

RICHARD: I'm going to start with a question, Ashley. Why did we decide to do this podcast episode?

ASHLEY: Well, it's not just this episode, but it's the next one, as well. We wanted to look at why both Democrats and Republicans are failing to win over two huge groups of voters.

RICHARD: Yeah, for the Democrats, they've lost support of rural voters and are doing way worse in most rural regions than they used to.

ASHLEY: And Republicans strike out with most Gen Z voters. Richard, we're going to discuss the GOP in our next podcast, but, in this episode, it's the Democrats. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. You know, I looked this up. Back in 1996, Bill Clinton won about half of all rural counties in his reelection bid, and that would be almost impossible for Democrats to do today. In the last presidential election, Joe Biden won just 7% of rural counties.

ASHLEY: That's a pretty stunning statistic. So we went in search of a true expert, a young, progressive Democrat who could not only tell us why her party's losing rural voters but how she won them back in her own race.

RICHARD: Our guest is Chloe Maxmin, a Millennial who was elected in a conservative district in rural Maine in 2020 after unseating a two-term Republican.

ASHLEY: At 29 years old, she became the youngest woman ever to serve in the Maine State Senate. Chloe spoke with us from the town just over from the one where she grew up, Nobleboro, Maine. You asked the first question, and it was pretty direct.

RICHARD: Chloe, you say that over the past decade, your party, the Democrats, have willfully abandoned rural voters, sending them a message that they don't matter. That's a pretty strong statement. Can you explain?

CHLOE: Sure. Yeah, so I am a Democrat, and I believe in the Democrat Party. I really align with its values, which I identify, as a Democrat, as seeking inclusivity and equity and access for everyone in our democracy. From that lens, I've seen from my own perspective as someone who grew up in a small rural town, how Democrat strategy has been much more focused on turning out folks in urban places. It's a strategy that has good intentions behind it, but then the consequences of that are that, in the long run, everyone who doesn't live in an urban area doesn't get that kind of investment. They don't get the candidates coming and knocking on their door. They don't get those personal touches and all of that investment in their vote. So one feels left behind, which is kind of understandable.

RICHARD: Rural voting trends have changed a lot in less than 15 years. What do the numbers tell us?

CHLOE: In 2009, there was almost no partisan lean amongst rural voters, and, by 2019, rural voters were going Republican by 16 points. From 2009 to 2019, the Democrats lost 1,000 state legislative seats, which is the greatest loss for any party since World War II.

ASHLEY: Do Democrats take rural voters more seriously before 2009? And if so, why the change?

CHLOE: Yeah, such a good question. There's so much behind that change. I mean, there's books and books written on the cultural and economic shifts that have happened to contribute to that change. In 2008, when Obama was running his presidential campaign, there were Democrats in every corner of this country organizing for him. Our campaigns, when I was door-knocking, I could see people's contact history, and the two big themes were, one, people had never been contacted by a Democrat before, and the other theme was they hadn't been contacted since 2008, measuring support for Obama.

ASHLEY: She says, in subsequent campaigns, Democrats shifted their strategy to focus more on cities and not campaign as much in less-populated parts of the country. So what was the impact of that?

CHLOE: There are so many forces that have contributed to rural folks trending more towards the right, and, from my perspective, I see a lot of those forces coming from how people campaign in rural areas, where Democrats really have most of their electoral investment in urban spaces because it's much easier to reach their base there. And so Democrats don't really invest as much in rural places. So it's much easier for folks not to hear the Democrat message, to just really engage with a Republican message, a right-wing message.

But beyond that, as well, there's so much more layered on. Rural citizens have lagged behind in almost every economic benchmark since the recession in 2008. There's a whole vibrant media network in rural communities that really doesn't exist amongst Democrats. And I think the rural way of life, too, is really just kind of centered on independence and self-sufficiency, which are much more aligned with how the Right talks about politics and policy than how the Left talks about it. So I think there's been cultural, economic, and political forces that have really contributed to a huge political swing.

