Notes

On a Rural Electoral Strategy

for 1984

by Richard J. Margolis

Acknowledgments

A number of individuals and institutions have made this paper possible. The Institute of Politics at Harvard loaned me the time and the typewriter; Rural America in Washington supplied a frame of reference and -- courtesy of George Rucker -- many of the facts; Working Papers provided a beginning by publishing my essay, "Wait Till the Rural Vote Comes in." Sensible advice and welcome encouragement came my way from friends and colleagues, including Judith Davison, Ethel Klein, Patrick Lucey, Gary Orren and Jody Severson. Leah Dickerman's late-innings research proved indispensable, as did her gentle criticisms. And Margaret Fresher and Veronica Serrato cheerfully typed a rather messy manuscript.

This is a working paper on rural votes and Democratic hopes. Its purpose is three-fold: (1) to suggest that the Democratic Party can no longer win national elections without paying closer attention to the rural vote; (2) to underscore certain electoral opportunities that await the next Democratic candidate for President; and (3) to sketch the outlines of a combined rural urban strategy for 1984.

No effort will be made here to argue that the rural sector constitutes anything like a single, homogeneous voting bloc. Quite clearly, it does not. As with their metropolitan counterparts, the political behavior of rural citizens varies from region to region, from ethnic group to ethnic group, even from election to election. One point of this paper is to challenge the notion that rural Americans are either fundamentally populist or fundamentally conservative. In fact, they constitute a large, diverse electorate whose values are changing and whose loyalties are accessible to both Republicans and Democrats.

My own impression is that many rural citizens today feel abandoned by both major parties -- by the party of William Jennings Bryan no less than the party of Theodore Roosevelt -- and that their sympathies will most readily be enlisted by candidates able to transcend urban habits of thinking and make rural sense.

NEED FOR A RURAL STRATEGY

Jimmy Carter could not have won in 1976 without strong rural support. With similar rural strength in 1980 he might not have lost.

Among the 31 "Rural Influence" states -- states with nonmetropolitan populations of 30 percent or more (See Table "A") -- Carter in 1976 carried 13 for a total of 126 electoral votes. From the remaining 18 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 also carried Pennsylvania and Ohio, both narrowly (Pennsylvania by 123,000 votes, Ohio by 11,000). Those victories occurred not only because Carter won substantial urban majorities, but also -- to quote 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 percent of the rural vote against an estimated 43 percent for Carter and four percent for John Anderson. Looked at another way, one-third of Reagan's 8.5 million popular vote majority came from rural ballots. Of the 13 Rural Influence states that had gone for Carter in 1976, all but three switched to Reagan in 1980. As Table "B" shows, Carter's electoral vote total from those states in 1980 was 28, compared with Reagan's 193.

A closer look at three of those "switch" states, as provided in Table "C," fully confirms the fragility of Democratic support in rural areas both north and south. In Mississippi, Carter lost 13 nonmetro counties that he had carried in 1976, while winning back only five others. In Tennessee and Wisconsin, he lost 18 and 20 previously carried nonmetro counties, while winning back not a single county. In fact, all 73 rural Tennessee counties registered losses for Carter in 1980, as did all but two of Wisconsin's 57 rural counties -- and Carter's gains in those two were less than one percent.

The forces that caused those sharp Carter declines among rural voters may have had less to do with specifically rural grievances than with such wider discontents as rising prices and imprisoned hostages. Nonetheless, 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 rural majorities: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Carter in 1976 -- the three who won.

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

To be sure, metropolitan voters continue to outnumber their nonmetro compatriots by at least two to one, the 1980 voting-age population percentages being 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 still larger in elections to come. For as Richard Scammon has observed about American politics, "Demography is destiny."

Thus the somnolence into which urban-based Democrats sometimes sink 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.

TABLE "A"

Rural Influence States, 1980*

State	Nonmetro % of Population
Alabama	38
Alaska	56
Arkansas	61
Delaware	33
Georgia	40
Indiana	30
Iowa	60
Idaho	82
Kansas	53
Kentucky	55
Louisiana	37
Maine	48
Minnesota	35
Missouri	35
Mississippi	73
Montana	76
Nebraska	56
New Hampshire	49
New Mexico	48
North Carolina	47
North Dakota	64
Oklahoma	41
Oregon	35
South Carolina	40
South Dakota	84
Tennessee	37
Vermont	78
Virginia	63
West Virginia	47
Wisconsin	33
Wyoming	85

*states with 30 percent or more nonmetro population

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980 Census of Population, vol. IV, Chapter A

TABLE "B"

Rural Influence States In Presidential Elections,

1976 & 1980

(Numbers refer to electoral votes.)

