

A RURAL STRATEGY FOR WISCONSIN DEMOCRATS

During the Walker Recall, I had the opportunity to visit with the AFT local in tiny Butternut, Wisconsin. The entire school district was a local of 21 teachers. They had collected hundreds of signatures for the recall petitions. I asked them, “How did you do it?” They told me that a group of them went every Wednesday after school to the transfer station. The town does not have garbage collection. Everyone has to haul their garbage to a transfer station. The teachers knew that, over a few weeks, they would meet everyone in town as they dropped off their garbage.

That is how rural organizing works. Give people the support they need to do the work and allow them the flexibility to decide how to accomplish their work, and they will do it. People know where to find their neighbors and how to talk to them about important local issues.

Bryan Kennedy was born and raised in a rural area. His parents live just outside of a small town with a population of 1,100. Bryan’s wife was born and raised on a family farm. While Bryan serves as Mayor of Glendale (a Milwaukee suburb) now, that is not where he came from.

Bryan, Amanda and Mandela (Team BAM!) are deeply concerned about the massive losses by Democrats in rural Wisconsin. State Representative Amanda Stuck helped Congressman Steve Kagen organize and win rural counties in the 8th congressional district. Bryan ran for Congress in the largely-rural 5th congressional district. We need a concerted effort to win back those areas now.

Back in October 2003, John Nichols wrote a piece in *The Nation* about Dems needing to reconnect with rural voters. That

admonition is even more striking now. Democrats hold 35 seats in the state legislature. 28 of them are clustered in south-central and southeastern Wisconsin. Dems hold almost no rural seats. They instead have urban seats in LaCrosse, Eau Claire, Oshkosh, Green Bay, Appleton, Superior and Ashland, as well as those surrounding Madison-Janesville and greater Milwaukee-Racine-Kenosha.

Nichols wrote almost 15 years ago: “Polls show that rural Americans are even more concerned than urban voters about access to healthcare, education and the jobs that have gone missing since George W. Bush became President. But rural voters also bring unique demands to the table—for constraints on agribusiness conglomerates, new approaches to trade policy and a renewed federal commitment to rural development. The ability of Democratic candidates to answer those demands with significantly more populist responses than did their predecessors in 2000 and 2002 will determine whether the party has a chance in 2004.”

In Wisconsin, we were still holding Assembly and Senate seats in areas like Rhinelander, Wausau, Mineral Point, and Wisconsin Rapids back in 2004. We thought we understood rural voters because we were carrying cities near rural areas. We ignored the admonition to develop a separate populist message and strategy to connect with voters on farms, in small towns and throughout the Northwoods.

Vast swaths of our state have seen small towns decimated when the paper mill shut down or nearby family farms were gobbled up by large agribusiness. The Democratic Party failed to capitalize on opportunities to connect with voters in these areas, and work

with them to save jobs and bring alternative employment opportunities.

Wisconsin Democrats must understand that not every child will go away to college or find a job in an urban or suburban area. Many need technical skills or attractive, family-sustaining jobs near where they were raised. Young adults shouldn't have to make a choice to leave their hometowns in order to start their lives, or stay, only to work at Wal-Mart or in the service sector.

Because we failed to connect with rural and farm voters, we lost them. Democrats controlled both house of the legislature in 2010. Seven years later, we hold only 1/3 of each chamber. Our path back to the majority comes through rural areas. There are not enough seats to gain in the greater Madison and greater Milwaukee area to get us to 50 seats in the Assembly.

We need to:

- Find ways to demonstrate the value of good government to rural and urban voters.
- Identify more voices to tell our story, especially in areas without elected officials who are progressive.
- Identify issues with which both rural and urban voters strongly agree (education, infrastructure, jobs) and make them a focus.
- Create opportunities for rural and urban legislators to work together on the issues that affect our state. These partnerships will help to minimize the perception of an urban/rural divide.
- Hire campaign and organizing staff who have a background in rural organizing or are from the area where they work.

A JOBS AGENDA

Rural Wisconsin is hurting. Democrats are working for them, but we fail to get that message out. After the 2014 election loss, the DPW conducted a post-mortem study. Here is what we learned:

”To understand the crux of the issue of Rural Wisconsin, we sought out and reviewed qualitative academic studies done in Wisconsin. These studies sought the views of individuals from throughout the state and found themes in how people think about government.

The studies found that a large number of people from rural sections of Wisconsin simply don’t think government is working for them. There is a deep-seated belief that government is taking resources from rural communities and moving them to urban areas, which is wasteful and inefficient from their perspective. This perceived transfer is creating an inequity which puts the party identified with government and urban communities at a severe disadvantage in many areas of the state.

