



# **CAN DEMOCRATS SUCCEED IN RURAL AMERICA?**

**A REVIEW OF STRATEGIES & PRACTICES THAT WORK**

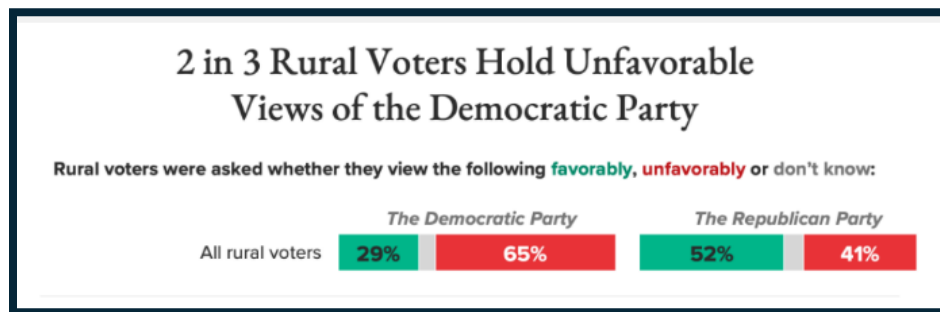
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## Introduction

In 1992, Bill Clinton won 47% of the rural vote across the United States. Since then, votes for Democrats, in both state and national elections, have been in freefall, with Hillary Clinton receiving just 29% of all rural votes in 2016. Virginia’s 2021 gubernatorial election provided further evidence of Democrats’ rural problems, with 44 counties—all predominantly rural—voting 70% or more for the Republican candidate, an *eleven-fold increase* from a decade earlier.



(Source: [January 2022 Morning Consult Survey](#))

The Democratic Party’s response to this precipitous decline has been, for all intents and purposes, to surrender. Based in large part on a lack of understanding of rural people and priorities, along with a reflexive dismissal of “low information” people “voting against their own interests,” leading Democrats have simply written off the countryside. It’s not just conservative-leaning rural voters who feel this abandonment; many if not most rural Democratic committees and candidates express this as well.

This is a major problem for at least three reasons: First, Democrats can’t win enough state and federal elections to effectively govern while routinely losing seven out of ten rural voters. Combined with a broader alienation from the Party on the part of both rural *and* urban working-class voters, there simply are not enough college-educated people in cities and suburbs to consistently win even slim majorities in Congress and most state legislatures. At the state level, Republicans are dominant, with potential impacts on federal elections and laws.

Second, the Democratic abandonment of rural, and its championing of disastrous policies such as NAFTA, have resulted in what can reasonably be

called one-party rule across the vast majority of legislative districts. Given the Republican Party's long-established affinity for the rich and powerful, its laissez-faire economic program ("tax cuts and deregulation") and its subservience to Donald Trump, Republican dominance across rural America has obstructed progress and prosperity. Many progressive economic ideas are popular among rural people, as demonstrated in [Part 2](#) of this report, but they rarely see the light of day.

And third, every person in this country, whether in New York City or Hazard, Kentucky, depends upon functioning, productive rural places. When some liberals glibly say, "Let the red states secede!", they fail to ask from where their food, fiber, energy and sustenance will come. Our extreme political divisions across geography not only threaten our democracy; they threaten our survival.

*This report represents a key tool in the effort to end one-party rule and overcome the rural-urban divide. Based on both original and external research, it is intended to help overcome the toxicity of the Democratic brand and restore competitiveness to elections in rural districts.*

Piecing together best practices for rural candidates is a complex, nuanced process which must be adapted to particular campaigns, places and political moments. What we offer here is not a prescription but a set of evidence-based strategies that we hope will be considered, tested and improved upon by future campaigns.

The Report has two parts: Part 1, our Candidate Assessment, distills lessons learned from in-depth interviews with 50 Democratic candidates who ran in rural districts between 2016 and 2020. [Part 2](#) is a synopsis of a wide body of research into the values and mindset common to rural voters and the best strategies for persuading swing voters and turning out low-propensity Democratic voters.

