
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

Spring 2026

Tired of losing

There is just no way to sugarcoat this.

Democrats have been getting their asses handed to them by Iowa's rural voters for well over a decade. The modest Blue Wave of 2018 left Democrats fooling themselves into thinking the strategy of making up for rural losses by doubling down on suburban women was the key to winning. But as losing margins continue to mount in Iowa's rural counties, it is time for Democrat' to recognize why they fail to persuade rural voters.

That starts with recognizing that championing ethanol is not some magic proxy for rural voters, and the "farm vote" is not the "rural vote."

According to USDA statistics, Iowa has 86,911 farmers. Only 45,000 of those farmers farm more than 200 acres. This is the high end of the likely pool of "conventional" farmers. Just 17,927 are classified as large producers with annual farm sales of over \$500,000. The Ag Census estimates the number of large producers represents 32,627 eligible voters (a 1.82 factor of the 17,927). Applying the same factor to the 45,000 farms over 200 acres would represent 81,900 eligible voters.

Iowa has 1,807,564 registered eligible voters. The conventional-to-

large-producer farmer vote thus represents between 1.5% and 3.9% of all of Iowa's eligible voters.

Iowa has 87,299 public school employees representing 4.2% of eligible voters; 218,045 health care workers making up 10%; and 586,000 Iowans receiving Social Security retirement benefits (28% of eligible voters).

Democratic candidates and officials will pledge their undying love for ethanol and then wonder why they got their asses kicked.

In most of Iowa's rural counties, three of the top employers – if not the top three – will be the hospital (if they still have one), public schools, and city and county government employees.

When you get past these government-sourced rural jobs, some light to medium manufacturing jobs, and small business ownership, Social Security retirement income might just be the next best gig in our small towns.

Yet for years Democratic candidates have been tying themselves in knots trying to outdo Republicans on support for ethanol to win the rural

vote. Our Democratic candidates and officials will pledge their undying love for ethanol and then wonder why they got their asses kicked in towns like Pleasantville.

I would wager a guess that less than 3,000 of those 32,627 large producers with an average age of 58 are persuadable voters. And I would contend that those 40,000 farmers on small farms, and a large share of the 87,299 public school employees, 218,045 health care workers, and 586,000 seniors who live in rural Iowa, are way more persuadable voters than the pro-ethanol, large-scale row crop and CAFO-owning farmers.

Granted that there are also non-farmers who support a pro-ethanol conventional farming agenda, but does anyone really think they are going to change now by more of the same messaging from Democrats?

Our two-crop and CAFO system of agriculture is failing us in so many ways. Farmers are going broke chasing taxpayer subsidies. Rural communities continue to decline in population and economic opportunity. Schools are closing. Access to rural health care is getting harder, especially for seniors.

Cont'd on Page 7

We need to elect grownups

The Iowa spring progresses. And like oddly determined losers in a fiction, our majority party arrives with more—and worse—ideas to improve our state. The spring 2026 legislative quilt is crazy indeed. Let's look at a few of my favorite squares.

First, we have an Iowa nice version of MAHA—Make America Healthy Again. HF2253 provides for citizens' ability to obtain Ivermectin OTC. Zero physician input. It also changes every reference to "pregnant person" in Iowa law to "pregnant female." (Because that's a distinction worth making amidst all our real problems.)

Governor Reynolds has already signed into law a bill barring local governments from passing civil rights protections exceeding state laws already on the books. This was done for the specific purpose of preventing cities or counties from protecting Trans people in the wake of the state's 2025 revocation of those protections.

In the same small-minded vein, a bill that bans local governments from providing forms of identification within their own communities was passed out of committees and is on the calendar for debate. Potential for calling it up in chambers appears high in the current climate. I live and am elected in a county that was a pioneer in the Community ID arena. Officials spent much time and thought setting requirements for obtaining the ID. They gained buy-in from religious and law enforcement leaders. They carefully refined protocols. The result is a form of ID that transitions insecure persons—those who've fled persecution, war, or endured other situations where original ID was lost or destroyed—into safer residents. The ID can help to open bank accounts, receive services, and gain employment. Eliminating this prudent, well-administered program where it exists serves no

legitimate state purpose and will reverse good outcomes.

