A CHER PAC RESEARCH PROJECT

HOPE FROM THE HEARTLAND:

How Democrats Can Better Serve the Midwest by Bringing Rural, Working Class Wisdom to Washington

BY CONGRESSWOMAN CHERI BUSTOS
& ROBIN JOHNSON

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Democrats' national level of support has seen better days. Much better.

By the numbers, Democrats are at their lowest in nearly 100 years.

While the party had a successful night in off-year elections on Nov. 7, 2017, and in the Dec. 12, 2017, special election in Alabama for U.S. Senate, Democrats will not return to majorities in Washington or the states without earning stronger support from the rural, working-class voters who propelled Donald Trump to victory in 2016.

Moreover, the party must listen to Heartland voters and embrace the opportunity to elevate their very real concerns in Washington.

After interviewing 72 successful local officials from rural areas in Midwestern states now dominated by Republicans, consistent themes emerged about how Democrats can both regain trust and import wisdom from those in places that feel forgotten by both national parties.

Our approach is unique. We sought out people who regularly face voters in rural and working-class areas. These leaders have not only witnessed cultural and economic shifts over time, but they have also prevailed on the front lines of recent political battles by addressing the real concerns of their constituents.

Those interviewed said national Democrats must acknowledge and stay focused on the bread-and-butter challenges facing hardworking families. Too often, they said, Heartland voters view national Democrats as fixated on siloed messages to specific groups that don't include them or are too focused on controversial social issues to the exclusion of economic concerns.

Instead, they urge national Democrats to stay focused on championing new policy solutions in infrastructure, education and small business that will elevate the economic fortunes of all voters, especially those in rural areas and small towns who feel their concerns aren't being addressed. When they open the paper in the morning or flip on the news at night, too often they see Democrats talking about things that don't directly relate to them.

They also recommend the party develop better communications tools to counter Fox News, talk radio and conservative social media. They urge the national party to listen to and engage rural constituencies and to welcome into the party those who share Democrats' broader goals, but may dissent on particular social issues.

Finally, those interviewed recommend a comprehensive review of campaign committees and consultants to re-think winning strategies unique to campaigns in rural areas.

With only a few election cycles until the next redistricting, there is limited time to listen and learn from those who have succeeded in these hard-to-win areas. However, if we do, Democrats can not only begin to reverse years of Democratic decline in the Heartland, but also better serve all Americans by delivering the economic change craved by those who have felt overlooked.

FORWARD

Democrats from rural areas face an existential crisis. The number of Democrats holding office across the nation is at its lowest point since the 1920's and the decline has been especially severe in rural America, whose economic fortunes have slipped markedly during this same period.

Donald Trump's election in 2016—with heavy support from rural voters—was not the first evidence of Democratic decline outside of urban areas. These challenges have been mounting since the 1990's.

The consequences of this deterioration are sobering for Democrats. In the Midwest, rural support for Donald Trump elevated him to upset wins in several states that propelled him to the White House. Rural areas contain many white, working class voters who were the key demographic of Trump's victory. The 2016 outcome demonstrated that rural, working class voters will not be ignored.

Democrats cannot win majorities in Washington or state capitals without doing better in rural areas. More importantly, Democrats risk forfeiting the opportunity to bring Heartland wisdom to Washington.

Immediately after my appointment as Co-Chair of the Democratic Policy and Communications

Committee for House Democrats and Chair of Heartland Engagement for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee after the 2016 election, we looked for ways to improve our communications and principles with a particular focus on the Midwest region.

As the only elected member of House Democratic Leadership from the Heartland, I believe stronger engagement in rural America and among working families is critical to both our future efforts at becoming a majority party and our ability to enacting policies that help every American.

I can relate to the experiences of legislators from rural areas. My district, the 17th Congressional District in central, northwestern and northern Illinois, covers 14 counties and includes some of the richest farmland in the nation and contains several manufacturing hubs and post-industrial smaller cities struggling to adapt to the challenges of globalization and technological advancement.

Most of the counties in my district are rural with a high concentration of working class voters. After defeating a Republican incumbent in 2012 and again in a rematch in 2014, I won 60 percent of the vote last year in a district that Donald Trump also won.

In my district, you hear stories of workers whose jobs were outsourced overseas and faced the indignity of having to train their replacements from China. Stories of working families holding multiple jobs and trying to save some money for their kids to have the opportunity to go to college. Stories of farmers concerned about how they have to transport their goods to market on crumbling roads and bridges.

There are places in our region where people feel they never fully recovered from the early 1980's recession let alone the Great Recession. They feel left behind and that neither party listens to them. Their votes in 2016 were a shock to our system, and they sent a message that they will not be taken for granted.

To find out more about how Democrats can better serve rural areas and improve electoral outcomes, **we sought out elected officials from rural areas, who faced the same voters, issues and cultural and economic shifts—and still emerged mostly victorious.**

In all, we spoke with 72 current or former Democratic officials who bucked the trend and succeeded in the rural Midwest, now dominated by Republicans. These officials, with 600 years of campaign experience combined, reflect the rich diversity of the Heartland region. From the Appalachian region of eastern Ohio to the Iron Range of northeastern Minnesota, from the Bootheel of Missouri to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, from the corn and bean fields of Iowa, Illinois and Indiana to the dairy farms of Wisconsin…

Our mission was to listen to folks on the front lines of the party. We wanted to find out what they hear, knocking doors and at events. From them, we want to learn how the party can:

1. **improve its messaging and the Democratic brand;**
2. **focus our policies on jobs and the economy;**
3. **reconnect with voters from the Heartland; and**
4. **adapt campaigns to be more successful in rural areas.**

We believe the most effective way for the party to better serve those in rural areas is to learn from those in the trenches, especially those who are actually succeeding.

We can all learn something from these stories and adapt them to our local conditions. This is an initial step to harness the ideas and energy from state legislative officials to begin the rebuilding process that will lead to victory.

Some of our findings have already been aired by party officials, officeholders and pundits after the 2016 election. There might not be any major surprises for those attuned to these issues and involved in the process to revitalize the party. But hearing directly from these Democrats *in their own words* provides a focus and intensity that polling and focus groups cannot. Our hope is that readers of this document will be as moved as we were by their dedication and concern for the party and the direction of this country.

- Congresswoman Cheri Bustos

HEARTLAND: THE KEY TO VICTORY

The eight states comprising the Heartland (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio and Wisconsin) are critical to determining winners in presidential elections and key to the balance of power in both houses of Congress.

Ohio and Iowa have been key battleground states for years. Michigan and Wisconsin were once considered reliably Democratic prior to 2016, with voters last supporting a Republican presidential nominee in Michigan in 1988 and Wisconsin in 1984. Indiana and Missouri are considered more solidly Republican, and Illinois and Minnesota are reliably Democratic, although Trump came within 1.5 points of winning Minnesota last year.

President Barack Obama won seven out of these eight states in 2008 and six of eight in 2012. President Donald Trump turned that around completely, winning six of eight in 2016 on his way to a surprise victory.

Less visible, but equally important, are elections for state legislative seats. As was evident from 2010, when Republicans picked up hundreds of seats across the nation, state legislative outcomes are critical not just for partisan control in the states, but also gaining the power to draw new district lines for Congress and the legislatures.

In less than 10 years, the Democrats' position in the Midwest has gone from one of strength to major weakness:

- In the U.S. House of Representatives, Democrats went from controlling a majority of Heartland seats in 2009 (57%) to 39% in 2017. Democrats comprised a majority of House delegations in seven Heartland states in 2009 and only one in 2017.
- Democrats controlled four of the eight State Senates in the region in 2009 (Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin) and control only one now (Illinois), losing 49 seats.
- In state General Assemblies, Democrats controlled seven out of eight lower houses in 2009 (all except Missouri) and now have the majority in only Illinois, losing 156 seats.
- Democrats also held six of the eight governorships in 2009 and now control only one.
- Republicans control all three major levels of government (both houses of the state legislature and the Governor's office) in six states and Democrats none.
- The 2016 Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, won less than 10 percent of the counties in the Midwest—63 out of 737—and those were mainly in large urban centers, suburbs and university towns.
- The only bright spot is the U.S. Senate where Democrats occupy 10 out of 16 seats in the Heartland. That is down two from 2009. Six seats are up in the 2018 election cycle and all are held by Democrats. The rural vote in states like Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin and Indiana will be critical in determining whether Democrats hold those seats.

In addition, the Heartland played a key role in electing Donald Trump president. Trump's win in traditional battleground states like Ohio and Iowa and traditional blue states like Michigan and

Wisconsin was fueled by votes from rural areas and from working class votes as evidenced by the flip of counties that voted for Obama twice to Trump. There were 206 counties nationwide that voted for

Obama in both 2008 and 2012 and switched to Trump in 2016. A majority of those counties (53 percent) are in the Heartland.

Many factors are involved in the Democrats' dramatic decline in the Heartland. Parties in control of the White House often lose congressional seats, especially in non-Presidential years, which might indicate a revival in party fortunes in 2018. Redistricting and gerrymandering also play a role in flipping congressional and state legislative seats in states that have partisan redrawing of districts.

But another key factor is the party's decline in support from rural areas. Democrats were elected and represented rural areas from throughout the Heartland as recently as 2009-2010. These rural areas contain many of the white, working class voters who were a key demographic in the 2016 presidential race and the object of focus and research since a share of them switched sides and helped deliver states like Iowa, Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin for Trump. As former Illinois State Sen. John Sullivan said, "Trump gave focus to rural voters and addressed their needs in the campaign. The 2016 election showed the Democratic Party DID need us."

Despite these trends, Democrats can do better in rural areas. We <u>can</u> earn back the trust of rural working class voters by:

1. **improving our messaging and the Democratic brand;**
2. **focusing our policies on jobs and the economy;**
3. **reconnecting with voters from the Heartland; and**
4. **adapting campaigns to rural areas.**

The remainder of this report will explore these four topics in greater depth.

1. MESSAGING: Improving the Democratic Brand by Focusing on Economic Issues

Democrats interviewed at the state legislative level overwhelmingly believe the party has a serious messaging problem. Some even question whether the national party even knows what it stands for anymore. Four themes emerged consistently in reference to Democrats' messaging in the Heartland:

- **a disconnect with rural voters;**
- **too much focus on targeting groups;**
- **the dominance of social issues; and**
- **the more competitive nature of rural districts.**

According to those interviewed, challenges associated with these issues have resulted in a Democratic brand and messaging that has hurt Democrats in the Heartland.

> "The reputation of the national party superseded our own reputations," said Ginny Favede, an unsuccessful 2016 House candidate from Ohio.
>
> State Rep. Mark Spreitzer from Wisconsin said "state and local Democrats have become more dependent on the national message. With our fates tied together, the national brand needs to be strong to help state legislative candidates."
>
> Former Iowa State Rep. Patti Ruff said, "The 'D' by my name hurt, and the top-end campaign hurt the bottom-end campaign. It had an elitist bent, which didn't fit for the working class."

It was in this landscape that Donald Trump was able to reach voters by addressing their concerns while Democrats were seen as focusing on social issues or not addressing economic anxieties.

