Winning in Red and Rural America
Breaking the Beltway Mentality

“You must unlearn what you have learned.” – Jedi Master Yoda

A narrative introduction... (howdy y’all!)

- From 2016 to now...
- Democrats won over 100 local and state elections in 2017/18, flipped 34 state legislative seats from red to blue and won gubernatorial elections in Virginia and New Jersey.
The Lay Of Land, A Guide

**Population Density:** Urban, Rural, and In-Between

72% of America’s land area belongs to rural counties

-- 157.8 million Americans live in 137 counties of 500k or more
-- 95.8 million Americans live in 453 counties with a population of 100k-500k
-- 49.6 million Americans live in 1,012 Counties of 25k-100k
-- 17.5 million Americans live in 1,508 counties of 25k or less
Are non-metro voters a lost cause?

“Rural Americans overall have mixed views on whether Trump respects them, with 50 percent saying he does and 48 percent saying he doesn’t, a finding that goes against a common theory that Trump won by providing a relatable alternative to political elites. And while 54 percent of rural Americans approve of Trump’s job performance, 40 percent disapprove. Equal shares of rural Americans — 30 percent — strongly disapprove and strongly approve.”

-Washington Post, 6.17.17
The Lay Of Land, A Guide

- ACA and Medicaid Expansion improving rural health care – 1.7 million rural Americans have gained coverage

- Rural America is well-positioned to lead the fight for renewable energy; 99% of wind projects are in rural areas. Growing demand for solar will require more solar fields. Bio-mass energy production is best located near major agricultural sites.

- Rural America is older than urban America: 1-in-5 rural residents is over 65. Per capita, Social Security is on average a greater percentage of retiree income than in urban areas.

- “Though rural America is more homogenous than urban America … 95.6% of rural America experienced increases in racial and ethnic diversity between 2000 and 2010…”

- ”People of color were responsible for nearly 83% of the population increase in rural counties” in the same period.

  --JEC Minority Report, “Investing in Rural America.” 2018
We don’t water down what we believe or our values; we need to do a better job of communicating these things.
Principals for Winning

**Narrative Personalization**
It is the foundation in which all progress will be rooted. As Democrats / progressives, we tend to talk policy and solutions, not narratives.

**Localization**
We recognize the big picture, but in failing to utilize effective narrative communication, we fail to localize the dialogue and hence we become the “other.”

**Authenticity**
Non-urban voters are more skeptical of government and authority on average than the rest of the country. Authenticity is the greatest determinate of trustworthiness.

**Values**
Non-urban voters see “values” – not socio-economics (despite the frequent assumptions) -- as the biggest divide between their interests and the rest of the country.
The social construction of self is largely based on narrative cohesion based on personal experience, starting in early childhood. We interpret narrative based on the narratives we have absorbed and believe. Journal or NREA reported study findings indicate that the rural nature of the participants’ communities had a significant impact on their identity formation and understanding of community. Trying on identities in adolescence leads to over binding.
Personal Narrative Example, Gov. Mike Beebe
Narrative

The “Do” List, The “Why” List

CONSTRUCT A PERSONAL NARRATIVE
Build your own narrative and story - narrative sequence, steps and components.

DEVELOP THE NARRATIVE OF YOUR CAMPAIGN AND ELECTION
Make the narrative of your campaign / election / candidacy parallel to your personal narrative.

TRANSLATE YOUR NARRATIVE
Translate your narrative into different mediums – traditional media, earned media, new media – and to specific audiences.

ELECTORATE(S)
This strategy is particularly important for rural and non-urban electorates, but is true for all electorates.

MORE RURAL, MORE NARRATIVE
Social network density, relationships more personal, emotional, direct

IMPORTANCE OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION
“The dimensions of being rooted in a particular place and having continuous life-long relationships with kin and friends underpin the psychology and sociology of these communities.” - Val Farmer, Clinical Psychologist specializing in rural mental health, family relationships, and rural psychology.
Localization

Study up. Show up.

Being local starts with being there.

Know what you are talking about.

Integrate localization in every part of the campaign.

Remember the importance of self-identification in rural communities?
‘Nuff said.
Show up.