States switching from Democratic in 1976 to Republican in 1980:

State	Votes
Alabama	9
Arkansas	6
Delaware	3
Kentucky	9
Louisiana	10
Mississippi	7
Missouri	12
North Carolina	13
Tennessee	10
Wisconsin	11
total	90

States Democrats held in 1980:

State	Votes
Georgia	12
Minnesota	10
West Virginia	6
total	28

States Republicans held in 1980:

State	Votes
Alaska	3
Indiana	13
Iowa	8
Idaho	4
Kansas	7
Maine	4
Montana	4
Nebraska	5
New Hampshire	4
New Mexico	4
North Dakota	3
Oklahoma	8
Oregon	6
South Carolina	8
South Dakota	4
Vermont	3
Virginia	12
Wyoming	3
total	103

b

TABLE "C"

Carter's Record in Nonmetro Counties

In Three States, 1976 & 1980

Wisconsin

Number of Nonmetro Counties	57
Counties with Carter Majorities, 1976	31
Counties with Carter Majorities, 1980	11
Net Loss	20

Mississippi

Number of Nonmetro Counties	76
Counties with Carter Majorities,1976	60
Counties with Carter Majorities,1980	52
Net Loss	8

Tennessee

Number of Nonmetro Counties	73
Counties with Carter Majorities, 1976	60
Counties with Carter Majorities, 1980	42
Net Loss	18

Source: America Votes (Nos. 12 & 14): A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics. Ed., Richard M. Scammon & Alice V. McGillvray. Washington, D. C.: Elections Research Center, Congressional Quarterly (1977 & 1981).

RURAL OPPORTUNITIES

The rural potential for Democrats in 1984 arises from three disparate events: a demographic shift outward from metropolitan to rural areas, amounting to a rural renaissance; a voting rights revolution in the south; and a farm crisis throughout much of agricultural America, particularly in the Midwest and parts of the South.

The Rural Renaissance

It is characteristic of this country that it should define its rural populace in metropolitan terms. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a rural resident is someone who lives in neither a city nor a suburb; he or she is said to live outside any officially designated "SMSA," the Bureau's shorthand for Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. In the 1980 census, about 63 million Americans, or 29 percent of the national total, were counted in that "nonmetro" category.

The figures, which represent a net rural gain of 16 percent, caught some by surprise. For by shifting their geographical points of focus outward, Americans have been making demographic history. Not only has the rate of rural expansion outstripped the parallel metropolitan rate by six percent, but the long, heartbreaking tailspin -- nearly two centuries of uninterrupted rural decline -- has at last been reversed. "The long-lamented overall exodus of people from rural communities has ended, at least for now," notes Calvin Beale, chief demographer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Equally astonishing has been the breadth and consistency of this rural tilt. It has embraced all regions, not just the Sun Belt; all ages, not just the elderly; all races, not just whites; and all classes, not just the poor in search of low rents or the rich in search of vacation homes. Many

of the gains, moreover, have occurred in genuinely remote places, and thus cannot be dismissed as mere extensions of suburban sprawl. Of the 2,469 counties classified as nonmetropolitan, more than 2,000 showed population increases during the 1970's, and more than half of those enjoyed gains in the previous decade as well.

It would be unwise, however, to see in all this the stirrings of a "back-to-the-land movement," since the actual direction taken thus far has been non-agricultural. Indeed, conventional meanings of "rural" are being swept away by the new demographics. Of the 25 million rural Americans now gainfully employed, fewer than two million (nine percent) pursue such traditionally rural endeavors as farming, forestry and fishing. The largest proportion (27 percent) holds jobs in services, the second largest (23 percent) in manufacturing and the third largest (19 percent) in wholesale and retail trades.

Although none of those vocations can be considered especially rustic, together they account for nearly 70 percent of today's rural work force. When one recalls that only a few decades ago more than half of all rural workers were engaged in agriculture, one must conclude that a quiet revolution has occurred. "We have a new distribution of people upon the land," writes Howard F. Conklin, professor of agricultural economics at Cornell University, "one that has never before existed in the history of the human race. It is a pattern in which non-farm people live in the country, far outnumbering farmers in most rural communities."

