



**#winrural**

**How to Build a Progressive Populist Political Movement  
in Rural and Small-Town America**

April 2019

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Integrate Rural Areas and Small-Towns in Statewide Electoral Strategies;

Develop county-level analysis of the rural vote in key states;

Importance of “People-Powered” Organizations with c3 + c4 and PAC Infrastructure;

Invest in narrative and communications infrastructure that speaks to rural values;

Build a policy agenda that speaks to rural needs; and

Early investment in infrastructure over multiple cycles to shift the political landscape.





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past century, from the New Deal to the civil rights movement, nearly every successful movement that sought to expand political freedom and economic opportunity was built upon broad coalitions between urban and rural communities. In recent years, that “great majority”<sup>1</sup> has frayed as a politics of resentment and division has put the promise of American democracy at risk. This report provides a path towards a new “great majority” -- multiracial, working class communities across rural, small-town, suburban and urban areas -- with the power to create a progressive populist movement that can transform the next generation of American politics. At this moment, one of the keys to building this movement is strengthening integrated voter engagement capacity in rural areas and small-towns in alignment with progressive organizing efforts in metropolitan areas across states.

Over the past 18 months, People’s Action and our allies have launched one of the largest rural and small-town progressive organizing efforts in the country. This past election cycle, our member organizations and allies knocked on more than 392,000 doors in rural communities and had over 115,226 conversations with rural voters which helped to elect progressive populist candidates across the country. This report shares key learnings from the field from the last election cycle and includes an analysis by Catalist of new data on voting trends in rural areas that helps to reshape the understanding of the 2018 election results. It also features case studies from five states that highlight critical steps that must be taken to prepare for future elections.

The role of the “rural vote” in the 2018 midterm elections has been hotly debated and pundits and political leaders shared wide-ranging opinions about election results in rural and small-town communities and the implications for the 2020 elections. The urban-rural divide was largely cast as a proxy for beliefs and values and the 2018 results were seen as intensifying the divisions of the 2016 election.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Frank, Thomas, et al. “Four More Years.” *Harper’s Magazine*, [harpers.org/archive/2018/04/four-more-years-2/](https://harpers.org/archive/2018/04/four-more-years-2/).

2 Chotiner, I., & Chotiner, I. (2018, November 07). The Deepening American Divide. Retrieved from <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/11/midterms-2018-results-polarization-urban-rural-divide.html>



But this misses a critical part of the story. An analysis of voting trends by Catalist shows that rural areas largely moved in a Democratic direction, often by even larger margins than the suburbs.

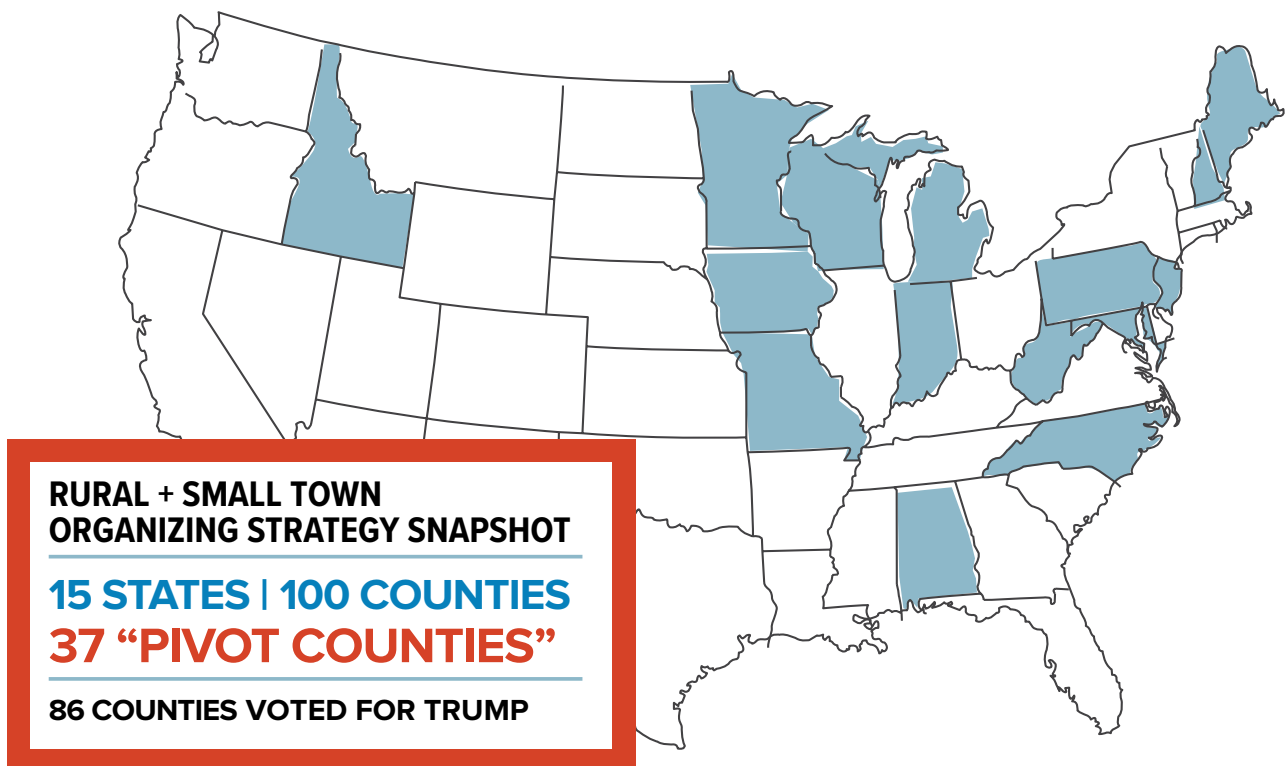
- From 2012-2016, rural areas became more Republican by about 11 points in margin.
- From 2016 to 2018, there was a major bounce-back, with the same areas recovering and becoming about 7 points more Democratic.
- Suburban areas trended Democratic in both elections.
- Urban areas moved in a direction towards Democratic candidates, but only slightly (they are already very Democratic).

Catalist estimates the margin change to be +7 points in rural areas overall, but there were some groups in rural areas that moved by much more than that. The biggest changes were among

white single women (+17), young white voters (+16), and people who have been historically modeled to be neither solidly Democratic or Republican (+14).<sup>3</sup>

**There are five major insights from the past election cycle that are critical in preparing for future elections:**

- The rural and small-town vote will be critical for the path to elect a new President and Senate majority;
- Down-ballot races matter and play a key role in shaping statewide elections;
- Race and immigration are key factors in bridging the rural-urban divide;
- Progressive populist policies are widely popular in rural and small-town America; and
- Campaigns need to invest in relational field programs to rebuild trust in rural communities.



<sup>3</sup> The "Modeled Middle" does not necessarily mean they are swing voters. Although some groups moved in a slightly negative direction, we don't consider those to be substantial changes. For example, African Americans in rural areas are estimated to have lost about 4 points in margin, but that only moves them from 94-5 (D-R) to 92-7. Because this data is ultimately based on surveys and models, and rural African Americans are a relatively small group (about 2% of 2018 voters), there is substantial uncertainty around this estimate.

## Recommendations

The People's Action Rural and Small-Town Organizing Cohort has **six recommendations** to strengthen rural and small-town voter engagement strategies in upcoming electoral cycles.

- 1. Integrate rural areas and small-towns in statewide electoral strategies:** Rural areas play a key role in shaping statewide electoral outcomes and impacting the composition of state legislatures and Congressional delegations. The outcomes of statewide elections depend on being far more competitive in rural areas, sparse suburbs and small-towns and closing the gap that has grown over the last several decades. The 2020 election will be critical in shaping redistricting fights over the next decade and it will be vitally important to have targeted races in rural areas to pick up additional seats in state legislatures that will draw maps for the next decade in most states.
- 2. Develop county-level analysis of the rural vote in key states:** Gerrymandering over the past decade has contributed to a distorted understanding of voting patterns in rural areas. County-level analysis of voting trends in rural areas is critical to develop effective accurate targeting and integrated strategies to support candidates up and down the ballot. Individual level voter targeting is still extremely important, but county-level analysis will help to identify political and demographic patterns and help to coordinate multiple touches with voters in their geographic environment.
- 3. Strengthen “people-powered” organizations with c3 + c4 + PAC infrastructure:** The brand of traditional political parties is badly damaged in rural areas and small-towns, especially for the Democratic Party. It is crucial to invest in the capacity of community organizations with c3 and c4 infrastructure and organize around the issues and policies that matter to rural voters and engage in political activity. It is also important to build infrastructure like Political Action Committees in states where it is needed to help develop comprehensive and coordinated strategies.
- 4. Invest in narrative and communications infrastructure that speaks to rural values:** Rural and small-town voters need to hear clear language and stories that communicates their values and speaks to their needs. The lack of investment in progressive communications infrastructure and the inability to communicate around shared values has led to a vacuum that has been occupied by extremist forces that do not represent the interests of rural communities. The strategy should highlight local residents as core messengers and should tap into the existing network of local newspapers, radio and social media.
- 5. Build a policy agenda that speaks to rural needs:** Rural communities share many concerns with urban and suburban communities, but rural problems need specific solutions. Rural and small-town communities also need to know that candidates and campaigns have an understanding of their experiences and have a clear plan to improve their lives.
- 6. Early investment in infrastructure over multiple cycles to shift the political landscape:** The lack of investment over the last several decades has led to a deterioration in voter engagement infrastructure in rural areas and small-towns. To rebuild capacity in these regions it is necessary to make early investments that help build capacity to engage voters around shared values and common issues outside of the election cycle. It is important that this investment includes a significant component to build both the paid and volunteer capacity to conduct relational field programs built around live conversations with voters in rural areas and small-towns.



# PEOPLE'S ACTION RURAL AND SMALL-TOWN ORGANIZING STRATEGY

**People's Action is one of the largest multiracial, people's organizations in the country, made up of 48 member organizations with more than 400 local staff in 30 states, representing over a million grassroots leaders in communities and online.**

Our mission is to build an America where we put people and planet first. Our strategy is to build powerful state-level community organizations; align around a long-term agenda for racial, economic, climate and gender justice; and drive coordinated campaigns that win real change in people's lives and shape an economy and a democracy that works for all of us. To build power for families and communities, we move people in large numbers through issue organizing campaigns and integrated voter engagement – using base-building, leadership development, direct action, large-scale grassroots and netroots action, and movement politics.

In the aftermath of the 2016 election, People's Action member organizations across the Midwest, Northeast and South began meeting to develop a collective strategy to address the moral and strategic imperative to strengthen our work in rural and small-town communities. Over the past eighteen months, our member organizations and allies have built one of the largest progressive rural organizing efforts through our Rural and Small-Town Organizing Strategy. The strategy spans 15 states and is targeting 100 counties and many of these communities are classified as persistent poverty counties.

