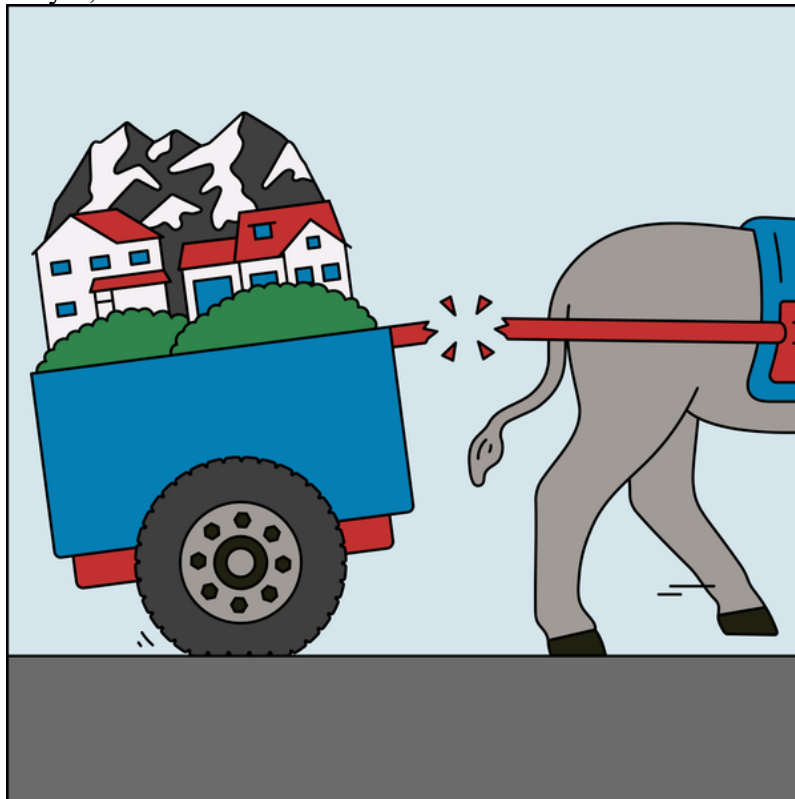


# What Democrats Don't Understand About Rural America

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By Chloe Maxmin and Canyon Woodward

*Ms. Maxmin, now 29, was the youngest woman to become a state senator in Maine's history. Mr. Woodward ran her two campaigns. They are the authors of the forthcoming book "Dirt Road Revival," from which this essay is adapted.*

NOBLEBORO, Maine — We say this with love to our fellow Democrats: Over the past decade, you willfully abandoned rural communities. As the party turned its focus to the cities and suburbs, its outreach became out of touch and impersonal. To rural voters, the message was clear: *You don't matter.*

Now, Republicans control dozens of state legislatures, and Democrats have only tenuous majorities in Congress at a time in history when we simply can't afford to cede an inch. The party can't wait to start correcting course. It may be too late to prevent a blowout in the fall, but

the future of progressive politics — and indeed our democracy — demands that we revive our relationship with rural communities.

As two young progressives raised in the country, we were dismayed as small towns like ours swung to the right. But we believed that Democrats could still win conservative rural districts if they took the time to drive down the long dirt roads where we grew up, have face-to-face conversations with moderate Republican and independent voters and speak a different language, one rooted in values rather than policy.

It worked for us. As a 25-year-old climate activist with unabashedly progressive politics, Chloe was an unlikely choice to be competitive — let alone win — in a conservative district that falls mostly within the bounds of a rural Maine county that has the oldest population in the state. But in 2018, she won a State House seat there with almost 53 percent of the vote. Two years later, she ran for State Senate, challenging the highest-ranking Republican in state office, the Senate minority leader. And again, in one of the most rural districts in the state, voters chose the young, first-term Democrat who sponsored one of the first Green New Deal policies to pass a state legislature.

To us, it was proof that the dogmas that have long governed American politics could and should be challenged. Over the past decade, many Democrats seem to have stopped trying to persuade people who disagreed with them, counting instead on demographic shifts they believed would carry them to victory — if only they could turn out their core supporters. The choice to prioritize turnout in Democratic strongholds over persuasion of moderate voters has cost the party election after election. But Democrats can run and win in communities that the party has written off, and they need not be Joe Manchin-like conservative Democrats to do so.

This is a story about not just rural Maine. It's about a nationwide pattern of neglect that goes back years. After the 2010 midterms, when the Democrats lost 63 House seats, Nancy Pelosi, then the House minority leader, disbanded the House Democratic Rural Working Group. Senator Harry Reid of Nevada later eliminated the Senate's rural outreach group. By 2016, [according to Politico's Helena Bottemiller Evich](#), the Clinton campaign had only a single staff person doing rural outreach from its headquarters, in Brooklyn; the staffer was assigned to the role just weeks before the election. And in 2018 the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, Tom Perez, told MSNBC, "You can't door-knock in rural America."