Understand the language, the issues, and something about the culture of the rural part of your state or your district. Don’t talk about the price of arugula at the supermarket in row-crop country.

Localize your campaign materials and communication: “Nearly 7 in 10 rural residents say their values differ from people who live in big cities, including about 4 in 10 who say their values are very different.” …not so much in the reverse.  - WaPo, 6.17.17
Localization, Gov. Jay Nixon
Authenticity

Authenticity has been a buzzword lately in campaigns and elections. Authenticity itself is nuanced and complicated; earning it is not.

Voters are more skeptical & less trusting than ever before.

True for all electorates, but exaggerated amongst non-urban communities.

“Scientific cherry-picking is not the exclusive domain of the rural, the non-college educated, or the religious. Kahan found that highly educated people with advanced reasoning skills were the most adept at filtering out evidence that contradicted their cultural predispositions.”

As Scientific American reported:

“As trust in experts declines, authenticity and personal connection matter more. And where does authenticity come from...?” Narrative story telling

“The Bull-Shit-Meter”

Rural, Southern, MidWestern voters can smell bullshit. “It is precisely because of the closeness of the social network that rural people generally confide in fewer people... [TRUST] Friendly doesn’t necessarily mean open.”
Authenticity Example, Gov. Roy Cooper
Are rural values under attack? Is there a war on Christmas?

Yes, no, and it’s not what you think.
Population decline. College attainment, poverty, teen births, divorce, death rates from heart disease and cancer, labor-force participation – rural ranks worse now amongst all 4 groupings. – Fox, 5/26/17

What’s the answer?
Define values. Identify common values.

What about faith and values? Is faith under attack?

Roughly 76% of Americans self-identify as people of faith, roughly 70% as Christians.

“Nearly 6 in 10 people in rural areas say Christian values are under attack, compared with just over half of suburbanites and fewer than half of urbanites.” - WaPo, 6.17.17
State of Rural America?

“Among [rural residents who don’t have a bachelor’s degree], only 34% believe they will eventually earn enough to lead the life they want. This demographic represents a larger share of residents in rural counties than it does in other parts of the country. Only 19% of people in rural areas have a bachelor’s degree, versus 31% of those in the suburbs and 35% of urban residents.” – MarketWatch / Pew, 5/18

- Rural families, on average, earn 25% less than their urban counterparts
- Net decline of population from 2010-2106
- Outward migration of young people: 28% decline in 20-24 between 2000-2010 (college debt)
- Rural employment has not yet returned to pre-recession levels
- Rural Jobs are concentrated in lower growth industries
- Rural communities and small businesses have less access to capital and financial services

--JEC Minority Report, “Investing in Rural America.” 2018
How Do Democrats More Effectively Address Faith Voters?

Do faith voters feel alienated?
Values Contrasts, *A Different Approach to Faith Voters*
Better Understand The Rural Values System

Recurring values of fairness, of community, and higher correlations with faith activity and community identification

“...deep-seated kinship in rural America, coupled with a stark sense of estrangement from people who live in urban areas”

It's a dialogue: “The rural value system is primarily communitarian and relational.”

“...misgivings about the country's changing demographics and resentment about perceived biases in federal assistance.”

Showing up is a value: “Rural people have more relationships characterized by this direct, personal style of interaction than do urban residents.”

Validators: “The dimensions of being rooted in a particular place and having continuous life-long relationships with kin and friends underpin the psychology and sociology of these communities”

Reach your audience.
Values, Authenticity, Localization, Personal Narrative: Billie Sutton for Governor
Strategy starts with your audience.

1. **Narrative**
   - Build your personal narrative.
   - Reflect the narrative of your campaign.
   - **Narrative is the foundation of all successful politics.**

2. **Localization**
   - Localize yourself and your campaign.
   - Go local when you go rural, suburban and anywhere in-between

3. **Authenticity**
   - Be true to yourself, your values and convictions and convey it.
   - **Narrative is the key to authenticity.**

4. **Values**
   - Embrace your values. Engage the value system of your electorate.
   - Don’t let anyone define your values but you.
Thank you!