



To: Interested Parties
From: American Family Voices
Re: **Proposal for messaging and organizing working-class voters**

American Family Voices is seeking to partner with organizations and funders looking to build support from working-class voters for progressive causes and campaigns in Pennsylvania and the industrial Midwest (IA, MI, MN, MO, OH, and WI). Leveraging the groundbreaking work in our Factory Towns project, we will build a communications hub for messaging and content creation, narrative building in local in-person and online communities, and fostering progressive community building by partnering with local organizations to host community events. The comms hub would develop content, including radio, TV, and digital ads, as well as written material and statements for stump speeches, and then continue to test its performance. On the content that tests the best, we will make it available to partners for their use, and in some cases we will make it public, so that the bigger progressive world can use it (or variations on it) in their messaging and organizing work. We seek to raise approximately \$1 million for a four-month campaign.

What we have learned so far

According to a study produced by AFV and 21st Century Democrats, the biggest changes in partisan voting margins in the battleground states north of the Mason-Dixon line between 2012 and 2020 did not happen in big cities, the much-discussed big-city suburban counties, or in the most rural, agricultural-economy-based counties. Democrats gained about 500,000 net votes in the first two categories and lost about 500,000 in the last category. Those are all big and important changes, but none were too surprising given a higher turnout election overall, the well-documented dislike of Trump in the suburbs, and the way he motivated Republicans to vote in rural America.

Where the biggest and most ground-shaking change in net votes came from, though, was in the small and midsized counties with a heavy manufacturing presence, the places we have come to call “Factory Towns.” In these counties, Barack Obama did relatively well in 2008 and 2012, winning the midsized counties in this cohort, and losing the

smaller Factory Town counties by smaller margins than many Democratic presidential candidates in the past. But Democratic presidential campaigns had a net loss of about 2.6 million votes between 2012 and 2020, with numbers very similar in 2016 and 2020, and much of that losing margin trickled down to other races down-ballot

These are the counties hardest hit by deindustrialization and factory closures. They have been slammed by the impact of trade deals, by opioid addiction and rising suicide rates, by the financial collapse and foreclosure crisis of 2008-9, and by the decline of health care and social services in their communities. The unions that used to be there fighting for their members' jobs, wages, and benefits -- as well as educating them about politics and getting them out to vote -- are generally either gone because of factory closings or significantly weaker.

The reason we picked these counties is partly because they are the counties that moved most dramatically toward Trump, but also because these are the voters who feel most forgotten and ignored by both parties and by their government. We knew that if we can begin to reach them, of all voters, we can figure out how to change the dynamics in American politics that are moving voters away from the progressive coalition and toward the Trumpian politics destroying our democracy.

Over the past few months, AFV commissioned Lake Research Partners to conduct polling and focus groups of Factory Town voters in these counties, and we added to that research with a set of four focus groups from voters in these kinds of Factory Town counties. You can read our analysis of the focus groups [here](#). We also contracted with TargetSmart to do a deep dive on the data from the voter files, the census tracts, and the economic and health care outcomes data from these counties and states. Our comprehensive report synthesizing all this information is [here](#).

The bottom line is that there are challenges aplenty for progressive issue advocates and candidates amongst these voters -- they are cynical and bitter and discouraged with both parties and our economic system. But there is also a clear path for us to successfully communicate to and organize them. Economic populism, empathy for the tough lives they have been living, specifics on the issues that matter, and building community solidarity will work with these folks.

Having done this first round of research, we want to take our work to the next level.

What we want to do next

1. Produce and test written, graphic, and video content with the following themes. We will commission Lake Research Partners for focus groups and ad testing.

- A. **Labor and small business.** The two most beloved institutions among working-class voters are unions and small businesses. One of the things we did in the focus groups was to read a positive statement about Joe Biden from a union leader, feeling like that would have more credibility than being from a partisan point of view. It worked extremely well. But we also noted how in the polling (not just ours but in general) and the focus groups, small business is a beloved institution. It gave us an idea, which is similar to something the anti-Walmart campaign did years ago which worked extremely well, which is to have messaging bringing a small business owner and a labor leader together talking about how they are united in terms of either issues or a candidate. We think it could be very powerful.
- B. **Progressive economic populism.** After the first few focus groups gave a sense of where these voters were coming from, we tested the following script in the last focus group, which was our most conservative focus group overall:

"Big Business CEOs and lobbyists already have people representing them in Congress. I'm running to fight for working people. I'm the only candidate in this race who wants to make sure that the billionaires and big corporations pay what they owe in taxes, so that the rest of us can get good schools and roads and health care. I'm the only candidate in this race who will take on Big Oil and the big food companies and the big drug companies and force them to stop price gouging and will vote to enforce the antitrust laws so that small businesses can compete against the big monopolies. I will work with anyone in either party who wants to help working people, but I will stand up to anybody in either party that looks down on us and tries to divide and distract us so that they can line the pockets of their big contributors. When I was growing up my parents told me that Democrats were the party that fights for working people. One of the reasons I'm running for Congress is to make sure my party lives up to its roots."

Given that this was a Republican-leaning group and that they tended to view all candidates and partisan ads with suspicion, the reaction to this ad was very positive. The combination of economic populism, a desire for the Democratic

Party to return to its roots as the party of working people (which was a theme we heard throughout the focus groups we did), and the willingness to be independent from the party if it didn't stand for working people seemed like it had a lot of potential. We want to continue to tweak and test these ideas in a variety of ways.

- C. **Local stories.** We think there is a lot of promise for ads that are grounded in, personal, local stories, whether that be from an independent source like the union and small business validation content we mentioned above or from another kind of organization or community leader. This is especially important given the level of personal and cross-generational hard times that working-class small and midsized town residents are living through: middle aged and older folks are having trouble making it as they head into their retirement years, and their kids are having trouble making it as well, which adds to their sense of frustration and angst. We want to produce and test a variety of story-based content focused on the hard times people are living through, and offering a more hopeful path forward, but without the happy talk. We need to offer hope without hype to these worried, cynical people.
- D. **Hypocrisy.** Given the cynicism among all the working-class voters we were talking to, we think the hypocrisy angle -- taking Republicans to task for doing ribbon-cutting ceremonies for projects they voted against, for example -- has a lot of promise.
- E. **Economic stability.** The phrase that kept cropping up in these focus groups was "there's always something": that Roseanne Roseannadanna sense that something negative was always going to bite them in the ass, whether it was the financial crisis in 2008, their local factories closing down, the opioid epidemic, the chaos and fighting of modern day politics, the COVID crisis, or the war in Ukraine. We need messaging that speaks to stability and getting America on track, without using happy talk that these voters definitely won't believe.
- F. **Connection to the community.** In these smaller towns, people feel forgotten. Advocacy groups, and especially candidates and elected officials, need to show up in these communities more, and listen rather than just give a quick speech and leave. And we would recommend ads and mail that have that sense of connection to these too often ignored communities. Landmark buildings and parks and schools with candidates in these kinds of communities should be shown in the pictures in brochures and mail pieces, and the visuals of ads as much as possible.

G. **Policy specifics.** While laundry lists and wonky talk should always be avoided, we were struck with the hunger of these focus group participants for specific policy ideas. Our sense is that advocacy groups and candidates should not be hesitant to talk in their ads, mail, and organizing work about the specific policy ideas they have for improving the economy.

2. Drive local media on the price gouging narrative with bracketing events. As part of the strategy to drive the price gouging narrative that is so resonant in Factory Towns – and throughout the universe of working-class voters – AFV will conduct a systematic PR effort in local media, and especially local TV. The events may also be live streamed on social media or news of them may be disseminated on various social media platforms.

The program will also aim to hold specific members of Congress accountable for refusing to support legislation that would curb price gouging – like the recent price gouging bill that passed out of the House or a windfall profits tax on the oil companies. In general, the goal will be to take the offensive on the price increase issue in key local markets.

The program will generate two types of press events:

- **Events that target the companies that are clearly price gouging.** These will primarily include large national or multinational corporations that have taken advantage of the war in Ukraine, COVID pandemic, and supply chain disruptions to raise prices well beyond the increases in their costs of inputs to pad profits. A principal target will be the oil industry. These events may take the form of press conferences or protests, eg. at stockholder meetings, local outlets of large corporations, etc.
- **Accountability events aimed at politicians who oppose measures in Congress aimed at curtailng price gouging.** Events could take the form of presence at candidate town halls, protests/press events at offices, and bird-dogging.

