TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

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BY
ANDREW LEVISON

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The previous memo in this series argued that there are four basic elements that form the very distinct social and political outlook of working class Americans who vote Republican but are not supporters of Donald Trump or the MAGA ideology. They are *cultural traditionalism, old-fashioned personal values, tolerance and class consciousness.*[1]

Democratic candidates who wish to run in strongly Republican districts need to understand these four aspects of the non-MAGA working class perspective. Journalistic interviews with individual workers offer some insight but are not sufficient for this purpose. What Democratic candidates need is a broad overview of what successful Democratic candidates have learned about these voters during their campaigns.

An important resource for this purpose was published last Fall by the Rural Urban Bridge Initiative. Based on interviews with over 50 Democratic candidates who outperformed the partisan composition of their district, the report's title indicates its thesis: "Can Democrats Win in Rural America: A Review of Strategies and Tactics That Work."[2]

Here is how the authors of the report explained their methodology:

> 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.

> Between November 2021 and July 2022, RUBI then conducted extensive interviews with 50 people, primarily candidates and elected officials, along with a handful of staff, about their experience running in rural elections.

Andrew Levison is the author of *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support.* He is also a contributing editor of *The Democratic Strategist.*

[1]https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_levison_Persuadable_workers.pdf

https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_levison_culturally_traditional_WWC_voters_v2.pdf

https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/11/14/before-midterms-trumps-image-among-republicans-had-become-less-positive/

[2]RUBI : Can Democrats Succeed in Rural America
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/610d482f3b9e856192886fe1/t/636eb33b324ed609f03f81fa/1668199229402/Executive+Summary_+Can+Democrats+Succeed+in+Rural+America_+-+Rural+Urban+Bridge+Initiative.pdf

We interviewed candidates from 25 different states. 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.

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.

The authors noted several common characteristics of the candidates they interviewed:

Candidates were generally known and well regarded in their districts. 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.

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.

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.

A key section of the RUBI report presents a detailed list of key attitudes and perspectives that were found among the persuadable rural voters that the candidates encountered – a list which closely corresponds with the four major clusters of attitudes of persuadable working class voters noted above. The typical non-MAGA rural or working class voter:

1. Cultural Traditionalism

★Patriotic, proud of America but open to doing a better job at living up to our nation's ideals

★Honors military and veterans but wary of endless war

★Sees small businesses and family farms as backbone of economy and is wary of large corporations pushing them out

★Feels pride of place and strong connection to farm/land/town/community

★(If white) Doesn't think about "white privilege" and resents being made to feel guilty

★Cares about and supports family and community, less so people in other communities

★Values freedom and liberty

★Believes in equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome

2. Old-Fashioned Personal Values

★Sees manual labor as equally if not more important and respectable than intellectual labor

★Takes pride in hard work and self-reliance. Hard work is a virtue, good for the individual, the family and the community

★Sees civility and compromise as virtues

★Sees honesty and integrity as virtue

★Helping each other is a community norm, with a strong preference for local, community-based solutions

★Desire to be respected and have practical, hands-on knowledge honored

★Preference for narratives that honor working people as engines of the economy

3. Tolerance

★Church-going and accepting of other faiths

★Rejecting but willing to be tolerant of gay marriage

★Moderately pro-choice but abortion not a priority issue

★Negative on transgender rights but open to persuasion, not passionate on the issue

★Feels positive or neutral about increasing racial and ethnic diversity and equates colorblindness with anti-racism

★Rejects racial discrimination and violence

★Has "live and let live" ethic but disagrees with cutting-edge social justice concepts

★Takes pride in being both open-minded and grounded in common sense

★Feels judged negatively by liberals for not being socially liberal enough but isn't constantly raging about "wokeness"

4. Class Consciousness

★Has mixed feelings of admiration and resentment toward the rich, particularly those who profit off average people and/or look down on rural and working folks

★If working or middle class, sees Republicans helping very rich and Democrats helping very poor while no one has their back

★Sees politicians disproportionately representing the interests of the rich and being out-of-touch with ordinary folks

★Sees a positive role for government theoretically but perceives government giving hard-earned taxpayer money to everyone but them

★Feels a sense of loss over community's economic decline, population loss and/or deaths of despair

★Sees a role for government in providing opportunities for people to help themselves but wary that direct government benefits indulge laziness

★Feels squeezed and/or have family or friends in trouble

★Upset by demise of community prosperity, trust, civility and social bonds

★Sees corporate greed, materialism and hyper-online-ism as bad for kids and society

★Feels betrayed by party that used to champion working class

★Alienation from and distrust in mainstream institutions and the political system run high

★Distrust of scientific and academic "experts"

★Belief in almost universal corruption on the part of politicians and lobbyists

★Anger at unchecked corporate profiteering

This list provides a uniquely deep insight into the perspective of Non-MAGA workers who generally vote Republican. The RUBI report indicates that these voters can be persuaded to vote for Democrats by candidates who understand their point of view and genuinely empathize with them even when there is disagreement on specific issues.

In recent years, however, it has become increasingly common among some progressive Democrats to argue that it is a waste of time and a misuse of resources to try to win the support of voters of this kind. The social and political outlook presented above, they argue, is essentially conservative – far too much so to be compatible with participation in a "big tent" Democratic coalition.

Based solely on the experience of recent elections this view can seem extremely plausible and indeed difficult to doubt. But it reflects a very limited historical perspective. In the 1950's and 1960's working class men and women with views like those presented above were reliable Democratic voters. As the RUBI analysis indicates, successful Democratic candidates have shown that it is possible to win these voters' support if the necessary effort and commitment is made.