

The background image is a vibrant autumn scene in a rural setting. A dirt road with wooden railings on either side leads into the distance. To the right, a large wooden barn with a corrugated metal roof stands next to a white house. A black and tan dog is walking on the grass in the lower right foreground. The background is filled with trees displaying colorful autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and green, under a clear blue sky.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INVESTING IN RURAL AND SMALL-TOWN VOTERS

THIS REPORT PREPARED FOR RURAL DEMOCRACY
INITIATIVE BY MIKE LUX, DECEMBER 1, 2021



**RURAL
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The central and urgent importance of making investments in rural and small-town voters

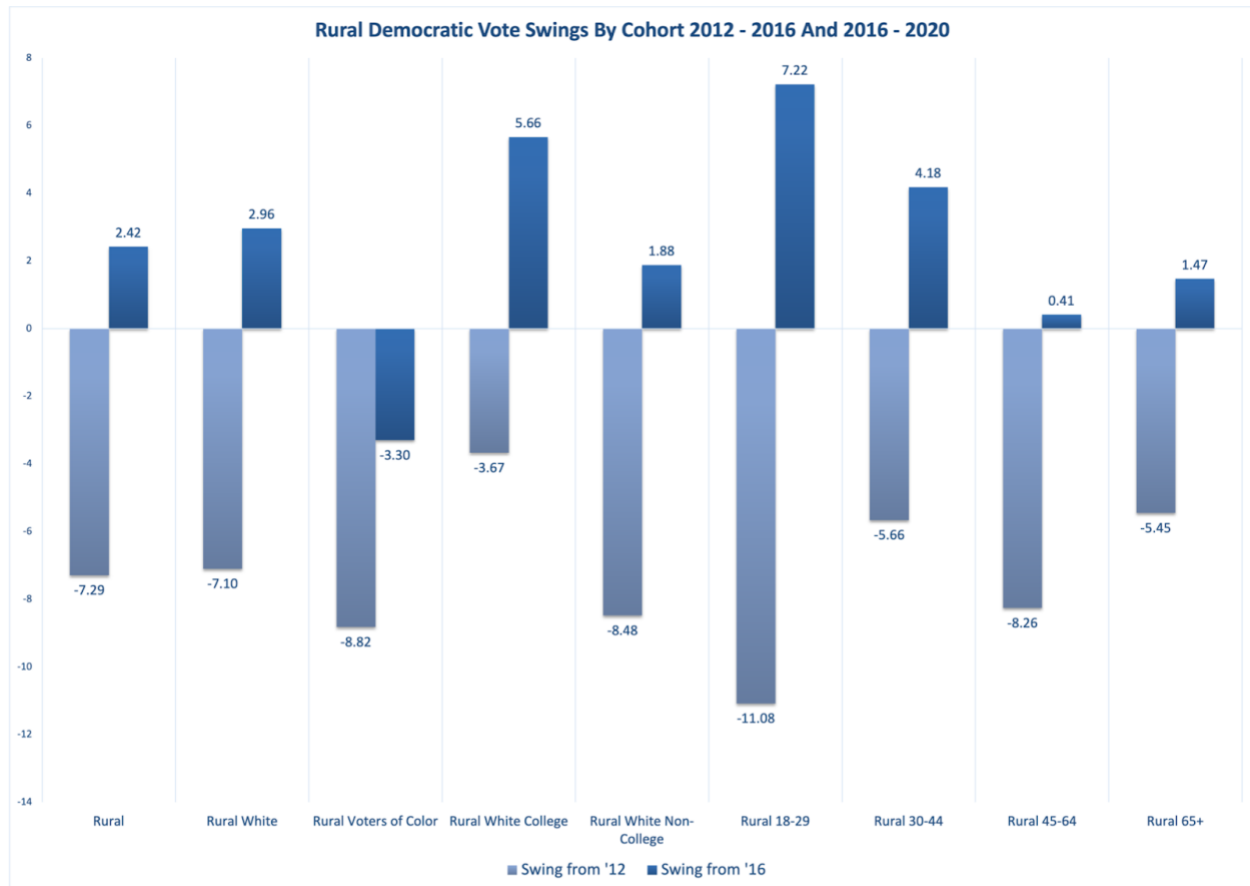
Whether you look at voting patterns or demographic trends, our form of government embedded in the Constitution, or the imminent danger of the rise of anti-democratic white nationalism, the growing strength of Trumpist Republicanism outside America's big metro areas is a huge problem. Democrats and the progressive movement have no other viable choice: if we are to build a long-term governing majority and defeat the attacks on our democratic system of government, we have to create a strategy for moving rural voters, small and mid-sized towns, and less populated states our way. And of all the political challenges we face, rapidly rebuilding Democratic and progressive support in these rural areas is among the hardest.

That statement in no way discounts the importance of registering and turning out the vote in big cities, or persuasion and GOTV efforts in big-city suburbs, or maximizing the youth vote in college towns and elsewhere. All of those strategies are essential to winning elections in the years to come, and they need to be well resourced. Thankfully, there are great organizations with proven organizing models for doing this work effectively.

What is far less-resourced, and what we need to learn much more about, is engaging the battle in rural America. Most of what urban-oriented Democrats think they know about rural and small-town voters is wrong: only a small percentage of them are farmers, they aren't all white, and they aren't all or even mostly impossible to persuade or organize for Democrats and progressive causes. Most importantly, while metro areas are growing as a percentage of the national population, and rural population is mostly shrinking, non-metro populations are still a significant share of the vote -- over 40% -- in most battleground states.

Winning more **rural and small-town (RST)** voters is hugely important, short and long-term, for several different reasons:

- Right now, the main people organizing in rural America are hard right, frequently white nationalist groups fervently in favor of Donald Trump's attack on democratic governance. If progressives and Democrats don't counter what is going on in rural areas and small to mid-sized towns, the violent, insurrectionist fervor is only going to intensify.
- RST voters are, contrary to conventional wisdom, among the swingiest voters there are among different demographic groups. They voted for Obama in the 40s, then plummeted to 32% for Hillary. They then went up 6% in 2018 before settling midway between that number and the 2016 percentage in 2020. If we make investments, there is a lot of potential for movement.



- Because of the electoral college, RST voters are disproportionately powerful in electing a president. Even the smallest population states get three electoral votes, and all but one (Nevada) of the traditional battleground states have a significant share of RST voters.
- While we don't know yet how redistricting is going to shake out, we do know that because Democratic base voters are more urban, they tend to live in highly concentrated congressional districts. RST voters tend to be distributed proportionally in more competitive districts.
- In a similar fashion, RST voters tend to get proportionally more representation in competitive state legislative maps, which means that in any purple state (let alone reddish ones), it is almost impossible to win majorities in state legislative chambers unless Democrats improve their RST vote.

The biggest reason: the Constitution favors small states in terms of representation in the U.S. Senate seats, meaning that RST voters have far more weight -- stunningly far more weight -- than big metro area voters. Let's start with the Senate map.

The Senate: Long Term Prognosis

In 2004, Arkansas, Louisiana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and West Virginia all had two Democratic senators; Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Montana, and Nebraska all had one. Fifteen Democratic senators from heavily rural states seems like a high-water mark for Dems, despite losing in Minnesota and South Dakota Senate races that year. But in 2006, Democrats picked up seats in Missouri and Montana, and in 2008, they picked up seats in Alaska and New Hampshire, bringing their net total to 17 senators from 12 states.

Today, those states mentioned above have a grand total of four Democratic senators, two of them from New Hampshire. One of them (Joe Manchin) won last time by about 3,000 votes. The other (Jon Tester) won by about 2,000. Maggie Hassan from NH is up in 2022, and her seat is considered one of the toughest to hold of all the Democratic senators this cycle. This trend puts into perspective the challenges we have going forward.