The goal of the project will be to generate hundreds of local press events and press stories -- from July through October -- in swing states and congressional districts.

Events will be conducted by local organizations that have been recruited through the national staff– or affiliates of national organizations who have legitimacy and interest in

the issue. They will be coordinated by a national organizing director and a national communications director who are dedicated to the project. These personnel will be supervised by Democracy Partner Robert Creamer, who oversaw similar local media programs in 2008, 2012, and 2016 for the Obama and Clinton campaigns and the DNC. The project staff will work cooperatively with national organizations who are active in the anti-price gouging campaign.

3. Foster online progressive communities and content distribution. There are a variety of online communities that speak to the Democratic base, and we work closely with the people in these spaces. Right now, though, there are few networks that publish online content for, or organize in, the Factory Town counties that are the focus of this project.

There are a couple with potential, though:

- A. Will Robinson has taken the lead in starting Real Voices Media, which is a network of 1.9 million people across nearly 400 Facebook communities in 15 states and includes most of the Factory Town project's target states. We want to leverage and expand their existing social media infrastructure to collaboratively create and distribute content.
- B. David Eichenbaum, Curtis Hougand, and Village Square are reaching online communities by creating media feedback loops utilizing top-down digital ads, bottom-up peer-to-peer micro-influencer content, and extensive social listening. We think that building out a network of local influencers on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok in the target counties could be very powerful in terms of moving out content. One of the things we heard frequently in the focus groups is that people get a lot of their news (if you can call it that) from content friends and family send them. We will create a steady stream of helpful progressive content that would go to these influencers and then distribute out to their networks.

4. Foster progressive community building by collaborating with local advocacy groups to host community events. The work done over the last several years on developing relational organizing and deep canvassing models of engaging voters and activists are incredibly important given how cynical voters are. Having said that, those organizing models are still mostly one-to-one, and based on our research, we are convinced that progressive groups, the Democratic Party, and candidates need to be very conscious

about building and strengthening community. The focus group participants are desperate for a stronger community to support them and their families and their neighbors in these troubled times. They are worried that the divisions exposed in our country in recent years are fraying the bonds of community in a deep way, and that we need to be doing something to mend them.

This is not something that is going to be solved by ads and mail. As important as it is, and as much as we strongly support these activities, this hunger for community is not going to be addressed by traditional ads, mail, door knocking, phone calling, and relational organizing work. We need to get organizations and campaigns to devote some real resources and attention to community building events, projects, and organizing models. As I wrote in my piece on the focus groups:

Candidates and party committees should be spending time doing things like sponsoring community events like Sherrod Brown's "movie nights," which he does in the old movie theaters of Ohio's midsized towns, where the theme is to build community spirit and togetherness. Or they could set up events that were community health clinics where people come in and get health care assistance that they couldn't otherwise afford. Or Chautauqua style events, where musicians, community theater performers, poets, and community organizations spend a day in a community.

We also need to find and create places where people can gather and hang out. A lot of local union halls that no longer exist used to have bars and bowling alleys where not just union members, but the whole community in working-class neighborhoods would gather to have fun and talk about their lives and politics. We need to rebuild that sense of community.

We will work with state and local groups and campaigns to develop organizing models that emphasize this kind of community building. Our budget includes \$10,000 sub-grants to state or local partner organizations in our seven target states every month to help them organize the kind of community building events described above in Factory Towns.

BUDGET

Our research is clear: groups and candidates can regain support for a progressive agenda if we use the right message and organizing techniques. Our strategy has to include economic populism, building community, and using a variety of channels for moving content and organizing Factory Town voters.

The Factory Towns project is seeking funding and organizational partners to continue developing strategies that break through to the people living in the working-class small and midsized counties we have targeted. The budget below reflects what our project wants to accomplish over the next four months.

Item	Monthly Cost	Total Cost
Overall campaign management, including message development, PR, and coordination with coalition partners	20,000	80,000
Video production	20,000	80,000
Program to Drive Local Media	40,500	162,000
Real Voices Media Facebook network campaign	45,500	182,000
Village Square micro-influencer campaign	56,250	225,000
Lake Research Partners focus groups + ad testing	17,750	71,000
Community building events program	70,000	280,000
Total Monthly	270,000	
Total 4 Months		1,080,000