



MEMO | 11/19/2021

Summary of National Rural Strategy Session

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SUMMARY

On November 6, 2021 RuralVote.org hosted a virtual National Rural Strategy Session. Just a few days after the Virginia and New Jersey elections and one year before the 2022 midterms, this event was intended for rural Democratic leaders to connect, talk about what hasn't been working, what has and what we can do in the future.

For the event, we had over 200 rural leaders sign up from 34 states representing over 50 groups. The four hour virtual event was hosted by Matt Hildreth of RuralOrganizing.org, J.D. Scholten of RuralVote.org, and featured 10 leading rural organizers, and a polling presentation by John Ray of YouGov.

The session included three breakout sessions allowing participants to meet each other in a small group setting and to answer these three questions: 1) What did we get wrong in 2020? 2) Besides "showing up" what gets votes? 3) If you had a million dollars what would you do in order to improve the rural vote?

PRESENTERS

Tedra Cobb - Backroads PAC
Shakya Cherry-Donaldson - 1000 Women Strong
Anderson Clayton - Rural Organizer from North Carolina
Barbara Leach - My Rural America
Jordi Comas - Hub Progress
Matt Barron - Importance of Rural Radio and Newspapers
Jane Kleeb - Chair of NE Democrats and founder of Bold Nebraska
Anthony Flaccavento - Rural Urban Bridge Initiative
Sarah Kruger - Southern MN Democratic Study Group
Tori Gleason - Rural civic leader in Western KS

BREAKOUT DISCUSSION - PARTICIPANT ANSWERS

1) **What did we get wrong in 2020?**

- The lack or limited amount of canvassing due to the pandemic hurt GOTV efforts for Democrats
- Messaging: Democrats need to be more aggressive, Democrats don't include rural messaging, Democratic messages getting hammered on social media (especially on economic issues)
- Underestimating Independent voters -- many are further right than what was thought making them unpersuadable in rural areas
- Lack of investment and permanent party infrastructure in rural areas
- Democratic leadership doesn't understand rural and they rely too much on polls and not enough on the local barkeep

2) Besides "showing up" what gets votes?

- Knock doors/person to person contact
- Candidate recruitment and allowing them to be authentic
- Building a platform that comes from communities and voters not donors
- Value based messaging and focus on local issues
- High levels of social media engagement
- Access to transportation (volunteering, early voting, voting day)
- Trusted local rural messengers
- Have a local space where anyone can come for help finding information on loans, grants, housing programs or whatever the local needs are and keep it going in some way all year, so they know they can count on the Democrats to always be there to help them

3) If you had a million dollars what would you do in order to improve the rural vote?

- Hire 10 year-round on-the-ground rural organizers
- Ads for billboards, radio, TV, newspapers, sponsor local events, i.e. rodeos, etc
- Organize informational and listening conferences with groups in rural areas
- Stop the DNC and any state party from pre-selecting candidates for the state-wide races
- Start an all-day rural radio station
- Create a fund and training for county parties
- Hire a community connector who deals with health issues that could roll into politics
- Create a digital media storytelling hub to make it easy for folks to share videos

POLLING

Key takeaways from our [YouGov commissioned polling](#) earlier this year:

- Democratic policies are popular among rural voters but many rural voters don't know these are Democrats' policies
- Both party brands are unpopular among rural voters, but the Democratic brand much moreso
- Persuadable rural-area voters do not watch (or trust) traditional media, are younger, and engage with politics on relatively newer platforms like reddit, Discord servers, and Twitter

- Strongly trusted messengers include doctors, nurses, and farmers, while strongly distrusted messengers include political leaders and the media
- Belief in misinformation is fairly common among rural voters, not just Fox News Republicans
- Party ID costs the Democrats 35 points in rural areas

RURALVOTE.ORG TAKEAWAY

After the Virginia and New Jersey elections there was a lot of talk that “Democrats need to show up.” This strategy session shows that there are strong, active Democrats all over the country and that the larger issue is that these folks need to be heard and funded.

The polling suggests that having a “D” by your name costs you 35 points as a candidate in rural communities in battleground states. That alone should make brand improvement a priority. The way we do that is by improving our messengers. With ARP, the bipartisan infrastructure bill and hopefully the BBB, we will have the largest investment in rural America since the New Deal. We need voters in Lock Haven, PA, Ellerbe, NC, Hinton, IA and all across the nation to know what the Biden Administration and the Democratic Congress are doing.

Currently, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee doesn’t have a rural desk, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee is focused on “winnable” races (almost entirely urban/suburban districts), and the Democratic National Committee isn’t prioritizing on-the-ground year-round organizing. Nationwide, rural voters make up about 20% of the vote. Do Democrats spend at least 20% of their funding on their vote? With the rural skew of the Electoral College, the Senate and the Supreme Court, the Democrats need to start investing in rural voter outreach.

We suggest investing in these three areas: 1) Year-round on-the-ground organizing to help with Party infrastructure and candidate recruitment. 2) Building a network of national rural messengers and national rural voter outreach plan. 3) Direct money to local high visibility campaigns.