

Bill Kaplan: Some Democrats are still not hearing rural Wisconsin

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Wisconsin farmers and rural small town working people once voted Democratic. Many no longer do. “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. ... These ‘Obama-Trump communities’ were located overwhelmingly in northern, western and central Wisconsin” (Craig Gilbert, MJS). And, the Washington Post reported that nationally there were over 9 million Obama to Trump voters. They are not racists.

In 2020, Trump increased his support in rural Wisconsin. President Biden flipped only 2 of 23 Obama to Trump counties (Door and Sauk). Biden narrowly won with increased suburban and urban support. It was worse in state legislative races. Democrats lost 2 Senate seats, while gaining 2 suburban Assembly seats. Yes, GOP gerrymandering is a big problem, but it doesn't entirely explain a shutout in rural areas.

Wisconsin Democratic U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin has been able to win in rural Wisconsin. In 2018, Baldwin flipped 17 counties that Trump won in 2016. Her recent listening visits across Wisconsin demonstrated her empathic personality. Moreover, Baldwin announced bridge, port, road and other projects. Her support for bipartisan infrastructure legislation has translated into vital help for the state.

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Similarly, Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers has shown support in rural areas. In 2018, Evers flipped 7 counties that Trump won in 2016. His down-to-earth

style has wide appeal. And, Evers has earned approval for his attempts to protect Wisconsinites during the pandemic, despite GOP obstruction. The low-key Evers seems like a regular person not a politician. He advocates pocketbook issues such as healthcare coverage expansion, more education funding and addressing rural priorities. Voters must hold GOP legislators accountable for their roadblocks.

However, there are big problems in rural Wisconsin. Expiration of federal pandemic funding for rural hospitals, coupled with inadequate private insurance payments spells disaster. The Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform estimates that 7 rural Wisconsin hospitals are “at risk of closing”, with 1 at “immediate risk of closing”. The sick and elderly will be in trouble, jobs will be lost and small towns devastated.

Moreover, enhanced tax credits for Affordable Care Act private insurance expire at the end of 2022. Thousands of Wisconsinites will face higher premiums and some will lose coverage. Same for pandemic Medicaid coverage which ends this summer. Hundreds of thousands of Wisconsinites could lose their Medicaid coverage. How will they and rural hospitals survive? Uncaring congressional Republicans, including Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson, obstruct solutions. And, GOP state legislators distract with crazy lies about (nonexistent) election fraud.

Expect nothing from the GOP. However, Democrats are not off the hook. Healthcare is a huge rural problem with acute disparities. The Wisconsin Democratic Party should be banging the drum across the state and organizing listening forums. Rural Wisconsinites will have much to say. Failure to listen and engage will once again marginalize the Wisconsin Democratic Party. It doesn't have to be this way. Senator Baldwin and Governor Evers have shown the way.

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