

DEMOCRATS

WHO WIN WORKING-CLASS DISTRICTS

A roadmap to winning by those who've won

By Congresswoman Cheri Bustos (IL-17, 2013-2023) and
Robin Johnson, Adjunct Professor, Monmouth College



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WINNING

We found exceptional Democrats who won back the working class

DEMOCRATS WHO WIN AGAINST THE ODDS

Democrats thrive in tough, working-class districts by securing Republican and Independent voters. These “political unicorns”—the candidates who succeed where others falter—are crucial for shaping the party’s future and winning elections.

Since 2017, we’ve amplified the voices of these Democrats, highlighting those who triumph in rural areas, Trump counties, and challenging territories where many wouldn’t tread. Our report aggregates insights from congressional and state legislative Democrats and elevates their strategies nationwide.

We developed clear metrics to identify these exceptional winners:

Democrats who win: We focus solely on those who won, given the stakes are too high for anything less.

Democrats who win competitive districts: Defined as winning less than 60% of the vote — most winning by margins under 55%.

Democrats who win in working-class districts: These districts have fewer college-educated residents than the national average (35%), aligning with the common definition of working-class voters.

Key findings include:

- Few Democrats remain in competitive working-class districts—only six members of Congress and less than 10% of state legislative Democrats in the Heartland meet this criteria.
- The Democratic brand struggles with working-class voters, many of whom no longer recognize the party’s platform. However, successful legislators show it’s possible to win back these voters.
- Hard work, door-to-door canvassing, listening, and focusing on kitchen-table economic issues consistently resonate with voters.
- Party messaging often feels convoluted and disconnected, relying on poll-tested language that alienates working-class communities.
- Candidates succeed when they are authentic, share values with voters, and have deep roots in the communities they seek to represent.

These examples highlight how Democrats can reconnect with working-class voters. By adopting these strategies, candidates can rebuild trust and the party—one voter at a time.

THESE WINNERS SHOW US THAT IT'S DONE THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY. [BACK TO BASICS.](#)

If you want to win back working-class voters and win more working-class districts to help Democrats build sustainable majorities, then talk to people like we did. Candidates who have actually run and won in places like these — not the coastal consultants, pundits, and third party special interests. Then listen to them about how they have actually done it.

Listen to people like:

[Josh Turek](#), a three-time medalist from the Paralympic Games who left his wheelchair and crawled up steps to knock doors in his hilly western Iowa district along the Missouri River.

[Jeff Smith](#), a state senator from rural Wisconsin who put a hand-painted sign in the back of his red pickup truck parked along the side of the road, inviting voters to pull over and visit with him.

[Grant Hauschild](#), the last remaining Democrat from the Iron Range of northern Minnesota where others have been wiped out in recent years.

These how-to stories from those who've conquered the toughest regions in the Heartland offer insights, but they won't reveal any magic formula, hidden secret, or must-follow strategy. These winners have gone back to basics.

THERE IS NO DURABLE MAJORITY WITHOUT [WORKING-CLASS VOTERS.](#)

For decades, working-class voters have anchored the Democratic coalition, a legacy dating back to FDR. Yet the numbers tell a stark story: with only 35% of Americans holding college degrees, the majority remain working class. **Securing wins in working-class districts is vital to capturing state legislatures, congressional seats, senate seats, sustainable majorities, and electoral college votes.**

Today, the Democratic brand faces growing rejection in rural counties and small towns—and increasingly among working-class voters across all demographics. This shift has spurred countless pundits, academics, and influencers to suggest strategies for Democrats, though many lack direct experience in winning competitive, working-class districts.

We reached out to Democrats who won competitive working-class districts and asked them:

How did you do it? What advice do you offer for the party to attract working-class voters? And the real answers are hidden in plain sight.

You'll hear from notable contributors including:

- A state senator who won a 2025 special election in a district that Donald Trump had won by 21 points just two months earlier.
- A former Chamber of Commerce President who wants Democrats to fight harder and become just as "ruthless" as their opponents.
- A combat veteran, a minister for 20 years, a public interest attorney, and a "good ol' country boy."
- Three actual members of the working class who represent the type of candidate many believe the party needs to recruit.
- Two state legislators from blue collar suburbs who won but are seeing the areas slowly move from Blue to Red.

Don't look for a trick play or a "Hail Mary." Plan for

THREE YARDS AND A CLOUD OF DUST



About the

AUTHORS

CONGRESSWOMAN CHERI BUSTOS IL-17, 2013-2023

Cheri Bustos was a five-term Congresswoman from downstate Illinois, representing a Congressional District that boasted close to 10,000 family farms and 90,000 labor households. She is the granddaughter of a hog farmer, the wife of a county sheriff, and a mom of three sons, one of whom is a proud Sheet Metal Worker. She is a Democrat in a Trump district, who won every political race she entered – winning by 20 points when Trump won her district, and 24 points two years later. She just left office two years ago.

RIGHT: Congresswoman Cheri Bustos job shadowed many workers during her 10 years in Congress. In all, she worked 130 different jobs for her “Cheri on Shift.” Here she is working at a body shop in Galesburg, Ill.



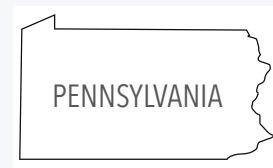
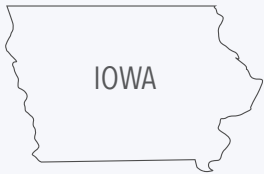
ROBIN A. JOHNSON ADJUNCT PROFESSOR, MONMOUTH COLLEGE

Robin Johnson is an adjunct professor of political science at Monmouth College, Monmouth, Ill. He is a long-time advisor to Cheri and has helped candidates in rural and working-class areas in the Heartland throughout his career. Robin was brought up in a blue collar, union household. He also was elected twice to a small town city council from a working-class district.



VOICES

5 members of Congress | 17 state legislators | 10 different states



State Representative Josh Turek
Iowa 20th House District

84.7% working class

52.5% 2024 winning percentage

HALF live below poverty line

// I am disabled and a wheelchair user. I live in a district with a lot of hills. But EVERY day from July 1 until Election Day, I went out and crawled up stairs, dragging my wheelchair to talk to the people in my district face-to-face. I was not efficient but I was damn effective.”

– Josh Turek – Iowa 20th House District

DEMOCRATS CARE

I am the sole Democrat to win in southwestern Iowa. I won by nearly 6 points in a county Trump won by 20 points.

I am a Democrat because, as JFK said, “Democrats care about people’s health, housing, schools, jobs and civil rights.” But we need more policies to demonstrate our true commitment to these issues and to the middle class and working families. We need what I like to call Prairie Populism for Iowans. This means fighting for economic policies that benefit the middle class and working families, along with ensuring the large corporations and the richest are paying their fair share.

I focus on issues that apply to everyone. Virtually everyone works and needs a paycheck. Same for healthcare. Same for education. Same for the air we breathe and water we drink. What you don’t see are any culture war issues or identity politics.

THREE WAYS TO WIN

Winning elections in competitive or red districts is a simple calculus. It’s three things.

