



The Value of Hard Work, The Unfairness of Crippling Costs, and the Need for an Optimistic American Vision

From Listening to Diverse Rust Belt Families, Messages for Democrats in 2020

"The economy is going well for who?" –Green Bay, WI man

"Where I'm at, they're a lot of jobs--they're just low paying jobs." –Mercer Co., PA man

"Working people need to be compensated. If I work hard, I should get paid hard. If I work hard, I should gain those benefits." –Cleveland, OH woman

Summary:

Rust Belt Rising listened to eight groups, totaling 60 voters:

- **Green Bay, Wisconsin:** white, blue-collar women and men
- **Southfield, Michigan:** middle class African American voters of mixed education
- **Mercer County, Pennsylvania:** white, rural, blue-collar non-college men and women; mix of millennial to middle-aged
- **Cleveland, Ohio:** non-college women and mixed-education millennials

Voters beyond those subsets are vital to listen to as well, but these are four electorally critical communities we selected for this project. Participants had voted for a Democrat in a recent electoral cycle. Most had also voted for a Republican in one of these cycles.

Five dominant themes emerged in our conversations, each explored in great depth below:

1. The Value of Hard Work and How it Should Still Earn You a Good Life
2. Rising Cost of Living
3. Health Care Bills and Prescriptions as the Overwhelming Cost
4. Paths to Good Jobs
5. The Need for Optimism in America

People across communities were responsive to the value of hard work. Democrats must begin the public conversation by showing that they understand these voters' struggle.

Despite skepticism about politicians, voters want to believe in American leaders who can solve problems they face—so young people can find a path to a career, families can have economic security, and older Americans can retire. They urgently want leaders to fix out-of-pocket medical expenses and unfair prescription prices.

We will be following this document with the release of a second brief on our economic messaging *polling* from Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. If you join the Rust Belt Rising network by emailing info@rustbeltrising.com, we can provide breakdowns of the polling by state, age, race, and party affiliations.



1. The Value of Hard Work and How it Should Still Earn You a Good Life

What We Heard:

"We're not compensated for what we do based on our skillset and our wages." —Cleveland, OH woman

"[My mom] didn't get the handout, she didn't get anything. She worked. And that made me work harder." —Cleveland, OH woman

"There's no programs for us...if you don't qualify for any of the programs for lower class or upper-class people then you're just stuck." —Southfield, MI woman

"Just cause you're working-class doesn't mean you don't struggle." —Southfield, MI man

"The middle class is absolutely shrinking." —Mercer Co., PA woman

"The middle class, we're completely left out" —Southfield, MI woman

"The job market itself has grown, but that is also denoted by the huge jump in part-time positions that just are not offered with the same benefits that were standard a decade ago." —Cleveland, OH woman

"I'm seeing so many part-time positions and less full-time positions. Companies are trying to avoid paying benefits." —Cleveland, OH man

"People are working two jobs and still need food stamps." —Mercer Co., PA woman

"I don't want someone to make sure I have an opportunity. I want there to be an opportunity." —Green Bay, WI man

Suggestions:

Workers, whether they were millennials or middle-aged, black or white, liked the value of hard work message most. They want candidates who stand up for industrious people so they have the shot at a decent life for their family, which they want to earn.

The belief our focus group participants expressed in the importance of hard work means that if Democrats show first that they share this value, voters may be more receptive to the Democratic policy that follows.

Voters believe in the values of working, saving money, overcoming struggle, and making sacrifices to build something.

Before they will consider any policy idea, people must first be convinced Democrats are fighting for them. Democrats must understand how deeply these voters believe in the need to work hard to succeed, and must help people understand how their stories and ideas support those values.

Even participants who pay little attention to policy liked a candidate who was able to connect with people and convey a sense of being ready to work alongside them. Voters thought of Tammy Baldwin and Barack Obama as having this sleeves-rolled-up quality of being on their side. It stuck with Michigan voters that Gretchen Whitmer talked about car insurance and the “fixing the damn roads.” One blue-collar Wisconsin voter credited Tammy Baldwin’s campaign as being about helping veterans. People thought Baldwin looked out for them, and Obama was a man of the people—but note that they also thought that Trump had been a businessman who could change things.

