



RuralOrganizing.org
Boldly Progressive. Proudly Rural.



PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH PROGRESSIVE STRATEGIES FOR RURAL ENGAGEMENT

ABOUT THIS REPORT

How do progressives win again in rural communities? Why have we struggled to break through? What does it look like to meaningfully engage rural voters and gain support for our candidates? In this report, RuralOrganizing.org provides findings, insights, and recommendations for progressives working to rebuild power outside major metropolitan areas.

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INTRODUCTION

Rural America has an incredible amount of legislative power in its grasp. Half of the U.S. population lives in just nine states,¹ which means half of our population shares just 18 Senators. Meanwhile, the other half of the country—many predominantly rural states—shares the remaining 82 Senate seats.

Historically, Democrats and Republicans engaged small-town and rural voters more-or-less equally. But today, Democrats have given ground outside major metros² and the Republican Party has become disproportionately rural. So today, especially when it comes to institutions like the Senate, *a rural red vote is worth more than a blue urban one.*

Two-thirds of non-large-metro registered voters agree Democrats “are out of touch with the real America,” approximately three out of five don’t believe Democrats are fighting for people like them,³ and a recent survey of rural voters shows the Democratic party is suffering from a deficit of trust.⁴ Until we address this urban-rural disconnect, we progressives will be fighting legislative battles with one hand tied behind our backs.

The good news—and there *is* good news—is that rural voters actually feel favorably toward progressive *policies*. In rural America, democratic policies outperform democratic politicians.⁵ This is especially true amongst young voters,⁶ as we are seeing a generational shift in rural consensus around a host of issues, like climate change, racial justice, and income inequality. This presents a critical opportunity for progressives.

How do we win again in rural communities? Why have we struggled? *What does it look like* to meaningfully engage rural voters and gain support for our candidates? In this report, RuralOrganizing.org provides findings, insights, and recommendations for progressives working to rebuild power outside major metropolitan areas.



¹ Fu, Florence. “Half of the US Population Lives in These 9 States.” *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 22 June 2016, www.businessinsider.com/half-of-the-us-population-lives-in-just-9-states-2016-6.

² Jones, Sarah. “How Can Democrats Win Back Rural America?” *Intelligencer*, New York Magazine, 5 Nov. 2019, nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/11/how-did-democrats-lose-rural-voters.html.

³ RuralOrganizing.Org. 2020 Public Opinion Research: Phase One Summary. May 2020.

⁴ Frameshift. “Rural Persuadable: Millennial Rural Report.” RuralOrganizing.org. Report of qualitative interview findings by Frameshift for RuralOrganizing.org. August 2020.

⁵ Hildreth, Matthew. “Why Democratic Policies Outperform Democratic Politicians in Rural America.” *TheHill*, 18 Nov. 2018, thehill.com/opinion/campaign/417268-why-democratic-policies-outperform-democratic-politicians-in-rural-america.

⁶ RuralOrganizing.Org. 2020 Public Opinion Research: Phase One Summary. May 2020.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our extensive public opinion research confirms that rural people are no strangers to bold actions and big ideas. They know a corporate agenda in Washington, DC is holding their communities back, and strongly believe the rural way of life is worth fighting for—because small town folks look out for each other.

Our research shows that progressives don't struggle in rural America because of our policy agenda. It's pervasive stereotypes that keep us falling short—both progressive stereotypes about rural people and rural people's stereotypes about progressives. Over the last two decades, many progressives became convinced that most rural people opposed their agenda of justice, equality, and solidarity, while many rural people became convinced that progressives are coastal elitists who care only for urban flourishing and want to fundamentally change their rural way of life.

These stereotypes are promoted heavily through right-wing media, and because many progressives aren't present in rural communities to counter these stereotypes through everyday interactions, this false narrative has been allowed to continue.

To make matters worse, Democratic political consultants often respond to this dynamic with a communications strategy rooted in their own stereotypes about rural voters. So, rather than putting effort into understanding and addressing the real and legitimate concerns these voters face, many Democrats focus on trying to just “blend in.” This approach perpetuates the rural perception that “all the politicians are the same,” and the result is rural voters *don't actually see a local alternative to the Republican Party*.

In this report, we provide concrete and specific recommendations for progressives looking to engage voters in small towns and rural areas.

In order to win again in small towns and rural areas, we progressives must:

1. Address the distrust and stereotypes that are preventing authentic engagement.
2. Build power and leadership locally using community care values-based framing.
3. Develop a bold progressive policy vision rooted in rural prosperity.

WHO WE ARE

RuralOrganizing.org is a 501c4 non-profit committed to rebuilding a rural America that is empowered, thriving, and equitable. We are passionate about making sure local, state, and federal policies reflect the values and needs of rural communities around the country.

WHY OUR WORK MATTERS

Many rural voters recognize the status quo isn't working for them, and—despite the dominant media narratives—they have many concerns about the current administration. But rural America was hurting long before President Trump's trade war with China. Wealth extraction, resource exploitation, and devolution created an interconnected economic, public health and environmental crisis in small communities that has been decades in the making. Suicide rates in rural counties are 25% higher than their metropolitan counterparts,⁷ the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated and highlighted the already deteriorating state of rural healthcare,⁸ and the struggles to provide equitable education opportunities are proving a threat to the very existence of rural communities⁹—not to mention the damage done by President Trump's trade wars.¹⁰

WHAT WE DID

To get an accurate snapshot of rural voters—and to understand how progressives can do better with this demographic—RuralOrganizing.org conducted an extensive public opinion project that included:

- Two national surveys conducted during March¹¹ and April of 2020
- Eight battleground polls (over 7,000 total voters surveyed in June and July 2020)
- 18 qualitative interviews with FrameShift
- 50 state social media analysis through Grow Progress
- An extensive yard sign field experiment¹²
- An in depth review of secondary data sources

⁷ Carroll, Linda. "Suicide Rates Are Rising, Especially in Rural America." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 6 Sept. 2019, www.nbcnews.com/health/mental-health/suicide-rates-are-rising-especially-rural-america-n1050806.

⁸ Ollove, Michael. "Rural America's Health Crisis Seizes States' Attention." *Rural America's Health Crisis Seizes States' Attention | The Pew Charitable Trusts*, 31 Jan. 2020,

www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2020/01/31/rural-americas-health-crisis-seizes-states-attention.

⁹ Jesse, David. "60 Miles from College: Lack of Education, a Way out of Poverty, Could 'Kill Rural America'." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 27 Jan. 2020,

www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/education/2020/01/25/college-near-me-poor-rural-michigan-poverty-community/2776721001/.

¹⁰ Hildreth, Matthew. "Why Democratic Policies Outperform Democratic Politicians in Rural America." *TheHill*, 18 Nov. 2018, thehill.com/opinion/campaign/417268-why-democratic-policies-outperform-democratic-politicians-in-rural-america.

¹¹ "March 2020 Change Research Poll Brief." *RuralOrganizing.org*, 19 Apr. 2020, ruralorganizing.org/blog/march-2020-change-research-poll-brief.

¹² "Leveraging Yard Signs in Rural Communities." *RuralOrganizing.org*, 09 Mar. 2020, <https://ruralorganizing.org/blog/organizer-toolkit-leveraging-yard-signs-rural-communities>.

FINDINGS

Our findings demonstrate rural voters are both supportive of key progressive policies and dissatisfied with the status quo. For example, a staggering 87% of nonmetro voters believe “the government mostly reflects the will of the rich and influential.”¹³ There is broad agreement that the government is not serving their needs, a plurality of 48% of nonmetro voters disagree that they have the ability to impact decisions made by the government,¹⁴ and 69% agree our economic system is rigged for the wealthy and powerful.¹⁵

The favorability toward progressive policies and unaddressed grievances provide a unique opportunity for progressives. However, strategies rooted in stereotypes, disconnects in message framing, and tentatively focusing on peripheral issues instead of bold policy agenda items are preventing progressives from achieving authentic engagement.