The reasons for the rural-urban divide are complex. Effective strategies for overcoming it will be varied and will evolve over time. But one thread that has emerged from our research, interviews and personal experience is the importance of *trust*. Simply put, Democrats have lost the trust of tens of millions of our fellow Americans, and without trust there is no hope of

changing minds and winning hearts. An experience shared by one of the candidates interviewed underscores the importance of trust and respect:

A retired miner greeted the candidate as he prepared to meet a crowd in a small rural community. Like many other miners, he supported the candidate because he had worked with the miners as they fought to preserve their union, struggled to restore protections from Black Lung disease, and create new job opportunities in their communities.

The miner shared that he was very upset to hear that President Obama had come out in support of same-sex marriage. “It’s an abomination,” he said before quoting a biblical passage to support that view. He continued to share his own sense that this just wasn’t right, wasn’t what God intended.

The candidate listened. He then acknowledged the man’s concerns, stating that he understood that gay marriage might seem strange and uncomfortable to him, before saying, “I know the bible says that, but it also says that we’re supposed to love one another, especially the people who seem most different from us.”

After a moment of reflection, the man said, “Yeah, I guess you’re right about that. We *are* supposed to love each other.” After a few more seconds of quiet, he added, “And I guess they’re just born that way anyway.”

Gay marriage and homosexuality contradicted this man’s beliefs and values. Yet in one short conversation, he shifted his thinking to a position of much greater acceptance. Why? *Because he trusted the messenger, whom he knew to be on his side on core bread and butter issues, and who had treated him with respect.* It is our hope that this report will provide ideas and tools for rebuilding the trust needed to win rural people back to Democrats and progressive ideas.

# Methodology

Between November 2021 and July 2022, RUBI interviewed 50 people, primarily candidates and elected officials, along with a handful of staff, about their experience running in rural elections. To begin, we created a pool of all rural Democratic candidates who ran in a state legislative, U.S. House, U.S. Senate, or gubernatorial race during the 2016, 2018, or 2020 election cycles (plus a few off-year races). Note that we did *not* interview 2022 midterm candidates. Out of that pool, we identified 235 individuals who outperformed their district's or state's partisan lean by 5% or more, and we sought to interview them.

We interviewed candidates from 25 different states.<sup>1</sup> All but six of our overperforming interviewees outperformed the partisan lean by 7% or more, often much more. Finally, we interviewed a small group of underperformers (whose results varied from -12.7% to 1.2% of the partisan lean) as a comparison group. All interviews were recorded, then read and reviewed independently by three RUBI scholars, with the resulting findings cross-checked to minimize mistakes or bias.

In order to maximize candidates' candor, RUBI signed non-disclosure agreements promising not to reveal their identity. For this reason, with a few permissible exceptions, quotations are anonymized.

These interviews present the candidates' perceptions of the events of their campaign and the causes of their electoral fortunes, as well as the challenges and problems they encountered. The key findings distilled from these 50 interviews help illuminate how and why effective rural candidates behaved in certain ways and the perceived effects of such behaviors, though they do not conclusively prove whether one strategy or tactic necessarily garnered votes. For example, many candidates describe "listening to constituents" as important for electoral success. However, we lack information as to whether or not our candidates are particularly skilled at listening, or to what degree feeling heard influences voters' perceptions of candidates. We *do* know from considerable research and interviews of rural voters that the perception that

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<sup>1</sup> We interviewed candidates from the following states: Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wyoming.

politicians do *not* listen to them is widespread, enabling us to infer that a candidate who appears to listen would be notable.

## A Caveat to our Findings

With nearly 80 hours of interview transcripts and thousands of pages of studies and reports as our “raw material,” we have highlighted findings that appear to be most strongly and frequently correlated with positive results (or the perception of positive results) for Democrats running in rural areas. Some of these findings will come as no surprise to most readers, while others may challenge conventional wisdom or the current priorities of leading Democrats.