Cautions:

Some voters repeated distortions, lies, and scapegoating they are hearing from Fox News, President Trump, and GOP politicians. Democratic candidates should stress that all people—whether black, brown or white—are working hard because we all want the same things for our families. Democratic policies support that reality.

The honor and dignity of a hard day’s work was an ideal that voters in all communities wanted to hear Democrats express. Democrats should support the value we share, reflecting black, brown, and white people’s day-to-day life across communities, and disarm inaccurate views of the Democratic party that some participants offered. Affirming how everyone is working hard allows voters to see a proposal as a fight for people like them—getting their cost of living under control.

Midwesterners have a sensitivity about the notion of anything “handed” to them. Candidates must be careful about that as they frame their policy proposals. Voters want an opportunity to change their material standard of life resulting from their work and wages. They want the government to change the current system favoring the rich so that people like them have the power to become economically successful.

Potential Messages — How You Can Use This in a Campaign:

Of six possible overall Democratic messages with different kinds of emphasis, using this “hard work” frame ranked the highest:

- In America, we’ve lost sight of the value of hard work and the people who do it. We need to look out for the people that are the backbone of America and built the country. That includes skills-training programs to make sure people have a path to a good-paying job even if they aren’t going to college and tax cuts for working people instead of the rich.
- Hard work has to still matter in America. Just as you are working hard, I will work hard in this office to stand up for your family.
- I’m running to give people a chance. Americans aren’t afraid of hard work. They just want a job that pays.
- No one can outwork us, but if you don’t pay a decent wage then people will stop working. That’s not who we are. We want to work. We want to earn the good life.

2. Rising Cost of Living

What We Heard:

"Working class used to mean you could survive, your head was above water. Now you're barely treading water." –OH woman

"The stock market is good if you have money to invest." –MI man

"Our income doesn't match our output." –WI man

"The cost of living, the cost of housing, insurance, health insurance, everything, cars, expenses, dental, vision, everything is going up, but the wages are flat." –MI man

"They can't put money aside cause they can barely make it from day to day, so they have nothing to fall back on if any little thing happens. Because the companies aren't giving the retirement benefits that we got when we started." –WI woman

"The employers are not giving their employees the raise to match the level of increase in the food. You used to be able to go to the grocery store and get a lot of food for a little bit of money and now you go and get a little food for a lot of money." –MI woman

"For the middle class, there's no relief for higher tuition, car insurance, the stuff we're struggling with." –MI woman

"There's more jobs, but the wage disparity—if you look at people in the '70, '80s, baby boomers – they probably made 20, 30% more money and I think that's a huge problem. The wages are lower." –OH woman

Suggestions:

In our focus groups, people told us how hard they are working, yet their earnings do not keep up with their costs from childcare to diapers.

Voters see jobs out there, just not ones that can support a family—and their paychecks are not increasing. The stock market is not helping them.

People want to be able to get ahead and they are focused on how costs are holding them back. Voters are looking for leaders to address their struggle paying the bills they are buried in, given earnings in today's jobs.

Their discontent went beyond the solution of raising the minimum wage to \$15. We heard that it would help some, but other voters said they already making more but are struggling with costs they worry will increase while their wages do not.

Many participants realize that there are some jobs available. But these voters need higher-paying jobs that can support a family, and solutions to the crippling and rising bills.

Cautions:

Some voters expressed the feeling that Democrats are part of what is costing them too much by giving out “handouts” to those who are not working hard. We heard a voter talk with pride about her mother not taking a “handout” and working hard instead. This is why Democrats need to express how hard people are actually working in order to prime Democrats’ policy ideas and to call out the Right’s strategy to divide hard-working people.

These participants had internalized the Right’s framing of earned benefits and support programs as “handouts,” yet these same voters expressed wanting more expansive health and social programs. Democrats need to focus on what our policies do for families.

A Cleveland voter said she could not see what Democrats do that actually helps people which would not also be provided by Republicans. Democrats need to help voters understand the contrast between the parties in protecting the social programs these voters actually support.