> Michigan State Rep. Jon Hoadley said, "Voters have been living with economic anxiety for a long time. Trump spoke to their economic fears while connecting those to long-existing racial tensions."
>
> Former Ohio State Rep. Nick Barborak said, "The 2016 election wasn't about Trump. It was an anti-establishment vote. It's not that people voted for Trump, but they voted against the Democrats. We're (seen as) the party of big cities and social issues."
>
> Illinois State Sen. Andy Manar said, "Rural voters feel the Democratic Party used to represent working class issues. We seem focused on things manifested in identity politics that don't apply to rural. There was a vacuum with these voters, and Trump filled it. Democrats didn't have a coherent message to rural voters and weren't reaching out."

To do better, we must **communicate better** and build a **better brand**.

THE CHALLENGES WE FACE

Disconnect with Rural Voters

A consistent theme among these current and former officials is that national Democrats are out of touch with rural and working class people. And because national Democrats are perceived as out of touch there is significant brand degradation for individuals down-ballot who are running as Democrats who may otherwise be perceived favorably by voters.

This feeling stems from the economic realities of the rural Midwest. When national Democrats trumpeted economic recovery during the last election cycle, many areas faced – and continue to face - stagnant incomes, fewer good-paying jobs and limited opportunities for children to stay in the area.

> "We never recovered from the economic recession of the 1980's," said former State Rep. Phil Tate from the northwestern part of Missouri. "The recession, coupled with the downturn in the garment and textile industries, have left this region hurting economically to this day."
>
> State Rep. Mike O'Brien, who represents a district in northeast Ohio, said "we haven't recovered from the recession yet."

"Folks out here feel left behind by Democrats. We've become the party of protest and rural people say, 'What about us? I'm working 40 hours a week at $10 an hour, and Democrats don't care.'"

– PAUL MARQUART
MINNESOTA STATE REP.

Siloed Messages

Others expressed the view that the party doesn't have a comprehensive message to all voters, but instead shapes its message to various groups and constituencies.

> Iowa State Sen. Chaz Allen advised the party to "stop talking to voters in silos." Former State Sen. Tim Cullen of Wisconsin said the party "appears to many to care more about specific categories of people than a person without a job."
>
> "The party needs one coherent, distilled message and it can't be all things to all people," said former Ohio State Senator Lou Gentile.

Social Issues

Further, many leaders relayed that social issues played a role in muddying the messages of local candidates in the 2016 election.

The people we spoke with focused on jobs and economic issues but faced voters who confronted them over social issues that were deemed to have been prioritized by the national party in day-to-day communications. This not only created obstacles for them to effectively communicate their messages, but also put them on the defensive about issues that weren't priorities in their campaigns.

> Former Michigan State Rep. Collene Lamonte said the party's message in 2016 "didn't align with what we were hearing at the doors. We lost our ability to talk to these people in a way they can trust us."
>
> State Rep. Nick Celebrezze, who represents a metro working class district in Ohio, said while knocking doors last fall that he heard over and over that "Democrats are talking bathrooms while Republicans are talking jobs."
>
> Wisconsin State Rep. Katrina Shankland talked about how her district, in central Wisconsin, which has an "outdoors culture," is not always in line with the national party message.

Competitive Districts

Many respondents said priorities are different in rural areas because the districts are more competitive. Gerrymandered maps produced by Republican majorities in most states created safer districts for Democrats in urban areas and tougher, more evenly balanced districts in rural areas.

> Michigan State Rep. Henry Yanez said, "I can't win without Republican-leaning Independent and Republican votes" in his competitive suburban and rural Macomb County district.
>
> "A lot of people don't know our message now" said former State Rep. Wes Shoemyer, from northeast Missouri. "Democrats have become policy wonks but aren't connecting with peoples' guts."

HOW DEMOCRATS CAN IMPROVE

Communicate Better

Democrats need to have a powerful message that communicates in clear and concise language. A common complaint we heard was about the way messages are delivered that sound like poll-tested talking points instead of everyday language most people use.

> Iowa State Sen. Kevin Kinney: "Our words don't match what rural people are saying."
>
> Ohio State Rep. candidate Ginny Favede: "The Democratic message is convoluted. It needs to be so easy a third-grader can repeat it."
>
> Minnesota State Rep. Jeanne Poppe: "Democrats need to tell stories and do more listening and less talking."

Missouri State Rep. and Attorney General candidate Teresa Hensley: "Republicans have a power we don't have. They are better at coming up with quick, easy slogans like 'right to work'. We stumble over slogans."

Further, those interviewed relayed the need to counter Republican dominance in the media. Too often the Heartland has too few Democratic voices on the airwaves and in the media to counter Fox News, talk radio and conservative social media that dominate much of the Heartland. And further still, even those few Democratic voices who do reach the airwaves often are urban liberals who do not relate to the Heartland.

A Better Brand: Sharing Values

Those interviewed offer a variety of themes they feel the party should communicate to the public that would help improve the Democratic brand in the Heartland.

The messages aren't just focused on rural areas but have appeal more broadly to working class and middle class people in metro areas as well. The themes almost all focused around the economy, jobs and opportunity.

While many of these themes are explored in more depth further in the report, here are their recommendations in their own words:

Iowa State Sen. Tod Bowman suggested the party "help Main Street versus Wall Street and the focus should be on financial security—quality, affordable health care, affordable college, pension security and supplemental savings."

Former Ohio State Rep. Nick Barborak said the party should "showcase issues people care about—economic opportunity, justice, fairness and educational opportunity. From FDR to

Clinton, Democrats talked economic issues—values people still hold on to. Obama won twice in Ohio by focusing on the middle class, not social issues."

Ohio State Rep. candidate Ginny Favede said the party "needs to identify with the core of

America—the ability to take care of families, put dinner on the table, represent core people."

"We need to be the party with our shirt sleeves rolled up, not the party with the cuff links."—Former Ohio State Rep. and state party chair Chris Redfern.

"....the most important voters out there—the guy on the back of the garbage truck scraping by with a wife, three kids and a pickup truck."

– FORMER MISSOURI STATE REP. TERRY SWINGER

Michigan State Rep. Henry Yanez spoke to the remaining popularity of Bill Clinton, "…he uttered four simple words—'I feel your pain.' When Democrats can say that and not talk about people 'clinging to their guns and religion,' we'll start doing better with rural and blue collar voters."

"the party needs a clear message and that message should have five priorities—jobs, jobs, education, jobs and jobs."

– IOWA STATE REP. TODD PRICHARD

2. ISSUES: Shape Solutions and Tout Policies that Advance the Heartland Economy

When asked whether the party has sound policies but doesn't communicate them effectively, or whether our policies need new ideas, most local Democrats say a little of both.

Local officials provided feedback that the party should focus messaging and policy solutions in the following key areas: **Economic Issues, Infrastructure, Schools, Small Business, Security, Farming and Agriculture and Government Waste.**

Those interviewed lamented the lack of a Democratic alternative as powerful as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which consistently provides state and local elected officials new conservative policies to drive state legislative agendas. A Democratic alternative could provide a fresh arsenal of competing ideas rooted in Democratic values to state and local elected officials.

For Democrats to improve outcomes, we must be better focused on developing and messaging on policy solutions that address real challenges in the Heartland.

Economic Issues

Not surprisingly, economic issues were cited with unanimity as the most important issue for the party. Many regions in the Heartland still haven't fully recovered from previous economic downturns. While unemployment rates are low, incomes are stagnant and the loss of manufacturing jobs removed a source of good-paying jobs that have been replaced by jobs that pay less and provide no benefits.

Often, new manufacturing jobs aren't as lucrative for rural workers. In one rural town, the State Senator said a manufacturer that left for Mexico paid $18 to $22 an hour and a new manufacturer pays $14 to $15 an hour and workers have higher health care costs. Economic issues were framed more in terms of income growth than job creation.

"The party should back either higher wages or lower taxes or both. Providing services and programs is not always the answer," said Iowa State Sen. Tod Bowman, suggesting instead tax reductions and a minimum wage increase.

"People are making less money comparatively than 15 years ago," said former Missouri State Rep. Phil Tate. "These people are tired of the status quo."

Michigan State Rep. Darrin Camilleri said the party needs to focus on "policies that put money in people's pockets."

Wisconsin State Sen. Jennifer Shilling mentioned pressures facing senior citizens in her district to keep working because they are not earning enough for retirement.

A former legislator said "more people are going to realize they are not going to be able to retire at a normal retirement age."

The working class "just wants a car that runs, a vacation, and to be able to buy their kids the shoes they want rather than the shoes they need"

- JANET BEWLEY
WISCONSIN STATE SENATOR

Several Ohio legislators talked about the heroin epidemic facing their areas and tied drugs to economic dislocation.

Ohio State Rep. John Patterson said "economic problems led, in part, to the drug problems facing Ohio."

What follows are the responses from current and former legislators on rural working class concerns and how the party should address them—in their own words:

"Go back to the 1950's for what mattered most to people—buy a house, trade in a car every couple of years—not for solutions but to lay out broadly what Americans wanted most."—Minnesota State Rep. Jeanne Poppe

"Concentrate on bread and butter working class issues. That's who we are. FDR, Truman—wages, good schools."—Indiana State Senate candidate Julie Berry

"All my constituents expected and wanted was to have the opportunity for a good job with decent wages, health care and a chance for a respectable retirement and hope the next generation would have more opportunities than the last one."—Former Indiana State Rep. Russ Stilwell

> "The party needs to focus on people trying to play by the rules….people working two jobs. They get discouraged after a while. The party needs to stand up for forgotten people."—Indiana State Rep. Steve Stemler.
>
> "Make working class people, who say 'I'm working my ass off here and making less money,' say 'This is the party speaking for me.'"—Former Indiana State Rep. Dennie Oxley
>
> "Rural Democrats should be talking about health care in terms of jobs. In all seven of my counties, hospitals are my largest employers. Make the proposed Republican cuts a jobs issue." - Michigan State Rep. Scott Dianda

Infrastructure

Those interviewed also cited the need for infrastructure investments. These investments included roads and bridges, locks and dams, broadband, drinking water and wastewater systems and electric grids. In their view, a focus on infrastructure supports local job creation and helps make those communities livable while also making the regions more attractive for new businesses.

> Ohio State Rep. Jack Cera on infrastructure: "We need funds for infrastructure. There used to be federal grants for water and sewer...We need investments in road infrastructure as well that can create jobs and open up parts of our counties for opportunities."
>
> "The lock and dam system is old and is key for the agricultural and grain industry," said Missouri Representative Tom Shively.
>
> Wisconsin State Senator Janet Bewley said, "We need infrastructure to succeed. We will be rural deserts if we don't invest and maintain our infrastructure."

Schools

Most rural legislators provided strong support for public schools and said this should be one of the major issues Democrats should prioritize.

They are concerned about threats to public schools from private school vouchers in Ohio to homeschooling in Iowa.

Legislators in Wisconsin see a growing threat to rural schools from the weakening of collective bargaining enacted by Republicans several years ago.

There is growing concern that withering criticism of public schools by conservative groups is causing young teachers to abandon the field.

This creates an opportunity for Democrats.

