

States of the Union

HOW TO REACH THE RURAL VOTER

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THIS is a working paper on rural votes and Democratic hopes. Mr. Mondale, please take note. Jimmy Carter could not have won in 1976 without strong rural support. With similar strength in 1980 he might not have lost. Of the 31 "Rural Influence" states—states with nonmetropolitan populations of 30 per cent or more—Carter in 1976 carried 14 for a total of 126 electoral votes. From the remaining 17 Gerald Ford collected 95 electoral votes. Had the totals been reversed, Ford would have won the election by five electoral votes.

In that election Carter carried Pennsylvania and Ohio, too, both narrowly (Pennsylvania by 123,000, Ohio by 11,000). Those victories occurred not only because Carter won substantial urban majorities, but also—to draw from an interview I had with his pollster, Patrick Caddell—"because we were able more or less to break even in the rural areas, something our [Democratic] predecessors had been unable to do." If Carter had lost Ohio and Pennsylvania, Ford would have won the election by 47 electoral votes.

In 1980 Carter suffered significant rural reversals. Ronald Reagan polled 53 per cent of the rural vote against 41 per cent for Carter and 6 per cent for John Anderson. Looked at another way, about one-fourth of Reagan's 8.4 million popular majority came from rural ballots. The Carter declines among nonmetropolitan voters may have had less to do with specifically rural grievances than with such wider sources of discontent as rising prices and imprisoned hostages. Nevertheless, the 1980 election can be seen as another illustration of the Democrats' frequent failure to attract rural votes in Presidential races. In the past eight such races, only three Democratic candidates have polled ru-

ral majorities: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Carter in 1976—the three who won.

The party's rural vulnerabilities appear especially troublesome in the light of a suburban electorate that continues to expand and of a central-city electorate that continues to shrink. The votes cast in our five biggest cities—Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit—dropped from 13.8 per cent of the national total in 1960 to 9.2 per cent in 1976. By 1980 they had slipped another notch, to 8.6 per cent.

To be sure, metropolitan voters still outnumber their nonmetropolitan compatriots by at least two to one. (The 1980 voting age population percentages were 68 and 32, respectively.) But if we divide the metropolitan electorate into its two natural components, the central cities (predominantly Democratic) and the suburbs (predominantly Republican), we then have three voting groups of nearly equal strength, with the rural sector emerging in some regions as a "swing vote."

Moreover, all the demographic evidence of late suggests that the rural vote will loom larger in elections to come. And as Richard Scammon has observed about American politics, "Demography is destiny." Thus the somnolence urban-based Democrats sometimes sink into when presented with rural political opportunities has begun to resemble what anthropologists call "cultural lag," meaning a group's delayed response to decisive social or technological change.

In fairness, the liberals' attitude is shared by much of a metropolitan public whose view of rural America is a mixture of nostalgia and condescension, a blend that sentimentalizes the past while discounting the future. In Washington over the years the idea of inevitable rural decline became an axiom to be discriminatorily applied in the making of national policy. The New Frontier invoked it in restricting development of Appalachia to "growth centers," a euphemism for cities; the Great Society applied it in the title that President Johnson's Commission on Rural Poverty chose for its report: "The People Left Behind."

To an extent rarely acknowledged, the policies turned out to be self-fulfilling. Even today, in the middle of a demographic boom, rural Americans as a group face sharply disproportionate hardships: They comprise one-third of the nation's poor, nearly one-half of the ill-housed and about three-fifths of the medically underserved. Ninety per cent of the counties designated by Federal officials as "Health Manpower Shortage Areas" are rural.

The point to bear in mind here goes beyond suffering: It is the inability of metropolitan Americans to accept their rural brethren as full partners in the national enterprise. The failure has distorted our understanding of rural life and consequently of rural politics, both its new significance and its renewed energies. The progressives' myopia, in short, is part of a larger blindness that has prevented many of us from seeing the rural forest for the urban jungle. If we hope to win elections, we must open our eyes.