We also note that the three primary authors of this study are long-time political progressives with extensive rural roots and experience in rural organizing and rural development. We have attempted to distill and share our findings based on the evidence, even in those instances where it wasn't what we had hoped to hear. We leave it to future candidates and campaigners to grapple with the dilemmas that arise when on-the-ground realities collide with cherished values and goals.

**PART ONE**

# **CANDIDATE ASSESSMENT**

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## Key findings from our candidate interviews are shared in three categories:

1. Characteristics of the candidates themselves
2. The campaigns, including the approach to issues
3. Communications and messaging

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL CANDIDATES**

The nationalization of politics presents a strong headwind against rural, progressive candidates. We found our rural candidates to be more successful in overcoming these challenges when they presented as authentically rural in terms of their upbringing and their knowledge of and focus on local issues.

#### **1. Candidates were generally known and well regarded in their districts**

Successful candidates tend to be known by their constituents for a variety of reasons. They have usually spent a significant amount of time in the district or state, if not their entire lives. They tend to have had jobs or careers of some visibility in their districts, often entailing a significant amount of public trust. Name recognition is an important factor in electoral success, but more than that, our successful candidates were well respected by people in their communities, usually across lines of ideological difference. This might be because they run a successful local (or bigger) business, managed the local grain elevator well and fairly, were previously elected to local government, or worked at the local grocery store for 20 years. *Longevity in the district and a history of contributing to the community lead to a sense that the candidate is rooted there and understands and cares about the community.* This is among the most important characteristics of successful candidates.

One South Dakota Senate candidate, Craig Kennedy, described how he was “just very active in the community, everything from playing sports when I was younger, helping coach sports when my kids were growing up, and being active in nonprofit organizations throughout the town. I did a lot of different things and was pretty active.”

## **2. Successful candidates prioritize listening ahead of attempts to instruct or persuade**

Sen. Jon Tester [told his constituents](#) at a 2020 Affordable Housing Summit, “My parents always said I had two ears and one mouth and should act accordingly. So, I will be relying on you to tell me what is going right, and what we need to be doing differently to solve this problem once and for all...I want to know what is really happening so I can take your ideas back with me to Washington and do something about it.”

Successful rural candidates prioritize listening and present themselves as listeners. Often, when we asked them what their talking points were for engaging voters, our successful candidates would respond that they had no agenda for those conversations other than to introduce themselves and ask what was on voters’ minds. *By putting aside their own policy ideas and “listening” at the outset, candidates give themselves a chance to find common ground before addressing differences.*

We recognize that people’s self-assessments can be inaccurate, including believing oneself to be “a good listener.” Nevertheless, the desire to be a listener and the priority assigned to listening distinguish our successful candidates from those more inclined to teach, to persuade, or to dismiss.

## **3. Candidates seek public office as a means to build a better world**

Successful candidates present themselves as low-ego people driven to politics by a commitment to public service, by something larger than themselves. For some, it was a particular issue they cared about, seeing public office as critical to changing the law for the better. Many were asked by their community to run because the current representative was not serving the community’s interests. They see themselves, and are often perceived by others, as being atypical for a politician, generally because of their candor and/or perceived authenticity. As one candidate shared, “The best compliment I got was from an independent voter who said, “You’re the most un-politician politician I’ve ever met!” A candidate who comes across as molded by consultants, regurgitating talking points and scripted answers, fuels the skepticism already so common among rural voters.

Successful candidates can easily explain why they are running and what they want to accomplish in office, often with a focus on concrete, local issues. They tend to see themselves as collaborators and partners rather than singular drivers of change. *They do not say things like, “These people are voting against their own interests.” On the contrary, they deeply respect their constituents and think of themselves as serving rather than “saving” or “leading” them. They understand that many of their constituents, including some in the opposing party, know things they don’t know, or that the “experts” have overlooked.*

#### **4. Successful candidates appeared personable, approachable, and non-dogmatic**

Regardless of the candidate’s ideology or policy platform, a reputation for peacekeeping, humility and open-mindedness is a widely shared trait. Our overperforming candidates are less dogmatic and more focused on solving specific problems than less successful candidates. They tend to put finding common ground and consensus at the forefront of their social interactions.