Potential Messages:

- The cost of living has skyrocketed in this country while wages haven’t budged in years, and it’s squeezing the middle-class. We need to pass laws that get drug prices under control, create educational opportunities that lead to good-paying jobs and can be paid for while working part-time, and give the middle class a tax cut so they can actually afford to put some money away for the future.
- For people who are working hard, health and education costs should no longer keep you from a better life.
- Everything is going up except wages. I’ll stand up for higher wages—not just minimum wage but a fair wage—so that you can provide for your family to have a good life—a home, health care, education, and retirement.
- We’re not fooled by the low unemployment rate. Millions of people have given up even looking for work because they can’t find jobs that pay. For 90 percent of Americans, wages have been flat for decades. We’re all working harder and harder for less and less.
- If corporations don’t raise wages, we can’t buy a car, we can’t buy a home to raise our family and the rich have all the money. We built America and now the Republicans don’t want to share it with us.
- For the first time, Americans think their kids won’t be better off. Yet I’m still optimistic because we believe in hard work in America.

3. Health Care Bills and Prescriptions as the Overwhelming Cost

What We Heard:

"If you have one major illness you can lose everything and that shouldn't be" —WI woman

"I am a recent survivor of breast cancer and it cost me \$30,000 out of my own pocket to save my own life." —PA woman

"Even though my husband is insured, I paid over \$4,000 for a birth." —OH woman

"You're having to pick if you eat or get your medicine." —PA woman

"Prescriptions are outrageous." —MI man

"The out of pocket expenses are just absolutely ridiculous." —PA woman

"Insurance premiums are the biggest issue that affects my family." —PA woman

"Even though we've had a lot of job growth, we've also had a lot of medical costs going up. Premiums are insane right now." —OH woman

"There was an elderly couple in front of us literally in tears cause they could not afford their prescription. They needed \$181 for a month's worth of supplies and they didn't have it...I said 'swipe my card.' I don't feel like the elderly or anyone should have to make a choice. We're losing people's parents, people's grandparents, people's kids cause they can't afford to pay for their medicine." —PA woman

Suggestions:

Voters' focus on costs can be seen in the two policy priorities which had the highest average ranking with voters: health care and prescription costs. The reality of working families' lives cannot be addressed without these issues that evoked more passion and stories than any other topic in the conversations.

People see the effects of politicians listening to pharmaceutical company lobbyists in the price of medication they are trying to afford.

Cautions:

Seniors were worried that Medicare for All will deplete their benefits ("The system can't hold it, can't support it. We can't afford it.") so candidates running on that issue need to succeed in assuring them that nothing will decrease their coverage.

Potential Messages:

- The cost of health care keeps rising and if it wasn't for the Affordable Care Act, pre-existing conditions would not be covered.

- Prescription drug prices in America are the highest in the world while pharmaceutical companies are making billions of dollars. The laws are made by lobbyists. They don't work for you and me. They work for big pharma. Lobbyists pay off the members of Congress to do their bidding and keep them in power with billions in campaign donations.
- Health care is a basic right. While some people are making tons of money, people can't afford life-saving drugs. They have to choose between food and medicine. That's not a choice hard-working Americans should have to make.
- If you need medicine, you should get it. That ought to be the law. It's un-American to make money selling drugs at prices we can't afford.
- We must put a cap on insurance premiums and out-of-pocket medical costs and cut the cost of prescription drugs.
- Decades ago, people had job security and economic security, but now most people are one hospital bill or layoff away from ruin, and it's harder than ever for people to retire securely after a life of hard work. I'll fight to secure retirement and stop health care bills from bankrupting people.
- The Republicans say Americans can't afford to pay for your health care or your retirement. We earned Medicare and Social Security by working hard, but Republicans want to cut it. They are taking away from us the things we earned.

4. Path to Good Jobs

What We Heard:

"For a long time, they've been promoting college so much for people and I think we need to promote the technical aspect a little bit more." —WI woman

*"Sometimes technical isn't looked at as good as college, people frown on that like you're not getting a wonderful education. There's a big need for that—you can make money doing that—they make it look like it's just vocational tech, it doesn't get as much glorification."
—PA woman*

*"For so many years college has been the focus and we're all in debt. I think there's not enough trade skill people to go work at trade jobs cause there's so much focus on college."
—PA woman*

"I can't afford to pay for my own kid to go to college, how am I gonna pay for everybody else's kid?" —PA woman

Suggestions:

A consensus that cut across communities was to increase technical training for certifications. Belief in the value of hard work among all voters, especially blue-collar voters, supported these kinds of careers. This dynamic explains why "increasing investment in skills and technical

training” ranked among their highest policy priorities and would be popular to emphasize to voters in a hard work frame.