Of the more than 136 million votes cast in the 2016 election, 77,744 votes in three states – Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin – effectively decided the election. Trump had a margin of victory of 176,478 in the counties where People's Action member organizations and allies are currently organizing in those same states--with plans to expand into more counties in 2019. There is a clear path to shifting the balance of power in those communities in a way that would profoundly impact the future of those states and the entire country.





**77,774 votes in three states--Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin--decided the outcome of the 2016 election. Trump had a margin of victory of 176,478 in the counties where People's Action member organizations and allies are currently organizing in those same states.**

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Over the past year, our member organizations and allies have

- documented over **10,000 deep listening conversations** that helped to launch more than **20 new organizing chapters** in rural counties across the country;
- knocked on more than **392,000 doors** in rural communities and had more than **115,226 conversations** with rural voters that helped to impact elections around the country;
- helped to **defeat proposed factory farms** that are destroying rural communities across the Midwest;
- won **millions of dollars for disaster relief** in rural New Jersey;
- helped to protect Native sovereignty by fighting against open pit mining from destroying tribal water sources and sacred land in Wisconsin;
- mobilized rural governments to **oppose new pipelines and fracking** and **pass the first-ever living wage** policies in rural North Carolina;
- helped pass the **first-ever non-discrimination ordinance** in rural Alabama; and
- helped to expand eligibility for Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Medicaid for low-income pregnant women in West Virginia.



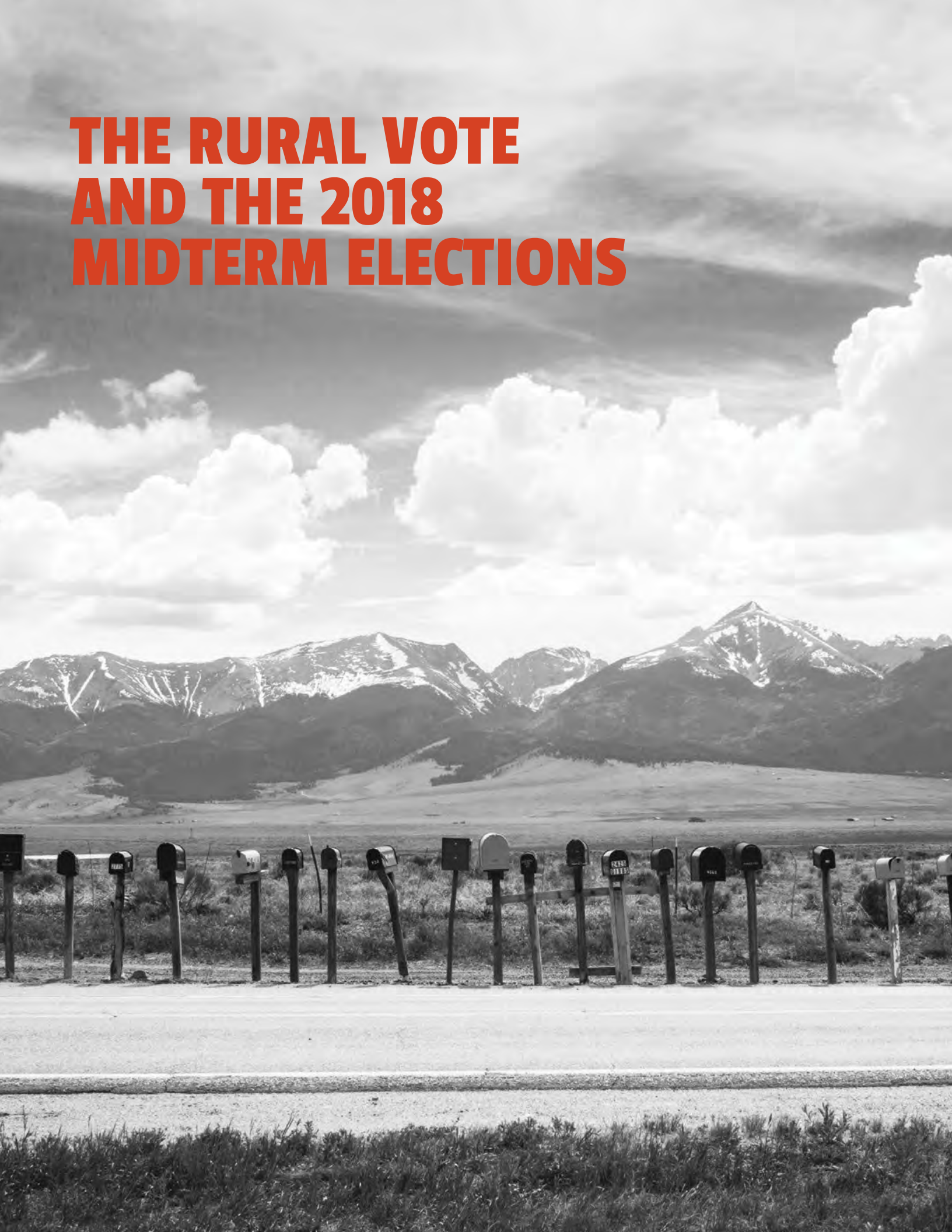
**Congressman Antonio Delgado at the announcement of his endorsement of Citizen Action of New York in their Hudson Valley office.**

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Our member organizations and allies have also played a key role in helping to win crucial elections in rural areas this past electoral cycle, including

- helping to flip Maine's Second Congressional District, the second most rural district in the country;
- helping to flip the 19th Congressional District in the Hudson Valley of upstate New York and elect Congressman Antonio Delgado [NY];
- playing a key role in helping to unseat Congressman MacArthur in southern New Jersey and holding him accountable for leading efforts to dismantle the Affordable Care Act;
- leading a massive field campaign which helped to flip the only House District in rural North Carolina;
- winning a key State Senate district in rural western Wisconsin in a region dominated by Trump in 2016; and
- flipping one of the most conservative House districts in the Michigan suburbs.

# THE RURAL VOTE AND THE 2018 MIDTERM ELECTIONS





On election night and in the weeks after the November 2018 midterms, pundits and political leaders shared divergent and often contradictory opinions about the role of the “rural vote” and the implications for the 2020 election.

“The Democratic collapse in rural areas that began to plague their candidates under President Obama worsened”<sup>4</sup> the *New York Times* wrote on election night. “Rural America’s much more Republican than ever before,” said Rep. Tom Cole [R-Oklahoma] while celebrating his reelection in an exurban and rural district on election night.<sup>5</sup>

The urban-rural divide was largely cast as a proxy for beliefs and values and the 2018 results were seen as intensifying the divisions of the 2016 election.<sup>6</sup> The new urban-suburban coalition was widely credited with handing Democrats their victories in the House of Representatives<sup>7</sup> and the poor performance in rural areas was seen as playing a key role in key Senate defeats in places like Florida and Missouri.

Deeper analysis painted a much more complex picture. Preliminary investigation in the weeks after the election showed that Democrats increased their vote share in dozens of the country’s most rural Congressional districts. Democrats pointed to victories in places like Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Maine and upstate New York as evidence that they had tapped into a “populist platform” that connected with rural voters and that would help them retake the White House and Senate in 2020.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the range of opinions, there appears to be a set of themes around which there is emerging consensus.

## The rural vote is critical in 2020 for the path to a new President and Senate majority

It is critical to close the gap in rural areas in key states to reshape the electoral map for the 2020 presidential election. In addition, Democrats will be prevented from retaking the Senate for years to come if they do not develop a stronger rural strategy.<sup>9</sup>

## Down-ballot races matter

Intentional gerrymandering<sup>10</sup> adopted by many states after the Republican wave election in 2010 make a rural strategy critical to impacting state legislatures around the country. Democratic candidates won more cumulative votes for the state legislature in places like Michigan, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania but continue to hold a minority of seats. Although the battle for Congress dominated media coverage in 2018, the election highlighted the importance of competing in down-ballot races to help to shape the state-wide balance of power.<sup>11</sup> Candidates who mount competitive races down-ballot in rural districts also help make the path easier at the top of the ticket.<sup>12</sup>

## Race and immigration are key factors in bridging the rural-urban divide

“The factors that divided the electorate in 2016 are dividing them even further now,” says George Washington University political scientist John Sides and author of *Identity Crisis*. “One example is the education divide within whites, which appears as large if not larger among women ... another example is the rural-urban divide. All of those demographic characteristics are correlated with views of race and immigration.”<sup>13</sup> Rural communities are becoming

4 Martin, J., & Burns, A. (2018, November 07). Democrats Capture Control of House; G.O.P. Holds Senate. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/us/politics/midterm-elections-results.html>

5 Wilson, R. (2018, November 07). America’s urban-rural divide deepens. Retrieved from <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/415441-americas-urban-rural-divide-deepens>

6 Chotiner, I., & Chotiner, I. (2018, November 07). The Deepening American Divide. Retrieved from <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/11/midterms-2018-results-polarization-urban-rural-divide.html>

7 Geoffreyvs. (2018, November 08). The Suburbs - All Kinds Of Suburbs - Delivered The House To Democrats. Retrieved from <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-suburbs-all-kinds-of-suburbs-delivered-the-house-to-democrats/>

8 Oliphant, J. (2018, November 21). Democrats see rural gains bolstering fight for White House in 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-rural/democrats-see-rural-gains-bolstering-fight-for-white-house-in-2020-idUSKCN1NQ193>

9 Tomasky, M. (2018, November 07). Think 2020 Will Be Better for Senate Democrats? Think Again. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/07/opinion/midterm-democrats-election-2020.html?module=inline>

10 Nestor M. Davidson Nestor Davidson, Paul A. Diller Paul Diller, Nestor M. Davidson Feed Nestor Davidson, Walsh, A. A., Diller, P. A., Diller, P., . . . Willamette University College of Law. (2018, December 13). A City-Suburban Coalition Can’t Win While the System Favors Rural Voters. Retrieved from <https://www.citylab.com/perspective/2018/11/representation-rahm-emanuel-urban-rural-suburban-election/577051/>

11 Heuvel. (2018, November 14). Katrina vanden Heuvel: How can Democrats win the rural vote? Retrieved from [https://madison.com/ct/opinion/column/katrina-vanden-heuvel-how-can-democrats-win-the-rural-vote/article\\_ca1829fd-61da-5374-b770-8f301474c386.html](https://madison.com/ct/opinion/column/katrina-vanden-heuvel-how-can-democrats-win-the-rural-vote/article_ca1829fd-61da-5374-b770-8f301474c386.html)

12 Theintercept. (2018, October 31). What the Progressive Surge in Rural America Means for the Election - and Beyond. Retrieved from <https://theintercept.com/2018/10/31/midterm-elections-2018-rural-progressives/>

13 Beauchamp, Z. (2018, November 07). The midterm elections revealed that America is in a cold civil war. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/midterm-elections/2018/11/7/18068486/midterm-election-2018-results-race-surburb>



**New Jersey Organizing Project and New Jersey Citizen Action members played a key role in holding former Congressman Tom MacArthur accountable at the ballot box for his role in attempting to take away the healthcare of his constituents.**

increasingly diverse<sup>14</sup> and there is growing evidence that race-conscious populist narratives resonate deeply in rural and urban communities.<sup>15</sup> It is critical to integrate multiracial bridge-building and race-conscious narrative strategies into any political organizing effort in rural and small-town communities.

