



## **One Country Project Democratic Debate Rural Report Card**

Over the past two nights, 20 Democrats who hope to lead our nation took to the debate stage to make their case to the American people. If any of them have real hope to occupy the White House, they will need to reverse the erosion of rural support for Democratic candidates. To do that, they need to listen to the voices of small towns across the country and open a dialogue with rural Americans that meets them where they are on the issues.

As part of our ongoing effort to raise the voices of rural Americans, the One Country Project conducted online discussions from June 11 to June 25 with 25 rural voters across Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Iowa, and Michigan who supported President Obama in 2012 and President Trump in 2016. We asked what drew them to support President Trump, and what they were looking for from national leaders on key issues. Within these conversations, we observed three factors that enticed these voters to switch to Trump – his stance on immigration, his perceived deal making ability, and his focus on jobs in their communities.

The early Democratic debates have provided aspiring presidents with one of the first high-profile opportunities to introduce themselves to a large national audience and make their case for leadership. In order to gauge how the field is doing reaching out to rural Americans, we compared the results of our survey with this week's debate to grade the discussion. With six months between now and the Iowa caucuses, it's fair to give the Democratic field an "incomplete." But, if this week's debate had been final exams, Democrats would hardly be making the grade.

Below, we review what our rural discussion participants told us they care about and compare that to the debate discussion on key topics to grade the Democratic field's performance with the rural voters Democrats need to get back.

### **Health care**

#### **The Rural Test**

Health care was a priority issue for our discussion group, in large part due to deep concerns about increasing out of pocket costs and rising premiums. The access challenges facing rural communities, including distance to care, hospital closures, and doctor shortages, were also named as causes of anxiety. Rural voters are concerned that these problems are getting worse because no action is being taken to address them. However, they expressed a strong sense of pride in the existing system, and are more concerned with increasing access than radically



reforming how care is provided. While they like President Trump's rhetoric about reducing drug costs, they are unconvinced he has actually done anything to improve their situation.

Some representative comments include:

- *He has been talking a lot about his upcoming health care plans but neither of them worked out. His organization ought to be more into improving the medical plans and procedures. Democrats are talking about making the changes in existing policies in order to allow more people to qualify for affordable care act plans.*
- *The region where I am living offers probably the best medical facilities in the country. We have the services like nobody else have. However, that isn't sufficient, primary concern remains availability and ease of use.*
- *I live near a town of 7000, and there are quite a few medical facilities that I can access. These facilities are owned by two health care systems. Unfortunately, though, each facility has its designated services...If a woman goes into labor, she has to go 35 miles to the hospital that offers ob-gyn/maternity services...Unfortunately, if her doctor is affiliated with health care system A, she cannot become a patient of health care system B. Redundancy is costly, but when living in a rural area, with the nearest "big" city 35-40 miles away, it can cause problems.*
- *In terms of availability of treatment, getting to and from doctor's offices and hospitals requires more time. There is a shortage of both nurses and doctors in the rural area which affects the quality of care for patients. Rural health care costs are higher in Wisconsin. (Rural areas) struggle to attract and retain health care professionals in rural areas.*
- *Maybe I've missed something, but except for his earlier attempt at getting rid of Obamacare, I'm not sure he's done anything to help improve health care. He may have something up his sleeve and may use as a campaign chip in a few months. He and his administration should be working more on lowering costs of prescription drugs, giving health insurance companies less power over acceptance/rejection of claims.*

### **Answers from the Democratic Field**

Health care discussion during the Democratic debate was dominated by high level discussion over the best way to achieve universal coverage, address high insurance and drug costs, and determine how much government should play a direct role in providing health care (ranging from offering a public option to compete with private insurance to moving toward a single



payer Medicare for All system). While there were consistent references to high costs and the excesses of drug companies and private insurers, there was virtually no specific discussion of the access challenges facing rural Americans.

Democrats deserve points for focusing on an issue that is clearly top of mind for rural voters, but the field missed the mark by having a high-level policy discussion that never addressed concrete solutions to the everyday challenges facing rural Americans. The lack of focus on President Trump's efforts to disrupt and dismantle the existing system, and his failure to follow through on addressing drug prices, also represented a missed opportunity to speak to rural concerns.

Some representative comments include:

- *I've been going around rural America, and I ask rural hospital administrators one question, "If all your bills were paid at the Medicare rate last year, what would happen?" And they all look at me and say, "We would close." – **Former Representative John Delaney***
- *If you want stability in the health care system, if you want a system which gives you freedom of choice with regard to a doctor or a hospital... the answer is to get rid of the profiteering of the drug companies... and the insurance companies, move to Medicare for all. – **Senator Bernie Sanders***
- *We must agree that access to health care must be a right and not just a privilege of those who can afford it. And in America today, far too many people -- in fact, 30 million people -- are going without access to health care. – **Senator Kamala Harris***
- *Obamacare is working. The way to build this and get to it immediately is to build on Obamacare. Go back and do -- take back all the things that Trump took away, provide a public option, meaning every single person in America would be able to buy into that option if they didn't like their employer plan, or if they're on Medicaid, they'd automatically be in the plan. – **Former Vice President Joe Biden***
- *If we're seeking to really reform our health care system, we've got to shut out big insurance and big pharma out of the drafting process so they cannot continue to profit off the backs of the sick people in this country who are searching and in desperate need of care. – **Representative Tulsi Gabbard***

**Grade: C-**



## Trade

### **The Rural Test**

It is not surprising that, given their outsized impact on rural communities, trade issues figure prominently in rural discussions of the economy. The rural voters we talked to are not reflexive protectionists – they believe in trade on the right terms. One of Trump’s main attractions to this group was his reputation as a dealmaker who could negotiate better deals than the past pacts that they believe have been bad for America.