1. You need a candidate who can effectively communicate with voters. If you can’t or you are unwilling to have a conversation with the other side, then you shouldn’t run.
2. You must have a message that applies to the vast majority of the constituents you are trying to represent. A great mistake that too many politicians make is feeling the need to weigh in on every issue. It’s only going to get you in trouble. We know what issues we win on. Stick to a simple message and be disciplined in staying with that message.
3. Hard work. It is not easy to win in red districts. You must be prepared to do the hard work. It is not fun or easy to call to ask for money. It is not fun or easy to go out every single day and knock doors. But without the work ethic, you cannot win.

State Representative Josh Turek
Iowa 20th House District

I am disabled and a wheelchair user. I live in a district with a lot of hills. My district is not accessible. Virtually every house has stairs, often 10 to 20 stairs for the houses in the hills. But EVERY day from July 1 until Election Day, I went out and crawled up stairs, dragging my wheelchair to talk to the people in my district face-to-face. I was not efficient, but I was damn effective.

Voters, even if they don't agree with you on every issue, will appreciate your passion, hard work and drive. Voters want someone who cares and is willing to do the hard work. They know if you are willing to work this hard to get their vote, then they can safely assume that you will work just as hard and passionately for them at the Capitol.




State Senator Jeff Smith
Wisconsin 31st Senate District

71.3% working class

50.5% 2024 winning percentage

RURAL COUNTIES



// It's more about demeanor and "honest speak" when it comes to messaging to working-class voters. I use the analogy that Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump win over voters because there is no question who they are. What comes out of their mouth is exactly who they are. Plain speaking. Authentic."

– Jeff Smith – Wisconsin 31st Senate District

BEATING THE ODDS

I have a long history of beating the odds or over-achieving according to the demographics in my district. One thing I have always been proud of is that my numbers were better than every Democrat at the top of ticket. Whether it was a coincidence or not, I was also ignored by our party leaders because I was in a district that was not on their radar and was often left on my own to hire my own manager and run my own way.

I AM A WORKING-CLASS VOTER

I consider myself to be one of those working-class voters our party struggles to reach, having a background as a small business owner in the service industry. I don't know any other window cleaners elected to political office.

It's more about demeanor and "honest speak" when it comes to messaging to working-class voters. I use the analogy that Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump win over voters because there is no question who they are. What comes out of their mouth is exactly who they are. Plain speaking. Authentic.

BE GENUINE

While raising enough money to compete is vital to any campaign, there is nothing more important than knocking on doors. After we were gerrymandered in Wisconsin, I knew I needed to do something different. It occurred to me that when I was knocking doors, I was walking away from my vehicle and out of sight of the traffic going by. So, I built a large sign and mounted it on my truck that reads 'Stop and Talk to Senator Jeff Smith.' This does not replace knocking on doors, as I still reach my goal of 10,000 doors knocked each campaign, but it has become my image. "Oh, you're the guy with the red truck." That idea that I listen to anyone out in the open is more important to voters than even my politics.


While signs don't vote, that sign has more value than all the other signs placed in my district put together. Respect.

Having a truck with a sign is not the image that works for everyone, but being genuine is. Making a real connection can make a difference. Being real, being yourself and giving your voters the sense that you face the same obstacles they face every day.

35% of residents have a college degree. The rest are


WORKING CLASS








MINNESOTA

State Senator Grant Hauschild
Minnesota 3rd Senate District

 **69.9%**
working class

 **50.8%**
2024 winning percentage

 **IRON RANGE**
of Northern Minnesota



// I focused on what matters to the people I represent – not national talking points or ideological purity tests... I didn't get pulled into partisan debates. I focused on issues that matter to families here: jobs, healthcare, schools, and infrastructure."

– State Senator Grant Hauschild – Minnesota 3rd Senate District

MY DISTRICT

Minnesota's Iron Range and other rural regions have deep roots in the Democratic and labor traditions. But over the past several election cycles, those same communities have increasingly turned to conservative candidates. **I currently represent the only exclusively rural Democratic district left in Minnesota – and that alone should tell us there's important work ahead.**

The challenge is not insurmountable, but it is real. What we're seeing is a growing disconnect – economic, cultural, and emotional – between the Democratic Party and rural working-class communities. Too often, rural voters feel unheard or undervalued. They perceive that their jobs are under threat, that their traditions are misunderstood, and that their concerns are overlooked in broader policy conversations.

TRUST IS DISAPPEARING

This isn't just about a single issue. It's about trust. And in too many places, that trust has eroded. I was able to win in a district that has trended heavily Republican and voted for Donald Trump in every election by running a campaign rooted in common-sense values and local priorities. I focused on what matters to the people I represent – not national talking points or ideological purity tests.

Here's what worked, and what Democrats can learn from it:

Keep it local and pragmatic. I didn't get pulled into partisan debates. I focused on issues that matter to families here: jobs, healthcare, schools, and infrastructure.

Stand up when needed. I ran as a moderate who puts my district before my party. When a policy didn't fit the needs of my region, I said so. That earned trust from independents and even some conservatives.

Speak plainly and honestly. I didn't over complicate my message. I talked directly to people in terms they understand and relate to.

Be present and stay present. I visited every corner of my district – union shops, town halls, small businesses, and community events. I showed up before, during, and after the election. That matters.


Based on that experience, here are five key steps for Democrats looking to reconnect with rural working-class voters:

1. **Show Up and Listen.** There's no substitute for being visible and accessible. Go where people are. Listen without judgment. Don't try to win the room – try to understand it.
2. **Support Their Jobs and Livelihoods.** It's not enough to support unions; we must also support the industries they work in. That means thoughtful policies around mining, forestry, manufacturing, and agriculture – not just regulations, but investment and modernization too.
3. **Deliver Results and Streamline Government.** Voters want to know that government can work efficiently and effectively. Let's focus on reducing red tape, making public services more accessible, and showing people that government can deliver real value to their lives.
4. **Respect Rural Culture.** From snowmobiling to church potlucks, rural traditions and community institutions matter deeply to the people who live here. Democrats need to approach these values with humility and respect. Even when there are disagreements, the tone and effort to understand can go a long way.
5. **Lead with Economic Fairness for Rural Communities.** Democrats win when we fight for working people. We must make the case that rural communities deserve their fair share of investment – and that unregulated market approaches pushed by some conservatives often leave these communities behind.

Right now, the Democratic brand in rural America is struggling – not because our values are wrong, but because our connection has weakened. Many rural voters still agree with core Democratic policies – they just need to know we're fighting for them, not speaking past them.


This is a moment to rebuild that trust. Let's lean into that opportunity with humility, urgency, and a clear message that no community is forgotten – and every voice matters.








INDIANA

State Representative
Wendy Dant Chesser
 Indiana 71st House District

 **77.3**
 working class

 **49.9%**
 2024 winning percentage

 **SOUTHERN**
 South along the Ohio River -
 Louisville within view



// This is the lesson that Democrats must learn if we are going to be successful attracting working-class voters: We need to be ruthless in all regards of messaging, policy, and practice.”

– Wendy Dant Chesser – Indiana 71st House District

MY STORY

In Southern Indiana, I was the only Democrat to win this past November, despite the scandal with our former Republican Sheriff – who also served as Chair of the Republican Party at both the County and District levels. He pleaded guilty to embezzling more than \$4 million from taxpayers, and a month before the November election, was sentenced to 12 years in prison.

My victory could be because I am a hometown girl, spending many of my first 25 years in District 71. It could be because I came home to assume the role as President of our Chamber of Commerce for 11 years, serving as the face of the business community and touting record economic and regional success. But I suspect it was more because I ran a tough campaign, and I hit my competition hard by calling out moral negligence for allowing an embezzler to raid our public safety coffers.