### **Progressive populist policies are popular in rural America**

Democrats are widely seen as having a history of not investing enough energy in “fighting the villains victimizing rural and small-town America”<sup>16</sup> and Democrats clearly struggle in rural areas when they attempt to run as conservatives.<sup>17</sup> Through deep listening campaigns conducted by People’s Action and in polls commissioned by groups like RuralOrganizing.org, rural residents consistently demonstrate broad support for progressive measures like free college tuition; Medicare for All; and increasing the minimum wage to \$15/hour. Polling also strongly suggests that small-town voters feel the system is rigged for the powerful and wealthy,

and a clear majority of rural residents believe that Congress is giving tax breaks to the wealthy instead of investing in rural areas.<sup>18,19</sup>

### **Campaigns need to invest in relational field programs to rebuild trust**

The lack of progressive political investment in rural communities has taken a significant toll. Organizers across the country report on canvassing rural communities where voters have not been spoken to in more than a decade. From Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack to current Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti there is broad consensus that campaigns need to invest time in rebuilding trust by listening. “I think Dems have finally heard loud and clear that you have to fight to win, you have to organize to win,” said Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti who spent the midterms stumping for Democrats around the country. “There’s no question that Dems need to be everywhere,” Garcetti said. “You’ve got to show up in these small towns, you’ve got to show up in rural areas, and you’ve got to listen.”<sup>20</sup>

14 Illing, S. (2017, April 24). “Rural America” doesn’t mean “white America” - here’s why that matters. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/conversations/2017/4/24/15286624/race-rural-america-trump-politics-media>

15 López, I. H., Shenker-Osorio, A., & Draut, T. (2018, April 14). Democrats can win by tackling race and class together. Here’s proof. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/14/democrats-race-class-divide-2018-midterms>

16 Hauser, J. (2018, November 17). Dems must wield power against the powerful to win back rural America. Retrieved from <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/417176-dems-must-wield-power-against-the-powerful-to-win-back-rural-america>

17 Isaac, J. C. (2018, November 10). The Democrats shouldn’t move right to win Trump voters. Here’s why | Jeffrey C Isaac. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/10/democrats-beat-trump-should-not-move-right-reasons-why>

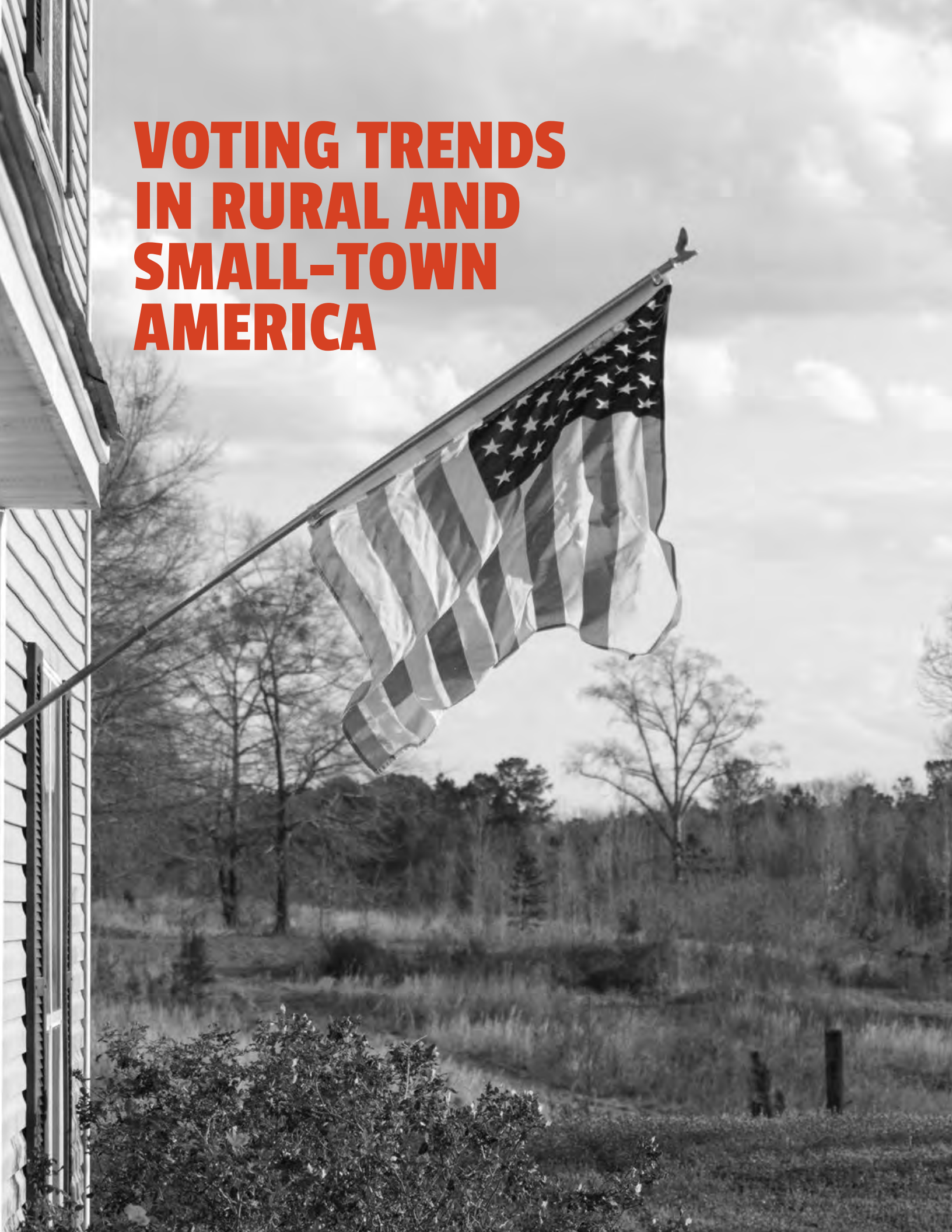
18 Kruggel, A., Juarez-Scruggs, J (2018, April 22). The Promise of a Progressive Populist Movement. Retrieved from <https://peoplesaction.org/the-promise-of-a-progressive-populist-movement/>

19 Speak Your Piece: To Win Rural America, Dems Must Lean into Progressive Policies. (2018, November 12). Retrieved from <https://www.dailyyonder.com/speak-piece-win-rural-america-dems-must-lean-progressive-policies/2018/11/11/28612/>

20 Wilson, R. (2018, November 07). America’s urban-rural divide deepens. Retrieved from <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/415441-americas-urban-rural-divide-deepens>

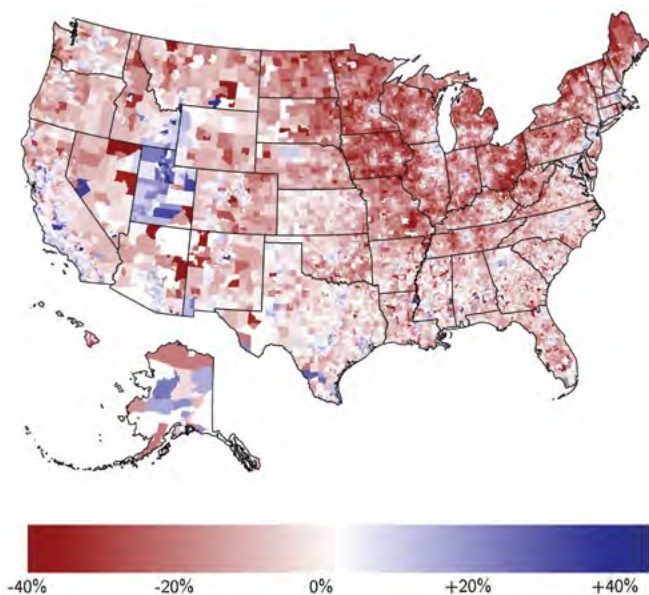


# **VOTING TRENDS IN RURAL AND SMALL-TOWN AMERICA**





Most people are familiar with the large-scale rural/suburban/urban story from 2016. Despite rural areas being more Republican even before this election, the change from 2012 to 2016 was dramatic: rural areas became even more Republican, suburban areas became more Democratic, and urban areas largely stayed the same, with small shifts towards Democrats. The 2012-2016 change is shown across the country in figure 1.