They also are open to President Trump’s use of tariffs to exert pressure on other countries – so long as the long-term impacts result in reduced trade deficits and increased production at home. However, patience with Trump’s trade war may be waning as the toll on the agricultural sector mounts, threatening long-term pain for little demonstrated gain.

Some representative comments include:

- *In my opinion the current policies made by President Trump and his administration would boost up the economy of the country. But the biggest negative impact they could have on the economy if the disputes with China and other countries remain un-resolved.*
- *That's right, Trump has shaken the trade policies and we can see the impact. It has both merits and demerits. As he has raised the tariffs on goods on all around the world and he said that the tariffs would be used to improve agriculture.*
- *President Trump offered some new policies but there's an adverse effect on farmers. We are interdependent and that is pretty important, perhaps, for a peaceful world. I think it is better for the individual farmer to decide what is best on his farm. Right now at this time when economically it's hurting everybody - beef, poultry, crops are taking hit. It's the worst time to have tariffs.*
- *In the short term there may be a trade war, but in the long run definitely China will have to give in and reduce tariffs and have more equitable trade terms with us. Negative impact is only this short term disruption in the trade. But it won't last long.*
- *Agriculture and rural life was doing tremendous before the tariff imposed. Rising prices and lower growth can itself tell that how important is it that our farm do well in this country. a) Farmers are suffering due to rising prices of the instruments. b) It has become crucial to make them succeed and it could be accomplished by reducing cost of cultivation.*



- *Trump has decided to resolve trade disputes, and promote agricultural innovation. American trade policy that is pragmatic, flexible, and steadfastly focused on our national interest. The tariffs and counter-tariffs we are enduring in this trade war are having a real impact on U.S. and Iowa farmers.*

### **Answers from the Democratic Field**

When trade surfaced as a topic during the Democratic debate, candidates made repeated mentions of the counterproductive effects of Trump's tariffs on agriculture and manufacturing while acknowledging we need trade deals that better serve American interests. In these ways, Democrats made strides in meeting rural voters where their concerns lie. However, at times the discussion moved beyond the need for better deals, taking on a more protectionist tone through criticism of TPP, NAFTA, and the proposed USCMA. And discussion of Democratic solutions was limited, which left President Trump's status as a welcome trade "disruptor" largely unchallenged.

Some representative comments include:

- *Not only did [Donald Trump] not have bad trade deals, he started a trade war with China and he just signed on to another bad trade agreement with NAFTA 2.0, give away to drug companies in Mexico. – **Senator Kirsten Gillibrand***
- *President Trump is trying to sell NAFTA 2.0. He's got a new name for it. It's just as dangerous as the old NAFTA. It's going to take away American jobs like the old NAFTA, like it did to Michigan. And we cannot have Democrats be party to a new NAFTA. – **Mayor Bill de Blasio***
- *I have put out a new comprehensive plan that says we're not going to do [trade] that way. We're going to negotiate our deals with unions at the table, with small businesses at the table, with small farmers at the table, with environmentalists at the table, with human rights activists at the table. And then, we're going to use the fact that everybody in the world wants to get to America's markets. – **Senator Elizabeth Warren***
- *When have we ever gone to war, including a trade war, without allies and friends and partners? As president, we will hold China accountable, but we will bring our allies and friends, like the European Union, to bear, and we'll also negotiate trade deals that favor farmers and American workers and protect human rights and the environment and labor, not just here in the United States. – **Former Representative Beto O'Rourke***



- *The bottom line is, you talk to any economist, there is not a single example in history where a trade war had a winner. Trade wars are for losers. And the bottom line is we've got to recognize, let's negotiate a better trade deal. But you're not going to win against China in a trade war when they've got 25 percent of our total debt. – **Former Governor John Hickenlooper***

**Grade:** B-

### Immigration

#### **The Rural Test**

Participants in our survey group demonstrated a strong belief that immigration is a crisis that must be addressed. They saw Trump as willing to tell it like it is and take strong action compared to others. This feedback is consistent with other qualitative One Country Project research that showed rural discussion of immigration focused on security and enforcement:

Some representative comments include:

- *I voted because he promised to deport illegal immigrants, rebuild infrastructure and cut taxes.*
- *He has limited refugees into the US. Created millions of jobs which resulted in decreased unemployment rate than ever before.*
- *I voted for Trump because I was against illegal immigration and he nailed it.*
- *I voted for Donald Trump for two main reasons, his stance on the economy and illegal immigration.*

#### **Answers from the Democratic Field**

While this week's debate featured a move back to the middle compared to the first Democratic debate, the tenor of the immigration discussion was predominantly driven by opposition to President Trump's policies with as much, if not more, discussion of making border crossing a civil offense as addressing border security issues. However, some calls did emerge for an approach akin to the 2013 immigration bill passed by the Senate that would have made significant investments in border security while also addressing the status of undocumented workers.



