



**To: Interested Parties**

**From: One Country Project**

**Date: 09/16/19**

**Subject: Economic Uncertainty, Common Concerns, and Party Perceptions in Rural America**

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## [Overview](#)

Last week, we released an [initial overview](#) of topline findings from a One Country Project and American Federation of Teachers poll conducted by Change Research. Interviews were conducted online from September 4 - 8, 2019. This poll includes 5,760 respondents in rural zip codes of Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

A closer look at the results yields several key findings that shed light on how rural Americans view their circumstances, challenges, and the alternatives presented by both major political parties.

- There are widespread, broadly shared concerns about both personal economic outlook and the overall economic prospects for rural communities.
- There are a core set of common concerns that rural communities share across party and demographic lines related to cost of living issues, the opioid crisis, health care costs, and the need to invest in rural communities.
- The attitudes and policy preferences for rural Democrats are very different from independents in their communities: In fact, rural Democrats' political outlook looks very much like Democrats on the coasts.
- Perhaps as a result, independent rural voters' perceptions of the Democratic party are poor – even in relation to issues the party conventionally considers brand strengths.

## [Economic Concerns Close to Home: Pessimism Reigns](#)

Despite widespread approval of President Trump's handling of the economy, rural voters are sending a clear message – their personal financial situation feels precarious and they see economies of communities like theirs struggling. These results indicate they have yet to benefit from improvements in the national economy or see evidence their prospects are likely to improve.



A plurality of all respondents (48%), and majority of Republicans (84%) strongly approve of the way President Trump is handling the economy, while a majority of independents<sup>1</sup> (55%) either strongly or somewhat approve. This approval also carries through demographic groups, with the exception of Hispanics (51% strongly or somewhat disapprove) and those with Bachelor’s degrees or higher (51% strongly or somewhat disapprove).

However, individuals reported feeling like they were, at best, treading water economically. When asked about their income, 85% of overall respondents, 95% of Democrats, 79% of Republicans, and 87% of independents say that it was either staying about even with the cost of living or falling behind. These concerns are particularly pronounced among majorities of women (56%), people aged 18-34 (56%), people 65 or older (50%), Hispanics (55%), and people with some college or less (50%) who feel their incomes are actively falling behind.

This economic anxiety also made itself evident when respondents were asked about which personal and local economic issues concern them most. Across political groups kitchen table concerns are at the top of the list. The following concerns topped other alternatives such as “younger generations moving away to find better opportunities”, “not enough jobs in my area,” or “jobs in my area will be replaced by automation.”

When you think about wages and the economy, which of these concerns you most? (Choose up to two.)				
	All	Democrat	GOP	Independent
<b>Bills going up faster than income</b>	23%	27%	19%	23%
<b>Jobs don’t pay enough</b>	16%	28%	7%	17%
<b>Saving for retirement</b>	16%	9%	21%	14%
<b>Paying off debt</b>	15%	12%	16%	15%

Across demographic groups, worries that expenses will outpace income were universal, and particularly pronounced among women.

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<sup>1</sup> When discussing independents, this memo refers to independents who do not consider themselves close to either party.



When you think about wages and the economy, which of these concerns you most? (Choose up to two.)					
Concern	Women	Men	18-34	35-49	50-64
Bills going up faster than income	26%	19%	21%	24%	21%
Jobs don't pay enough	18%	14%	21%	17%	15%
Saving for retirement	13%	18%	12%	19%	22%
Paying off debt	13%	17%	22%	17%	11%

Additionally, respondents have a bleak view of the future economic vibrancy of their own communities. When asked whether small town Main Streets are declining or thriving, the **most** optimistic groups were Republicans (who still felt that things were declining); 56% declining, 44% thriving and men; 67% thriving, 33% declining. Other notable responses included:

- All: 71% declining, 30% thriving.
- Independents: 79% declining, 21% thriving.
- Women: 74% declining, 26% thriving.
- Age 18-34: 73% declining, 27% thriving.

Rural America is on the front lines of President Trump's trade war, and partisan viewpoints are more divided on that front. When asked whether the trade war is harmful but necessary, harmful and should be stopped, or not harmful:

- All: 39% harmful but necessary, 36% harmful and should be stopped, 14% not harmful.
- Democrats: 7% harmful but necessary, 83% harmful and should be stopped, 2% not harmful.
- Republicans: 60% harmful but necessary, 5% harmful and should be stopped, 24% not harmful.



- Independents: 34% harmful but necessary, 36% harmful and should be stopped, 8% not harmful.
- Men were particularly inclined to say the trade war was harmful but necessary (47%) while women and voters with a Bachelor's degree or higher were most likely to say the war is harmful and should be stopped (44% and 49%, respectively).

Overall, the results paint a picture of pessimistic rural communities facing economic uncertainty. Only Republicans see signs of progress; the rest feel very vulnerable.