THE RULES HAVE CHANGED

This was hard for me to do. I have spent my career in positions where it was important to be liked. I was known for building consensus, sharing credit and allowing everyone to “save face.” But I quickly learned that when competing against ruthless tactics, I needed to beat them at their game.

HOW TO CONNECT

Democrats must learn if we are going to be successful attracting working-class voters, we need to be ruthless in all regards of messaging, policy, and practice. To connect with blue collar or working-class voters, Democrats should first explore how these voters see themselves. They are tough, gritty and independent people. No one gave them anything, they fought for it. They want to engage in battle, even if they get bloody and bruised. Unfortunately, we as Democrats do not project that toughness. We are thoughtful, trustworthy, educated, compassionate, and deliberate. That image, unfortunately, is no longer connecting with our base.

State Representative
Wendy Dant Chesser
Indiana 71st House District

To attract working-class voters, Democrats need to present as both strategic and tough. Standing on principle isn't enough. Republicans are loud; they make claims that are unfounded and promises that are ill-advised. We fall into their traps and defend ourselves on issues that do not affect most of the people we serve.

For example, as the mom of a 17-year-old daughter who plays high school basketball, I had to defend against a false claim that I wanted to ruin girls' sports -- and there isn't a known case of a transgender athlete within 100 miles of my District. Yet I had to spend time, money and effort on that issue instead of continuously reminding everyone that we had spent 10 years being robbed blind by a greedy former Sheriff who was enabled by the Republican Party.

We have yet to take Republican campaign issues and show we not only have better solutions, but also that we're willing to go all out to fix it. A great example is immigration. Under fascist leadership, the Republicans have convinced working-class voters they will focus on deporting immigrants, only because they have successfully characterized them as dangerous and criminal. However, no one denies that most immigrants -- whether here legally or illegally -- are hardworking. Instead of focusing on what the immigrant population is doing for our economy and tying immigration to the workforce challenges we face as a nation, Democrats talk about our humanity and how we should care for these souls. Not all blue-collar workers give a crap about helping this population because they need help, but they may respond to a consistent effort to show them as a vital part of our economy.

WE MUST BE TOUGH

Unfortunately, the Democratic brand in Southern Indiana -- and I fear across the nation -- is weak. We are about protecting our own hierarchies instead of focusing on bold platforms that both address the needs of our working class and message a strength that can overcome the rhetoric from the right. If we can show grit and build momentum, more working-class voters will be likely to jump in with us.



“ It’s my belief that the over-emphasis on social issues is losing us working-class voters. I can say personally both from polling and what we experience on doors in the district that most voters view the emphasis on social issues as a drawback to our party brand rather than a bonus.”

– Joey Andrews– Michigan 38th House District

REGIONAL ADJUSTMENT

It’s my belief that the over-emphasis on social issues is losing us working-class voters. I can say personally both from polling and what we experience on doors in the district that most voters view the emphasis on social issues as a drawback to our party brand rather than a bonus. To that end, we did the opposite of what happened nationally. We defined our opponent as the social issues guy, overly focused on abortion and gender issues, while we frame ourselves as the economic campaign focused on pocketbook issues.


This focus allowed us to tell voters that we understood inflation’s impact and we were making moves to save them money on every front from education to the taxes they pay, to their retirement. As a result, we won by more in 2024 than we did in 2022 because we flipped the script.

BACK TO BASICS


I firmly believe the Democratic Party needs to get back to its roots and focus on the economy, wages, consumer protection, and housing. We should be the party of reform that is focused on building things (houses, factories, roads, rail etc.). Show voters we can cut through red tape for them and make government work for them and their community again. This is both a messaging and policy issue. As a mentor once told me, people like progressive policy, they hate progressive politicians.

BRAG ABOUT THE COMMONSENSE


We need to stop being the activist party, focus on kitchen table issues in a pragmatic way. Implement the progressive policy that helps people when we get into power, but continue talking about it in a pragmatic way. In other words, stop bragging about being transformational; start bragging about our commonsense solutions to everyday problems facing our communities. Then we need to deliver and remove barriers to that delivery.




US Representative Nikki Budzinski
Illinois 13th Congressional District




66.6%



57.7%



CENTRAL
and Southern Illinois



“ To earn the trust of voters, Democrats must do more than show up. We need to listen, engage, and reconnect with working people. Even those who didn’t support me in 2022 saw that I was committed to delivering real results through bipartisan, common-sense solutions.”

– Nikki Budzinski – Illinois 13th Congressional District

FOCUSING ON SOLUTIONS

As the representative for thousands who have supported Donald Trump in multiple elections, I’ve never made him the focus of my campaign or work. Instead, I focus on delivering results for my district and addressing everyday concerns facing working-class voters.

The results from last year’s election are clear: A large portion of Americans felt dissatisfied with the direction the country was headed. It marked a turning point where many working-class voters no longer felt represented by the Democratic Party, and I believe this is both a policy and messaging issue.

WE NEED TO LISTEN...

Many Democrats have shifted their legislative focus from issues like reducing costs to tackling identity politics, which likely alienated moderate and Republican voters. When people see this, it raises questions about the Democratic Party’s priorities. If we’d listened more carefully, we might have recognized this problem earlier.

We need to meet voters where they are, not where we wish they were. This means listening with empathy, not judgment, offering humility instead of “perfect” solutions. I don’t believe in finger-pointing or grandstanding. I believe in problem solving and working across the aisle where we can. We need more of this within our party.

...AND WE NEED TO DELIVER

I focus on bringing back dollars to our communities. This has an impact on all voters – no matter who you supported in the election. When they can see and feel positive changes in their community, it can shift their image of you and perhaps the Democratic Party.

To earn the trust of voters, Democrats must do more than show up. We need to listen, engage, and reconnect with working people. Even those who didn’t support me in 2022 saw that I was committed to delivering real results through bipartisan, common-sense solutions. That’s why I increased my vote share in all seven of my counties and outperformed Kamala Harris by more than seven points.

If Democrats focus on local concerns and show up with an open ear, we can become the party of working people once again. And when we do, we’ll be positioned to win.

State Representative Will Jobe
Missouri 21st House District

85.2% working class

51.4% 2024 winning percentage

NORTHERN
 part of Independence

“By talking to people about being a combat veteran, a minister for 20 years, a public interest attorney, and a good ol’ country boy, I was able to demonstrate that I am not the boogeyman they have been conditioned to fear. I was able to demonstrate our mutually shared values, and explain why those values lead me to a home in the Democratic Party.”

– Will Jobe – Missouri 21st House District

MY DISTRICT

House District 21 is a true 50/50 district that has been represented by a Democrat for at least the last 15 years. The district has also historically voted Republican at the top of the ticket, with Trump winning by a significant margin in each of his campaigns for President.

In 2024, Trump won my district by nine points. Because of this dynamic, it has been essential that any candidate for District 21 be able to pull support from moderates and Republicans in order to win. Basically, unless a candidate can outperform the top of the ticket, it is very difficult to prevail in this district.

KITCHEN TABLE ISSUES ARE KEY

So how does one do that? “It’s the economy, stupid.” It’s as true today as it was in 1992 when James Carville said it: The most important issues facing American voters are the things discussed around the kitchen table. Those issues, the ones that most affect everyday Americans, used to be the Democratic Party’s stronghold. But over the last few decades, the Party has allowed our big tent to be whittled away.