An overperforming statewide candidate talking about his demeanor: “I think that it’s a function of growing up in a family of six kids, where I was the middle. And it was always trying to compromise and figure out how to bring everybody together. It was a function of being gay, and always looking over your shoulder and thinking, you know, who’s talking about you or going to say something about you or something like that. And I think it’s a function of being in business and always trying to find compromise.”

Another one of our successful candidates mentioned that she “spoke Republican” because she was married to one. Successful candidates are not surprised by the views of their political opponents because they hear those views expressed by their neighbors, friends, or in some cases, families. This familiarity allows a candidate to see where their own values may overlap with a voter from the other party (or different ideology) and make a persuasive case that they can represent the interests of all their constituents. They do not see or speak about conservatives as “deplorables.”

We recognize that the race and gender of a candidate can influence people's perceptions of how "approachable" or "relatable" they are, or whether their demeanor is seen as inviting rather than confrontational. *Understanding that in general, white men benefit from that presumption more so than women or people of color, it remains the case that projecting or building a relatable persona is an asset for rural candidates.*

##### **5. Successful candidates are both very familiar with their district and strongly focused on rural issues of local importance**

Most successful candidates tend to be rural-focused and to have rural issues and people at the heart of their campaigns (more on this below). While this may seem obvious, it contrasts with candidates who lead with and focus primarily on "DNC talking points" while showing less concern about issues of widespread concern in their district. *Successful candidates tend to have a deep understanding of the lives of their constituents and intimate knowledge of the history and critical challenges of the areas they desire to represent. This "local fluency" is stronger when it includes an understanding of the strengths of the area, including local success stories, alongside an understanding of the problems.*

A West Virginia State Senate candidate put it this way: "You know, it's hard to get a platform off of somebody that's not familiar with your area. You have to campaign on local issues."

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE CAMPAIGNS, INCLUDING APPROACH TO ISSUES**

Our findings reinforce the benefits of running for an open seat and the relevance of national trends (e.g., the president's party typically loses seats in its first midterm). Statewide campaigns differ somewhat from campaigns in smaller districts. In state legislature districts, for instance, successful candidates often endeavor to personally knock every single door, a task unrealistic for a statewide candidate or for many congressional candidates whose rural districts may encompass vast geographic areas. In larger races, staffing and money is considerably more important than in lower-level races. Midterm races during Republican presidencies offer underappreciated opportunities for progressive rural candidates.

Among Democratic pundits and strategists, there is much debate about whether to focus on “persuasion or mobilization.” Most of our successful candidates managed to do *both*, finding means of persuasion that also enhanced their ability to motivate and mobilize their base (for example, by focusing on key local issues or by building a reputation for getting things done). *Most overperforming candidates recognized that, in predominantly rural districts, the base simply is not big enough to win, requiring them to both motivate liberal-leaning non-voters and to persuade independents and some soft Republicans.*

### **1. To the extent possible, personal contact with voters remains essential**

Personal contact involves door knocking, first and foremost, along with other means of direct engagement with voters. In smaller districts, like state legislative districts, successful candidates tend to knock every door at least once (even in rural districts where the doors are far apart). Very importantly, candidates also avoid targeting by party preference and voting propensity (though some of our overperformers do target, most of them seek to have their campaigns knock every door and try to talk to everyone). This means they are not just seeking to turnout their base, but also to persuade voters not already in their camp. In fact, some of our overperformers believe that the most productive door knocking is when they visit voters who are rarely or never visited by other campaigns. In larger districts and statewide races, quality staff and volunteers who are able and willing to take a listening, respectful approach, are essential to achieving a high volume of direct voter contact.

Even in statewide races or geographically large congressional districts, door knocking received a relatively high priority, primarily via networks of well-trained volunteers. Given the impossibility of reaching every door in these districts, however, other efforts were made to meet voters in person, including town halls and participation in community events, fairs, festivals, etc. To be effective, these events need to meet voters on their “home turf” rather than being large gatherings in a distant regional center.