Gov. Reynolds also continues her insidious degrading of Iowa's public education by boosting charter school support to an embarrassing degree. In the Des Moines Register's recent article on bills that survived the 3/20 second funnel, here's how they describe her bill: "State funding for public charter schools would be brought in line with the money public schools receive... It would clear the way for charter students to attend public school for drivers education courses, take part in public school athletic programs and do their course work at their resident public school districts (House File 2699/Senate File 2406)."

Her bill would burden public schools with providing services to charter school students and create a laughably "level" playing field that serves to undermine a once-admirable system of public education in our state. Again, zero state purpose, and massive harm.

I must add, given my sparkling 'glass half-full' personality, that some poisonous bills perished with the second funnel. The most gruesome was HF2338, a "Don't Say Gay" bill. This would have extended a bill passed last year to include grades 7-12. Its all-encompassing wording would have cut students off from any LGBTQ support at the most tumultuous time in the human life cycle. Distressed young people with nowhere to turn may well have died had the bill passed. Why do I say this? Here's the bill summary: "Prohibiting school districts, charter schools, and innovation zone schools from providing any program, curriculum, test, survey, questionnaire, promotion, or instruction relating to gender theory or sexual orientation instruction in grades seven

through twelve." Tell me that doesn't cover counseling.

I haven't even discussed looming property tax bills. The GOP is now panicked over revenue forecasts and their own budget mishandling. They may hit cities and counties with reductions in revenue so severe that local services across the board will feel an impact.

It's the same mess the GOP in Iowa always creates. Tank the budget, harass vulnerable citizens, and prop up weak right-wing ideological concepts using 'reserve funds' (hello University of Iowa Center for Intellectual Freedom, we see you circling the drain). This entity, a solution for no existing problem whatsoever, is now begging for students to register for its classes. Offerings are postponed for now. If the GOP really believes in the free market, this husk of nothingness will soon be left to die in the free academic economy.

I end with a fact we all know: Iowa is better than any of this. We need to elect grownups who will shun the basest ideological urges in favor of lifting this state to its best level. Education, health care, human services, civil rights, fostering entrepreneurship—these things used to be our pride, and a delightful surprise to those in other states who often felt themselves more evolved than we here in Iowa. Leadership needs to bring us back to basics, and as voters it's up to us to employ political leaders who will do it.

—Kim Painter is the Johnson County Recorder, first elected in 1998.

Sinclair Lewis: still a great read

I am a cultural historian. I contend literary scholars, given the perspective of historians, ought to allot more weight to Sinclair Lewis's contribution to the formation of middle-class identity. Lewis was considered a distinctly contemporary author in the 1920s; his work remains current.

E. M. Forster in 1922 caught the draw: "I persist in exclaiming, for what Mr. Lewis has done for myself and thousands of others, is to lodge a piece of a continent in our imaginations." Lewis had just published *Babbitt*, two years following the stunning success of *Main Street*. Three exemplary novels followed: *Arrowsmith* ('25), *Elmer Gantry* ('27), and *Dodsworth* ('29). I encourage literary scholars—who, for a variety of reasons starting in the 1930s, came to dismiss Lewis's work as second-rate—to take another look. Lewis's reception in the twenties was formidable because of his sensitivity to the nation's history, its promise, and at points its troubling trajectory. I mean to broaden the perspective as to why the 1930 Nobel recipient's novels resonated forcefully one hundred years ago and remain in print. The Roaring Twenties was a foundational decade. The USA was in a formative, booming, ballyhooed period of the emergent twentieth century.

Lewis was acknowledged as a top-drawer writer. He recognized in the country's transition from a nineteenth-century pioneer society to a twentieth-century urban-industrial colossus an intense change in the manner of living. His ability to address a multitude of emergent concerns mesmerized the chattering classes. The bulk of the citizenry naturally did not read him, but a significant array picked up his works. Lewis sold in unprecedented numbers. Readers found the author spoke

to their musings on what was taking hold in America.