FINDING ONE: DISTRUST AND STEREOTYPES ARE PREVENTING AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT

What comes to mind when you think of rural America? White? Farmer? Staunch Republicans? Proud Trump supporters? Opposed to government in everyday life? These are overly broad, common stereotypes that misinform progressive strategies for rural engagement, and mischaracterize rural populations.

In politics, perception holds more power than reality and our research shows that overcoming progressives’ stereotypes about rural voters, and rural voters’ stereotypes about progressives, is the first challenge for authentic rural engagement.

Recommendation: Don’t forget about the rural progressive base

Our research shows that while rural voters do lean right when it comes to political identity, the breakdown is not nearly as dramatic as often portrayed in the media. In fact, there is a comparable difference—approximately 8%—between “strong Democrats” and “strong Republicans” when comparing voters in large metropolitan counties to counties small and nonmetro counties.

According to our April 2020 national survey of 1,274 Americans conducted by change research, roughly 19% of rural voters in small metro or nonmetro counties consider themselves to be “strong Democrats.” In large metro counties, 27% of voters identify as “strong Democrat.”

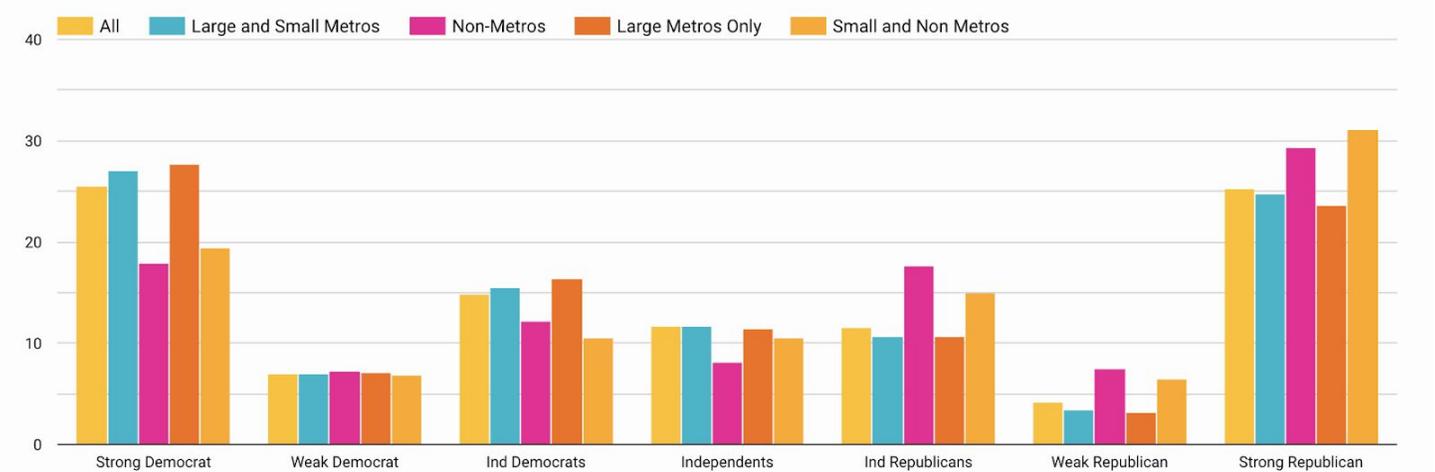
Similarly, 23% of voters in large metro counties consider themselves to be “strong Republicans” compared to 31% in small and nonmetro counties.

¹³ “March 2020 Change Research Poll Brief.” *RuralOrganizing.org*, 19 Apr. 2020, ruralorganizing.org/blog/march-2020-change-research-poll-brief.

¹⁴ “March 2020 Change Research Poll Brief.” *RuralOrganizing.org*, 19 Apr. 2020, ruralorganizing.org/blog/march-2020-change-research-poll-brief.

¹⁵ RuralOrganizing.Org, “Message Matrix | 2020 Battleground Polling of Rural Voters.” Jun. and Jul. 2020.

Voter Partisanship By Metro Type

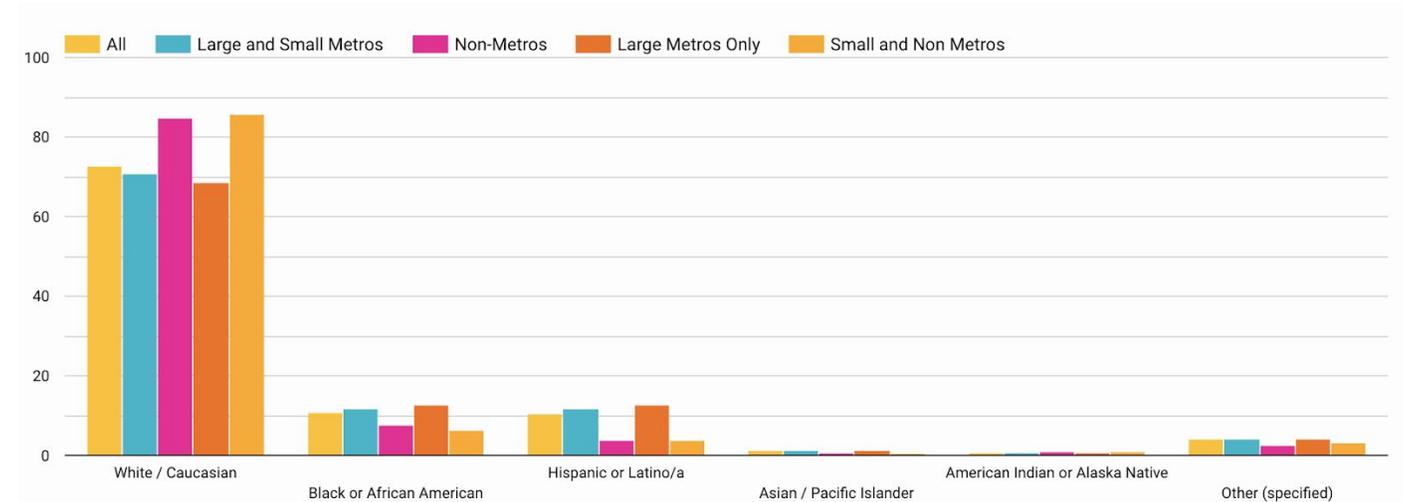


Source: April 2020 National Survey Of 1,274 Americans Conducted By Change Research And Commissioned By RuralOrganizing.Org

Rural doesn't mean white

Rural is an identity, not just a geography. However, it's not simply a 'White' identity. While rural America is 20% more White than urban America, the racial and ethnic makeup is much more diverse than some might assume. From African-American communities in the Black Belt and Mississippi River Delta, Native American communities in the West and Midwest, to Latinx communities in the Borderlands, Midwest, and West, and various immigrant communities across all regions of rural America—the diversity of rural America is frequently understated. In fact, one in five rural voters is a person of color¹⁶—a significant enough portion of the rural vote to decide critical elections.

Voter Partisanship By Metro Type



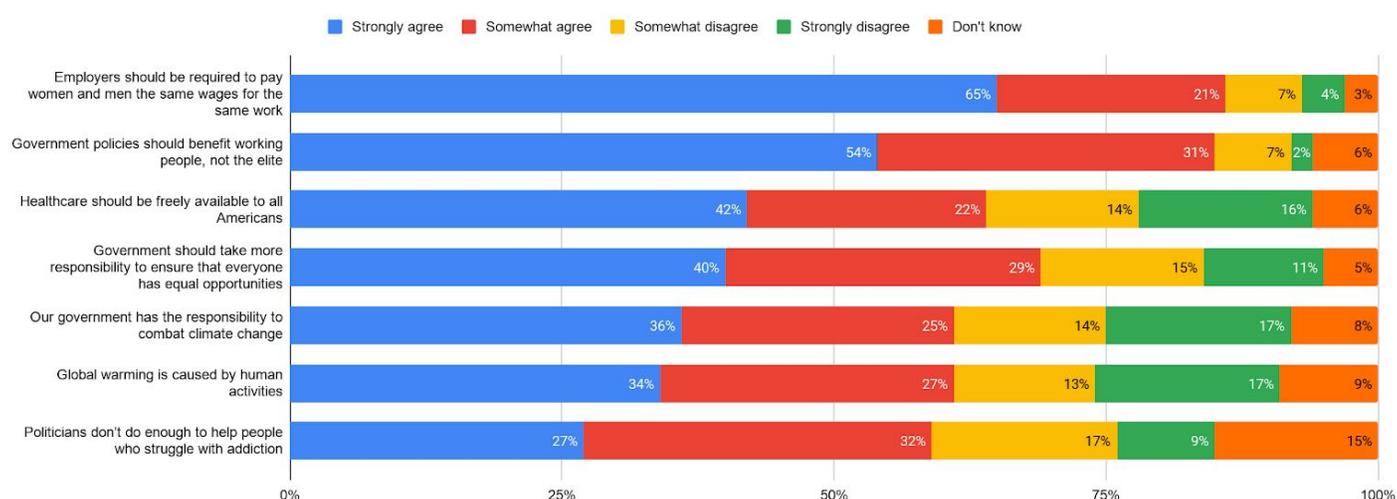
Source: April 2020 National Survey Of 1,274 Americans Conducted By Change Research And Commissioned By RuralOrganizing.Org

