

Jerry Hagstrom



Democrats need a rural reset

IT'S TIME for the Democrats and rural Americans, particularly farm leaders, to think about each other.

Almost all of rural America is under Republican control. The 2010 elections eliminated most of the Democratic House members. In 2016, exit polls showed that rural voters gave Donald Trump at least two-thirds of their votes.

But now there are strong signals that Democrats may recapture control of the House and possibly the Senate. Democrats face many challenges in reconnecting with rural America, and farm and other rural leaders need to be prepared for the fact that Congress may change hands.

Farmers are thrilled that Trump has reduced regulation. Many rural Americans feel he shares their disconnect with urban, coastal culture. But not all is perfect in the Trump-rural relationship. Last week, when Trump traveled to the American Farm Bureau Federation convention in Nashville, Farm Bureau members applauded when he said, "Build the wall." But reporters also heard some boos from the audience, probably from farmers who are dependent on immigrant workers.

Farm leaders are terrified that Trump will withdraw from the North American Free Trade Agreement. They are urging their members to tell Congress and the White House that withdrawal would lead Mexico to import corn, soybeans, and meat from countries other than the United States and disturb the way that animals and food move back and forth to Canada. Trump has said he will not make a decision on NAFTA withdrawal until after the July 1 Mexican presidential election. A withdrawal announcement in late summer could come just in time to affect grain and markets, and reduce enthusiasm for Republicans in rural districts for the November elections.

But the best news for Democrats is the low white-rural turnout for the Republican candidates in the 2017 elections for governor in Virginia and senator in Alabama. Nationwide, Democrats have not won outright in rural areas for decades, and the Virginia and Alabama races followed a classic pattern that allows Democrats to win elections: Rural voters gave Republican candidates the majority of their votes, but their turnout was low enough that an urban and suburban surge elected Ralph Northam and Doug Jones.

The women's vote helped Democrats in Virginia and Alabama. Rural women do not talk about sexual harassment as openly as their city sisters, but it happens. The candidates' views—and Trump's reputation—could affect the rural women's vote in 2018.

Democratic rural leaders are still coping with their anger

that the 2016 Hillary Clinton campaign refused to pay attention to them, on the mistaken theory that Clinton would take the Midwest without a rural effort and the campaign would use its resources to win Florida, North Carolina, Georgia, and Arizona. But rural Democrats are beginning to recover. When the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee brought a crop of 2018 House candidates to Washington a few months ago and invited reporters for an off-the-record meet-and-greet session, candidates from rural districts in many states, including Kansas, New Mexico, New York, Michigan, and Arizona, sounded eager to run.

Last week, Rep. Cheri Bustos released a report, *Hope from the Heartland*, based on interviews with rural Democratic officeholders in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The report confirmed that Midwestern rural Democratic candidates need to address economics and avoid the national party's focus on abortion, gay rights, and minorities.



Rep. Cheri Bustos

Barbara Leach—a former Iowa farmer and state Democratic party vice chair who ran a group called My Rural America in 2006 and 2008 when Democrats won House seats—is restarting her effort to teach Democrats how to communicate in rural America. Leach, an Agriculture Department appointee in the Clinton and Obama administrations, said rural candidates and party officials need to "go back to talking to people in person, not talking to them on the phone, not bombarding them with emails asking them to send \$5 or the sky is falling." She said Democrats need to use radio, small-town newspaper ads, and events that earn media coverage on issues such as health care, veterans' benefits, high-speed-internet service, and the challenge of farming today.

Democrats might win the House by taking suburban seats in blue, coastal states. That would force the party to build a House Agriculture Committee majority with urban and suburban members who don't know agriculture or the needs of places with a population so sparse that government subsidies are vital to provide medical care and broadband.

There are Democratic candidates with rural knowledge such as Judith Canales and Lillian Salerno, Obama USDA appointees running for House seats in Texas. Lobbyists and PAC directors should get to know them—if only to protect their own interests. □

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