Lewis critiqued the temper of his times. The "new middle class" was an intoxicating subject. These denizens were hailed bearers of the New American Standard; what characterized that life? Lewis embraced the winds of change and raised storm warnings. Values, ethics, religion; the role of the worker, of women, the proliferation of the white-collared; corporate concentration, ideological extremism, the explosion of media—identities of individuals were up for grabs and aspirations debated. Lewis believed the citizenry could do a whole lot better. Tawdry selfishness had taken hold, bigotry poisoned the air, and malaise amidst all the twenties cheer gripped the populace.

Historians have assigned students Lewis's five 1920s masterpieces: *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Arrowsmith*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *Dodsworth*. For cultural specialists, he is rich to teach. He is artful, funny, and deeply persuasive: citizens need to take their own measure, that of communities, and of the country. Lewis continues to add up, because in the 1920s America took on its essential twentieth-century identity. Here lay a land of promise, goods, security, and insecurity; a country and people increasingly commodified, seemingly more stable, and discouragingly more distant from rock-solid virtues of hard work, belief in God, commitment to family and community... those values we like to think the pioneers of a more halcyon past represented. Citizens in the twenties appeared to be in search of an identity in which they could place their faith; a people somehow satisfied but dissatisfied like Lewis himself...like Americans well into the twenty-first century struggling to discern "who are we as a people."

Read the Constitution: The Founding Fathers spelled out the challenges of their day. We must confront ourselves, always.

The novelist's reception in the twenties was formidable because of his sensitivity to the American Promise: All have rights to freedom, opportunity, security, and respect. Literary scholars and critics ought to credit Lewis for what in his day was considered a striking, lasting take on the American Experiment. The literary elite, across one hundred years now, have in passing noted the place of history in his work, but nowhere do they engage the breadth and depth of its content. Lewis offers an accessible examination of the intersection of history and literature.

Yes, the author for some 1920s readers and critics appeared harsh in his takes on the Republic's denizens, but at base those who purchased his novels knew what was up. Here was their story, and here within it was resolution. Lewis had placed his trust in the middle class, the embodiment of the fulfillment of the American Promise. He carried the banner for American Progress. His main aim was reformation of the rising middle class. Get back to grassroots values and know-how. Progress, and yes, regression; ultimately steps forward; always taking stock, addressing change. Critiqued by some as a pessimist, Lewis all along was optimistic his country has what it takes to do well: *everyone deserves a fair shake*.

—Edward Agran lives in Iowa City and is a professor emeritus of history at Wilmington College. His new book, *Sinclair Lewis: The 1920s and the Shaping of American Identity*, is available at *Prairie Lights*.

Culture control and the rise of fascism

It's a rite of passage for any woman that one day a man is going to look her in the eyes and try to explain to her that her place in society is nothing more than a womb. Or a kitchen. Or a bed. That woman will push past that conversation with a deeper understanding of how she is observed by someone she thought she could trust. This happens in any place where a woman exists. It doesn't matter where she works, where she comes from, or what her socioeconomic status is.

Sometimes a woman will embrace the boot that lands on her neck. She will look at a culture that reduces her to nothing more than a few nouns, and in her desperate wish to be free, she'll think that she can reclaim her place within those words. These are the Tradwives of today. The Tradwife, or "traditional wife," grew out of social media. The movement encourages young women and girls to aspire to two goals only in life: be a wife and mother. The Tradwives of social media are largely fake—the bread they spend hours baking in videos is store-bought, as are the vegetables they claim they grew in a garden. But the content they spread has real consequences. They promise a pain-free, easy life to young women without divulging the details that led many women to resist this "traditional" way of life.

The Tradwife movement has come into popularity with the rise of another internet phenomenon – the Manosphere. The Manosphere consists of men who also wish to return to what they see as a traditional lifestyle. These men believe that they're owed a certain kind of life, and that it's the women who are denying it to them, instead of the slow crush of capitalism. They believe they don't have a house and a wife and children because women have become

too entitled for wanting these things on their own terms.