> "Teachers have become free agents and competition for quality teachers has become fierce. This may bode well for wealthier districts, but in poorer and rural districts, whose teachers are being poached by wealthier and bigger districts, the outcome is more ominous," said Wisconsin State Senator Janis Ringhand.
>
> "We need to build schools that parents can trust again and counter the drumbeat of negatives against public schools. We need to create public schools as institutions of excellence, and stop testing kids all the time," said former Michigan State Rep. Collene Lamonte.

Minnesota State Rep. Julie Sandstede supports a "back-to-basics approach," and schools should focus on what works. "Kids are tested to death." Teachers are leaving the professions and the job is "more paperwork than teaching."

Small business

A large number of Democrats we spoke to highlighted the need for the party to reach out more to small businesses.

Some want to see more economic development incentives targeted to small businesses instead of large corporations. They referenced how small businesses create jobs *in* the community, and revenues stay *in* the communities.

Others, while acknowledging the need for worker and consumer protections, want to see fewer regulations on smaller firms.

Some respondents spoke of helping Main Street firms compete through tougher anti-trust enforcement and anti-monopoly legislation.

Several also spoke of small business owners as part of an expanded definition of working class voters that the party needs to reach out to more.

> "Help Main Street versus Wall Street," said Iowa State Sen. Tod Bowman. He pointed out how his dad put five kids through college while running a service station. Now, big companies will pay a manager $40,000 and "take the rest of the money out of the community."
>
> Democrats should focus more on working class voters "who pay their taxes quarterly," said Iowa State Sen. Chaz Allen.
>
> "Small businesses are drowned by regulations. We should be a party to help—not get rid of regulations but make government help small businesses with compliance. We need a government system that helps—show them how to do it right. Big businesses need more regulation—not small businesses," said former Michigan State Rep. Collene Lamonte.
>
> "We need to change the economic rules so Main Street retail can fairly compete with digital companies and multinationals," said Michigan State Rep. Jon Hoadley, who also talked about helping small businesses and entrepreneurs by investing in start-ups—"maybe a tax credit for the first three people hired—distributive tax credits."
>
> "Find out where younger people want to live and incentivize small businesses there—jobs that can't be outsourced," Michigan Rep. Kristy Pagan said.
>
> "The party needs to incorporate a message including anti-corporate, anti-foreign ownership of land and agricultural companies and anti-consolidation and concentration in industry, especially agriculture," said former Missouri Rep. Wes Shoemyer.

Security

Some Democrats talked about security in an expanded sense of providing both public safety and economic security. Many pillars of economic security have been weakened through Republican policies aimed at health care, retirement and collective bargaining.

Further, when Ohio State Sen. Joe Schiavoni talks about safe communities as a top issue, he isn't just talking about police and fire. He suggests expanding the definition of safe communities by including roads and bridges, water quality and fighting opioids, as well as crime.

> "Democrats need to do and say two things, first and always, when communicating with skeptical voters ... I will keep you safe, and I won't waste your money. After establishing those credentials, Dems will be able to discuss investments in education, health care and job creation," said Iowa State Sen. Jeff Danielson.

Farmers and Agriculture

Iowa State Sen. Tod Bowman traces the problems of Democrats to the farming culture and that they do not compete for farm votes.

While the number of farms has shrunk due to consolidation, Bowman and other rural legislators point out the prevalence of part-time farmers, those who own fewer than 200 acres and those who rent out acreage. They may not be big landowners but still represent the farm culture of "looking at the bottom line, being more individualistic and a maverick and being averse to taxes and regulation."

> "Don't tell them what to do; get buy-in from them," said Iowa State Sen. Kevin Kinney.

> "We need candidates that have backgrounds in agriculture and understand agriculture," said Iowa State Rep. Bruce Bearinger.

> "We need to reach out to farmers more—No one talks to them," said former Ohio State Rep. Chris Redfern.

> "We need to bring farmers and miners into the conversation about regulation," said former Minnesota State Rep. Terry Morrow.

Government Waste and Reform

Some of the rural legislators we spoke with referenced the party's reputation as big spenders, and say Democrats need to demonstrate they can spend tax dollars wisely and be able to effectively manage public resources.

Further, many thought their constituents felt the government was rigged against them.

Democrats must do better to advocate to reform the system to ensure their constituent voices are heard instead of special interests – this includes campaign finance reform, gerrymandering and transparency.

> "Democrats need to do a better job of showing how we use tax dollars wisely," said Wisconsin State Rep. Katrina Shankland.

> "Democrats have to come into office emphasizing spending money wisely" and "be intellectually honest and not just want to spend, spend, spend," said Wisconsin State Sen. Robert Wirch.

> "People don't trust either party with spending. The Republicans cave to corporate interests. We need to put messaging in laymen's terms and equate money wasted with people's salaries or wages," said Minnesota State Rep. Jason Metsa.

> Wisconsin State Senator Jennifer Shilling said, "We need to be the reformer party." And use technology "in a smarter, more effective way… Why are we still printing phone books?"

3. BIG TENT: Bridge the Urban-Rural Divide by Welcoming Heartland Values

Differences have always existed between rural and urban areas, but the rural officials we interviewed feel their way of life, views on issues and culture are increasingly objects of derision and condescension by "urban elites".

Their perspective is that the party's priorities are shaped by elites from the coasts and Heartland legislators pay the price for policies, attitudes and messages that are counter to their local cultures and mores.

Perhaps the biggest complaint we heard from rural Democrats in the Heartland is that the Democratic Party, traditionally a party that welcomes diversity and inclusion, has become intolerant of dissenting views, especially on social issues.

"Don't talk down to rural voters. Talk to them as your neighbors, as equals. National Democrats are perceived as arrogant and we've lost credibility in rural (areas) because we're not in touch with people."

– IOWA STATE SEN. KEVIN KINNEY

> A former legislator said, "Democrats are seen as only for the elites, are snooty and look down on working class voters."
>
> Minnesota State Rep. Jeanne Poppe said, "Some in the party, especially from metro areas, are not tolerant of other opinions, especially on guns and abortion. It's OK, if you're liberal, to be intolerant."
>
> Former Indiana State Rep. Dennie Oxley said, "We say we're diverse and tolerant, but we're really not tolerant of certain groups."

The divide has manifested in differences in how people view and discuss social issues with each other.

Further, unlike most urban districts that are drawn with a disproportionate number of Democratic voters, many rural districts are competitive. Rural Democrats often need the votes of Republicans to win.

> Michigan State Rep. Tom Cochran said, "Rural Democrats have to reach out to more than just Democrats because voters in rural and working class areas will vote the candidate, not the party."
>
> Minnesota State Rep. Gene Pelowski said, "The 'metro-centrics' in our party don't know the difference between majority and minority. They just play to the base. They don't care about winning elections."

"We can't win with just Democratic votes. We've got to get Independent and Republican votes, too."

- MISSOURI STATE REP. BEN HARRIS

Local officials focused in on several social issues that can challenge Democratic messaging in rural areas including: **Abortion, Guns** and **Religion** and other hot button social issues**.**

For many interviewed the challenge is not the party's position, as much a matter of emphasis. They feel too often, social issues take priority to the *exclusion* of economic issues.

Consistently we heard that for the party to win more in rural areas and regain majority status in Washington and in Heartland states, Democrats need to become more inclusive of rural culture and focus on areas of broader agreement such as economic issues - but that's not what these officials or their constituents hear from the party on a day-to-day basis.

> "We cannot lose the cultural popularity contest and think we can still win elections,' said Iowa State Sen. Jeff Danielson. "We cannot constantly challenge basic cultural norms with academic arguments and lose our audience because voters see us as hostile to their way of life." He calls his approach to political culture "pragmatic populism."
>
> Former Michigan State Rep. Bill LaVoy connected with voters by talking about riding a motorcycle, hunting and fishing, and Iowa State Sen. Chaz Allen touts his experience as a race car driver on his Facebook and Twitter pages.
>
> Many of the people we spoke with own guns and are active in sporting activities. Former Indiana State Rep. Russ Stilwell described his southern Indiana district as comprised of "gun totin', Bible thumping, blue collar, flag waving patriots who would tell you like it is, expect you to listen to their concerns and want to know you care about people like them."

None of this should be interpreted to mean Democrats must be conservative on social issues to win in rural areas. In some areas, that may be truer than others. Many of those we interviewed said you can be progressive and win in rural areas. And while most are for marriage equality and pro-choice, they lead with issues like roads, schools, and jobs.

While the Democrats interviewed agreed the party should remain fierce advocates on many of these issues, they simply did not see those issues as being in the forefront of the minds of most voters they encounter. For those interviewed, it comes down to a matter of emphasis and pragmatism. "I can't fight for transgender issues if I'm not in office," said former Michigan State Rep. Collene Lamonte.

Abortion

While pro-choice is the dominant position in the national Democratic Party, many rural legislators hold pro-life positions that reflect their own views and those of their constituents.

There are pro-life Democrats from all Heartland states we reached out to. They do not want to feel they are being purged from the party.

> Former Missouri Rep. Steve Hodges added, "The pro-life position is important in rural Missouri."

Many expressed concerns with choice litmus tests and the impact that has on rural Democrats.

> "If (the party position is that Democrats can't be pro-life)… then, no, there isn't room for people like me," said Julie Berry who ran a close race for the Indiana Senate.
>
> Former Ohio State Rep. Nick Barborak, who considers himself pro-choice, said that "we might as well write off eastern Ohio" if the party rejects candidates who are pro-life.

Rural pro-choice Democrats we interviewed talked about abortion as an important issue, but one they emphasized less than other priorities, like kitchen table economic issues faced by all of their constituents.

> One Iowa legislator spoke of "out-front issues and back issues," and an Ohio legislator said they "are important but not the focus of what our message should be." Another former legislator said "it's not retreating to emphasize economic concerns in rural areas that are more unifying than cultural issues."
>
> Former Michigan State Rep. Terry Brown suggested reframing the issue. "When people hear pro-choice, they think anti-life." He suggests the party change its messaging to reflect Democratic support for the 'culture of life' which includes support for schools, health care and retirement security.

Guns

Perhaps no issue symbolizes the urban-rural divide more than guns. Rural Democrats interviewed described a feeling that their urban counterparts just don't understand the cultural dimension of this issue.

Former Missouri State Rep. Phil Tate traces Democrats' declining performance in rural areas to Bill Clinton and his gun control proposals in the 1990's. Republicans took the issue and "elevated it way beyond what it should have been."

Anti-gun perceptions of the national party are tied to local Democrats in rural areas and are difficult to overcome.

> Ohio State Rep. John Patterson described the issue in terms of the economic dislocations in rural areas. "Jobs leave, businesses leave. There's an additional sense of loss when their kids leave. Guns are seen as the last straw. Hunting and guns are part of the culture—it's who we are."
>
> Former Illinois State Sen. Gary Forby said the gun issue is a major reason why Democrats have lost the votes of union members in his district, deep in southern Illinois. "When I walked into union halls, they talked concealed carry first and union issues second."

Religion

Many rural Democrats spoke about the role of religion in rural areas and how the party needs to do a better job of talking about the role of faith in their lives.

Former Michigan State Rep. Terry Brown said Democrats should "stress freedom of religion, why we're for religious liberty and support all religions."

Wisconsin State Sen. Jennifer Shilling talked about how some socializing in rural areas occurs at churches and church events, and State Sen. Robert Wirch from Wisconsin said it's important to be seen at church events and provided an example of attending as many fish fries as he can during Lent.