### Common Concerns: Opioids and Health Care Costs

There are several issues where majorities of all ideologies and demographics noted very serious concern. Except where noted, majorities of voters cite the following issues as very serious concerns across all political and demographic groups:

- Opioid and prescription drug addiction (48% plurality among men)
- Cost of prescription drugs
- Cost of health insurance premiums
- Insufficient treatment options for mental health conditions (43% plurality among Republicans, 41% plurality among men, 48% plurality among those age 65+)

Large majorities across all political and demographic groups also note that senior care was either a very serious or somewhat serious concern. At the same time, majorities across all groups either strongly or somewhat agreed that “corporations have too much influence over rural America,” and that “the current tax system is much too generous to the rich.”

There is also widespread agreement on what types of investments are most needed in rural communities. When asked, “If your local government could spend \$10 million dollars creating or improving any of the following services in your community, what would you want to prioritize,” a clear consensus emerged. Among all groups (except independents closer to Democrats) investments in roads, bridges, and infrastructure was the top choice. Among all respondents, independents overall and all demographic groups but one, K-12 education was the second choice. Other second choices were small business loans (men, people age 50-64) and clean energy (Democrats).

Policies to provide working families with more resources also attracted broad-based support. Across all political and demographic groups, large majorities either strongly or somewhat supported guaranteed paid sick leave and paid family leave policies.



### City Democrats and Country Democrats: Rural Democrats are different from their Communities

People who identify as Democrats in rural areas have a strongly different sense of the world than the rest of their communities. They care about different issues and they have views that look more like Democrats on the coasts. Independents believe the GOP fits them better (by double digit margins, in some case large double digit margins) on everything EXCEPT “prioritizes fairness.”

Some examples of this dramatic disconnect:

**TOP ISSUE:** Just 5% of Democrats cite immigration as their top issue. Their top issues are health care (54%), environmental issues (47%) and gun violence (36%).

For independents, the top three issues are health care (29%), immigration (28%) and gun rights (28%).

For Republicans, it's immigration (61%), gun rights (54%) and corruption (24%).

**TRUMP JOB APPROVAL:** For Democrats, it's 8% approve/92% disapprove. For independents, it's 51%/45%. For Republicans, it's 96%/4%.

**ON TRADE POLICY:** Asked if they agree that President Trump is fighting for trade policies that are good for my community and the country: Democrats: 9% agree/89% disagree, independents: 45%/44%, and Republicans: 94%/4%.

**ON NAFTA:** For Democrats, favorability is 49% favorable/14% unfavorable. For independents, it's 22%/35%, and for Republicans, it's 18%/52%.

**ON AOC:** For Democrats, her favorability is 68% favorable/12% unfavorable. For independents, it's 15%/59%. For Republicans, it's 0%/93%.

**\$15 Minimum Wage:** Combined support among Democrats is 91%/8%, whereas for independents it's 49%/49%, and for Republicans it's 16%/82%.

**Cancellation of Student Debt:** Combined support among Democrats is 85%/14%, whereas for independents it's 44%/52%, and for Republicans it's 82%/16%.

### Party Perceptions Down on Democrats



Among the rural electorate, the poll shows Democrats will need to overcome deep perception problems if they hope to break through with policy proposals and win rural support. Even on issues that have traditionally been Democratic strengths or tied to the Democratic identity, overall respondents and independents gave the nod to Republicans over Democrats, while expressing skepticism of both parties.

Value	All	Democrat	Republican	Independent
Looks out for working people	D - 29% R - 44% Neither - 24%	D - 77% R - 3% Neither - 17%	D - 1% R - 78% Neither - 18%	D - 13% R - 17% Neither - 64%
Looks out for middle class families	D - 28% R - 43% Neither - 27%	D - 77% R - 4% Neither - 17%	D - 1% R - 76% Neither - 21%	D - 13% R - 17% Neither - 68%
Cares about people like me	D - 26% R - 41% Neither - 31%	D - 74% R - 3% Neither - 21%	D - 1% R - 74% Neither - 23%	D - 7% R - 11% Neither - 78%
Plays by the rules	D - 18% R - 31% Neither - 50%	D - 54% R - 3% Neither - 42%	D - 1% R - 56% Neither - 43%	D - 5% R - 12% Neither - 81%
Values hard work	D - 19% R - 49% Neither - 21%	D - 57% R - 5% Neither - 18%	D - 1% R - 85% Neither - 11%	D - 5% R - 24% Neither - 59%
Supports rural communities	D - 21% R - 44% Neither - 29%	D - 59% R - 10% Neither - 27%	D - 1% R - 77% Neither - 18%	D - 5% R - 18% Neither - 69%

These trends are consistent across demographic groups, with the exception of Hispanics and people with Bachelor's degrees or higher, both of which give the nod to Democrats over Republicans over who looks out for working people and the middle class. No demographic group gave an advantage to Democrats on support for rural communities or valuing hard work.

### Conclusion



These responses demonstrate that rural Americans continue to have serious concerns about their well-being and future prosperity. While President Trump and Republicans currently hold an edge, economic anxiety coupled with significant signs of disaffection with both parties show that a significant number of rural Americans may be open to new arguments. However, in order to connect, Democrats will need to do a better job of speaking to common concerns with approaches that challenge party perceptions and speak directly to rural values.