This is the future that is being built around us. The Manosphere and the Tradwife movement are just two small branches that operate as part of the larger movement to return to "traditional values." It's not shocking that Manosphere content peddlers are notorious bootlickers of Donald Trump. The violent hatred of women (specifically women of color and transwomen) that comes from the White House today began on the internet forums that created the Manosphere.

Today's young men and women are being pushed towards this sort of gender essentialism for a reason.

Today's young men and women are being pushed towards this sort of gender essentialism for a reason. Culture control is important for the rise of fascism. This is why it is vitally important that any movement that wants to fight the growing threat of fascism first learns how to fight patriarchy. To someone like me, this fight looks radically different than it did even ten years ago. And, in some ways, it's the same as it's always been.

We have a mountain of work to do to get past just the basics of gender equality. There are many people who think that we've solved these problems and that women should shut up and be grateful for the freedoms they've been given. There are even more people who feel as if we've gone too far—that a woman's right to her own body and her own life should not exist. As long as these ideas

persist in our culture and in our laws, we will never achieve any sort of meaningful advancement towards equality.

It's hard to change these big cultural monoliths, I understand that. But we cannot go on like this. It frightens me to see young women my age falling prey to a society that wants them to believe that they are "just a girl." By giving in to a government that wants to define a woman by her barest biological basis in order to attack our trans sisters, we are allowing ourselves to be put into a very dangerous place.

At the same time, we need good men to be our allies. If men are unable to hold each other accountable, to call out bad behavior between themselves, then any movement that relies primarily on men and intentionally excludes women is dead in the water.

This is where I see my hope: In my union, our movement has been spearheaded by some of the most determined people I've ever met. The majority are women. They understand that we are in a battle for something much bigger than our own union contract. The things we fight for as women lead to a better and more just society for all.

—Abigail Scheppmann is a barista at Starbucks in Iowa City.

A legend is gone

Dick Myers passed away on March 19 at the age of 91.

There are very few people in Johnson County (indeed, in the state of Iowa) who haven't felt Dick's influence, starting with his service as a city council member and Mayor of Coralville in the 70s. From 1982 to 1993 he was on the Johnson County Board of Supervisors. He then spent ten years in the Iowa House of Representatives, including several years as House Democratic Leader. The only election he ever lost was in 1978, to Jim Leach (who went on to serve for thirty years). In addition to being elected over and over at the city, county, and state levels of government, Dick was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to a federal position, spending a year as Iowa director of the FHA, the Farmers Home Administration.

Throughout this time, for nearly forty years, Dick owned the legendary Hawk I Truck Stop in Coralville. The popular restaurant and supply shop served countless truckers, travelers, and townspeople (one regular customer: Jim Leach). It was a landmark in Johnson County and beyond, but it was also known to many as a place to get a job. People with alcohol and other drug problems, with prison records, with mental illness, people with no homes, down to their last chance... they could find a job at the Hawk I Truck Stop.

How did people know to look for a job at the truck stop? Well, Dick had been an alcoholic himself (a legendary one, some say). When he quit drinking, he became a key player in starting MECCA, the Mid-Eastern Council on Chemical Abuse, which later became Prelude, and is now known as Community and Family Resources. Dick helped with fundraising, with a building, and even

Dick was legendary as an elected official, a truck stop owner, and a friend to people needing a hand.

with hiring the first director. Thousands of people with substance use disorders have since received help, largely thanks to Dick's behind-the-scenes efforts.

Dick was not only legendary as an elected official, a truck stop owner, and a friend to people needing a hand. He was a relentless campaigner for Democratic candidates. When he got on board for someone, few were more valuable. In 2003 he helped boost Howard Dean into frontrunner status by endorsing him and traveling the state for him (on his Harley). Dick and his wife Doris were more successful in 2007, when they became early supporters and tireless workers for Barack Obama.

A word about Doris—a powerhouse in her own right. She is the epitome of a selfless, hard-working Democrat. She was a nurse at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics for twenty years and was active in the successful Service Employees International Union organizing drive there. While Dick was the high-profile elected official, Doris was making phone calls, stuffing envelopes, bringing food to headquarters for volunteers, and hosting dozens of receptions and fundraisers at their home in River Heights.

