



## **TDS STRATEGY MEMO:**

### **THREE IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT RURAL AREAS THAT DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES AND POLITICAL STRATEGISTS NEED TO UNDERSTAND.**

BY

ANDREW LEVISON



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**THREE IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT RURAL AREAS THAT DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES AND POLITICAL STRATEGISTS  
NEED TO UNDERSTAND.**

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**1. Rural political districts are widely diverse and any “One Size Fits All” political strategy will inevitably miss the mark.**

The two photos that inevitably illustrate the text of most political articles about rural areas are of wheat fields and cattle ranches. In reality, however, there are actually a very wide range of very distinct rural areas with equally distinct social and political characteristics.

Agricultural areas alone include Florida districts where oranges and other citrus fruits are harvested, California districts where lettuce, grapes, tomatoes and other vegetables are harvested and other areas devoted to tobacco, soybeans, corn and wheat. Other rural areas are devoted to resource extraction and exploitation – strip- and open-pit mining, fracking, natural gas and oil well operation, commercial timber and fishing operations and, increasingly, the rapidly growing outdoor recreation and tourism industries. A third rural environment are places where manufacturing and food processing facilities are located: industrial plants that fled from urban areas in previous decades, carpet and furniture making factories and poultry, pork and beef processing facilities. All these areas are unmistakably rural” but the communities and cultures that exist within them are so significantly different from each other that they create substantial differences in social and cultural outlook.

For Democratic political strategy the key fact is this: No generic rural “message” or organizing strategy can adequately capture the distinct local “flavor” of these communities without sounding out of touch and unconvincing.

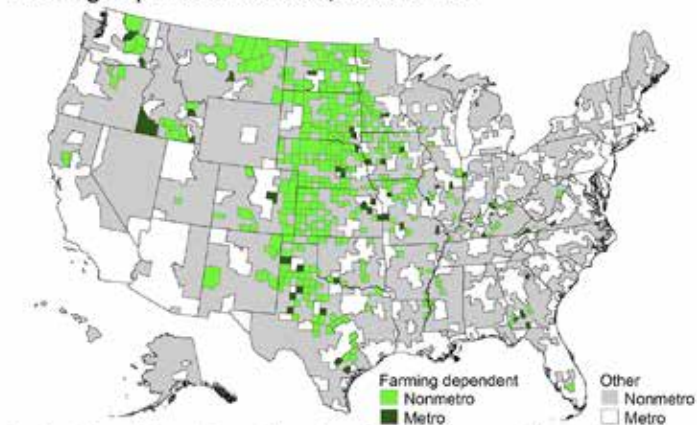
To illustrate this, consider the following illustrations:

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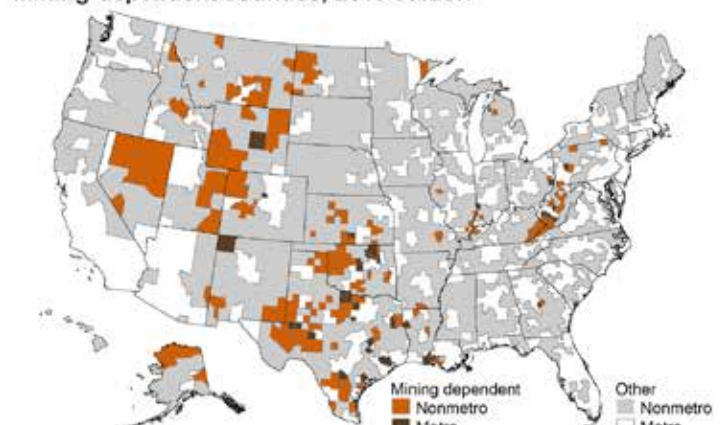