Religion and faith remain the cornerstones of many aspects of life in the Heartland, and Democrats need to do better at sharing their own faith.

> Former Ohio State Rep. Chris Redfern said Democrats "need to talk faith and how it impacts our ability to make decisions."
>
> Indiana State Senate candidate Julie Berry said the Democratic brand has been tarnished as "unpatriotic" and too many people think "we don't love God and country." She added that "faith has to be a part of the conversation—all faiths and tolerance. The Republicans do NOT have a monopoly on faith."
>
> Former Missouri State Rep. Wes Shoemeyer added that if Democrats prioritize social issues in his region, "a Catholic and Southern Baptist world, you lose."
>
> A former legislator makes the argument that Democrats can win over voters by talking about faith. "Democrats are more compassionate and kind. They want to do what the Christians say to do—help people."
>
> Indiana Senate candidate Chuck Freiberger said Democrats need to "reframe family and moral issues along the lines of hard work, religion, family, and that includes women's and LGBT issues, where people are coming around. Hatred, as preached by Trump, is not a family value."

4. ADAPT: Re-think Strategies for Rural Campaigns

Beyond messaging, policy and culture, we also examined how campaigns are run in rural areas.

One of the most important takeaways from our Heartland outreach is the dissatisfaction of most elected officials with how rural campaigns are approached by party officials, activists and consultants.

One thing is clear: What we've been doing hasn't been working in the rural Midwest.

The Democratic Party needs an honest, comprehensive examination of its leadership, campaign strategies and tactics, key players and, perhaps above all, its attitude, to turn things around and to begin winning elections in rural areas. As conveyed by these officials who have been successful, candidates in rural areas must do three key things:

1) **SHOW UP** – It is not enough to try to reach rural voters from afar. This is particularly true for national races. You must show you care enough about their votes to show up.

    Indiana State Senate candidate Chuck Freiberger said, "People like to see you. Be active in the community. Be seen."

    Illinois State Sen. Andy Manar's first rule of thumb (and advice to rural candidates) is to put himself in uncomfortable places. For every comfortable place, such as churches or the chicken dinner circuit, he puts himself in an uncomfortable place—"places or events that tend to draw Republican voters." He said, "Just my presence there and showing my face goes a long ways with those voters."

2) **LISTEN** - We are born with one mouth and two ears. Both as candidates and as a party, local officials cited the need to do a better job of listening to voters' concerns in rural areas and to those who have had success in campaigns in rural areas.

    Former Ohio State Representative and state party chair Chris Redfern said national Democrats never sought out his advice on campaigning despite the fact that the state was carried by President Obama twice and won the Ohio House of Representatives under his leadership.

    Indiana State Rep. Steve Stemler echoed that feeling, saying, "Nobody ever reached out to me." He has served since 2006.

"The party better start listening to a few of us left here in rural"

- MINNESOTA STATE REP. GENE PELOWSKI

"Democratic leaders don't understand the needs of rural voters," said former Illinois State Senator John Sullivan.

3) **WORK HARD** – This is a given in all races, but particularly true in rural areas. Some interviewed feel the party as a whole became sluggish and perhaps too complacent in recent years, underestimating the need to organize, party build and undertake traditional constituent outreach. These activities are layered on the already required time commitment necessary to raise funds to even compete.

"Nobody wants to organize anymore, and the party has become lazy," Indiana State Rep. Terry Goodin said.

"We lost the majority because we got lazy and outworked," said former Missouri State Rep. Phil Tate.

After Indiana allowed voter registration at driver's license facilities, "Democrats got lazy," said Indiana State Senate candidate Chuck Frieberger and "didn't keep personal contact and lost ground."

CAMPAIGN TACTICS

Beyond these three overarching principles, many of the current and former legislators spoke of the need to rethink our strategic approach to races in the Heartland – including specific strategies.

Many were highly critical of the Democratic Party's approach to campaigns in rural areas. They believe campaigning is different in rural areas compared with urban settings and that Democratic Party campaign operatives, leaders and consultants too often apply "cookie cutter" approaches that aren't effective.

Those interviewed believe the national and state parties need to overhaul their approaches to rural campaigning, cultivate new campaign operatives and consultants with expertise in rural areas and, above all, listen to their ideas and feedback on what they are hearing directly from people at the grassroots level as well as which campaign and party building techniques work and those that don't.

To be clear, these tactics should be considered in the unique context of each race (focus, scope, level of seat). It will always be necessary to devote time to fundraising to build the resources necessary to run effective campaigns.

While races will still need to evaluate the use of TV and social media, the tactics discussed in further detail below may need to be approached differently in rural campaigns, depending on location and whether the race is local, state or federal.

Recruitment

A key is candidate recruitment. Former Indiana State Rep. Russ Stilwell referenced former Indiana House Speaker John Gregg's strategy of going into small towns and talking to people in coffee shops, at the Chamber of Commerce and at fraternal organizations. He would ask who the most popular person in town was, find a consensus and go visit the top two or three people and recruit them to run. Candidates should fit the district's demographics and culture and be involved in the community.

"Campaigns in rural are often about the candidate," said former Minnesota State Rep. Ted Winter.

> "We've got to get back to what Rahm Emanuel did—recruit people who can win in the districts--PERIOD," said former Indiana State Rep. Dennie Oxley. "If we want to be in the majority, recruit those who can win."
>
> Michigan State Rep. Tom Cochran said, "We don't develop a farm team—a base of local candidates for office who can be ready to move up. We didn't do it and still don't do it."

Consultants

According to those interviewed, dissatisfaction extends to party consultants who rural Democrats see as pushing "cookie-cutter" approaches to campaigns and who advocate tactics more suited to urban areas than rural.

Most of all, candidates and officeholders in the Heartland just want party leaders, activists and consultants to listen to them and respect their views on what it takes to win in rural areas.

> "We select the same people and make the same mistakes over and over again. Democrats do things the same old way and are shocked when they get the same results. There's no accountability, and it's the same old message," said a former legislator. "They (party leaders and consultants) only want to listen to the pollster. They don't care what we're hearing on the ground."

The Basics: Canvassing, Absentee Ballots, Get-Out-The-Vote

Iowa State Sen. Jeff Danielson said campaigns need to put their energies into canvassing, absentee ballots and Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV), the building blocks of campaigns.

Candidates should commit to pursuing these objectives before the party commits to helping them.

For example, Indiana State Rep. Terry Goodin focused heavily on voter identification. Through door-to-door and quick, three-minute phone calls, his campaign identifies straight Democratic voters.

Door-to-Door

Rural candidates approach door-to-door campaigning differently in small towns.

Many rural Democrats we spoke with feel it's a mistake to only knock specific, targeted doors in rural small towns. Instead, many said they knock all doors of registered voters. "If they're a registered voter, I want to talk to them," said Missouri State Rep. Ben Harris, the only remaining rural Democrat in the state legislature. "Some hard Rs slammed their doors in my face, but others let me put up yard signs."

> Minnesota State Rep. Paul Marquart goes door-to-door even in off-years, and hits every door. "There's a difference in campaigning in rural areas. If you pass doors, people will notice. If you have to travel an hour to get to a small town and an hour back, it makes sense to hit 'em all and meet as many people as possible."
>
> Wisconsin State Sen. Janet Bewley conducts what she calls "Main Streeting," where she visits every business in small towns. Her goal is often just wanting people to say "she's OK," that she's "safe" to know and vote for. "All I want for people to know is that I'm on their side."

Radio

Most officials we spoke with feel radio advertising is a "necessity" for rural districts, as former Iowa State Rep. Patty Ruff put it.

Michigan State Rep. Scott Dianda believes radio is important because it zeroes in on older voters who are a more important demographic in rural areas.

Additionally, with lots of blue collar workers spending their days driving or working on a site, radio is a good way to reach them all day.

Officials who use radio generally focus their ads to run during morning farm programs and call-in shows.

> Former Michigan State Rep. Terry Brown believes the party needs to "advance what we're doing in rural America by using radio with brief updates on rural issues. The Republicans do this effectively. People in rural areas don't hear about us local Democrats at all. Our voices need to be heard."

Phones

Some officials feel the party uses phones too much, and it turns off voters with continuous phone calling, especially in the late stages of campaigns.

While phones are often a part of necessary voter identification and outreach efforts, rural Democrats feel they should be used more strategically and paired better with other activities.

> According to Indiana State Rep. Terry Goodin, "Working people buy phone minute cards at Walmart and don't want to spend a lot of time on the phone for polls or ID calls."

Mail

Rural Democrats understand that direct mail is a necessity, but some feel the campaigns send too many mailers and many, like former Minnesota State Rep. Terry Morrow, criticized the cookie cutter nature of most mail that lacks in creativity.

Some advocate the party study the effectiveness of mail, especially when campaigns send up to 20 pieces.

Newspaper Ads

Most modern campaigns don't put a priority on newspaper ads for small weekly papers common in rural areas.

While there wasn't unanimity among people we spoke with, many strongly believe advertising in small town weeklies is important for rural candidates.

These officials also send news releases to weeklies and some write opinion essays because smaller papers will frequently print them.

There is an acknowledgement that social media is vital these days to reach voters, especially younger people, but also that weekly newspapers are still critical to reaching voters in small towns and surrounding rural areas, especially seniors.

Former Indiana State Rep. Dennie Oxley said, “People read them cover-to-cover,” an opinion echoed by other rural officials.

“They are the only papers in my district,” added former Iowa State Rep. Patti Ruff.

Validators

Several officials talked about the importance of seeking the right people to feature in campaign advertisements as endorsers.

Wisconsin State Rep. Katrina Shankland talked about the importance of reaching “thought leaders” in rural areas and small towns who can influence others.

Michigan State Rep. Jon Hoadley said, “Personal validation is critical in this fake news era.” He suggested people in “tiers 2-3,” not the most popular people in communities, be sought out for endorsements and testimonials. Get people who are “popular at churches or on the block” and communicate the endorsements through mail and digital.

Year-round outreach

Officials in at least two states spoke of how Americans for Prosperity, the Koch brothers’ super PAC, has year-round offices throughout their states with full-time staff dedicated to identifying voters. The party needs to match that effort to be able to compete in the future.

A former legislator said, “We need to ID people. A lot of new people voted and had to re-register. These voters were mad as heck. The GOP is always sending voter registration forms to people.”

Data and Analytics

Modern campaigns from the presidential to local levels have increasingly relied on data analytics for decision making, involving everything from messaging to fundraising.

Rural Democrats we spoke with conceded the importance of data, but many strongly suggested that the party focused too much on the science of campaigns to the detriment of the art of campaigning.

For example, Wisconsin State Sen. Janet Bewley feels the party relies too much on data and analytics.

Ohio State Rep. candidate Ginny Favede said volunteers used flawed lists and walked two blocks to knock one door. “Volunteers were grumbling because they were passing people they knew in houses that should have been knocked.”

A former legislator said, “Our data was just really bad.”

CONCLUSION: WE CAN WIN

After the electoral routs suffered by Democrats in the Heartland in recent years, the incumbents we spoke with are survivors.

Others fell short in recent election cycles, and a good share of the cause can be traced to the damaged Democratic brand and top of the ticket candidates.

