

Battle Intensifies Over Rural Voters

Can Obama turn those red states to blue?



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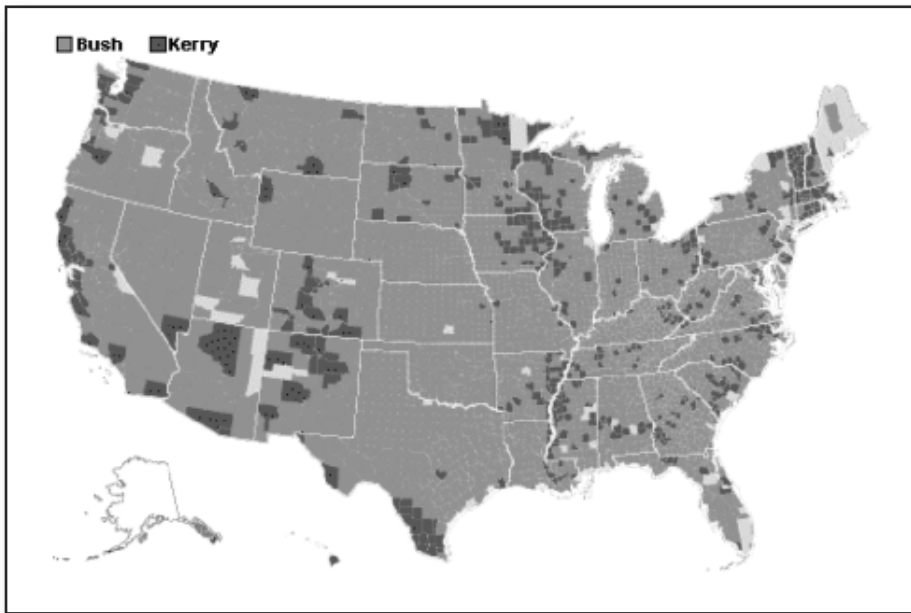
(Editor's note: Sara Wyant attended the Democratic National Convention in Denver, CO. last week and will cover the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, MN. this week.)

During the last two presidential election cycles, Republicans counted on rural voters to help get them elected. Urban areas like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles predictably turned out large numbers of Democrats. But to counteract that large, big city voting base, Republicans organized farmers, ranchers and small business people to get out the vote and keep those "red" GOP states from turning "blue" on election day.

No where was this more evident than in 2004

Democrats have high hopes that Virginia, the former Republican stronghold, and even Indiana, where there is a tight race for Governor, will turn out for Obama in high numbers this year. In North Dakota, where Democrats haven't carried the state for 44 years, North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Roger Johnson says Obama and McCain are running neck and neck in the polls. And in Denver, Colorado, home of this year's Democratic convention and a growing Hispanic population, there's a great deal of optimism that the state will be "in the blue" by election day.

However, GOP strategists remain hopeful that they can reverse a few trends on their own, especially in historically Democratic states hit hard by America's manufacturing decline: Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. The challenge will be whether or not the 60 million rural voters who so strongly supported Bush in 2004 will be as forceful for Mc-



when Rural Americans voted overwhelmingly for GOP presidential candidate George Bush. Take a closer look at the map, which shows the counties that voted for Bush (light grey) and Sen. John Kerry (dark grey) and you can see why Bush owed all of you who live in Rural America a big debt of gratitude.

50-state strategy

But it didn't take long for Democrats to look at the same map and figure out that that they needed a different game plan to win in 2008. After analyzing the voting data, Democratic National Committee Chairman and former presidential candidate Howard Dean developed a "50-state" strategy that's designed to focus on grass-roots activism and small donors in what have typically been hot-beds of the Republican faithful. The DNC built a new voter database, a strong Internet connectivity platform, and paid for campaign workers on the ground in every state to bolster the state committees.

For the first time, the Democratic National Committee formally established a "Rural Council" to focus on agriculture and small business issues. During this week's Democratic National Convention in Denver, they are hosting two sessions on rural issues – one focusing on how to use the Internet and other tools to help organize and excite other rural voters. They rolled out their rural platform and talking points to explain why they believe Barack Obama would be a much better choice for Rural America.

"We've never been this organized going into a presidential convention before," noted rural organizer Matt Baron, who presented an analysis of what he described as Sen. John McCain's "extremist" votes on farm policy. The Rural Council handed out buttons and bumper stickers for the "Obama Main Street Team."

More states in play

Many political pundits predict that, compared to previous years, 2008 offers a wide-open contest where up to a dozen new states may be in play for the first time in decades.

These include the five usual toss-up states – Ohio, Missouri, Iowa, New Hampshire and New Mexico – where neither party has won more than three of the past five elections.

Cain this year. For now, the Obama team appears to be much more organized and aggressive than the McCain team.

McCain's farm policy?

Many who have traditionally supported Republican candidates tell me they are genuinely unenthusiastic about the farm policies advocated thus far by this year's presumptive GOP nominee: Sen. John McCain. Rightly or wrongly, they perceive that McCain does not view America's 60 million rural residents, including about 1.8 million people who qualify under USDA's definition as farmers and ranchers, to be an important constituency in this fall's election. He's not supported recent farm bills and he does not favor many of the subsidies currently in place for renewable fuels.

"I'll do what I can, but I'll probably have to hold my nose to vote for the man," an influential Southern farm leader told me recently. Over two dozen state and national leaders we interviewed in recent weeks, who have historically voted for GOP candidates, shared similar frustrations.

However, McCain's Vice Presidential pick is seen by many as a gamechanger with the rural base, as well as several other conservative and evangelical interest groups. Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, who hails from a small town, wins rave reviews from agricultural groups in her home state and has reinvigorated many who have been waiting on the sidelines to endorse McCain.

Arizona Farm Bureau President Kevin Rogers, who is a strong McCain supporter, says he's hopeful that Aggies will see a lot more out of McCain on farm and rural policies within the next 30 days. "It would have been nice if this would have happened months ago, but Ag is finally moving on his radar screen," Rogers says. He thinks most farmers will find more in common with McCain than not. "He (McCain) may not agree with you on every issue related to renewable energy, but he agrees on the end-game of reducing our dependence on foreign oil." 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