The new pattern may have profound effects both on national policies and national politics. For one thing, latecomers to the rural sector tend to be better off than their rural neighbors. By 1978, rural family income had risen to 80 percent of urban income, still a figure to be deplored but a 14 percent improvement over the 1950 mark. As recently as 1969 there were

66 rural counties where more than half the population lived in poverty; by 1979 the number had declined to two.

Some of the gains can be attributed to the rural influx of retirees eligible for social security and other benefits. Federal transfer payments in 1979 accounted for 15 percent of nonmetropolitan personal income, compared with 12 percent in metropolitan areas. Thus any candidate hoping for rural votes will have to take the social-security constituency into strict account.

A more significant development has been the creation of new jobs in rural areas. As Ted K. Bradshaw and Edward J. Blakely have noted in Rural Policy Problems: Changing Dimensions (Lexington, 1982), rural areas "have now moved from being places where low-skill, dying industries locate to ones where newer growth industries are located." The new-style jobs, along with the old-fashioned kind that are still extant, have attracted many workers unable to find employment in the central city. These newcomers entertain metropolitan ideals and aspirations, even if their lives and livelihoods are now rural-based. In consequence, they are beginning to change the face of rural politics.

In swift transition now are many of the values underlying traditional rural politics. In his recent book, Politics in the Rural States (Westview, 1981), Frank W. Bryan, a political scientist at the University fo Vermont, examined scores of national opinion surveys hoping to pin down current rural-urban differences. The results proved ambiguous. Bryan concluded on the one hand that "on several of the 'gut issues' that dominate public concern in America --women's rights, the rights of the accused, minorities, welfare spending and civil disobedience -- rural people still stand to the right of urbanites." On the other hand, "Very little difference appeared when rural and urban respondents were asked to prioritize government spending." The two welfare-type spending categories that

rural people overwhelmingly favored were health and education.

Another analyst -- Norval Glenn, professor of sociology at the University of Texas -- discovered from surveys he conducted that rural opinion was shifting even on some "gut issues." He found, for instance, a softening of rural resistance to feminism, perhaps because so many small town women had taken jobs outside the home. In addition, while rural residents continued to oppose big government, they seemed no happier with big business. Finally, "Rural people seem to have lost their long-standing aversion to federal aid."

It is already possible here and there to find political illustrations of changing rural values. In Vermont, it was essentially the new settlers of old villages -- the young fugitives from New York and Boston -- who gave liberals one of their few victories in 1980, the reelection of Senator Patrick J. Leahy. His surprisingly strong showing among small towns in the southern part of the state more than made up for his equally surprising losses in Vermont's two metropolitan areas, Burlington and Montpelier.

In Missouri, a 1977 statewide right-to-work referendum was soundly and unexpectedly defeated when rural Missourians turned out in force to vote No. Delighted labor officials attributed their victory to the support of former city residents, mainly workers, who shifted their places of residence but not their political allegiances.

And in the 4th Congressional District of Mississippi last year, Wayne Dowdy, a liberal Democrat, upset a conservative Republican in an election whose outcome hinged on the rural vote. Dowdy attracted rural black votes because he supported renewal of the Voting Rights Act, and he attracted rural white votes because he strongly opposed cuts in Social Security. According to a Dowdy campaign worker in McComb, many of the voters "were folks who had once lived in places like Chicago or Memphis. When they came back home, they brought some political sophistication with them."

Such victories, it is true, do not necessarily bespeak the emergence of a progressive majority throughout rural America. What they do point to is the

presence of large new constituencies in traditionally rural sectors, citizens whose habits of thinking and voting are significantly different from those of their rural neighbors.

The Southern Black Vote

Rural blacks comprise 44 percent of the total black voting-age population in nine Southern states (excluding Flordia and Texas). Their presence represents a first-rate opportunity for the 1984 Democratic Presidential candidate, who must win the South or else lose the election. As of 1980, the South had 88 "Black Belt" counties, where a majority of the population was black. Nearly all those counties were rural, and 64 of them could be found in just four states: Alabama (10), Georgia (20), Mississippi (22), and South Carolina (12).

As Table "D" shows, rural blacks outnumber metropolitan blacks in Mississippi, Arkansas and both Carolinas, and constitute more than one-third of all blacks in every state but Virginia and Tennessee. By and large, the states with heaviest concentrations of rural blacks were ones in which Reagan enjoyed unusually narrow majorities. Excepting Georgia, where Carter won handily, and Virginia, where Reagan reciprocated, Reagan's total margin of victory in the remaining seven states came to fewer than 200,000 votes, or an average of 27,706 votes per state.

