

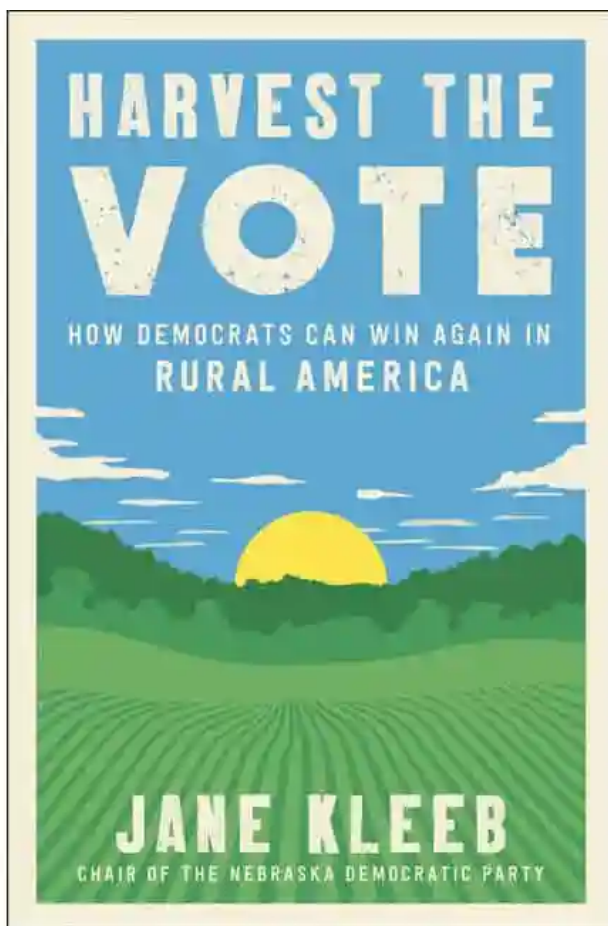
RURAL VOTERS

Book Review: 'Harvest the Vote – How Democrats Can Win Again in Rural America'

The book by the head of the Nebraska Democratic Party makes strong arguments why Democrats should reach out for rural voters. The question is whether anyone will listen.

by **Matt L. Barron**

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Kudos to Jane Kleeb, who chairs the Nebraska Democratic Party, for writing this book. However, my fear is that her pleas will fall on deaf ears. This is my 42nd year working to help Democrats compete for and win rural votes, and I've never seen things this bad.

One trap that Kleeb falls into is that like many before her, she sees things too much through the farm and ranch frame. Rural America is about 20 percent rural and farmers are less than one percent of that 20 percent and shrinking. While many rural communities still depend on extractive economic sectors like fishing, forestry and mining, there are growing numbers of rural voters who live in areas for their outdoor recreation and retirement amenities.

Kleeb parrots the line that Democrats must show up and listen in rural places in order to begin turning their electoral fortunes around. She also correctly states that “we must invest real money and significant time to win again in our small towns.” Both strategies are needed to win a larger share of the rural vote. Here is the real nub of the problem. Since President Trump's election in 2016, Democratic campaign committees, their allied super PACs and numerous Trump resistance groups have raised millions of dollars with which to fight Republicans. Sadly, it is hard to document any of it going to compete for rural and exurban voters.

Kleeb highlights Montana Senator Jon Tester who echoes the “show up and listen” mantra. But in the critical 2016 election for the Senate when Tester chaired the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, he failed to create a Rural Desk that could help candidates win the rural counties in their states. Democrats blew good opportunities to flip GOP seats in: Arizona (McCain), Missouri (Blunt), North Carolina (Burr), Pennsylvania (Toomey) and Wisconsin (Johnson), and only had a net gain of two seats which left the new Senate at 52 Rs to 48 Ds for Trump's first two years. Former Senator Russ Feingold did show up in all 72 Wisconsin counties but he never exposed Johnson's record of voting against the 2014 Farm Bill and other key legislation affecting rural areas of the state. Tester, who represents the nation's seventh most-rural state, has never explained why he did not hire some DSCC staffers experienced at showing candidates how to reach rural constituencies with earned and paid media, providing advice on which of their votes and policies have hurt rural interests and how to develop a field and organizing plan for campaigning in small towns and rural precincts.



