

# Bill Kaplan: Wisconsin Democrats have a rural problem

Posted on Monday, Nov 15, 2021

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Wisconsin Democratic Senator Gaylord Nelson and Representative Dave Obey grew up in rural Wisconsin and never forgot their rural roots. These political icons knew that to win and govern they had to appeal to the entire state, including rural communities. They told me that the Democratic Party couldn't be a national party or win state legislative control without doing well with rural voters.

The recent Virginia elections suggest Democrats still struggle mightily in rural America. The NYT reported: "In 2008, there were only four small Virginia counties where Republicans won 70 percent or more of the vote in that year's presidential race. Nowhere was the party above 75 percent. This year, Mr. (Glenn) Youngkin (GOP gubernatorial winner) was above 70 percent in 45 counties - and he surpassed 80 percent in 15 of them." Pointedly, Steve Bullock, former Montana Democratic governor, said: "Look at some of those rural counties in Virginia as a wake-up call. Folks don't feel like we're offering them anything, or hearing or listening to them."

I hope the Wisconsin Democratic Party and state Democratic leaders are looking at the Virginia elections and lessons for Wisconsin. Wisconsin farmers and small town working people are consistently voting Republican. MJS reporter Craig Gilbert has brilliantly analyzed election returns: "Trump dramatically outperformed Romney in smaller, rural and blue-collar communities. He won more than 500 cities, towns and villages that voted for Obama in 2012. He won 190 of them by at least 20 points. These 'Obama-Trump communities' were located overwhelmingly in northern, western and central Wisconsin. Their median population was less than 800."

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This pattern persisted in 2020. Craig reported: “Four years ago, Donald Trump won 536 communities in Wisconsin that voted for Barack Obama in 2012. ... This year (2020), Trump won almost all of them again.” Biden flipped only 2 of 23 “Obama-Trump counties” – Door and Sauk. Biden won narrowly in Wisconsin with increased support in suburban and urban areas. But Democrats saw a loss of 2 state Senate seats, while only gaining 2 suburban Assembly seats. Again, shutout in rural areas.

Takeaways: Obama-Trump voters are not racist, gerrymandering is a big problem for state legislative and congressional races, but throwing our hands up in the air in frustration won't help. Democratic Governor Tony Evers and Senator Tammy Baldwin did better in rural counties than Clinton or Biden. So it's not impossible – but we must try harder in 2022.

The Wisconsin Democratic Party ought to recruit and help fund candidates in all 72 counties. This gives voters a choice and builds a “farm team” for future elections. Obey said to me: “The best way for Democrats to win in rural Wisconsin is to campaign there. The focus, money and organizational efforts must be on state legislative races in rural areas.” The party should also explain clearly how the recently passed bipartisan infrastructure bill helps each county.

Most importantly, Democratic leaders and candidates should exit their comfort zones and listen intently to rural voters. It could lead to surprising results.

*– Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.*