

Building Progressive Power in Rural America: Options for Donors

A pervasive assumption in U.S. electoral politics is that Democrats are the party of urban voters and Republicans are the party of rural America. While it's true that many rural Americans do tend to lean conservative, these assumptions grossly underestimate the potential support in rural America for both the Democratic Party and the issues of greatest concern to the progressive movement.

This brief will show how donors can invest in work that helps build progressive power and improve Democratic performance in rural America. It also underscores the stakes of political competition in these areas given how rural voters are overrepresented in the Senate and also have the power to decide elections in key swing states.

In researching this brief, Blue Tent found five major areas where donors can help to build progressive power and advance Democratic gains in rural America:

- Make year-round investments in local organizing and leadership.
- Invest in mobilization efforts that treat rural voters like swing voters.
- Support messaging and narrative work.
- Support trusted local messengers.
- Support progressive policy change on issues that matter to rural Americans.

One of the key findings of this brief is that a significant percentage of rural Americans already support progressive policies, including those related to healthcare, infrastructure and the economy. Support for progressive policies, however, has not translated to support at the ballot box, in large part because many rural Americans feel that the Democratic Party **doesn't care for them** and has left them behind. This is something that both the Democratic Party and progressives must address if they are to build power in rural areas.

The Opportunity

Democrats cannot afford to ignore rural America. Half the U.S. population lives in just nine states but is represented by only 18 Senators; the other half lives in mostly rural states but is represented



by 82 senators. To put it simply, as a result of the structure of our electoral system, [a rural vote matters more than an urban one](#) when it comes to amassing power in the Senate.

While Democrats can win the presidency without winning rural states, they probably can't gain more than razor-thin control in the Senate without winning more rural votes. Without majorities in Congress, Democrats have little hope of passing any legislation, much less enact a bold progressive agenda. Doing better with rural voters is also a key to making gains at the state level, where Republicans currently control all branches of government in 23 states that are home to 137 million people.

The good news is that there is clear potential for Democrats to build greater support in rural areas. While polls [show](#) that most rural voters identify as Republican, survey research conducted in 2020 by [RuralOrganizing.org](#) found rural voters support progressive policies on issues like the need to combat climate change, Medicare for All, and workers' rights, irrespective of stated party affiliation. Likewise, rural voters also support federal government programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, EITC, and Social Security—programs that these communities rely on heavily—as well as recent [federal government spending](#) related to COVID recovery. This contrasts with the widespread belief that rural Americans are staunchly against an active federal government.

Similarly, while the image of a rural voter is the stereotypical white conservative, about [24% of rural Americans are people of color](#), according to the latest U.S. Census. In fact, [Latinos are the majority](#) of the rural population in the Southwest, Native Americans the majority in the Great Plains, and Black residents the majority in the Southeast.

Beyond activating latent support for the Democratic Party to win elections, building power in rural areas should be a progressive goal in and of itself. Rural Americans struggle with a lack of access to comprehensive healthcare and broadband, little to no public transportation, and high levels of unemployment and poverty.

Addressing these challenges in a meaningful and visible way, as the Biden Administration has begun to do with a [number of initiatives](#), can help build support for the Democratic Party in rural America—if it is complemented by well-funded grassroots organizing and messaging efforts.

Currently, though, rural organizing and power-building remain largely under-resourced. Donors at all levels can make a big impact in this area.

Strategies for Impact

After years of neglect and under-investment, progressive organizations are now engaged in a range of efforts to connect with rural Americans and build support for the Democratic Party. Blue Tent has identified five approaches to this work that deserve support:

1. Year-round Grassroots Organizing: Sustained, year-round support is crucial for building power, and especially important for grassroots organizations in rural areas. According to Lauren Gepford, Director of Movement Labs' Rural Power Lab program, Democrats are not investing nearly enough in organizing infrastructure in rural communities. "The majority of investment is in cyclical campaigns and not in infrastructure," said Gepford. "[Infrastructure] may be less sexy, but it's also highly important to winning at the ballot box." This work takes time and persistence. "We build that infrastructure year-round by running creative programs in rural communities that constantly keep folks organizing to meet the needs of the community then and there," said Pablo Correa, co-founder and co-executive director of Rural Arizona Action (RAZA). These programs include things like advocacy, community organizing, leadership development and voter registration. In doing so, RAZA is able to build a workforce large enough to have an impact during the election year. "We don't ramp up for campaigns, we pivot," said Correa. Equally important is support for local leaders. "The biggest thing we need is to invest in actual organizing," said Sarah Jaynes, executive director of the Rural Democracy Initiative (RDI) in an interview with Blue Tent. "When you organize in communities, you win. And so it starts with the ground-up in terms of building local leaders from the community."

2. Mobilization Efforts That Treat Rural Voters Like Swing Voters: "Many Democrats have all but given up on engaging rural voters or understanding the specific needs of rural communities," said RuralOrganizing.org's executive director, Matt Hildreth. [Hillary Clinton made little effort to court rural voters](#) during the 2016 presidential election and won only 32% of the rural vote, according to [data](#) from Catalist. By contrast, in 2008 Barack Obama's campaign invested more and won [39% of the rural vote](#). These numbers show rural voters are far [more persuadable](#) than conventional wisdom suggests. Democrats can achieve a lot simply by "losing by less" in rural counties. Even a small shift in the rural voting patterns would make a big impact on elections. "If we are able to improve rural margins even by 2 to 3%, this could provide the margin

of victory in many battlegrounds,” wrote RDI in its report on the importance of investing in rural and small-town voters.