**Farming-dependent counties, 2015 edition**



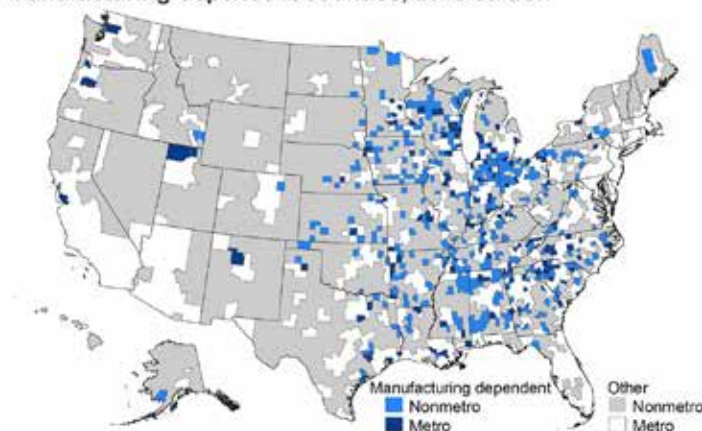
Farming-dependent counties are those where 25 percent or more of the county's average annual labor and proprietors' earnings were derived from farming, or 16 percent or more of jobs were in farming, as measured by 2010-12 Bureau of Economic Analysis, Local Area Personal Income and Employment data. Note that county boundaries are drawn for the farming-dependent counties only. Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from Bureau of Economic Analysis.

**Mining-dependent counties, 2015 edition**



Mining-dependent counties are those where 13 percent or more of the county's average annual labor and proprietors' earnings were derived from mining, or 8 percent or more of jobs were in mining, as measured by 2010-12 Bureau of Economic Analysis, Local Area Personal Income and Employment data. Note that county boundaries are drawn for the mining-dependent counties only. Map revised May 2017; see errata for details. Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from Bureau of Economic Analysis.

**Manufacturing-dependent counties, 2015 edition**



Manufacturing-dependent counties are those where 23 percent or more of the county's average annual labor and proprietors' earnings were derived from manufacturing, or 16 percent or more of jobs were in manufacturing, as measured by 2010-12 Bureau of Economic Analysis, Local Area Personal Income and Employment data. Note that county boundaries are drawn for the manufacturing-dependent counties only. Map revised May 2017; see errata for details. Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from Bureau of Economic Analysis.

**Recreation counties, 2015 edition**



Recreation counties determined by a weighted index of three measures: 1) jobs; 2) earnings in the following: entertainment, recreation, accommodations, eating/drinking places, and real estate; and 3) the share of vacant housing units intended for seasonal/occasional use. Recreation counties are those with a score more than one deviation above the mean. Note that county boundaries are drawn for the recreation counties only. Map revised May 2017; see errata for details. Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from Bureau of Economic Analysis and U.S. Census Bureau.

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## 2. Rural small towns have deep social divisions between a rural economic elite and the working class population

As an article in The U.K. Guardian noted:

A class of local elites owns the valuable land that surrounds a typical rural small town, which is home to a post office, public schools, a grocery store, and sometimes a hospital... the owners of physical assets—fast food franchises, apartment complexes, car dealer-

<sup>1</sup><https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-typology-codes/descriptions-and-maps/>

See also: <https://ruralinnovation.us/blog/defining-rural-america/>

ships—make up the rest of this scaled-down hierarchy. They sit on local non-profit boards, run the chamber of commerce, and are influential members of their churches. They often hold elected office and are disproportionately responsible for the political constitution of rural areas.<sup>2</sup>

Beneath this rural elite there are a wide variety of working class occupations, ranging from farm and ranch workers and foremen to truck drivers, feedlot, storage facility and warehouse workers, mechanics and repairmen and regional concentrations of lumber workers, fishermen, oil pipeline and refinery workers, strip mine and open-pit mine workers, forestry employees, firefighters and others.

Using educational levels as a very rough guide to social class, it is clear that there are a higher proportion of working class people in rural areas than in urban areas. Almost half of rural inhabitants have only a high school education or less and less than a fourth are college graduates while in cities college graduates represent over a third.

Educational levels of the population – Urban vs. Rural:

	High School or Less	Some College	College Grad
city	36	27	37
rural	45	31	22

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However, both the business and resource owners and the working class people who work for them in rural areas share a clear “rural consciousness” of themselves as “country people” rather than “city people” and have a widespread resentment of the latter. But there is also a substantial difference between their outlooks. The first group is the natural, quite passionate base of the Republican Party while the working people have a wider range of views.