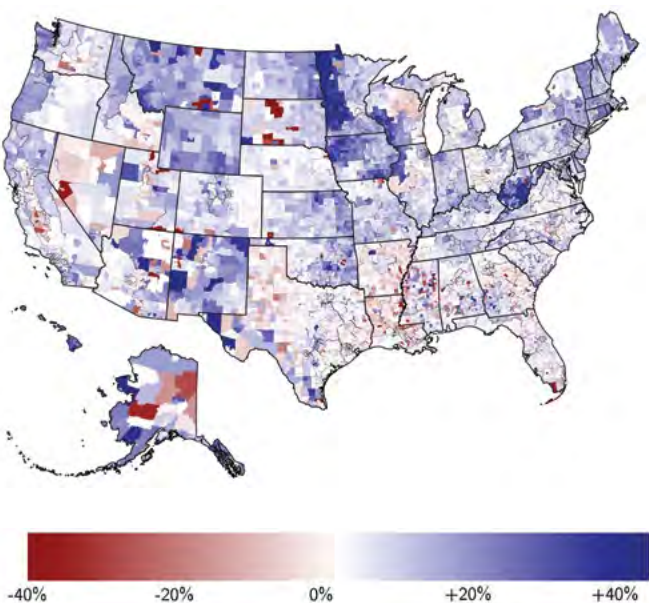


**Figure 1: 2012 - 2016 Change in Democratic Margin**

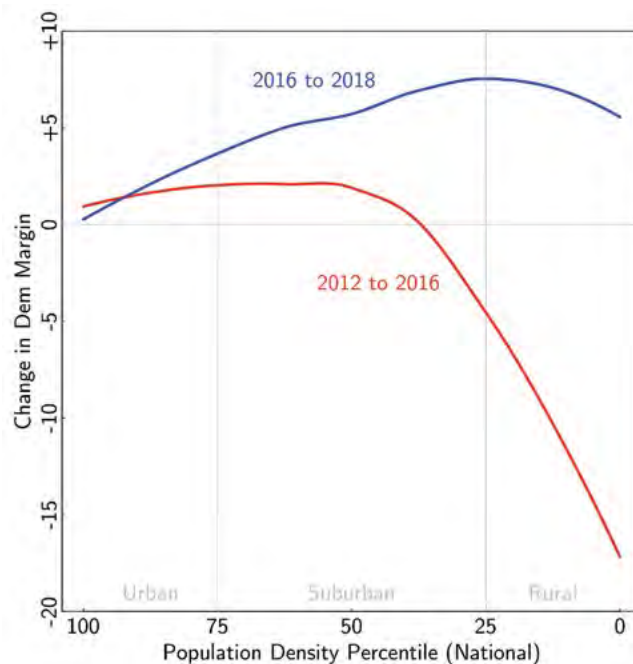
Media reports have largely described 2018 as a continuation of this trend, focusing mainly on suburbs that flipped Congressional seats from Republican to Democratic. But this misses a critical part of the story: rural areas also largely moved in a Democratic direction, often by even larger margins than the suburbs. Figure 2 shows the large-scale national trend, comparing 2016 Presidential results to the 2018 House results.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 3 shows the year-to-year trends more explicitly. Every census tract in the country is categorized as urban, suburban, or rural, based on population density. The most urban (dense) tracts are shown on the left, and the most rural tracts are shown on the right. From 2012-2016, rural areas became more Republican by about 11 points in margin. From 2016 to 2018, there was a major bounce-back, with the same areas recovering and becoming about 7 points more Democratic. Suburban areas trended Democratic in both elections, and urban areas moved in that direction but only slightly (they are already very Democratic).

What about demographic groups within rural areas? While the margin change is estimated to be +7 points in rural areas overall, there were some groups that moved by much more than



**Figure 2: 2016 to 2018 Change in Democratic Margin**



**Figure 3**

<sup>21</sup> The maps show census tracts, using precinct-level election results where available, and projected individual-level model scores and CD results elsewhere. We project the results for uncontested races based on national trends, so that they can be reasonably included in the analysis.

that, as shown in Figure 4. The biggest changes were seen among white single women (+17), young white voters (+16), and people who have been historically modeled to be neither solidly Democratic or Republican (+14).<sup>22</sup>

This trend can also be seen in publicly available data. CityLab from the Atlantic has a Congressional Density index classifying each district. Although Democrats tended to flip more suburban seats (because they were closer to 50%), there were also big margin changes in Pure Rural, Rural/Suburban Mix, and Sparse Suburban districts (Figure 5).<sup>23</sup>

Similar shifts exist in state-level elections. Many of these trends (at all levels) are often driven by candidate-specific characteristics like incumbency, the level of competitiveness and funding into the race, and many others. A full analysis of all of these factors is outside the scope of this report, but without question there were major rural gains in many important areas of the country. Figure 6 shows maps for three major Midwestern battleground states: Wisconsin (Governor), Michigan (Senate), and Pennsylvania (Senate) and illustrating the margin gains compared to 2016. Areas that are classified as urban and suburban are outlined in green. In many of these places, Democratic margin gains were fairly limited. In contrast, there were large and consistent gains in the rural areas in all three states (and many other states across the country).

It is also important to understand that rural gains were *not* consistent everywhere. Figure 7 shows the hotly contested elections in Georgia (Governor) and Texas (Senate), as examples. Democratic gains in both of these elections were more isolated to urban and suburban areas, particularly in the Georgia race. It is also important to note that 2018 numbers are still preliminary and as vote history and precinct-level election results, are collected it may change these numbers to a degree. However, the overall findings continue to demonstrate the important role that rural areas and small-towns can play in future elections.

## Change in Dem Margin, 2016 to 2018 (Rural)

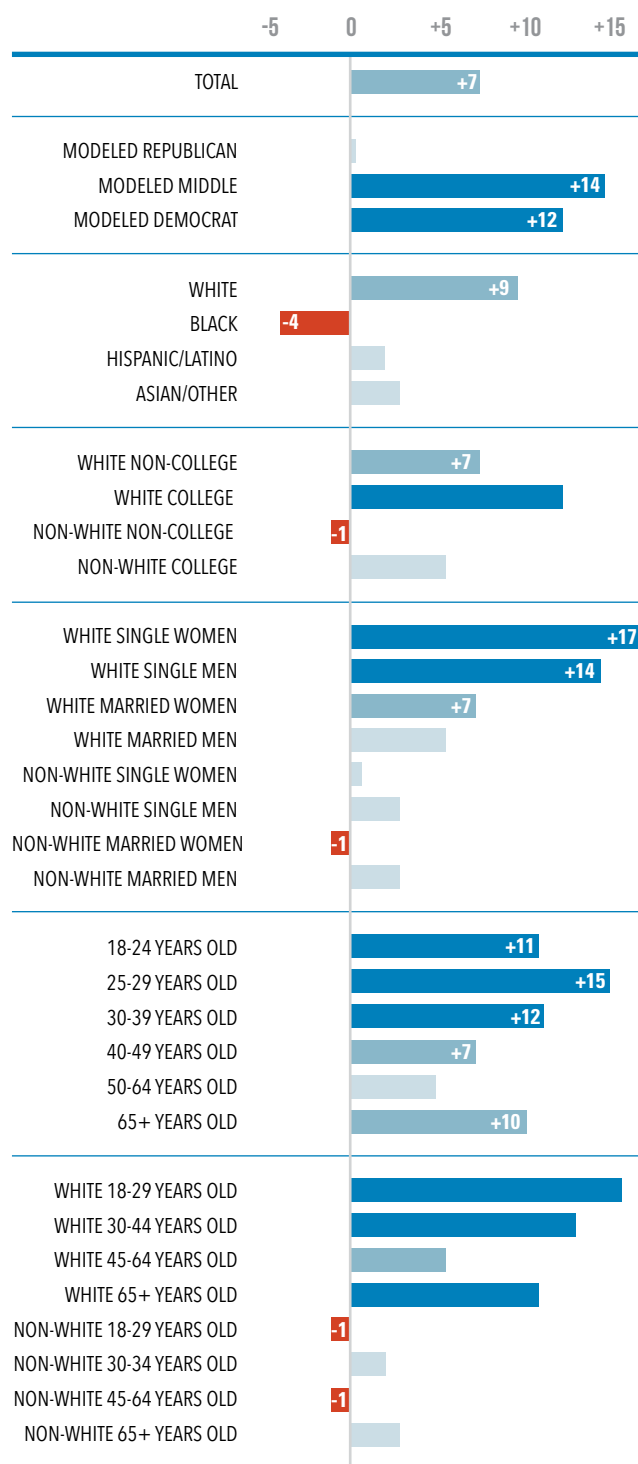
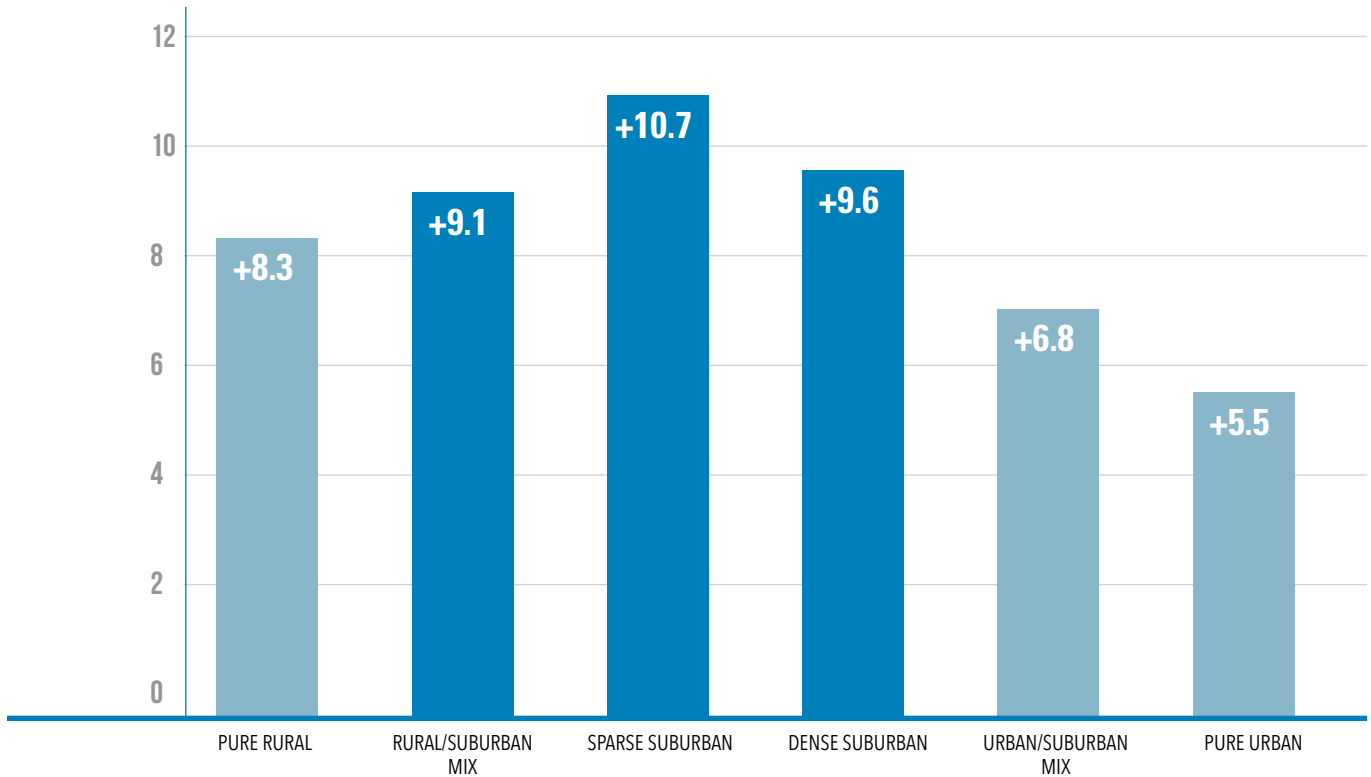


Figure 4

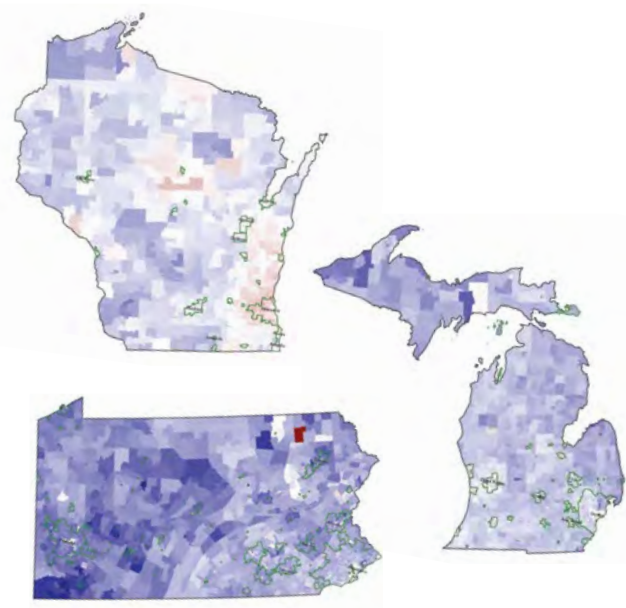
22 The “Modeled Middle” does not necessarily mean they are swing voters. Although some groups moved in a slightly negative direction, we don’t consider those to be substantial changes. For example, African Americans in rural areas are estimated to have lost about 4 points in margin, but that only moves them from 94-5 (D-R) to 92-7. Because this data is ultimately based on surveys and models, and rural African Americans are a relatively small group (about 2% of 2018 voters), there is substantial uncertainty around this estimate.