We can get a clearer idea of the significance of the rural black vote by examining the voting performances of Mississippi's "Black Belt" counties in 1976 and 1980. The Democrats enjoyed gains in 15 of those counties, while showing losses in only 7. Meanwhile, in rural Mississippi's 54 predominantly white counties, the Republicans registered 35 gains and 19 declines.

TABLE "D"

Percent of Black Population
In Nine Southern States
Living in Nonmetro Areas

State	Percent
Mississippi	78.2
Arkansas	57.2
North Carolina	51.7
South Carolina	51.1
Georgia	40.2
Alabama	38.2
Louisiana	35.4
Virginia	25.6
Tennessee	19.7

Source: "Land and People: A Fact Book." Washington, D.C.: Rural America

In 1984, a relatively small addition of rural blacks to the voting pool could make an enormous difference in the outcome. Table "E" indicates Reagan's 1980 margins as well as the number of unregistered voting-age blacks in each of the nine states. The percentages of unregistered blacks run highest in some, but not all, of the states with substantial rural black populations-- North Carolina, Georgia and South Carolina, for example. In none of the nine states listed does the proportion of unregistered blacks fall below one-third.

TABLE "E"

State	Voting-Age Blacks	Not Registered	Reagan's 1980 Margin
North Carolina	897,000	506,000	39,383
Georgia	982,000	472,000	-236,787
Virginia	714,000	331,000	237,435
South Carolina	625,000	292,000	11,057
Alabama	644,000	272,000	17,462
Louisiana	813,000	256,000	64,400
Tennessee	479,000	158,000	4,710
Mississippi	541,000	131,000	11,808
Arkansas	233,000	85,000	5,123

Source: Joint Center for Political Studies analysis of Census Bureau data; figures based on 1982 voting data

The Farm Crisis

The farm crisis is real, and so is its political fallout. In states where "rural" is more or less synonymous with "family farm," it presents Democrats with rare electoral opportunities in 1984. Those opportunities extend beyond the "bread-basket" states to a half-dozen or so industrialized states that still have substantial numbers of family farms and small towns dependent on agricultural prosperity -- e.g., Illinois, Wisconsin, Michiagan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York. In addition, the farm crisis can have a liberalizing impact on thousands of white farm families in the South, many of whom voted for Reagan in 1980 . If the populist impulse persists anywhere in America, its most likely home is here, among the hard-pressed small farmers of the South and Midwest.

To Midwest ballot-watchers, any doubts that the epidemic of small-farm bankruptcies and foreclosures had become a political event as well as an economic disaster were dispelled in November, 1982, when Bob Kerrey, a liberal Democrat, drew on rural voters to get elected governor of Nebraska. His story bears retelling, not only because it underlines the current volatility of the farm vote, but also because it provides an interesting model for future elections -- nothing less than a rural-urban strategy for liberal candidates.

Kerrey's victory -- to quote Jody Severson, a paid consultant in the campaign-- was "the result of a desperate gamble." Kerrey pinned his hopes "on a strategy that focused on the rural voters of western Nebraska, the most Republican part of a Republican-oriented state." Furthermore, Kerrey was running against a very popular incumbent, Governor Bob Thone, a man who had never lost an election. The fact that Thone had once been a Congressman from one of the state's most rural districts made Kerrey's rural hopes seem all the more implausible.

Yet the gamble paid off -- largely because Nebraska's farmers were confronting difficulties reminiscent of the Great Depression, and they saw no succor or sympathy forthcoming from the Reagan Administration. Kerrey offered them a helping hand. He barnstormed 26 rural counties, Severson recalls, "promising to do whatever a governor could do on behalf of farmers." Small-town convassers went from door to door drumming up support for Kerrey; others telephoned the undecided rural voters: "It's a close race. Bob Kerrey really needs your support. He asked me to call..." For good measure, thousands of "open letters" to rural Nebraska were inserted in hometown newspapers.

Kerrey did not win a rural majority, but he came close enough while collecting 54.2 percent of the vote in Omaha. With one major difference, his 1980 accomplishment paralleled that of Carter's in 1976 when he took Ohio and Pennsylvania by breaking even in rural areas. The difference was that Carter had no special rural drum to beat -- he had to rely on his "downhome" style -- while Kerrey could capitalize on the farm crisis, an issue of surpassing importance to rural Nebraskans. That issue is not likely to go away in 1984.

