Did the Democratic Party Abandon Rural America?

Evidence from a Survey of Local Party Officials

Daniel M. Shea

Nicholas F. Jacobs

Colby College

Abstract:

The Democratic Party's retreat from rural America has left many local organizations struggling to survive. Once central to small-town civic life, rural Democratic committees now face dwindling membership, scarce resources, and minimal contact with higher-level party officials. Drawing on a 2025 national survey of 871 county party chairs, this paper assesses whether rural Democrats have been effectively "set adrift" by their own party. We compare rural and non-rural committees across four dimensions: organizational vitality, candidate recruitment, coordination with state and national offices, and relationships with professional consultants. The results reveal a party divided not only by geography but by communication and trust. Even after accounting for budgets and activity levels, rural Democrats remain far more likely to view the national party as out of touch with local realities. We conclude that the Democratic Party's rural decline reflects institutional neglect within its own stratarchical structure—and poses serious risks for democratic representation.

Introduction

Across much of rural America, the Democratic Party has faded from political relevance. Once a central institution of small-town civic life, local Democratic committees now struggle to raise money, recruit candidates, and maintain visibility. In many counties, they are shells of their former selves—run by a handful of volunteers with limited resources and minimal contact with higher-level party officials. This atrophy matters: when local organizations falter, the party loses its grassroots infrastructure, its pipeline of future candidates, and its capacity to contest elections beyond the nation's cities and suburbs.

The erosion has been especially acute in the wake of the 2024 election. Democrats lost the White House and both chambers of Congress, suffering some of their worst rural margins in modern history. In more than half of rural counties, Democratic presidential candidates received under 25 percent of the vote, and many state legislative districts went uncontested. National polling underscores the crisis: only 31 percent of Americans now view the Democratic Party favorably—its lowest rating in decades—while barely half of self-identified Democrats express optimism about the party's future (Pew Research, 2024). The party's rural retreat has become both a symptom and a cause of its broader malaise: as organizational networks wither, the party's message, presence, and legitimacy fade alongside them.

This paper examines that estrangement directly. Drawing on a 2025 survey of 870 county party chairs nationwide, we assess whether rural Democratic leaders have been "set adrift" by their own party. We compare rural and non-rural committees across four dimensions—organizational vitality, vertical coordination with state and national offices, relationships with professional consultants, and perceived voice in party decision-making. We

then estimate multivariate models to test whether rural Democrats' sense of abandonment persists after accounting for budgets, activity levels, and professional linkages. The findings reveal a party divided not simply by geography but by communication and trust—a hierarchy that listens least to those who need it most.

The Decline of Democratic Support in Rural Areas

As recently as the early 1990s, rural and urban voters were not far apart in their partisan preferences; many rural counties were competitive and in some regions even leaned Democratic. Over the past quarter century, however, a major realignment has unfolded: rural areas across all U.S. regions have shifted decisively toward the Republican Party (Jacobs and Shea, 2023; Brown and Mettler, 2024). By the 2010s, the rural-urban divide had become one of the dominant cleavages in American politics. "The hemorrhaging of Democratic votes in rural areas affects nearly every aspect of American government," wrote Jacobs and Shea. "Rural support for Democrats at all levels of government…has fallen every year since 1980" (2003, 8).

In 2000, Republicans held only a slight edge in party identification among rural voters (51 percent Republican vs. 45 percent Democratic leaners). By 2010, that GOP advantage widened to 13 points, and it has nearly doubled since. By the early 2020s Republicans enjoyed roughly a 25-point lead in rural party affiliation (Pew Research Center, 2024). Conversely, Democrats now dominate urban centers by a comparable margin. The geographic polarization is stark: in the 2024 presidential election, Donald Trump carried 93 percent of all rural counties (Economic Innovation Group, 2025). Maps tracking vote shifts from 2000 onward show rural counties moving to the right much faster than urban America has shifted left (Scala & Johnson,

2024). Even traditionally Democratic rural strongholds—such as parts of the Upper Midwest—have trended Republican.

As for the precise timing of the shift, Jacobs and Shea (2023) use county-level aggregate data to show that while there have been short periods of a hefty urban/rural divide, the sustained realignment we are currently experiencing began in the early 1980s.

Explaining the Turn Against Democrats

Scholars have proposed several overlapping explanations for why rural Americans have turned away from the Democratic Party. These explanations can be grouped into cultural, economic, and place-based identity factors—though in practice they are deeply intertwined.

Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (2004) famously posited that conservatives won over rural white working-class voters by emphasizing "explosive" social issues such as abortion, gun rights, and same-sex marriage, redirecting populist anger toward liberal elites. Frank argued that rather than blaming corporate interests for economic hardship, many rural voters came to resent urban liberals for promoting social change that conflicted with traditional values. He concluded that the Democratic Party's embrace of cosmopolitan social liberalism made it anathema to small-town voters who see those stances as threats to their way of life. More recent work by Norris and Inglehart (2019) broadens this argument into a global *cultural-backlash* framework, showing how older, rural, and less-educated citizens in advanced democracies react against rapid social liberalization—a dynamic that in the United States has largely benefited Republicans.