¹⁶ United States Department of Agriculture. "Rural America at a Glance: 2018 Edition." 2018. PDF file.

Many rural voters support progressive policies

Contrary to much of the conventional wisdom, rural voters support key progressive policies. For example, support for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—a program the Trump administration continues to put on the chopping block¹⁷—is more favorable among rural battleground voters than Donald Trump by five points,¹⁸ and support for the US Postal Service—which Republicans are remiss to fully support even with an election during a pandemic¹⁹— is more popular than the Republican party.²⁰ To be sure, rural support for progressive policies stretches far beyond SNAP and the Postal Service—they especially agree with progressives on pro-workers policies, healthcare, and addiction recovery, climate change.

Issue Agreement Among Rural Battleground State Voters



Source: 2020 Battleground Polling of Rural Voters. 7,000 total voters surveyed in June and July 2020 June and July 2020

The fallout of the coronavirus pandemic is also impacting rural thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs about the role of government. Of particular grievance here, given rural voters' agreement with progressive ideas of healthcare, is the fact that the pandemic hit while hospitals in rural communities were already closing, particularly in those states that failed to expand Medicaid.²¹ More to the point, while many rural voters we surveyed and interviewed put a premium on self-reliance for everyday affairs, the majority also recognized the important role the federal government should have played during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, and strongly recognized Trump's failed leadership.

¹⁷ Rosenbaum, Dottie, and Zoë Neuberger. "President's 2021 Budget Would Cut Food Assistance for Millions and Radically Restructure SNAP." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, 18 Feb. 2020, www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/presidents-2021-budget-would-cut-food-assistance-for-millions-and-radically.

¹⁸ RuralOrganizing.Org. 2020 Public Opinion Research: Phase One Summary. May 2020.

¹⁹ Levy, Pema. "Democracy Depends on the US Postal Service More than Ever. Republicans Won't Fix Its Shortfalls." *Mother Jones*, 2 Aug. 2020, www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/08/usps-postal-service-november-election-trump-republicans-shortfalls-coronavirus/.

²⁰ RuralOrganizing.Org. 2020 Public Opinion Research: Phase One Summary. May 2020.

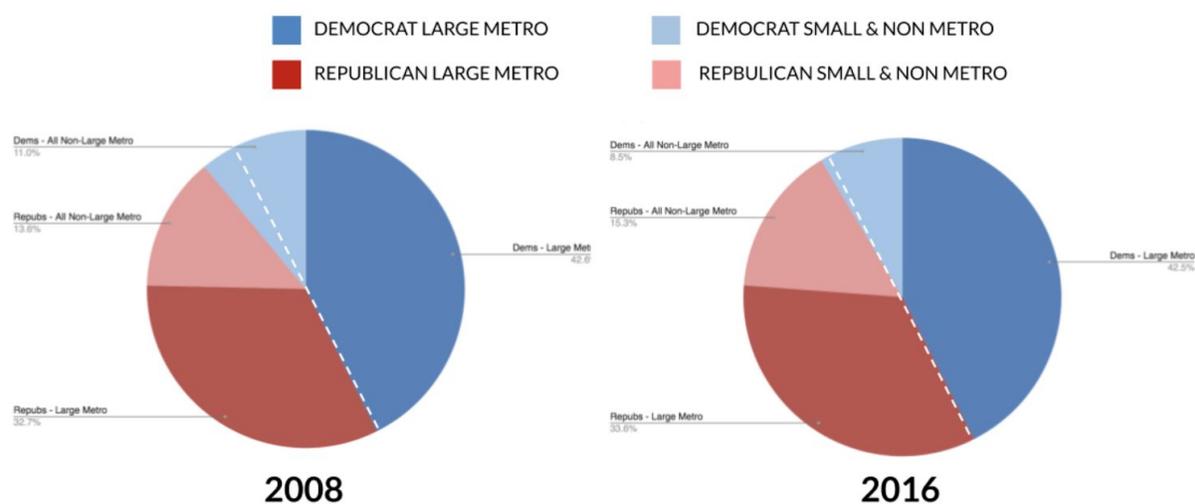
²¹ Scott, Dylan. "1 In 4 Rural Hospitals Is Vulnerable to Closure, a New Report Finds." *Vox*, 18 Feb. 2020, www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/2/18/21142650/rural-hospitals-closing-medicaid-expansion-states.

Our national polling conducted during the early spring of 2020 showed nearly three-quarters of surveyed voters had either somewhat serious (29.7%) or very serious (43.6%) concerns about coronavirus; Only 7% say they have no concern.²² Moreover, we found 55% strongly disapprove of the Trump administration's handling of the pandemic.²³ In a survey of rural voters identifying current concerns surrounding the virus, social distancing hurting the economy was of *least* concern, outpaced by USPS running out of funds, lack of testing, and the virus spreading at businesses, schools, and universities.²⁴

Recommendation: See rural voters as swing voters

Rural America may have helped elect Donald Trump in 2016, but they are not all staunch "Trump voters" as too often portrayed in the media. As the noted current dissatisfaction and support for key progressive policies suggest, rural voters' support for the Trump administration is not a given, and these same voters have switched sides in the past. Contrary to what many pundits have reported, the current Republican wave in small towns and rural communities was not the results of Barack Obama's candidacy. In fact, 2008 was a high-water mark for Democratic popularity in rural counties. Barack Obama won 43% of the vote in rural America. However, by 2016, Democrat Hillary Clinton took just over 30% of the rural vote.²⁵

Democratic Presidential Performance 2008 v 2016



Source: Independent Analysis Commissioned By RuralOrganizing.Org

While both Democratic candidates won the popular vote in 2008 and 2016, in our system of government, where a candidate gets their votes matters almost as much as how many votes the candidate receives. And the Democratic non-large-metro drop off between 2008 and 2016, especially in states like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania was enough to ensure President Donald Trump would ultimately win the electoral college.

²²"March 2020 Change Research Poll Brief." *RuralOrganizing.org*, 19 Apr. 2020, ruralorganizing.org/blog/march-2020-change-research-poll-brief.

²³ RuralOrganizing.Org. 2020 Public Opinion Research: Phase One Summary. May 2020.

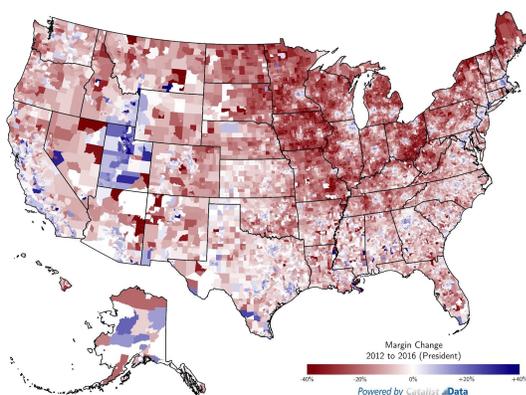
²⁴"March 2020 Change Research Poll Brief." *RuralOrganizing.org*, 19 Apr. 2020, ruralorganizing.org/blog/march-2020-change-research-poll-brief.