TALK TO VOTERS

As Democrats, if we are going to gain back the ground we have ceded in the last few years, we must be real and present, meeting our working-class constituents where they are. We must show them through face-to-face interaction that we are not the boogeymen and women that Fox News portrays us to be. We must focus always on the kitchen table issues that are affecting our families. As we do this door by door, conversation by conversation, we can demonstrate in an honest and meaningful way that the party standing up and fighting for the working people and families is the Democratic Party.

State Representative Will Jobe
Missouri 21st House District

BE PRESENT

This is why I made it a point to talk to as many voters as possible, both hard-nosed Republicans and strong Democrats. In those conversations, and in my advertising, I leaned on my history and personal experience to break through many of the walls erected by the increasing number of single-issue voters.

By talking to people about being a combat veteran, a minister for 20 years, a public interest attorney, and a good ol' country boy, I was able to demonstrate that I am not the boogeyman they have been conditioned to fear. I was able to demonstrate our mutually shared values, and explain why those values lead me to a home in the Democratic Party.


In being present and listening, I was able to show that I care about their concerns and would go do something about them. I believe it was that work, door by door, that allowed me to earn the votes of many otherwise Republican voters.




10% of state legislative districts held by Democrats are competitive and

WORKING-CLASS







State Representative Sean Brennan
Ohio 14th House District




76.2%
working class



58.1%
2024 winning percentage



BLUE
COLLAR
suburbs



// It's more about demeanor and "honest speak" when it comes to messaging to working-class voters. I use the analogy that Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump win over voters because there is no question who they are. What comes out of their mouth is exactly who they are. Plain speaking. Authentic."

– Sean Brennan – Ohio 14th House District

PROVE YOU CARE

Get to work building a brand that wins back working-class Ohioans/Americans. I hear a lot of complaining, protesting, and a lot of the same failed messaging and prioritizing, but what is being done to win folks back?

I work hard every day in my district proving to my constituents - Democrats, Independents, and, yes, Republicans - that I care about them. **I knock on doors - all doors - even when I am not on the ballot** and go to just about every community event and talk to my people - a lot of hard conversations. I conduct myself in a civil manner and model what I want to see in a statesman/stateswoman. **It is not brain surgery. In fact, I was awarded Most Bipartisan Legislator in 2023.**

EXPAND THE FOLD...

Quite frankly, I don't think too many folks in our party are really concerned with growing the party and winning folks back (they expect people to "wake up" and come back to us). What tangible efforts are being done to show that they are? Listening to Bill Maher a little more might not be a bad idea - he speaks the hard truths that too many Democrats don't want to hear.

...BY REMEMBERING OUR ROOTS

I am not surprised why so many folks are ticked off at our party for leaving them behind - and have left it. I'm not leaving my party like many of them because I still believe in the old soul of the Democratic Party - I want to model what our party has stood for over decades and want to be a moderating force in hopes of winning folks back.

State Senator Nick Pisciotanno
Pennsylvania 45th Senate District

70.4% working class

53.1% 2024 winning percentage

POST-INDUSTRIAL scars of lost manufacturing

“ I was able to win in a district that has trended heavily Republican and voted for Donald Trump in every election by running a campaign rooted in common-sense values and local priorities. I focused on what matters to the people I represent – not national talking points or ideological purity tests.”

– Nick Pisciotanno – Pennsylvania 45th Senate District

PEOPLE ARE FRUSTRATED

The sentiment I feel most frequently from my constituents is dissatisfaction with the status quo. **It is more difficult to succeed in the United States than it used to be.** The challenges of housing costs, education quality and affordability can make people feel like they are being left behind. It feels much more difficult and expensive to raise a family. The ladders of opportunity that were available to our parents’ or grandparents’ generation feel inaccessible to the current generation. This creates understandable frustration with the party in power, **which is why you tend to see swing voters move back and forth between the political parties every election.** Given the close polarization of the electorate with most voters sorted into their political camps, these swing voters ultimately decide very close elections.

ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSE

Due to habitual dysfunction in Washington, D.C., neither party is able or willing to fix the root causes of these issues, though it feels like Republicans at least pay better lip service to them than Democrats have in the past decade.

My campaign in 2024 was successful despite being outspent by \$1.8 million and the national environment heavily favoring Republicans based on a few factors.

- I highlighted my combination of experience from my time in the state House, combined with a still fresh perspective as a younger member who could speak to lived experiences facing swing voters.
- My campaign spoke to economic issues as much as possible tying them to some of the work I had done already cracking down on junk fees and challenging corporate power.

- We targeted swing voters with specific moderate messages on economics but also validated my candidacy with endorsements from moderate-coded organizations like the building trades, fraternal order of police, and political allies like the very popular Governor Josh Shapiro, which provided a solid foundation to burnish outsider credentials that appeal to swing voters.
- The extensive constituent service work I did throughout my House district in the past four years converted a small, but significant group of Republicans to support me in my Senate race, which is why I over performed up-ballot Democrats in my House district on Election Day.

MY ADVICE

The Democratic Party and candidates running in swing areas need to **address the economic anxieties facing working-class people**. We need to talk about those issues, offer solutions, and do our best to actually get things done that help alleviate the challenges facing the working class, particularly families.

If the national party is unable to adjust to these types of policy and messaging priorities, local candidates need to develop a distinct brand that differentiates their type of Democrat from the national party. Gov. Shapiro is an excellent model for developing that kind of brand which includes strategic breaks with the national image of the Democratic Party without abdicating the party's core values, and a focus on working hard to get things done that measurably improve people's lives.



State Senator Mike Zimmer
Iowa 35th Senate District

76.6% working class

52.0% 2024 winning percentage

EASTERN
Obama Trump country

//I have come to believe that Democrats have a messaging problem. I have heard from younger voters that they don't know what the Democrats stand for. We need to take back the identification piece of the puzzle. We need candidates who reflect the values and work experiences of many of our constituents and emphasize our similarities."

–Mike Zimmer – Iowa 35th Senate District

MY DISTRICT

Clinton County reflects 70% of Senate District 35. Current census data indicates a loss of 2,000 people in the last 10 years, a 4% decline. The county has an average income of \$65,000 with almost 13% of families living in poverty, 90% are white, and 21% of the population is older than 65. While more than 90% of the residents have a high school diploma, 22% have a bachelor's degree.

There really is no "special sauce" to my election win. I ran as a moderate on many issues and my supporters included several Republicans who were reluctant to support my opponent, an anti-vaxxer activist who was also a local county Trump organizer for the 2024 election.

TALK TO EVERYONE

We canvassed many doors for four weeks. We concentrated on the larger population centers, but I spent the last week knocking on the doors of our smaller rural towns. That was important for me to do, because these **residents often feel left behind and that their voices are not being heard.**

I took advantage of every media opportunity – television and radio interviews (local and national), podcasts, newspaper guest columns, and nine meet-and-greets in three counties with potential supporters.

COMMIT TO A CONSISTENT MESSAGE

Through these experiences I have come to believe that Democrats have a messaging problem. I have heard from younger voters that they don't know what the Democrats stand for. We need to take back the identification piece of the puzzle. **We need candidates who reflect the values and work experiences of many of our constituents** and emphasize our similarities. I have tried to do that by stressing my past small business experience as a construction company owner, a teacher and coach, and the president of the local school board.