No outsider can speak for rural Americans—they will have to speak for themselves. But it seems to many observers that what rural citizens want most from their President are fairness and equity—an even break for everyone, not just a tax break for the rich, and an equitable distribution of benefits and services to all sectors of society, not just the metropolitan sector. A Democratic slogan along the lines of "Let's Be Fair" would be instantly understandable to rural voters, whose values still tend to set justice above welfare, and it would have the added appeal of highlighting Reagan's unfair policies.

Then, too, it seems clear that rural people hope for a more generous measure of recognition and respect from Washington; they look for signs that the enrichment of their lives and the preservation of their communities are now deemed important items on the national agenda. "Pay Attention" could effectively supplement "Let's Be Fair."

As it happens, Ronald Reagan has paid remarkably scant attention to rural America's deepest aspirations, centering on home, school, and community life. His "solution" to the farm crisis,

the Payment-In-Kind, or PIK, program—in which farmers earn greater subsidies by producing less food—provides an excellent metaphor for everything that is wrong with Reagan's rural policies. Not only does PIK reward corporate agriculture at the expense of family farmers, it also endangers the welfare of small-town businesses. For when farmers make money by not producing, farm suppliers lose money by not selling.

Reagan's nonfarm rural policies have scarcely been more encouraging. His draconian cuts in rural health and education have worked hardships on young and old alike, and his flirtation with Social Security reductions has frightened the millions of elderly who constitute 42 per cent of the rural population. Rural towns, no less than individuals, have been victims of his philosophy. Sharp curtailments in the Farmers Home Administration budget have virtually eliminated water and sewer projects for smaller communities. Deregulation, meanwhile, has left thousands of towns bereft of public transportation, and now—thanks to decisions taken by the Federal Communications Commission—threaten to put local telephone service rates beyond the reach of millions of rural families and businesses.

For good measure, Reagan's Postal Rate Commission has apparently decided to remove Carter's informal ban on small post office closings—an especially sensitive point with small-town residents, who depend on their local post offices for all manner of social services. Finally, the Reagan recession has struck hardest at rural America, where unemployment rates run two percentage points higher than the national average.

BY AND LARGE, Reagan's assault on the quality of rural life has been accomplished without fanfare or any suggestion of political accountability. Most of the programs gutted or wiped out were, even in more prosperous times, wrapped in obscurity; they constituted tiny nests of rural largesse that managed to exist between the

cracks of an otherwise indifferent Federal bureaucracy. Typical was the Rural Community Fire Protection Program, created by Congress in 1973 to provide "financial, technical and related assistance. . . to organize, train and equip local firefighting forces. . . ." Never adequately funded, the program under Reagan has been cut from more than \$100 million a year to a sum approaching extinction. For many small-town residents, the consequences have been tragic. Last year, the National Bureau of Standards conducted a 12-state study on fire facilities and concluded that rural victims of home fires were nearly twice as likely to die as were nonrural victims.

One upshot of all this has been a widespread increase in rural unrest. The misgivings remain politically inchoate—they could move either Leftward or Rightward, depending on which party reaches rural voters more convincingly. Prompted by a growing suspicion that "the plain people"—to use an old populist term—are getting less than a fair shake from Washington, many rural citizens today seem more nearly prepared to voice their dissatisfaction than at any time since Harry Truman ran and won on a rural platform in 1948.

The Democratic candidate for President in 1984 will have a chance to direct those complaints into liberal channels. He can do that best, in my opinion, by emphasizing fairness, equity and recognition, and by focusing sympathetically on rural dilemmas that have political implications: how to find a doctor and pay for medical bills; how to secure a steady job that offers an adequate wage; how to give the kids a decent education; how to get from here to there in a town without buses; how to keep the telephone bill from going sky high; how to stop the government from shutting down the post office; how to keep the house from burning down; how to pay off the interest on the farm mortgage—how, in other words, to survive as a rural American. The candidate who takes a vocal interest in such questions will have earned the thanks—and maybe the votes as well—of rural Americans everywhere.