²⁵ Bishop, Bill. "One More Time: Rural Voters Didn't Desert Dems in 2008." *Daily Yonder*, 31 May 2018, dailyyonder.com/one-time-rural-voters-didnt-desert-dems-2008/2018/05/31/.

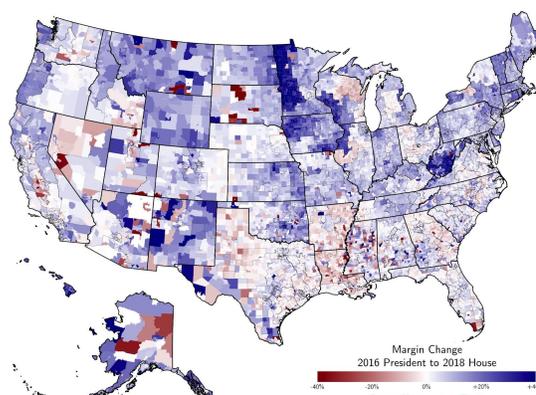
Rural voters are swinging back toward Democrats

However, in 2018 we saw another rural shift—a shift back from voting for Trump in 2016 to supporting Democrats in the House in 2018. In fact, the rural vote was the largest swing block between the 2016 general and 2018 midterm elections, voting for Donald Trump in the former and then for a Democrat in the latter. This swing was especially prevalent among individuals ages 44 and under.²⁶

In 2018, Rural areas largely moved in a Democratic direction



Rural America shifted towards Republicans from 2012 to 2016.



Rural American bounced back towards Democrats in 2018.

Our qualitative research with FrameShift suggests that these trends will likely continue as we head into the 2020 election cycle. Through this FrameShift's analysis, we found a significant number of "Conflicted Republicans" who maintain a degree of loyalty to the Republican Party, but have serious doubts about President Trump, as well as "Third-Party Voters" who feel betrayed by both parties, fear President Trump, and do not trust the GOP to check him. Both groups were found to be persuadable to vote for Joe Biden.²⁷

Qualitative Interview Findings From FrameShift

2016	Post 2016	Covid 2020	Elections
<p>Trumpism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Had doubts about Trump, but could never vote for Hillary or Democrats. - Had some hope about change - Trump felt different from a typical politician, maybe he could get more done? 	<p>Seeds of Doubt</p> <p>Trump made some mistakes, but it was not enough for them to turn on their party / sense of identity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trump Twitter bullying - Kids in cages - Tax cut didn't help - Is he really Christian? 	<p>New & Strong Doubts</p> <p>CORE DOUBT: NOTHING IS GETTING DONE & CHAOS IS EVERYWHERE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Democrats are pointing fingers and blaming Trump. - Trump is causing more conflict. - Chaos in civil society, COVID hospitals, DC policy making. - Republicans haven't stepped up with a clear plan. - The party of faith, family does not now have our backs. - The party of law and order is now as chaotic as the Democrats. 	<p>Confusion</p> <p>WHAT AM I NOW?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I'm a conflicted Republican. I'm not a Trump Republican...and I'm not sure what the party stands for anymore. <p>I'M ALONE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I can't speak freely in my tribe. - Anxious and stressed about what to do, I end up in "political purgatory."

Source: Frameshift. "Rural Persuadable: Millennial Rural Report." RuralOrganizing.org. Report of qualitative interview August 2020.

²⁶ Ghitza, Yair. "Revisiting What Happened in the 2018 Election." *Medium*, Medium, 21 May 2019, medium.com/@yghitza_48326/revisiting-what-happened-in-the-2018-election-c532feb51c0.

²⁷ Frameshift. "Rural Persuadable: Millennial Rural Report." RuralOrganizing.org. Report of qualitative interview findings by Frameshift for RuralOrganizing.org. August 2020.

FINDING TWO: WE MUST BUILD POWER AND LEADERSHIP LOCALLY USING COMMUNITY CARE VALUES-BASED FRAMING

In recent years, conservatives have invested heavily in weaving together rural identity—especially this stereotypical rural White identity—with their ideology. Needless to say, it worked. The majority of rural people self-identify “conservative” or “moderate”²⁸ and connect through tradition, religion, working class sensibilities, country and community pride, freedom, patriotism, and family values.

Rather than fighting over the media-boosted, mythical, rural, White farmer vote—a strategy that serves to reinforce this stereotype—progressives should embrace strategies that address and reaffirm the true value and diversity of small towns and rural communities. Rural voters believe that the rural way of life is worth fighting for because small towns and rural communities look out for each other. This type of community care is both a progressive *and* rural value, and, as such, it’s the value that should spearhead our engagement efforts.

Recommendation: Reaffirm the rural way of life

While many rural voters feel disconnected to the Republican Party, progressives struggle with their own trust deficit in small towns and rural communities. Many rural voters in our qualitative focus groups said comments such as, “Democrats are all talk and no action” or “I hear them, but I never see them.”

Additionally, many focus group participants reflected an urbanized image of Democrats and progressives. To these participants, the Democrats represent big city interests while Republicans were the party looking out for “the little guy.”

Progressives must work to incorporate images and affirmation of true rurality—not stereotyped—in our everyday efforts in order to reinforce the idea that rural people are a part of the progressive agenda.

“It’s hard for me to have a connection to the Democrats. I’m a rural Iowa guy. I see the big cities run by Democrat mayors and governors.”
- Michael M. Focus Group Interviewee

²⁸ “March 2020 Change Research Poll Brief.” *RuralOrganizing.org*, 19 Apr. 2020, ruralorganizing.org/blog/march-2020-change-research-poll-brief.

Rural Voters Are Looking For Leaders Who Will Fight For Them

Despite a strong association between rural America and farming, farmers don't even make up 10 percent of the rural workforce. Most rural Americans are employed in the education, healthcare, and social assistance sector, and more rural Americans work in manufacturing and retail than agriculture.²⁹

Rural voters want leaders who will have their backs by supporting their small businesses and critical services in their communities like their grocery store, pharmacy, and schools. Unfortunately, for the last thirty years, politicians from both parties have largely ignored the true concerns of rural voters.

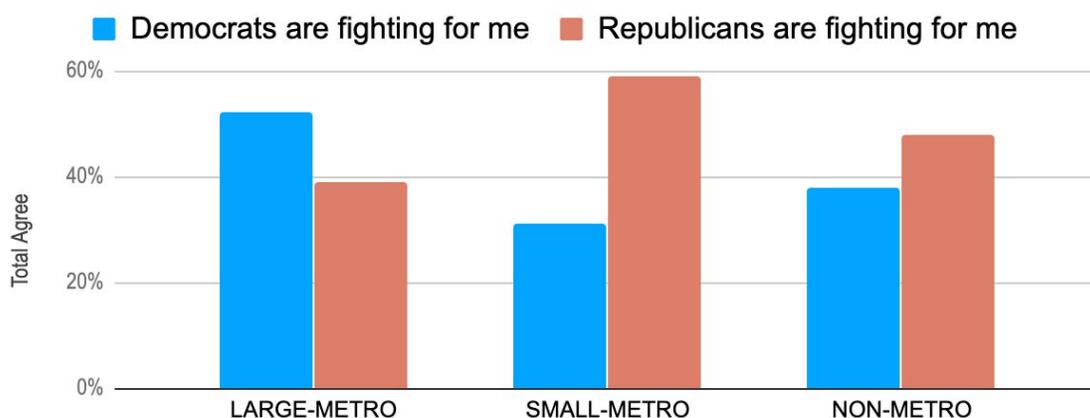
On the right, politicians use talking points about freedom and self-reliance to deregulate special-interest industry groups who, in turn, extract wealth and resources from small towns and rural communities. That's why tax dollars earmarked for rural America ends up on Wall Street instead of Main Street.

In effect, taxpayers spend billions of dollars subsidizing corporations who pocket the profits then spend millions more to revitalize rural economies after these corporations bled them dry.