TOWARD A RURAL ELECTORAL STRATEGY

The reflections that follow will bring us a step or two closer to development of a national rural strategy that can both supplement and safeguard the Democrats' traditionally urban focus. The idea is to attract larger Democratic minorities among rural voters in order to protect shrinking Democratic majorities in the central cities. Accordingly, this section contains two parts: (1) a look at where rural votes are most likely to be won and where they can do the most good, and (2) an examination of what issues and themes are most likely to prove appealing to rural voters.

Rural Votes

On a state-by-state basis it is possible to devise a rough index of rural potential for the Democratic Presidential candidate in 1984. Among other things, this "Rural Potential Index" (RPI) should take into account the electoral votes to be won or lost in each state, the percentage of rural voters therein and the 1980 margin between Carter and Reagan within a given state. A high RPI state -- i.e., one in which rural Democratic votes are to be greatly prized -- will be a state that boasts a relatively large number of electoral votes and a substantial percentage of rural voters. It will also be a state that Carter either won or came close to winning in 1980.

At the outset we can safely exclude from RPI consideration the 14 states -- most of them Western --in which Carter collected less than 40 percent of the Democratic-Republican vote: Alaska (33%), Arizona (32%), Colorado (36%), Idaho (27.5%), Kansas (36.5%), Montana (36%), Nebraska (28%), Nevada (30%), New Hampshire (33%), North Dakota (29%), Oklahoma (37%), South Dakota (34%), Utah (22%) and Wyoming (31%).

Four other jurisdictions -- those with nonmetropolitan populations of less than

10 percent -- can also be ruled out: California, the District of Columbia, New Jersey and Rhode Island.

RPIs for the 33 remaining states are shown in Table "F". They were calculated in the following manner: number of electoral votes, plus nonmetro percentage of population, plus or minus the Carter-Reagan percentage margin -- plus if Carter won, minus if he lost.

Pennsylvania, for example, has 27 electoral votes and a population that is 17 percent nonmetro. Reagan beat Carter in Pennsylvania by 8 percentage points. Thus Pennsylvania's RPI is 27 plus 17 minus 8, or 36. In the case of West Virginia, where Carter defeated Reagan by a four percent margin, 4 points must be <u>added</u> to the state's 6 electoral votes and 47 percent nonmetro share, yielding an RPI of 57.

TABLE "F"

State Rural Potential Index

State	Electoral Vote	Nonmetro Population %	Carter % Margin, 1980	RPI
Mississippi	7	73	-1	79
Vermont	3	78	-7	74
Georgia	12	40	+15	67
Arkansas	6	61	-1	66
Maine	4	67	-4	67
Virginia	12	63	-14	61
Kentucky	9	55	-1	63
North Carolina	13	47	-2	58
West Virginia	6	47	+4	57
Iowa	8	60	-14	54
Minnesota	10	35	+4	49
New York	41	10	-3	48
South Carolina	8	40	-1	47
Tennessee	10	37	0	47
Alabama	9	38	-1	46
New Mexico	4	58	-20	42
Louisiana	10	37	-5	42
Missouri	12	35	-8	39
Wisconsin	11	33	-6	38
Illinois	26	19	-8	37
Pennsylvania	27	17	-8	36
Delaware	3	33	-2	34
Ohio	25	20	-12	33
Texas	26	20	-14	32
Michigan	21	17	-7	31
Massachusetts	14	15	0	29

Table "F" (cont.)

State	Electoral Vote	Nonmetro Population%	Carter% margin, 1980	RPI
Oregon	6	35	-12	29
Hawaii	4	21	+2	27
Maryland	10	11	+4	25
Indiana	13	30	-20	23
Washington	9	20	-14	15
Florida	17	12	-18	11
Connecticut	8	12	-11	9

*Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, "1980 Census of Population," vol. IV, Chapter A.

Table "F" merits inspection by any Democratic Presidential candidate trying to decide how to allocate rural campaign resources in 1984. Roughly ranked but strategically suggestive, the top 21 RPI states (through Pennsylvania) add up to 248 electoral votes; if one includes all 26 states with RPIs of at least 30, the electoral total swells to 323.

Several additional points can be made. For one, Southern states loom especially large in the rural electoral scheme of things. Mississippi, Georgia, Arkansas, Virginia and North Carolina, along with the border states of Kentucky and West Virginia, are all among the top ten RPIs. The next cohort down includes South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama and Louisiana. By and large, this is good news for Democrats, considering the potentially large rural black vote and the added "attraction" of the farm crisis.

