

MEMO *Published October 10, 2019 · 6 minute read*

How to Talk About Climate in Rural America



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Background

It's no secret that rural voters will play an intensely watched and significant role in the 2020 election cycle. A decline in support for Democrats among rural voters in 2016 helped hand the presidency to Donald Trump, particularly rural voters in three key states: Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

Candidates in 2016 struggled to impart their vision to voters in rural communities, particularly around policies that would address climate change. While candidates were honest about the changing nature of jobs due to a clean energy transition, they were not successful in helping these voters understand the immense economic potential that the transition would bring to their communities.

To learn how candidates can successfully talk to rural voters about climate change, we conducted a poll with One Country Project of 1,600 likely voters in rural counties in eight states: Alabama, Iowa, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. What we learned can help presidential hopefuls and candidates running for office in rural communities talk to this crucial voting bloc about their vision for addressing the climate crisis and expanding economic opportunities beyond big cities, the coasts, and the suburbs. One major thing we learned from this research is that 54% of all respondents, including 59% of rural Obama-Trump voters, believe that climate change is an environmental problem that's having a serious impact right now.

Here are three easy tips and message guidance to talk about climate in rural America:

1. Listen and Engage Voters in Rural Communities

Often the only voices that are amplified on climate are ones that are white, wealthy, college-educated, ideologically progressive, and from the coasts. But climate change is not just happening in big cities or to voters that match that profile. Our research found that a plurality of likely voters (48%) in rural communities say global warming is real and one-third say it is human-caused. And while respondents in our research listed climate behind other important concerns like health care, jobs, and economic growth, **71% of respondents believe rural voices have an 'indispensable perspective' on climate change.**

That means candidates shouldn't take rural voices for granted on this issue and should focus on making them feel heard. Candidates should be on the ground talking to voters about how climate is impacting their communities and be upfront about addressing the economic insecurities they may feel about a transition to clean energy. Sixty-three percent of rural voters say that policies to address climate change will increase their energy bills, raise taxes, and make the things they buy more expensive. Nevertheless, more than half (55%) believed that innovations in cleaner forms of energy and electric vehicles will benefit their community.

Candidates need to talk to rural voters about the opportunities of a clean energy economy - not only about how their policies can be effective and affordable, but also how they will be fair and inclusive of the concerns of rural communities.

2. Talk About Innovation and Concrete Climate Solutions in Rural Communities

Fifty-nine percent of rural voters polled believe that if we address climate change the right way, it will improve America's competitiveness, make the United States a leader in clean energy and technology,

and make countries like China follow the rules. Sixty-one percent of voters in rural communities believe that climate action could make the United States a world leader in clean technology. This response explains why investing in research, development and demonstration for clean energy technologies is such a popular policy option among rural voters (76% total support, with 40% strongly supporting). It ranked third out of eleven policies among our total sample, and second among rural Obama-Trump voters. And most importantly, 64% of all rural voters polled would be supportive of climate action if it protected jobs or created new jobs in their communities.

Our poll also found that rural voters responded favorably to incentives for individuals and families to weatherize their homes and make them more energy efficient (85% support), tax incentives and subsidies for individuals to place energy-generating solar panels on their roofs and on their land (77% support), tax incentives and subsidies for individuals to place wind turbines on their land (68% support), and to use more sustainable farming methods designed to store more carbon in the soil, and reduce the carbon output from agriculture (59%).

This suggests that these voters have a great appetite for solutions that provide opportunities for their communities. Candidates should lead with policies that add options and make those options more affordable and accessible, instead of emphasizing bans and taxes (which were the least popular policy options, by far). Talk to voters in rural communities about how technological innovations in farming will not only reduce carbon emissions but make farming techniques more effective and ultimately make their farms more profitable. And lean into specific policies that can be used to cut their energy use and bills, improve their quality of life, and create new jobs and income opportunities.

3. Be Honest About Your Approach and How it Will Impact Rural Communities

Voters in rural communities feel that have an indispensable view on climate change, but they don't believe policymakers are taking those views into account. The voters we polled felt that neither Republicans (58%) or Democrats (62%) took their way of life into consideration when they talk about climate change. And even though Trump won rural voters by a 64-30% margin in 2016, we were surprised to find that they felt the same way about him (54%).

This means rural voters might be with the President on a variety of other issues, but many don't think he's gets them when it comes to climate. This is a huge opportunity for smart candidates to lead on climate, if they can listen and overcome perceptions of how these voters feel Democrats have traditionally addressed this issue.

Not surprisingly, only 6% of rural voters have a great deal of trust in the federal government to handle climate change the right way. But to our surprise, our research found that rural voters have more trust in farmers and ranchers (77%), scientists (72%), people in their communities (71%) and even *gasp*

environmental groups (58%). These voters have a high-regard for data and science as well as for the people in their communities. Given this level of trust, candidates should find people from these particular categories to advise them when developing climate policies and assist them with outreach to rural communities.

It's up to candidates and elected officials to communicate how their clean energy innovation and deployment proposals will specifically improve the lives of people in rural communities, and to point to specific and relatable examples of rural communities that are already benefiting from climate and clean energy policies.

Conclusion

Democrats are unlikely to win rural America outright in 2020, but this research showed that they can engage these communities on climate issues in a meaningful way that may help win over some voters. Smart candidates should listen and engage rural voters about climate, talk to them about concrete solutions, innovation, and the opportunities that will be available in the new clean energy economy. And they should be honest about how their approach will impact these communities. Engaging rural Americans on climate issues is not only helpful for Democrats in 2020, it's key to enacting the ambitious policies we'll need to reach net-zero emissions by 2050.