Cautions:

Focus group members were concerned about anything with the word “free” in it, wary that they could be paying for it. This is not to say they may not ultimately support that policy if communicated differently, but they wanted to be sure a program would benefit them.

Potential Messages:

- For the first time in history, a majority of Americans no longer believe their kids will be better off than they are. It’s harder and harder to find good jobs that can support a family. Instead, we have become a gig economy where people work two or three jobs to make ends meet.
- The cost of college has many people asking whether it is worth it anymore and those who choose to go are starting out life saddled with debt. Many of them are in their forties before they can even think about buying a home, much less saving for their own child’s education.
- We need skills-training programs to make sure people have a path to a good-paying job even if they aren’t going to college and tax cuts for working people instead of the rich.
- Whether you are working with your hands, working outdoors or working at a desk, the only thing that matters is that you are happy doing it and that you are making a good living. College is not the only path to being able to take care of a family.
- People will figure it out, but we have to give them the options instead of telling them everyone should go to college. Some people want to go straight to work and some of them end up further ahead.

5. The Need for Optimism in America

What We Heard:

“Our generation will not retire...we’re going to work until we die.” —OH woman

“It seems like there’s no hope. But the American dream means you can’t see it yet but it’s attainable.” —OH woman

Suggestions:

Voters are unhappy about our country’s direction and want to be inspired. Because they still believe America is a special country to be part of, they know we can do better. The focus on what they are upset about should not obscure that messages should outline a better plan. They want their candidates to have a vision specific to their community for where it can go.

Voters in Mercer County told us the history of each company that operated there, but not because they are looking backward. They wanted a sense of what the future looks like for them. Recalling Obama, they were won over by his positive, inspiring vision. An Ohioan explained to us how Obama was for blue-collar people.

Cautions:

For many voters who are more focused on family and work than politics, specific policy proposals charted less favorably than clear aims that we can achieve like lowering prescription drug costs and health insurance premiums.

Potential Messages:

- Republicans haven't delivered better jobs, affordable housing, affordable health care, a quality education for our kids, or a secure retirement in our old age.
- We need a path where hard work is rewarded with fair wages. It's a path where healthcare is guaranteed for all at a price we can afford.
- In an economy of working 2 and 3 jobs, we want the middle-class promise restored—if you work hard, you will earn the wages for a good job, a nice place to live, care you can afford, and an education for your kids to have a better life.
- We believe in the basic truth that Americans are better when we work together. We believe in values like hard work, justice, and freedom. We believe in the promise of America. Above all, we believe in ourselves. That's our story, our community, our America.
- I believe in a brighter future for our district, and I believe we can solve the problems that face us. We can build world-class schools, rebuild our infrastructure, and pay people enough so their kids can have the future they dream of. If politicians can put aside the partisan fights and get to work, there are a lot of great ideas out there that we could all agree about.
- You shouldn't have to worry every night and every morning that you can't pay bills. You work hard. You should expect to have a little security in your lives.
- We believe in America and that's why we want to invest in ourselves—our health care, education, and roads and bridges.
- If we have the basics covered for ourselves and our children, the next generation of Americans will have the confidence and the support to try new things, solve problems, take chances and make our world a better place.
- We just want to get back to the basic middle-class promise—for anyone willing to work hard, you should be able to afford a decent home, health care and education for the kids, and a decent retirement. That's not asking very much given that you're putting in the work.

Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Wisconsin Focus Group Issue Priorities:

We asked voters to choose the proposals they thought most important. How these voters ranked issues should not dictate what a candidate believes is most practically and morally needed in their community but is context to be aware of for the cases we must make to earn voter support for policies. Utilizing values that voters share can help win support for any of these policies.

