

# Health Care and Rural Voters in 2020

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Democrats hold an advantage on the health care issue with rural voters, and it is among the most compelling arguments with rural voters for Democrats – especially the key demographics of rural women under 50 and college-educated men. Democrats would benefit from framing the election as a decision on health care priorities.

In our research, rural voters voiced concern not only for the price of health care, including the price of prescription drugs, but also for the long-term viability of rural hospitals and the accessibility and geographic proximity of specialty care.

RVI survey research tested multiple arguments for a generic Democrat, including “The coronavirus outbreak has shown us how important it is for everyone to have quality and affordable health care. ... Democrats believe we must lock in protections for those with pre-existing conditions and make the cost of health care and prescription drugs more affordable.”

This argument moved rural voters overall by seven points beyond the generic Democratic baseline and 12 points among rural women under 50 and four points among rural college-educated men, the two demographics most likely to provide new Democratic votes in rural communities in 2020 according to RVI research.

## Top Line Findings

- Democrats should elevate the health care issue with rural voters and frame the election about health care when possible, an issue on which Democrats have a lead over Republicans with rural voters.
- The health care issue was one of the most effective tested with rural voters, moving rural voters by seven points in the direction of generic Democrat, 12 points among women under 50 and four points among college-educated men.
- A top-of-the-mind concern among rural voters in focus groups included protecting and supporting rural hospitals and health care providers as well as addressing the distance to specialized care.
- Rural persuadable voters overall (13 percent of whom are neither Democrat nor Republican) are more likely to say education and health care, are top issues of concern for them.

- Among women under 50 and college-educated men – two of the rural voter segments who moved towards Democrats the most during RVI’s survey – health care, small business advocacy, and education were the most convincing agenda items.
- Describing what rural voters would like to see in an elected official or candidate, reducing waste, fraud, and abuse rose to the top. Rural health care, small business support, and improving education trailed closely behind as the next-most important.
- Not simply a federal issue, rural voters expect to see state politicians take action on health care. When asked to name the top issue in Wisconsin that they would like to see the Governor and the state legislature address, “health care” was one of the most frequent answers among rural voters interviewed.
- The coronavirus pandemic was a top-of-mind concern for rural voters interviewed in multiple focus groups across the Midwest. Strengthening the rural health care system and rebuilding the small business economy post-pandemic were key concerns.

## Testing Health Care Ad Concepts

Health care was a consistently strong issue when presented in ad concepts tested with persuadable rural voters in focus groups in Midwest swing states.

**CONCEPT:** “The coronavirus outbreak has shown us just how important health care is: from locking in protections for pre-existing conditions to bringing down the cost of care and prescription drugs. But in rural communities like ours, we also have to find more options for access to quality care and specialists locally that don’t require a three-hour drive.”

**REACTION:** Four participants related strongly to this concept, relaying personal stories of accidents and other health care crises that proved the importance of rural health care infrastructure. One Trump supporter said that despite his doubts about the validity of the pandemic, he agreed with and supported the message of the health care concept that referenced the pandemic.

**CONCEPT:** Rural communities need a leader “supporting small businesses, growing jobs, protecting rural hospitals and health care”

**REACTION:** A majority of rural focus group panelists favored ad concepts with that phrase. One female panelist was particularly drawn to the health care concept in ads tested when it went on to reference COVID-19.

**CONCEPT:** “...our tax money sent to Washington. This money could provide working ... families with better access to health care and to support rural hospitals. But our Republican legislators ... left that money in Washington to be sent to other states, because of party politics. Expanding Medicaid would ensure thousands of hardworking ... families get access to health care and help our economy recover from the pandemic. We need leadership, not petty politicians.”

**REACTION:** This ad concept was generally a favorite among rural focus group participants.

**CONCEPT:** “A report on rural health care ... warned a dozen hospitals are on the brink of closing. If my child or spouse -- if your child or spouse -- needs emergency or specialized care, it could be an hour’s drive away, or more. Yet politicians at the capitol refuse to do anything about it. Medicaid Expansion shouldn’t be about politics. It means protecting our rural hospitals. I’ll fight for that ...”

**REACTION:** A majority of participants preferred this concept, and rural health care resounded strongly with participants with some telling personal stories. One female panelist worried that perhaps rural hospitals in her area did not have an adequate supply of ventilators if COVID-19 impacted her area.

## Findings

Frustrations existed among rural focus group panelists with their communities, largely because of lack of opportunities in their communities, including health care options (like specialists), lack of educational activities, lack of job and career opportunities, and quality of life concerns like spotty internet and cell service and fewer shopping and dining options.

When panelists were asked to devise a plan to help their family, health care dominated the discussion. A lack of specialty health care was a common frustration with panelists. When discussing access to specialized doctors, one panelist noted she had to drive four hours to see a specialist and traveled across the country to see another. Rural voters were lasered in on kitchen-table priorities like health care, jobs, and schools, in addition to the concurrent protests focused on police brutality.

## Democratic Advantage

Democrats hold advantages with rural voters on health care, schools, making college more affordable, and improving race relations. Democrats should look to, when possible, frame the election with rural voters around health care while authentically specifying their agenda to rural health concerns including increased access to hospitals and specialty care in proximity to rural areas. Supporting rural hospitals is critical. Focus group respondents described the distance to medical care as unacceptable.

Leveraging Democratic strength on health care to the degree Democrats can raise the profile on these issues, they are better poised to win:

- Health care is about driving down costs for both care and prescription drugs
- More options are needed for rural quality care and rural specialists that don't require a long car trip
- Support is needed for existing rural hospitals and rural health care providers

Rural panelists discussed their health care concerns in personal terms:

- "My husband and I both live in fear having to go to the hospital for any reason because the medical bills accrued, even after our insurance pays, will be catastrophic to our financial welfare."
- "Better access to specialized doctors in our rural area where we do not have to travel every time to Green Bay or further for treatments."
- "Supplemental insurance to help cover the costs that my medical insurance will not cover."
- "Access to more medical specialists."
- "Helping families that experience medical trauma is important. The costs are dramatic in so many ways. Help the families that are caught in the middle. Not rich enough to pay and yet not poor enough to be helped by the government."

Research showed that requiring accountability and transparency in the use of taxpayer money is a strong position for Democratic candidates competing in these rural areas, specifically when candidates talk about

more money getting into local health care. Democrats should be aggressive in talking about weeding out any waste, fraud, and abuse in state health care programs.

While not tested in-depth, evidence suggested tying Republican candidates to special interest like big health care companies and big pharmaceutical companies can be a powerful way to define Republicans. This creates a core contrast of Democrats fighting for rural families and hospitals while Republicans side with big special interests – even when it drives up costs and hurts rural communities.

## **Pandemic and Health Care Policy**

The nearly universal concern among rural panelists at the time of this research was coronavirus related. Generally, most participants felt things were going to get worse before they get better. The fear of the unknown was the biggest worry, but the concerns lay more in the public health and economic impact from the pandemic rather than personal concerns for death or illness from the virus.

Panelists indicated they believed different solutions were required for responding to the pandemic in rural communities compared to urban communities. Rural voters linked the pandemic to evidence of the need to improve the health care system – both for lowering costs and improving access in rural areas.

## **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