On the left, many Democrats have all but given up on engaging rural voters or understanding the specific needs of rural communities, and instead pursue one-size-fits-all policies leaving their rural engagement efforts to K Street lobbyists who speak only for the agricultural industry groups.

As a result, nonmetro voters feel that both parties are failing to fight for them.

National Survey Of Large, Small, And Non-metro Voters



Source: March 2020 National Survey Of 1,213 Americans Conducted By Change Research And Commissioned By Ruralorganizing.Org

Recommendation: Build trust locally

Our qualitative research through FrameShift outlined the challenge ahead for progressive rural engagement. Rural voters often don't know Democrats in their communities, and they tend to get their

²⁹ *Beyond the Farm: Rural Industry Workers in America*. The United States Census Bureau, 5 Jan. 2018, www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2016/12/beyond_the_farm_rur.html.

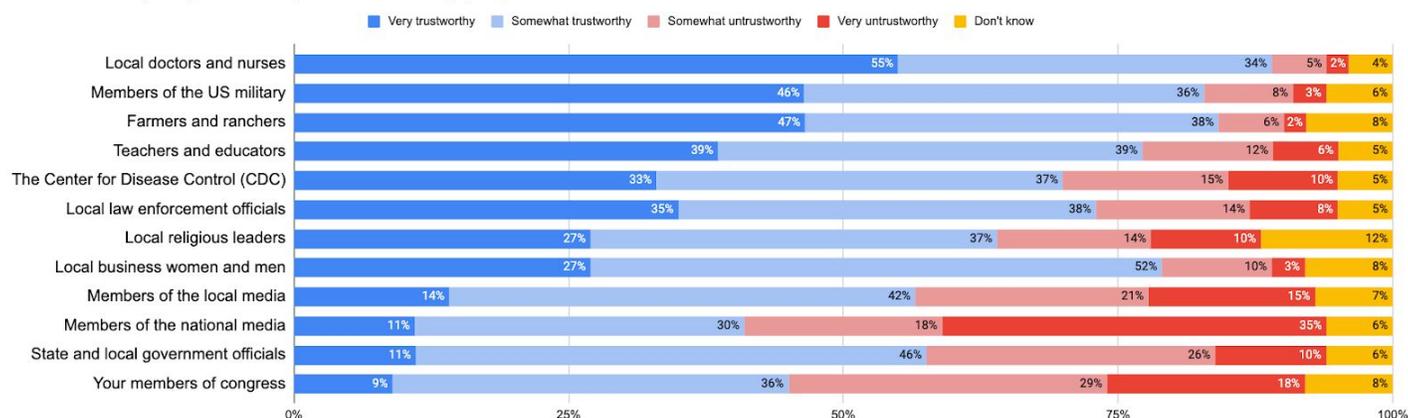
information about national politics from national cable news sources. As a result, many rural voters that we interviewed expressed impressions of Democrats as a group of sneaky, elitist, out-of-touch city-slickers, who thrive on drama and conflict, and want to give everything away for free.³⁰ A lack of local influence allows media-driven stereotypes to fill the void.

However, the rural voters we interviewed who had interactions with Democrats at the local level tend to have a different impression of Democrats, nationally. More research on this topic is needed, but we believe this finding to be a telling factor in how trust is built in rural America: locally.

Rural voters are accustomed to interacting with community leaders in tangible ways, such as conversations with local government leaders at the grocery store or a child's school function. This allows for cumulative, organic, trust-building experiences. Subsequently, the accessibility of local leaders in everyday life makes democracy and decision-making feel accessible at the local level—a meaningful and empowering sentiment given the current distrust of government.

Trusted Messengers Among Rural Battleground Voters

How trustworthy do you currently find the following people?



Source: 2020 Battleground Polling of Rural Voters. 7,000 total voters surveyed in June and July 2020

Recommendations: Invest in authentic, visible, local, rural progressive messengers

In rural America, the messenger is the message. If a rural voter doesn't feel you understand them—who they are, what they care about, and how their community works—they aren't likely to entertain your message.

Investing in strong local, rural messengers accomplishes two objectives. First, it challenges the perception among rural voters that progressive means urban. When rural voters don't see progressives in their community, progressives are easily portrayed as outsiders. Second, local messengers are trusted more than national messengers, so local voices have an easier time connecting with their intended audience.

³⁰ Frameshift. "Rural Persuadable: Millennial Rural Report." RuralOrganizing.org. Report of qualitative interview findings by Frameshift for RuralOrganizing.org. August 2020.

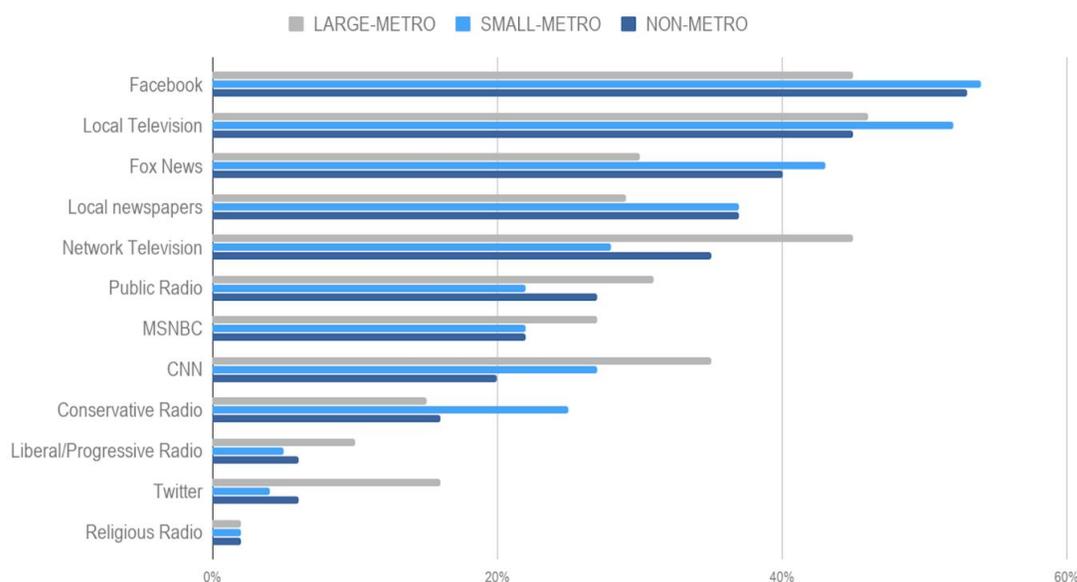
Messengers in rural communities, where neighbors often know each other, can often look different than urban areas. Something as simple as placing a campaign sign in your front yard can localize a message, making progressives intentionally visible.

Our yard sign field study³¹ in Kentucky during the 2019 gubernatorial race was successful in generating this intentional visibility of the more progressive candidates on two fronts. First, it established the candidate's presence from within the community, as opposed to national news. Second, the door-knocking process for yard sign placement proved an effective means to identify the most vocal supporters—those who are willing to publicly stand out from the collective conservative identity.

In this sense, the biggest value is creating excitement and a sense of viability among a base of voters—it generates a sense of *we* that the rest of the community can see. Our field study gives reason to believe an increase in visibility may translate into an increase in votes, as the findings provided suggestive evidence that yard signs increased Democratic votes by up to 2 votes per precinct.

Our research shows a similar pattern of trust-building in news consumption practices as in on-the-ground interactions. Facebook (53%) and local television (45%) are the top two sources of news and information amongst nonmetro voters, followed by Fox News (40%) and local newspapers (37%). (While Fox News is an outlier in terms of local, it has right-wing bias and reinforces the collective rural identity as Republican.) It is noteworthy that the nonmetro demographic represents the largest percentage of voters who use Facebook as a primary news source,³² because while Facebook is not inherently local, users tend to read and share news from friends and family—those on the inside that they already trust.

News Consumption By Metro Type



Source: March 2020 National Survey Conducted By Change Research And Commissioned By RuralOrganizing.Org

³¹ "Leveraging Yard Signs in Rural Communities." *RuralOrganizing.org*, 09 Mar. 2020, <https://ruralorganizing.org/blog/organizer-toolkit-leveraging-yard-signs-rural-communities>.