These Heartland Democrats are battle-tested, have faced the voters in Republican waves and are still standing.

The moods of those we interviewed varied from frustration with the party, to anger at Democratic party leaders, to hope that the party can do better in the future and rediscover its roots and message.

Several of the people we spoke with described their rural districts as "forgotten" by the Democratic Party. Ohio State Rep. John Patterson said, "You don't need a passport to come to northeast Ohio."

The message delivered to us: 'Don't give up on rural.'

These rural Democrats haven't given up hope. Some are concerned that, after an initial flurry of interest in the Heartland after the 2016 election, attention will fade.

The feeling was unanimous that Democrats can earn votes back, but only with a better, more disciplined approached to winning these tough Heartland races.

But the problems Democrats face in rural and working class areas aren't going away. In fact, the stakes have never been higher.

The next two election cycles will be critical for the long-term strength of the party. Redistricting in 2020 could consign Democrats to minority status for another 10 years in these states and in Congress if we fall short.

The officials we interviewed suggested the following opportunities for future action:

- Democrats need to emphasize issues that unite the party and go back to core principles on economic opportunity, increasing incomes, and economic security.
    - Specific opportunities for rural Democrats are in infrastructure, education, small business, security (both economic and safety), agriculture, and reducing government waste.
    - The party needs to develop new policy ideas for the state and local levels. Several called for a strong and robust Democratic policy shop as powerful as ALEC on the right.
- The party needs to develop better communications tools, outreach, entities and messaging to counter Fox News, talk radio and conservative social media.
- The party needs a comprehensive review of leadership and campaign apparatuses, consultants and strategies. Many rural leaders want new blood and fresh approaches.

- The party needs to broaden the concept of the working class, which includes not just union members, but also other types of workers and small business owners.
- The party needs to get back to a "Big Tent" philosophy that embraces those who agree on the vast majority of issues, but who may have dissenting views on certain issues.
- The party needs to engage with existing rural and working class Democrats on a more regular basis to learn from their experiences and chart the path forward.

These rural voices should be heard as they provide a valuable message to Democrats as we prepare for this next election cycle.

With close to a thousand seats lost across the country in the last decade, now is the critical time to examine everything from top to bottom.

The stakes are enormous. The party cannot get back to majority status in either Washington or state capitals in the Heartland without bringing the wisdom of rural working class voters to national debates.

And in the words of Iowa's newly elected State Rep. Phil Miller, "I know we can get them (Obama-Trump Voters) back. I got them back."

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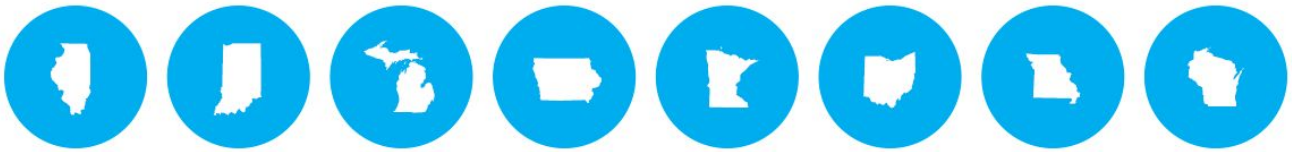
VOICES FROM THE HEARTLAND



A DEEPER DIVE

By Congresswoman Cheri Bustos and Robin Johnson

Voices From The Heartland

Indiana: State Rep. Terry Goodin

Traditional political thought holds that a Democratic-drawn map virtually guarantees Democratic control of a legislative body. Democratic mapmakers will draw districts that cram Republican voters into a limited number of districts and spread Democratic voters out as much as possible yet still win enough districts to achieve a majority. That is, until a Republican tsunami hit Indiana politics in 2010.

Democrats went from a 52 to 48 majority in the Indiana House to a 40 to 59 minority overnight with a map their leaders had drawn. Armed with a new map drawn by Republican leaders, Republicans furthered the Democratic devastation by reducing their number of seats to 30.

With one exception, Democrats are limited to bigger cities, university towns and suburbs. The outlier is Terry Goodin, the only rural Democrat remaining in the Indiana legislature.

It wasn't always that way. Goodin, who was first elected in 2000, recalls when the Democrats had a majority in the General Assembly and one-third of the members were from southern Indiana with most from rural districts.

In fact, Democrats controlled the Indiana House 13 of the last 25 years. They most recently had control in 2010. And Goodin is vocal about where at least part of the blame lies.

The national Democratic Party is "out of touch with mainstream America" and "it's a regional party from the two coasts," Goodin said. "It's the party of political correctness" and "too much identity politics" where "winners and losers are picked by their labels."

He said there are still local Democratic officials in his area because voters "look past party labels and they know the individual candidates."

"These voters are still Democrats locally but 'feel abandoned' by the national party. They are moderate and want the two parties 'working together.'"

– INDIANA STATE REP. TERRY GOODIN

Goodin's rural district shows how Democratic fortunes have flowed over the years and is a microcosm of the party's fortunes in rural Indiana. His three counties, Clark, Jefferson and Scott, were all won by Bill Clinton twice in the 1990's. Al Gore won Scott, and came close in Clark in 2000. John Kerry slipped

below 45% in all three counties, but Barack Obama, although losing all three both times, was competitive with percentages ranging from 44% to 48%.

However, Hillary Clinton's numbers were awful. Her best county in Goodin's district was Clark with 36% of the vote. She received 32% in Jefferson and 29% in Scott, Goodin's home county, where he ran *44%* ahead of her. He also outpaced her by 23% in Jefferson and 17% in Clark.

Rural Indiana will play an important role in determining first-term Senator Joe Donnelly's fate in 2018. He won all three of Goodin's counties with numbers ranging from 49% to 53% and will need to be competitive next year because of the lower turnout typically seen in non-presidential elections.

How does Goodin remain in office when so many rural Democrats have lost? One of his keys to success is matching the culture of his district.

He describes himself as similar to *Hillbilly Elegy* author, J.D. Vance, in terms of his Appalachian background and upbringing.

Goodin is more conservative on cultural issues, but progressive on economic issues.

For example he said the national party needs to "get off the gun issue." Get it out of the platform and "leave it to the states to address." He said he has a lot of trappers and hunters in his district—probably 40%- and they are pro-gun rights.

The agenda for the party should focus on jobs and "helping kids have a better life" but "we're not there now" with too many $9 to $10 an hour jobs. He believes in a minimum wage increase but suggests different terminology, such as a living wage, because the term minimum wage may have become "too stigmatized or, even worse, portrayed as the least or minimum of something."

He suggests the party "use Bernie Sanders' playbook" for talking to working class voters. We've let "the Republicans steal the economic issue." Goodin said area factories are begging for employees but the pay is only around $10 an hour.

He suggested policies that require jobs created to pay at least what people can receive from welfare to eliminate disincentives to work.

Government should not subsidize any firms that don't pay a living wage or to companies that take jobs overseas, he said.

Another key issue is education reform. Goodin, a school superintendent, feels we are "stuck in the 20th century" in education policy, and his district has a program where 30% of recent high school graduates also received their associate's degree. As part of this program, graduates earn their Associate's Degree with no cost to them. Obviously, "this is an affordable college initiative."

Goodin said this program, in effect for five years, hasn't had any downsides and feels it's the type of innovative effort the party needs to offer new ideas to voters to help make their lives better.

Goodin also has strong feelings regarding campaign techniques. He is adamant that the federal and state parties stay out of his district and has developed his own program focused on voter identification and mobilization.

Goodin feels the party uses phones too much and relates how the most popular bill the legislature passed during his tenure was the "Do Not Call" bill.

Also, he said “working people buy phone minute cards at WalMart and don’t want to spend a lot of time on the phone for polls or ID calls.”

According to Goodin, the lack of creativity in campaigns is part of a broader malady inflicting the Democratic Party. He said “nobody wants to organize” anymore, and the party has become “lazy.” He advocates less mail and phones, saying they have been the party’s “downfall” in campaigns.

While mail is still important, he suggests fewer mail pieces and “more creativity.”

Goodin’s creativity in both policy and politics provides some lessons for national Democrats on how they can do better in rural areas. It all starts with hard work, something Goodin, who also raises cattle on his family farm, knows something about.

It’s also about knowing the district, reflecting its people and priorities and simply living up to the phrase, “He’s a Goodin.”

Voices From The Heartland

Iowa: State Sen. Rita Hart

The counties along the Mississippi River in Iowa provide some of the clearest illustrations of the Obama-Trump vote and implications for the future of the Democratic Party.

Iowa had more Obama-Trump counties than any state in the nation, which led to a winning margin in the state greater than Texas (9.5% versus 9%). Iowa's 31 Obama-Trump counties were 26% of the total in the entire country.

A cluster of these counties are in the northern part of the state but perhaps the most significant group runs along the Mississippi River. Every county but one (Scott) running from the Missouri to Minnesota state lines voted for Obama twice and switched to Trump. The drop-off from Obama's 2008 victory to Clinton's 2016 loss ranges from 43.7% in Jackson County to 22% in Dubuque County. The margins between Obama's 2012 reelection and 2016 range from 22.8% in Clinton County to .6% in Louisa County.

These are mostly post-industrial counties with significant numbers of white, working class voters who were attracted by Trump's message of attacking unfair trade deals, rebuilding the nation's infrastructure and his blunt, plain-spoken style.

Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders split the 10 counties along the river during the Democratic caucuses.

The counties feature medium-sized, working class cities surrounded by small towns and rural areas.

They gave Democratic presidential candidates from 2000 to 2012 between 55% and 60% of the vote. Obama won all 10 counties twice, Gore won 9 of them and Kerry 8. Hillary Clinton won only one.

The Democratic defeat at the top of the ticket reverberated down to legislative races. Democrats lost two seats in the House including Rep. Patti Ruff from Allamakee and Clayton Counties in the far northeastern part of the state.

The results in the State Senate were worse, with six Democrat incumbents going down to defeat and the party losing control of the chamber for the first time since 2006. Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal went down to defeat, and long-time incumbent Tom Courtney lost his seat that included Des Moines County and Louisa County along the Mississippi.

Republicans control both houses of the legislature and the Governor's office and have now implemented a far right agenda of stripping away collective bargaining rights, cutting education and privatizing Medicaid.

The results obviously haven't escaped the notice of State Sen. Rita Hart. She's a mother of five who owns and operates a farm with her husband in rural Clinton County, which had the largest shift from Obama in 2008 to Trump in 2016. Her district is competitive. She first won her Senate seat in 2012 with 54% of the

vote and won reelection in 2014 with 52%. She is one of five incumbents likely to be targeted by Republicans in 2018.

Can Democrats win back voters who crossed over for Trump?

Hart believes the Trump victory was a "one-off" because these voters' hopes for change are being disappointed.

"We need to be able to develop a strategy to bring them back in and let them know we care," she said. "And our candidates need to be more authentic and attentive to people's concerns."

Hart demonstrates her care and authenticity by meeting voters at their doors and listening to their concerns.

She spoke of how she learned through door-to-door of many older women struggling to make ends meet. The women made more money in the past than they do now and are now making do with less.