But the raw Senate representation numbers make an even stronger case for investing in rural and small-town voters. More and more of our nation's population are moving into big metro areas and the biggest states. Already, more than half of the population lives in just nine states. That means *less than half* of our population is represented in the Senate by 82 senators.

The 26 smallest states by population have only 18% of our citizens living in them, but of course, represent 52 senators.

And don't forget that several of our biggest states -- including Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin -- contain large swaths of rural and small-town territory that often swing elections.

However, before you go screaming into the woods and give up all hope for the Democrats controlling the Senate in the years to come, keep in mind the real potential we have over the long run if we only make the needed investments in small states and RST voters.

First, remember that a small and/or rural state does not necessarily equate to having a strong Republican lean. The most rural state in America is Vermont, which is also one of the most liberal. Other heavily rural states include Delaware, Maine, New Hampshire, and New Mexico, where Democrats hold seven of the eight Senate seats. There are other states which are not as rural, but which are certainly in the small population category, namely Hawaii and Rhode Island, both of which are heavily Democratic and have two Democratic senators.

Figure 1. Change in Rural Population of Color, 2010-2020

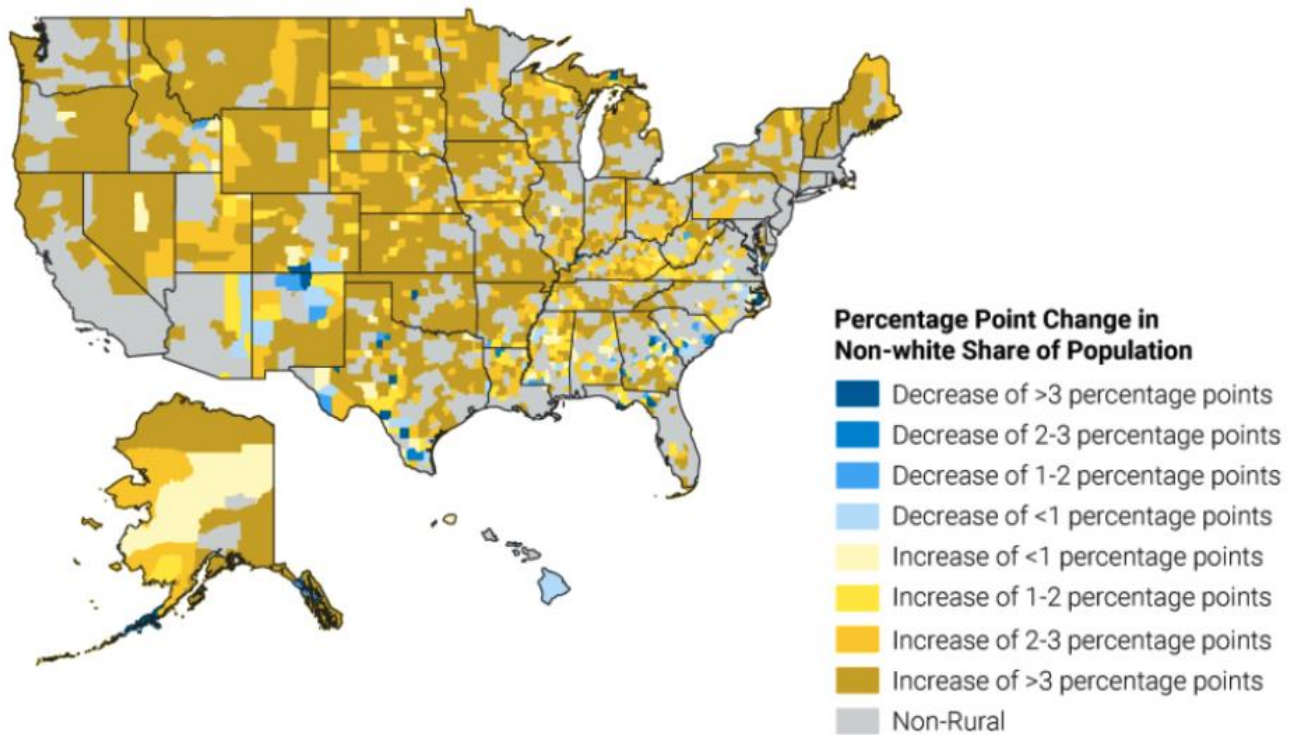
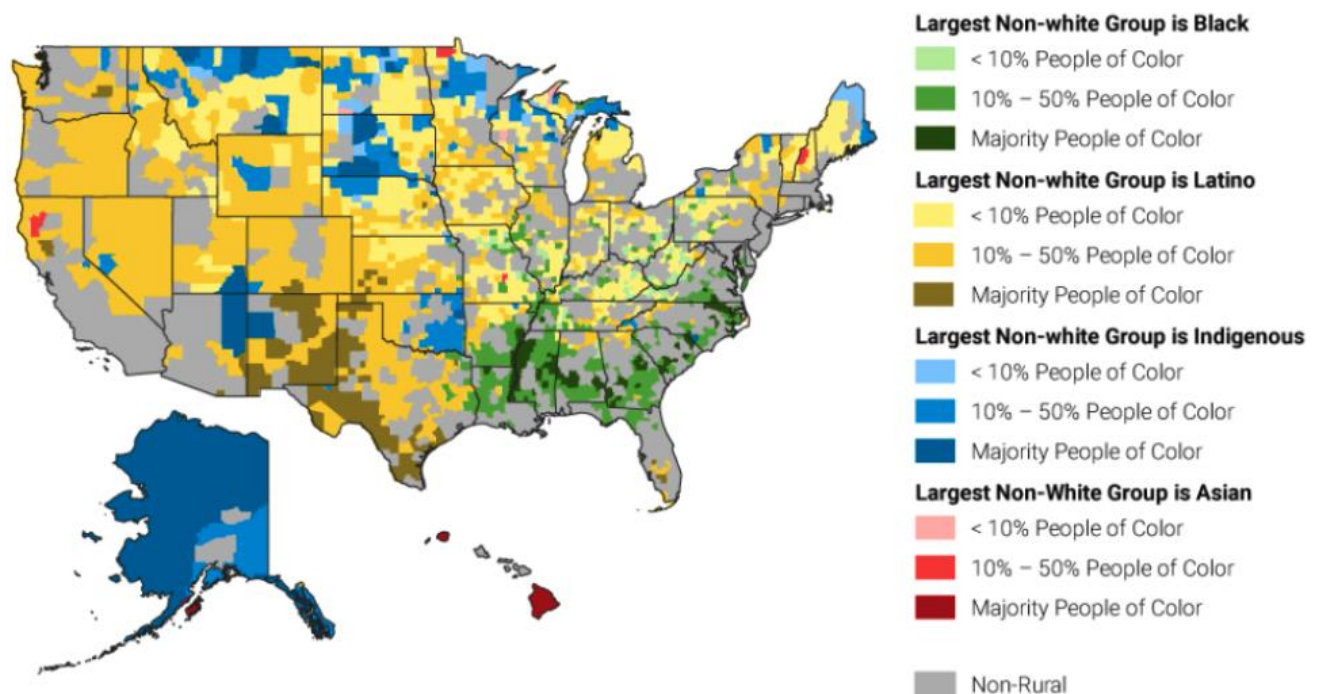


