

A Look Back At How Rural America Voted

Obama Made Inroads While McCain Failed To Build On Past GOP Successes

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There is something simple, yet powerful about showing up and asking people to support your candidacy. The Obama campaign, with a tremendous fundraising advantage and strong grassroots ground game, understood the importance of doing just that in Rural America. A closer

look at the election results showed that their efforts paid off. The U.S. population as a whole. McCain continued the Republican tradition of winning the rural vote with a margin that slipped back to 13.6 percent but still remained substantial.

Political pundits note that, it's amazing that McCain did as well as he did in rural areas, given his positions on farm programs and ethanol. But these polls don't necessarily reflect opinions of actual farmers, who may have supported McCain on business and tax issues but not his farm policy stands. In fact, pollsters told me they don't focus solely on the actual "farm vote" anymore because the numbers are so small, compared to the 60 million individuals who fit the definition of rural.

Republican pollster Bill Greener of Greener and Hook partially discounts the '08 results because "It's always difficult to try to achieve a third term of any party" – and because Obama enjoyed two exceptional advantages: unlimited money and heavy voting in urban and near-urban areas. But he concludes that the results should be a wake-up call for Republicans: "What it means for the future, is that Republicans had better reconnect with rural voters. . . Rural America will maintain its importance. . . It constitutes the base of the Republican party, along with small business owners."

Center for Rural Strategies President Dee Davis also sees the '08 results as a special case, not necessarily a sign of a shift in rural attitudes. He concludes that "Politically, I think it was an interesting election and we saw that when an election turns on economics, then rural voters tend to be more Democratic and when it's about cultural issues like gay marriage for example or guns, then rural voters tend to be more Republican."

Yet Davis says that traditional Republican ties to rural areas may be challenged because "What Obama has is an opportunity to include rural America in a different kind of discourse. Everybody is talking about how we are going to turn the economy around, how we're going to try to look for more sustainability, how we are going to green the country, how we are going to produce fuels here at home. All these are meaningful conversations for people in rural communities. So I think what Obama has got is an opportunity to include rural as part of the solution, and not as a problem, not part of an obligation or indebtedness." Δ

Editor Sara Wyant publishes a weekly e-newsletter covering farm and rural policy called Agri-Pulse. For a four-week free trial, go to www.Agri-Pulse.com

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An analysis from the Center for Rural Strategies' online news journal, the Daily Yonder, illustrates that, of the 3,113 counties nationally, the majority stayed the course. There were 2,203 counties, most of them exurban and rural, that supported the Republican candidates in both the 2004 and 2008 races. However, those that turned from Republican "red" to the Democrat's "blue" made a difference in some key "swing" states in 2008.

The Daily Yonder's Bill Bishop and Tim Murphy identified 327 counties, including 177 rural counties that voted for Bush in 2004 and for Obama in 2008. Their study shows that of the 45 counties which switched from Kerry in '04 to McCain in '08, only 34 were rural. The study also showed that The Midwest was the hotspot for flips this year, accounting for 173 or nearly half of all flips, with 172 of the 173 moving from red to blue.

Clearly, Obama fared better in rural areas than Kerry did in 2004. Analysis from the Center for Rural Strategies shows that in the battleground states which Kerry lost by a 15 percent margin in 2004, Obama cut that deficit to just 7 percent. And in this year's seven battleground states, the number of rural votes which switched from the Republican to the Democratic candidate in Indiana and North Carolina was more than enough to win the two states for Obama. Yet, part of this year's rural-vote difference may come down to the excitement Obama sparked among young voters and his campaign's winning strategy of targeting university towns in more rural states. That strategy helped turn a number of counties from red to blue. (See table and map on page 13.)

One key to George W. Bush's 2000 and 2004 victories was that he won rural voters nationally by 11 points in 2000 and 19 points in 2004 – an expected edge for Republicans since the 23 percent of U.S. voters who live in rural areas are disproportionately older and whiter than

Battleground States in 2008, where a handful of rural votes were more than enough to determine the outcome in Indiana and North Carolina:

	Obama		McCain		Other
Ohio	2,708,988	51.2%	2,502,218	47.2%	1.6%
Florida	4,143,957	50.9%	3,939,380	48.4%	0.7%
Indiana	1,367,503	49.9%	1,341,667	49.0%	1.1%
N. Carolina	2,123,395	49.9%	2,109,402	49.5%	0.6%
Missouri	1,436,814	49.3%	1,442,673	49.5%	1.3%
Montana	229,725	47.2%	241,816	49.7%	3.2%
N. Dakota	141,113	44.7%	168,523	53.3%	2.0%
Total Votes:	12,151,495	50.3%	11,745,679	48.6%	1.1%