Another major explanation centers on rural economic grievances and the perception that urban elites have ignored or harmed rural communities. Katherine J. Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment* (2016) captures this vividly through interviews with rural Wisconsinites. She identifies a "rural consciousness" shaped by three beliefs: neglect by decision-makers, unfair resource allocation, and cultural contempt from urbanites. These perceptions fuel resentment toward government and experts—resentment that politicians like Scott Walker or Donald Trump have effectively harnessed. Cramer notes that this anger is often directed "sideways," at perceived undeserving beneficiaries such as welfare recipients or public employees (85–86). Rural residents talk about values intertwined with economic concerns: moral worldviews about hard work and community merge with frustrations over economic decline. Because Democrats are associated with government programs and technocratic elites, they frequently become the target of that resentment.

Jacobs and Shea (2023) describe rural Americans as developing a distinct political identity rooted in place-based solidarity—a belief that they "rise and fall together" as rural people (p. 112). This identity emphasizes rural uniqueness and separateness, anchored in the conviction that rural communities possess values fundamentally different from urban America. Drawing on a large national survey of over 14,000 Americans, Jacobs and Shea show that this sense of shared fate, rather than economic status or religiosity alone, explains much of rural support for Republicans and mistrust of Democrats. Rural voters widely perceive that the Democratic Party "stands in the way" of rural interests (119). In short, a politics of place has supplanted a politics of class: Democrats are viewed not just as policy opponents but as cultural outsiders.

Some scholars argue these forces operate sequentially. Hochschild (2016) depicts rural Tea Party supporters as feeling they had "played by the rules" only to watch "line-cutters" get ahead—a moral narrative of injustice later weaponized in partisan culture wars. Thus, the rural turn against Democrats can be seen as a two-stage process: material decline, leading to a loss of trust, culminating in cultural resentment. Even Democratic strategists of the 1990s, such as the Democratic Leadership Council, arguably reinforced this perception by courting affluent suburbanites—"effectively abandoning" the working class (Frank, 2004, 211). Over time, that perception hardened into a cultural narrative of betrayal.

Likewise, Brown and Mettler (2024) find that rural and urban voting patterns began to decisively diverge in the late 1990s. Their analysis shows sequential phases in the rural realignment: first came economic stagnation and depopulation in many rural counties during the 1990s–2000s, prompting voters to break from Democrats. Then, from about 2008 onward, cultural and ideological forces accelerated the shift, as rural areas with higher shares of non-college-educated residents and evangelical churches swung heavily Republican. In their words, "political-economic forces [led] the way" in activating the rural shift, with cultural attitudes and the "nationalization of policy" deepening the divide (p. 641).

An emerging perspective is that national Democratic leadership—and to some extent, state-level leadership—walked away from rural areas as things started to look bleak. Democratic pollster John Zogby described this mindset clearly: "After Barack Obama's decisive victory in 2008, Democratic Party strategists fell under the sway of the notion that the future of their party's dominance was insured because, as they put it, 'demographics are destiny'" (Zogby, 2023). By 2017, Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer was equally candid about the shift in priorities: "For every blue-collar Democrat we lose in western Pennsylvania, we will pick up two

moderate Republicans in the suburbs in Philadelphia, and you can repeat that in Ohio and Illinois and Wisconsin" (Chait, 2017). By 2021, a piece in *Time* summarized the prevailing logic: "It's become something of a cliché in Washington for Democratic strategists to assert that 'demographics are destiny.' What they mean is that the diversifying electorate—and the shrinking role of white voters—will render Republicans incapable of sustaining power for much longer" (Beckwith, 2021).

Self-Inflicted Wounds?

The question here is how much of the dramatic turn in rural areas can be attributed to this strategic recalibration by the national Democratic Party?

In the early 2000s, Howard Dean's "50 State Strategy" represented the opposite impulse. As DNC Chair (2005–2009), Dean championed an organizing model that placed staff and resources in *every* state, including traditionally red and rural areas that national strategists had long written off. The idea was simple but bold: rebuilding party infrastructure everywhere would expand the Democratic map and re-engage voters who had felt ignored. The approach helped fuel Democratic successes in 2006 and 2008, but it also generated internal tension with the DCCC and Obama-era campaign operatives who favored data-driven targeting and efficiency.

After Dean's departure, many aspects of the 50 State Strategy were quietly abandoned, replaced by a more centralized, resource-triage approach that prioritized winnable districts and metropolitan turnout (Berman, 2014; Kamarck, 2013; Rosenfeld, 2017). The retreat from that inclusive strategy may well have set the stage for the subsequent erosion of Democratic presence in rural America.