23 In Pennsylvania, district lines changed between the 2016 and 2018 elections. As a result, we used 2016 Presidential results under the new district lines as the baseline.

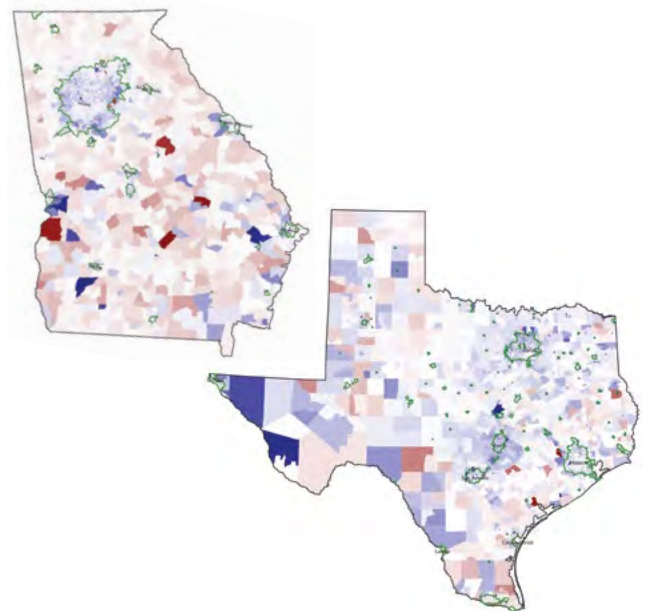
## Change in Dem Margin, 2016 to 2018



**Figure 5**  
CD results by CityLab Clusters. 340 CDs contested both times.



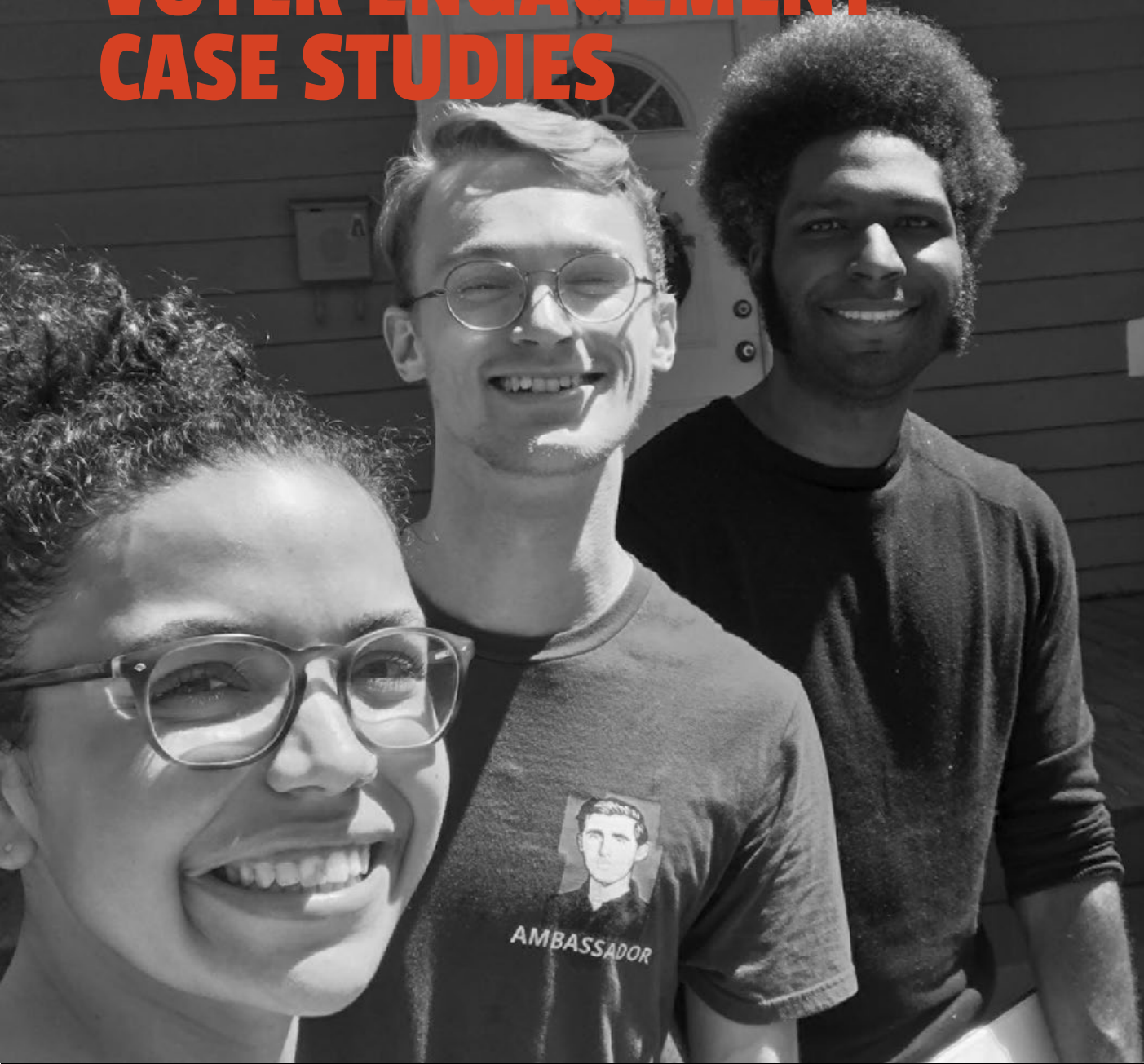
**Figure 6**  
2016-2018 Change in Democratic Margin in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania [from left to right]



**Figure 7**  
2016-2018 Change in Democratic Margin in Georgia and Texas



# RURAL AND SMALL-TOWN VOTER ENGAGEMENT CASE STUDIES



Hometown Action leaders in Alabama heading out to canvass.

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During this last election cycle, our member organizations and allies knocked on more than **392,000 doors** in rural communities and had more than **115,226 conversations** with rural voters. From Alabama to Idaho and Minnesota to Maine, our member organizations and allies played a key role in helping to win crucial elections in rural areas. These case studies lift up examples of how to organize in rural, small-town, and suburban communities to build an enduring progressive majority across the country.

# THE SECOND IN MAINE

## FLIPPING THE SECOND MOST RURAL CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT IN AMERICA



In the Second Congressional District in Maine, the incumbent had won election for the past century prior to 2018. By most traditional measures the seat should have been considered a Republican stronghold.<sup>24</sup> Incumbent Bruce Poliquin had won his two previous elections handily; the district was the second most rural Congressional district in the country;<sup>25</sup> and was one of only two districts in New England that voted for Donald Trump.<sup>26</sup> Fortunately, leaders at Maine People's Alliance saw things differently. The organization set their sights on this race in August 2017 when they launched an aggressive accountability campaign on Poliquin for his votes on the repeal of the Affordable Care Act and the Trump tax bill. For more than 12 months, they relentlessly bird-dogged Poliquin, garnering

prominent media coverage at a local and national level.<sup>27</sup> One action at a local senior citizen center was featured prominently in television ads about the race from challenger Jared Golden.<sup>28</sup> Maine People's Alliance held bi-weekly press events, elevating the voices of seniors and veterans<sup>29</sup> and reached hundreds of thousands of Mainers with digital content on the Maine Beacon, their internal news publication.<sup>30</sup> They also generated over 100 letters to the editor and opinion editorials from local constituents that helped to highlight the impact of Poliquin's decisions on local residents.<sup>31</sup>

Maine People's Alliance had a long-standing relationship with Jared Golden during his tenure in the Maine House of Representatives and

24 Kane, P. (2017, February 09). Should House Democrats write off rural congressional districts? Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/should-house-democrats-write-off-rural-congressional-districts/2017/02/09/9ea98502-eee0-11e6-b4ff-ac2cf509efe5\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.a8f8278aef2b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/should-house-democrats-write-off-rural-congressional-districts/2017/02/09/9ea98502-eee0-11e6-b4ff-ac2cf509efe5_story.html?utm_term=.a8f8278aef2b)

25 Both Parties Will Contest Maine's Massive 2nd District. (2018, June 04). Retrieved from <https://www.dailyonder.com/parties-will-contest-maines-massive-2nd-district/2018/06/04/25920/>

26 Jared Golden: His golden opportunity. (2019, March 14). Retrieved from <https://pinetreewatch.org/jared-golden-his-golden-opportunity/>

27 Collins, S. (2017, August 25). Behind closed doors, Bruce Poliquin says talking to press could cost him his seat. Retrieved from <https://bangordailynews.com/2017/08/25/politics/behind-closed-doors-bruce-poliquin-says-talking-to-press-could-cost-him-his-seat/>

28 Writer, C. E. (2017, July 12). Poliquin under fire in video, audio over health care bill. Retrieved from <https://www.centralmaine.com/2017/07/12/maine-rep-poliquin-targeted-in-videos-over-health-care-legislation/>

29 Higgins, A. (n.d.). Veterans Rally At Bruce Poliquin's Bangor Office In Support Of Affordable Care Act. Retrieved from <https://www.mainepublic.org/post/veterans-rally-bruce-poliquin-s-bangor-office-support-affordable-care-act#stream/0>

30 DeRose, C. (2018, August 13). 'He just disappears': Constituents share stories of Rep. Poliquin's serial avoidance of voters. Retrieved from <http://mainebeacon.com/he-just-disappears-constituents-share-stories-of-rep-poliquins-serial-avoidance-of-voters/>

31 Contributed. (2018, October 25). More tax cuts for the wealthy don't help small-business owners like me. Retrieved from [https://bangordailynews.com/2018/10/25/opinion/contributors/more-tax-cuts-for-the-wealthy-dont-help-small-business-owners-like-me/?fbclid=IwAR2T-Mc76LqQ39MnS3vcN1-UIEUgl-T9kSm97sFoZWNZskTW\\_6RVPxLJ7K0](https://bangordailynews.com/2018/10/25/opinion/contributors/more-tax-cuts-for-the-wealthy-dont-help-small-business-owners-like-me/?fbclid=IwAR2T-Mc76LqQ39MnS3vcN1-UIEUgl-T9kSm97sFoZWNZskTW_6RVPxLJ7K0)





Maine People’s Alliance outside of former Congressman Bruce Poliquin’s office.

endorsed Golden in the June 2018 primary. In support of his candidacy in the general election, Maine People’s Alliance ran a large field program that transitioned from educating voters about Poliquin’s record to supporting Golden and reached over 20,000 voters in the buildup to the general election in November 2018. In addition to their field program, Maine People’s Alliance focused on turning out young voters and “New Mainers”—recently naturalized citizens. Maine People’s Alliance provided full-time staff support for Maine Student Action and hired student interns and fellows on the campuses of Bates College, Bowdoin College, University of Maine [Orono], and Central Maine Community College, who educated and turned out hundreds of young voters on each campus. The organization worked closely with immigrant-led groups in

the Lewiston and Portland communities to train dozens of community leaders, who knocked on thousands of doors and held face-to-face conversations with thousands of Maine’s newest citizens about supporting progressive candidates—in addition to working with mosques and faith leaders to organize free rides to the polls on Election Day.

