

NISKANEN C E N T E R

GONE COUNTRY:

Why Democrats Need to Play in Rural America, and How They Can Do It Again

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Key Takeaways

- The urban-rural divide has become a defining feature of U.S. politics, and the 2020 elections provided further evidence that the Democratic party has collapsed in much of rural America. The cost of that collapse can be better understood by looking at the recent history of five western states that collectively account for less than 2 percent of the U.S. population.
- The American political system's institutional arrangements allow small, rural states to punch above their weight. This means that even if Democrats enjoy significant majority support nationally, they will struggle to achieve their policy goals if that support is confined to urban and suburban areas. And geographic polarization is also bad for the country as a whole because it diminishes electoral competition and fuels extremism.
- The nationalization of American politics is the key problem facing Democrats in rural areas.
- To become competitive again in rural America, Democrats need to blunt the forces of nationalization by developing strong, localized brands on both image and policy. A central part of this task will involve identifying and championing salient policy issues that resonate with rural electorates but that have been neglected in the national political discourse.

Contents

Partisan divisions and the health of the American political system	4
A tale of five states: Democrats' rural problem	6
Nationalization and the urban-rural divide	9
All hat, no cattle: The Democratic response to their rural problem	11
Speaking to rural America with substantive policy	12
<i>Public lands</i>	15
<i>Taking on Big Agriculture</i>	15
<i>Taking up hyperlocal issues specific to states and districts</i>	16
<i>Investing in party infrastructure</i>	17
Conclusion	17
About the authors	18
Acknowledgements	18

Aside from the presidency, the 2020 election results were deeply disappointing for Democrats. While the blows were geographically dispersed from Maine to Montana, many shared a common feature: underperforming in rural areas. This failure obviously limits Democrats' ability to pursue their agenda, but more importantly, it's also a problem for the health of the American political system because the increasing urban-rural divide is a prime source of polarization.

Many Democrats would prefer to ignore their rural problem because making a play for rural voters might require compromises in the pursuit of their progressive agenda. Others, under the sway of *The Emerging Democratic Majority* thesis that their inevitable, demographics-driven political dominance is just around the corner, think that chasing rural voters is both a fool's errand and unnecessary.¹ As the *Washington Post*'s Holly Bailey has reported, a large faction of the party thinks it's "crazy" to woo rural voters. According to this line of thinking, "rather than tying themselves in knots chasing a deeply conservative electorate that loves guns, opposes abortion and is firmly in the GOP camp, Democrats need to focus on driving up enthusiasm among people who share their values." As one party activist explained: "Instead of chasing and obsessing over voters who are not obsessing over us ... what if we invested in voters who are more likely to vote for Democrats? Women of color vote 3-to-1 for Democrats, compared to white guys. It doesn't make sense to use a strategy we know loses elections."² Many progressive Democrats are also ill at ease with expend-

1. John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002). Judis and Teixeira's work was more nuanced and qualified than the popular understanding of their book would suggest.

2. Holly Bailey, "Still Traumatized from 2016 Loss, Democrats Weigh How Much to Reach Out to Rural America," *Washington Post*, May 8, 2019.

ing additional energy and resources courting a demographic that is already overrepresented in the halls of power.³ From this perspective, the focus should be on reducing the influence of this voting bloc, not reinforcing it.

If it weren't for the U.S. Senate, which provides equal representation for every state regardless of population, Democrats could arguably indulge such preferences. But given that they only won control of the chamber this year by relying on Vice President Harris' ability to break ties, the filibuster-proof majority necessary to pass the party's more ambitious goals is out of reach for the foreseeable future.

So it's not only dubious as a matter of civics to write off the nation's rural voters — it's a serious strategic error that imperils Democrats' ability to hold the Senate, let alone dominate it. Democrats should also keep in mind that states are not uniformly "rural" or "urban": Competitiveness in rural areas would enhance the party's prospects in more populous states, too. If Democrats could avoid handing over so much of the rural vote to Republicans in key battlegrounds like Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, they would have a near-lock on the Electoral College.

Democrats' ambivalence about rural America has often led them to look for easy fixes for attracting greater support in the country's heart- and-hinter-lands. Outfitting candidates in cowboy hats or staging hunting photo-ops often seem like crafty ways of signaling cultural proximity to voters.⁴ But too-clever-by-half image makeovers only go so far and, at worst, can come off as transparently condescending. Another popular approach in Democratic circles is to simply dream of long-shot structural changes — like eliminating the filibuster or adding states — designed to blunt Republicans' countermajoritarian advantage. But given the closely divided Congress, these proposals don't appear to be plausible in the near future.⁵ Democrats — not to mention rural America and the country as a whole — would be better served by the party considering what it would take to be competitive in states that actually exist.

We focus here on five Western states that highlight the Democrats' problem.⁶ While Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and the Dakotas account for less than 2 percent of the total U.S. population, their senators wield the same collective power in the upper chamber as those hailing from the five most populous states of California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania. And if one party were able to corral those five big-box states in flyover country, it would already be one-fifth of the way to a Senate majority before it even looks to the other 98 percent of the country's population. As

3. See Emily Badger "As American as Apple Pie? The Rural Vote's Disproportionate Slice of Power," *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 2016, and Nestor M. Davidson and Paul A. Diller, "A City-Suburban Coalition Can't Win While the System Favors Rural Voters," *Bloomberg City Lab*, Nov. 30, 2018.

4. See, for example: Brian Montopoli, "Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer Wields 'VETO' Branding Iron," *CBS News*, Apr. 15, 2011; Rob Quist for Montana, "Defend," 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsMlhdrz7nE&feature=youtu.be; Quist, "Footage From the Road," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8b8ck46pu4>; Montanans for Morigeau, 2020, <https://twitter.com/shanemorigeau/status/1313173819071242240?s=20>.

5. Even supposing that they could muster the votes to eliminate the filibuster and that statehood could then be granted to either Washington, D.C., or Puerto Rico and that the senators from the "new state" would both be Democrats, a Democratic Party that fails to compete in rural areas at a level that allows them to replace Tester's (MT) and Manchin's (WV) seats when they leave the stage would yield no net gain for Democrats in the chamber (not to mention that this assumes Democrats will be able to maintain all the seats they currently hold in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Georgia — all competitive states that have rural population shares higher than the national average).