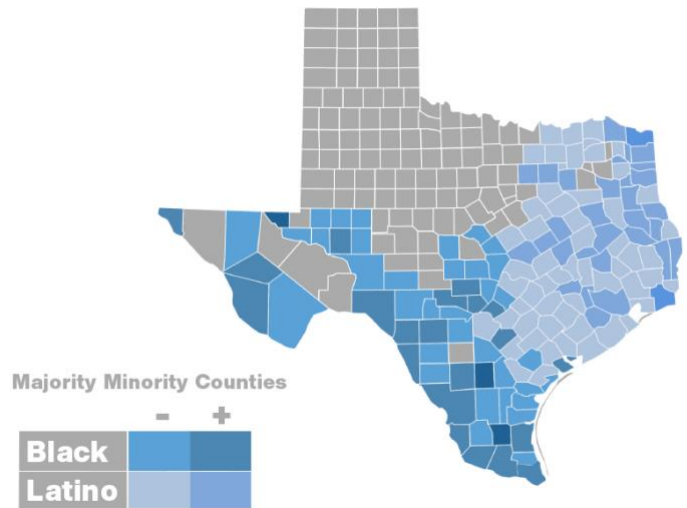
Figure 2. Rural Americans of Color in 2020



Source: Brookings Institute

Second, at least some rural states are changing demographically and politically. Some examples:

- Because of rising Latino population numbers and other recently naturalized immigrants, many states with large rural/small town populations are becoming more ethnically diverse, with urban areas in those states also growing, and that is going to change their politics over the next decade if we make the needed investments. Texas is now over 50% people of color, and elections there will continue to get closer if we invest in outreach strategies to the heavily Latino counties in rural South Texas and largely un-organized Black communities in East Texas. Georgia and Mississippi are now more than 40% people of color, with North Carolina only a little behind at 37% and South Carolina at 35%. Even historically heavily White and Republican Midwestern states like Kansas and Nebraska are now over 21% people of color, with that percentage growing steadily year after year.

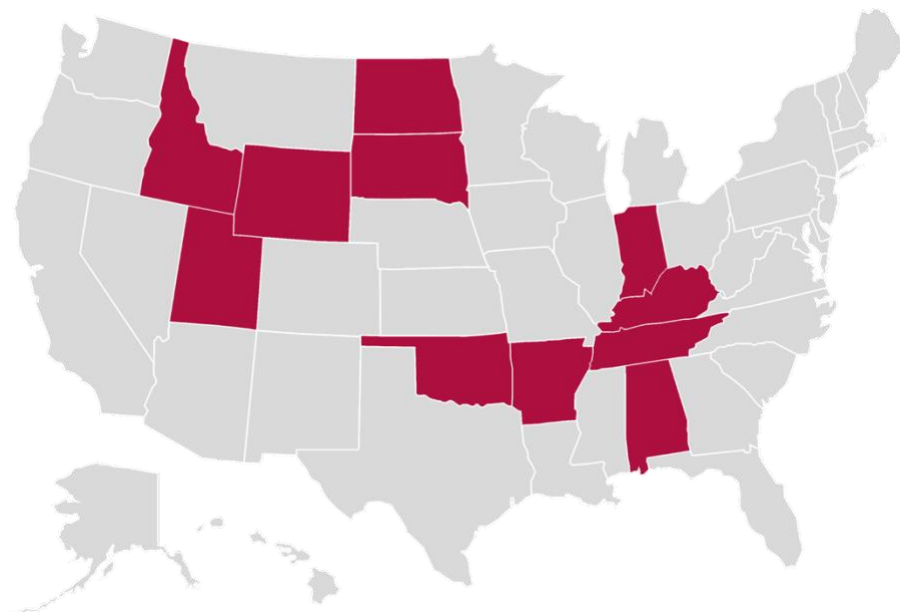


- Alaska has long been a more interesting state politically than the national stereotype, and it is quietly moving in a more Democratic direction. Alaska has had both a Democratic senator and Democratic governor in the last 20 years, and long-time Congressman Don Young has come very close to being beaten multiple times in the last few elections. The state legislative House chamber has had a mix of Democrats, Independents, and moderate Republicans in a power-sharing agreement for the last three terms. Anchorage and its suburbs, which contain the three most diverse high schools in the US, are now more than half of the state's population, and in the 2030s, Alaska will be more than 50% people of color. Democratic performance and registration statewide are steadily gaining about 1% a year. This will be a very competitive state within a couple of election cycles.
- Democrats have won governor or Senate elections in Montana six times since 2006, so this very rural state continues to be competitive. The state is still 83% White, but its multi-racial population has grown 185%, and the Latino population has grown 58% in the last decade.

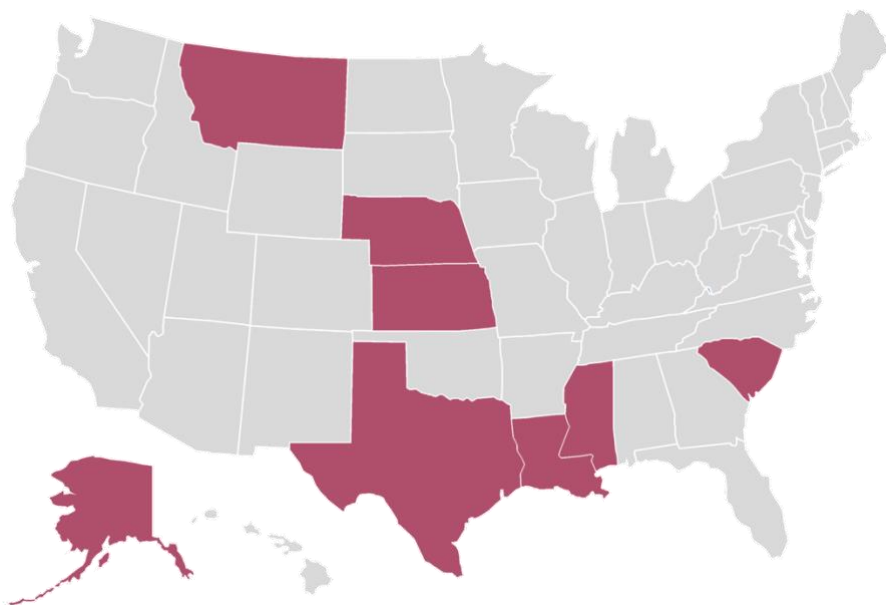
Keep in mind that in all cases, the demographic trends we're discussing are accelerating. Latino and immigrant populations, for example, are very young compared to the White population. If we don't forget about these states, we could see a new wave of states where we are winning Senate races soon.

So, what's the fight for a Senate majority look like in the decade to come?

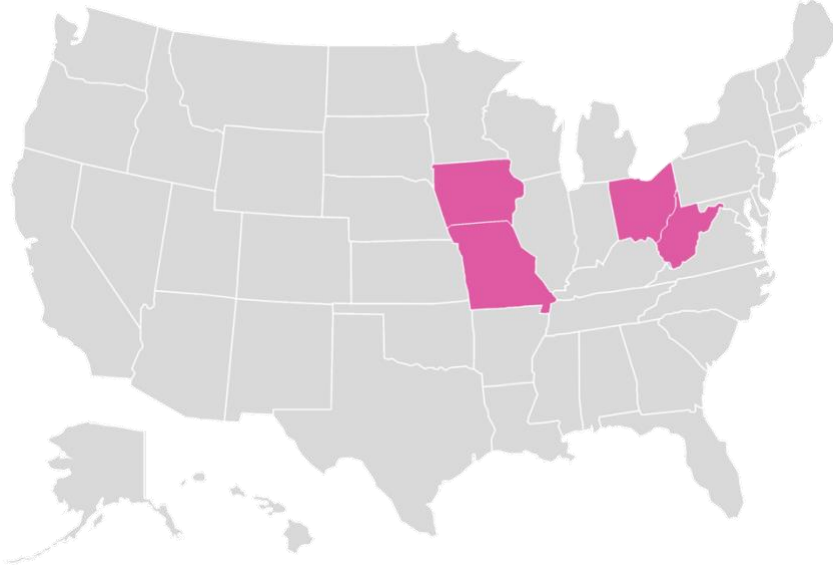
Category 1: Deep Red. We can always hope for miracles, but these are states where it is pretty unlikely we will see a Democratic senator in this decade: WY, ID, UT, ND, SD, OK, KY, TN, AL, AR, IN. That's 11 states and 22 senators.



