issues; when asked to devise a plan to help their family, healthcare dominates the discussion – with a smattering of other “quality of life issues” offered as well.
- A candidate who prioritizes small business over large corporations.

Findings

Hard work and overcoming adversity or overcoming the everyday struggles of families that work for a living were important attributes rural voters gravitated towards in a candidate. When testing creative concepts, one participant said he liked the image of a candidate working hard and “his parents working hard as he grew up.” Building on this, a participant said, “I think when you have experienced nothing but privilege in your life, then it’s hard to imagine what everybody in the country is going through. I think having different perspectives in life is important for some.” Given a blank slate for an ideal legislative candidate, these voters laser in on a bipartisan, independent profile and someone with working-class roots.

Another focus group participant said he wants an elected official who has, “maybe lived life and has had to work a day mining and living a day of being at war. You know, like someone not behind the scenes pushing a pencil, but more somebody that’s been in life and experienced it.” This sentiment was expressed by another participant who described his ideal candidate as a person “who came from the bottom, who worked their way up into where they are today.”

A plurality of rural voters interviewed felt state and local officials have the most impact on their life – especially when discounting the most strongly partisan Republicans. This view should give local and state Democratic candidates confidence they don’t have to get drawn into every hot-button national debate – and can instead aggressively focus on the agenda for their local communities, regions, and state. These

voters were lasered in on kitchen-table priorities like jobs, schools, and health care, in addition to protests focused on police brutality.

Focus group participants expressed a frustration with too much partisan bickering and fighting in government which contributes to a suspicion among rural / small-town voters as to why there is not enough progress being made on their concerns.

Many respondents' political world view is shaped by their faith, and they look for that in the candidates they vote for. "I would hope they would believe in a higher power," said a participant from Wisconsin. A Michigan panelist said her ideal candidate for office would have "a strong religious background, regardless of what the religion is – you know, Christian [protestant], Catholic, whatever, as long as it's a strong religious background."

Overall, multiple focus group panelists indicated they increasingly have come to see Democrats as out-of-step with their values. "Images of guns and hunting means the candidate supports the 2nd Amendment as well as the freedom of faith," said one panelist making a direct connection to guns and God.

One panelist strayed from this narrative when he said, "I consider myself an evangelical, but I have a concern when a politician tries to pander," and he doesn't like having "evangelicals too close to a political party."

Participants expressed specific preference for candidate narratives that included police or military service and criticized career politicians. A participant said he was dissatisfied with "both options for president; Biden has been in office for 28 years, Trump's on Twitter. He isn't politically correct, but you know where he is coming from." President Trump's Twitter activity was noted by another supporter. A supporter of President Trump, he said his "ideal candidate is someone like Trump, but who will actually listen to the experts and stay off Twitter."

Rural panelists strongly indicated they wanted a candidate who would be above partisanship and political "bickering." One participant was direct in expressing a desire for someone who will "focus on outcomes, not bickering." Another said, "There is too much emphasis on the problem rather than the solution." Another panelist brought this back to, "It's important to hear the candidate's values." And for one participant, that value is keeping people living in their rural community. "I liked he was willing to work with anyone to keep citizens in rural communities and not leaving to go to a big city," a participant said. Although this sentiment was echoed by many panelists, it is worth noting that when testing proactive messages, direct criticisms of the political establishment and its gridlock could sometimes be interpreted by panelists as itself being part of the "political bickering."

Being explicit about bipartisanship and political independence and not being afraid to condemn the current system is a strong platform for Democratic candidates. Candidates cannot emphasize enough efforts to require accountability and transparency as to how taxpayer money is spent – such as when talking about more money getting to the classroom, local health care, job training programs—always accompanying that with muscular assurances of accountability to ensure aggressively rooting out waste.

Panelists interviewed identified frustrations because of a lack of opportunities in their communities, including health care options (like specialists), lack of educational activities, lack of job and career mobility, income-earning barriers, and quality of life concerns like spotty internet and cell service. Concern for the fate of Main Street small businesses and their impact on rural communities cannot be overstated.

Candidates should work proactively to acknowledge and address not only the positive qualities of rural communities but also the unique challenges and threats they face.

Focus group panelists gravitated to the idea of a candidate who would work across party lines, show independence, and unite people. Despite a generally conservative-minded group of participants, Trump was seen as very divisive. He gets some credit for his core issues (border, economy), with almost all criticisms focused on his abrasive style. Panelists named dysfunctional partisanship and (to a lesser extent) currying favor with special interests as what bothers them about politicians. Ideological complaints were less prominent.

Persuadable rural voters were more likely to find Trump a divisive figure and to think his brand had polluted the Republican brand at other levels of the ballot. Persuadable rural voters were more likely to take issue with his erratic behavior, chaotic style of leadership, degradation of others, and a perceived refusal to listen to others or to experts; although some focus group participants saw Trump's style as a positive, most (even some who prefer Trump to Biden) were also very critical of his tone and demeanor. It is worth noting that down-ballot candidates appeared to benefit from remaining "above the fray" of national politics by not engaging, and persuadable rural voters had less expectation they engaged in national issues and preference for their focus on state issues.

Conclusion

Democrats up and down the ballot have room to narrow margins with the rural electorate by localizing their campaigns, by making the effort to communicate directly with rural voters, and by intentionally highlighting the parts of their own agenda and personal narrative that authentically match the desired candidate qualities and attributes sought by rural voters.

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.