MY DISTRICT

We must recruit candidates who reflect voters' values. We also must get these candidates in front of the voters, both physically and in all forms of (legacy and social) media. We need to make inroads in communications. We can't compete with the Republicans when they have blanket coverage of constant hate on the same (AM) stations where farmers get their commodity reports. Fox News has also become a juggernaut of misinformation/partial information.

WE MUST BE BETTER AT COUNTERPUNCHING

The Republicans have hit hard on transgender and immigrant hate, sowing fear and inciting distrust toward others, and Democrats have not done a good job countering that. We need to invest in targeted media to counteract the propaganda of hate that permeates our country.

It will not be a quick or easy fix.



State Representative Jeremy Dean
Missouri 132nd House District

81.9% working class

51.6% 2024 winning percentage

\$33,562 average income

// For Democrats to succeed in districts like the one I serve, they must prioritize economic issues in their messaging. In our campaign, we heard time and again from constituents who felt abandoned by politicians who failed to address their economic concerns.”

– Jeremy Dean – Missouri 132nd House District

IT’S [STILL] THE ECONOMY STUPID

Too often, political messaging focuses on telling voters what they need rather than listening to what they actually want from their government. When it comes to earning their trust, the key is simple: listen.

The phrase “It’s the economy, stupid” still rings true today. **For Democrats to succeed in districts like the one I serve, they must prioritize economic issues** in their messaging. In our campaign, we heard time and again from constituents who felt abandoned by politicians who failed to address their economic concerns. Democrats must make it clear how they plan to fix the economy, lower costs, and create opportunities for all—not just the wealthy. It’s not an, “I hate rich people,” mindset. It’s an, “I want everyone to be rich,” mindset.

Our campaign was able to secure a victory because we focused on three main strategies.

1. Direct Voter Contact

We dedicated an enormous amount of time and effort to canvassing, meeting voters where they were, and engaging in real conversations. While we had a small team and couldn’t reach every single resident, **we prioritized swing voters**—those who might be undecided or open to changing their minds. These face-to-face interactions were crucial in building trust and credibility.

2. Follow-Up Matters

Canvassing alone is not enough. **If a voter expressed uncertainty, had questions, or simply needed more time to decide, we made a concerted effort to follow up.** I, as the candidate, personally revisited these voters to answer their questions and hear their concerns. This direct engagement allowed me to connect with them on a deeper level, reinforcing our commitment to serving their interests. Many voters were more likely to support a candidate they had spoken with personally and who demonstrated genuine care for their issues.


3. Leveraging Social Media

The district I serve is home to multiple higher education institutions, making young voters a critical demographic. To engage this population, **we ran targeted social media campaigns**, emphasizing the importance of voting where they live. By pushing this message, we helped increase turnout among younger voters who otherwise may not have participated.

REGAINING TRUST


Democrats need to shift their approach. Conversations with voters should center on their economic struggles and how the party plans to address them. When speaking with working-class constituents, social issues—while important—should not be the primary focus. Many voters want to know how they will afford rent, buy groceries, and provide for their families. If we fail to address these core concerns, we risk losing their support.








MICHIGAN

US Representative
Kristen McDonald Rivet
Michigan 8th Congressional District

 **76.1%**
working class

 **51.3%**
2024 winning percentage

 **CENTRAL**
includes Flint, Saginaw
Bay City and Midland



// “We need to use words that average Americans use, not those from a faculty lounge. We need to boil issues down to the ground level.”

– Kristen McDonald Rivet - Michigan 8th Congressional District

MY DISTRICT

While we have a diverse set of workers in the Congressional District I represent, the one thing that connects all our people is our pocketbooks. **Everybody simply wants the chance to work hard and earn a better future for themselves and their kids.**

FOCUS AND STAY COMMITTED

That’s what I want, too. I am a common-sense mom of six who is focused on the issues impacting working families, namely affordability and safety.

Very deliberately, all of our messaging clung to these narratives, and we refused to “chase pitches” outside of our defined lanes. In doing so, we created non-partisan permission structures for voters, even Trump voters, to vote for me.

I have lived here for decades and understand the daily struggle of Michigan families. They need to know and feel that.

During my campaign, I personally spoke directly to the voters in many of our ads. Hearing directly from me, voters got to know me, and they were more likely to believe what I had to say. It also made negative attacks on me less believable.

GROUND GAME IS KEY

And we invested heavily in our ground game. In all, **we knocked over 260,000 doors and made nearly 1 million phone calls** – a statistically significant volume in an election with 425,000 voters.

We engaged every stakeholder – labor unions, community organizations, book clubs, churches, meeting voters personally and making my case.

US Representative
Kristen McDonald Rivet
Michigan 8th Congressional District

In doing so, we had a person-to-person pulse on what mattered, drove turnout among less-likely Dems, and persuaded some likely Republicans.

Here are a few things our Party should consider as we work to win working-class voters:

- Speak accessibly – We need to use words that average Americans use, not those from a faculty lounge. We need to boil issues down to the ground level.
- Have a positive agenda – We can't simply resist; we need a positive vision for how we will address the real challenges working families face, if they elect us.
- Focus on broad issues – We need to focus our messaging and agenda on broad issues that affect everybody.
- Recruit candidates who get it – We will do best when our candidates come from and understand the communities they aim to represent.



State Senator Brad Pfaff
Wisconsin 32nd Senate District

68.6% working class

52.4% 2024 winning percentage

LACROSSE
and along the Mississippi

// "What I hear when I talk to voters is they see us fighting cultural wars more than focusing on helping them afford to keep the lights on, afford healthcare, or buy a new home. They see many in our party use language that seems fake and overly poll tested."

– Brad Pfaff – Wisconsin 32nd Senate District

MY BACKGROUND

The slow exodus of working-class Americans from our party has made once reliable Democratic strongholds competitive – and in some cases reliably Republican. Since winning my first election by just 582 votes, I worked, nonstop, on the issues that matter most to the same working-class, rural folks I grew up with. Four years later, in a worse year for Democrats, I won my district by 5 points, more than any Democrat on the ballot.

I'll boil down my overperformance to three reasons:

1. Voters see me focusing on bread and butter, kitchen table issues that impact their daily lives. Yes, they know I'm a Democrat. Yes, they know I vote and stand up for Democratic values. They know I'm working and fighting for them and their families.
2. I show up. I try to be visible in places Democrats don't usually go – from church potlucks and fundraisers to rural community events and parades. You can't expect somebody to vote for you if you don't show your face in their community.
3. I've worked hard to make sure my constituents know where I came from and my story, so they realize I share their values and concerns because I'm their neighbor. I'm rooted in the same community they are. It's easier to vote for somebody when you know they're one of you.

TOO MANY CULTURE WARS

There is no quick fix to turning around our party's brand. Working-class voters have walked away from the party that has historically staked its claim on fighting for middle class issues. What I hear when I talk to voters is they see us fighting cultural wars more than focusing on helping them afford to keep the lights on, afford healthcare, or buy a new home. They see many in our party use language that seems fake and overly poll tested.

State Senator Brad Pfaff
Wisconsin 32nd Senate District


THEY NEED TO KNOW YOU'LL FIGHT

We're too worried about being politically correct and as a result we talk past many of the voters we're trying to appeal to. They can't relate, connect, and communicate with us and they think we're not fighting for them.