Category 2: Red, but Changing. These states will remain challenging, but are moving our direction, and by the middle or end of the decade, with the right candidates and campaigns, we will have a chance to pick up some Senate seats in this category: AK, MT, NE, KS, MS, SC, TX, LA. That's another 7 states and 14 senators. Notice how rural that list is?



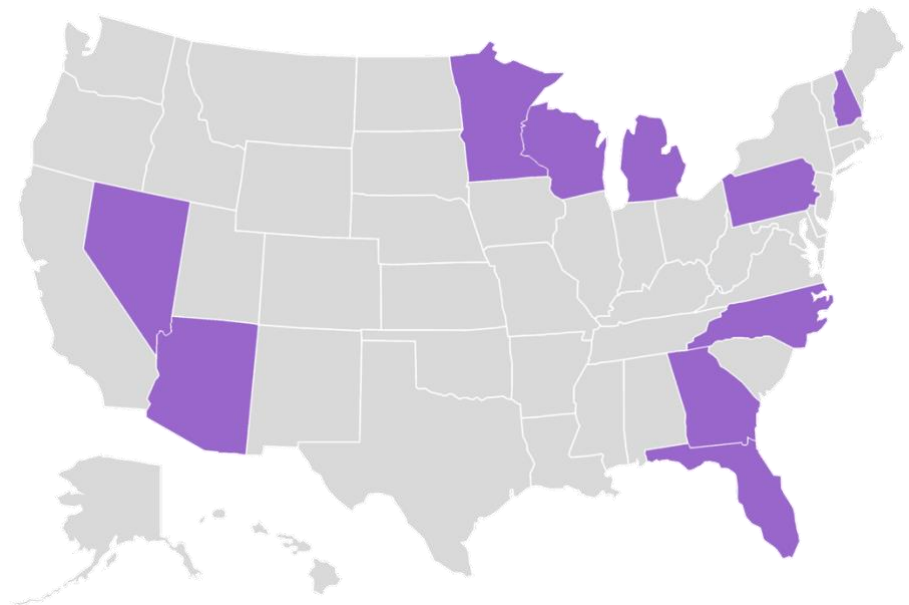
Category 3: States that used to be purple or blue states. Missouri, Iowa, Ohio, and West Virginia are four very working-class states with a lot of rural turf that used to be very open to Democrats but have been moving away from us in the past decade. Up until the Gore-Bush election in 2000, where Democrats were taken by surprise by WV going for Bush, the state had been one of the most reliably Democratic states in presidential elections, and it had two Democratic Senators. It is now one of the



strongest Trump states, but Manchin remains a popular local politician, and his approval rating has been going up this year. Missouri has moved strongly to the right but had a Democratic Governor and Senator only five years ago, and Jason Kander came extremely close in his Senate bid in 2016. Iowa and Ohio are populist states we can still win - In 2018, Sherrod Brown increased his win percentage over his 2012 margin when the Obama campaign spent millions there on GOTV, and Iowa

Democratic Congressional candidates won 3 of 4 races and almost won the 4th.

Category 4: All-out battleground states. In AZ, FL, GA, MI, MN, NV, NH, NC, PA, WI, the large majority of Senate elections will be competitive all decade long. MN has historically leaned D, but because rural and small-town voters are moving in the wrong direction, MN has increasingly become a swing state. That's ten states, 20 senators, 14 of which are currently Democratic. Again, note how much rural/small town turf is in these states. Arizona, Florida, and Nevada have fewer RST voters than the other states, but they are close enough that the RST votes still matter.



First, our odds of winning the Senate are very long if we don't start winning more in the second and third categories above, the lean Republican and old battleground bullets. In every single one of those states, rural and small-town voters are an extremely large and extremely determinative portion of the electorate. And second, in the battleground category, one where we clearly must do very well to have hopes of controlling the Senate, seven of the ten states have large and influential sectors of the state population that are rural.

The states where we need to invest in rural and small-town voters for the 2022 cycle and long term

Recommended target states for RST investment in the 2022 cycle:

States that the party committees and most groups are targeting. Classic battlegrounds with significant rural populations where the elections are usually close, and that will likely have hotly contested races for both Senate and governor, and usually other important down-ballot races as well. In 2022, those states are:

1. **Georgia.** Stacey Abrams is running for governor again, and Senator Warnock, because he won a special election, has to run again in 2022. This pair of races is going to be the highest-profile shootout of the cycle. Making sure we pull out all the stops to register and turn out Black voters in small towns and rural areas is going to be critical.
2. **New Hampshire.** Even with Sununu's decision not to challenge her for the Senate, Maggie Hassan is the most vulnerable Democratic senator on the ballot in 2022, as NH is always a closely contested state. There will also be at least one highly competitive congressional race in this heavily RST state. The state legislative chambers are also always competitive.
3. **Wisconsin.** It still isn't known whether or not Ron Johnson will run for reelection, but either way, this Senate race will be one of the closest, as the margins in WI elections have been razor-thin over the last decade. Additionally, Gov. Evers is up for reelection, and that will be another tight race. Despite strong margins for Democrats in Madison and Milwaukee, if we are not more competitive in the smaller towns and rural counties, we could be swamped.
4. **Pennsylvania.** The PA open seat will be another top Senate target in a traditionally close swing state. Governor Wolf is term-limited, so that is an open seat as well. We don't know what the congressional districts look like yet, but PA almost always has three to five competitive House districts. Trump won PA in 2016 by running up huge margins in rural counties and small to mid-sized

factory towns, and Biden took it back not only with big turnouts in Philly and Pittsburgh but by aggressively contesting those small and mid-sized counties.

5. **North Carolina.** NC doesn't have a gubernatorial race this cycle, but its open Senate seat will be one of the most competitive in the country -- it was the last state in the country to be called both in the presidential and Senate races in 2020. As with most states, the district lines aren't settled yet, but even if the Republican map is upheld, there will be at least one highly competitive US House race. NC is a surprisingly rural state, 39.8%, and has the [largest rural population outside of TX](#), many of them African-American and other people of color.

Rural Populations (1,000)	
State	Rural
Texas	3,648
North Carolina	3,200
Pennsylvania	2,817
Ohio	2,571
Michigan	2,519

Source: [XLS Urban and Rural Population by State - Census.gov](#)

6. **Arizona.** AZ will have a highly competitive Senate race, a highly competitive governor race, other important elections down-ballot. AZ does not have a large RST population but is such a tightly competitive state that those small numbers will likely matter.

Recommended states for long-term investment:

Investment in non-metro America needs to not just be a 2022 project. Over the next decade, for reasons outlined above, we have real potential to make purple states with major rural turf more blue and to turn a set of heavily non-metro states that are currently red or reddish into purple states.