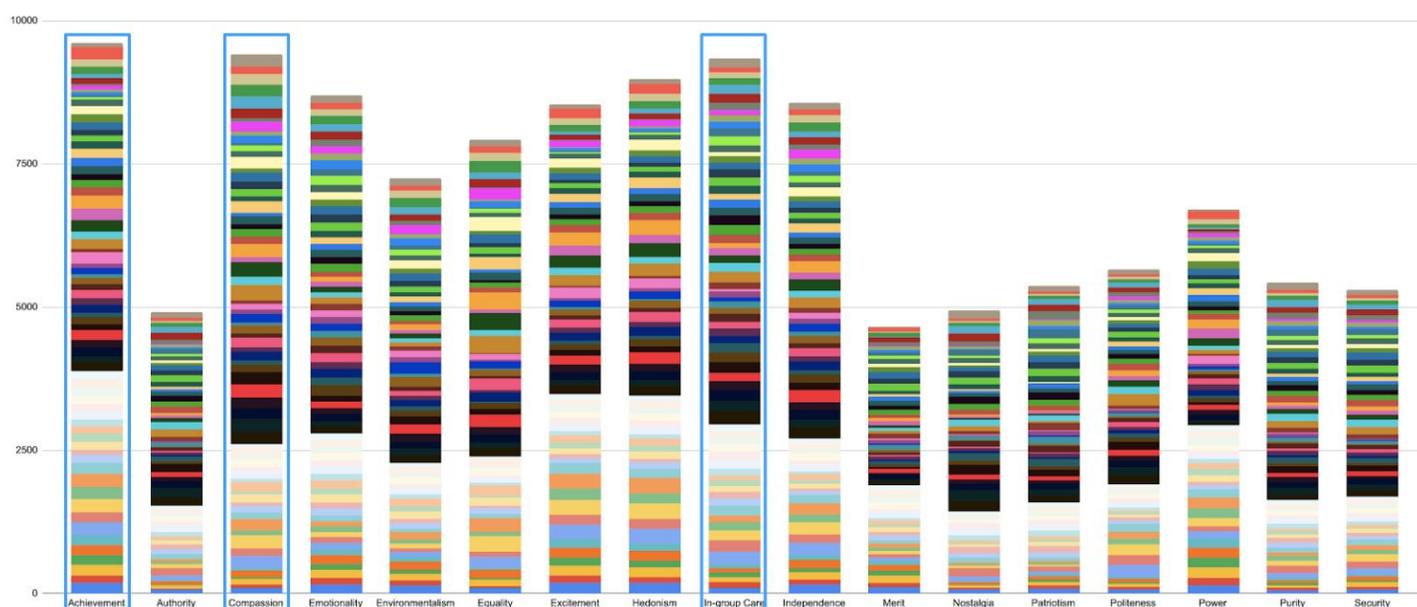
³² "March 2020 Change Research Poll Brief." *RuralOrganizing.org*, 19 Apr. 2020, ruralorganizing.org/blog/march-2020-change-research-poll-brief.

Recommendation: Lead with community care values

Through our ongoing partnership with Grow Progress, RuralOrganizing.org examined extensive personality profile data for voters in Arizona, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Montana, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and West Virginia.

Our aim was to identify common values-framed messages that appeal both to our rural base (voters with a “somewhat liberal” and “very liberal” ideology) and rural persuadable voters (weak Democrats, moderates, and weak Republicans living in rural areas). Additionally, we attempted to identify potential values conflicts between our rural base voters, rural persuasion voters, and urban base voters.

Grow Progress Social Media Listening Research



Source: Grow Progress social media values assessment

Through this analysis, we believe the most overlap exists between our rural base and rural persuadable voters through a In-Group care values frame. According to Grow Progress, In-Group care is the act of helping and caring for the wellbeing of those around you, especially your family and friends (your “in-group”). People who hold this value as a large part of their belief system are more likely to be devoted to the welfare of people with whom they are close, as well as—more generally—the people with whom they frequently see and interact. They are motivated by family and protecting the welfare of others.

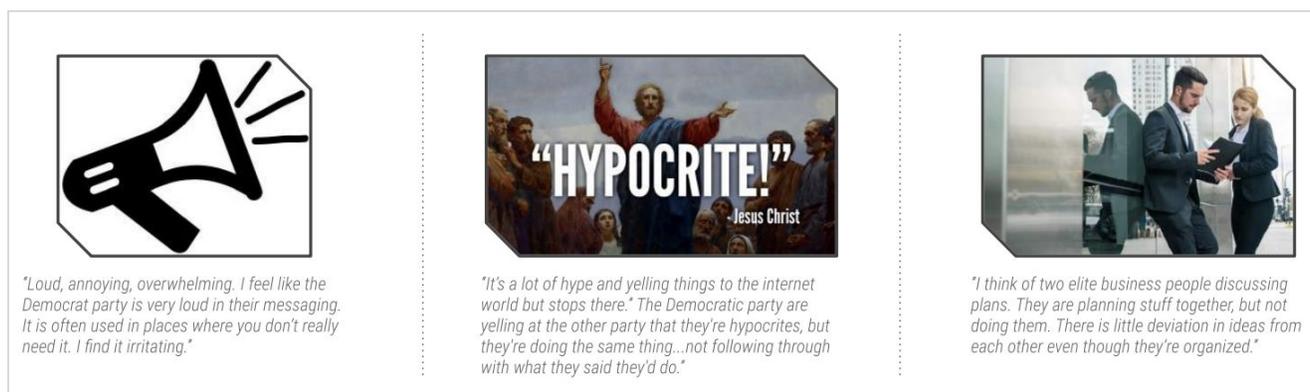
IN-GROUP CARE VALUES FRAME

The act of helping and caring for the well-being of those around you, especially your family and friends.

Recommendation: Care and celebrate more, critique less

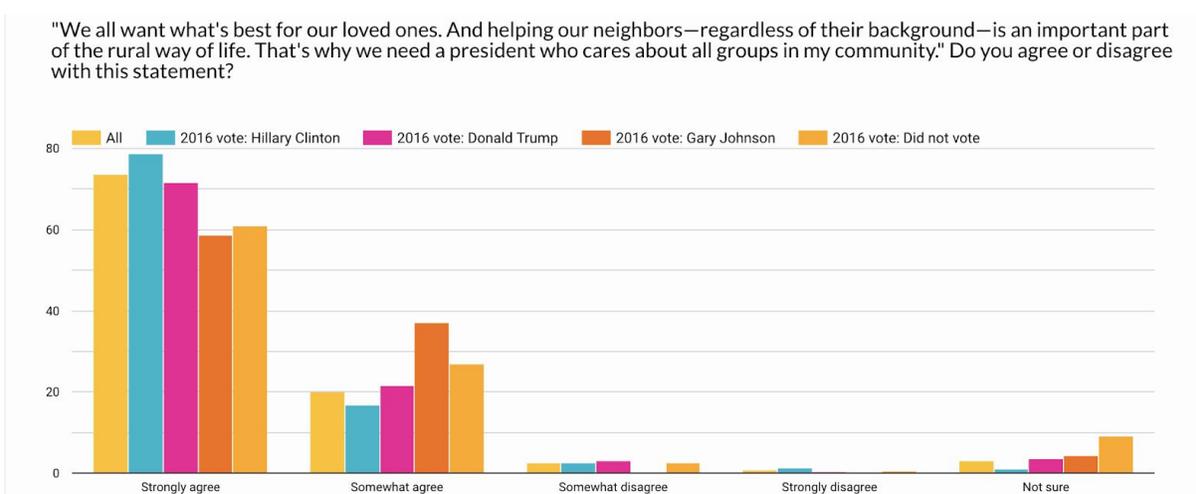
Our qualitative research through FrameShift found that many persuadable rural voters feel overly critiqued by progressives. Many rural voters expressed significant feelings of concern about saying the wrong thing and being “jumped on” by the progressive community.³³

Images Submitted to FrameShift To Reflect Voter’s Feelings Toward Democrats



Source: Frameshift. "Rural Persuadable: Millennial Rural Report." RuralOrganizing.org. Report of qualitative interview August 2020.