BE AUTHENTIC


My advice to Democrats running in districts like mine is simple: be authentic to yourself and your district – in your communications with voters and with your overall campaign message; show up – you can't expect voters to vote for you if you're not there to show them you care enough to show up; and lastly don't forget the core values that make you a Democrat. Center yourself in that frame and you're on the right path.








ILLINOIS

US Representative Eric Sorensen
Illinois 17th Congressional District

 **75.4%**
working class

 **54.3%**
2024 winning percentage

 **NW AND CENTRAL**



// Our team has seen success because of how locally focused we are. We think about the words we use, we think about the images we share, and we tie everything back home. My advice to candidates running is focus on your communities and stay local.”

– Eric Sorensen – Illinois 17th Congressional District

MY BACKGROUND

When I first ran for Congress in 2022, I ran as the trusted TV weatherman, someone trying to keep my communities safe ahead of severe weather. **I ran as a candidate that the people knew and trusted.** People were used to seeing me as their weather guy, not as a political figure. When Republicans tried to tie me to Nancy Pelosi or Bernie Sanders, it was laughable. Everyone knew I didn’t know them!

CHOSE YOUR WORDS WISELY

Our team has seen success because of how locally focused we are. We think about the words we use, we think about the images we share, and we tie everything back home. **My advice to candidates running is focus on your communities and stay local.** Don’t just talk about inflation or reproductive rights; highlight local impacts and examples.

For example, when talking about inflation, I always had local stories ready to go. Whether it was the concerned mother at the Jewel-Osco grocery store who said the normal grocery cart had doubled in price or the senior who slid back one of the three orange pill containers at the pharmacy because they couldn’t afford it.

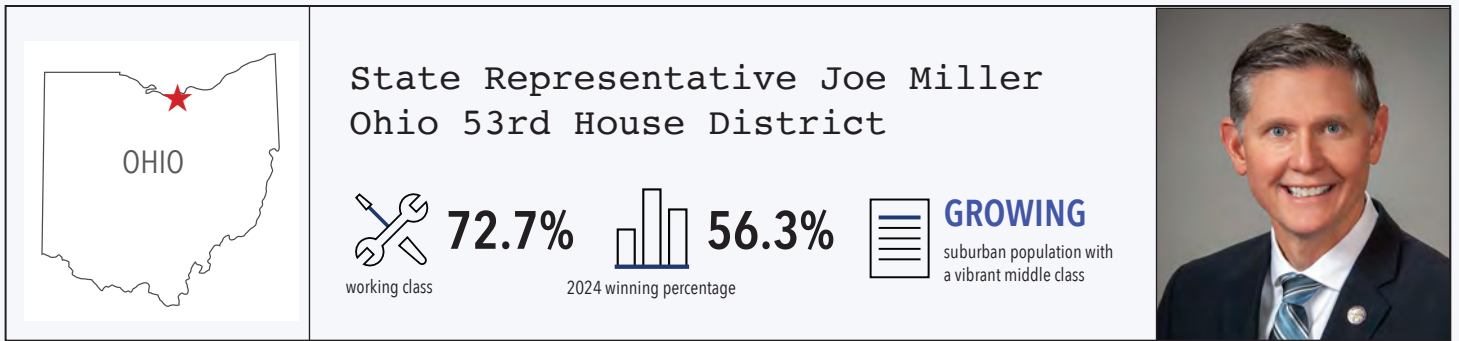
I don’t spend a lot of time talking about my opponents, but when I did, I always tried to frame them in a local light. Less about “national Republicans” and more about local, unique examples about why they weren’t suited to represent the people of central and northwestern Illinois.

I think my final recommendation is: **We should never be talking about politics; we should be talking about our values.**

WORKING-CLASS

voters no longer understand what the Democratic Party stands for and find the messaging convoluted.





State Representative Joe Miller
Ohio 53rd House District

72.7% working class

56.3% 2024 winning percentage

GROWING suburban population with a vibrant middle class

// Voters in working-class communities can quickly spot a politician who talks down to them or changes their message based on the audience. I made it clear that I wasn't a career politician—I was their neighbor, someone who understood their struggles."

– Joe Miller – Ohio 53rd House District

A DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE PARTY AND THE PEOPLE

One of the major challenges the Democratic Party faces with working-class voters is the perception that the party has moved away from their concerns. **There is a growing belief that Democrats prioritize urban and progressive issues over economic stability and job security** for blue collar workers. The party's messaging sometimes leans heavily into cultural issues at the expense of addressing pocketbook concerns.

Many voters feel unheard when they express concerns about inflation, energy costs, and trade policies that directly impact their livelihoods. This disconnect has pushed many working-class voters toward candidates who, rightly or wrongly, position themselves as champions of the working man and woman.

Three key factors set my campaign apart from others:

1. Community Engagement Over Partisan Rhetoric – Rather than focusing on national party narratives, my campaign was centered on the concerns of the people in my district. I listened more than I spoke, and when I did speak, I made sure my message was tailored to the needs of our local communities.
2. Economic Focus Over Ideological Battles – While some campaigns get caught up in divisive cultural debates, I prioritized economic issues. My advocacy for job training programs, small business incentives, and apprenticeship opportunities resonated with voters who want to see tangible improvements in their lives.
3. Authenticity, Accessibility, and Core Values – Voters in working-class communities can quickly spot a politician who talks down to them or changes their message based on the audience. I made it clear that I wasn't a career politician—I was their neighbor, someone who understood their struggles and had real solutions. My tagline, "He listens. He cares. You matter." was not just a slogan—it was the foundation of how I interacted with voters, showing them that their voices were heard and their concerns were my priority.

RETURN TO THE FUNDAMENTALS

To attract working-class voters, Democrats must return to the fundamentals: fighting for good wages, affordable healthcare, and strong unions. But beyond policy, the approach must be personal. Too often, voters feel like political leaders speak at them rather than with them.

Here's my advice:

- Meet Voters Where They Are – This means showing up at the factory gates during shift changes, attending community events, and knocking on doors. Relationships matter.
- Talk About the Economy in Clear Terms – Avoid jargon and partisan framing. Voters care about how policies will impact their day-to-day lives.
- Be Authentic – Don't try to sound like a national spokesperson. Speak from the heart and be willing to acknowledge when the party has fallen short.



State Representative Tom Townsend
Iowa 36th Senate District

66% **working class**

50.5% **2024 winning percentage**

DUBUQUE
centered

// When candidates come to speak to working people, they focus too much on talking points. Working people appreciate being real and getting to the point. Also, it's hard to talk to someone who is struggling and then tell them how great the economy is. You have to be able to communicate on their level."

– Tom Townsend – Iowa 36th Senate District

MY BACKGROUND

There is no secret that knocking on doors was a big part of how I won. My background is what was important to making it successful. As someone who grew up on a small farm, graduated from a small school, joined the Navy, completed the Nuclear Power Program, and serving on submarines, I could connect to everyone at some level.

I had great conversations in the most rural part of our district. **We knocked almost exclusively on persuasion doors,** (sometimes some solid Democratic doors would have been nice), but we stuck with the hard conversations. Being a veteran also was very helpful at many of the doors.

I've been a union electrician, been on workers' compensation, been unemployed, and, during the recession, nearly lost my house. No offense to people who took a different path, but I have life experiences that make me a little unique. I am not talking with people like I understand their situation; I am talking to people because I have been there.