A Southern State Senator said, “I won by knocking on doors. I knocked on those doors in [the] County three times—once before the first, once before

the second, and once before the general election. Knocking on doors matters. It's hard work...but those are things that a Democrat can do in a Republican area to establish some sort of identity.”

Though employed by only a small percentage of candidates, one other effective means of direct voter contact was real time local problem-solving. In one case, this involved the candidate, staff and volunteers helping bridge health care and vaccine access gaps during the height of the pandemic. In another, it meant the candidate meeting with workers at a local factory that had abruptly closed, and following up by getting them legal and practical assistance. While novel, more campaigns should consider making local problem-solving part of the campaign itself.

## **2. High quality staff with local roots or “fluency”**

Some of our successful candidates in smaller races had no staff at all, but in larger (e.g., statewide races), high quality and experienced staff with local knowledge is imperative. This is especially true since a candidate cannot knock a significant percentage of doors in statewide or geographically large congressional races. Staff and volunteers are necessary to do that work. The same is true for fundraising. While some smaller district candidates did not fundraise much at all, statewide races necessitated a modern campaign fundraising operation.

“Quality staff,” as our successful candidates saw them, often included people who are local, or with strong and long-standing ties to the area, rather than the itinerant staffers who typically come into small communities with strong campaign experience but little local knowledge, sensitivity or connections. *Many of the skills of campaign logistics, organizing and field work can be learned on-the-job, if an otherwise strong local candidate lacks extensive campaign experience. What can't be learned in a short time is an intimate knowledge of the local community.*

## **3. Campaigns favored consultants with strong local knowledge and utilized local media**

Successful candidates crafted both campaign and messaging strategy themselves or with local advisors and consultants. Few utilized “Beltway

consultants” or others with strong campaign experience but no local knowledge, finding them to be a poor fit for the districts in which they were running.

Similarly, candidates tended to focus on local media outlets, including radio and small-town newspapers, both for earned media and paid ads. Rural radio in particular tends to be highly affordable and relatively effective at reaching beyond the base.

#### **4. Most successful campaigns focused on issues of particular relevance to their district, rather than putting forward elaborate policy platforms**

Successful candidates prioritized issues of particular relevance to their district, especially those impacting jobs, livelihoods, and the economy, along with health care, education and other so-called “bread and butter” issues. Some candidates were able to make wider state and national issues (or policy questions) more relevant to their constituents by utilizing local examples or otherwise grounding the question in the local context. This capacity to help people understand complex issues and to see potential solutions is no doubt useful in any district, but particularly in rural areas far removed from the seats of power. A national issue such as NAFTA, [widely regarded](#) by rural residents as “bad” for job security and job creation, cannot be avoided by rural Democratic candidates. Rather, those candidates who acknowledge the harm it has done and then focus on economic and trade policies that promote “reshoring” or support for local manufacturers are likely to fare better. There is additional discussion of this issue in [Part 2](#) of the report.

*Candidates and campaigns who focus on practical problem-solving, even as a step towards larger progressive change, seem best able to reach beyond the choir, or to energize non-voters back into the political process. There is very wide and deep skepticism about words and promises among the American electorate, all the more so among rural residents. Candidates who validate voters' concerns and briefly explain their understanding of what has caused the problem and how it can be solved—without launching into long-winded political theories or policy laundry lists—appear to be in the best position to both mobilize and persuade.*

One candidate, who served in the Minnesota State House, recounted “a young man who came to the door whom I realized was crippled. I talked with him for a while. I was listening to what his concerns were, and I showed him that I was willing to work on those problems. Later, I met him at a farm bureau meeting. He was Secretary of [his local] Farm Bureau, which is a pretty conservative farm organization. But they were more concerned about real issues. When I was talking to them, [the young man I’d met] said, ‘You know, I know you’re a Democrat, but I’m going to vote for you because I know that you care. And I know that you’ll do something positive.’”