This is reflected in political attitudes. At first glance, among both college and non-college voters, the gap between urban and rural people is clear. 75% of urban white college graduates voted for Biden in 2020 in contrast to just 39% of rural white college graduates. Among white non-college voters, 59% of those in urban areas voted for Biden in contrast to only 25% in rural areas.

	2020 – Vote for Biden
White College Graduates - Urban	75
White College Graduates - Rural	39
White Non College - Urban	59
White Non College - Rural	25

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/22/us-politics-rural-america>

<sup>3</sup><https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/lbc/educational-attainment-rural?tid=1000>

<sup>4</sup>[https://www.dropbox.com/s/re0gtn1o57fzwp5/Catalist\\_What\\_Happened\\_2022\\_Public\\_National\\_Crosstabs\\_2023\\_05\\_18.xlsx?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/re0gtn1o57fzwp5/Catalist_What_Happened_2022_Public_National_Crosstabs_2023_05_18.xlsx?dl=0)

But the data also show that geography can be more powerful than class. 59 percent of urban non-college voters voted Democratic – a strong majority. But only 39% of rural white college graduates voted Democratic. The surprising fact is that **urban less than college voters were more Democratic than rural college graduates.**

**As a result, in formulating progressive and Democratic strategy it is important to clearly focus messaging and outreach on both the unique class and regional characteristics of these voters.**

### **3. Rural voters are largely Republican but they are not all staunch ideological conservatives or MAGA extremists.**

To begin with, there are very significant pockets of Democratic support in rural areas. Latinos in Texas and the Southwest, African-Americans in the “Black Belt” of rural counties that stretches from Georgia to Louisiana and Native American communities in many areas of the west, southwest and mountain west remain majority democratic (although among Latinos there has been some slippage in recent years).

But on a deeper level it is crucial to recognize that while a very daunting majority of white rural workers now vote for the GOP, they are not all staunch ideological conservatives or MAGA extremists.

The basic, very widely shared political outlook in rural America is properly called cultural traditionalism. It is a perspective shaped by the major social institutions in rural life – the church, the military, the local business community and the traditional High School civics version of the American system of government. The values it endorses are religious piety, patriotism, small business/free enterprise and constitutional democracy.

These same values are shared by many people in urban America as well but whereas people who live in urban areas are clearly aware that there are people with different values and ideas who live around them, people in rural areas find these traditional values to be almost universally held and therefore see them as obvious “common sense” or “what everybody just knows” rather than a specific perspective.

In the post-World War II era in rural areas liberal and progressive “New Deal” democrats like Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern were able to succeed because they combined their progressive social and economic views with an understanding and respect for the basic cultural traditionalism of the districts and voters they represented.

But today there is also an important distinction between MAGA extremists who hold racially biased, theocratic, and bitterly anti-liberal views on the one hand and others who were raised with a more tolerant “Judge not lest ye be judged” version of Christianity (one which is still widespread in rural America) and an instinctive “populist” distrust of business and politicians.

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For progressives and Democrats the key to effective rural organizing is to carefully follow a basic two level approach. On the one hand candidates should show a clear understanding and respect for many rural voters' basic cultural traditionalism, even in cases where they disagree with it on specific issues, while at the same time drawing clear distinctions between the extremism of the MAGA supporters and the more tolerant and economic populist views of non-extremist rural Americans. For progressive and Democratic political strategy the basic fact is that the MAGA supporters in rural America cannot be persuaded; a significant group of non-MAGA rural voters can.

The Directory of Rural Organizations, a project of the Rural Urban Bridge Initiative and The Democratic Strategist, provides a substantial list of over 130 organizations that are either rural-based or rural-focused and specialize in areas such as rural electoral organizing, voter protection and registration, rural economic development and policy advocacy.

The recent companion report by the Rural-Urban Bridge Initiative *Can Democrats Succeed in Rural America? A Review of Strategies & Practices that Work* offers a wealth of specific examples of how this approach can be applied in practice. Every prospective Democratic candidate who wants to run in rural districts should read and apply it as a key resource for their campaign.