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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Big-city liberals got just what they deserved last November — a kick in the jeans from rural voters.

If liberal Democrats are serious about rebuilding the allegedly shattered New Deal coalition, they will have to figure out a way to recapture rural affections. These have been fading for some time — since the 1920's, in fact, when the Democratic Party began staking its life and its fortune on the urban vote.

There was a time, of course, when rural America and the Democrats were virtually the same thing. Thomas Jefferson called farmers "the Chosen People of God." William Jennings Bryan, a Western agrarian through and through, once characterized the citified East as "the enemy country."

But industrialization and the New Deal changed all that. Democrats became urbanized and rural people became Republicanized, and that was all right with the Democrats.

So long as cities were thriving and their political machines were humming, it was possible for Democrats to win Presidential elections without benefit of rural support. One Tammany Hall could outscore a thousand Wichita Falls.

New demographic patterns have again altered the arithmetic. Not only is the central city shrinking but also, for the first time in more than a century, the rural sector is expanding.

"We have a new distribution of people upon the land," notes Howard E. Conklin, professor of agricultural economics at Cornell University. "one

that has never existed before in the history of the human race. It is a pattern in which nonfarm people live in the country, far outnumbering farmers in most rural communities."

As Mr. Conklin makes clear in a recent essay, the new rural trend embraces all ages, not just the retired elderly, and all classes, not just the affluent with their vacation homes.

The upshot has been something of a rural renaissance. Preliminary 1980 census figures indicate that the rural population has grown by 4 million since 1970.

The figures pose a challenge to liberal Democrats. Certainly they will have to show more sensitivity to rural needs than they have displayed. To begin with, they might re-examine the common assumption that rural America exists solely for the convenience of city people and suburbanites — as a dispenser of rest and recreation, for example, or as an ideal dumping ground for chemical and nuclear wastes.

"Rural" is not precisely a synonym for "empty." There are 65 million people out there, and they would like to stay healthy. (They would also like to stay rural — a status endangered in some places by America's rush to rusticity.)

It may be a measure of the Democrats' metropolitan myopia — their habit of not seeing the rural forest for the urban jungle — that they still don't know who beat them in November. To hear them tell it, the defeat of Jimmy Carter came at the hands of a sinister coterie of prayer-mongers, anti-abortionists, and ayatollahs. In fact, Mr.

Carter lost because a solid majority of rural Americans voted against him and his party.

It would have been surprising if they had voted otherwise. After all, it has been about half a century since the Democrats made anything beyond a superficial commitment to rural citizens — to the preservation of small farms, for instance, and to the improvement of rural housing. It is not generally understood that half the nation's stock of decrepit housing is situated in rural areas, while only one-fifth of all Federal housing funds find their way there.

No wonder rural Americans are suspicious of "big government." Invariably it has saddled them with bureaucracy while depriving them of subsidy.

One of Mr. Carter's first acts as President was all too symbolic. In launching a post-inaugural economic

emergency plan designed to pump \$4 billion into municipal public works, the Carter Administration casually excluded from eligibility all towns with populations below 50,000.

The idea of encouraging a rural-liberal force in American politics is not so outlandish as it may seem to the many whose expectations of rural people have been largely shaped by "The Waltons" and "The Little House on the Prairie."

But rural nostalgia, the dead hand of history, is part of the problem. Instead of sentimentalizing rustics on the tube, we should be reaching out to flesh-and-blood rural voters, signing them up for liberalism.

Richard J. Margolis, a writer, was the first chairman of Rural America, an organization that seeks to promote the interests of rural residents.

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