

## OPINION

# A New Voice for Winning Back Lost Democratic Voters



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6 MIN READ

Representative Marie Gluesenkamp Perez chose her guest for last month's State of the Union address in order to make one of her favorite points. She invited Cory Torppa, who teaches construction and manufacturing at Kalama High School in her district in southwest Washington State, and also directs the school district's career and technical education program. President Biden did briefly mention career training that night in his very long list of plans; still, Ms. Gluesenkamp Perez wasn't thrilled with the speech.

"I went back and looked at the transcript," she said, "and he only said the word 'rural' once."

It's safe to say that Ms. Gluesenkamp Perez was one of very few Democrats in the room listening for that word, but then she didn't win her nail-biter of a race in a conservative district with a typical Democratic appeal. To court rural and working-class voters who had supported a Republican in the district since 2011, she had to speak to them in a way

that her party's left wing usually does not — to acknowledge their economic fears, their sense of being left out of the political conversation, their disdain for ideological posturing from both sides of the spectrum.

She came to Congress in January with a set of priorities that reflected her winning message, and she is determined to stress those differences in a way that might help Democrats lure back some of the voters it has lost, even if it means getting a lot of puzzled looks and blank stares in the Capitol.

Ms. Gluesenkamp Perez was already an unexpected arrival to the House. No one predicted that she would win her district, and her victory (by less than one percentage point) was widely considered the biggest electoral upset of 2022. The Third Congressional District is exactly the kind that Democrats have had trouble holding on to for the last 10 years: It's 78 percent white, 73 percent without a bachelor's degree or higher, and made up of a low-density mix of rural and suburban areas. It voted for Barack Obama once, in 2008, and Donald Trump twice, and the national Democrats wrote it off, giving her almost no campaign assistance.

But as the 34-year-old mother of a toddler and the co-owner (with her husband) of an auto repair shop, she had an appealing personal story and worked hard to distinguish herself from the usual caricature of her party. She said she would not support Nancy Pelosi as speaker, criticized excessive regulation of business, and said there should be more people in Congress with grease under their fingernails. But she also praised labor unions and talked about improving the legal immigration system, boosting domestic manufacturing, and the importance of reversing climate change. In the face of this pragmatic approach, her Republican opponent, Joe Kent, followed the Trump playbook and claimed the 2020 election had been stolen and called for the F.B.I. to be defunded. She took

a narrow path, but it worked, and you might think that Democratic leaders would be lined up outside her office to get tips on how to defeat MAGA Republicans and win over disaffected Trump voters.

But some Democrats are still a little uncomfortable around someone who supports both abortion rights and gun rights, who has a skeptical take on some environmental regulations, and who has made self-sufficiency a political issue.

“It’s a little bit of a hard message for them to hear, because part of the solution is having a Congress who looks more like America,” she said in an interview last week. “It can’t just be rich lawyers that get to run for Congress anymore.”

She said there is a kind of “groupthink” at high levels of the party, a tribalism that makes it hard for new or divergent ideas to take hold. But if Democrats don’t pay attention to newcomers like Ms. Gluesenkamp Perez, they risk writing off large sections of the country that might be open to alternatives to Trumpism.

“The national Democrats are just not ever going to be an alternative they vote for, no matter how much of a circus the far right becomes,” she said. “But I think there obviously can be competitive alternatives. There are different kinds of Democrats that can win, that avoid the tribalism.”

She mentioned Representatives Jared Golden of Maine and Mary Peltola of Alaska, and Senators Jon Tester of Montana and John Fetterman of Pennsylvania, as examples of elected officials with an unusually broad appeal because they understand the priorities of their districts or states.

In her case, those priorities center on relieving economic despair and providing a future for young people who have a hard time seeing one, particularly if they are not college-bound. Pacific County, on the western end of her district, had an 8.4 percent unemployment rate in January,

compared to the 3.4 percent rate in tech-saturated King County, home of Seattle, just 150 miles to the northeast. Not everyone needs a four-year college degree, or is able to get one, but the economy isn't providing enough opportunities for those who don't take that path. Many high school students in her districts are never going to wind up in the chip factories that get so many headlines or in the software companies farther north, but without government support, they can't even get a foothold in the construction trades.

She supports what has become known on Capitol Hill as “workforce Pell” — the expansion of Pell grants to short-term skills training and apprenticeship programs, many of which are taught in community colleges. The idea has won approval among both conservative Republicans and Democrats like Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia. She said she could not hire older teenagers as apprentices in her auto repair shop because it would bump up her liability insurance. (A local nonprofit group has helped her shop and other businesses cover the extra cost, giving many students the opportunity for on-the-job training.)

“My generation was the one where they were cutting all the shop classes and turning them into computer programming classes,” Ms. Gluesenkamp Perez said. “It took 10 or 15 years for that to hit the market, but now, coupled with the retirement of a lot of skilled tradespeople, there's a six-month wait for a plumber or a carpenter or an electrician. You'd better be married to one.”

She is also critical of putting certain environmental concerns ahead of human ones, a position sure to alienate some in her party.

“My mom grew up in Forks, Washington, which is sort of epicenter of the spotted owl, and that decimated jobs,” she said, referring to the federal decisions in the 1990s to declare the northern spotted owl as endangered,

closing off millions of acres of old-growth forest to logging. “People had trouble feeding their families. That indignity cast a really long shadow. People felt like they were being told they couldn’t work.”

The Trump administration opened up much of that habitat to logging in its final days, but that decision was later reversed by the Biden administration. (The congresswoman hasn’t weighed in on that reversal.)

Winning over lost voters can often mean just talking about the kinds of daily concerns they have, even if they are not monumental. That’s why Ms. Gluesenkamp Perez is an enthusiastic supporter of the right-to-repair movement, which promotes federal and state laws to give consumers the knowledge and tools to fix their own products, whether smartphones, cars, or appliances. Many companies make it virtually impossible for most people to replace a phone battery or make an adjustment on their car.

“From where I live, it’s a three-hour round trip to go to the Apple Store,” she said. “Right to repair hits people on so many levels — their time, their money, their environment, their culture. It’s one of the unique things about American culture. We really believe in fixing our own stuff and self-reliance. D.I.Y. is in our DNA.”

She and Neal Dunn, a Republican congressman from Florida, introduced a bill last month that would require automakers to release diagnostic and repair information about cars so that owners wouldn’t have to go to a dealership to get fixed up. That’s probably not a surprising interest for the owner of an independent repair shop, but it’s not something most Democrats spend a lot of time talking about.

It’s the kind of thing, however, that may spark the interest of swing voters tired of hearing Republican candidates talk about cultural issues that have no direct relevance to their lives.

“We have to stop talking about these issues of ‘oh, the creeping dangers of socialism,’ and start talking about getting shop class back in the high schools,” she said. “I don’t know anybody who stays up at night worrying about socialism. But they worry about a kid who doesn’t want to go to school anymore. Or, am I going to lose the house? Is there a school nurse? Those are the things that keep people up at night, and we have to find a way to make their lives better.”

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