We saw this pattern for ourselves. In 2019, the Maine Senate Democratic Campaign Committee told us that it didn't believe in talking to Republicans. (The group's executive director did not respond to a request seeking comment by publication time.)

That blinkered strategy is holding the party back. When Democrats talk only to their own supporters, they see but a small fraction of the changes roiling this country. Since 2008, residents of small towns have fallen behind cities on many major economic benchmarks, and they watched helplessly as more and more power and wealth were consolidated in cities. We saw up close the loss, hopelessness and frustration that reality has instilled.

The current Democratic strategy leads not just to bad policy but also to bad politics. Our democracy rewards the party that can win support over large areas. Ceding rural America leaves a narrow path to victory even in the best circumstances. When the landscape is more difficult,

Democrats set themselves up for catastrophic defeat. But we don't have to cede these parts of the country. Democrats have to change the way they think about them and relate to the voters who live there.

What much of the party establishment doesn't understand is that rural life is rooted in shared values of independence, common sense, tradition, frugality, community and hard work. Democratic campaigns often seem to revolve around white papers and wonky policy. In our experience, politicians lose rural people when they regurgitate politically triangulated lines and talk about the vagaries of policy. Rural folks vote on what rings true and personal to them: *Can this person be trusted? Is he authentic?*

While these defeats ought to prompt real soul-searching within the party, some political scientists and many mainstream Democrats have taken them as proof not that their own strategies must change but rather that rural Republicans are too ignorant to vote in their own best interest. It's a counterproductive, condescending story that serves only to drive the wedge between Democrats and rural communities deeper yet.

Chloe has knocked on more than 20,000 doors over the past two cycles, listening to stories of loss and isolation. One man told her she was the first person to listen to him. Most campaigns, he said, didn't even bother to knock on his door; they judged him for what his house looked like. Another voter said she had been undecided between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump until Election Day but voted for Mr. Trump because, she said, at the Republican convention, he talked about regular American working people and Ms. Clinton didn't at her convention.

Something has to change. The Democrats need a profoundly different strategy if they are to restore their reputation as champions of working people, committed to improving their lives, undaunted by wealth and power. In our view, the only way for Democrats to regain traction in rural places is by running strong campaigns in districts that usually back Republicans. This change starts with having face-to-face conversations to rebuild trust and faith not only in Democrats but also in the democratic process. Even though it's hard work with no guaranteed outcome, it is necessary — even if we don't win.

In our two campaigns, we turned down the party consultants and created our own canvassing universe — the targeted list of voters we talk to during the election season. In 2020 this universe was four times as large as what the state party recommended. It included thousands of Republicans and independents who had (literally) never been contacted by a Democratic campaign in their entire time voting.

Our campaign signs? Hand-painted or made of scavenged wood pallets by volunteers, with images of loons, canoes and other hallmarks of the Maine countryside. Into the trash went consultant-created mailers. Instead, we designed and carried out our own direct mail program for half the price of what the party consultants wanted to charge while reaching 20 percent more voters.

Volunteers wrote more than 5,000 personal postcards, handwritten and addressed to neighbors in their own community. And we defied traditional advice by refusing to say a negative word about our opponents, no matter how badly we wanted to fight back as the campaigns grew more heated.

When we embarked on this road, the path was rocky. Chloe came home from canvassing distraught one day and dictated a voice memo to herself: “I talked to a lot of people I’ve known my whole life, and they wouldn’t commit to vote for me.” They knew she was a good person; the only reason they refused to support her was that she was a Democrat.

Another day she met a couple who thought people should be able to snowmobile and hunt and fish and ride A.T.V.s on protected lands. Chloe told them she agreed; while she considers herself extremely progressive, there are some things she thinks the left is too rigid on. Then the conversation turned to immigration, and the couple told her that undocumented immigrants should be separated from their kids. “I literally have no idea what to say to that besides just not getting into it,” Chloe reflected. “But is that being disingenuous? Is that not fighting the fight?”

We heard some rough stuff, and we didn’t tolerate hate. But through the simple act of listening, we discovered that we could almost always catch a glimpse of common ground if we focused on values, not party or even policy. If people said they were fed up with politics, we’d say: “Us, too! That’s why we’re here.” If they despised Democrats, we’d tell them how we had deep issues with the party as well and we were trying to make it better. It was how we differentiated ourselves from the national party and forged a sense of collective purpose.