3. Messaging and Narrative Work: While it’s true a large share of rural voters support policies championed by progressives, RDI points out that many rural voters don’t make the correlation between the policies and the progressive wing of the Democratic Party—or Democrats in general. Organizations like RDI and RuralOrganizing.org are working to develop messaging and narrative projects to help progressives understand how to better communicate with rural voters. “We aren’t communicating in a way that resonates with them,” said RDI’s Development Director Renee Linde. “We know that the way we talk doesn’t work. And so it’s learning how to maybe say the same thing but in a way that actually resonates with the person you’re talking to.” RDI is working on a [Winning Jobs Narrative](#) project, which will provide a framework for engaging with working people across race and place. Hard work in their everyday lives is something that resonates with rural voters. As such, RDI suggests that Democrats emphasize how things like paid family leave, childcare and child tax credits help hard-working Americans. In other words, rural Americans need to know that Democrats are fighting for them.

4. Developing Trusted Local Messengers: For rural Americans, the messenger is equally important as the message itself. Progressive donors can help open the door for authentic engagement by supporting local organizers. Messengers who are authentic and local, whether they are candidates, spokespeople, activists, organizers or staffers, will be far better received in rural communities than those who come from more urban areas. It’s also essential that these messengers use political language that is not condescending or alienating. Deep canvassing has been one of the most effective and persuasive strategies for engaging rural voters. This approach involves multiple in-person contacts a year to engage people on the issues they care about and lay the foundation for effective voter mobilization efforts. Down Home North Carolina’s (Down Home NC) communications director, Gwen Frisbie-Fulton said: “Over and over again, our deep canvassers show us that our rural neighbors are very persuadable, and they’re really concerned about the same things we’re concerned about.” Such work is time-intensive and expensive. Grassroots groups need reliable funding to employ local organizers who can build up the relationships over time needed to become trusted messengers.

5. Progressive Policy Work on Rural Issues: Rural America is struggling and a national strategy is needed to both address its needs while at the same time breaking down the so-called

rural-urban divide. As experts have noted, while urban areas receive the bulk of funding for policy work, rural and urban areas [depend on each other](#) and policies must therefore be beneficial to both. Many politicians, for example, continue to conflate rural policy with agricultural policy, despite the fact that less than 10% of rural Americans work in agriculture, according to the [U.S. Census](#). That isn't to say that agriculture should be ignored altogether. A crucial policy priority for progressives is passing and enforcing antitrust and anti-monopoly policies. Progressive candidates can potentially make significant inroads with rural voters by [addressing consolidation](#) in the agriculture sector and [fighting Big Ag](#). In 2021, Family Farm Action, RDI, and RuralOrganizing.org hosted a rural policy action summit and subsequently published a [report on their findings](#), including recommendations to increase investment in infrastructure, housing, small business development, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and natural resource conservation. The report also found investments in basic liveability—broadband, housing, healthcare, education, and children—are crucial. Donors should support organizations—including [think tanks](#)—that work on understanding both the unique policy needs of rural America while also acknowledging the interdependence of rural and urban centers.

Options for Donors

Blue Tent recommends that donors contribute to the following organizations working to build progressive power in rural America. We also encourage donors to explore other organizations in this space, including in their home regions.

- [RuralOrganizing.org](#): RuralOrganizing.org is a network of national organizations dedicated to progressive policy work to rebuild a rural America that is "empowered, thriving, and equitable." In addition to using digital technologies to mobilize its network to support policies and candidates at all levels, RuralOrganizing.org provides crucial polling and data on demographics and best practices on how to engage with rural voters.
- [Rural Democracy Initiative](#): RDI is a coalition of local and national funders who support building sustainable progressive infrastructure across rural America. RDI works to amplify the voice and political power of rural people for progressive policy change through a range of strategies, providing 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) funding to organizations working in rural areas across the country. RDI offers donors an easy pass-through option for supporting local groups on the ground.

- **Movement Labs:** Movement Labs uses peer-to-peer texting to help grassroots organizations recruit and help candidates run for office, focusing primarily on battleground states and states that they hope can turn from red to purple. Last year, it launched a Rural Power Labs program, which partners with local and state parties to offer resources, training and support for rural Democratic parties. "Our theory of change is that supporting local parties that are doing outreach to build the party and make people feel more favorable towards Democrats and progressives will pay off over the long run," said Gepford.
- **Down Home North Carolina:** Down Home North Carolina (Down Home NC) is a 501(c)(4) membership-based organization that engages in year-round work to build multiracial power for working people in North Carolina's small towns and rural places. Down Home NC has a 501(c)(3) arm and a PAC.
- **Rural Arizona Action:** Rural Arizona Action (RAZA) is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization that works to build power in rural Arizona. Along with its 501(c)(3) arm, Rural Arizona Engagement, RAZA serves as an outlet for people who want to put their civic interest and activism into action. Through its different arms, RAZA engages in voter registration work, community organizing, and advocacy on water and broadband.

Conclusion

Rural America is a potential source of electoral strength for Democrats. Rural residents already support a number of key progressive policies, so the Democratic Party has an opportunity to improve its performance with this part of the electorate. By supporting year-round organizing, better messaging strategies, and local messengers, as well as treating rural voters like the swing voters they are, donors can build progressive power in rural America, benefitting both Democrats and rural America at large.

You may also want to check out:

- [Building Progressive Power and Winning Elections in the South: Options for Donors](#)
- [The Rural Problem: Why Democrats Struggle With Rural Voters and How They Can Win Them Over](#)
- [Shaping the Federal Courts: How Donors Can Make a Difference](#)
- [Movement Voter Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)