6. One may wonder why we do not focus on other states in the region, such as Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico. We don't focus on these states because Democrats' rural problem is more than countered by demographic and urbanization trends in these states. If this essay were instead focused on issues that Republicans need to address, these states would be good cases to focus on.

it stands, the Republican Party has nearly accomplished the task. As recently as 2008, the parties split those 10 seats, but today, Montana's Jon Tester is the lone Democrat.

That relatively recent past, however, reveals how Democrats could regain a foothold in those states, as well as other rural parts of the country. Despite a disastrous showing in 2020, it has been Montana Democrats who have most effectively competed against Republicans in this region over the last few decades. There are clear lessons from those successes that Democrats should try to recapture in Montana and export to other rural areas.

Our nationalized political environment is a central problem that Democrats will have to confront head-on to be competitive in rural areas. There are two core approaches that they must take simultaneously, one defensive and one offensive. First, Democrats running in these areas need to play a little defense in obvious ways, like actively rebranding themselves on mainstay political issues like the Second Amendment and abortion. This isn't a new or particularly difficult plan to implement, but it's one that Democrats seem to have abandoned in recent cycles because efforts to neutralize these hot-button issues requires taking policy positions that are out of step with Democrats elsewhere, particularly those in the party's activist base. Such defensive tactics will also only go so far. The second and more important key is to go on the offensive to creatively localize their races by adopting popular positions on issues that don't cleanly map onto national partisan cleavages. This positive strategy allows candidates to offer tangible help to rural communities while also carrying the pleasant upside of facing far less intraparty pushback because focusing on these issues would not conflict with national Democratic priorities.

Partisan divisions and the health of the American political system

In and of itself, there is nothing surprising or even necessarily concerning about urbanites and rural folks having political differences. However, those differences become problematic when they transform into a divide that is uniform, deep, and intense. Indeed, research now convincingly shows that when social groups become systematically "sorted" into one party or another, hostility toward "the other team" increases, because party labels come to represent much more than just partisanship or policy preferences. They increasingly represent "who we are" in a much more fundamental sense. That mentality stimulates the politicization of anything and everything and raises the perceived stakes of electoral competition.⁷ This politicization extends itself into seemingly apolitical spaces such as the vehicles we drive, the clothes we wear, the beer we drink, and even the public health protocols that we do or don't follow. Once this kind of geographic sorting is put in motion, it's easy for path dependence to take hold. That is, a 60-40 Republican advantage in a rural area can quickly turn into a 75-25 split if the Democratic brand becomes a toxic form of identity there. It is exactly this phenomenon that has been sweeping many parts of rural America in recent years, while an opposite dynamic has plagued Republicans in many urban areas. To be sure, geographically-based partisan gaps will always exist, but in a healthier polity they wouldn't be as extreme as those we see today, and they wouldn't transcend politics to affect our day-to-day life.

7. See, for example, Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), and Will Wilkinson, "The Density Divide: Urbanization, Polarization, and the Populist Backlash" (Niskanen Center, June 2009).

Of course, there are plenty of extreme divisions within American society. Demographic groups often lean solidly in one direction or another. African Americans are notable in this regard, routinely supporting Democrats at very high levels.⁸ Some occupational groups also witness high degrees of partisan grouping, as anyone who has spent time in a university faculty lounge can attest. But intense and deeply ingrained geographic divisions are arguably more concerning. Many of the worst episodes in American history — most notably the Civil War and the Jim Crow era — can be graphed on to intensely-partisan geographical divides. In addition to heightened potential for political violence, geographically concentrated partisan dominance can lead to other ills as well. For example, the corruption of urban machines was certainly facilitated by partisan hegemony.

“A healthier two-party system would see a stronger Republican presence in urban centers and Democrats present and competitive in rural areas.”

A healthier two-party system would see a stronger Republican presence in urban centers and Democrats present and competitive in rural areas. Without negating the often equally lopsided partisan dynamic in urban areas — which Steven Teles has recently explored⁹ — we focus here on the increasingly bleak situation Democrats face in rural America. It should be mentioned, though, that these situations are interactive. A Republican Party that faced more competition in rural states would have to try to expand the playing field elsewhere and attempt to be more competitive in urban areas, and vice-versa for the Democrats.

The electoral situation for Democrats in many rural areas is already dire and at risk of becoming unsalvageable. Rapid-onset one-party dominance has already left minority-party infrastructure totally hollowed out in many places. For example, South Dakota — which had an all-Democratic congressional delegation as recently as 2005 — saw its last remaining Democratic field offices closed permanently in 2019, leaving the party with no physical presence in the state.¹⁰

From Democrats’ perspective, their rural failing carries the greatest cost in the Senate. Because of the central role that states occupy in our political system, underperforming in rural America compromises the party’s ability to transform its national majorities into governing majorities. Simply put, the Senate’s permanent rural bias provides the GOP with an advantage in the chamber even if it routinely falls short of 50 percent support in the country as a whole. Urban-based Democrats may complain that this situation is unfair — and perhaps it is — but it’s a good bet that, despite any inequities, the Senate is sticking around.

Geographic polarization isn’t just bad for Democrats, it’s bad for American democracy because it diminishes electoral competition. The outcomes of most electoral races, at virtually every level of

8. Ismail K. White and Chryl N. Laird, *Steadfast Democrats: How Social Forces Shape Black Political Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

9. Steven Teles, “Can Republicans Capitalize on Urban Political Opportunity? A Lifelong Democrat Suggests How the GOP Can Become Viable in American Cities,” *City Journal* (Mar. 2021).