I strongly believe that too often we talk at people and we are not listening. My education came through hard work, whether that was onboard a submarine or on a jobsite. As I now serve as a Senator, it's obvious to me that Democrats are struggling to find ways to reconnect with working people. I keep reminding my colleagues that it starts with always thinking of workers first. A tax cut for business seems great, but not at the expense of workers. I'm not a believer of trickle-down economics.

MY THOUGHTS ON THE ISSUES

I feel there are several issues hurting Democrats with working people. I will start with the unions. This is a complicated issue, and not one that is the same for all union workers. Take the IBEW for example; while Hillary Clinton was saying "coal is dead", Trump was bragging about reviving coal. Like it or not, the IBEW represents many workers in the coal-fired power houses. We have told them for years to vote their paycheck, not their hobbies, and they finally listened to us.

But there are many other issues. I feel like local leaders are not willing to engage their members on politics enough. When I got into the Local, most of the politics I knew came from the Business Manager. Now, the members already come to a meeting informed of what they think are the facts, largely obtained from social media and Fox News.






When candidates come to speak to working people, they focus too much on talking points. Working people appreciate being real and getting to the point. Also, it's hard to talk to someone who is struggling and then tell them how great the economy is. You must be able to communicate on their level.

MY ADVICE

When talking to working people, treat them with respect, listen to them—they have great ideas. Don't talk down to them. Most importantly, less is more. I know people who can talk for 20 minutes and say less than I say in five minutes.

Never take anything for granted. Always believing that I could lose kept me motivated.



 <p>SOUTH DAKOTA</p>	<p>State Senator Jamie Smith South Dakota 15th Senate District</p> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  77.8% <small>working class</small> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  52.4% <small>2024 winning percentage</small> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  SOUIX FALLS </div> </div>	
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// We must spend more time engaging with people, listening to their concerns, and building relationships. Too often, we have demonized those who disagree with us, creating an environment where people feel they can't come back into the conversation without being told 'I told you so.'" – Jamie Smith – South Dakota 15th Senate District

MY DISTRICT

For years, this district has been a Democratic stronghold in a state dominated by Republicans. However, the political landscape is shifting.

Historically, we have been home to traditional Catholic Democrats—working-class families who valued community, faith, and family. But in recent years, many former Democratic voters have left the party. A significant reason for this shift is the abortion issue, especially with the Cathedral located in the heart of this district.

Another contributing factor to the district's changing political makeup is the influx of new voters. With the construction of luxury condos and apartments in downtown Sioux Falls, younger, more affluent residents have moved in. This demographic has different priorities and concerns compared to the long-time working-class residents.

NATIONAL PARTY SHIFTING FOCUS

One of the major challenges we face is how the national Democratic Party has shifted its focus. **The party has largely ignored and forgotten an important segment of its base—working-class men.** This group has historically voted blue, but many now feel unheard in the party's messaging. The national Democratic Party has failed to address their economic concerns while placing a larger emphasis on issues of identity.

Meanwhile, Republicans have successfully weaponized the shift in Democratic messaging to divert attention from critical problems like affordable housing, childcare, and education. As a result, the national conversation often misses the struggles of working-class families. We may say that our policies work better for the working class, but our party has to back that message up with tangible results, not general statistics.

LOCAL FOCUS IS KEY


My campaign was focused on solving “real South Dakota problems,” problems we all face, regardless of personal identities. I focus my efforts on working together to address the issues that matter to the people here — whether it’s affordable housing, childcare, or quality education.

Democrats must stop trying to win debates through philosophical discussions. Instead, we need to break down our solutions into sound-bite-sized pieces that resonate with the average voter. **We must spend more time engaging with people, listening to their concerns, and building relationships.** Too often, we have demonized those who disagree with us, creating an environment where people feel they can’t come back into the conversation without being told “I told you so.” It’s critical that we approach every conversation with respect and understanding.


Winning in a district like mine requires doing the hard work—going door to door, being an active part of the community, not just showing up for photo ops. You need to show up when people are struggling, regardless of their political affiliation.


Winning in a district like mine requires doing the hard work—going door to door, being an active part of the community, not just showing up for photo ops. You need to show up when people are struggling, regardless of their political affiliation.







US Representative Frank Mrvan
Indiana 1st Congressional District

 **73.8%**
working class

 **53.4%**
2022 winning percentage

 **NORTH-WESTERN**



// I start by showing up and listening and then executing legislatively...This is what has proven to be successful. No big secret. Just doing the work — like our working-class families.”

– Frank Mrvan – Indiana 1st Congressional District

MY DISTRICT

The diverse region I represent in Congress includes an incredible steel and manufacturing industry and rural areas with a vibrant and engaged agricultural community.

We are home to one of the most industrial concentrated manufacturing areas in our country, including the largest inland oil refinery east of the Mississippi River and one of the largest steel-producing districts in the nation. This has created the conditions for a very proud and skilled workforce and members of organized labor.

MY FOCUS ON THE ECONOMY

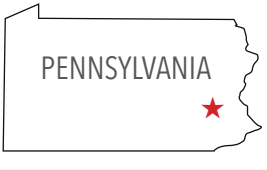
This is not your typical Democratic Congressional District. But we have been successful politically and governmentally, I believe, because **my primary focus in Congress has been to directly advocate for Northwest Indiana and demonstrate my singular focus** and results to support economic development, the creation of more good-paying job opportunities, our institutions of higher education, our law enforcement agencies and first responders, as well as nonprofit organizations that benefit vulnerable populations in our region.

MAKING IT HAPPEN


I start by showing up and listening and then executing legislatively.

I make a concerted effort throughout every month of every year to attend monthly labor union meetings, to attend various civic group and community organization meetings, to attend church and other religious services, and to visit with farmers and other industry leaders to hear about their latest initiatives and know that my office is here to support them and their good work. This is what has proven to be successful.


No big secret. Just doing the work -- like our working-class families.




State Senator Judy Schwank
Pennsylvania 11th Senate District




73.4%
working class



58.7%
2024 winning percentage



READING
entire city included



//

I also use techniques that consultants and some in the party advise against....I'm a big believer in yard signs. Consultants tell me, "Yard signs don't vote," but they are very important in rural areas and send a strong, symbolic message of support to neighbors that it's OK to support a Democrat."

– Judy Schwank – Pennsylvania 11th Senate District

THE PART NEEDS TO DEFINE ITSELF

The Democratic Party has been defined by others rather than defining itself. We have failed to communicate our vision for the country or align together on similar goals, so people are confused about what we stand for.

MY BACKGROUND

I pass the test as a trustworthy candidate: I have a long history outside of politics in my district and people feel they know me, know what I stand for and that I'm sincere.


The top three reasons for my success are:

1. I show up. People see me working, and I'm approachable.
2. I focus on the district rather than the state capitol.
3. My staff assist me in using social media effectively, and I hold a variety of meetings from town halls to "Coffee with the Senator" events to meet personally with constituents.

TALK TO ALL THE PEOPLE


Democrats should use every possible technique to meet and talk with constituents and start early—don't wait for petition signing season to contact voters. **I urge people who are considering running for elected office to be able to state why they are running and what their goals are. Just being a Democrat is not enough.** Candidates must know their strengths and weaknesses and be prepared to give 110% if they decide to run.


I also use techniques that consultants and some in the party advise against. For example, I frequently appear on talk radio on AM stations and advertise on them as well. And I'm a big believer in yard signs. Consultants tell me, "Yard signs don't vote," but they are very important in rural areas and send a strong, symbolic message of support to neighbors that it's OK to support a Democrat.





