

This report summarizes discussions with participants who live in small towns and rural communities. They included Democratic volunteers, leaders, and candidates. The purpose of the listening tour was to identify rural residents' key concerns and opportunities to improve rural voters' support for Democratic Candidates in 2026 and beyond.

RURAL VOICES: NCDP Rural Caucus Listening Tour Report

July 2026

Executive Summary

RURAL VOICES: NCDP Rural Caucus Virtual Listening Tour

July 2026

Overview & Objectives

In July 2026, the North Carolina Democratic Party (NCDP) Rural Caucus conducted three virtual listening sessions involving 31 participants (including local candidates, volunteers, and community leaders) across NC. Participants spanned the Mountains, Foothills, Piedmont, Sandhills, Triangle, Eastern NC, and the Coastal Plain. The virtual tour's objective was to identify core challenges facing small-town and rural North Carolinians and translate those insights into effective campaign strategies and messaging priorities for Democratic candidates and volunteers in rural districts.

Participants' Priorities

Cost of Living & "Kitchen Table" Issues: Affordability is the single largest concern for rural families. Discussions focused heavily on daily expenses—groceries, housing, utilities, gas, childcare, and healthcare—rather than national partisan debates.

Public Education & Childcare: Participants emphasized that public schools serve as vital economic and community anchors. Major concerns included teacher shortages, funding cuts driven by private school voucher expansions, and proposed limits on local property tax revenue. Childcare shortages were highlighted as a major barrier to workforce participation.

Healthcare Access: Rural communities continue to face hospital closures, long travel distances for specialty and primary care, reduced ACA funding, and limited mental health resources.

Infrastructure, Water & Environment: Industrial water pollution, drought, aging water/waste water and road systems, and limited broadband/cell service remain critical vulnerabilities.

Data Centers: The rapid growth of AI data centers drew significant debate regarding water depletion, noise, and environmental impacts. Participants voiced strong support for increased regulation, local transparency, and evaluating moratoriums (noting the NCDP SEC's call for a two-year moratorium).

Key Political & Outreach Takeaways

Overlooked and Underestimated: Participants felt that rural counties are often overlooked by statewide candidates and the coordinated campaign. Additionally, some participants feel "city Dems" underestimate the importance of faith in rural communities, and confuse Christianity with Christian Nationalism. Democrats in statewide elections cannot win without improving results in rural communities. Indeed, NC Dems have not won a Presidential election or a U.S. Senate race since 2008.

Targeting Unaffiliated Voters: Unaffiliated voters now constitute the largest voting bloc in most rural NC counties. Most are politically moderate, weary of partisan rhetoric, and open to Democratic candidates who focus on pragmatic, community-oriented solutions.

Polls find that Trump's hold on rural voters in swing states is softening due to rising food, fertilizer, and fuel costs, creating a strategic window for Democratic engagement.

Alternative Engagement Strategies: Because traditional door-to-door canvassing is less efficient in sparsely populated areas, recommended tactics include strategic direct mail (EDDM), phone banking, handwritten postcards via VoteBuilder targeting (specifically targeting infrequent voters), presence at local festivals/farmers' markets, and faith-based outreach.

Cross-County Collaboration: Small rural county parties face resource constraints and benefit significantly from sharing messaging, pooling campaign materials, and coordinating volunteer efforts across legislative and congressional districts.

Candidates' Perspectives: Candidates have found that rural voters are more interested in economic (affordability) issues and shared values than in political ideology.

Strategic Conclusions & Next Steps

To win in rural North Carolina, Democratic candidates and party organizations must prioritize listening over persuading and focus on shared values rather than partisan ideology. Rebuilding trust requires a sustained year-round presence, messaging centered around local economic relief and quality of life, and bipartisan collaboration to address infrastructure and healthcare challenges.

Strategically, we must recognize that Dems cannot win in rural areas (including districts with rural precincts and counties) without the support of Dems who vote infrequently and the Unas who are likely to support Democratic candidates in this midterm and future elections.

The Rural Caucus (RC) plans to make this report available to candidates and party leaders in order to help Democrats win in 2026 and beyond. Additionally, the RC plans to host other listening sessions with participants across the state.

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Respectfully Submitted by NCDP Rural Caucus Officers August 2026

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2nd VC, Misti Williams (Brunswick)

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RURAL VOICES: NCDP Rural Caucus

Virtual Listening Tour July 2026

Introduction & Overview

During July 2026, the NCDP Rural Caucus hosted three virtual listening sessions. The purpose was to hear directly from people who care about small and medium sized towns and rural communities. The tour's objective was to identify core challenges facing small-town and rural North Carolinians and translate those insights into effective campaign strategies and messaging priorities for Democratic candidates in rural districts.