10. Lisa Kaczke, “South Dakota Democratic Party closing Sioux Falls, Rapid City offices,” *Argus Leader*, Aug. 30, 2019.

government, have become increasingly uncompetitive and easy to predict.¹¹ And that's problematic from the perspective of representational quality and democratic accountability. As urban districts become ever-bluer, and rural districts ever-redder, incumbent politicians worry more about the prospect of being primaried than about a credible challenge in the general election and are therefore incentivized not toward compromise, but toward extreme and performative stances in order to signal ideological-partisan purity – thus reinforcing polarization and negative partisanship.¹² As for accountability, polarized electorates are very reluctant to vote for a challenger from the opposite party, even if their co-partisan incumbent is a do-nothing or worse.¹³

There is also evidence that a lack of two-party electoral competition fuels extremism. As competition declines, politicians become increasingly untethered from public opinion in their districts – frequently becoming far more extreme than their so-called “mandate” legitimates.¹⁴ As research has shown, veering toward ideological extremism is tantalizing and relatively costless to politicians in electorally noncompetitive environments because voters in these places are less interested in politics, less aware of their representatives' policy positions, and less likely to hold them accountable at election time.¹⁵

South Dakota's Republican governor, Kristi Noem, provides an instructive example. Despite a relatively narrow three-point victory in 2018, Noem lurched hard to the right and came to personify Trumpism. South Dakota's 2020 election results, which saw Republican candidates romp to wins of 30 points and more, suggest that whatever indignities her shift required, it was a sensible political calculation. Underscoring the GOP's newfound dominance in South Dakota, Democrats didn't even field a challenger against first-term Rep. Dusty Johnson for the state's at-large district, a seat they held as recently as 2010.

A tale of five states: Democrats' rural problem

Every state, of course, has its own unique contours. Yet the five states we focus on here are similarly situated geographically and have all seen a sharp drop in partisan competitiveness.

11. To be sure, there are some outliers. But even among these outliers, the prognosis for competitive elections seems grim. Over the last decade, for instance, Missouri and Nevada experienced stints of apparent competitiveness on their way to collapsing into one-party dominance. We contend that geographic polarization is a strong driver of increasing non-competitiveness, which is consistent with David Hopkins, *Red Fighting Blue: How Geography and Electoral Rules Polarize American Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). Regarding evidence that American elections are becoming increasingly uncompetitive, see Alan I. Abramowitz, Brad Alexander, and Matthew Gunning, “Incumbency, Redistricting, and the Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections,” *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 1 (2006): 75-88; Reid Wilson, “Study: State elections becoming less competitive,” *The Washington Post*, May 7, 2015, though also see Bernard Fraga and Eitan Hersh, “Are Americans Stuck in Uncompetitive Enclaves? An Appraisal of US Electoral Competition,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 13, no. 3 (2018): 291-311.

12. See, for example, Sarah E. Anderson, Daniel M. Butler, and Laurel Harbridge-Yong, *Rejecting Compromise: Legislators' Fear of Primary Voters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

13. See Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster, “The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of US Elections in the 21st Century,” *Electoral Studies* 41, no. 1 (2016): 12-22; H. Benjamin Ashton and B. Kal Munis, “Information Valence and Evaluations of Congress and Individual Legislators: Experimental Evidence Regarding Negativity Bias in Politics,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* (2020).

14. John D. Griffin, “Electoral Competition and Democratic Responsiveness: A Defense of the Marginality Hypothesis,” *Journal of Politics* 68, no. 4 (2006): 911-921.

15. Philip Edward Jones, “The Effect of Political Competition on Democratic Accountability,” *Political Behavior* 35, no. 3 (2013): 481-515.

As noted above, South Dakota Democrats are facing something approaching an existential crisis. Apart from the relatively close 2018 gubernatorial election, the situation has been getting steadily worse over the past decade. As recently as 2011, Democrats held 40 percent of seats in the state Senate and 34 percent in the House. Yet following the 2020 elections, those numbers have slid to all-time lows of 8 percent and 11 percent respectively. At the congressional level, the transformation has been even more dramatic. Between 1963 and 2005, Democrats George McGovern and Tom Daschle occupied the state's class 3 U.S. Senate seat for all but 6 years.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Democrats held the other Senate seat for over half of the period between 1973 and 2015, including Tim Johnson's three terms from 1997 to 2015. South Dakota's at-large House seat had also been kind to Democrats. From 1983 through 2011, Democrats held the seat for 12 of 16 Congresses.

The wheels started to come off in 2004, when Republican John Thune unseated Daschle by less than 5,000 votes in what was considered a shocking upset. Thune has since won an uncontested 2010 election and carried 71 percent of the vote in 2016. Johnson declined to seek reelection in 2014, clearing the path for Republican Mike Rounds, who won reelection in 2020 by 32 points. And Democratic Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin lost her bid for a fifth term in 2010. It's been all downhill since: Democrats haven't seriously contested either Senate seat since Daschle's and Johnson's departure and have only crested 40 percent of the vote in two of the U.S. House elections over the last decade.

The utter collapse of Democrats in South Dakota isn't an isolated case. Idaho was an early mover and foreshadowed the red wave that eventually overtook the region. A fourteen-year stretch in Idaho, from 1980 to 1994, provides another startling illustration of how quickly things can unravel. At the beginning of this period, Democrats were the clear minority party in the Gem State, but were still competitive. Both U.S. House seats had been held by Republicans since the mid-1960s and Republicans had long had a stranglehold on the legislature. However, two iconic Democrats — Frank Church and Cecil Andrus — loomed over Idaho politics and helped keep the party competitive. In 1980, Sen. Church was running for a fifth term and Democrats were in the middle of a 24-year run of holding the governor's office, anchored by Andrus' four victories. Church's razor-thin defeat in the Ronald Reagan-led 1980 wave election was a stunning blow and a harbinger of things to come.¹⁷ Even so, Democrats continued to hold the governor's office. What wasn't necessarily clear at the time but is evident with the benefit of hindsight is that when Andrus retired in 1994, the bottom fell out for Idaho Democrats. In the 26 years since, Republicans have thoroughly dominated the state's politics, and they have only extended their power over the last decade.¹⁸

The key point here is that particular individuals with their own brands can obscure partisan shifts in the electorate (often driven by the nationalization of politics). Church and Andrus played this role in Idaho and allowed Democrats to appear more competitive than they really were. Once these

16. The U.S. Senate is divided into three "classes." Each of these classes runs for reelection separately from the others on its own six-year cycle. South Dakota's Senate seats are in classes 2 and 3, Montana's in 1 and 2, etc.

17. Marc C. Johnson, *Tuesday Night Massacre* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021). Several other liberal icons in the Senate also went down this year, including George McGovern (SD), Birch Bayh (IN), and John Culver (IA).