Jane Kleeb in 2013. (Photo by Mary Anne Andrei / Bold Nebraska. Used with permission)

Prior to a chapter that recaps the fight she led to stop the Keystone XL Pipeline through the group Bold Nebraska, Kleeb cites former Senators Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota and Claire McCaskill of Missouri among a list of ex-senators who were rural champions. This is odd because in 2015, after the Republicans captured the Senate following the 2014 midterms, one of the first actions they took was on a **bill** to approve Keystone XL. Heitkamp and McCaskill joined with every Republican (except Senator Rubio who did not vote) in voting yes. And after President Obama vetoed the bill both women voted to **override** his veto. During her lone term, Heitkamp pocketed more than \$633,000 in campaign cash from the oil and gas industry and voted with Trump 54.8 percent of the time during her last two years in office, 2017-18. Even Ben Nelson, the last Democrat from Nebraska in the Senate told *Energy & Environment News* in November 2011 that “I’ve never been opposed to the pipeline.”

Kleeb beats up on firms like Tyson Foods and Monsanto for their monopolistic practices in the marketplace, writing “let the Republicans defend corporate America. It’s our job to stand up for and with the people.” But again, there is a disconnect. Powerful House Democrats like Representative Collin Peterson of Minnesota and Representative Richard Neal of Massachusetts who chair the committees on Agriculture and Ways and Means, respectively, are adept at carrying water for BigAg and Wall Street because they raise so much of their

political donations from these corporate special interests. Heitkamp and McCaskill each accepted thousands of dollars in contributions from Tyson, Monsanto and Costco (which wants to build massive chicken production facilities in a small Nebraska town).

It is also head scratching that Kleebl blames the loss of the public option in the Affordable Care Act on Democrats not pushing back on the Tea Party narrative of health care reform when it was Max Baucus, Montana's other senator, who killed the public option in the Senate Finance Committee that wrote the final bill.

Kleebl is correct that the Democratic brand is badly damaged with rural voters and that on issues such as eminent domain for private gain, Democrats are nowhere to be found. She is spot-on in noting that until Democrats get serious about closing the gap with rural voters, they will continue to lose statewide elections.

Kleebl's prescriptions for change, which include putting rural Democrats in leadership roles in the party and investing state parties (many of which can't keep their lights on in red states), left me feeling even more depressed than when I began the book.

This is because so many signs are pointing the other way. Following the disastrous 2010 midterms, Representative Nancy Pelosi disbanded the House Democratic Rural Working Group, a very modest messaging unit, and Senator Harry Reid deep-sixed the Senate Rural Outreach arm, a similar shop in his chamber.

Over at the Democratic National Committee, the Rural Council is still stuck in second class status, unable to become a full-fledged caucus. Why? Because under party rules, the group must represent at least 2 percent of the DNC membership and its members must share an "immutable characteristic." As a result, the roadblock is that being rural is not a permanent trait. I swear, you can't make this stuff up. There is finally a "director of rural outreach and engagement" at the DNC, but many see this lone hire as tokenism instead of a real commitment to fighting for rural votes in the 2020 elections.

The DSCC, Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee are all still without Rural Desks, meaning geographic minorities are not important enough to devote any financial resources to. Even a newly announced [DNC Environment and Climate Crisis Council](#) lacks a designated rural seat (although the Native American member hails from rural Plummer, Idaho).

Back in 2009, during a meeting with Michael Vachon, the political director for Democratic mega-donor George Soros, where I was trying to make the pitch for funding for a rural issue advocacy group with my co-founder in advance of the challenging 2010 midterms, Vachon opened by stating that "it always bothered me that Nebraska gets the same two senators as my state of New York." This comment unnerved me as a

worrisome insight into the mindset of the liberal left donor community and their view of rural people. Finishing Kleeb's book, I thought of how little has changed in the decade since that moment of heartburn. Until Democratic donors start to put some dollars toward cost-effective messaging and organizing aimed at rural voters, we won't move the needle in the direction that Kleeb and others think it needs to go.

Any farmer will tell you that trying to harvest a crop without applying nutrients to the soil is a fool's errand. In politics, and especially in Democratic rural politics, failure to extend any care and feeding to the grassroots results in poor harvests of votes.

Kleeb ends her book with a list of groups worthy of support but for some inexplicable reason she only mentions five. There are well established organizations such as the League of Rural Voters and [My Rural America](#) along with newer entities such as [Focus on Rural America](#) and the [Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition](#) that are doing critical work in the rural electoral and policy space and need sustenance.

Matt L. Barron is a rural strategist and runs [MLB Research Associates](#).