In the northeast, Vermont and Maine rate high but are less electorally significant than New York and Pennsylvania, with their ratings of 47 and 36, respectively. New York's electoral votes and the evenness of the contest there in 1980 make it a particularly good rural bet for Democrats next year. The lesson of Carter's 1976 triumphs in Pennsylvania and Ohio should not be lost.

Finally, there appear to be several states in the Midwest -- notably Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois and perhaps Ohio -- where a rural strategy can pay dividends. Here again, the farm crisis should make a real difference.

Table "G" provides a somewhat different way of ranking rural electoral opportunities. It singles out 17 states that Carter lost in 1980 and shows what proportion of nonmetro votes in each state would have had to switch in order to have changed the outcome. No one working for a Democratic turnaround in 1984, of course, will rely exclusively on rural votes. Big-city ballots will have to play the major

role. Still, the figure in Table "G" underline the frequently overlooked importance of nonmetro voters, even in states like New York, where they comprise only ten percent of the voting population.

Not unexpectedly, the list bears more than a passing resemblance to the RPI roster in Table "C". Southern and border states remain prominent, though the additions of Massachusetts and Delaware as 5 percenters are a pleasant surprise. The 17 states represent 174 electoral votes. Add in the 49 electoral votes that Carter actually won in 1980, and we get a total of 223 -- about five-sixths of the way to the Promised Land.

TABLE "G"

Aspects of the Carter-Reagan Vote:

17 States That Reagan Won

	State	Electoral Votes
Where a nonmetro shift of less than 1.5% would have changed the outcome:		
	Arkansas	6
	Kentucky	9
	Mississippi	7
	Tennessee	10
Where a nonmetro shift of less than 5% would have changed the outcome:		
	Alabama	9
	Delaware	3
	Massachusetts	14
	North Carolina	13
	South Carolina	8
Where a nonmetro shift of less than 10% would have changed the outcome:		
	Louisiana	10
	Maine	4
	Missouri	12
	Vermont	3
	Wisconsin	11
Where a nonmetro shift of less than 15% would have changed the outcome:	Iowa	8
	New York	41
	Oregon	6
	Total	174

Themes and Issues

Prevailing attitudes toward rural America have long been characterized by a mixture of nostalgia and condescension, a blend that sentimentalizes the rural past while discounting the rural future. For many politicians and government officials 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 the 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. Those were the years (1950-1970) when rural schools by the thousands were being consolidated out of existence, joining rural post offices, churches, and other local institutions in a parade of extinction. They were also the years when small farms were disappearing at the rate of nearly one-million every decade. One could sympathize with Oren Lee Staley, the president of the National Farmers Organization, when he uttered his oft-quoted jeremiad: "The farmhouse lights are going out all over America."

The federal goverment, meanwhile, did little to rekindle the lamps. To vary the metaphor, the current of reform that from time to time flowed through the nation -- the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the Great Society -- flowed around rural Americans, leaving them largely untouched. To this day, 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 percent of the counties designated by federal officials as "Health Manpower Shortage Areas" are rural.

The point to bear in mind here goes beyond rural suffering: it speaks to 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 thus of rural poltitics, 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 now, 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, including this writer, 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 <u>un</u>fair policies.

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

As it happens, Ronald Reagan has paid remarkably scant attention to rural America's deepest aspirations, which center on home, school and community life. His "solution" to the farm crisis, the Payments-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 <u>lose</u> money by not selling.

Reagan's nonfarm rural policies have scarcely been more encouraging. His flirtation with social security reductions has frightened millions of the rural elderly, and his draconian cuts in rural health and education have worked hardships on young and old alike. Rural towns, no less than individuals, have been victims of his philosophy. Sharp curtailments in the Farmers Home Administration budget have all but 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, which aimed at providing "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, if not wholly understood. 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 discontents 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 the major themes cited earlier -- fairness, equity, recognition -- and by focusing sympathetically on rural dilemmas that have political implications, if not solutions: how to find a doctor and pay for medical bills; how to hold a steady job that pays an adequate wage; how to help the kids get a decent educaction -- and how to pay for college; 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 short, to survive as a rural American. The candidate who takes a vocal interest in such questions will have earned the thanks -- and, yes, maybe the votes as well -- of rural Americans everywhere.

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