During a discussion at a local diner, she soothed the concerns of an elderly woman expressing fears that her health care would be taken away after she learned about Republican proposals to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

Hart's district captures the changes in the economy over the past 20 years and how new ideas are needed for these areas to remain competitive in today's world.

The largest employer in the district is Archer Daniels Midland, which is tied to the agricultural economy. Manufacturing jobs in Clinton fell from 36% of total jobs in 1970 to 20% in 2010 while median household incomes dropped from 101% of the national level to 76%. The city's population declined nearly 25%.

This story is similar in other manufacturing towns along the Mississippi in Iowa and in the Heartland.

To address the economic challenges, Hart's top priorities are jobs and education and, as a former teacher, she talks about the inseparability of the two.

"She acts as a facilitator of her district and focuses on 'bringing people together' with the primary focus on economic development."

– IOWA STATE SEN. RITA HART

Hart brought local economic development groups together as Chair of the Clinton County Economic Development Coordinating Council to network and align their missions. She also works with the Clinton Mayor's Group that meets regularly.

She notes the importance of having small town mayors involved because they are part-time and lack the expertise and contacts that exist for larger city mayors. This effort fits into her philosophy

of wanting the state to help steer and coordinate local efforts that could foster job attraction and retention.

Hart is also passionate about the role of community colleges and how they can strengthen workforce development and improve skills training. Much of community college is already "free" because area schools have expansive policies, allowing high school students to attain college credits.

She believes that rethinking community college should be part of an effort of reforming education in the state, from pre-school to college levels.

Beyond policy, Hart feels the Democrats need to upgrade their campaign strategies as well. Especially for rural areas.

"Too much money is spent on direct mail," she said. "It irritated people."

She feels the Republicans use radio more often and more effectively.

To counter that, Democrats need radio "to appeal to blue collar voters" by being "more clever" and using "humor and music."

She said newspaper ads are "more effective in small towns and rural areas." Social media can be used as a "hammer" and needs to be clever as well.

Hart's race and others in Iowa will be closely watched to see if Trump working class voters will come back to Democrats, remain with the Republicans or stay home.

Democrats like Hart have a chance to reverse the loss of these voters and begin Iowa Democrats' road to recovery from the disaster of 2016.

Voices From The Heartland

Illinois: State Rep. Jerry Costello, Jr.

For a rural Democratic legislator like Jerry Costello, Jr., the Illinois political landscape holds both good and bad news.

First the good news.

Illinois is the outlier among the states in the Heartland region. It is the only state where Democrats maintained control in the state legislature from 2009 to the present and where the party seems likely to maintain control.

In the State Senate, Democrats still maintain the 37-22 majority they enjoyed in 2009.

In the General Assembly, Democrats controlled 70 seats in 2009 and currently have 67.

The party also holds both U.S. Senate seats and a majority of the congressional delegation (11 out of 18). Although, only one of those Democrats in the U.S. House is from outside Chicagoland and represents a Rural Congressional District.

Illinois has seen a major shift in regional population and voting patterns during recent decades.

The downstate region outside of Chicago and its suburban and collar county areas used to have more Democratic legislators from its rural areas than it does now. In the 1980's and '90's, Democrats held seats in downstate areas that were largely rural, such as Mount Vernon, Effingham and Centralia. Some downstate Democratic legislators represent districts with rural areas, but they are largely urban or have a major university.

"Now, there are just two House members and one Senator from rural districts. And one of the House members just announced his retirement, and Costello has a political bounty on him placed by the deep-pocketed incumbent Republican governor."

– ILLINOIS STATE REP. JERRY COSTELLO, JR.

Population declines in downstate areas, combined with population growth and outmigration from Chicago to surrounding suburbs and counties, led to Democratic gains in the suburbs and losses

downstate. In addition, the decline of coal and manufacturing downstate caused a decrease in union membership and sapped Democratic strength.

Rural population declines are likely to continue in Illinois. Between 2010 and 2016, almost every rural county in the state (60 out of 62) lost population, including both rural counties in Costello's district.

Hillary Clinton won only seven counties outside of Chicago and the suburban collar counties in 2016. Democratic U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth won 12 counties the same year. U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, also a Democrat, won 11 counties two years earlier, far off from his performance in 2008 when he won all but three counties statewide.

Former Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn won only three downstate counties in 2010 and none in 2014. Former Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich did much better, winning 34 downstate counties in 2002 and 34 in 2006, including many in southern Illinois.

The performance of the Democratic Party at the presidential level is a factor in the disappearance of rural Democrats. Rural incumbents who held against the wave for many years either succumbed to defeat or saw the seats flip to Republicans after their retirements.

Former Democratic Rep. Kurt Granberg served a rural southern Illinois district for 22 years until his retirement in 2009. Republicans have held the seat ever since. Former Democratic State Sen. John Sullivan served for 14 years, representing a western Illinois district before retiring in 2015. A Republican replaced him, running unopposed.

Former Democratic Sen. Gary Forby represented a rural State Senate district at the far southern end of the state for 14 years, staving off millions of dollars of attack ads, before being ousted in 2016. He said Democrats are hoping to recruit candidates to attempt to take back his senate seat and a house district the party lost in 2016.

Trends in presidential voting in Costello's district tell the story. He represents the 116th District, located southeast of St. Louis along the Mississippi River. In Monroe County, the largest and most Republican in his district, Democratic performance varied from 36% to 42% between 1988 and 2012 until Hillary Clinton dropped to 29% in 2016. In the most Democratic county, St. Clair, Democratic performance didn't vary much during the 1988 to 2012 period, ranging from 54% to 60%. Clinton fell to 50% in 2016. The other two counties, Perry and Randolph, have slowly shifted from Democratic to Republican. Bill Clinton won these counties twice and even Mike Dukakis won them in 1988. Gore won Perry and lost Randolph. Kerry and Obama in 2008 were competitive in both, but Obama dropped to 40% in both in 2012. And Clinton declined to about 25% in both last year.

Costello survived these trends by blending a working class-centric approach to economic issues and a conservative cultural profile to match his district. He won with 62% of the vote in 2012 and was unopposed in both elections since.

Costello, Chair of the Downstate Democratic Caucus said, "The Democratic brand is hugely damaged, and it's going to take a while to bring it back. Democrats in southern Illinois have been more identified by bathrooms than by putting people back to work."

Area Democrats were also hurt by Hillary Clinton's comments on coal. The national party is "not viewed as helpful and it causes more harm than good to be associated with it. We have pushed the working class into the Republican Party," Costello added.

While economic issues are important, he also pointed to polls last year showing guns and abortion to be among the most important issues in his district. The Democrats have "got to find a way to bridge the urban-rural divide," which, because of Chicago, is most salient in Illinois among all Heartland states.

Costello urged urban Democrats to acknowledge that "guns and the 2nd Amendment are heritage issues in southern Illinois and that responsible, legal gun ownership is passed from generation to generation."

Costello described how the local economy changed from a manufacturing focus in the 1960's to services in the 2010's with the number of union members declining from 33% in 1960 to 11% in 2011.

He's found an economic message that resonates with his working class constituents: CEO's make 300 times what average workers made compared with 20 times their pay when manufacturing was central to the economy.

He looks for "people in the middle." "If I can get Independents and Republicans to talk issues, I can usually get them to come around" because of his more conservative views, especially on cultural issues.

Costello firmly believes Democrats can win back working class Trump supporters. We need "fundamental change within the party." The party is now "urban-focused" and needs to get the focus "more balanced" with rural. It will need a "grassroots, ground-up solution."

He advocates a 10-year plan on economic revival that targets millennials. He also wants to focus on reaching out to small businesses, pointing out that 80% of people are employed in small businesses in the U.S. He wants to "level the playing field between large and small businesses, especially on state economic development incentives."

Costello is especially interested in the role of electric cooperatives in rural America and a possible increased role for co-ops in other areas of rural development.

Overall, the party needs a "unifying message on the quality of rural life, involving agriculture, health care and jobs."

While Democrats will likely maintain control in Illinois because of strength in Chicago and the surrounding counties, the outlook for downstate Democrats is less certain.

Economic, cultural and political trends during the past 20 years led to Republican dominance outside of larger downstate cities, such as Rockford, Peoria, Champaign and Rock Island-Moline.

Policy ideas put forth by Costello can lay the groundwork for rural Democrats to become more competitive, but that's only one side of the equation. The question remains of how urban and rural Democrats can overcome their cultural differences that can hurt rural candidates in down-ballot races.

Voices From The Heartland

Ohio: State Rep. Jack Cera

To visualize this gritty blue collar area of southeastern Ohio, think of the opening scenes of the movie "The Deer Hunter," where a group of close friends worked in the steel mills, hunted in the surrounding mountainous terrain, drank excessively and lived by a code of family, friends, church and loyalty before the Vietnam War shattered their lives.

In fact, some of the scenes were filmed in towns within Jack Cera's 96th State House District.

Those industrial days are gone, and the region is struggling to replace those good-paying steel and coal jobs with new ones that can support a middle class existence.

That's why Cera openly hopes for his district to become the "Saudi Arabia of Ohio."

Now serving his second stint in the Ohio House, Cera witnessed the economic hardships brought about by the vanishing steel and coal industries.

"We lived off coal forever. We didn't have Ohio State University to support us like Columbus," Cera said. He labels his area of the state the "Forgotten Ohio" because Republicans have refused to share oil and gas severance taxes with the southern part of the state. "The elites in Columbus don't understand oil and gas as an industry."

The big economic prize the region is pinning its hopes on is a planned $6 billion investment by a Thai firm that will process oil and gas into plastic. It will create 4,000-6,000 construction jobs and 800 permanent jobs. It will also attract a lot of spin-off jobs.

Cera is well aware of the environmental risks of oil and gas drilling, especially fracking. They have experienced some moderate earthquakes, not due to fracking, but due to injection wells. And his support for the oil and gas industry caused problems with environmental groups. But he feels the economic rewards outweigh the environmental risks. These views have caused him "problems within our own caucus." But good-paying jobs are hard to come by and much needed to replace the lost coal and steel jobs, he said.

The 96th District lies in Appalachia, a region of the nation long associated with deep poverty.

Cera talked of old Appalachia and how Eleanor Roosevelt and Bobby Kennedy both visited the region. He said "things aren't that much different now from the old Appalachia. The safety net helps, but some still live in extremely bad conditions. I don't represent a wealthy area… even working people are living day-to-day."

In 1983, there were 18,000 union mineworkers in his region, and now there are none.

> **"We've also lost lots of factory workers, but many blame us (Democrats) for not caring for them."**
>
> – OHIO STATE REP. JACK CERA

Economic decline coincided with political shifts as the Democrats have lost seats in rural Ohio.

He also blamed the Democratic Party, saying it "has gotten away from an economic message" and that it needs to get one and "keep on message."

Cera appeals to "F.D.R. Democrats" who "don't want to hear about social issues." These issues "have driven working class voters away from us. Every time we talk about peripheral issues, we get off message and we lose votes."

"Trump talked trade, coal and jobs, and working class voters will hopefully find out it's B.S." Cera emphasized the peripheral issues are important but not the focus of what the message should be. He described himself as "pro-coal, pro-gun and moderate pro-life."