18. The GOP has without interruption controlled the governor's office, both Senate seats, and the state legislature by routinely lopsided margins. With just one brief exception, the same is true of the state's U.S. House delegation (the lone anomaly featuring an unusually weak candidate who went down in a squeaker in the 2006 Democratic wave election; Republicans promptly picked the seat back up in the next cycle by a typically easy 10-point margin).

iconic figures leave, the partisan dynamic of the day asserts itself. Similar examples of politicians outlasting their party's sell-by date can be clearly seen in the other states we examine here, such as Sen. Tim Johnson in South Dakota or Sen. Jon Tester in Montana. Even so, it's important to bear in mind that these partisan dynamics are not predestined, but rather are the consequences of decisions made and actions (not) taken.

South Dakota and Idaho are illustrative examples of just how quickly the Democrats' demise has unfolded in some states, but the party's performance has declined even in places where it was never very competitive. In Wyoming, the nation's most Republican state for each of the past two cycles, Democrats have had very little success statewide over the past 40 years.¹⁹ Throughout the '90s and up until 2008, however, Democrats consistently held about one-third of the seats in the state House, and they even occupied the governor's mansion from 2003 to 2009. Since 2010, however, Democrats in the Cowboy State have seen their numbers in the legislature more than halved, and none of their candidates have managed to garner more than 30 percent of the vote in major statewide races.

While Idaho and Wyoming may be easy to dismiss as helplessly Republican states that continue to burn slightly deeper shades of red, that characterization most certainly does not apply to North Dakota or Montana (or South Dakota, discussed above). Democrats in North Dakota held a monopoly on the state's congressional delegation from 1987-2010, anchored by Sens. Quentin Burdick, Kent Conrad, and Byron Dorgan and Rep. Earl Pomeroy. Over the past decade, however, North Dakota has veered about as hard to the right as any other state over the same period. Apart from Heidi Heitkamp's sub-1-point victory in the 2012 Senate race, it's been all downhill since. Indeed, Heitkamp's 10-point loss in her 2018 reelection bid was what now passes as a strong showing for North Dakota Democrats; the party's standard-bearers have routinely suffered staggering losses of 50+ points in most other major statewide contests and have seen narrow Republican legislative majorities (for example, a five-seat advantage in the state Senate in 2010) quickly morph into overwhelming supermajorities.

Of all the states in the region, Montana is the one that should most concern Democrats, since it's the state where the party has had the most success in the 21st century. It offers a prime example of Democrats' collapse in rural America in an era of hypernationalization.

While the Treasure State once appeared to be an anomaly amongst its neighbors, the similarities have become increasingly apparent. In 2008, Democrats swept nearly all statewide offices and won a one-seat majority the state legislature's 100-seat lower chamber. Though the state House majority was very short-lived (Republicans gained 18 seats in 2010), Montana Democrats otherwise held their ground throughout the Obama era. As recently as 2014, Democrats controlled both U.S. Senate seats (including the one Max Baucus had held since 1978), the governor's mansion, and a smattering of other statewide offices. But following last year's elections, Sen. Tester is the last holdout, and he increasingly appears to be the kind of unique figure — like Baucus himself or Idaho's Andrus — who can withstand the partisan dynamics of his state. Even so, the margins

19. President Trump received a higher share of the vote in Wyoming than he did in any other state in both 2016 and 2020. Recent survey data from Pew Research also suggests that the proportion of residents who identify as Republican in Wyoming is greater than in any other state: <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/compare/party-affiliation/by/state/>. Gallup data from 2018 also confirms this: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/247025/democratic-states-exceed-republican-states-four-2018.aspx>.

of Tester’s three wins have ranged from razor-thin to narrow. Meanwhile, Montana Republicans running statewide almost always cruise to double-digit wins. Last year, this once proudly independent state that routinely elected Democrats was overtaken by a red wave. The GOP easily swept seven statewide races, winning all but one by double digits. Those victories were cemented by overwhelming margins in rural counties.²⁰

All told, there is a clear pattern across these five largely rural states: Democratic fortunes have tanked in the last decade. This is true in Montana, South Dakota, and North Dakota, states with strong Democratic traditions that have been transformed into Republican strongholds. And it’s true in Idaho and Wyoming, where Democrats were always the minority party but have nonetheless seen their fortunes plummet to new depths. The transformations have been rapid and suggestive of Republican dominance for the foreseeable future.

“Resentment of urban areas by rural people is a significant factor in rural votes against Democrats.”

Nationalization and the urban-rural divide

At the national level, the picture has been every bit as harrowing. As political scientist David Hopkins has documented, the urban-rural divide broke open in a significant way across the whole country in the mid-1990s and has been growing ever since, reaching its zenith in the Trump era.²¹ The results of the 2018 midterms provide the most compelling evidence. That year heralded a so-called “blue wave” in which Democrats flipped 36 House seats, regaining the chamber for the first time since 2010. Yet a closer look revealed that the wave only hit urban

and suburban America; it scarcely made a splash in rural areas. In fact, of 61 “purely rural” House seats held by Republicans, Democrats only picked up one (and even that victory probably would not have materialized if not for Maine’s newly enacted ranked-choice voting system).²² 2020 saw Democrats’ rural collapse extend still further as they lost 13 House seats in purely rural or semirural districts.

While the media has acknowledged the existence of the urban-rural divide and frequently dispatched coastal, metropolitan-based journalists out into the “boonies” to try to understand the exotic worldviews of aggrieved country folk, political scientists have been more skeptical. They observe that the so-called urban-rural divide may not have anything to do with ruralism or urbanism per se, but may simply be attributable to differences in the demographic (race, gender, socioeconomic status) composition of urban, suburban, and rural communities. New research sheds light on this question directly, showing that while demographic composition clearly matters, so too do feelings of geographic resentment.²³ Importantly, however, geographic resentment appears to only impact Democratic candidates. That is, resentment of urban areas by rural people is a sig-

20. Eric Dietrich, “How Montanans voted, precinct by precinct,” *Montana Free Press*, November 5, 2020.

21. David Hopkins, *Red Fighting Blue: How Geography and Electoral Rules Polarize American Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

22. Geoffrey Skelly, “The Suburbs — All Kinds of Suburbs — Delivered the House to Democrats,” *FiveThirtyEight*, Nov. 8, 2018. “Purely rural” here refers to those House districts with the lowest population densities (e.g., Nebraska’s 3rd district) — for a more complete discussion, see: <https://github.com/theatlantic/citylab-data/blob/master/citylab-congress/methodology.md>.

23. Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2016).

nificant factor in rural votes against Democrats. For these rural voters, the Democratic party and urbanity appear to be fused. Resentment of rural areas is *not*, however, a significant predictor of vote choice among urbanites and suburbanites; rather preference for Democrats in these areas appears to largely be an artifact of demographic composition.²⁴ This means that there is major asymmetry in how the parties must navigate the urban-rural divide. For Republicans, grappling with the divide is less complex, at least theoretically: Perform better with demographic groups that disproportionately live in nonrural areas, such as minorities (which they appear to have done in 2020), and they will make gains. Democrats, on the other hand, must make inroads with various demographic groups while also confronting the complex cultural disconnection that they have with rural Americans. That disconnect separates them from rural residents of various backgrounds, as resentment of cities is widespread in rural areas, cutting across many other demographic divides, including racial identity, partisan identity, and ideology.²⁵ Making this task even more tricky is that Democrats need to do all this while maintaining their appeal with growing urban-based demographic groups.

Confronting party stereotypes, such as the notion that Democrats are the party of snobby, urban, coastal elites, is complicated by the nationalization of American politics. At its core, nationalization is a byproduct of the homogenization of political communication. One key driver of nationalization has been the withering away of local news sources, a problem that is particularly acute in rural areas.²⁶ Historically, parties and candidates alike have relied on local news to help carve out distinct local brands. Without local considerations to draw upon when evaluating politics, voters default to national considerations, including party stereotypes. For example, local newspaper closures are linked to subsequent increases in straight-ticket voting in those areas.²⁷ Similarly, a lack of access to televised local news is also associated with voting a straight partisan ticket.²⁸ Importantly, voters desire the local considerations that local newspapers and television stations have historically provided; when national media conglomerates purchase local television stations and nationalize their content, viewers express lower satisfaction with the content overall, and a nontrivial number of people tune out altogether.²⁹ The decline of local news is certainly a big part of the problem of nationalization. For the donor class, this problem also presents an opportunity. Philanthropists could do a real service to rural America and the country as a whole with a project to revitalize local news outlets by either subsidizing or purchasing small newspapers and television stations. For parties and candidates, however, the decline of local news is largely outside their control.

24. Nicholas F. Jacobs and Kal Munis, "Place-based Resentment in Contemporary U.S. Elections: The Individual Sources of America's Urban-Rural Divide," working paper <<https://bit.ly/39apPbq>>.

25. Kal Munis, "Us Over Here Versus Them Over There...Literally: Measuring Place Resentment in American Politics," *Political Behavior* (2020).

26. See "The Expanding News Desert" project at UNC-Chapel Hill: <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/>

27. Joshua P. Darr, Matthew P. Hitt, and Johanna L. Dunaway, "Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior," *Political Communication* 68, no. 6 (2018): 1007-1028.

28. Daniel J. Moskowitz, "Local News, Information, and the Nationalization of US Elections," *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 1 (Feb. 2021): 114-129.

29. Gregory J. Martin and Joshua McCrain, "Local News and National Politics," *American Political Science Review*, 113:2 (2019): 372-384.

All hat, no cattle: The Democratic response to their rural problem

Mainstream Democrats' response to their rural problem comes in three main varieties. The first response is grounded in the *Emerging Democratic Majority* thesis.³⁰ For many Democrats (as well as Republicans), this theory came to take on a prophecy-status that allowed them to believe that the country was on the verge of a post-partisan era in which Democrats would reign supreme.³¹ The popular understanding of Judis and Teixeira's work exaggerated some of their actual claims, but Believers were sure that demographic tides were destined to elevate Democrats to overwhelming and more-or-less permanent majorities for the foreseeable future. In this understanding, Republicans are little more than pitiful dinosaurs destined to go extinct very soon. The upshot is that Democrats don't need to do anything to appeal to voters; the country will naturally come to them in short order. Nearly 20 years on, and with no enduring Democratic majority in sight, many analysts — including one of the original authors — no longer endorse key tenets of the theory, although its hold on the imagination of Democrats remains strong to this day.³²

A second response has been aggrieved hopelessness and self-pity. Democrats in this mode lament the undemocratic structural barriers facing their party — the Senate, but also the Electoral College and the Supreme Court — and decry the unfairness of it all, recognizing that it is all but impossible for sophisticated progressives such as themselves to appeal to the “deplorables” in the countryside.³³ Much of this exasperation is understandable. It does indeed seem deeply unfair that the Dakotas, with a combined population of 1.6 million residents, get four senators while California's nearly 40 million residents get two.

A third response has been a more optimistic offshoot of the second. Taking their bearings from the inherent unfairness of the system, Democrats in this camp have been more optimistic that structural overhauls of the American political system are possible and have placed their hopes in various schemes to alter those institutions that are working to their disadvantage.³⁴ To deal with the Republicans' current head start in the Electoral College, they propose a national popular vote. To address the now solidly conservative Supreme Court, they advocate term limits for justices or “packing” the Court. And to tackle the rural bias in the Senate, they suggest adding new, solidly Democratic states.³⁵ Yet, as the Niskanen Center's Steven Teles argues, while the objections about the unfairness of our system may be logical and some of the proposed reforms seem intriguing, they are also a dead end strategically.³⁶

The good news for Democrats who are ready to put down their frayed, decades-old copies of *The Emerging Democratic Majority* is that they don't need to reinvent the wheel. They can look to the

30. Judis and Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*.

31. See, for instance, Mike Murphy, “For Republicans the Ice Age Cometh,” *Time* Jun. 22, 2009; Republican National Committee, “Growth and Opportunity Project,” Mar. 18, 2013.