Slowly but surely, we thought we might be able to turn things around. A young woman who opened her door said that she couldn’t afford to take her child to the emergency room. She had never voted for a Democrat, but she committed to vote for us. There was a man with a Trump bumper sticker on his truck who, after talking with Chloe, put a Chloe Maxmin bumper sticker on his tailgate, too. There was a preacher who had never put up a political sign in his life until our campaign.

Perhaps the most memorable experience was in 2018 at the end of a winding driveway on a cold fall day. Several men were in the garage, working on their snowmobiles. Chloe stepped out to greet them. “Hi, I’m Chloe, and I’m running for state representative.” The owner immediately responded with a question: Did she support Medicaid expansion? Chloe answered honestly that she did. The man pointed an angry finger toward the road and told her to leave.

Taken aback, Chloe asked: “Hold on a second. What just happened? I’m honestly just interested to hear your perspective, even if you don’t vote for me.”

This gentleman went on to tell his story, how he grew up on that very property without any electricity or running water; how he had worked hard to build a life for himself and his family, which included paying for his own health care without any help from the government. This was his way of life and what he believed in. It was an honest conversation, and by the end, he said he would vote for Chloe.

Gradually, our volunteers learned from Chloe how to find common ground. Despite the many doors shut in their faces, they largely succeeded.

“Talked with a 43-year-old guy who announced that he wasn’t voting, that he was so depressed at the quality of people in office,” an old-timer who was one of our volunteers recounted in an email. By the end of their conversation, he was going to vote just for Chloe. “The fact that an older person is optimistic and working to elect young people is a great thing,” the voter told him.

Another volunteer once called these conversations “a connection with each other and with something bigger that each one of us craves.”

When Covid hit in March 2020, we tried a new way of fostering these connections, pausing the campaign and pivoting all our resources to supporting seniors struggling with the isolation and upheaval of the pandemic. With some 200 volunteers, we made more than 13,500 calls to seniors in the district — regardless of their political affiliation — and offered them rides, pharmacy pickups, connections to food banks and a buddy to call them every day or week to check in.

A volunteer spoke with an elderly woman who depended on the library for large-print books, but the libraries were closed. We found a bookstore that delivered some. Another volunteer talked with a gentleman who had no internet and therefore no access to the news. She bought him a subscription to The New York Times.

The Democratic campaign leadership was eager to replicate our success but also fundamentally unequipped to understand what we were doing. At the height of the pandemic, we told the Senate Democratic Campaign Committee about our approach. Almost immediately the committee’s staff was instructed to tell Democratic candidates to make similar calls, but only to seniors within their “persuasion universe” — people whose votes they thought they could win. Specifically, people over 60 who were likely Democratic voters. We read this in horror and immediately wrote back, imploring the leaders to not limit the scope of the calls. They brushed us off.

It was far from the only time party leaders told us they knew better than we did. In the final stretch of the 2018 campaign, they insisted that as part of their turnout effort, they would send their people to conservative households that had told us Chloe was the only Democrat they would support. We were terrified that volunteers reciting a generic script, pushing folks to vote for Democrats up and down the ticket, would alienate the disaffected Republican voters whom we had worked so hard to persuade to vote for Chloe.

We begged the party officials to reconsider. They refused. It wasn’t until the afternoon of Election Day that they backed down, telling us they were unable to mobilize enough volunteers to send down the back roads to the district. That experience only reinforced our belief that candidates should be able to control the resources that the party puts into districts, so that they can iterate and improve on the one-size-fits-all strategies that the Democrats tend to employ.

After both successful campaigns, we asked ourselves: Is our strategy something that can be replicated? We scaled up our approach in 2020 to solidify some of our tactics, such as focusing on canvassing voters whom the party had given up on, eschewing consultants and leaning into values-driven messaging. But at the same time, we knew that the back roads of Maine were unique; the roads of Georgia, Wisconsin, Washington or Utah might require their own strategy. A state or local campaign is an easier ship to turn than a U.S. Senate campaign and is better situated to buck consultants and bring a different politics to folks’ doorsteps. We certainly don’t have all the answers; all we can hope is that our example will help persuade candidates to try, to recommit themselves to rural places, to listen, to learn and to evolve.

As Democrats, we feel every day the profound urgency of our times, the existential necessity of racial justice, the impending doom of the climate crisis, the imperative to reform our criminal

justice system and so much more. At the same time, as a party, we've made some big mistakes as we walk down the road to a better world. Abandoning rural voters could be one of the costliest.

But it's not too late to make amends, to rebuild our relationship with the quiet roads of rural America. We have to hit the ground running, today, this cycle, and recommit ourselves to the kind of politics that reaches every corner of our country.