Dick and Doris were inducted into the Johnson County Democrats Hall of Fame in 2011. That same year, Dick was also the recipient of an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Iowa. But the honor he said he was most proud of in his long career was the honorary membership he received from Iowa's largest public employee union, AFSCME Council 61. What a sign of respect for a guy who negotiated many labor contracts from the management side and who was never a union member himself. That was Dick Myers: the only person in Iowa with both an honorary union card and an honorary doctorate degree!

The legend is gone but won't be forgotten.

—Dave Leshtz

Iowa has a radio problem

There is a book out now, *Rural Versus Urban: The Growing Divide That Threatens Democracy*. I saw an interview by Paul Rosener of Barn Raiser Media with one of the authors, Suzanne Mettler.

The discussion covered factors they believe responsible for our current situation.

The erosion of the New Deal, the Reagan era, deregulation, union-busting, abortion, evangelicals, gun rights, NAFTA, money, culture wars, Democratic party failures, etc. are presented as explanations for the magical powers of the GOP to put themselves in power no matter how horrible their policies and how unlikable their candidates.

They mention nothing about the growing conservative media Republicans have spent decades building. Republicans have made it their mission to own and control the media for the purpose of winning elections. This is no accident. Their primary method of doing so is by strategic use of language to ruin the Democratic party reputation in the eyes of the public. That is what they set out to do and that is what they have done. (See the award-winning documentary *'The Brainwashing of My Dad'* by Jen Senko about the history of the Republican plan to win elections and keep Democrats out of power forever by establishing their own media).

The author admits her cited reasons for the urban rural divide aren't enough to explain why huge swaths of people continue to vote for Republicans when their policies make their lives worse.

Lying to the public through the mass media is obviously unsustainable for a democracy. Millions of Americans and many Iowans live their lives according to the lies they are told by Fox News. One-third of the country thinks Donald Trump is their savior.

Trump's numbers still hover around 30% approval. Pundits on our side cite

this as good news and how historically bad it is for an American president. But when you think about everything the felon in the White House has done and Republicans have done alongside him, approval should be one percent.

Why do voters support Democratic policies but tell you at the doors they would never vote for a Democrat? Pollsters analyze election data, but the interpretation of the data typically makes no attempt to add a contextual layer examining the false beliefs voters absorb from media. I attended a Zoom event where Iowa pollster Ann Selzer was asked why voters were never asked where they receive their news. She replied, "that is never going to happen." And that was the end of it.

Iowa has a particular problem. We have several Sinclair Broadcasting TV stations and a statewide network of commercial radio stations that pump multiple hours every day of rightwing garbage into our communities. Dave Bradley has been writing about the radio problem in Iowa for two decades.

He wrote about Mettler's conclusions, *"I think what they wrote hit the mark, but I am surprised by what they left out. That is media, and most specifically local radio in the rural areas. Of course, local TV stations and social media such as Facebook come along to cement the norms in rural areas that are planted in rural areas by local radio stations. After Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the far right gobbled up small and medium-sized radio stations that local people trusted and where they would get their opinions shaped daily.*

They also added major radio stations like WHO in Des Moines. Farmers and small rural businesses had decades of connecting to the world through the radio; suddenly all the radio stations were booming out Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. When

they turned to TV, newspapers, or the new internet, their opinions were confirmed by those media as they were also brought up by the far right.

Liberal leaders downplayed the effect of local media and instead tried to focus on national issues. Anything they did was clobbered by thousands of local radio, TV, newspapers, and internet influencers almost as quickly as they said it.

Howard Dean's 50-state strategy was the only thing close to really confronting the overwhelming local media powerhouse that the far right had built. I'm surprised it was not even mentioned."

We should be more concerned that enough people to decide elections believe provably false ideas. It is hard for many to accept that TV, radio, and media in general have so much influence. Maybe because no one knows what to do about it. I wish Iowa had a Chris Jones for media. Jones, running for Iowa Secretary of Agriculture, got the problem of big ag and our polluted water into the conversation, something that was considered political suicide for Iowa Democrats just months ago. I have begged and pleaded with *Free Press* to establish state and local chapters to help states get organized to push back but the answer is always the same: no money for that!