ASHLEY: You campaigned in a rural Maine district that, I believe, has the oldest population in the state, and you were a progressive in your mid- to late-20s when you started campaigning. How big a challenge were you facing?

CHLOE: It was a big challenge. Certainly, others have faced greater challenges, but I ran for State House in the district that I grew up in. I was running in District 88, which hadn't been won by a Democrat since it had been in redistricted in 2010, and it had a 16-point Republican advantage. I ran because I really was seeing, as a progressive, how the Left was leaving behind communities like mine. And I love my hometown. I love my community. Growing up, my memories of the culture of the town that raised me was really centered around kindness and compassion, and do you show up when someone is in need? Are you kind? Do you say hi when you go to the grocery store? It was a values-based way of thinking about the world. My first political memories were watching Clinton get impeached on PBS as my parents were cooking dinner.

So, when I ran for office, I knew that I was progressive, but I knew my community, too, and I didn't feel like we were that far apart. A lot of the reasons why I'm progressive are because of my community. So I started to knock on doors. I knocked on a lot of doors. In my two races, I knocked on about 20,000 doors. Almost all of those folks that I talked to were Republicans and independents, and what I found is so much common ground, as is the theme of this podcast, that one might think on the outset that a young, 25-year-old progressive woman running in the oldest county in the nation in a conservative community might find herself at odds with the folks that she's talking to, but I found so much kindness and common values and common dreams and common hopes with my community even though some of those folks would have Trump signs out on their lawns or their Trump bumper stickers.

So I found that common ground, and I really came to see that we had so much in common when it came to our values. I never talked to a single Republican in my community who wanted more expensive health care. We all agree that we want accessible health care, and we want affordable health care, but sometimes we have different ideas about how that's actually manifested in the world, what that bill looks like, what that policy is called. But when we can simplify things and connect on a more human level, there's a lot there.

RICHARD: You've tapped into something that we rarely hear of when discussing politics, and that are the two words "kindness" and "empathy." Usually, we hear policy discussions. We may even hear people say, "Ooh, it's a good idea to listen to people not like you." But you're talking about something else that I think is undervalued in our politics, especially when it comes to reaching into communities that perhaps difficult to persuade to vote for you as a candidate, and that is kindness. Do you agree? Do you think that that is something that people often miss?

CHLOE: I certainly think we miss that not just in politics but in our society as a whole these days. Someone asked me the other day, "What are you most scared of?" And I was like, "Oh, gosh, I'm not going to be able to think of an answer," but then the first thought that came to mind was, "I'm scared of the lack of empathy and kindness that we have in our country right now, the lack of space that we have for other people's experiences," and, to me, that's really scary. So, for us campaigning, kindness and compassion and listening and respect were at the core of everything that we did.

What I hear from people and what I experienced as a citizen before I ran is just everything feels so transactional. It's all about a vote and empty promises, and then you go on, and you feel unrepresented, and you can't get in touch with the person that you just voted for. They're not listening to you, and the cycles continue. So I really just wanted to prioritize being a human first and really listening to people and what they were actually facing in their lives and not just focus on the fact that we identified with different parties.

ASHLEY: Can you elaborate a bit, Chloe, on how you found common ground with so many of these people whose doors you knocked on? I'd love for you to tell a story or two about a particular interaction and how it seemed as if that person might feel quite differently than you at the beginning of the conversation, but by the end, you had closed that gap, and they'd said, "You can count on my vote."

CHLOE: Oh, my gosh, that happened so much, which was such a shocking experience for me. But I always think of it as just forming a relationship. If you're at a party or at a bar or at a sports game, and you meet someone new, you don't go, "Hey, this is what I believe in. Do you believe in it, too? And, by the way, do you want to talk about the most divisive issues of our time with me on your doorstep?" That's not how we form relationships. We ask questions, see how the person's day is going, find something in common to talk about, and then you build your relationship from there.