## **5. Candidates don’t spend much time attacking Trump**

Consistent with our overperforming candidates’ predilection for amenability and preoccupation with local issues, they largely steered clear of Trump. As discussed in Part 2, attacking Trump often backfires, and depolarization is a wise strategy in rural areas dominated by Republican and swing voters. In a post-interview survey, nearly three fourths of our responding candidates indicated that they never spoke of Trump or spoke about him only a little bit.

## **COMMUNICATIONS AND MESSAGING**

Successful candidates adapt their messaging to both their region and the specific audience they’re addressing, while maintaining their own authenticity. From talking about abortion and guns differently than most Democrats, to emphasizing principles and values over policy, the candidates we interviewed were careful but genuine about how they communicated with voters. There is no question that issues such as these are usually very difficult for Democrats running in rural districts. However, candidates who both listen well and candidly respond, rather than “pivoting” away from the tough issues are likely to earn respect from a wider swath of voters.

### **1. Our overperformers tend to be plainspoken and avoid political jargon**

Many candidates expressed frustration with “talking points” that flowed from the DNC, state parties, or consultants, both the language itself and the lack of rural-focused material. Some of them preferred to be unscripted, while others



had more polished stump speeches and elevator pitches. To our knowledge, none of our overperformers used focus groups or polls to test messages.

One candidate shared how “plain talking” can reach more people, describing a short talk followed by a Q&A at a house gathering in a very small town. The talk and discussion covered a wide range of issues and ideas. After it was over, an elderly lady from the community said to the candidate, “Honey, I understood every word you said. Don’t you change a thing!”

*We characterize this as “talking like a neighbor, not like an activist,” and this appears common among our overperforming candidates.*

## **2. Successful candidates communicate with far fewer words, both in writing and speaking**

As our top candidates know, people in the countryside strongly prefer clear, concise communication over verbosity and nuance. In fact, for many, a lot of words signal that the person either doesn’t know what they’re talking about, or is attempting to pull the wool over their eyes. Hence, effective rural candidates have learned to shut up—and listen. And when they do speak, they are concise, direct and more concrete than abstract. While this is primarily true of how they speak, written campaign materials, from mailers to walk cards to websites and social media, also tend to follow this rule.

Jessica Douglass, a candidate for the Maryland State Senate, put it this way: “I speak Republican, I guess. I’ve not been a lifelong Democrat. I’m not working for the Central Committee, I’m not going to say ‘don’t vote for a Republican.’ That’s the wrong way to go. It’s not a party thing. And so I approach it as an individual—this is who I am, and I’m your neighbor. I go to that church right there down the street. Here’s a picture of my four boys. It’s a very colloquial approach.”

## **3. Overperforming candidates focus on whatever issues local people care about; there is no formula other than that**

Nationally, Democrats debate whether they should focus on “kitchen table” issues or the hot-button social issues of the day. We think this debate largely misses the point. The focus of overperforming candidates reflects local voters’

top concerns, whether those concerns are cultural, social, or as is most often the case, economic. A strong understanding of how bigger issues and policy questions play out in the local district is critical, as is the candidate's fluency with local issues.

One example of this local issue focus came from Jeff Piehl, a candidate for the North Dakota State Senate: "I was trying to make it local. I was trying to say, hey, we know your streets need attention. We know you rely on your ambulance service and your fire departments. You know, I know this. And we want to make sure that...whether it's your city for the streets or your county for highways, for gravel roads, your local fire department, we want to assure that they have adequate funding and adequate training for your safety, for your protection out here. And to make sure that they knew that if there was a concern that I would always be accessible for those concerns...I just tried to try to make it as close to their living situation as I could. Snow removal: another one, I want to make sure that we're getting adequate funding to get your roads plowed out so that schools are funded..."

Among the bigger national issues, guns and abortion generally cannot be avoided on the campaign trail but must be discussed with respect for different points of view. As with most everything else, this begins with listening. In some instances, "agreeing to disagree" is the best outcome achievable. This generally earns the candidate more respect than either a dogmatic insistence on their position, or avoidance of the issue by pivoting to other, more comfortable issues (though some candidates did attempt to avoid these issues).