32. For reappraisals, see, for instance: Judis, “The Emerging Republican Advantage,” *National Journal*, Jan. 31, 2015; Sean Trende, “What to Make of John Judis' ‘Republican Advantage,’” *Real Clear Politics*, Feb. 11, 2015. On its continued resonance, see, for instance: Paul Waldman, “Is the Emerging Democratic Majority Finally Coming to Pass?” *The American Prospect*, Aug. 11, 2019.

33. Ezra Klein, “The Crisis isn't too Much Polarization. It's too Little Democracy,” *Vox*, Nov. 12, 2020.

34. Lee Drutman, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

35. Simon Barnicle, “The 53-State Solution: New states are the answer to America's minority rule problem,” *The Atlantic*, Feb. 11, 2020.

36. Steven Teles, “Our Political System is Unfair. Liberals Need to Just Deal with It,” *New York Times*, Nov. 17, 2020.

not-too-distant past in which they were competitive in rural America. To be sure, that competitiveness didn't necessarily produce majorities in congressional delegations or state legislatures, and it didn't mean Democratic presidential candidates carried rural states, although sometimes it did translate into those things. But even when it didn't, maintaining a degree of competitiveness paid dividends. Margins matter; there's a big difference between losing rural counties 55-45 and the all-out collapse that has been increasingly common for Democrats.³⁷

In mostly rural states like those we focus on here, stronger Democratic showings at the statewide level, even in losing efforts, can also buoy the prospects for co-partisans down the ballot, such as state legislative candidates.³⁸ And healthy minorities in state legislatures are able, with the help of a little defection from moderates from across the aisle, to have a shot at preventing the most fringe right-wing bills from passing. Recent legislative sessions in Montana, for example, have featured a working coalition of "Conservative Solutions Caucus" Republicans joining with Democrats to pass key budget bills and Medicaid expansion over the objection of hardline Republicans who have majorities in their caucuses, but not in the chambers as a whole.³⁹ And in battleground states with some blue urban areas sprinkled amidst a sea of red, keeping the rural margins in check makes it far easier to carry the statewide offices and the presidency. In, for instance, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, Democrats don't need to win rural counties; they only need semi-respectable showings to stay in the hunt before the urban centers seal the deal.

Speaking to rural America with substantive policy

Donning bolo ties and condemning Wall Street elites may help rural Democrats look the part. But it's more important to recognize that messages that play well on the coasts often just don't resonate in much of rural America, even if the messenger is wearing a cowboy hat and adequately investing in digital advertising. As Rep. Abigail Spanberger (D-VA) and other swing-district Democrats have noted, The Green New Deal and defunding the police aren't as well received in Manhattan, Montana, as they are in Manhattan, New York.⁴⁰ Cultural differences comprise part of the reason for this, but these and many other national Democratic priorities are either wholly urban issues or often cast that way. Democrats need to realize that rural areas have unique policy concerns that aren't satisfied by platitudes on abolishing ICE and the urgent need to usher in new gun control measures. A national Democratic Party linked to that agenda is, to put it mildly, not helpful to candidates running under that party's banner in most rural areas. With Trump on the ballot, this election was probably destined to be intensely nationalized, although the progressive agenda playing out in the background certainly didn't do Democrats in Montana and surrounding states any favors. Indeed, after years of bucking the trend and maintaining its status as a bastion of split-ticket voting, Montana appears to have finally succumbed to the forces of nationalization, seeing Republican wins up and down the ballot last fall.

37. Hopkins, *Red Fighting Blue*.

38. Robert E. Hogan, "Gubernatorial Coattail Effects in State Legislative Elections," *Political Research Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2005): 587-597.

39. Shaylee Ragar, "Moderates Emerge as Major Players in Montana Legislature," *Montana Free Press*, Jan. 14, 2009.

40. It is worth noting here that support for the most ambitious police defunding proposals (i.e., abolishing police) is remarkably unpopular with every group. For instance, Gallup polling from summer 2020 finds only 33 percent of Americans under the age of 35 support the proposal, whereas those numbers shrink to 27 percent of all Democrats and 22 percent of Black Americans. Overall, despite a majority of Americans supporting Black Lives Matter, an even larger majority of Americans support either keeping police funding the same, or even increasing it, not decreasing it. For more discussion, see Ben Guarino, "Few Americans want to abolish police, Gallup survey finds," *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2020.

Yet Big Sky Country's recent history highlights the two lessons that could facilitate the Democrats' return to competitiveness, both in Montana and in rural areas more generally.

The most obvious, but also more difficult, part of the answer is to rebrand. That means campaign messaging built around culturally conservative themes. And while this may be a bitter pill for progressives to swallow, guns are the cultural elephant in the room. However, as the Niskanen Center's Matthew Yglesias has recently shown, the tradeoff needn't be as vexing for progressives

as they often assume.⁴¹ The truth of the situation is that gun control legislation is extremely difficult to pass, and the go-to proposals wouldn't do much good at combating the problem anyhow. In a nation in which mass shootings have become common, that's a frustrating realization. But it sits alongside another reality that is just as clear: Democrats pay an enormous political price when their candidates running in rural America get tagged as anti-gun.

“Democrats who have been successful in Montana...have [championed] issues that are important to their electorates but have escaped the attention of their national parties.”

It would be best for Democrats to allow their rural candidates to be pro-gun; they're simply too psychologically powerful as a cultural and identity symbol. It should be noted, however, that stressing their Second Amendment bona fides won't be a panacea for Democrats because these are issues that Republicans already effectively “own.” Issue ownership is a term used by political psychologists to describe the phenomenon wherein issues come to be strongly cognitively linked to a specific party in the minds of voters.⁴² Democrats own issues like education and health care; Republicans own issues like national security and guns. So while Democrats running in rural districts should make their pro-gun stance clear, this is largely a defensive strategy because no Democrat is going

to convincingly “out-gun” a Republican opponent.

Abortion is another sensitive issue on which national Democrats would be well-served to permit a greater degree of diversity. It's not necessary for rural Democrats to pretend to be strident pro-lifers, but it would be helpful if candidates could signal some cultural distance from the national party by, for instance, dropping the euphemism of “women's health,” opposing late-term abortions, and dusting off and emphasizing Bill Clinton's old formulation of “safe, legal, and rare.” Single-issue abortion voters aren't going to be swayed. And mild heterodoxy on abortion is, like guns, a purely defensive tactic aimed at only partially defusing a toxic issue at the margins. But even partially neutralizing the abortion issue would be beneficial.