Golden trailed the two-term incumbent Republican Bruce Poliquin by around 2,000 votes on election night. Neither candidate won a majority of the vote, so Maine’s newly implemented ranked-choice voting system called for the second preferences of the two independent candidates to be redistributed to either Poliquin or Golden. Independent voters overwhelmingly ranked Golden as their second choice and he defeated Poliquin by 3,000 votes after the final tally and became the first challenger in Maine’s Second Congressional District to unseat an incumbent since 1916.

*“The moral of the story is simple and it’s something that Maine People’s Alliance gets: never give up. When you know that you stand on the right side of the arc of moral justice stand proudly and speak truth to power. Don’t give up. Together we are going to put the country on the path to freedom, justice and love. The way life should be.”*

REP. JARED GOLDEN, ME-2



Congressman Jared Golden at the Maine People’s Alliance “Rising Tide” dinner.





# “STOP AND TALK”

## THE JEFF SMITH STORY IN RURAL WISCONSIN

At the turn of the last century, the “Wisconsin Idea” embraced the notion that Wisconsin was a “laboratory for democracy” and progressive reforms. For most of the past decade, Scott Walker with the support of Americans for Prosperity<sup>32</sup> made Wisconsin into their personal testing ground for the Koch Brothers’ libertarian embrace of free markets and limited government. “The transformation of Wisconsin from the birthplace of public-sector unionization to a conservative stronghold with a battered labor movement is remarkable on its own terms,” a group of researchers who spent the past five years studying the Koch Brothers influence over the past five years recently wrote. “But even more remarkable is how the same story is playing out across dozens of other states.”<sup>33</sup> A central part of the strategy was what political scientist Kathy Cramer calls the “politics of resentment” which tapped into anger around declining economic conditions and builds a rural identity and consciousness which is deeply polarized along partisan lines and assigns blame for growing inequality on cities, people of color, and elites.<sup>34</sup>

Cramer believes that the best way to address the politics of resentment is to have “authentic conversations” where rural people have a sense

of their own agency and are treated with dignity and respect.<sup>35</sup> Citizen Action of Wisconsin organizer and newly elected State Senator Jeff Smith proved this theory in his successful race for the 31st State Senate District in rural western Wisconsin.

Smith ran a successful window-cleaning company for many years in Eau Claire and first ran for local school board after volunteering at his daughter’s school and seeing first-hand the need for more funding for local public schools. He became increasingly frustrated with the state of politics in Wisconsin and then decided to run for state office. Jeff was elected to the State Assembly and served two terms before losing during the Tea Party wave in 2010 and the Assembly districts were subsequently badly gerrymandered.

In 2017, Jeff went to work with Citizen Action of Wisconsin. He built an “organizing cooperative” in Western Wisconsin with more than 200 members who paid dues every month to support a full-time organizer and began working on a broad range of local issues like defeating factory farms; clean water; fair maps and redistricting; immigrant rights; criminal justice reform; and health care for all. Jeff

32 Kaufman, D. (2018, August 01). The Undoing of Progressive Wisconsin. Retrieved from <https://progressive.org/magazine/the-undoing-of-progressive-wisconsin/>

33 How the Koch brothers built the most powerful rightwing group you’ve never heard of. (2018, September 26). Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/sep/26/koch-brothers-americans-for-prosperity-rightwing-political-group>

34 Cramer, Katherine J. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. Print. <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo22879533.html>

35 Kathy Cramer on The Politics of Resentment: What I Learned from Listening. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://civic.mit.edu/2017/05/31/kathy-cramer-on-the-politics-of-resentment-what-i-learned-from-listening/>



worked closely with members across the state to develop the Citizen Action Wisconsin Statewide Progressive Agenda and ensured that rural concerns were a big part of the statewide agenda.<sup>36</sup>

In 2018, Jeff declared his intention to run for Wisconsin State Senate in the 31st District. In the Democratic primary, many key entities stayed on the sidelines because they wanted an establishment candidate who would be able to raise large sums of money and run on a more moderate platform. Jeff was not that candidate. Instead, Jeff ran a grassroots campaign with Citizen Action of Wisconsin members on a progressive populist platform and beat the establishment candidate by 24 points in the primary. In the spring elections, more than 49 members of Citizen of Action of Wisconsin were elected to local office.<sup>37</sup>

“We’re going to have a progressive, liberal Democrat representing western Wisconsin, in a very rural district, because I talk to people,” Jeff Smith said in the weeks before the general election. “I’m out there out in the open with my truck with a big sign that says, “Stop and Talk to Me!” People are welcome, and that’s all they really want – someone they can talk to, who listens to them, and responds to them.”



State Senator Jeff Smith during his time as a community organizer with Citizen Action of Wisconsin.



Jeff Smith on the campaign trail with the “Stop and Talk” truck.

36 Citizen Action of Wisconsin 2020-2028 Platform. Retrieved from <https://app.box.com/s/lssw8z8nnvlgyl85xzoiz289karg9epm>

37 Kraig, R. (2018, August 15). Progressives Win Big in Wisconsin Primary. Retrieved from <https://ourfuture.org/20180815/progressives-win-big-in-wisconsin-primary>





Citizen Action of Wisconsin members with Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers and Lt. Governor Mandela Barnes.

Jeff’s campaign directly challenged the agenda of Scott Walker and the Koch Brothers in a region that swung heavily for Donald Trump.<sup>38</sup> “We most definitely have to address the move to let corporate America determine whether we regulate or don’t regulate,” Smith said on the campaign trail. “We need to address that: we just cannot wipe out regulation and think corporate America is going to do the right thing. We’re all in this together and it’s going to take a movement of everyone coming together. We can’t let the ego of politicians get away from them to think that they are going to be some sort of heroes. They have to keep listening and they have to keep embracing everyone around them to lift us all up.”<sup>39</sup>

*“The only way to ignite the next great reform era in Wisconsin is to bridge the divide and rebuild an authentic community of interest between rural and urban Wisconsin.”*

ANGELIQUE ROGERS,  
ORGANIZING DIRECTOR FOR  
CITIZEN ACTION OF WISCONSIN

On election day in November, State Senator Smith and a number of Citizen Action of Wisconsin members won, including Lt. Governor Mandela Barnes, the first Black Lieutenant Governor in Wisconsin history,<sup>40</sup> State Treasurer Sarah Godlewski, and State Assemblymember Marisabel Cabrera. The slate of multiracial and progressive populist candidates combined with powerful people-powered grassroots organizing have begun to restore the idea of Wisconsin as a “laboratory for democracy.” Newly elected Governor Tony Evers and Lt. Governor Mandela Barnes are working with Citizen Action of Wisconsin to enact bold reforms on healthcare and rural politicians like Senator Smith are advancing a progressive populist agenda that embraces racial and economic justice.<sup>41</sup>

“The only way to ignite the next great reform era in Wisconsin is to bridge the divide and rebuild an authentic community of interest between rural and urban Wisconsin,” says Angelique Rogers, the organizing director for Citizen Action of Wisconsin. “We are building grassroots organizing power through our organizing cooperatives in Milwaukee (the major urban area in Wisconsin) and four regions of the state where we are deeply engaged in rural and small-town organizing.”

38 Western Wisconsin Swings Heavily For Donald Trump. (2016, November 11). Retrieved from <https://www.wpr.org/western-wisconsin-swings-heavily-donald-trump>

39 Smith, J. (2018, October 23). Riding Backroads for Change in Rural Wisconsin. Retrieved from <https://ourfuture.org/20181023/riding-backroads-for-change-in-rural-wisconsin>

40 Mandela Barnes To Become First African-American Lieutenant Governor. (2018, November 07). Retrieved from <https://www.wpr.org/mandela-barnes-become-first-african-american-lieutenant-governor>

41 Smith, J., & Smith, J. (2019, March 10). Jeff Smith column: Walking in someone else’s shoes. Retrieved from <https://www.piercecountyherald.com/opinion/columns/4578840-jeff-smith-column-walking-someone-elses-shoes>



# “HE MAKES TIME TO MEET, HE LISTENS, AND HE ACTS”

## LESSONS FROM THE MINNESOTA ATTORNEY GENERAL RACE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF GOVERNING WITH THE PEOPLE

When Land Stewardship Action began to aggressively advocate in support of Keith Ellison in the race for Attorney General, he was down 11 points in the polls as allegations of abuse made by a former girlfriend dominated the news. Campaign morale was suffering and many in the progressive community were unsure of continued support. Ellison had risen to national prominence as the first Muslim elected to Congress and a national leader on populist progressive issues, but he faced a hard road to winning statewide office in a state that Donald Trump narrowly lost. Land Stewardship Action leaders took the allegations of abuse very seriously and examined them closely and determined with the facts available that they supported Congressman Keith Ellison in his race for Minnesota Attorney General. In a message to their supporters, Land Stewardship Action Fund board members Beth Slocum and John Fisher-Merritt wrote that “We did not make this decision lightly because it is important for women to be heard and taken seriously. We discussed this with Keith and called on him, as a candidate for Minnesota Attorney General, to acknowledge the reality and harm of gender oppression and lay out how he will work to address it. He has committed to do this.”