<i>Policy Proposal</i>	<i>Mean rating out of a 1-10 scale of importance to each participant</i>
Putting a cap on insurance premiums and out-of-pocket medical costs	8.9
Cutting the cost of prescription drugs	8.8
Increasing investment in skills and technical training	8.6
Shoring up Social Security's finances and increasing monthly benefits to seniors	7.8
Making sure all workers have a portable IRAs or other retirement savings programs that stay with them even when they change jobs.	7.6
Ending misclassification of full-time workers as independent contractors and guaranteeing them full benefits	7.5
Requiring paid sick days and paid family leave and ending misclassification of workers as independent contractors	7.5
Middle-class tax cuts, paid for by tax increases on millionaires	7.2
Providing Medicare to all Americans	6.9
Taxing employers whose workforces disproportionately rely on federal government assistance programs due to their low wages	6.6
Providing free community college to anyone who gets a B average or higher in high school	5.8
Raising the national minimum wage to \$15 an hour	4.7

Michigan and Wisconsin Focus Group Issue Priorities:

In two states, we drilled down with a different methodology to learn more about voters' priorities.

<i>Policy Proposal</i>	<i>Chosen as one of a voters' top 2 priority</i>
Improving and expanding the current healthcare and health insurance system	14
Increasing investment in skills and technical training	10
Limiting the money corporations or the rich can spend in elections	7
Middle-class tax cuts, paid for by tax increases on millionaires	6
Providing free four-year college, either to everyone or to people who get a B average in high school	6
Cutting the cost of prescription drugs	5
Providing Medicare to all Americans	5
Raising the national minimum wage to \$15 an hour	5
Fixing or building new infrastructure like roads and bridges	4
Shoring up Social Security's finances and increasing monthly benefits to seniors	2
Adding funding to K-12 and pre-kindergarten education	1
Providing free four-year college, either to everyone or to people who get a B average in high school	0
Making it easier to form and join a union	0

Top-rated narratives in focus groups ranked:

With these priorities established, different narratives were tried. We tested hard work, financial security and costs, future/solutions, and opportunity story frames to all four groups. For the last two states we listened to, we replaced the “fairness” frame that was being given the lowest ranking with a “costs” message to see if it would resonate more.

Message	Mean rating out of 10
<p>[HARD WORK] In America, we’ve lost sight of the value of hard work and the people who do it. We need to look out for the people that are the backbone of America and built the country. That includes skills-training programs to make sure people have a path to a good-paying job even if they aren’t going to college and tax cuts for working people instead of the rich.</p>	8.8
<p>[FINANCIAL SECURITY AND COSTS] Decades ago people had job security and economic security, but now most people are one hospital bill or layoff away from ruin, and it’s harder than ever for people to retire securely after a life of hard work. I’ll fight to secure retirement, stop health care bills from bankrupting people, and fight outsourcing that continues to destroy communities’ way of life.</p>	8.5
<p>*[COSTS] The cost of living has skyrocketed in this country while wages haven’t budged in years, and it’s squeezing the middle-class. We need to pass laws that get drug prices under control, create educational opportunities that lead to good-paying jobs and can be paid for while working part-time, and give the middle-class a tax cut so they can actually afford to put some money away for the future.</p>	8.4
<p>[FUTURE/SOLUTIONS] I believe in a brighter future for America, and that the American people can solve the problems that face us. We can build world-class schools, rebuild our infrastructure, and make our economy stronger by building the jobs of the future. If politicians could put aside the partisan fights and get to work, there are a lot of great ideas out there that we could all agree in.</p>	8.2
<p>[OPPORTUNITY] We need to focus on making sure people have opportunity, a real path to the middle class, from urban areas to rural America to everywhere else. That means a strong education system with a path for everyone, a growing economy where businesses are creating jobs,</p>	7.9

<p>and investing in jobs of the future so America is competitive in the global economy.</p>	
<p><i>*[FAIRNESS] The millionaires and billionaires have rigged the system against the rest of us, and that's what I'll work to change. I will get big money out of politics that means politicians look out for their rich donors rather than us. I'll fix the tax code, closing loopholes and raising rates on the richest so they are paying what they can afford. I'll use that to make America more fair for working people, funding priorities like schools and jobs.</i></p>	<p>6.7</p>

More Focus Group Takeaways:

Who to Blame

What We Heard:

"All these wealthy people are doing very well right now, and you're seeing all of these businesses that have been around Green Bay going down." –WI woman

"Big pharma shouldn't have big pockets like they do." –PA woman

"Owners of the companies, the managers, they're making all the money, so much money it's unbelievable, and they're not passing it down to the employees...and with the unions being destroyed, there's nothing to protect the middle-class people anymore." –WI woman

"The big pharma CEOs, when you hear about the amount of money they make, it's just mind-blowing." –PA woman

"Companies are so hung up on satisfying Wall Street that they're cutting jobs. The banks get all these tax breaks, look at General Motors: they're cutting blue-collar and white-collar jobs just the way that CEOs just want to satisfy Wall Street to increase the stock price and they do that by cutting jobs and it's just uncertain, you just don't know if you're gonna have a job." –MI woman

Suggestions:

Participants did believe the system favors the rich—who they think should pay their fair share—and they see wealthy donors as a big problem.