Participants were encouraged to speak openly about the challenges facing their communities, what they believed should become priorities for Democratic candidates and elected officials, and how the Rural Caucus can help elect Democrats in local, district and statewide elections.

Representatives from counties in the Mountains, Foothills, Piedmont, Sandhills, Triangle, Eastern NC, and the Coastal Plain participated in the discussions. While each community faces unique challenges, many of the same concerns emerged repeatedly regardless of geography.

Even though communities differ economically, politically, and culturally, our participants consistently shared desires for practical solutions, improved local engagement, and elected officials who understand the realities of rural life and the need to reach bipartisan solutions.

In total, there were 31 participants, excluding Rural Caucus officers. The largest group attended the first session. The first two sessions included several candidates, and every session included participants from multiple counties across the state. Most participants provided feedback, with nearly all ratings and comments being very positive and only one negative rating.

Participants' Key Concerns

Key concerns included cost of living, public education and childcare, healthcare, water and environmental stewardship, data centers, and rural economic development.

Cost of Living Remains the Dominant Concern

Across all three listening sessions, participants consistently described rising everyday expenses as the issue affecting rural families the most.

Rather than focusing primarily on national political debates, participants repeatedly returned to "affordability" and "kitchen table issues" including:

- Rising grocery prices
- Utility costs
- Housing affordability
- Child care expenses
- Fuel prices
- Healthcare costs

The candidates who participated agreed that these are concerns they hear most often while speaking with voters. Overall, participants noted that conversations centered around affordability resonate better with voters than highly partisan issues— especially with Unaffiliateds.

Public Education and Childcare

Concerns regarding funding for public education was a recurring theme throughout the listening sessions. Participants expressed concern about:

- Reduced funding for public schools, due to the expansion of private school vouchers
- Teacher shortages due to uncompetitive salaries and lack of resources
- Proposed amendments to limit counties’ ability to raise property taxes, which would limit counties’ main funding sources for public education

Several participants noted that public schools often represent the largest employer in many rural counties and serve as important community anchors.

Access to affordable child care was also discussed extensively. Participants described child care shortages as barriers preventing many parents from participating in the workforce.

One participant suggested exploring partnerships between public schools and child care providers to improve access for working families, illustrating the group's focus on practical, community-based solutions rather than simply identifying problems.

Healthcare Access is a Challenge in Many Rural Counties

Participants described healthcare access as a continuing challenge in many rural counties. Concerns included:

- Affordability and cuts to Obamacare (ACA)
- Hospital closures
- Preventive care, access to primary health providers
- Limited specialty care & access to mental health resources
- Long travel distances for treatment

Several participants noted that healthcare issues intersect with many other rural concerns, including transportation, economic development, aging populations, and workforce recruitment.

Water and Environmental Stewardship

Water and environmental protection were among the most discussed topics during the listening tour. Participants raised concerns regarding:

- River and groundwater industrial pollution
- Groundwater sustainability amid drought conditions
- Agricultural (need for water, impact of fertilizer)
- Industrial development
- Long-term environmental planning, loss of farmland and forests to development (industrial and housing)

Infrastructure Concerns

Discussion also included broader infrastructure concerns, including:

- Internet and cell phone access problematic in many areas
- Aging community water systems in some towns
- Groundwater contamination and/or depletions in some rural areas
- Aging and damaged roads & bridges (aging and storm damaged)
- Utility capacity to accommodate residential, commercial, and industrial growth in developing areas

Participants generally agreed that growth should be accompanied by adequate planning and infrastructure investment.

Data Centers in Rural Communities

The subject of artificial intelligence infrastructure and large-scale data centers generated one of the most extensive discussions during the first listening session. Participants expressed a wide range of perspectives, including statewide moratoriums while additional environmental studies are completed. Concerns included:

- Water usage (ground water depletion and/or contamination) and long-term environmental impacts
- Noise pollution and potential air pollution (diesel generators in one proposal)
- Need for community, state, and federal planning and regulations
- Transparency (from developers and AI companies)
- Economic benefits versus environmental and quality of life costs

We discussed the importance of evaluating projects individually rather than treating all proposed data centers alike. Some local governments/counties have responded to community concerns by adopting ordinances establishing standards that future developments would need to meet.