This needle is most difficult to thread on guns. Democratic candidates who are gun owners themselves, well versed in their use, terminology, and cultural appeal usually have a small advantage with rural voters (we are *not* suggesting that candidates purchase a gun as a campaign tactic). Not every gun safety measure is toxic, but a candidate should talk about them with specificity from the perspective of a responsible gun owner. Many of our overperforming candidates simply take a wide-ranging pro-Second Amendment position and oppose gun control measures generally, while others gave equal priority to gun ownership rights and so-called common-sense measures to reduce gun violence (universal background checks, Red Flag laws, limits on magazine clips).

One example of the latter approach came from South Dakotan Craig Kennedy, who said, “I’ve been a hunter my whole life. I got a whole case full of guns at home. But I’m not afraid to tell people I think there needs to be a limit. I’ll use an example and talk about magazine size and say, who in the world needs a 30-round clip? When I go to hunt ducks, I have to put a plug in my shotgun so I can’t put more than three shells in at a time. I can only put five in my deer rifle. Why do I need 30? If I can’t hit it with the first shot, I shouldn’t be shooting. And I think people can relate to that around here.”

While we wouldn’t say it’s impossible for a strongly pro-gun control candidate to win a rural race, strong positions on this issue will likely make any rural race considerably more difficult.

As to abortion, the post-Dobbs environment is different from the 2016—2020 period when our candidates ran for office. While it remains a very challenging issue for Democrats in most rural areas, it may be an issue where Democrats can now find a bit more common ground in these districts. Several of our most successful candidates are pro-life, but that is not a requirement for success. Not all voters demand agreement on this question, but they do require that candidates have coherent and compassionate positions on this most hot-button of social issues.

Overperforming rural candidates begin by acknowledging that abortion is unfortunate, no matter the path to it, as it almost always results from unwanted or dangerous pregnancies. These candidates emphasize the shared agreement that fewer abortions would be desirable, whereas many of the *underperforming* candidates simply attempted to dodge the issue altogether or stake out no position on this and other controversial issues. For example, one underperforming candidate said, “I kind of stay out of the abortion thing. Another underperforming candidate shared, “Abortion, guns and gays. These are things you are not going to win on in rural areas, so you answer honestly and quickly and move on to other issues.”

If it can be credibly done, we recommend candidates take a more proactive posture on abortion, putting a strong emphasis on the proven steps that reduce unwanted pregnancies as set forth in [Part 2](#) of this report.

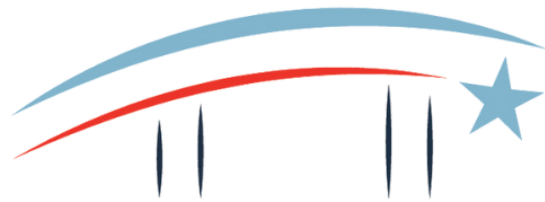
We note that none of our pro-choice overperformers accused pro-life voters of misogyny or other moral failures. On the contrary, they affirmed the deeply personal moral dimensions of the issue. Likewise, they did not argue about when “life” begins, nor did they shrug off the termination of a pregnancy as nothing more than a health care procedure akin to having a tooth extracted.

***In sum, our interviews of 50 rural candidates suggest they perform significantly better when they:***

- ★ ***listen first, talk less***
- ★ ***are locally rooted with a strong history in and understanding of the district***
- ★ ***truly respect people across ideology and party***
- ★ ***are mission-driven, not ego-driven***
- ★ ***prioritize local needs and issues***
- ★ ***are candid and plain spoken about their beliefs, even on contentious issues***
- ★ ***present themselves as non-dogmatic problem solvers; and***
- ★ ***run campaigns where community activity and personal contact is central***

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# RURAL URBAN BRIDGE

I N I T I A T I V E

[RuralUrbanBridge.org](http://RuralUrbanBridge.org)