



## Combating the Deep Distrust of Democrats in North Georgia

By Jack Zibluk

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In May 2024, Democratic state representative candidate Cathy Kott held a rally at a park in Chatsworth, Georgia. About 30 people attended, most of whom seemed to be friends or family members. Also in attendance was the ubiquitous Shawn Harris, who ran for Congress against Marjorie Taylor Greene; Kevin Aronhalt, who was running for state representative in Rome, Georgia; and me, holding forth from Georgia's northwest corner.

We all made our standard presentations, Kott, a registered nurse, talked about Medicaid expansion. Harris and Aronhalt talked about organizing to win votes. And I talked about reaching across assorted aisles to work with those with whom we might disagree.

We patted backs and glad-handed. My campaign staff, consisting of two Australian shepherd dogs, got a lot of attention. I am usually their plus-one, and I am still remembered as "the guy with the dogs."

At the end of our presentations, three young men from the neighborhood sauntered by. They asked what we'd do about gas prices. I said, "it's complicated," and another candidate said, "that's not a state issue." Our lackluster answers rankled them, and they continued to heckle us on immigration and other issues before muttering and trudging off.

I quickly found out it was a challenge even to get to the issues let alone articulate a response to them. When I put out my first yard sign in front of my house, a usually friendly neighbor looked at me and, just short of anger, asked, "Are you a Democrat?" I backpedaled and said, "I am not the political type, usually, but yes, the Democrats sponsored me."

He shook his head, looked down and walked off.

A few days later, a local business person wanted to give me \$20 cash for the campaign. He didn't want to write a check because he wanted no record of having contributed to a Democrat.

So I decided to downplay my party affiliation, keeping it off any literature and signs. Of course, there was blowback. "If I was in a competitive district and the point was to rally our established voters, I'd fly that flag," I told my detractors, "But I want to win over people who (like my neighbor) wouldn't talk to me if I did."

I held back from saying, “Hey do you want to feel good and be self-righteous, or do you want to win votes?”

When I downplayed the toxic “D” target on my back, I was able to have some pretty-good conversations, including with one Republican candidate who agreed to support me. Most of the conversations came down to inflation.

And, really, there is a good answer that most Democrats seem to have missed. To paraphrase Democratic gadfly James Carville, “it’s the pandemic, stupid.” The pandemic began during the Trump administration, and it was President Joe Biden’s job to clean up the dog’s dinner served up by the virus. From supply chain disruption to school and workplace restructuring, the cost of about everything went up. It really is simple as that. I might not have changed any minds, but people listened.

And I listened, too. There is a deep distrust of Democrats, and it’s cultural. I know plenty of LGBTQ people, environmentalists, feminists and others who might otherwise be considered liberal, but here they’re raised to call themselves conservatives and often Christians, rather than those horrid anti-American Maoist liberal Democrats.

So, running as a stealth liberal, conversations with local people revealed concerns about traffic safety, which became one of my major issues, and health care, particularly mental health, especially regarding drug addiction, an issue the state of Georgia handles poorly.

Immigration came up, too. As the grandchild of immigrants on both sides of my Russian-Irish family, I take immigration issues personally. Walker County Sherriff Steve Wilson told me immigration wasn’t a major issue in our corner of the state. I deferred to him and stayed away from that discussion even though I wanted to take a few swings at people after hearing some hateful things about people like my grandmother, who fled the Bolsheviks in 1918.

Communists, we’re not. As a matter of fact, the direct descendants of Polikarp and Anastasia Zibluk include two people who earned doctoral degrees (including me), attorneys, health care professionals, a Miss Connecticut (USA) and a rodeo cowboy. We are Americans in every sense.

I am also a third-generation public servant. My Irish grandfather was a police officer and my grandmother a police dispatcher; my dad was the city chemist for the wastewater treatment plant at the city of Waterbury, Connecticut. My education was subsidized by scholarships at Southern Connecticut State, and the taxpayers of Ohio paid for my doctorate from Bowling Green State University. I have worked as an educator at state universities for more than 30 years.

So it’s genetic that I approach politics as a public service. When I am out campaigning, it’s not about politics. It’s about listening and doing the job. It’s about roads and public health and safety, not slogans or platitudes.

I like to think that’s what people want no matter what your party affiliation.

*Jack Zibluk is a professor of communication at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga and a former journalist.*