It's important to celebrate what is right and what is good about our country and rural communities. When we are too quick to point out what is going wrong or broken about current policy without first building trust, we risk coming across as agitators instead of helpers. After the groundwork of care and celebration has been laid, progressives can move forward policy discussions for a better rural America, having gained the trust of voters that their ideas are motivated by protecting the welfare of members of the community. This is where the In-Group care framing of messages is particularly useful.



Source: March 2020 National Survey Of 1,213 Americans Conducted By Change Research And Commissioned By Ruralorganizing.Org

³³ Frameshift. "Rural Persuadable: Millennial Rural Report." RuralOrganizing.org. Report of qualitative interview findings by Frameshift for RuralOrganizing.org. August 2020.

Use fact-based In-Group humor to challenge conventional wisdom

Fact-based “In-Group” humor can also be an effective means to engage young voters and usher in progressive ideas that counter the right-wing narrative. For example, in mid-late Spring 2020 when a White nationalist misinformation campaign put dozens of rural communities on alert that “Antifa” was being bused in for protests,³⁴ ‘Liberal Redneck’ comedian Trae Crowder posted a video³⁵ that debunked and poked fun at the rumor through use of rural In-Group tropes. He used “insider” tools to usher in “outsider” ideas, an approach that both disarms and engages.



Liberal Redneck - Rural Antifa Panic

11 weeks ago · 985K Views

   41K

³⁴ “Fighting Misinformation In Small Towns and Rural Communities.” *RuralOrganizing.org*, 13 June 2020, ruralorganizing.org/blog/resource-fighting-misinformation-small-towns-and-rural-communities.

³⁵ Crowder, Trae. “Liberal Redneck - Rural Antifa Panic.” *YouTube*. June 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9XEUxqSisQ>.

FINDING THREE: WE MUST DEVELOP A BOLD PROGRESSIVE POLICY VISION ROOTED IN RURAL PROSPERITY

Progressives aren't losing rural voters because rural voters oppose their policy platform, we're losing rural voters because these voters *don't* associate popular progressive policies with Democratic candidates. Based on the stereotypes of rural America progressive candidates are often coached to "just try and blend in" but the truth is, many voters don't see a distinction between the major parties, and *both* are unpopular.

To put it in perspective, the Democratic (48%) and Republican (47%) Parties have a higher disapproval rating than Black Lives Matter protesters (43%)³⁶ among rural battleground voters.

Recommendation: Don't be afraid to stand out

The lack of distinction can make it difficult for voters to associate messages with their corresponding messengers. For example, we asked rural voters if they agree with a message and then asked them to assign it to Trump or Biden. They like Trump's Drain the Swamp messages, progressive pro-labor messages, and anti corporate lobbyist messages, *but there's no Trump/Biden distinction on anti-lobbyist messages.*

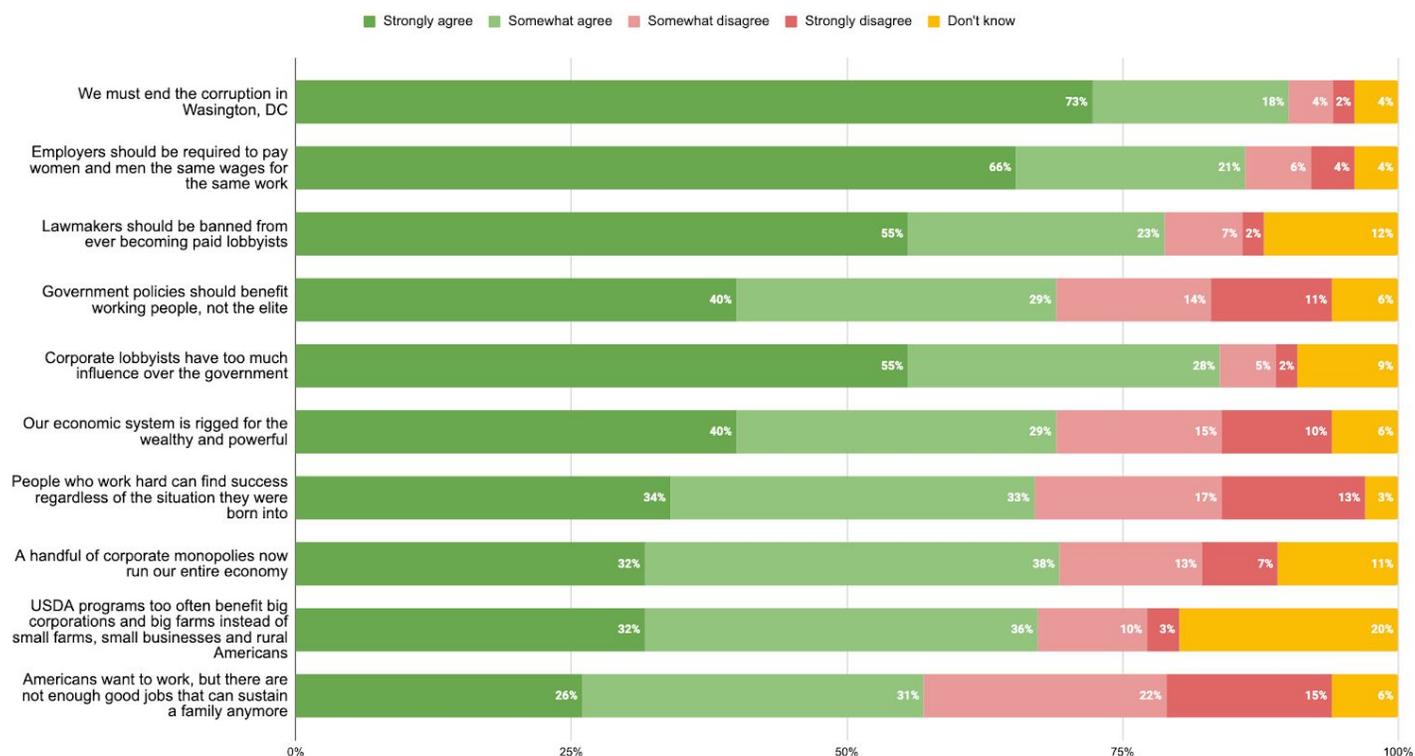
	Key		Clear attribution to Biden		Clear attribution to Trump		No Strong Distinction	
Message	DO YOU AGREE?		WHO WOULD SAY IT?					
	Total agree	Total disagree	Biden	Trump	Both	Neither	Don't Know	
We must end the corruption in Washington, DC	91%	6%	30%	37%	15%	10%	8%	
Employers should be required to pay women and men the same wages for the same work	87%	10%	46%	16%	19%	8%	10%	
Government policies should benefit working people, not the elite	85%	10%	46%	20%	13%	11%	11%	
Corporate lobbyists have too much influence over the government	83%	7%	34%	24%	9%	17%	16%	
The small town and rural way of life is worth fighting for	83%	10%	24%	36%	13%	12%	14%	
I am proud to be an American	79%	18%	13%	45%	33%	3%	5%	
Lawmakers should be banned from ever becoming paid lobbyists	78%	9%	25%	25%	7%	20%	22%	
We can't allow racism to divide and distract us from the real source of our problems	77%	17%	26%	41%	12%	8%	13%	
A handful of corporate monopolies now run our entire economy	70%	20%	41%	15%	7%	20%	17%	
My faith is very important to me	70%	25%	26%	32%	17%	12%	12%	

Source: RuralOrganizing.Org, Message Matrix | 2020 Battleground Polling of Rural Voters. 7,000 total voters surveyed in June and July 2020 June and July 2020

³⁶ "March 2020 Change Research Poll Brief." *RuralOrganizing.org*, 19 Apr. 2020, ruralorganizing.org/blog/march-2020-change-research-poll-brief.