Instead, he wants the Democrats to "focus on meat and potatoes issues—things that matter most to people (in my district). The party needs to be interested in working class issues—jobs and making sure kids have better opportunities. People don't want to hear retraining. They want jobs."

Republicans have dominated in Ohio at the state-level over the past 25 years. While Bill Clinton and Barack Obama carried the state twice, only Ted Strickland won the Governor's race for one term during that time period. He won most of the counties in the state and a majority of rural counties, including all of Appalachia.

Bill Clinton won Cera's district twice and Obama once, but the three counties shifted to Romney in 2012. Obama lost by five points in Jefferson County and eight points in Belmont and Monroe Counties. However, Hillary Clinton in 2016 lost these counties by 35, 39 and 47 points respectively.

Cera said Hillary Clinton "was killed" by her comments on coal and miners. And Clinton's poor performance had negative repercussions for down ballot races.

Democrats have fared far worse at the legislative level in Ohio. In the past 25 years, they controlled the House for only five years, most recently in 2009-10. They have not controlled the State Senate at all during that period. The party was hurt by gerrymandered districts after the 2010 election that cost the party seats mainly in rural and suburban areas.

But 2018 may provide an opportunity for Democrats to begin coming back in Ohio since the political landscape traditionally favors the party not holding the White House.

Part of the recovery process will be getting rural, working class voters who crossed over for Trump to come back to the Democrats.

Cera thinks it's possible to gain back Obama-Trump working class voters by "getting them to pay attention to what the Republicans have been doing to them for 20 years."

He said many working class voters in Ohio he's spoken with said they "knew Trump was full of it but voted for him because he's not Hillary. He's an outsider and they are tired of politics as usual."

A sign that may help guide the party forward is the results from a 2011 statewide referendum (Issue 2) on a measure that would overturn a Republican-backed law eliminating public employee collective bargaining rights. A no vote protected collective bargaining rights for public employees. Issue 2 lost 39% to 61% and carried only six counties. The measure failed in all three of Cera's counties – 31% to 69% in Jefferson and Belmont Counties and 26% to 74% in Monroe County. These strong results seem to confirm Cera's belief that economic issues are most salient to working class voters in his area, and they still hold working class values.

But the party label still carries baggage and needs overhauled to offer rural Democrats any hope.

For Cera, it's starts with simplifying the party's message. "We've lost touch as Democrats. The elites in our party overthink this stuff on messaging. We need to speak more about infrastructure, education and jobs."

Voices From The Heartland

Minnesota: State Reps. Rob Ecklund and Jason Metsa

Like in southeastern Ohio, the need for good-paying jobs in natural resource extraction industries in northeastern Minnesota creates tensions between the labor and environmental wings of the Democratic Party.

In both states, industries that serve as a major source of jobs have environmental impacts with political consequences.

In Appalachian Ohio, the industry is oil and gas. In the Minnesota Iron Range, it's mining.

Democrats representing these rural regions feel the party's messaging and policies are driving voters away from the party.

Rob Ecklund, represents House District 3A, which borders Wisconsin, Canada and Lake Superior and includes all or parts of four counties, all in the Iron Range. He lives in International Falls which is on the Canadian border and is referred to as the "Icebox of the Nation."

His heritage is bound with the politics of the region: Ecklund worked in a paper mill and served as President of the Steelworker's local union. His district depends on mines and paper mills for good-paying jobs. The mines were worked by union members who voted Democratic and provided a strong base for candidates outside the Minneapolis-St. Paul region. But he is starting to see slippage in Democratic support because of the party's weakening commitment to the working class.

"We left normal working class people behind... The party needs to get back to a focus on jobs... Our area needs logging and mining to survive, and the companies are constantly on the defensive."

– MINNESOTA STATE REPS. ROB ECKLUND

Minnesota nearly joined Wisconsin and Michigan as surprise wins for Trump in the Heartland region. He lost to Clinton by only 1.5% in the state. But the effects of Clinton's poor performance were felt down ballot. Democrats were hopeful of regaining the State House, but instead lost three seats. The party controlled the State House for 13 of the last 25 years and lost control in 2014. The longer term trend is ominous: Democrats went from controlling 87 seats in the Minnesota House in 2009 to 58 in 2017, a loss of 29 seats.

The real damage came in the State Senate, where Democrats went from a 10-vote majority to losing control by one vote. Among the losses were five senior Democrats from rural areas.

The State Senate was a foundation of Democratic strength in Minnesota. The party controlled the Senate all but three of the past 25 years and had a 46 to 21 majority in 2009.

In the last two campaign cycles, Minnesota Democrats lost control of both houses of the legislature, with critical losses occurring in rural areas. In 2016, the state had the third-highest number of counties in the nation that voted for Obama twice and Trump.

Ecklund felt the effects of the Republican surge in rural areas, warning that rural Minnesota is "swinging from purple to red."

Western Minnesota, from the Canadian border to Iowa, "used to be all Democratic years ago, but now there are only three Democrats left."

He sees his district going purple "within two election cycles." His district includes Koochiching County, which flipped 30 points from Obama in 2008 to Trump in 2016.

The neighboring district to the south, District 6B, also in the Iron Range, is trending away from Democrats as well. Jason Metsa, a field coordinator for the North East Area Labor Council, was first elected in 2012 with 68% of the vote, was reelected in 2014 with 64% and won in 2016 with 61%.

His legislative district voted Republican in the presidential race last year for the first time since 1932.

He referenced the fact that his district was "70% DPI (Democratic Performance Index) in 2012 and is down to 60% in the latest election."

He echoed Ecklund's belief that the region is changing, and that his district is trending to swing in the next six to eight years on the present course.

"It's frustrating," Metsa said.

"Democrats have lost the faith of regular folks that our party stands for jobs."

– MINNESOTA STATE REPS. JASON METSA

Ecklund places part of the blame on the urban-rural divide in Minnesota and the cultural differences between city and rural officials.

"There are a lot of pro-life Democrats in Minnesota," Ecklund said. He is a gun owner and said, because of that, "I am looked at as a whacko by some in my caucus.

"The Republicans have taken the gun issue away from us. We need to get our rural voices and ideas into the platform more.

"Our message became far too splintered to please social groups. I support all their causes but we are getting away from what our message should be. We need to become the 'Big Tent' party again."

Economic issues could help unify the party except for the battle over mining that pits unions against environmentalists. He said there are a couple of large mining firms looking to expand opportunities locally. One is to mine for copper, one of the precious metals needed for, among other things, cell phones. "We can use domestic copper from here in the United States instead of importing it," Ecklund said. He gets allies "from the other side (Republicans) while our party is trying to shut us down."

Metsa agrees with Ecklund, saying that **"people want $40 an hour jobs, the good-paying copper mining jobs."**

He supports expedited mining permitting and utilizing science in more regulations without compromising the integrity of the environment. "Too many times, the permitting process takes 10-12 years, which is too long," he added. Metsa is hopeful the Blue-Green Alliance, a national organization that includes leading unions and environmental organizations, can help overcome differences between jobs and the environment.

It may seem odd to hear Democrats railing against regulation, but these rural representatives see mining jobs as part of their future economy.

Ecklund said it's too costly for companies to build new paper mills so he is trying to advance mining while also stimulate new business opportunities for rural Minnesota.

"Democrats should cater to small businesses more," he said. "We should start focusing on broadband and tech and rural Minnesota can come back. Broadband, which isn't available in much of rural Minnesota, is the new economic driver for the workforce."

Ecklund will have a say on the party's direction on messaging in Minnesota as part of a team focused on how the party can communicate better.

Our platform is "too multi-faceted" he said and should focus on the basics. "The wind should be at our backs in 2018. If not, it's because we have too much of a broad-based message."

As for Metsa, he is still haunted by what a friend told him during a conversation at a local hardware store right before the 2016 election. His friend told him, "You (Democrats) are all about social issues. You forgot about me."

Whether Minnesota Democrats can develop a unified message that brings all groups together may be key in whether the party can recapture legislative seats and control of the State Senate in 2018 or whether rural areas continue their movement to the Republican column.

Voices From The Heartland

Missouri: State Rep. Ben Harris

Like Indiana, Missouri features only one remaining rural Democrat.

Ben Harris represents a district southwest of St. Louis that has undergone a rapid transformation from a competitive district that often voted Democratic to one that in the last two election cycles has changed to solidly Republican. It's a microcosm for what's happened across the entire state.

"There's just a few Democrats left in rural areas anymore," Harris said. "Many local Democrats tell me they didn't leave the Democratic Party—the party left them."

Harris describes himself as "more of a Blue Dog Democrat" and is pro-life and pro-gun. "The national party is too far left and voters take it out on local Democrats down to the county level." Harris said Jefferson County in his district was reliably Democratic 10-12 years ago—"hard to win if you're not a Democrat"—but now it's "super-Republican and they even control county positions."

The numbers on presidential elections back up Harris. Bill Clinton carried Jefferson County twice as did Al Gore and Barack Obama in 2008. Even northeastern liberal candidates like Mike Dukakis and John Kerry received 49% of the vote in narrow defeats. But Obama fell to 42% in 2012 and Hillary Clinton received just 30% in 2016.

In Washington County, the other county in Harris' district, the chasm is even deeper. Dukakis and Bill Clinton carried the county with more than 50% of the vote and Gore and Obama (2008) won with slightly under 50%. Kerry barely lost the county in 2004 with 49%. But the bottom dropped out the last two elections with Obama gaining only 29% in 2012 and Hillary Clinton falling to only 21% in 2016.

Harris represents the rural part of Washington County and said it includes "families and churches that have been there hundreds of years. They feel Democrats are putting other people ahead of them."

He first won his seat with 56% of the vote in 2010 and 52% in 2014. He was unopposed in 2012 and 2016, but is term-limited in 2018 and "doubts if a Democrat could hold my seat." Harris thinks Republicans might have given him a pass in 2016 knowing they would pick up the seat in 2018 anyway. He added that, with the way the election went statewide in 2016, the only reason he won may have been because he was unopposed.

The numbers from Harris' district track along with statewide results.

Democrats controlled the Governor's office for 20 out of the past 25 years but lost a bitterly contested race in 2016 that was likely influenced by the results at the top of the ticket. Gubernatorial elections in Missouri are held in presidential election years, and Democrats are usually helped by a larger turnout. But that edge didn't help in 2016 as Clinton ran eight points lower than the gubernatorial candidate, Chris Koster.

Democrats have also been competitive at the legislative level until recent years. In the State House, Democrats had a majority for 11 of the past 25 years and controlled the chamber as recently as 2002. Democrats controlled the State Senate for nine of the past 25 years and most recently in 2000.

As with other Heartland states, the key election was 2010 when Republicans re-drew legislative maps and decimated the ranks of Democrats, especially those in rural areas.

Democrats held 74 out of 163 State House seats in 2009 but that dropped to 46 in 2017, a loss of 28 seats.

In the State Senate, Democratic strength declined from 11 to 9 out of 34 total during that period.

Republicans now have super-majorities in both Houses and Democrats are limited to the St. Louis and Kansas City areas as well as university towns like Columbia.

In Congress, Democrats went from representing four out of nine seats in 2009 to just two in 2016—those in St. Louis and Kansas City.