There is an additional set of states with significant rural/small-town turf that not everyone considers tier one 2022 targets, but where we think significant 2022 investments could achieve important results and could help lay the groundwork for turning the state blue or purple in the years to come:

1. **Ohio.** Ohio has moved Republican in recent years, but Sherrod Brown increased his percentage in 2018, the governor's race was very close that year, and Democrats won a critical statewide Supreme Court race in 2020. There is an open Senate seat in 2022 with Tim Ryan running on our side, the governor seat is up with a strong Democratic candidate (former Dayton Mayor Nan Whalen), and there will likely be some congressional races in play. We need to keep investing to bring Ohio back into the purple zone, and small cities and rural gains will be key.

2. **Iowa.** Chuck Grassley will be 89 years old on Election Day and is running again in spite of polls showing that majorities of Iowa voters wish he would retire. The governor has never been especially popular and almost got beat in 2018. All four congressional races were competitive in 2018, three of the four were in 2020, and at least two will be this time around. The state House is in play and is targeted by the DLCC. Remember: this state voted for the Democratic candidate for president six of seven times between 1988 and 2012 and was represented in the Senate by Tom Harkin for 30 years up until his retirement in 2014. Democrats should not be giving up on Iowa.

3. **Michigan.** MI doesn't have a Senate race, but they will have a competitive governor race and other statewide offices up. Both houses of the state legislature are very much in play. There will likely be at least a couple of competitive US House races. And with MI a competitive state for most of the last century in presidential politics, we clearly need to keep investing here.

4. **Minnesota.** MN doesn't have a Senate race in 2022, but there is a lot going on in the state. We don't know yet whether Gov. Walz will have a tough race, but he could, and so could AG Keith Ellison. There will almost certainly be two to three close congressional races. Both legislative chambers are in play. And with MN moving from lean blue to squarely purple in recent years, we need to keep investing.

5. **Maine.** No Senate race here either, but Jared Golden's heavily rural House district is one of the most competitive in the country. Former right-wing Gov. LePage is running again for his old job, so there will be fireworks in that race. The Democrats control both legislative chambers, but both will be competitive in 2022. And ME is only a lean-Dem state in presidential politics, so it needs sustained investment.

6. **Alaska.** Lisa Murkowski will probably win reelection, but the Trumpies are mad at her and may cause some trouble both in the primary and general election -- the dynamics are very unpredictable, especially with the new ranked-choice voting. Ancient Congressman Don Young has had trouble winning reelection multiple times in recent years. The Democrats in the House have forged a six-year-old power-sharing arrangement with Independents and moderate Republicans. And, as written above, Democratic performance in the state has been rising steadily by about 1% a year for the past several years. If Democrats and progressives invest in AK, we will elect Democratic senators and a Democratic congressperson soon.

In addition to those six states are states that have been Republican over the last few decades but for demographic and other reasons have the potential to move toward purple. We start that list with Texas: if Democrats start winning statewide elections there, it transforms American politics. Smaller states on this list include KS, MS, MT, NE, and SC.

The persuasion potential for rural and small-town voters

One of the big reasons to have hope for rural states, and the rural counties in the big battleground states, is that RST voters are far more persuadable than conventional wisdom suggests. One of the biggest myths in the modern political era is that the cities are Democratic, rural America is solidly and consistently Republican, and that most swing voters are in the suburbs. The recent history of voting patterns does not bear this out, and in fact, confirms that there are wider swings in rural, small town, and mid-sized town voters than in most other parts of the electorate.

According to Catalist, the urban percentage for the Democratic presidential candidates in 2012, 2016, and 2020 was identical in every one of those elections, 71%. The suburban percentage went from 50% in 2012 to 48% in 2016, then bounced up to 54% in the 2018 midterm and 53% in the 2020 presidential race. Meanwhile, the rural percentage was 38% for Obama in 2012 (after being 45% in 2008), dropped all the way to 30% in 2016, popped up six points to 36%, and was 33% in 2020. In other words, not even including the big Obama bump in 2008, the rural percentage between 2012

and 2020 had a spread of 8%, more than any other geographical sector of the electorate. In fact, that eight-point spread was bigger than any other major demographic group. Some major groups, like women and urban voters, barely moved. Some, including men and suburban voters, bounced around within a five-point range. The biggest other spreads were among African-Americans and Latinos, both in the six to seven range, still short of the eight-point range for rural voters.

Going further back, exit poll numbers showed Clinton in 1996 got 45% of the rural vote, even though he was running against Mr. Rural America Bob Dole. After eight years of declines in rural voting for Democrats, the DNC under Howard Dean decided to invest heavily in rural voters and small states through its 50 State Strategy, and the rural vote went back up in 2006 and 2008, whereas noted above, Obama matched Clinton's 45% performance.

Factory Towns

Here's another perspective on how many swing votes are in non-metro America: the groups American Family Voices (of which I am the board chair) and 21st Century Democrats commissioned a new report we called [*Factory Towns*](#). The report studied nine states, plus counties in upstate New York, that are the part of the country widely known as the Rust Belt. The nine states included Pennsylvania and most of the Midwest: IL, IN, IA, MI, MN, MO, OH, WI. These are the states that have been hardest hit by deindustrialization and factory closings, by trade policy and the loss of private-sector union jobs.

The report divided the counties into six different categories: metro/big cities, big-city suburbs, college towns, rural counties dominated by agriculture, mid-sized manufacturing counties, and small manufacturing counties. The report's last two categories were focused on the manufacturing heavy working-class counties outside of major metro areas, one with mid-sized towns of 35,000 to 100,000 in population, and the other counties without a town that size, but still more manufacturing-oriented as opposed to more purely agriculturally based. These "factory town" counties, which were 40% of the voters in the states studied, were the focus of the report.

The report discovered that Biden gained almost 541,000 votes in the biggest cities in the states/counties studied and more than 506,000 votes in the suburban counties of those big cities in terms of net votes. Biden also added to the Obama 2012 vote margin in the smaller towns dominated by big colleges and universities, picking up 140,000 plus from their 2012 margins. However, that's where the good news ends.

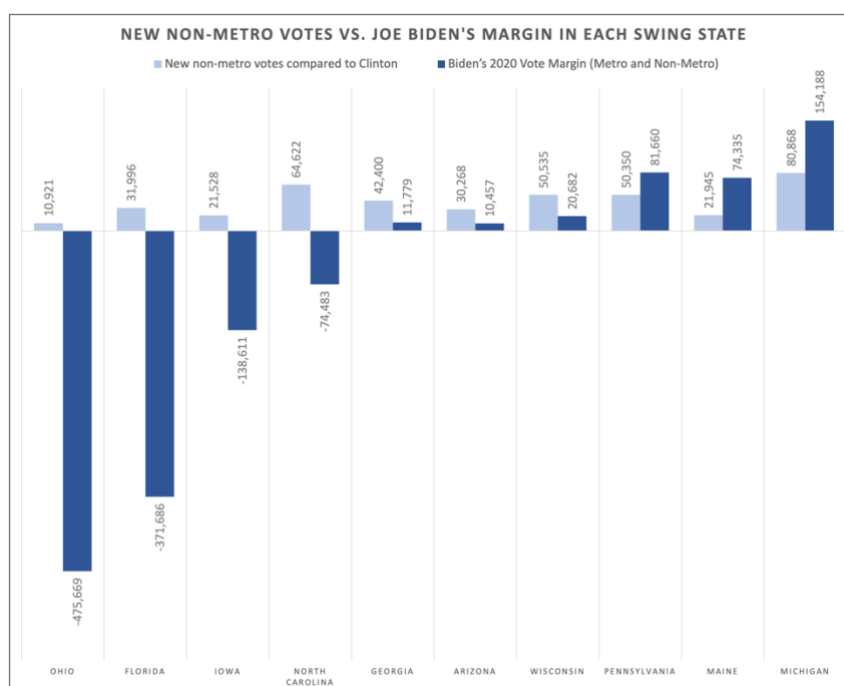
In midsized, working-class towns in these states, even son of Scranton Joe Biden lost major ground. In 2012, these were the most closely contested kinds of counties, and Obama won them overall by a margin of roughly 106,000 votes, an important factor in his victory in the battleground states studied. Democratic performance in the following two elections fell off sharply. Even though Biden did slightly better in these counties than Hillary Clinton did, the Democratic margin change in 2020 went deeply underwater: we lost these kinds of counties by almost 661,000 votes, almost 767,000 votes worse than in 2012.