In the wake of the Obama years, many journalists, campaign strategists, and local party leaders have argued that national Democratic decision-makers fully shifted their focus away from rural America, channeling attention and funding toward metropolitan turnout and persuasion. After the 2016 election, for example, several post-mortems pointed out that Hillary Clinton's campaign emphasized urban and suburban targets and skipped key battlegrounds like Wisconsin—an omission that came to symbolize how non-metro areas had been overlooked (Devine, 2018; KPBS, 2019).

To be sure, a *Politico* piece published shortly after Clinton's defeat, "The Revenge of the Rural Voter," (Evich 2016) explores not only the campaign's neglect of rural areas, but the outright disdain the campaign seemed to have for this part of the electorate. "By all accounts, the Clinton campaign didn't think it really needed rural voters…The campaign never named a rural council [and] didn't build a robust rural-dedicated campaign infrastructure." The article went on, "A staffer in Brooklyn was dedicated to rural outreach, but the assignment came just weeks before the election." The lack of any rural focus did not go unnoticed, at least among rural Democrats. "Democrats in agriculture circles buzzed with frustration over what they regarded as halfhearted efforts to engage rural voters…"(Evich, 2016).

Cliinton go obliterated in rural areas. While Obama's support in rural America also eroded between 2008 and 2012, from a high of 41 percent to 38 percent, Clinton's share plummeted to 29 percent. (Evich, 2016). The same dynamic shows up in candidate recruitment. Democrats frequently failed to contest local offices—especially in rural jurisdictions—ceding control of local agendas and weakening the networks that usually connect local candidates to national tickets (Contest Every Race, 2022–2024). Recent analysis by Willbanks and Shepherd (2025) reinforces this point, showing that Democratic vacancies in county leadership and a rising

share of uncontested open-seat contests have become key markers of organizational decline, particularly across rural regions.

Taken together, the journalistic reporting, quantitative evidence, and civic audits all point to the same conclusion: as rural margins worsened, national Democratic strategists increasingly concentrated their efforts elsewhere, effectively walking away from rural Democrats. The results—lower turnout, smaller vote shares, uncontested races, and thinner organizational capacity—are only now being seriously confronted (Colvin, 2024; Vassallo, 2025; Willbanks & Shepherd, 2025).

It is fair to say that in the last few years, some national Democratic allies have tried to correct the course. New rural initiatives have been launched precisely because earlier campaigns "shied away from rural counties," signaling at least some acknowledgment that the party had under-invested outside major population centers (Colvin, 2024; Scherer, 2024). Groups such as the Rural Urban Bridge Initiative (RUBI) and the Rural Democracy Initiative (RDI) now focus explicitly on rebuilding local party infrastructure, recruiting rural candidates, and changing messaging to better resonate in small-town and rural districts (RUBI, 2025; RDI, 2025). Meanwhile, movement organizers and progressive advocates have pressed the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to put more muscle into rural organizing, arguing that Democrats have "burned through billions … without improving [their] position" and need to rebuild the local infrastructure that once anchored their presence in small towns and rural counties (Vassallo, 2025).

The DNC under its new Chair Ken Martin has signaled a renewed emphasis on geographic breadth, modestly expanding its "Red, White & Blue" program and reintroducing

small-grant initiatives to help rural county committees hire part-time organizers and upgrade basic digital tools (Democrats.org, 2025). Parallel efforts outside the DNC—such as the Rural Democracy Initiative, Contest Every Race, and Run for Something's "Every County" campaign—have attempted to fill the vacuum by recruiting local candidates and offering training and micro-funding where state parties remain weak (RDI, 2024; Contest Every Race, 2023; Run for Something, 2024).

Still, many rural county chairs describe these efforts as episodic rather than systemic, noting that investments often vanish after one cycle and rarely translate into sustained field staff or candidate pipelines. Some party strategists continue to argue that scarce resources are better spent mobilizing base voters in high-density metropolitan areas, while others view renewed rural engagement as essential to rebuilding a national governing majority. The hard internal debate—targeted efficiency versus geographic depth—remains unresolved even as Democrats belatedly rediscover the value of "being present everywhere" (Teixeira & Judis 2023; Willbanks & Shepherd 2025).

In sum, there seems to be evidence to suggest the strategic changes at the national level may have contributed to the estrangement. But the general theme—that rural Democrats were effectively set adrift by their national and state party leaders—has received limited scholarly attention. Most of the narrative has been constructed by journalists and campaign chroniclers rather than systematically tested by political scientists. Their accounts, while insightful and often compelling, tend to rely on anecdote and insider reporting rather than comparative or quantitative evidence.

This paper is designed to fill that gap. Drawing on new data on local party organizations, we examine whether and how the Democratic Party's institutional presence has contracted across rural America—and what that retrenchment has meant for electoral competitiveness and party organizational vitality.