Progressive pundits are big on touting independent media. They seem to think internet podcasts and Substack are the answer to beating back the dominant corporate media. They argue that we should abandon legacy media - radio and TV—because "nobody watches TV or listens to the radio anymore." I guess they haven't noticed that there is a reason Republicans have taken over the 'legacy' media. How else could America elect someone like Donald Trump?

—Trish Nelson is the administrator for www.blogforiowa.com.

**Cont'd from Page 1
Tired of Losing**

If all that were not enough, it is now decisively clear Big Ag is poisoning our water as our rural decline continues.

It is time to ditch our fear of the Farm Bureau, Big Pig, Big Corn, and Big Ag Chemical and trust voters with the truth. Our agricultural system needs to change.

An increasing number of small and traditional family farmers are recognizing the need for change.

Most importantly, if Democrats can't see that standing up for safe, clean water, paired with support for public schools, access to health care, and support for Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and IPERS are a much more powerful set of rural voting issues than ethanol and more of the same corporate ag policies, we deserve to lose—again.

If you are tired of losing, as I am, here are a few suggestions:

- Get up to speed on water issues so you can push candidates

and hold them accountable for their answers. Start with the Central Iowa Water Quality report and the Harkin Institute's water quality policy recommendations.

- Be vocal in your support for Chris Jones for Iowa Secretary of Agriculture and Land Stewardship. He gets it.
- Push other Democratic candidates to lead on clean water and ditch the ethanol worshipping.
- I'm guessing you don't need much help in speaking up for public schools, access to health care, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and IPERS if you are reading *The Prairie Progressive*.

—John Norris is former Chief of Staff at the US Department of Agriculture, former Director of the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, and former Chair of the Democratic Party.



- April 1**
Disability Advocacy Day at Iowa Statehouse
- Apr 8, 1966**
Last remaining poll tax outlawed
- April 14, 1986**
US bombed Libya
- April 17, 1961**
CIA-funded Bay of Pigs invasion: Cuba
- April 26, 1986**
Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident
- April 30**
Lisa Graves, author of *Without Precedent*, reading at Prairie Lights Books, 7:00 PM
- May 1, 1886**
Demonstration for 8-hour day in Chicago began May Day tradition
- May 1, 2011**
Osama bin Laden killed
- May 4, 1931**
Miners and strike-breakers fought in Harlan County, KY
- May 5, 1961**
First Freedom Ride
- May 9**
University of Iowa Labor Center anniversary gala, Iowa Memorial Union
- May 14, 1961**
Freedom Riders bus bombed and burned in Anniston, AL
- May 16**
Johnson County Democrats Hall of Fame reception
- May 21**
Johnson Co. Dems Legacy Club
Speaker: Liz Mathis
Info: wm.gerhard@gmail.com
- May 29, 1851**
"Ain't I a Woman" speech by Sojourner Truth at Women's Rights Convention in Akron, OH
- May 31, 1921**
Greenwood massacre in Tulsa

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—Art Cullen, *Storm Lake Times Pilot*

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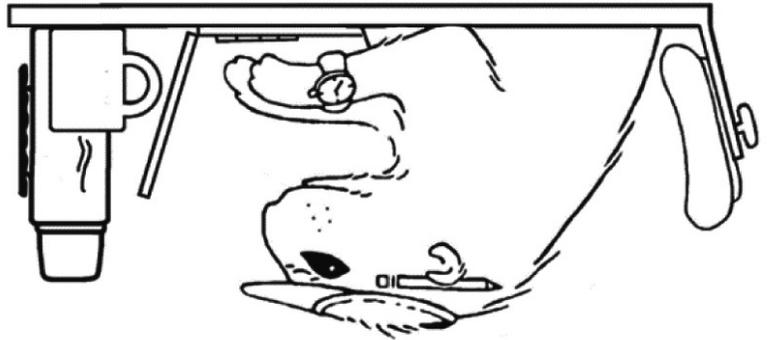
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