There's this one story that forever changed me. I was knocking, in my first race in 2018, in the biggest town in my district, which was the most conservative town. We were the only Democrat on the ticket to win in that town. I walked up to this guy's house. He was in his garage working on his snowmobiles with a bunch of folks, and he walked up to me, and I said, "Hey, I'm Chloe, and I'm running for State Rep. Just stopping by to see if you have any thoughts on your mind." And he said, "I just have one question for you. Do you believe in Medicaid expansion?" Because we were debating Medicaid expansion in Maine at the time." And I said, "Yes, I do," because I try to be an honest politician, and he pointed his finger out towards his driveway, and he was like, "You can leave now."

And I was so surprised at how this conversation had gone south in 30 seconds that I was like, "Hold on a second. Can you just tell me what you're thinking? Even if you don't vote for me, I'd love to hear why you think what you think." And he told me this story about how he grew up in the house that he currently lived in, and he grew up without any electricity, any running water, and he just worked hard his whole life to make a life for himself, and part of that ethic for him was paying for his own health care. He just didn't believe in government-funded health care.

While I do believe in government-funded health care, I had so much space for his story and his struggle and the way that he decided to live his life. And I shared that with him, and he just appreciated that I didn't yell at him or judge him or come after him for thinking differently. He voted for me, and I went back in 2020 because I was afraid I'd lost his vote, but he said he was going to vote for me again, and it just, to this day, remains one of the biggest lesson points of my life.

RICHARD: That was a pretty amazing response by you. You must've been tempted to give an angry response. What was going on there emotionally?

CHLOE: There are so many folks, not just myself, who have done this work on both sides of the aisle who have taken the time to drive down the long driveways and talk to people. I'm not the only one who has done this, but one thing that I always felt was a frustration at people's lack of willingness to have a conversation. Politics has become so divisive that so much of the time, people are like, "You're a Democrat. I will not talk with you," or, "You're a politician. I will not talk with you." When he was like, "Can you leave now?" I was like, "Well, I'm genuinely here to listen to you. That is my genuine, from-the-heart motivation is to listen to you." But I was lucky that he was willing to talk with me. That was a special, sacred gift.

ASHLEY: Our guest is former Maine State Senator Chloe Maxmin. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. You know, Ashley, we're right in the middle of several episodes about voters. The last podcast that we did was on some of the most misunderstood voters in America, independents.

ASHLEY: Today, we're learning more about how Democrats might win back more rural voters, and, next time, we'll look at young Republicans who say they know how to go after young voters in their teens and 20s.

RICHARD: So, now, Ashley, I have a question for our listeners, which is: what kinds of ideas do you have about podcasts that you'd like to listen to?

ASHLEY: Would you like to discuss something else? Do you have an idea about a topic we haven't discussed? Give us your feedback at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

RICHARD: Now let's hear more of our chat with Chloe Maxmin. We do often hear this phrase that voters go for the person, not for the party, but I think you're taking this a stage deeper in saying that people vote for the whole person, not the party. They vote for someone who's really connecting with them rather than the party or the policy. Is that correct?

CHLOE: Yeah. That's certainly what I've tried to do. Even though I'm a Democrat, I don't agree with the Democratic Party all the time. I've certainly voted against my own party while I've been in the

legislature. I disagree publicly with my party a lot of the time. So my identity as a Democrat really isn't about a party. It is about my values, and I've just identified a party that I think aligns with my values the best. But being able to get to that level with folks, especially if you're knocking on a door, and they're home with their kids, or they just got home from work, or they're leaving for work or for whatever reason, it takes some time to get to that moment in a conversation with people.

ASHLEY: Chloe, you grew up in rural Maine, in Nobleboro. You campaigned in the community where you were raised. I know there was a real connection between you and your constituents. What was it like growing up there?

CHLOE: I was raised in a small town of about 1,600 people. My parents were not from Maine. There's a big thing in Maine about, you know, you got to be from Maine, you got to be a Mainer, be born in Maine. My parents weren't born in Maine, but they moved here before I was born, and my dad started a small farm. So I grew up helping my dad on the farm, and that was really so much of my life. It's just such a beautiful part of the world, and I love it so much.