Much of this belief is backed by a belief that the decision-makers in government are not listening to the needs of rural Wisconsin. Ironically enough, those needs are much like those in urban Wisconsin - education, infrastructure, and jobs.

We need the conversation at the rural gas station in the morning or at the transfer station each week to shift from the bad things that government is doing to a discussion about how government can work to enhance rural lives.”

LOCAL MESSAGING

A ward captain/town captain model empowers local people to talk to their friends and neighbors about issues that are important in the town or in the county. It also shores up our struggling county parties and reinvigorates them with activity and purpose. Struggling small county parties will see an influx of new energy and enthusiasm with ward captains in every voting ward in the county.

We need to trust our fellow Democrats to know how to talk to their neighbors and where to find them for those conversations to happen. In a recent visit in Darlington, I learned that local Democrats were discussing CAFO operations and the pollution of groundwater. In Central Wisconsin, frack sand mining is causing different environmental concerns. Rural schools have been hurting in funding since Walker's reductions and freezes began in 2011. Transportation infrastructure is crumbling with roads in disrepair and no automobile alternatives such as train or bus. Failure to expand Medicaid or allow for Badgercare buy-in as a public option have taken healthcare options away from many rural Wisconsinites. Democrats can use these local issues to talk to our neighbors about the environment and transportation, and find common values.

While overarching, big picture messages build party unity, canvassing needs to become localized. We need to allow local people to tailor the message that works in their community. Literature needs to be customized. We cannot bus in people from the outside to knock doors in a smaller town or hire city staff to run the party GOTV effort in rural areas. For one thing, the outsider likely does not have a working understanding of the area

and its concerns. For another, rural voters are more likely to listen to their neighbors and be distrustful of outsiders.

The DPW County Chairs Association can become a clearinghouse for ideas on messaging that are meeting with success all around the state. Counties can coordinate and share with one another what is working. The DPW Rural Caucus is another venue for idea and information sharing.

The party must also become more tolerant of guns and religion in rural areas. We need to respect that gun ownership is high outside of metropolitan areas and hunting is an annual sport enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of Wisconsinites. Rural communities are also connected to their parish or local faith community. Secular ideals might appeal to urban elites and academics, but they miss the mark in small towns.

TALK TO EVERYONE

A significant downfall of the party in recent elections is to ignore voters that we perceive to be “not Democratic voters.”

Republicans did not give up their relentless assault in David Obey’s former district. For over 40 years, Wisconsin’s 7th CD elected and re-elected Obey to Congress. Republicans did not judge those voters as “not Republican voters.” They, instead, made a case for why those voters should switch loyalties. Now that district is red.

We need to understand that political viewpoints change over time. If we stop talking to someone because they were not with us in a particular election cycle, then we lose them forever.

Likewise, just because we identified an Obama supporter in 2008 does not mean that that same voter is still with us. We need to engage them in every election and find out what issues matter to them now—not four, eight or ten years ago.

It is time for Democrats to “knock every door” and begin to rebuild our outdated data in the VAN. We have not done a statewide canvass in years. The Obama campaign made a strong effort to organize the whole state in 2008, but even they did not get to everyone, particularly in rural areas. We need to develop a plan to contact every voter at least once BEFORE Fall 2018 and find out what issues resonate with them.

The Democratic Party must become the biggest proponent and advocate of rural broadband. Our rural schools and school children deserve the same tools and opportunities as urban and suburban children. Additionally, for the party, internet service outside of metro areas and larger cities is spotty, which makes it difficult to access the VAN electronically or enter data in the field. There is a win-win when we advocate for expanded broadband opportunities—better opportunity for our children and greater facility in running political operations.

CONTEST EVERY OFFICE ON THE BALLOT

Every other Fall, there are statewide, Congressional, US Senate, State Assembly and State Senate seats on the ballot. In 2016, 21 Assembly seats held by Republicans went unchallenged by a Democrat. Nearly all of them were in exurban and rural areas. We need to field candidates in EVERY legislative district.

There are also a number of county courthouse races for county clerk, district attorney and county treasurer, among others. We need to be contesting every one of these seats. Many voters don't come out to vote unless they have a reason to vote. They may look at one or two statewide offices and decide that it is not worth their while to go vote. Let's give voters a full ballot.

Every DA candidate drives additional votes for the top of the ticket and for our candidates for congress and the state legislature. Every county treasurer candidate does the same. A full ballot gives voters a reason to take the time to go vote.

Our rural, wooded and farm areas are teeming with people that share our values. We, as Democrats, need to reach out to them and draw them back into our party. That will take a concerted effort. Team BAM! (Bryan Kennedy, Amanda Stuck and Mandela Barnes) are experienced organizers that will build the infrastructure to get rural Democrats talking about issues and engaging voters.