Party Organization and Rural Infrastructure

American political parties operate as stratarchies—decentralized networks in which national, state, and local committees each retain substantial autonomy (Eldersveld 1982, Epstein, 1986). Within this system, the national party concentrates on presidential campaigns, messaging, and fundraising, while state and county organizations handle candidate recruitment and grassroots mobilization. No single actor commands the entire enterprise; instead, authority is continually negotiated across levels. This layered structure has profound implications for rural party committees. If the Democratic National Committee (DNC) prioritizes other regions and withholds support, local organizations in rural areas can gradually atrophy without any explicit decision ever being made to abandon those communities.

Party stratarchy also creates strategic asymmetries where each party directs its resources. Republicans, despite their strength in rural America, cannot ignore urban and suburban voters entirely—they need at least some foothold in cities to win statewide races. Democrats, by contrast, can (and often do) secure national victories with minimal rural support, relying heavily on urban and metropolitan turnout. This electoral calculus encourages Democrats to invest less in rural infrastructure, further deepening the organizational gap between the parties.

Recent research confirms how stark this gap has become. Willbanks and Shepherd (2025) find that since 2016, the Democratic Party has effectively retreated from many rural areas. The

decline has been stark: roughly 20 percent of rural counties nationwide now lack a local Democratic chair, a vacancy rate about six times higher than that of Republicans (who have left only about four percent of rural counties without GOP leadership). Likewise, Democrats failed to field a congressional candidate in approximately 12 percent of rural districts, whereas Republicans contested virtually every rural seat in recent election cycles. These lapses in infrastructure and candidate presence carry real electoral consequences. Counties without an active Democratic committee have experienced significantly lower voter turnout and as much as an eight-point drop in the Democratic vote share in statewide races (Willbanks & Shepherd, 2025). In short, when party organization on the ground collapses, performance at the ballot box suffers.

Nevertheless, there are growing voices within the party now warning of the dangers of ceding rural America. The Rural Urban Bridge Initiative (RUBI)—launched by progressive organizers to rekindle Democratic support beyond the cities—and state-level leaders like North Carolina's Anderson Clayton have openly pushed the DNC to reinvest in rural field operations (Vassallo, 2025). Clayton's recent campaign for state party chair explicitly argued that "#RuralMatters," insisting the party refocus on engaging rural voters. New analyses also underscore how much the party stands to gain from a rural rebound. Scala and Johnson (2024) show that even a modest three-point uptick in the Democratic vote share across rural counties could alter presidential outcomes in multiple swing states—evidence that re-engaging rural communities could yield high electoral returns.

Roscoe and Jenkins's (2012, 2016) survey of more than 1,100 local party organizations finds that local committees—including those in rural areas—often function as *service providers*, offering voter data, volunteer labor, and campaign coordination in exchange for candidate

investment. They describe this decentralized arrangement as a state party confederation, in which resources and authority are *negotiated* across organizational levels rather than *commanded* from above. In this confederated model, a local party's vitality depends on its internal capacity and its vertical linkages to the state organization—factors that strongly predict the scope of local electoral activity. Active and well-integrated local parties engage more in candidate recruitment and voter outreach, and their counties tend to yield stronger presidential vote margins for their party, though the relationship is less consistent down the ballot.

Their work also helps explain why many rural Democratic committees struggle to remain viable. They show that local parties with limited organizational capacity and weak connections to their state counterparts tend to engage in fewer core activities—such as candidate recruitment, fundraising, and voter mobilization—and to perform worse electorally. Although they do not focus exclusively on rural areas, their findings imply that many small, resource-poor Democratic committees occupy the weaker side of the exchange within the state party confederation. In such contexts, minimal cross-level support reinforces local inactivity and electoral decline. By the same logic, rebuilding organizational maturity and strengthening vertical linkages, particularly between state and county committees, should yield the greatest marginal returns in precisely those regions where Democrats now underperform—rural America.

All told, the current literature on local party organization hints at a potentially uneasy relationship between rural Democratic committees and their state and national counterparts. Journalistic accounts and a handful of case studies have conveyed rural party leaders' feelings of being overlooked or under-supported by the national party, but systematic evidence remains limited. It is not yet clear whether this tension reflects genuine organizational neglect, divergent strategic priorities, or simply the structural realities of modern campaigning. What is clear is that

the party's stratarchical design—dividing authority among national, state, and local levels—can complicate coordination and blur accountability for resource allocation.

Data and Methods

To empirically assess the potential estrangement of local party organizations, we conducted a nationwide survey of county and local party chairs during the spring of 2025. Using an exhaustive search of public records, state party websites, and other verified online sources, we compiled a contact list of 6,158 party officials—including county chairs, vice chairs, and other local leaders from both major parties. Each potential respondent received a personalized email invitation to participate in an online survey administered through Qualtrics, followed by two reminder messages sent over a three-week field period.