If “all politicians are the same,” progressives would do better to stand out—a lack of local representation leaves an association vacuum, and negative stereotypes of Democrats fill the void. The coupling of rural America’s perceived Republican identity and the perceived lack of distinction between parties has a blurring effect. Meaning, a rural voter may not know a progressive when they see one, *unless the progressive is intentionally visible*. The challenge is, then, to find and energize a base of local, rural progressives to be visible within their community to create inside-out visibility.

Agreement Among Rural Battleground Voters



2020 Battleground Polling of Rural Voters. 7,000 total voters surveyed in June and July 2020

To this end, it’s paramount to keep in mind rural voters aren’t looking for more corporate candidates to “fit in” with them—they’re looking for authentic leaders who have their back. It is our policies that demonstrate we have their back, and rural voters respond favorably to them.

More than half of respondents were more likely to support candidates who declared everyone should have the option of enrolling in Medicare, stated human activity causes global warming and our government has an obligation to combat it, and that protecting transgender students allows them “the same opportunity as their classmates to fully participate in school.”³⁷ Half our surveyed battleground rural voters even agreed we should spend more money on education, public housing, and mental health, and less money on the police. Regarding healthcare—a top issue for rural voters—65% agreed healthcare should be made freely available to all Americans.³⁸

³⁷ RuralOrganizing.Org, 2020 Public Opinion Research: Phase One Summary. May 2020.

³⁸ RuralOrganizing.Org, “Message Matrix | 2020 Battleground Polling of Rural Voters.” Jun. and Jul. 2020.

Recommendations: Embrace Small, Local Businesses and Oppose Corporate Corruption

Rural respondents, both in our qualitative and quantitative research, demonstrated significant support for candidates who expressed anti-corporation and pro-small business sentiment both related to agriculture and tax incentives.

Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who said each of the following statements?

Candidate Messages	non-large-metro Young People	non-large-metro Independents
A handful of corporate monopolies now run our entire food system. We need a moratorium on factory farms and corporate monopolies in food and agriculture.	88% more likely to support	82% more likely to support
Every person, whether you live in the city or a small town, should have access to a good grocery store and pharmacy.	85% more likely to support	87% more likely to support
Tax incentives should prioritize small local businesses over major corporations.	79% more likely to support	91% more likely to support
Keeping undocumented immigrants off the books and in the shadows hurts US workers and only benefits shady employers, but legalizing immigrants currently working in our communities would benefit all workers.	61% more likely to support	58% more likely to support
Global warming is caused by human activities and our government has the responsibility to combat it.	59% more likely to support	54% more likely to support
Protecting transgender students helps ensure that they have the same opportunity as their classmates to fully participate in school.	57% more likely to support	51% more likely to support

RuralOrganizing.Org. 2020 Public Opinion Research: Phase One Summary. May 2020.

The opportunity here is to align ourselves with rural voters in the fight against corrupt corporate lobbyists. Not only do corrupt lobbyists make a better counterpoint than Republicans, because it helps us to avoid ostracizing potential voters who might perceive us as against their way of life, but it assures voters we are on their side. It's not about beating an opponent, it's about a better quality of life. Our fight is not *against* Republicans, it is *for* rural America.

Recommendations: Develop A Bold Policy Vision Rooted In Rural Prosperity

Our extensive polling confirms that rural people are no strangers to bold actions and big ideas. They know a corporate agenda in Washington, DC is holding their communities back and strongly believe that the rural way of life is worth fighting for because small town folks look out for each other. Rural voters want

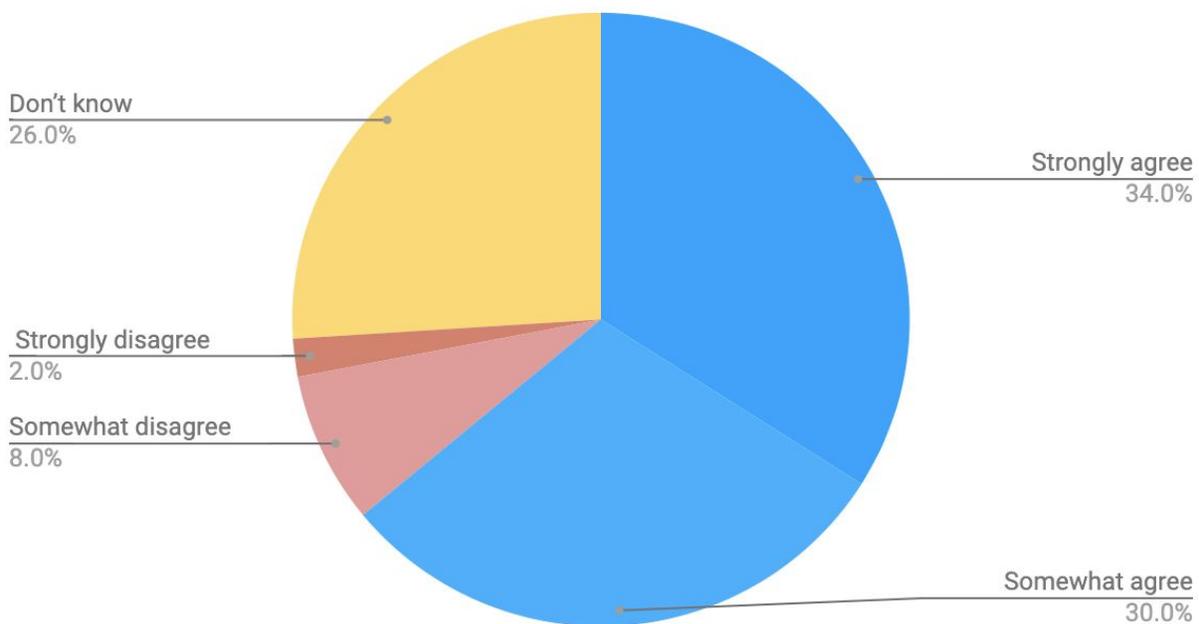
leaders who will have their backs by supporting their small businesses and critical services in their communities like their grocery store, pharmacy, and schools.

While Democrats have long championed programs focused on small towns and rural communities, our qualitative research found that rural voters have little to information about these programs. Terms like “rural development” also leave many rural voters with the impression that the federal government is looking to urbanize their communities which most do not like.

Similarly, there is a marked lack of confidence as to the USDA’s benefit to rural America. Our polling also found 64% of rural battleground voters think USDA programs benefit big corporations and big farms instead of small farms, small businesses, and rural Americans. Approximately one quarter don't know who benefits—despite rural development programs being the most popular programs in rural America.³⁹ That’s a grim view on the agency Abraham Lincoln coined “the people’s agency.”

Agreement Among Rural Battleground Voters

USDA programs too often benefit big corporations and big farms instead of small farms, small businesses and rural Americans



Source: RuralOrganizing Battleground Polling of Rural Voters. 7,000 total voters surveyed in June and July 2020

Progressives lack a strong central concrete proposal: create a national office of rural prosperity to solve the unique structural challenges of rural housing, education, healthcare, small business development, and job creation. We know it will resonate because at RuralOrganizing.org, we spent a year surveying rural voters and that’s what we learned.

³⁹ RuralOrganizing.Org, “2020 Battleground Polling of Rural Voters.” Jun. and Jul. 2020.

CONCLUSION

Progressives have an historic opportunity to shift the politics of rural communities in states across the country. The stage is set: Our extensive public opinion research confirms that rural people are no strangers to bold actions and big ideas, they know a corporate agenda in Washington, DC is holding their communities back, and strongly believe it is worth fighting for the rural way of life—because small town folks look out for each other. They're looking for a leader to join their fight.

Even better, our research makes clear that progressives don't struggle in rural America because of our policy agenda. Voters in small towns and rural communities support key progressive policies.

How do we translate this support into votes? So how do we win again in rural communities?

We must disown stereotypes about rural "Trump voters" and reaffirm the true complexity and diversity of rural identity. We must close the trust gap between progressives and rural people by building trust locally and prioritizing relationships and community care values-based messages over partisan talking points. We must embrace small, local businesses oppose corporate corruption, invest in and elevate authentic, visible, local, rural, progressive messengers, develop a bold policy vision rooted in rural prosperity.

We must be boldly progressive and proudly rural.