INDIANA

State Representative Sue Errington
Indiana 34th House District

 **74.6%**
working class

 **55.1%**
2024 winning percentage

 **SHRINKING**
population from the 1970s.
Home of Ball State University



// My advice is that voter contact is a critical piece of success. That means knocking on doors personally and with volunteers. Help voters get to know you before you run through community service and volunteering in the campaigns of other candidates.”

– Sue Errington – Indiana 34th House District

MY BACKGROUND

I’ve been in the Indiana House of Representatives since 2012. Working-class voters who were a key driver of Democratic victories back in the mid-to-late 20th century and were reliable straight party Democratic voters have been gravitating toward the Republican Party, and are still straight party voters, but now for Republicans. President Trump’s appeal is the major reason for this movement.

I worked for Planned Parenthood for 17 years which people thought would be a drag on my candidacy. It wasn’t.

In 2024, I was the only winning Democrat on our county ballot. The three top reasons are:

1. People know me from my years of representing them. An important part of legislative work is constituent services. I’m very attentive to that part of the job.
2. I show up. In election season, I spend a lot of time knocking on doors, attending events, and doing things to keep my name before the public. In the off seasons, I continue to keep my name before the public.
3. I am a vocal supporter of issues people in my district care about such as our schools and the environment.

MY BACKGROUND

My advice is that voter contact is a critical piece of success. That means knocking on doors personally and with volunteers. Help voters get to know you before you run through community service and volunteering in the campaigns of other candidates. Know your district - what people care about, be true to your values, and build trust.

Many seem to think that Democrats no longer reflect working-class values or care about the economic issues that affect them. They perceive Democrats as weak and untrustworthy.

Going door to door in the early days, I would find many young people who had lost hope for a better life because they could no longer get a good job with little education like their fathers did. I’m not encountering that attitude as much now. Maybe it is far enough in the past that it’s no longer an issue.

There’s also a resentment of the affluence of the people at the university and the hospital which they can see every day. It increases their feeling of being left behind.

State Representative Tip McGuire
Wisconsin 64th Assembly District

70.9% working class

55.7% 2024 winning percentage

NE KENOSHA COUNTY

// Democrats should seek to elevate the voices of regular, non-elected people who are impacted by public policy and put them front and center of the conversation.”

– Tip McGuire – Wisconsin 64th Assembly District

TRUST ISSUES

The critical challenge that hinders the appeal of the modern Democratic Party to many voters is one of trust. **Most voters do not trust politicians. Many voters do not trust institutions or experts.** Our values still appeal to voters, but we have to present our perspective in a way that understands and bridges the trust challenges that politicians and institutions have with many voters.

I have two very basic suggestions that will help to make a difference:

1. Democrats should seek to elevate the voices of regular, non-elected people who are impacted by public policy and put them front and center of the conversation.
2. The Democratic Party should be seeking candidates with long, deep roots in their district that extend beyond political activism.

These two principles have benefited my electoral success, and more so, have benefited my legislative work as well.

- In most of my campaigns, I have run grassroots efforts that focus on including the testimonials of local people who can highlight the benefits of my service to our community.
- There is no question that a lifetime spent in the community, has benefited my electoral success. I have found being of the community and having deep roots here to be a strong buffer against the negative attacks that have been launched at me during political campaigns.

LEVERAGE YOUR COMMUNITY

I recognize that it sounds a bit oversimplified and pretty obvious, but I also know this: When I have sat in on candidate recruitment conversations, the question of where the candidate went to high school or how deep their roots go is often not asked. And **when I read consultant-driven, message-tested mail pieces, there is often a lack of personal statements and testimonials** from those who know or have been helped by the candidate. Instead, I often see top-line messaging that has been massaged and poll-tested.

I can put this plainly: If I know your cousin from playing Little League together years ago, and I knock on your door, are you more likely to trust me and vote for me? If a neighbor tells you that I helped them out when they needed it, are you more likely to trust me and vote for me?

US Representative Marcy Kaptur
Ohio 9th Congressional District

72.1% working class

48.3% 2024 winning percentage

NORTHWEST includes Toledo

// Democrats tend to focus on social justice which is critical. But without economic stability social justice cannot fully take root. Of late, this dimension is where our party has NOT focused.”

– Marcy Kaptur – Ohio 9th Congressional District

MY FOCUS

From my very first election until today, my chief focus has been on **spurring economic growth by voting to save and modernize legacy manufacturing** — this includes steel, specialty metals, automotives, and trucks — as well as spawning new enterprise through research and development in engineering, agriculture, energy, new fuels, solar, nuclear, medicine, and tourism. It is a focus deeply rooted in the people and the future of the Great Lakes region from which I hail.

MY DISTRICT

Representing eight counties in northwest Ohio, seven of them heavily rural, **it gets down to making life affordable for hard working people.** We’re about creating enterprise, with living wage jobs so families can afford a home, ensuring excellent medical care, providing access to education and quality childcare, and investing in job and skills training that ensures their competitiveness.

Democrats tend to focus on social justice which is critical. But without economic stability social justice cannot fully take root. Of late, this dimension is where our party has NOT focused. The GOP talks a good game, but their real game is exploitative fear.

Despite my efforts, global trade agreements have hit our region hard as multi-nationals, and the billionaire class have outsourced middle class jobs and production in a race to the bottom where labor in penny-wage nations gets exploited and American workers get pink slips.

I’ve served in Congress long enough to see bad trade deals outsource half of the productive wealth of my district. I fought against those lopsided deals with every ounce of strength I had. I didn’t win those fights. Then the damage cascaded as evidenced by vast and growing U.S. trade deficits. Then came the crushing housing market collapse in 2008 as greed in the mortgage market wiped out local lending institutions and the equity of families across the industrial Midwest.

NATIONAL MESSAGE NOT CLEAR

Donald Trump’s message “Make America Great Again” resonated because life has not been made better for people despite a strong work ethic. And despite its long, storied history with working-class America, the Democratic Party’s brand is not clear. How is it that with this storied history, that Democrats represent more of the highest per capita wealth districts in the country than working-class districts?

Neither party has offered effective trade or financial reforms to reinvest in working-class communities that meet the economic imperative of balancing trade accounts and restoring local capital accumulation. The concentration of wealth in the top 1 percent of the population in the United States has reached levels not seen since the 1920’s.

The 2024 elections were a profound rejection of the Wall Street-dominated politics that have plagued American voters for decades. Democrats got too close and are paying the price as turnout was down across the country in traditionally Democratic cities and towns – and up in heavily Republican rural areas.

If Democrats are to regain control of congress and the presidency, we need to put forth candidates who can win in Trump won districts in middle America – candidates who speak out against outsourcing, put manufacturing jobs ahead of corporate profits, stand up to China, and oppose the bad trade deals that got us here and have devastated America’s Heartland and worsened our horrible trade deficit.

As the first member of my family to graduate from high school and college, I know firsthand the harsh edge of the working-class struggle. I have tried very hard to serve our district, regardless of party affiliation. I attend events in all our counties, as does my staff. We listen to what is on people’s minds. We answer our phones. We show that we care, we respond, and most importantly, we try to help.

As a Democrat in a district that Trump carried handily, I will continue to focus on the real challenges facing working people and to fight each day to make life better for each and every one of them.

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