The survey yielded 871 completed responses, representing local party leaders from every region of the country and from both Democratic and Republican organizations. The questionnaire included items on party coordination, candidate recruitment, and organizational health, as well as standard demographic and attitudinal measures. While the sample is not probabilistic, the breadth of participation across diverse geographic and partisan contexts provides a valuable window into the state of local party infrastructure in 2025.

Roughly two-thirds of the respondents identified as Democrats (66%). The sample leaned strongly rural: over half of respondents reported that most voters in their area live in rural or rural–suburban communities. Most respondents were long-serving local officials—more than two-thirds had been active in party politics for over five years—and the majority possessed at least a college degree, with nearly half holding graduate degrees. Ideologically, the sample spanned the political spectrum, though Democrats were more likely to describe themselves as

liberal or *very liberal*, while Republicans tended toward *conservative* or *very conservative* self-identifications.

Findings: Have Rural Democrats Been Left Behind?

Organizational Vitality

One of the first questions to consider concerns the viability of rural Democratic county committees compared to their counterparts elsewhere. Have rural units experienced a marked decline in activity, engagement, and core party functions? This question is not trivial. County committees are the connective tissue of American party politics—the institutions that recruit candidates, mobilize volunteers, raise funds, and maintain visibility between election cycles. When these organizations wither, the effects ripple outward: fewer contested races, weaker voter contact, and diminished local voice in state and national politics. Assessing the vitality of rural Democratic committees, then, provides an essential window into the broader health of the party's grassroots infrastructure.

Echoing the county-level realignment outlined in the literature review, local Republican organizations report substantially better momentum than their Democratic counterparts. Among GOP chairs, 76 percent say their committees are *much* or *somewhat better* than two decades ago, compared with 57 percent of Democratic chairs. By contrast, one-quarter of Democrats describe their organizations as *somewhat* or *much worse*, versus only one in ten Republicans. This pattern aligns with the feedback loop described in the stratarchy literature: as national actors concentrate their resources in dense metros and competitive suburbs, rural infrastructure atrophies, which in turn depresses both performance and morale.

The perception of decline is reinforced by operational indicators. Rural Democratic committees report lower average scores across several *activity scales*, including fundraising events, community outreach, and volunteer mobilization. They also operate with markedly smaller budgets: a majority of rural Democratic chairs fall within the lowest funding categories (under $5,000 annually), while Republican and urban committees are far more likely to report budgets above $25,000. Taken together, these patterns depict a party apparatus structurally weakened—organizations that are surviving, but seldom thriving, in much of rural America.

Local party vitality is the most visible sign of abandonment. When committees stop meeting regularly, lose volunteers, and run on tiny budgets, the infrastructure necessary to contest elections evaporates.

Figure 1 about here

Several of the open-ended responses from rural Democratic party leaders suggest they are facing problems and that things could get worse:

> *Local parties are trending to be less relevant than ever before.*
>
> *The local Democratic parties will be the boomers' last stand. When this generation is gone, the local committees will collapse. No one younger is showing up, and meetings keep getting smaller.*
>
> *I think political parties are in decline. Our committee used to have energy, but now it's the same few people trying to hold things together. We're all tired.*

Of course, part of this rural disadvantage reflects structural realities rather than simple neglect. When we control for resources and organizational activity—committees' budgets, the number of events they hold, and the experience level of their leaders—the gap between rural and non-rural organizations narrows but does not disappear. Roughly one-third of the difference in perceived vitality is explained by these factors, suggesting that resource scarcity and smaller membership bases account for some, but not all, of the malaise. Even after adjusting for these conditions, rural Democratic chairs remain significantly more likely than others to describe their organizations as struggling, which points to deeper problems of morale and connectivity rather than capacity alone.

Candidate Recruitment

Because a core function of local parties is to field candidates, we examine where races go uncontested. Disaggregating by party and geography shows that uncontested contests are concentrated most heavily among rural Democrats. Combining the top two categories ("frequently" or "almost always" uncontested), 64.2% of rural Democratic chairs report chronically uncontested environments (N=251), compared with 52.8% among non-rural Democrats (N=263). On the Republican side, the shares are lower—53.6% for rural Republicans (N=97) and 35.6% for non-rural Republicans (N=135). At the other end of the distribution, "very rare" uncontested races are most common among non-rural Republicans, consistent with broader patterns of GOP competitiveness in suburbs and exurbs. These results align with the stratarchy mechanism discussed in the literature and complement the work of Willbanks and Shepherd (2024) : where national and state parties invest less, local pipelines thin out and uncontested races proliferate—especially for Democrats in low-density places.