The report also looked at the presidential voting patterns in two different kinds of rural counties: rural counties with a more agriculturally based economy and rural counties with a relatively strong manufacturing economy. The Democratic presidential candidates suffered serious losses in both, but

the losses were worse in the counties with a bigger manufacturing presence. Our research found that rural counties with a higher reliance on manufacturing jobs 20 years ago shifted harder to the right from 2012-2020 than those with a lower reliance on manufacturing jobs. In the small manufacturing counties we studied, Democrats had a net loss in their voting margin from 2012 to 2020 of more than 1,868,000 votes.

So, looking at just the pure raw numbers, the vote margins that shifted away from us in those mid-sized manufacturing counties, but especially the rural manufacturing counties, dwarf the changes in vote margins in the suburbs and cities. When you combine the losses in factory towns, it is easy to see why the proverbial "blue wall" crumbled and why states like IA, OH, and MO have gone from being highly competitive battleground states to going for Trump by sizable margins.

How New Non-Metro Votes Contributed to Joe Biden's Victory in Key Battleground States



From a [RuralOrganizing.org](https://www.ruralorganizing.org) report, this graph demonstrates both the challenge and opportunity for Democrats in non-metro states. The lighter blue color shows the number of votes Joe Biden picked up in non-metro counties within critical swing states. The darker blue color shows the number of votes that decided the electoral outcome of those states. A negative number means Joe Biden lost. A positive number means that Joe Biden won.

In 10 of the key battleground states, although Joe Biden lost the non-metro vote, compared to Hillary Clinton in 2016, Joe Biden picked up over 3.5 million non-metro votes in these states. In Arizona, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, his new non-metro pickups were enough to push him over the top.

Going deeper into the Catalist crosstabs

If you go deeper into the Catalist crosstabs, you can discover even bigger pockets of persuadable voters. For example, while rural 18-29 year-olds always tend to be more Democratic than their elders, in 2018, that cohort jumped all the way to 48% who voted Democratic in the congressional elections. While that number slipped back down to 41% in 2020 as more Trump voters turned out, there is clearly more potential in the younger cohorts for Democrats.

On the other side of things, in 2012, rural people of color voted for Obama at 74%, but that number slipped dramatically in 2016 and 2020, to 66% in 2016 and only 62% in 2020. Clearly, more outreach - focused on persuasion as well as GOTV -- is needed for rural POC.

There is clearly a lot more to explore in terms of which rural and small-town voters should be the focus of our organizing and messaging. For example, rural white voters without a college degree are very challenging for Democrats right now -- Obama got 31% of them in 2012, we haven't made it out of the 20s since. But with focused investments in long-term rural organizing among younger voters, people of color, among rural voters who come from or used to come from union households, and women, we have a real chance to significantly change the numbers. **And if we are able to improve rural margins even by 2-3 percent, this could provide the margin of victory in many battlegrounds.**

The top ten challenges in non-metro organizing

Hopefully, by now, the reader is convinced of the critical importance of targeting non-metro counties and voters. Now let's look at the challenges in doing that, and what we know from our work is successful in moving RST voters.

The good news is that RST voters are more persuadable than conventional wisdom has declared them, and RST voters favor most of what is in the Democrats' issue agenda. The bad news is that due to decades of political neglect by Democrats, economic struggle, and the increase of right-wing disinformation and populist rhetoric, Democrats and progressive's challenges in mid and small towns and rural America are not going to be overcome easily or quickly. Here are the **top ten** challenges we have to contend with:

1. Republicans have been courting non-metro voters for many years; haven't Democrats haven't been showing up much. The legacy of this is the fallback assumption in rural America that Republicans are the ones who care about and fight for rural voters. [Polling](#) commissioned by [RuralOrganizing.org](#) showed that even when RST voters agree with Democrats on the issue -- and they do much of the time -- they assume it is the Republicans who are with them on those issues.
2. Race and cultural issues can be highly effective wedges, and the Republicans have brilliantly played those cards for a long time, ever more openly in the age of Trump. Part of it is language and message, as the progressive talking points tend to be written by people sitting at a computer in big cities or suburbs. We need to make sure that our political language is not alienating or condescending and also prioritize recruiting and training organizers who come from rural and smaller towns. Addressing race, research among non-metro voters shows that it is better *not* to avoid the topic, but instead to

use tested messaging such as the [Race-Class Narrative](#), starting the conversation by talking about politicians and corporate special interests who use race to divide and distract us from the pressing issues we all have a stake in.

3. Voter files in rural counties tend to be more outdated and not kept up as well, with the lack of recent investment by Democratic Party entities and progressive groups making it more difficult both to organize voters there but also to analyze the results with the detail available in metro area counties. We need to start making substantial investments in improving rural county voter files and call lists.
4. Added to the data challenge is the lack of broadband in many rural areas -- something that will start to improve because of the recent infrastructure bill but will pose a problem for a good while. This is a big problem for organizers and canvassers working rural turf, but it's also a major issue in basic communications, as so much political discourse happens online.
5. About 25% of rural America is now people of color, up from 19% in the 2010 census, so the percentage is growing rapidly, but sending organizers who are people of color into rural areas has challenges: the days of violence and danger for people of color doing organizing and voter registration in rural counties are not limited to the past. That is especially true with the resurgence of white nationalist groups over the last five years and the frightening increase in hate crimes. As our organizations and campaigns send non-White organizers into these communities, we will need to spend additional resources to ensure their safety.
6. One important challenge is distance. It takes a lot of time, fuel, and wear and tear to organize rural/small town communities, with one organizer often working in regions where it might be several hours across.
- 7.. The great majority of the progressive groups in most states regularly convene in one to two major urban areas, making it hard to build trust, visibility, and relationships with the groups and leaders in more remote parts of the state. For example, often, the rural groups aren't included or are an afterthought at the state c3/c4 voter engagement tables, where many of the strategy conversations happen, and resources are allocated. In many cases, the issues the statewide politicians or Democratic Party are talking about fall flat in small-town communities, where they have a very different perspective. It's very easy for rural people to identify the messages that come out of and are meant to communicate to the cities.
8. There are amazing, talented leaders in rural regions, but it is often difficult to retain them. Once they have training and experience, these leaders are often recruited into other higher-paying jobs or jobs with more professional opportunities in the cities.
9. In small-town communities, people are interconnected with and rely heavily on their neighbors. Because there is less visible support for progressive issues and Democratic leaders, people notice those who take progressive public positions. This has always been a serious problem, but with the increasingly nasty political culture driven by Trumpism, it is growing worse. Progressive leaders in small towns have gotten fired, divorced, threatened, and shunned in school and church communities. Rural groups need to be ready to provide strong, consistent support and community backing to these leaders.

10. With the decline of local and regional newspapers and radio stations, people outside of metro areas are hearing less and less about local issues, local groups' communications efforts, and local candidates. National media stations and talk shows are becoming ever more dominant, which is one of the biggest reasons for the decline in ticket-splitting. Add to this the right-wing investments in buying up local media, with Sinclair's large collection of local TV news stations, which all parrot far-right talking points a case in point.