Although participants differed on the preferred approach, there was broad agreement that communities deserve transparency, meaningful public input, and appropriate safeguards before large industrial projects are approved.

Supplemental information following discussion:

- NCDP SEC has called for a two-year moratorium on data centers.¹
- PRESS RELEASE (July 1, 2026): Governor Stein Announces AI Strategic Roadmap to Protect and Better Serve North Carolinians, Prepare Workers, and Strengthen Economy ²
- State of North Carolina AI Leadership Council: Statewide AI Strategic Roadmap³

¹ Environment: Env. 001 A RESOLUTION TO ESTABLISH A STATEWIDE MORATORIUM ON DATA CENTERS, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WtzYa8vU57jSU189VErCvzJQ-PfQfDM043YgyWoclo8/edit?tab=t.0>

² <https://governor.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2026/07/01/governor-stein-announces-ai-strategic-roadmap-protect-and-better-serve-north-carolinians-prepare>

³ <https://it.nc.gov/documents/statewide-ai-strategic-roadmap/open>

Rural Economic Development

Participants expressed support for economic growth that benefits local communities, but it is a two-edged sword. How do we attract investment while preserving the qualities that make rural North Carolina unique. Participants identified several priorities including:

- Supporting small businesses and farms
- Local employment opportunities and workforce development
- Agriculture and agribusiness
- Broadband expansion and other infrastructure improvements
- Affordable housing and protecting resources

Many noted that successful economic development must balance growth with protecting natural resources and community character.

Improving Outreach in Rural Communities

Overlooked and Underestimated

Several participants expressed concerns about often being overlooked and underestimated by many statewide candidates, the State Party, and the Coordinated Campaign. Since 2008, Democratic voter registrations have fallen dramatically in rural counties while Unaffiliated and Republican registrations have grown. Consequently, Democratic candidates have a difficult time winning statewide and congressional district races that include rural precincts and counties. Indeed, Democrats have not won a Presidential or U.S. Senate election in NC since 2008.

Further, participants noted that it often seems that statewide campaign efforts (whether a candidate or the coordinated campaign) underestimate the importance of faith communities in rural areas. There is often confusion among “city Dems” regarding the difference between Christian beliefs and Christian Nationalism, a political ideology that overlaps with White Evangelicalism and MAGA ideology.⁴

Unaffiliated Rural Voters Are Critical to Our Success

One of the strongest themes across all three listening sessions was the importance of engaging unaffiliated voters and infrequent Dems. Participants observed that unaffiliated voters now represent the largest voting bloc in almost all rural counties. Unas and infrequent Dems are critical to Democratic candidates’ success in local, district and statewide elections.

Several important observations emerged:

- Many, if not most unaffiliated voters are politically moderate.
- Many express frustrations with both major parties and are tired of “partisan politics”
- Many, if not most, are willing to consider Democratic candidates when discussions focus on community concerns and shared values rather than ideology.
- Most unaffiliated voters – and even some infrequent Dem voters -- prioritize practical issues (e.g. affordability and “kitchen table” issues) over partisan debates.

⁴ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/a-different-gospel-how-christian-nationalism-distorts-the-way-of-jesus>

Candidates shared that their conversations regarding affordability, education, healthcare, and infrastructure proved more productive than discussions of divisive political issues. Candidates who participated generally agreed that successful outreach requires listening before persuading.

Fortunately, Trump's stronghold on rural voters is slipping, making many more voters (especially unaffiliated) open to Dem candidates.

Supplemental information following discussion:

- *Donald Trump's Approval Rating Flips with Rural Voters* (July 25, 2026)⁵
- *Trump's support in rural America slips as fuel and food prices climb* (June 14, 2026)⁶
- *DCCC: NEW POLL: Rural Voters Sour on Trump and GOP's Broken Promises on Economy, Higher Prices* (June 16, 2026) ⁷
- *YouTube MSNOW: Trump Suffers Double Digit Loss in Support from Rural Voters* ⁸

Alternatives to Door-to-Door Canvassing

In many rural communities, it is difficult to reach voters in sparsely populated areas. It is impossible to reach as many voters in small towns and rural areas in a given timeframe as can be reached in large cities and urban areas. Throughout the sessions, participants discussed alternatives to door-to-door canvassing to connect with voters, including:

- *Strategic* VoteBuilder targeting (especially infrequent voters, e.g. those who voted in 2024, but not in 2022) for phone banking and direct mail such as handwritten postcards
- Every Door Direct Mail (EDDM)⁹ – a cost-effective alternative to postage stamps or bulk mail rate, but cannot target specific voters.
- Conversations with voters at community festivals, farmers' markets, and local events
- Volunteering with civic and other non-profit organizations
- Faith community outreach (town halls, debates, meet the candidates)
- Community watch meetings
- Local business engagement

Participants noted that trust develops over time through consistent presence within the community rather than only during election seasons. Relationship building takes time.