Figure 2 about here

Again, a number of the open-ended responses reflected these findings. For example, one rural Democratic chair noted,

> *Party chairs do not operate as (probably because they aren't trained as) community organizers. Many have a hard time recruiting and retaining volunteers, and don't think in terms of delegating. That being said, most volunteers are older and don't often have the capacity to learn how to use organizing tools such as the Google suite, Mobilize, Votebuilder, and so on. The state party should do more to train county chairs and volunteers.*

Part of the rural Democratic shortfall in candidate recruitment reflects underlying resource constraints rather than simple indifference. When we introduce controls for committee budgets, organizational activity, and recent electoral competitiveness, the rural–Democratic gap in uncontested races narrows but remains statistically significant. In other words, poorer and less active county organizations are indeed less able to recruit candidates, yet even committees with comparable resources report greater difficulty in rural Democratic strongholds. This pattern suggests that beyond material capacity, a combination of weak pipelines, limited encouragement from higher-level party officials, and the perception that Democrats cannot win locally continues to suppress candidate emergence.

Vertical Coordination with the National Party

Another dimension of broad party strength is the extent of coordination between local, state, and national party organizations. These vertical linkages are critical to the functioning of a modern political party. They determine whether resources, messaging, and strategic guidance flow effectively across levels, or whether local committees are left to fend for themselves. Strong coordination helps translate national priorities into local action—channeling funds, training, and

voter-contact tools downward—while also carrying local knowledge and candidate pipelines upward. When these connections fray, local parties lose access to expertise and reinforcement, and national leaders lose their most reliable grassroots partners. As Herrnson (2009) observes, party vitality depends on continuous information and resource exchange across these levels, linking formal committees and allied networks into a coherent campaign apparatus. Assessing the quality of these relationships therefore provides a direct measure of the party's organizational coherence and its ability to compete beyond a single election cycle.

Both rural and non-rural Democrats overwhelmingly report operating on their own: 86 percent of *rural Democrats* (N = 250) and 86 percent of *non-rural Democrats* (N = 264) say they "operate independently with minimal coordination," while only two percent and 1.5 percent, respectively, report "strong coordination." Among Republicans, the picture is notably better: "minimal coordination" drops to 71 percent for *rural Republicans* (N = 99) and 72 percent for *non-rural Republicans* (N = 138), and "strong coordination" rises to 11 percent and 7 percent respectively. In other words, when contact with the national party is scarce, it is especially scarce for Democratic chairs—regardless of whether they lead rural or non-rural committees—whereas Republican chairs, and particularly those in rural areas, are more likely to experience strong national ties. This pattern matches the stratarchy literature's account of resource triage: vote-rich geographies and partisan strongholds receive the bulk of national attention, leaving many Democratic county organizations, rural and non-rural alike, to "go it alone."

Coordination is comparatively stronger with state parties across the board, and the partisan gap narrows. "Strong coordination" is reported by 32 percent of *rural Democrats* (N = 251) and 29 percent of *non-rural Democrats* (N = 267), alongside 36 percent of *rural Republicans* (N = 100) and 36 percent of *non-rural Republicans* (N = 140). Correspondingly, the

share saying they "operate independently with minimal coordination" falls to the mid-teens for both parties—16 percent(Dem-rural), 15 percent(Dem-non-rural), 19 percent (GOP-rural), 15 percent (GOP-non-rural). State parties, in short, provide a closer and more even connective tissue than the national committees, though Republicans still retain a modest edge in "strong" ties. Taken together, the data reinforce the core mechanism emphasized in the literature: in a stratarchical system where vertical links are negotiated rather than commanded, Democratic committees—particularly at the national interface—report thinner coordination, and that thinness is only partially offset by somewhat stronger relationships with their state organizations.

Figure 3 about here

Figure 4 about here

These results reveal an organization divided not only by geography but by level of connection within the party network. Rural Democratic committees clearly exhibit weaker vitality—smaller budgets, fewer activities, and greater pessimism about their future—but the coordination data suggest the problem extends beyond geography. Both rural and non-rural Democratic chairs report minimal contact with the national party. Fewer than two percent of rural Democrats and virtually none of their suburban or urban counterparts describe a close relationship with national leaders, while roughly four-fifths in each group say they operate independently. Even at the state level, Democratic committees are far more likely to describe their ties as "limited" than "close." Republican organizations, by contrast, report modestly higher levels of vertical integration at both tiers. The pattern underscores that the Democrats' challenge is not confined to the countryside—it reflects a broader erosion of connective tissue between

local and national actors, a breakdown in the very stratarchical coordination that once allowed the party to mobilize effectively across place and scale.

Some of this coordination gap reflects predictable structural differences. When we control for local committee budgets, activity levels, and the presence of recent candidates, the rural–Democratic shortfall in national contact narrows but remains significant. Even resource-rich rural committees report limited communication with the DNC, suggesting that geography and strategic prioritization—rather than organizational weakness alone—continue to shape how attention flows downward through the party network.

Working with Professional Consultants

Another dimension of integration involves the relationship between county committees and professional campaign consultants, often dispatched from state capitals or Washington. These operatives now play a central role in the mechanics of modern campaigning—overseeing media buys, digital strategy, voter targeting, and compliance. In principle, such expertise can help local committees professionalize and compete more effectively. Yet it can also create dependence and distance, replacing grassroots know-how with top-down direction. As Herrnson (2009) notes, the rise of professional consultants within the party network has redistributed campaign expertise away from local committees, strengthening coordination in some respects while eroding local autonomy in others. Examining how frequently, and on what terms, local chairs interact with consultants offers insight into whether professionalization has strengthened the party's local infrastructure or hollowed it out.