"Term limits and gerrymandering really hurt," Harris said. He points to the growing urban-rural divide in the party that is also responsible for much of the Democratic decline over the past 10 years. "Republicans do a good job of keeping us divided," but Harris also points to problems within the Democratic Party as well.

"It seems we can't just be a Democrat anymore. We have to be for or against a person or policy. Many people tell me the Democratic Party just doesn't represent us anymore."

Harris firmly believes the party can compete in rural areas and gain working class Trump voters back but "it will take some time and not if national Democrats keep pushing the party further and further left. We would do better by staying with working class issues like jobs." Even that is challenging because...

"whenever we speak about jobs, it's hard to get the message across because the Republicans beat us up on social issues."

– MISSOURI STATE REP. BEN HARRIS

Harris believes a key to his success is reaching beyond just Democratic voters. "We can't win with just Democratic votes. We've got to get Republican and Independent votes too." He said he had a lot of Republican supporters in his elections.

Harris is ultimately optimistic the tide can be turned. "The best thing for Democrats is that Trump won."

He also feels that total Republican control of the executive and legislative branches in Washington and Missouri will rebound to the benefit of Democrats. “Whenever a party controls all three (both houses and the executive), the other party usually benefits.”

But the opening for Democrats is only if the party welcomes rural voters who may differ with their urban counterparts on certain issues. His advice to the party: “Go back to the big tent philosophy and be more open to everybody. Don’t eliminate whole groups of people because they disagree with elements of the platform.”

Voices From The Heartland

Wisconsin: State Sen. Janet Bewley

No other state in the Heartland has been as fiercely competitive over the past 10 years as Wisconsin. This state supported Barack Obama twice in 2008 and 2012 by seven points and then stunned the political world by delivering its 10 electoral votes to Donald Trump in 2016.

It's the first time Wisconsin voted for a Republican presidential candidate since 1984.

Scott Walker's election as Governor in 2010 brought forth a polarizing agenda that resulted in a recall election in 2012 and a bitter reelection in 2014, all of which he won by 6 to 7 points.

Janet Bewley's political career spanned this tumultuous period in Wisconsin. She served on the Ashland City Council from 2007 to 2009 before winning a seat in the General Assembly in 2010 with 53 percent of the vote. After reelection in 2012, she ran in the primary and general elections for the 25th District State Senate seat in northwestern Wisconsin, winning the latter with just 51 percent. Now she is preparing to face voters again in 2018, while Walker seeks a third term as Governor.

Most of the counties in her Senate district are competitive, with Democratic presidential candidates usually receiving at least 45% of the vote.

Only once since 2000 did a county perform worse for a Democratic presidential candidate than 40%, and that was Vilas County at 38% for Gore.

However, Hillary Clinton received less than 40 percent of the votes in 9 of the 13 counties. In the previous off-year gubernatorial election in 2014, the Democratic candidate scored less than 40% in three counties. Clinton won 12 counties in Wisconsin, the second highest total in the Heartland, and three of those counties are in Bewley's district.

Bewley's reelection is likely to be competitive again. She serves the largest Senate district in the state that borders Lake Superior to the North and Minnesota to the west. The economic base consists of small farms, small manufacturers, logging and forestry, small businesses and tourism.

The area's heritage includes a large number of union workers which gave it a Democratic tilt, especially in Ashland, Bayfield and Douglas counties. It is a rural district, and she is as adamant and enthusiastic about the region's economic possibilities as she is about the working class people she serves.

> **The working class "just wants a car that runs, a vacation, and to be able to buy their kids the shoes they want rather than the shoes they need"**
>
> – JANET BEWLEY
> WISCONSIN STATE SENATOR

As Vice-Chair of the Democratic National Committee's Rural caucus, she feels the national Democratic Party's message hasn't been effective and is perhaps less important than "wanting to understand, and value, working people. We have to agree as a party that we want to earn their votes."

She also dislikes the condescending attitude displayed by party elites towards the working class: "If anyone calls them Bubbas, they'll have me to contend with." Bewley is "disappointed in her colleagues who are dismissive of those who listen to country music and watch NASCAR. All Democrats don't have to like the same things or listen to the same radio stations. But we must want to listen to rural folks. We've let them down."

Her seat is critical to her party's efforts to regaining a majority in the next several election cycles. Democrats controlled the State Senate for eight of the past 25 years, most recently in 2010 when they held 18 of the 33 seats. Now, they hold just 13 seats.

The party held the Governor's office for eight years and the State House for five years during this period.

Democrats had a 52 to 46 majority in the House in 2009, but have lost 16 seats since then, with Republicans now controlling the body 63 to 36.

The congressional delegation also flipped. Democrats held five of the eight seats in 2009, but now Republicans control five of eight.

To win her seat again, Bewley is focusing on several issues that will help rural areas like hers to compete in the economy and attract younger families. That's why she emphasizes improving the infrastructure of rural areas.

"We need infrastructure to succeed. We will be rural deserts if we don't invest and maintain our infrastructure. The lack of good roads, broadband and cell phone reception holds the area back from its economic potential."

Infrastructure is not just important for economic development and quality of life, but for attracting and retaining young people to the area. "Place-building amenities won't happen without a quality infrastructure," she added. "Young people won't see us as livable communities."

Bewley also talked about the importance of education and health care to her Senate District. Both sectors are now economic drivers in northwestern Wisconsin. She referred to Medicaid funding as part of the "social infrastructure" in rural areas. "People shouldn't have to worry about being sick."

To win a second Senate term, Bewley will have to contend with voters who supported both Obama and Trump in her district. In fact, Wisconsin had the second highest number of counties (23) in the nation that supported Obama twice and then switched to Trump (Iowa had the highest with 31). For example, her district includes all of Price County which had a 38-point turnaround from Obama in 2008 to Trump in 2016.

In addition to infrastructure, Bewley believes Democrats can win these voters back by focusing on issues that matter to the working class, like the economy, health care and education.

Cultural issues are important, but not the main object of her message. She describes herself as pro-choice on abortion and "pro- Second Amendment, but in favor of common sense regulations on guns, such as keeping guns out of the hands of criminals."

Wisconsin will again be facing competitive elections up and down the ballot in 2018. Bewley anticipates another spirited race and is no stranger to close elections. The margin in her first race for State Representative was 1,301 votes and 1,610 votes for her first State Senate run.

Voices From The Heartland

Michigan: State Rep. Donna Lasinski

Across the Heartland, population changes and movements are changing the nature of legislative districts and impacting the balance of urban, suburban and rural representation.

Population changes so far this decade offer clues on how districts will change the next time redistricting occurs in 2020 and the implications for how Democrats approach rural areas.

This is especially relevant to Michigan, which has the second lowest percentage of rural population in the Heartland at 22 percent (Illinois has the least).

Using U.S. Census Bureau designations, 80 percent of Heartland rural counties lost population between 2010 and 2016, while more than half (56%) of metro counties in the Heartland gained population during that time period.

Just 20 percent of incumbents included in our research represent districts where all their counties are rural, and this figure will likely decline after the next redistricting.

The significance is that the next redistricting after the 2020 census will undoubtedly shift more rural people into districts with suburban populations.

Many of these districts will resemble the 52nd House District in Michigan represented by Donna Lasinski. This district is in Washtenaw County, a metro county and home of Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan.

The 52nd District, however, includes virtually none of the city and is mainly comprised of neighboring townships with both suburban and rural features.

Lasinski estimates only 20 percent of the district is walkable and that 11 of 14 townships in the district are rural. The mix of suburbs, small towns and farms could provide some competing pressures on matters of politics and culture that Democrats will have to navigate to be competitive in these districts.

Lasinski provides an example of how to do so.

She describes herself as a "working class kid" who went on to receive an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. A mother of three, Lasinski began her public service outside of government by forming a small business that addresses summer learning loss among students. The program she developed is now used in 38 states. One of the reasons for creating the company is her desire to "close the achievement gap" among students.

She also served as Chair of the Ann Arbor schools' Parent Teachers Organization.

Lasinski began her political career by winning a seat on the Ann Arbor School Board in 2014. Her candidacy arose from a belief that "strong communities are built around strong public schools" and that "if you want to have a great place to live, you have to take responsibility for it."

Admitting that she is "impatient for results," she then ran for an open seat in the state House of Representatives in 2016, saying that many of the roadblocks she found in advancing public education were based in state government. She won both the primary and general elections with 52% of the vote.

She approached her career in public service as a problem-solver who used pragmatism to overcome hurdles placed in front of her.

And she takes that approach to campaigns as well. The 52nd District is highly competitive, with the parties alternating victories in recent years.

Her election marked the first time in years the same party won back-to-back elections.

She said she is "not someone who came up through a political path" and "is not a huge partisan politician." But her experiences and viewpoints on the Democratic Party's approach to rural and working class voters offer insights on how the party can improve its performance outside of urban areas and in districts with a mix of suburban and rural voters.

She said "the Democratic party is a party of elites" and that the party meetings she attends are "not inclusive with rural, working class voters." Some are often condescending in their language and attitudes, referring to working class and rural voters as "they" and "them." She said one of the biggest disconnects between urban and rural voters is the degree of respect for college educations versus skills training.

Lasinski is also critical of many elected Democrats who are "focused more on talking than listening." As a party, "we need to stop questioning people's values and put our focus on key issues like jobs and education. We have to have a positive agenda."

Her agenda is improving public schools, creating a better climate for small businesses and more funding for roads. In her rural district, access to high speed internet is her highest priority. Her desire for more investment in schools and roads is balanced with better performance measurements of spending to ensure taxpayers are getting their money's worth.

On hot-button cultural issues, she is pro-choice and supports common sense gun regulations while understanding guns are a part of the rural lifestyle. But she said "neither were big campaign issues."

Her pragmatic approach to governing includes "bringing people together to solve problems." Lasinski sought out the views of law enforcement, gun club owners and local elected Republicans when legislation was introduced that weakened concealed carry regulations. Her no vote was based on this outreach, and she explained her vote publicly as based on the opinions of these constituents.

Lasinski also found common ground with Republicans on issues like apprenticeships and environmental regulations.

Democrats need to do better at talking about progressive values as the foundation of positions on issues"

– DONNA LASINSKI
MICHIGAN STATE REP

She will be in a position to influence the party after being put in charge of messaging for the House Democratic Caucus.

The party has a steep hill to climb. Michigan Democrats haven't controlled the State Senate in the past 25 years. They held the State House for seven years—the last time in 2010. Since 2009, Democrats have gone from a 67 to 43 majority in the Michigan House to a 45 to 65 minority, a loss of 22 seats.

In the State Senate, Democrats controlled 17 out of 38 seats in 2009 but have just 11 now.

The congressional delegation has flipped from eight to seven Democratic to nine to five Republican.

On top of the challenges of retaking the legislature, Trump defeated Clinton in Michigan by 10,704 votes out of approximately 4.5 million cast. It was the first time a Republican presidential candidate won the state since 1988. Michigan had the fourth highest number of counties in the Heartland and fifth highest in the nation that voted for Obama twice and then switched to Trump.

Many of these counties include working class areas that were once a foundation of Democratic strength.

"What people want is a job, to come home and have a little fun," Lasinski said. Her success in a district with a mix of suburban and rural voters offers a guide to candidates more likely to face changing populations in their districts in the future.