The years of low investment into rural organizing and communications infrastructure in counties that are not part of a big metro area are costing us in a lot of different ways. That means we have a lot of challenges to overcome. The good news, though, is that where progressive organizations, state parties, and county organizations are making needed investments, we are starting to see results.

What works in non-metro America

Despite the many challenges, recent investments in rural and small-town organizing and communications have yielded significant increases in support for progressive issues and candidates. Together, the Rural Democracy Initiative network and other campaigns have refined numerous winning strategies over just the past three years

Deep canvassing. An array of community organizing networks led by People's Action have pioneered a technique for voter persuasion they call deep canvassing. Whether on the doors or on the phone, they engage in much longer than usual -- an average of 10 minutes per person rather than the usual 30-second canvassing approach -- dialogues with voters that are a genuine give and take. The results have been astounding. In one study published in the American Political Science Review, the deep canvassing technique was found to be 102 times more effective than a typical voter persuasion contact.

Deep canvassing works with all different kinds of voters, but it has been especially effective compared to other techniques in terms of breaking through in small towns and rural counties.

Some of the biggest advances have been in messaging:

- Hard work is something RST voters really relate to in their everyday lives. If Democrats want to promote things like paid family leave, childcare and child tax credits, and other new government programs, they need to emphasize these things help hard-working Americans. The [Winning Jobs Narrative](#) framework offers many insights about how to communicate about work, jobs and the economy with working people.
- RST voters strongly relate to small business. When Democrats pick fights with abusive big businesses, which they should and which RST voters will likely support, they should always say they are doing it at least in part to benefit small businesses, to help those small businesses compete with the "big boys."
- Farmers are not the end all and be all in rural America anymore, as less than 2% of the population is actively engaged in farming. But most people in small towns either originally come from farm families, used to be farmers themselves, or they know and do business with

farmers. Farmers, like other small businesspeople, are widely admired in small towns and rural America, and Democrats should talk about them more.

- According to polling for more than a couple of decades now, freedom is the single most valued word in the American political dictionary, and RST voters prize it even more than the rest of the population. Republicans use the word all the time, mainly talking about freedom from government. Democrats need to contest this definition, talking about freedom as the ability to chart your own course, take care of your family, and live independently from the big businesses and wealthy CEOs trying to dominate your life.
- The messengers are even more important than the message: what works best in rural America is authentic, local candidates, spokespeople, activists, and staff people. If you have the kind of candidate who is grounded in the community, telling stories about working people, small businesses, and farmers, the Democrat will have a much better chance than a one-size-fits-all generic campaign crafted in Washington, DC.

One of the key tactics that works in rural organizing is to directly push back against some of the challenges listed above. For example, the problems we have with local media can be softened by buying ads on local radio stations and newspapers: the owners of these outlets are desperate for ad money and will start treating our candidates and groups better when they are getting ad revenue from them. Another example is visibility: if we can get a few key people in small towns to put up yard signs, it will make other Democrats in the area braver about speaking their views.

Keep in mind that many local races are non-partisan, which makes it easier for Democrats to win. The more Democrats win at the local level, the more we build our capacity and infrastructure. Another tactic to explore is running Independents for some offices, which has helped us win a variety of races (including the governor of Alaska a few years back).

Examples of rural organizing that have made a difference

Using these messaging, organizing, and communications models, organizations, state parties, and campaigns are starting to see success when they make the kinds of investments needed in non-metro counties. Here are some examples:

1. 1000 Women Strong, Georgia. A new organization called 1000 Women Strong was started right after the general election in 2020. They saw an opportunity to build permanent, creative space to develop leadership and organizing skills for thousands of Black women in rural communities. With unique insight into what it would take to win in largely Black counties of rural Southwest Georgia, they approached RDI with an urgent proposal for intensive, local get-out-the-vote to reach 102,000 households. Within a week, donors in the RDI community contributed their first \$150,000 to hire staff, print materials, and be ready to knock on doors in a part of the state no other group could reach. The 22 rural counties they worked in had some of the largest gains from the general election to the runoff, providing the margin of victory in the Senate races.

2. Pennsylvania United. This past winter, the members and staff at PA United sought out candidates across Western PA to run for local office through their new "Our Communities Can't-Wait" campaign. Each chapter took the time to recruit and train poor and working people - people who never in their lives thought they should be a candidate for office. Of the 26 candidates who ran for city council, Mayor, and school board, in places like Erie, State College, Greensburg, and Crawford, 22 won their primary elections, and 14 won in the 2021 general.



Pennsylvania United

3. We the People

Michigan. We the People Michigan (WTP) provided one of the clearest examples in 2020 of building power through a multi-racial coalition that unites rural and urban

leaders. Beyond their work carefully stitching together a statewide coalition, WTP also led one of the most expansive deep canvass operations in the country across 14 mostly rural counties. The result? Leaders developed by WTP won 19 municipal and school board positions across seven rural counties. And the presidential margins from 2016 to 2020 shifted significantly toward Joe Biden, particularly in the top third of the state, including the rural Upper Peninsula. While Biden failed to improve on Clinton's margins in metro Detroit, his improvement elsewhere provided the difference. And their dedicated activists didn't stop on Nov 4 -- they became the public force defending the results in the harrowing weeks that followed. WTP Executive Director Art Reyes made national news as he confronted Michigan legislative leaders at the Detroit airport en-route to meet with Donald Trump at the White House and hear Trump's request to block Michigan's election results.

4. Wisconsin Farmers Union. Wisconsin Farmers Union (WFO) was founded in 1930, but this historic organization broke incredible new ground in 2020 with innovative and timely campaigns. Their inspiring partnership with Wisconsin's immigrant advocacy group (and RDI grantee), Voces de la Frontera, won better conditions for meat-packing workers in rural Wisconsin. WFO also led a high impact advertising campaign that urged action to protect the U.S. Postal Service from the Trump administration's attacks geared toward undermining the election. And WFO trained dozens of their farmer members to lead conversations with thousands of rural voters about local "fair maps" anti-gerrymandering policy - winning 13 of 14 county-level fair maps resolutions on the ballot. By the end of 2020, 54 counties had passed fair maps resolutions, and 28 counties had passed referendums.

5. Wisconsin Democratic Party. The Wisconsin Democratic Party made an extraordinary commitment in the 2018 and 2020 cycle to gaining ground in rural counties. They organized more than 90 neighborhood volunteer teams in rural counties, and their program resulted in increasing the



Wisconsin Democratic Party

Democratic vote in every rural county in the state. In the 22 reddest rural counties, they increased the Democratic vote enough that it would have provided the margin of victory for Biden just in those counties.

5. Bold Nebraska and the Nebraska Democratic Party. Jane KleeB founded an organization called Bold Nebraska that was devoted to rural organizing, starting out fighting the Keystone XL pipeline, which they successfully killed. Bold's "Cowboys and Indians Alliance" in western NE became a powerful rural organizing model for the rest of the country. Jane then became chair of the

NE Democratic Party, and in the four years since she has been playing that role, NE has a net gain of more than 140 Democrats who have won local elections, with a win rate in 2020 of 71%.

Our theory of change

How do we propose to take advantage of the potential for persuading RST voters outlined in the section above?

We have three broad overarching strategies, as well as a view on the different kinds of counties in non-metro America and how to approach them. Let's start with the three big ideas:

1. Focus on engaging with, registering to vote, and turning out the people of color and Bernie populists who live in rural areas and small/mid-sized towns.