Among rural Democratic chairs, only 7 percent report that consultants are commonly active in local campaigns, compared with 24 percent of suburban and 30 percent of urban chairs. Likewise, just 9 percent of rural respondents say they interact with consultants "frequently,"

while more than half describe such contact as "rare" or "nonexistent." Geography also shapes perception: rural chairs are far more likely to see consultants as out of touch or dismissive of local realities. As one rural Democrat put it, "Consultants parachute in with no sense of the community, then disappear after Election Day." Another added, "The consultants don't value the work we do—they see rural counties as lost causes."

These sentiments point to a deeper structural divide within the party. Professionalization may bring technical expertise, but it can also widen the gulf between paid operatives and grassroots organizers. One Democratic chair captured this tension succinctly:

> *Local parties remain the primary source of volunteer energy for voter contact and turnout. A candidate without that energy will struggle regardless of financial resources. Paid voter contact is less effective than partisan volunteers. That said, when candidates can pay for outside consulting, the consultants tend to look down on the very things local parties do—and this produces tension between local candidates and parties.*

Together, these findings suggest that geography not only affects the presence of professional support but also colors how it is experienced, reinforcing broader patterns of strategic neglect and cultural distance within the Democratic Party's organizational network.

Table 5 about here

Voice and Representation

Beyond questions of coordination and consulting lies a more fundamental concern: whether rural Democratic leaders feel heard within their own party. County chairs serve as the party's front-line representatives, but many question whether their perspectives carry any weight

in shaping broader strategy or resource allocation. Having a "seat at the table" is more than symbolic—it determines whether the experiences of small-town organizers and rural voters inform campaign priorities, messaging, and investment decisions. For many rural Democrats, the issue is not only a lack of communication but a sense of invisibility and value within a party increasingly oriented toward metropolitan politics.

Survey results underscore a striking disconnect between local Democratic leaders and the national party—but geography matters. While discontent is widespread, rural Democrats express the most acute sense of isolation. Among Democratic chairs in rural counties, a full 91 percent say they operate independently from the national party, compared to 85.8% of non-rural Democrats and 71 percent of Republicans. Just one percent of rural Democratic chairs report close, sustained coordination with national actors—lower than any other group.

This sense of exclusion is reinforced by responses to a related survey question: whether local chairs feel they have a meaningful "seat at the table" when it comes to party decision-making. Among rural Democratic leaders, fewer than 10 percent agreed with that statement, while over 60 percent disagreed outright.

Several respondents elaborated in open-ended comments, describing party decisions as "top-down," "prepackaged," and "made in D.C. with no input from people on the ground." This sentiment underscores a larger organizational and cultural divide. As one chair wrote, "They want us to execute the plan—but we're never in the room when the plan is written." Another stated,

I would hope that as local party leaders we would band together and ensure rural voices are heard. I fear that most organizations tend to centralize their power and become less motivated to listen to rural voters.

Some of this alienation stems from organizational isolation rather than geography alone. When we control for state-level coordination, budget size, and contact with consultants, the rural–Democratic gap in perceived "voice at the table" narrows but remains substantial. For example, even among rural Democratic chairs who report *strong coordination* with their state party—roughly 30 percent of the group—only about 9 percent feel they have any real voice in national decision-making. This suggests that the problem lies less in communication capacity than in recognition and respect.

This pattern suggests that the party's stratarchical structure—where authority and resources are negotiated across national, state, and local levels—leaves rural committees disconnected. While party design may account for some of this, rural chairs describe more than a structural gap. Their open-ended responses frequently reference a sense of being "forgotten," "overlooked," or "ignored" by party leaders. These perceptions are not merely anecdotal: they align with Roscoe and Jenkins's (2012, 2016) findings that weak vertical linkages contribute directly to organizational fragility and poor performance—a pattern especially pronounced in smaller or resource-poor county committees, many of which are rural.

This divide also carries a symbolic weight. As Thomas Frank (2020) argues, the Democratic Party's increasing alignment with urban professionals has left rural voters culturally alienated, fostering a sense that the party neither understands their communities nor shares their values. That feeling is echoed in our data. One rural chair noted: "The DNC has no idea what we

deal with out here. We're told what to do, not asked what we need." The feedback loop is clear: material neglect fuels disconnection, which in turn deepens strategic withdrawal.