Ellison’s commitment to meeting with rural farmers, listen to their concerns and make public commitments to take action was central to the

success of his campaign. Keith sought out Land Stewardship leaders to shape his priorities as a candidate for Attorney General and then met with them multiple times. At the Mosel farm in Holdingford in Stearns County, Ellison toured the farm with 16 leaders of Land Stewardship Action. They talked about how sweetheart deals for the very largest dairy farms are hurting independent producers, and how corporate control over agriculture, health care, and the broader economy has gone unchecked. At the Nelson dairy farm in Altura in Winona County, Ellison sat down with 11 farmers from Land Stewardship at the kitchen table. Farmers shared stories of how limited access and expensive health care is hurting us and our communities, while insurance corporations continue to make staggering profits.

At the Land Stewardship Action Fund Leadership Assembly in St. Peter on October 7, Ellison met with 130 Land Stewardship leaders from across Minnesota. Ellison shared how as Attorney General, he would work for rural communities and work closely with Land Stewardship Action Fund leaders. He responded to questions and saw eye-to-eye with the people in the room. He communicated an understanding of how corporate control of the economy and democracy is a challenge that must be directly confronted. As the people’s attorney, he pledged to do exactly that alongside community members.<sup>42</sup>

42 Who We Are. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://landstewardshipaction.org/take-action/land-stewardship-action-fund-supports-keith-ellison-for-minnesota-attorney-general/>



**Congressman Keith Ellison meets with Land Stewardship Action members during his campaign for Attorney General.**

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**Congressman Keith Ellison at the Land Stewardship Action Fund Leadership Assembly.**

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**Land Stewardship Action Fund members launched a visibility campaign to show support in rural communities for Keith Ellison's campaign for Attorney General.**

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Throughout the process, Ellison met with rural communities, listened and took action which culminated with the release of the “Family Farm Protection Plan.”<sup>43</sup> The plan reflected many of the concerns raised by Land Stewardship Action leaders and included ambitious proposals to improve rural healthcare, fight agricultural monopolies, and support family farmers. In October, Land Stewardship Action leaders began a campaign to show visible support for then candidate Keith Ellison because of commitment to take on corporate special interests and put people before profits.

“It’s the best family farm platform, including action on healthcare, that I’ve seen,” wrote Farmer Paul Sobocinski of Redwood County. “I support Keith Ellison for Attorney General,” wrote Farmer Tom Nuessmeier, LeSueur County. “He’s willing to take on the corporate power that is weakening our rural communities and look into antitrust violations. Farmers need that.”

On the campaign trail, Ellison spoke about the needs of rural communities even when in urban areas. “I want you all to know that if you look at the numbers, the one group that is seeing their mortality numbers get worse are 50-year-old straight white men in rural communities,” Ellison told a crowd at the First Avenue nightclub in Minneapolis. “They are being hit with the opioid crisis, they are being hit with suicide and depression. I say this to you because I want you to know that there is no one, no one, no one outside of our circle of compassion. All are in. Everyone is in.” Ellison had read the study on the “deaths of despair” by researchers Anne Case and Angus Deaton which detailed the increase in suicide, opioid and heroin overdoses among white males and was the only member of Congress to reach out to the researchers to learn more about their findings.<sup>44</sup>

Ellison won a difficult race in large part because of his ability to put forward a progressive populist platform; build bridges across race and place; and his commitment to working with people’s organizations and willingness to be accountable. Since his election he has continued to meet with Land Stewardship Action leaders and is demonstrating the potential of multiracial alliances to advance a progressive populist agenda.

43 Anonymous. (2018, August 09). Keith Ellison Releases “Family Farm Protection Plan” to Restore Fairness in Farming as Attorney General. Retrieved from <https://keithellison.org/news/2018/8/9/keith-ellison-releases-family-farm-protection-plan-to-restore-fairness-in-farming-as-attorney-general>

44 Lowrey, A. (2017, March 09). Is It Better to Be Poor in Bangladesh or the Mississippi Delta? Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/03/angus-deaton-qa/518880/>



# America is for All of Us

## LANCASTER STANDS UP AND THE JESS KING CAMPAIGN



Members of Lancaster Stands Up at a protest outside of the office of Rep. Lloyd Smucker.

In the wake of the November 2016 election, 300 Lancasterians came together for an emergency community meeting, and Lancaster Stands Up [LSU] was born. Over the past two years, LSU has revolutionized grassroots political action in an area that went heavily for Trump in 2016 and that has long been considered a conservative stronghold.

Led by a multiracial and intergenerational 12-person leadership team, LSU quickly burgeoned into a vibrant long-term organization that now boasts over 900 members and eleven local teams (e.g., Ephrata Stands Up) that have dramatically changed the game in Lancaster County and the 11th Congressional District. LSU has applied public pressure to elected officials on a range of issues, especially immigration, healthcare, the tax bill, and racial justice. LSU organized the four largest public demonstrations in Lancaster in at least 50 years (2,000 protesting the Muslim Ban;

1,000 after Charlottesville; 3,000 for gun reform; 1,000 to Keep Families Together).

Importantly the organization quickly expanded its activities from town hall meetings and public demonstrations to also contest for electoral power—from the bottom up. In early 2017, LSU began its first independent canvass. Not long after, two LSU leaders (Becca Rast and Nick Martin) helped to launch and then run the Jess King for Congress campaign, one of the largest and most dynamic US House races in 2018. The King campaign knocked over 200,000 doors and made more than a million phone calls, dramatically increasing Democratic turnout in Lancaster City and in smaller towns and rural areas. They made gains in every single precinct in Lancaster County. Parallel to the King campaign, LSU ran an independent electoral effort, mobilizing hundreds of members to volunteer, knock doors, and make calls for King and other LSU-endorsed candidates.



Both Lancaster Stands Up and the Jess King campaign shook up politics-as-usual in the area. They didn't just set out to defeat Trump and Republicans. They also openly criticized the current leadership and direction of today's Democratic Party—for failing to stand up for everyday working people and failing to stand up to Wall Street and big corporate interests. Their message polarized voters on a “bottom vs. top” axis instead of a “liberal vs. conservative” axis. This strategy proved effective in inspiring low-propensity Democratic voters to turn out and also persuading independents and a surprisingly high number of Republicans to vote for King.

Key to the organization's success has been its insistence on building a place for everyday people to get involved. From the start, LSU has been attuned to the working people in the area, not to a prior existing “Left.” A conscious narrative strategy has animated LSU's public-facing communication, that centers on consistently signaling a broad and inclusive we. LSU has wrestled intentionally with the question of how to build a popular political vehicle in a majority white area that not only includes people of color,

but where communities of color have power in the organization. Lancaster City has a slight majority of people of color, while the surrounding county is overwhelmingly white. The organization has incorporated Demos' *Race Class Narrative* research into canvass scripts and LSU's organizing story places culpability on those at the top, but responsibility for turning it around on its base. The message is clear and it's been working: this only gets fixed by everyday people getting involved, overcoming the politics of fear and division, and building people power to revitalize our democracy.

A week and a half after the 2018 election, over 500 LSU members and supporters turned out to a mass meeting to dig into what comes next. Since then LSU has helped to recruit candidates for key offices in Lancaster County in the 2019 cycle—from school board to commissioner to District Attorney—and LSU local teams are getting read to help to elect them. Local teams are also developing their capacity to apply pressure and run campaigns on local and state issues, including increasing the minimum wage, housing, health care, and a Pennsylvania Green New Deal.

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**More than 500 people attended the Lancaster Stands Up mass meeting a week and a half after the 2018 election.**



# BUILDING A CARING MAJORITY IN THE SUBURBS

## MOVEMENT POLITICS AND THE MICHIGAN PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN



In early 2018, Laurie Pohutsky attended a “Movement Politics Academy,” a 33-hour leadership training program for candidates, campaign staff, and activists organized by the Michigan People’s Campaign. Pohutsky lives in Livonia, a suburb of Detroit with many blue-collar workers in the auto industry. Livonia is known as being one of the whitest and least diverse small cities in America and has historically been known as one of the cities built by white flight from Detroit.<sup>45</sup> Despite the strong union presence and working-class population, Livonia has voted Republican in Presidential elections since the Nixon era.

“The Michigan People’s Campaign Movement Politics Academy gave me the start I needed,” Pohutsky recounts. “Their ground game made the difference in this election. It’s a new day for young people in our state. Anyone thinking of running for office and looking to make a change should definitely look into their development program.”

Pohutsky decided to run for State Representative of House District 19, which covers most of Livonia, and ran on one of the boldest progressive populist platforms of any Democrat running in the state: Medicare for All; public funding for

elder care; ending mandatory minimum sentencing; increasing protections for the LGBTQ+ community; an infrastructure overhaul funded by increased overweight trucking fees; increasing regulations and sanctions against corporate polluters; increasing access to early education and raising teachers salaries; and maintaining Michigan’s pro-choice laws and investing more in sexual education. Livonia was not the place where traditional political consultants believed a candidate could be expected to win on a bold progressive platform and Michigan House District 19 was not on anyone’s “battleground” lists in early 2018.

Pohutsky knew that the people of Livonia valued hard work and supporting your family to have a good quality of life. She also knew that they were frustrated by typical politicians. She saw these shared values as an opportunity to meet people where they are at and ran one of the most robust field campaigns the district has seen in recent memory. Taking what she learned at the Michigan People’s Campaign Movement Politics Academy, she planned to flip House District 19 by having real conversations with residents’ about their values and experiences and connect those stories to her policy solutions.

45 Alhajal, K. (2016, May 13). Detroit ranked last in ethnic, economic and class diversity. Retrieved from [https://www.mlive.com/news/detroit/2016/05/detroit\\_ranked\\_last\\_in\\_ethnic.html](https://www.mlive.com/news/detroit/2016/05/detroit_ranked_last_in_ethnic.html)





**Michigan People's Campaign members getting ready to canvass in Livonia.**



**State Representative Laurie Pohutsky being sworn into the Michigan Legislature.**

Michigan People's Campaign invested heavily in a field program in Livonia after members from the city had endorsed Pohutsky during the primary which she went on to win against the establishment candidate. The organization build a strong volunteer canvass program which was augmented by paid canvassers from the Michigan People's Campaign fellowship program.

The campaign began early with "deep canvassing" conversations which focused on the need for public funding for long-term care needs. Everyone canvassed was invited to participate in the weekly community meetings where neighbors could tell their "care stories" and envision co-governing with Pohutsky, and these meetings were used to recruit more canvass volunteers. Michigan People's Campaign also ran targeted digital ads that featured residents telling their "care stories" and expressing how they trusted

Pohutsky to center their values and be a champion for long-term care and healthcare needs when she made it to Lansing.