As we have mentioned earlier, 25% of the people who live in rural America are people of color (10 years ago, that percentage was 20%, which shows how quickly the POC numbers are growing in small towns and rural areas). However, Black, Latino, Native American, and refugee and immigrant populations outside of big metro areas are rarely targeted as aggressively in Democratic Party and progressive registration and GOTV campaigns as their metro area counterparts. The result is that their registration and turnout numbers tend to be extremely low. And most voter engagement campaigns do not sufficiently emphasize culturally relevant persuasion, which is especially important among rural BIPOC communities that have moved to the right in the past two cycles. If we make the investments in these especially underrepresented voters, it will make a big difference in the net margins in the non-metro counties.

You add to that turnout effort what we call the Bernie populists. There is a long tradition in this country, dating back to the first populist revolt of the 1880s, of rural anti-big business economic populism. That tradition, while no longer a majority of rural voters, still is out there today. Note that in the 2016 Democratic primary contest, Bernie won most of the smallest and most rural states and did very well in the rural areas of the Midwest as well. Those rural Bernie voters did not perform well for Hillary: many did not turn out, some went for the Green candidate, and some even voted for

Trump, who ran to Hillary's left on trade and Wall Street. These populist, anti-establishment RST voters got no attention from Hillary's campaign in 2016, and that lack of outreach definitely showed.

The bottom line is that doing better in non-metro areas is not only about persuading moderates. We can win a lot of votes if we engage, register, and turn out the Democratic base voters, both in terms of POC voters and the Bernie populist types.

2. Connect with RST voters with words they are comfortable with, and issues that are on their minds. See the bullets about message and messengers above: we can't emphasize this kind of messaging enough. It has always been true, but it is even more true in this polarized and mistrustful era: rural is an identity, and people who live in smaller towns and out in the country have lives that look very different than people who live in sprawling metropolitan urban areas. Their language is different, their culture is different, and their mistrust of and cynicism about people from big cities tends to be high.

3. Talk about economic issues. Some Democrats believe that the only path to victory is to talk about how terrible Trump is or to talk about social issues that they think suburbanites will like. If we are going to compete in rural areas and small towns, we need to talk about economics with these voters in a way they relate to - good local jobs, hard work, cost of things they need like prescription drugs, health care and housing.

Fortunately, RST voters like many of the same things that working-class voters in metro areas do. Polling shows they are aligned with Democrats on lowering health care costs, raising taxes on the wealthy, tougher regulations of Wall Street and Big Tech, the creation of new jobs in solar and wind energy, expanding Social Security benefits, expanding affordable childcare, extending the child tax credit, and a host of other economic issues. But in order for them to know we are in favor of these things, we need to talk about them on the campaign trail and run ads mentioning those issues and how we have delivered on them. One important note - RST voters are particularly mobilized by trade and outsourcing of jobs, which drew them to Trump. We need to have an answer on this issue to get many of them back.

Beyond these big picture ideas, our next step is to develop and target specific strategies and research for seven different kinds of non-metro counties:

1. Counties with agriculturally based economies. Some rural counties' economies really are still dominated mainly by farms and ranches and the local businesses that service those farms and ranches. They don't have local factories or service sectors. These kinds of counties would need their own ag-oriented strategy.

2. Factory Town counties. These are featured in the Factory Towns report mentioned earlier, defined as counties with over 13% of the county's economy (20% higher than the national average) in the manufacturing sector. Some of these counties are smaller and more rural, and some are mid-sized counties. These counties lost more net Democratic votes from 2012 to 2020 than any other kind of county.

3. College town counties. These are smaller counties that are dominated by a good-sized university or college. Not surprisingly these tend to be more liberal, and Democrats gained about 100,000 net votes in these kinds of counties from 2012 to 2020. It is crucial that progressives and Democrats pay attention to registering and turning out the vote of students not only in the huge, big city university towns, but also to these mid-sized and small colleges in smaller towns.

4. Travel and tourism counties. Think counties in or adjacent to national parks or other recreation and tourism destinations. We need to do more analysis of these kinds of counties, but we know some of them tend to be more liberal politically.

5. Indian reservations. The counties that include Indian reservations often have huge barriers to voter participation and have correspondingly very low registration numbers and low turnout in elections but tend heavily toward the Democratic Party. Native-led groups organizing on reservations have had a major impact in boosting engagement.

6. Rural counties that have heavy populations of either Latinos or African-Americans. In the Southeast, there are quite a few rural counties with majority Black populations. In the Southwest, including Texas, there are many rural counties with majority Latino counties (east Texas also counties with large Black populations). As with the reservation counties, registration and turnout tends to be low in these counties.

7. Mixed counties. There are also a good-sized number of counties that have a genuine mix of economic and demographic factors. For example, one part of the county might contain a major tourist area and be more liberal, while the rest of the county is farmland and more conservative. Or one town in the county has a modest-sized college, while the other side of the county has a small factory. And while we haven't talked much about the "exurbs" because they are part of extended metro areas, some counties are a mix of suburban, exurban, and more traditional agriculture. These mixed counties clearly need a strategy all their own.

The Factory Towns report gives us a lot of data on those kinds of counties and some data on college town counties and agricultural counties, but in general, RDI needs to do more research and analysis on which organizing strategies work best in each because non-metro counties are not one-size-fits-all.

RDI and the other organizations working in this space have a critical role to play in conducting and assembling more research about what does and doesn't work in non-metro America. Questions to explore include: What are the best mediums and platforms for communicating in rural counties? How do we best use the exciting new relational organizing tools being developed by progressive groups in small towns? We need to find out more about whether former urban dwellers moving to rural areas are likely Democrats or likely Republicans and do more research to understand what drives the Bernie populist voters. We need more in-depth messaging research about the Factory Town counties and how to make the Race-Class Narrative and economic narratives more effective in terms of partisan politics. We need to keep exploring how to add scale and heft to deep canvassing techniques. All of these examples, and many more, need more research and analysis if we are going to make Democratic and progressive gains in non-metro America in the years to come.

Conclusion

The math here is simple: going back to the Factory Towns report, Democrats were able to gain about 1.1 million votes on their margins in metro areas in the presidential races between 2012 and 2020, but we lost 3.2 million on those margins in the non-metro counties. Or the math in the Senate: there are 31 states where the majority of the voters lives outside of urban areas. Or the math in the Electoral College: there is only one battleground state (NV) where the non-metro area vote doesn't play an outsize role in who wins the state.

Democrats have no choice if they want to win enough elections to govern in this country; we have to do a much better job of competing in rural and mid-sized counties. RDI's program of investment and research has already had some big successes: now we need to expand and deepen that reach and research.

The good news is that there are a lot of swing voters in non-metro America, and a lot of voters who would lean Democrat but who have not been turning out to vote because the Democratic Party and the progressive movement doesn't pay enough attention to them. The Democratic Party's economic issue agenda is as appealing to RST voters as it is to urban and suburban voters. And we have a growing track record of targeted investments that make a serious impact in this turf. Joe Biden made enough of a dent in these counties to win the key battlegrounds in 2020. Stacey Abrams and a rich host of Black-led groups led an organizing effort in Georgia that gave Democrats three huge statewide victories in 2020. Effective organizing in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and mid-sized factory towns made important strides that allowed the state to go blue in the 2020 presidential and Senate elections.

Rural and small-town organizing, and RDI investment, is making a difference, but we need to immediately scale up a serious, sustained investment in these counties, one commensurate with their political importance. If Democrats can keep building enthusiasm and keep their persuasion efforts going strong in metro America while adding 3-5% to the Democratic vote share in non-metro America, Democrats can build a strong governing majority and win the 2022 and 2024 elections decisively.