Voters see the effects of politicians listening to pharmaceutical company lobbyists in the price of medication they are trying to afford.

Cautions:

People are more receptive to criticisms of specific corporations for their actions than general anti-corporate rhetoric. Examples would be talking about a company who off-shored, and is hurting workers and local small businesses. Leaders can explain the human cost of a bad actor's actions and a solution.

Potential Messages:

- Republicans told us [x company] shouldn't be held responsible for its employees, customers or the environment. Just leave them alone to make money and it will all be ok. Their corporate executive makes hundreds of times what a middle-class employee does. They told us that trickle-down economics will somehow extend prosperity to everyone if we just let the rich keep all of our wealth. We know that money actually trickles up. Right-wing politicians have divided us, squandered our wealth, and left us all feeling less and less economically secure.
- This is what happens when the government is run by the lobbyists rather than the people. As corporations keep all the money to themselves, you get less and less.
- Right-wing politicians like my opponent have peddled these lies to the American people who have hungered for something to believe in while the middle-class American promise has collapsed. I will stand up against outsourcing that continues to destroy communities' way of life.

How the Parties are Perceived

What We Heard:

"Democrats look out for the people. They are more accepting of change." —Cleveland OH woman

"The Democrats seem like their whole slogan is 'give it away'. Everything for free. No one should work. The Republicans—they want you to work." —Cleveland, OH woman

"I think Democrats are more for assisting everyone at the same equally. Which is not the same thing as helping people build themselves up and move forward." —Green Bay, WI man

When asked what people liked about Democrats, participants responded about seeing them as the party of the middle class, or for, "the people." One Michigander liked that Democrats are talking about CEO pay skyrocketing while their wages go backward. A Cleveland woman liked that Democrats fight for the rights of women and people with disabilities.

A young, rural Pennsylvanian who disagreed with Democrats on guns and abortion praised them for funding the schools he went to and making the financial aid possible for his fiancé to become a nurse as a single mother. What he didn't like about Republicans was that they want him to be on his own—and have wealthy parents—to get postsecondary education

College-educated voters, millennials, and African American voters particularly saw the Republicans as the party of the rich, giving tax breaks to them instead of talking to regular

people. Some blue-collar and rural white voters saw the Republicans being too socially extreme, serving corporations and the wealthy, and only worrying about themselves.

When we ask Clevelanders which party is looking out for the middle class, the response was “nobody” and “what middle class?”

Potential Messages:

- I am about common-sense, Midwestern values and bread and butter issues of the middle-class promise: a job, home, health care, education, and retirement.
- We don’t ask for anything to be given to us, we earn it. Whether we work in farms or factories, big business or small business – we work hard.

Help Young Adults Vote: A More Operational Issue

What We Heard:

“I never re-registered, so I had to miss that one.” —Cleveland, OH man

“Oh, I never got an absentee ballot. Guess I’m not voting. I just wasn’t thinking about it.”
—Cleveland, OH woman

Young adults said their failure to vote in the past had less to do with policy than logistics. If a campaign wants them to turn out, that campaign needs to do the work of helping them register and, for some, figure out the absentee process. One particular policy proposal we heard young adults support was paid sick days. This was especially true of parents so they can be at a family member’s side when those they love need them.

For additional survey questions and more specific information such as state breakdowns, email info@rustbeltrising.com. *Rust Belt Rising trains Democratic candidates in the six states bordering the Great Lakes (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) to transform their values into effective economic messages for our base of working families. Through down-ballot work in these six states, RBR is committed to building a pipeline of diverse, qualified candidates.*

Focus groups conducted by Anzalone Liszt Grove Research.