Collaboration across counties and within districts

Participants expressed strong support for greater collaboration among county parties. Several participants noted small rural counties often face similar challenges (e.g. volunteer and financial resources) and could benefit significantly from sharing ideas and coordinating resources.

⁵ <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-approval-rating-flip-rural-voters-12244109>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trumps-support-rural-america-slips-fuel-food-prices-climb-reutersipsos-poll-2026-06-14/>

⁷ <https://dccc.org/new-poll-rural-voters-sour-on-trump-and-gops-broken-promises-on-economy-higher-prices/>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gD7gh6Lh44>

⁹ <https://www.usps.com/business/every-door-direct-mail.htm>

Suggestions included:

- Coordinating volunteer efforts for multi-county districts (state & federal), such as Donkey Express, coordinated town halls and meet the candidates, etc.
- Sharing successful messaging and activities
- Sharing ideas and examples of materials (e.g. palm cards)

Candidate Perspectives

Candidates shared information from conversations they've heard from voters while campaigning.

Common themes included:

- Many voters know little about state or local government.
- Education about local down ballot offices remains important.
- Voters want practical solutions, not political ideology.
- Discussions of shared concerns and values are more effective than partisan messaging.
- Civility and collaboration continue to resonate with many rural voters.

Candidates have found that voters want elected officials who are willing to work across party lines for bipartisan solutions while remaining committed to their communities' constituents.

Overlapping Themes

Although participants discussed a wide variety of topics, several themes emerged throughout the listening tour. Participants repeatedly emphasized:

- **Strategic, affordable GOTV efforts for counties, districts, and candidates**
 - Unaffiliated voters are critical to Democrats' success
 - Improving Democratic turnout among infrequent voters is also critical.
 - Listening to constituents must remain a priority.
 - Respectful dialogue and collaboration are essential for rebuilding trust among rural voters, including infrequent Dems and most Unaffiliated voters.
 - Use several means to connect with voters, including alternatives to in-person canvassing, such as phone banking, EDDM, festivals, postcards, town halls, etc.
 - Collaboration and cooperation across counties and within districts
- **Connect with voters through shared values and concerns: The economy and infrastructure**
 - The economy and affordability remain the primary concerns for most rural families.
 - Rural communities want responsible economic development, sustaining our natural resources and supporting our farmers.
 - Water quality and system infrastructure deserve greater attention.
- **Connecting with voters through shared values and concerns: Quality of life**
 - Quality of life, environmental protections (esp. water), public education, and healthcare
 - Public education continues to be central to healthy rural communities.
 - Healthcare access to primary care, hospitals, and specialists is challenging in many rural areas.

Summary & Conclusions

The first three Rural Caucus Listening Tour sessions found that rural North Carolinians are eager to share their experiences and concerns when given the opportunity to be heard.

While participants represented different regions across the state, and sometimes held differing perspectives on specific policy questions, they consistently expressed a desire for candidates who will seek solutions (including bipartisan solutions) focused on improving economic and infrastructure concerns and preserving the quality of rural life.

Strategically, county parties and candidates must reach out to Unaffiliated voters who lean Democratic and to Democrats who vote infrequently. Improving turnout among Dems and Unas likely to vote for Dem candidates are keys to our success.

These listening sessions provided valuable insight into the priorities of rural Democrats, including candidates, volunteers, and community leaders. The participants reinforced that improving Democratic turnout and trust among rural residents includes listening carefully, respecting differing perspectives, and building relationships rooted in shared values and common concerns.

Next Steps

This report is intended to be shared with Democratic candidates and party leaders in order to help Democrats win in 2026 and beyond. Please feel free to share with your colleagues.

The Rural Caucus plans for these conversations to continue as part of an ongoing effort to strengthen Democratic engagement throughout rural North Carolina and ensure that rural voices remain central to the party's future planning, GOTV efforts and outreach.

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DISCLAIMER: This report is not intended to provide an exhaustive account of every concern facing rural communities. Rather, it reflects only the concerns, perspectives and priorities that were shared with us by participants during these three listening sessions. (Hence, our plans to conduct additional virtual listening tours.)