This kind of rebranding is challenging because it runs counter to the party's dominant ethos and risks internal acrimony. Many party activists will no doubt object. Still, Democrats have managed to navigate these waters in the recent past and should attempt to do so again.

41. Matthew Yglesias, “National Democrats' Misguided Re-Embrace of Gun Control,” *Slow Boring*, Nov. 25, 2020.

42. See, for example, Stephen N. Goggin and Alexander G. Theodoridis, “Disputed ownership: Parties, Issues, and Traits in the Minds of Voters,” *Political Behavior* 39, no. 3 (2017): 675-702.

Still, while that kind of rebranding is necessary, it isn't sufficient. To win back votes from Republicans in the countryside, Democrats must offer something more than Republican Lite.

Democrats who have been successful in Montana over the last couple decades have gone on the offensive by offering something more substantive than strategic positioning on dicey cultural issues. They have been able to identify and champion salient issues that are important to their electorates but that have escaped the attention of the national parties. In other words, successful Democrats in Montana tend to “go local” both in terms of style *and* substance. The good news on this front is that there are many potential opportunities in this space and that they are carry none of the intraparty baggage and resistance that goes along with the kind of rebranding we propose on issues like guns and abortion. In other words, this part of the puzzle is both easier to implement and more effective at reaching rural voters.

Developing a strong localized brand on both image and policy is viable for three reasons. First, most people have an affection for and interest in their local geographic communities, whether that be their state, hometown, or other small-scale geography.⁴³ Second, as public opinion scholars have found time and again, most voters are not especially ideological and therefore do not bring a set of highly sophisticated and internally consistent preferences to bear when they evaluate politics.⁴⁴ The ideological arena is one that political elites, not average voters, operate in. There's a clear lesson here for rural Democrats: they should deemphasize abstract ideological concepts and substitute in local issues and concerns that are actually near and dear (literally) to the people they seek to represent. Third, championing local issues should, in nearly all cases, involve little or no tradeoff. That is, championing nonpoliticized local issues that rural people care about won't drive urban voters away from the party.

As previously mentioned, nationalization is caused in part by the homogenization of news diets brought about by the decline of local news and simultaneous proliferation of the internet and cable news. However, Democratic candidates running in rural areas have other tools at their disposal to help localize their races. In addition to old school face-to-face interactions, press releases, social media, and political advertisements are all potentially powerful avenues of communication that parties and candidates can directly control. Democrats running in rural areas would be wise to use these channels of communication to localize themselves and offer fresh policy ideas that push back against the negative stereotypes of the national Democratic party. Recent research provides evidence of the potential effectiveness of this approach, finding that localized political rhetoric is more appealing to independents and voters of the opposite party than national, partisan rhetoric.⁴⁵

What Montana Democrats — and similarly situated Democrats across the country — need now are some substantive issues that can blunt the forces of nationalization that threaten to make Mon-

43. Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K. Fabian, and Robert Kaminoff, “Place-identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 3, no. 1 (1983): 57-83; Nicholas F. Jacobs and Kal Munis, “Staying in Place: Federalism and the Political Economy of Place Attachment,” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 50, no. 4 (2020): 544-565.

44. Philip E. Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” in *Ideology and Its Discontents*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964); Donald R. Kinder and Nathan P. Kalmoe, *Neither Liberal nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

45. Richard Burke and Kal Munis, “Talk Local to Me: Assessing the Heterogenous Effects of Localistic Appeals,” working paper, <<https://bit.ly/2NxaoBS>>.

tana indistinguishable from Idaho. (Republicans in deep blue urban areas might seek out similar opportunities.)

Public lands

For example, in recent decades Montana Democrats have had success in positioning themselves as defenders of public lands access. While largely neglected in national political discourse, this “local” issue has been a silver bullet against the forces of nationalization that created a downward spiral for Democrats in other rural states.

Public lands access was (and may remain) a great issue for Democrats in Montana because it allowed them to define the narrative for an issue that neither national party has ownership over, but that has a cross-cutting partisan appeal in the Montana electorate. Indeed, Montanans of all demographic backgrounds rely on public lands for recreation activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, cross-country skiing, mountain biking, and camping. Environmentalists, a part of the national Democratic coalition, are certainly well-represented among these groups, but so is the conservative-leaning “hook and bullet” crowd. For example, the Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, a grassroots hunting and fishing conservation group whose membership includes far more self-identified Republicans and independents than Democrats, has recently taken several high-profile GOP members of Congress to task for proposals that the organization deems hostile to public lands access.⁴⁶ The upshot: Championing public lands has long been an effective issue with crossover appeal for independents and weakly aligned, nominally Republican voters.

Republicans in Montana this year rhetorically embraced the issue for the first time, which may have temporarily neutralized Democrats’ public lands advantage (in much the same way as Democrats could blunt their anti-gun reputation in order to neutralize the Republican advantage on that issue). However, COVID-19 may provide an opportunity for Democrats to reclaim the issue. Specifically, the virus seems to have precipitated a large influx of ultra-wealthy outsiders looking to social distance in Montana’s wide-open spaces.⁴⁷ Many of the newcomers will buy parcels adjacent to public land and, if history is any guide, will seek to close access to these lands for locals. Democrats could seize on these new class-based and geographic in-group vs. out-group dynamics in order to pair the public lands issue more forcefully with their party’s old-school reputation of standing with regular folks against the rich.

Taking on Big Agriculture

Montana Democrats and their co-partisans in the region need new issues neglected by the national parties to champion alongside public lands access, and we believe agriculture is ripe for the picking. Across Big Sky Country, family farms and ranches still lie at the symbolic, cultural, and economic heart of most communities. It’s an article of faith in these areas that farmers and ranchers are not getting a fair shake and are being held hostage by meatpacking and grain-trading corporations. It’s easy to see why this is an area of concern for rural communities: The four largest meatpacking firms in the U.S. (two of which are foreign-owned) control roughly three quarters of

46. An overview of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers’ recent membership demographics can be found here: https://www.backcountryhunters.org/2020_member_survey_results. For an example of the advocacy, see Juliet Eilerin, “Facing backlash, Utah Rep. Jason Chaffetz withdraws bill to transfer federal land to the states,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 2, 2017.