Some representative comments include:

- *[On decriminalizing the border] So in my view, if fraud is involved, then that's suitable for the criminal statute. If not, then it should be handled under civil law. – **Mayor Pete Buttigieg***
- *[On decriminalizing the border] The point is not about criminalization. That has given Donald Trump the tool to break families apart. – **Senator Elizabeth Warren***
- *I believe that we should have a civil violation. No president before President Trump enforced the law in the way he has enforced it. Because he's using it as the crutch to lock up women and children, to separate mothers and babies, to put them behind bars. – **Senator Kirsten Gillibrand***
- *This is about leadership and understanding that we can and should have both secure borders as well as humane immigration policies. – **Representative Tulsi Gabbard***
- *And you don't have to decriminalize everything. What you have to do is have a president in there with the judgment and the decency to treat someone that comes to the border like one of our own. – **Governor Steve Bullock***

**Grade:** D-

## Climate

### **The Rural Test**

Our discussion, and other OCP qualitative research, suggests that there is a window opening for a climate conversation with rural Americans. Participants in our discussions universally accept that conditions are changing, but look at the problem through the prism of their experiences on the ground as opposed to a high-level global challenge. For example, they emphasized weather patterns and recent rainstorms, flooding, and heat patterns and the impact on their region and the agricultural economy. Many see climate change as real, but as one force putting pressure on their lifestyle – not a crisis in apocalyptic terms. As such, there is room to consider action, but sweeping transformational action could be seen as worse than the challenges presented by climate change itself.

Some representative comments include:



- *There has been so much rain this season, with flooding rampant particularly through the midwest states, and many farmers worrying about how their crops are being ruined, and potentially their livelihood.*
- *Agricultural yield will decline due to change in climate and hence having impact on the economy of the nation.*
- *Yes, it does affect the rural area more because farming, fishery are the sectors which directly got affected by climate change.*
- *With respect to weather, shifting in rainfall and snowfall patterns, changing in season patterns, winters are really rough. Agriculture is the backbone of the economy and climate change has a direct impact on crops. farmers are suffering a lot due to unpredictable weather.*
- *The usual pattern is not being followed. Because of which the crops and plantations are also getting affected. The harvest time of a lot of crops are at stake. Climate change has also affected the dairy and poultry industry- Breeding time and duration of the cattle's have been affected.*
- *The overall productivity is reduced because of increasing temperatures. A lot of plant species are not able to survive through the harsh climate and shifting temperatures. Rural life depends crucially on agriculture. Such sudden climate change has affected the yielding a lot thereby hampering the basic living of rural people like us.*
- *With so much flooding and rain, the farmers are terrified and anxious to see their crops ruined. This flooding not just ruins the crop cultivation this year but also deteriorates the quality of soil and the subsequent crop quality in the coming years will also deteriorate. Lower the agricultural productivity lower the income for the farmers.*

### **Answers from the Democratic Field**

The Democratic debates devoted significant time to the discussion of climate change, and there were occasional mentions of the impact that climate change is having on rural life. However, the tone of the discussion was characterized by the urgency of crisis response, and the need to pursue the sweeping “Green New Deal” or otherwise transform America’s entire economy. Democrats were talking about a topic that matters to rural voters, but in terms more likely to alienate than create allegiances.





Some representative comments include:

- *I know the firsthand terrific impact of climate change on Americans across the country already. The family who I saw, with their aluminum home now, just a pile of molten aluminum, they lost everything in the paradise of fires; the non-profit in Davenport that was washed away in the floods. We have to act now. – **Governor Jay Inslee***
- *The greatest threat to humanity is global climate change. I visited a family in Iowa who - water spewed into her home, Fran Parr, it tossed her refrigerator upend, all the furniture was broken, all the dishes were broken, and mud was everywhere. That is the impact of severe weather right now on families' lives. – **Senator Kirsten Gillibrand***
- *So, climate crisis is the existential crisis for our world. It puts every living thing on this planet at risk. I have a plan for a green industrial policy that takes advantage of the fact that we do what we do best, and that is innovate and create. – **Senator Elizabeth Warren***
- *But you cannot get there on climate unless we talk about agriculture. We need to convert our industrial agriculture system, over to a sustainable and regenerative agriculture system that actually sequesters carbon into the soil. And you can go ask Gabe Brown and Allen Williams who actually make money off of regenerative agriculture, so we can move away from all the subsidies that we're giving to farmers. They haven't made a profit in five years, and we could start getting good food into our schools and into our communities. – **Representative Tim Ryan***

**Grade: C-**