"Volunteering with Michigan People's Campaign during the midterms was more than just pushing politicians and political rhetoric," says Karolyn Coffey, one of the most active volunteers in the canvass program. "It was about building relationships around common goals that directly impact our own communities. My experience gave renewed faith that government power can truly come from the people, when given opportunities to engage, validate, and empower." Michigan People's Campaign volunteers and the Pohutsky campaign found it easy to engage voters in deep canvass conversations. Regardless of party affiliation, people were happy to just have a candidate and canvassers talk face to face with them without pushing a party slate.

House District 19 was one of the last races to be called and Pohutsky pulled off a stunning upset winning by 224 votes. Not only had Livonia voted Democratic for the first time in decades, it elected a newcomer running on a bold, progressive populist agenda that took strong positions on racial and gender justice. Although Democrats won the Governor's race, House District 19 was one of only five Democratic pick-ups in the House.<sup>46</sup>

"Michigan People's Campaign has put its values and mission into action in the political sphere, and helps people like me run for office on those values," Pohutsky said after the election. "I wouldn't have been as effective a campaigner without working with them."

Pohutsky is now a member of the "Michigan Caring Majority" caucus that Michigan United has developed in collaboration with Caring Across Generations, and her face-to-face approach as a representative is changing how residents view local and state politics. She hosts regular coffee hours and her first town hall will be on corporate pollution issues that have been silently harming the city for years. Not only will she be the first elected official bringing this issue to light in the city, she is advocating for residents to be able to meet with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. Her active presence has surprised constituents, who have never experienced this level of accessibility and accountability from their elected officials.

46 Gray, K. (2018, November 07). Dems make gains in Michigan and Congress, but blue wave falls short. Retrieved from <https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2018/11/07/democrats-michigan-house-senate/1835284002/>





# KEY LEARNINGS

Across the country, there are a set of key learnings from the 2018 midterm elections about what it takes to mount effective political campaigns in rural and small-town communities. These lessons are crucial for any strategy in subsequent elections.

## **Build movement politics, not politics as usual**

People’s Action and our allies are committed to doing politics differently and building a “movement politics” that will help advance a multiracial populist agenda to put people and planet first. Creating transformative change in these regions and states requires a deep investment in civic engagement that expands the electorate and builds the capacity to hold elected officials accountable once they are in elected office. A “movement politics” approach towards elections helps to prepare communities to “co-govern” with elected officials to ensure that their values and priorities are enacted. “Movement politics” means building infrastructure that will outlast a single election cycle and takes a longer-term approach towards creating political change. It focuses on elevating “people power” and invests heavily in field

programs and developing volunteer capacity. It also prioritizes fundraising for individuals rather than corporate PACs.

Across the country, the decline in progressive organizing infrastructure has had a dramatic impact on rural areas. In rural and small-town communities across the country, organizers reported that they canvassed voters who had not been contacted by a Democratic campaign in more than a decade. Even Tom Perez, Democratic National Committee chair, said in an interview that “you can’t door knock in rural America.” The reasons for the shifts are complex, but after knocking on hundreds of thousands of doors in rural communities across the country, it is apparent that “politics as usual” has failed rural communities.<sup>47,48</sup>

## **Rural communities and small-towns as part of the progressive coalition**

It is critical that rural communities and small-towns are integrated into statewide civic engagement strategies to help build an enduring progressive majority. There is no legitimate path to creating the type of governing power required to advance progressive change in our country

47 Down Home North Carolina, “No One Ever Asked Me Before,”(February 2018). Retrieved from <https://downhomenc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/dhnc-2018-report-FINAL.pdf>.

48 Maxmin, C., & Woodward, C. (2018, October 26). What a Rural Maine House Race Can Teach the Left. Retrieved from <https://www.thenation.com/article/what-a-rural-maine-house-race-can-teach-the-left/>

– and in most states – without a much more robust multiracial, urban-rural coalition. A study by the USDA found that rural communities received between 6% to 7% of foundation grants awarded from 2005 to 2010 although they account for 19% of the U.S. population.<sup>49</sup> The lack of investment has meant that right-wing forces funded by ultra-rich donors and corporate interests have sent anti-government, anti-pluralist, xenophobic, and socially divisive rhetoric across rural America virtually unchallenged for decades.

### “Building a bigger we”: expanding the circle of solidarity

There is growing evidence that an integrated race-class narrative is far more powerful than appeals to only economic populism.<sup>50</sup> The scholarship of Ian Haney-Lopez and the research of Anat Shenker-Orsorio have provided a blueprint of how to build a narrative strategy that helps to expand the circle of solidarity and win elections. Testing and developing these narratives in rural areas and small-towns could prove decisive in shaping electoral outcomes in 2020 and subsequent elections.

### Bold agenda and populist platform

Presenting a vision and policy agenda that can reverse the decline in living conditions in rural and small-town America requires having a deeper analysis of how these conditions were created and have been allowed to endure. Suicide rates are now higher in rural America than elsewhere. Medicaid now pays for more than half of all births at rural hospital<sup>51</sup> and more than 100 hospitals in rural communities have shut down since 2005.<sup>52</sup> Over the course of the last generation, major sectors of the rural economy have been taken over by a handful of extractive, multinational corporations. To regain trust in rural communities, Democratic candidates will need to advance a much more bold vision that will confront the role that the consolidation of corporate power has played in the devastation of rural communities. Political candidates will need to support a much more bold vision and policy agenda for rural communities that will address the rural healthcare crisis; roll back the power of corporate agriculture and support family farms; make college for all a reality for rural communities; and end the failed war on drugs that is fueling the overdose crisis.

Down Home North Carolina’s movement politics program reached deep into rural communities across the state.



Down Home North Carolina members at a “party to the polls” early voting event.



49 “Rural Gets Less Foundation Money.” *Rural News and Information*, [www.dailyonder.com/rural-gets-less-foundation-money/2015/06/29/7893/](http://www.dailyonder.com/rural-gets-less-foundation-money/2015/06/29/7893/).

50 Godfrey, E. (2018, October 09). How a ‘Race-Class Narrative’ Can Work for Democrats. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/08/how-a-race-class-narrative-can-work-for-democrats/567185/?preview=hK4Z5oFDTIUjKRUAAbdRwXHA-YM>

51 Miller, S. (2018, November 28). Democrats Can Win Back Rural America, But First They Need To Understand What Bled It Dry. Retrieved from <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/sarahmiller1/democrats-win-rural-america-but-what-broke-it>

52 Kallbach, B. (2019, February 27). Rural America Needs Medicare for All Now. Retrieved from <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/02/27/rural-america-needs-medicare-all-now>





**Chrysa Ostenso was one of more than 49 Citizen Action of Wisconsin members who were elected to office up and down the ballot in 2018.**

### **People's organizations as the 'tip of the spear'**

The brand of the Democratic Party in rural communities is deeply damaged. The deep distrust of government in marginalized working-class communities in rural and small town America requires that community organizations be at the center of any engagement strategy. "Breaking through these voters' skepticism in the political system will be challenging, and will take time," pollster Guy Molyneux has argued. "Community organizations and non-elected community leaders must be the 'tip of the spear' as progressives seek to engage."<sup>53</sup> Investing in independent and trusted community organizations that have credible community-driven endorsement processes will be crucial to any strategy to build progressive political infrastructure in rural areas and small-towns.

### **People's candidates up and down the ballot**

It is critical to run progressive populist candidates up and down the ballot to strengthen statewide electoral efforts. People's Action and our allies are building a new candidate pipeline of trusted community leaders who have a deep commitment to movement politics. We are recruiting and training 500 community leaders nationwide to run for office up and down the ballot between now and 2020. Over 290 of our members have won elected office around the country in 2017 and 2018. In rural areas, this requires an investment in building the capacity of candidates, campaign staff, and community organizations that have the capacity to train and support new candidates with enough infrastructure to be competitive in local and state races.

<sup>53</sup> "Mapping the White Working Class: A deep dive into the beliefs and sentiments of the moderates among them," Guy Molyneux, *The American Prospect*, December 20, 2016.





Building a progressive populist movement in America has the potential to create a seismic shift in our political landscape and restore public faith in our democracy. It is not a small task, but there are clear steps that can be taken to put us on the right path. The People's Action Rural and Small-Town Organizing Cohort has **six recommendations** to strengthen rural and small-town voter engagement strategies in upcoming electoral cycles.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Integrate rural areas and small-towns in statewide electoral strategies:** Rural areas play a key role in shaping statewide electoral outcomes and impacting the composition of state legislatures and Congressional delegations. The outcomes of statewide elections depend on being far more competitive in rural areas and small-towns and closing the gap that has grown over the last several decades. The 2020 election will be critical in shaping redistricting fights over the next decade and it will be vitally important to have targeted races in rural areas to pick up additional seats in state legislatures that will draw maps for the next decade in most states.
- 2. Develop county-level analysis of the rural vote in key states:** Gerrymandering over the past decade has contributed to a distorted understanding of voting patterns in rural areas. County-level analysis of voting trends in rural areas is critical to develop effective accurate targeting and integrated strategies to support candidates up and down the ballot. Although individual level voter targeting is still extremely useful, the county-level analysis will help to identify political and demographic patterns outside of political boundaries and help to coordinate multiple touches with voters in their geographic environment.
- 3. Strengthen “people-powered” organizations with c3 + c4 + PAC infrastructure:** The brand of traditional political parties is badly damaged in rural areas and small-towns, especially for the Democratic Party. It is crucial to invest in the capacity of community organizations with c3 and c4 infrastructure and organize around the issues and policies that matter to rural voters and engage in political activity. It is also important to build legal infrastructure like Political Action Committees in states where it is needed to help develop comprehensive and coordinated strategies.
- 4. Invest in narrative and communications infrastructure that speaks to rural values:** Rural and small-town voters need to hear clear language and stories that communicates their values and speaks to their needs. The lack of investment in progressive communications infrastructure and the inability to communicate around shared values has led to a vacuum that has been occupied by extremist forces that do not represent the interests of rural communities. The strategy should highlight local residents as core messengers and should tap into the existing network of local newspapers, radio and social media.
- 5. Build a policy agenda that speaks to rural needs:** Rural communities have many shared interests with their urban and suburban communities, but rural problems need specific solutions. Rural and small-town communities also need to know that candidates and campaigns have a clear understanding of their experiences and have a clear plan to improve their lives.
- 6. Early investment in infrastructure over multiple cycles to shift the political landscape:** The lack of investment over the last several decades has led to a deterioration in voter engagement infrastructure in rural areas and small-towns. To rebuild capacity in these regions it is necessary to make early investments that help build capacity to engage voters around shared values and common issues outside of the election cycle. It is important that this investment includes a significant component to build both the paid and volunteer capacity to conduct relational field programs built around live conversations in rural areas and small-towns.

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