47. Rob Rogers, “Coronavirus Spurs Increased Interest in Moving to Montana,” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 30, 2020.

the market, while the four largest grain-trading companies control 90 percent of that business.⁴⁸ Folks in farming and ranching communities allege that this level of consolidation has led to price-fixing and other ills associated with de facto monopolization. Recent months have demonstrated that consolidation also affects consumers, who have seen major price hikes and a scarcity of meat products due to kinks in supply lines wrought by COVID-19.⁴⁹

There is a strong desire in rural communities for government to address this problem. Even radical solutions, such as antitrust action, enjoy substantial support. Democrats are arguably better positioned than Republicans to take up this fight, given that one of the more universally appealing aspects of their historic brand includes a willingness to stand up to “big corporations” on behalf of “the little guy.” That populist style often resonates in rural America, and addressing the perceived abuses of Big Ag could fit nicely into that disposition and deliver real help to rural communities. More fundamentally, however, this issue offers Democrats an opportunity to substantively engage rural America because, like public lands, the issue hasn’t yet been clearly claimed by either national party. And while defending public lands may have particular resonance in the West, taking on Big Ag could prove fertile ground for enterprising Democrats across the country, including some of the Midwestern Electoral College battlegrounds.

Taking up hyperlocal issues specific to states and districts

Finally, it would also be advantageous for Democrats to identify even more localized and contextually particular concerns within their own states and districts.

This might mean making a truly one-off local issue a focal point, such as when Baucus prioritized the plight of an asbestos-ravaged Libby, Montana.⁵⁰ Or it might mean pushing back on overreaching plans from Washington, D.C., as Andrus did when the federal government targeted Idaho as a dumping ground for nuclear waste.

Yet another option would be to do a much more effective job of framing orthodox Democratic policies, such as those on health care, in terms of the positive effects they have for rural communities. There were some major missed opportunities to do precisely that in Montana in 2020. For example, Gov. Steve Bullock’s Medicaid expansion bill was a boon for rural hospitals, but most voters didn’t know that.⁵¹ Bullock was also an early leader in aggressively combatting the COVID-19 pandemic, which should have met with wide approval in rural Montana communities because their populations are significantly older than those in the state’s urban communities.⁵² Framing the COVID-related policies in this way was not a priority, however, and Democrats should know better than to rely on voters making these connections for themselves.

There are a number of other potential issues that don’t map cleanly onto the national parties. Veterans are disproportionately located in rural areas and have an array of concerns that are important

48. Christopher Walljasper “More Foreign Ownership of U.S. Beef Processors Raises Food Safety Concerns,” *The Counter*, Jan. 20, 2020; Robert Leonard and Matt Russell, “What Democrats Need to Know to Win in Rural America,” *New York Times*, Mar. 17, 2019.

49. Tom Lutey, “Montana Ranchers Turned to Local Sales in a Tough Year,” *Billings Gazette*, Dec. 23, 2020.

50. Mike Dennison, “For Libby Residents Harmed by Asbestos, Max Baucus has Delivered – Again and Again,” *Billings Gazette*, Feb. 9, 2014.

51. Holly K. Michels, “Rural hospitals don’t want to see Medicaid expansion go away,” *Missoulian*, May 30, 2017.

52. Eric Dietrich, “Montana is the Oldest State in the West. Demographics Tell the Tale,” *Montana Free Press*, Aug. 30, 2019.

to them, as Tester has recognized and attended to since his first days in the Senate.⁵³ Wildfires are a persistent issue in the rural West, and they don't discriminate based on partisanship. Suicide and opioid abuse also disproportionately afflict rural areas. Apart from pointing out the impracticality of private schools in sparsely populated areas, championing public K-12 education and pushing back against Republican efforts to divert public funding toward private and charter schools is a potential winner in rural areas, where a great deal of community identity and pride is vested in local school systems and their high school sports teams.⁵⁴ Infrastructure projects, including pledges to secure funding for rural sewage systems, highways, bridge projects, and broadband could also help curb the nationalization of our politics and recast the focus on local issues that matter to people on the ground but that have been neglected by the national parties.

Investing in party infrastructure

As important as policy platforms and messaging strategies surrounding those platforms are, to maximize the effects of these changes Democrats should also invest in building a permanent, durable party infrastructure that allows them to have a meaningful presence in rural communities. The effort might combine the retro with the contemporary, consisting of one-part Howard Dean circa 2005 and one-part present-day Stacey Abrams. Dean, the former Democratic National Committee chair, championed a "50-state strategy" on the premise that building the party up everywhere would eventually allow Democrats to make inroads in places they'd previously written off as hopeless. A 2.0 version of this approach could emphasize both building up state parties, as Dean did ahead of Democratic triumphs in 2006 and 2008, and the community organizing that Abrams spearheaded in Georgia and that paid off in this year's runoff victories in U.S. Senate elections.⁵⁵ Abrams forged synergistic relationships between the party and aligned movement groups. Together they engaged in sustained, on-the-ground organizing that helped Democrats register voters, fix the candidate pipeline problem, and craft and disseminate a distinct local brand aligned with constituent needs.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Ultimately, however much some urban Democrats might gripe about making a play for rural America, the reality is that under the system we actually have — as opposed to the one they might wish we had — running up the margins in Silver Lake and Park Slope is not going to cut it if Democrats ever hope to wield the legislative power necessary to enact their preferred agenda. To have an actual governing majority, Democrats need to reverse their rural free fall. And that would be positive not only for the Democratic Party, but for all who hope to recapture a healthy, dynamic, and functional political system.

53. "Rural Veterans at a Glance: Economic Brief Number 25," U.S. Department of Agriculture, November 2013.

54. Mara C. Tieken, *Why Rural Schools Matter* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2014).

55. See, for example, Brittany Gibson, "How Georgia Got Organized," *The American Prospect*, Jan. 2, 2021; Joshua Jamerson, Cameron McWhirter, and Valerie Bauerlein, "Georgia Senate Wins by Democrats Followed Years of Party Organizing," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 6, 2021.

56. Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

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