I always loved my community, too, going to the grocery store and saying hi to everyone. I went to the local public high school, and, to this day, every time I go out into the world, I see someone that I went to school with or who I grew up with. And it's just such a tight-knit place. Growing up, I always felt like kindness was so much at the core of it, and so many of the people who were part of my childhood, I later came to realize were registered Republicans. They are registered Republicans. But that's not what stood out to me. It was who they were to me and how much they influenced me growing up. So that was a really special part of my life.

My experiences campaigning here have been a little sad because I feel like some of that kindness and that sense of respect has left. It's been captured by the negativity of our times. So it's been really sad to feel like the place that I live now is not the place that raised me, but I keep fighting for it, anyway.

RICHARD: In what ways is it not the place that you were raised in?

CHLOE: I think just the lack of space to have conversations with people, and, in 2018, I felt like things were rough. I'd go canvassing on my own road, and people would be like, "I'm not voting for you because you're a Democrat," even though they've known me for my entire life. I'd be so hurt and confused by that, but I was like, "Okay, I guess that's just what the parties have done to us now." I just wish that there was more space for that kindness, but it doesn't mean it's gone.

ASHLEY: You've been an environmental activist for years, starting when you were quite young, I think. How did you find common ground on that issue? Did you have to work hard on that, or was that an easy one to find common ground on with your neighbors?

CHLOE: My approach doing this work is not, "Hello, my name is Chloe. I believe in the climate crisis, and it freaks me out every day. Does it freak you out, too?" That's not how I think about it. My introduction is always, "Hey, I'm Chloe. I just stopped to see what's on your mind today and how I can best represent you." So, with that open-ended question, I honestly rarely heard people use the word "climate change" or talk about the environment. I can remember probably less than five instances where those specific words were said. But I did hear people talk a lot about, "Oh, man, I used to be able to go ice fishing every December growing up, and now the lake's not frozen," or, "I really want my kids to be able to

grow up here, but there's just not enough jobs," or, "Oh, my gosh, heating oil is just so expensive. I can't make it through the winter."

So I'd hear these other stories that, to me, are really connected with the fight for climate justice, but that's not how my community talks about it, so I don't need to talk about it that way. But I realized that it really wasn't that far apart from how I think about these issues. It's just from the perspective of a rural, working-class community.

ASHLEY: You say you don't have to be a moderate or somebody like Joe Manchin to win over rural voters, but a lot of middle-class voters worry about taxes. Is that a real hurdle for progressives?

CHLOE: In my experience talking with folks, and I can really only talk from my experience, I actually did find a lot of ground with folks when it came to taxes. We have a really regressive tax system where it puts all the burden of funding really important public goods like our schools on lower-income and middle-class folks. In communities like mine, the schools are basically run on property taxes, which is one of the most regressive taxes out there. I think that there's a lot of wealth in this country, and if that wealth was taxed appropriately, it could alleviate a lot of the scarcity that we feel on the ground, at the local level and stop pitting folks against each other because I think that there are plenty of resources in this country. And when I talk to people about that, most people would be like, "Yeah, I agree. Let's tax the folks who can afford it, and don't tax me when I'm a senior living in my home, and I can't survive on my Social Security."

RICHARD: What do you say to fellow Democrats in Maine and in other parts of the country about reaching out to rural voters?

CHLOE: I think when we talk about the Democrats as a whole, the strategies and the tactics that we use, the ways that Democratic candidates are supported by the party, it's a toolkit that is really created more for urban campaigning. But I do think that what it means to run and win and serve in rural places as a Democrat, it's a different story, and I really want to be able to provide the resources and support for people to make that story a success, to make that story one that is really rooted in empathy and kindness, that really prioritizes common ground with people and that isn't built on party warfare.

