

ARTS AND CULTURE

Review: Dirt Road Revival

An account of unlikely wins by a young Democrat in rural Maine could serve as blueprint for progressive candidates setting their sights on rural America.

by **Skylar Baker-Jordan** March 25, 2022

Photo by Clay Banks on Unsplash

While campaigning for the Maine House of Representatives in 2018, Chloe Maxmin found herself “a trailer at the end of a dirt road in one of the most rural counties in the most rural state in the nation.” The curtains were drawn, and its inhabitant “emerged in a cloud of cigarette smoke.” Most people would have understood if the 26-year-old Maxmin, alone in the woods with a strange man, turned and ran.

Instead, she stayed and listened. In doing so, she earned the man’s vote. “You’re the first person to listen to me,” he told her. “Everyone judges what my house looks like. They don’t bother to knock. I’m grateful that you came.”

It is this kind of empathy and understanding for her rural neighbors which helped Maxmin become a rising star of Democratic politics. In 2018, she rose to national prominence when she defeated her Republican challenger, becoming the first Democrat to represent her deep red rural district in Augusta, Maine. Two years later, she would once again shock the political establishment when she defeated Dana Dow, the incumbent Senate Minority Leader, becoming the first candidate to unseat a party leader in Maine since 1992.

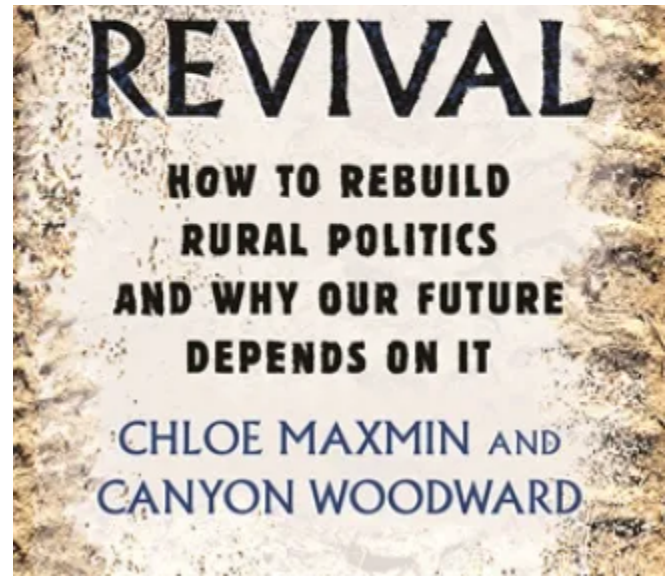
How Maxmin and her friend-cum-campaign manager Canyon Woodward accomplished the seemingly impossible – twice – is the subject of their forthcoming book, “Dirt Road Revival: How to Rebuild Rural Politics and Why our Future Depends On It.” Part memoir, part guidebook for other progressive candidates looking to make inroads down those dirt roads, Maxmin and Woodward recount – with glaring honesty and a preternatural self-awareness – how they made the Democratic Party relevant in a place the Democrats have themselves all but written off.

To be certain, this book is a wonky, though accessible, read. Its intended audience is not the average reader – though they certainly can glean many insights into rural politics from it – but rather the politicians currently running the Democratic Party and those who think they can do a better job of it.

In a way, though, that makes the book more timely and more important. This is not a valedictory address. It is a how-to manual for those on the left who want to win in rural America. “An unwavering commitment to stay connected to the working class and rural people is a must in order to achieve long-term success,” they write. That includes rural voters who may have voted for Trump, a group for whom too often on the left “people’s tremendous empathy stops cold...”



In fact, much of this book is an explanation as to why people in rural America voted for Trump, and how Democrats can win those voters over. Not only did they value someone they viewed as a straight shooter – and whether you or I or Maxmin or Woodward believes Trump is honest, many undoubtedly do – but they saw him and other Republicans speaking a language they understood. “Intentionally or not, liberal academics and mainstream Democrats have talked down to rural Republican voters for years,” they write. “Bill Clinton’s neoliberal policies of the 1990s decimated rural jobs in a way that is still felt today, and rural America fared worse under Obama than any other part of the country.”



As voters lost faith in either party’s ability to deliver material change to their economic conditions, they turned instead to cultural and religious issues as determiners of their vote. That bodes ill for Democrats, whose base is increasingly urban and suburban. Maxmin and Woodward posit that a lack of basic understanding of rural America is at the heart of Democrats’ failures to make gains here.

Source: [Beacon Press](#)

Maxmin and Woodward are rural Americans themselves, a fact that no doubt contributed to their ability to see the forest for the trees. Both have a deep understanding of the nuances of rural life – Maxmin writes of respecting “no trespassing” signs, something I myself have seen ill-advised canvassers ignore – and what it takes to win here.

That is why they knew better than to listen to former Democratic National Committee Chair Tom Perez when he said that “you can’t door-knock in rural America.” Maxmin knew that not only could you door knock in her district but that doing so was vital to winning any election. “Canvassing is key to winning in rural districts,” they write.

That is because people in rural America value relational politics, one where you show up, build a rapport and a mutual respect and trust. So Maxmin ignored the DNC and knocked on doors – 10,000 of them in 2018 (in a district that only has 9,000 people, meaning she made multiple trips to some houses – on purpose!) and more than 13,000 doors in 2020. She knocked on anyone and everyone’s door – Democrat, independent, or Republican.

The point was to make connections and win over those the party thought was unwinnable. “We see listening as an act of liberation, resistance, and revival,” they write. Not only did they listen, though; they responded. When in 2020 their campaign was abruptly postponed due to the pandemic, they turned the organization they had built into a mutual aid society, running errands for and check on vulnerable members of the community.

In that way, Maxmin and Woodward were able to demonstrate to the people of the district that she was not just a politician looking for their votes, but a public servant looking to make their lives better. She has a deep connection to her community, one that too many politicians have lost – especially on the left, where a deep connection to the community was once prized. By demonstrating this commitment, though, Maxmin was able to win over Trump voters and win. Twice.

That alone makes this book worth reading for anyone interested in how to repeat what too many on the left have written off as impossible. Maxmin and Woodward make clear that they are not exceptional wunderkinder. They simply threw out the rulebook for running in rural America, embracing “politics as unusual” and building a community, not just a campaign.

Theirs is the way forward for Democrats and rural communities alike. They have demonstrated a commitment to spending time and resources to not only win over rural voters, but to materially improve their lives. It’s time for other Democrats to take note. Rural America is winnable, but to get there, progressives will need to throw out the old roadmap and follow Maxmin and Woodward down this dirt road.