RICHARD: Do you think there's been movement in the Democratic Party, a broader recognition that there does need to be stronger, better outreach to the forgotten voters of rural America?

CHLOE: I think that it's being talked about more and more, which I think is really important. I also hear from so many folks who have run for office, worked on campaigns, or just organized in rural places in every corner of the country who face really similar dynamics, no matter where they are, of just feeling like there's not enough investment from the party or anyone in districts where Democrats may not win. So, instead of doing good organizing and still talking to people and engaging folks on the issues, a lot of times, Democrats can't find good candidates or just don't put any investment into a community. I

t's kind of like an all-or-nothing type equation to really gain some traction in rural places, if not to win then just to connect with huge swaths of our country and the struggles of rural Americans, which is a voting block that now has a lot of political power. We need to connect with folks, and I think that sometimes might require more a nuanced mindset. Maybe we run, and we don't win, but maybe we win in the next cycle or the cycle after that. And in the meantime, how is that making our party and our

understanding of what's happening in every diverse corner of this country, how is that improving our understanding so that we can truly represent everyone in our communities?

ASHLEY: You've outlined all these ways in which you were able to connect with rural Mainers and win votes. What was it like as an actual politician when you got to the State House? How easy or not was it to find common ground with others in the legislature.

CHLOE: Yeah, that's also such a good question because I always felt like the camaraderie and the common ground that I could find going door-to-door in my community, that it was much more accessible than what I could find in the State House. The higher you go in leadership on both sides of the aisle, the more divisive things become. Maine is pretty chill in this game of states, but I still found it to be a really divisive, tough environment. Sometimes I'd vote with the Democrats, and sometimes I'd vote with the Republicans, and I was so committed to really trying to represent my community. So I felt like, no matter which way I went, I was always disappointing somebody.

RICHARD: You've said several times that you didn't always vote with your party. Can you give us an example of something where you perhaps went with the Republicans or you didn't vote with your own party in the state legislature or state senate?

CHLOE: I think it was some bills, I felt like, would create a little bit more flexibility in the framework that could benefit rural communities that kind of don't have access to a resource hub. There was one time when we had a really big budget vote, and I was one of a few Democrats to side with the Republicans, and that was really tough.

ASHLEY: You chose not to run for state senate again. What's next?

CHLOE: Yeah, I decided not to run again so that I could devote myself full-time to supporting lots of rural folks who are running and organizing in different parts of the country. and not just get myself elected. It was such a great honor to serve my community for four years. I started when I was 25, and I ended when I was 30. So that's a good formative chunk of my life. My community's doing well, and I hope people feel like I served it well.

RICHARD: Final question, are you hopeful that you will be able to get your message across and that the dynamics will change?

CHLOE: I find a lot of hope in people's commitment to a just and equitable democracy. Everywhere I look, I feel like that work is happening. That makes me feel really excited. I think that the challenges that rural America faces, whether it's about party representation or our economy or access to health care or schools, those are challenges that are going to take years, if not decades, to unravel. So it's a long-haul fight, but all good things are, and I just find hope in so many people who are really engaging with this process instead of just saying, "Things are too messed up, and I'm gone now."

ASHLEY: Chloe, thanks so much for coming on Let's Find Common Ground today.

CHLOE: Thank you for having me, and I'm sorry, again, for my awful rural internet. It's so bad.

RICHARD: I know. It's an example of why we need to help the rural parts of America.

ASHLEY: Exactly.

RICHARD: Chloe Maxmin speaking to us from rural Maine, where the Wi-Fi coverage is pretty sketchy, something that clearly needs to be fixed in many parts of America.

ASHLEY: Yep. In fact, the only reason her audio was so good in our interview was that we asked her to record her side of the conversation and then send it to us afterwards.

RICHARD: Actually, that was your idea, and it kind of saved the day.

ASHLEY: Which reminds us, if you want to share your ideas about the podcast, go to commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

RICHARD: We want to know your suggestions for future episodes. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.