Table 6 about here

One of the clearest signals of estrangement between local and national actors comes from how county chairs perceive political consultants—those who often help shape campaign messaging, outreach, and spending decisions. In our survey, Democratic chairs, especially in rural areas, consistently described consultants as disconnected from local realities. Among rural Democrats, over 70% reported that consultants are "pretty much out of touch with our community," while fewer than 30% said consultants understand their context and value their input. Non-rural Democrats expressed similar skepticism, though with slightly more positive views. These numbers suggest that despite efforts to bring professional expertise to down-ballot races, local actors frequently feel sidelined by the very advisors meant to support them. So it seems rather clear that rural Democratic leaders have felt they have little input with the professionals that run campaigns in their area.

This dynamic has significant consequences for trust and organizational alignment. When consultants are seen as parachuting in with pre-baked strategies and little local knowledge, chairs become less likely to adopt their guidance or collaborate on messaging. One respondent wrote: "The consultants were nice, but they clearly didn't know anything about our voters. They talked past us, not with us." This sentiment echoes broader concerns in the literature about national campaigns dominating messaging at the expense of local nuance (Herrnson, 2009; Scala & Johnson, 2024). Rebuilding rural Democratic infrastructure may therefore require more than just funding or field staff. It may require a rethinking of who gets to design strategy—and whether local knowledge is treated as a core asset or an afterthought.

National Party Branding and Strategic Disconnect

While much of this paper has focused on organizational vitality and coordination, the survey also sheds light on the symbolic and perceptual dimensions of party connection—how local leaders view the national party's *brand* and *strategic orientation*. These perceptions matter greatly. Even well-organized local committees struggle to recruit candidates or mobilize volunteers if national associations are seen as toxic or detached from local realities.

Table 7 captures this dynamic directly, asking county chairs whether a connection to the national party helps or hurts their local candidates. The results are telling. Only about one in five rural Democratic chairs say that the national association helps their candidates; nearly half say it *hurts*. By contrast, most Republican chairs—rural and non-rural alike—see the national brand as an asset in their communities. Among suburban and urban Democrats, opinions are mixed but far less negative than in rural America. The pattern underscores that for Democrats, national affiliation carries sharply different meanings across geography: in metropolitan areas it conveys legitimacy and resources, but in much of rural America it has become a liability.

Table 7 about here

These descriptive results invite a deeper question: *why* do some local leaders view the national party so negatively? To explore this, Table 8 presents a multivariate model predicting whether respondents believe the *strategies and tactics* of the national party are "out of touch" with what is happening in their own area. This measure moves beyond branding to the substance of political alignment—whether the national party seems to understand local priorities, culture, and political conditions.

Table 8 about here

The results are striking. Even after controlling for budgets, organizational activity, ideology, and coordination with state parties, rural Democratic chairs stand apart as the most alienated group in the dataset. The *rural × Democrat* interaction is large and statistically significant ($p < .01$), indicating that rural Democrats are substantially more likely than any other group—including rural Republicans—to view their national party as strategically disconnected. In practical terms, a rural Democratic chair is nearly twice as likely as a suburban Democrat and more than three times as likely as a rural Republican to say that national messaging and tactics are "out of touch" with local realities.

Several open-ended responses vividly illustrate these patterns. One rural chair wrote, *"Every time they talk about rural issues, they make it sound like they're talking about someone else's community, not ours."* Another commented, *"The national people mean well, but they don't understand what plays here. It's a different language."* These statements echo what the quantitative results make plain: the divide between national and local Democrats is not merely organizational but cultural, rooted in contrasting understandings of what politics means and how it should be practiced.

Taken together, Tables 7 and 8 reveal the twin challenges facing the Democratic Party in rural America. The first is reputational—many rural leaders see national branding as a drag on local competitiveness. The second is perceptual—those same leaders increasingly believe that national strategies and messages fail to connect with local values, priorities, and lived experience. Even when rural committees are moderately well funded or have some coordination with state organizations, the sense of strategic alienation persists.

Discussion: Why We Should Care?

This study has shown that the organizational estrangement of rural Democratic committees is more than a matter of structure or strategy—it is a question of presence, legitimacy, and shared purpose. Rural chairs describe a party that no longer feels like a partner: national actors prioritize urban strongholds, professional consultants misunderstand local contexts, and the pipelines that once carried ideas and resources between levels of the party have thinned to a trickle. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle of disengagement and decline—one that constrains both the party's electoral potential and its democratic function.

But why would this matter? Why should we care?

The first reason this matters is purely electoral, pragmatic. As rural Democrats repeatedly remind us, there is no sustainable national majority that begins by writing off most of the map. When top-of-the-ticket Democrats garner only twenty or thirty percent of the rural vote, they force themselves into a mathematical cul-de-sac: they must win near-unanimous margins elsewhere to compensate. Even modest gains in rural areas—a few percentage points of restored competitiveness—could reshape statewide contests and determine control of Congress and the presidency. In that sense, rebuilding ties with rural America is not nostalgic outreach; it is a strategic necessity.

Much related, investing in local party infrastructure is not merely symbolic; it is the seedbed for future political success. Robust county and municipal committees are where volunteers become candidates, where campaign skills are learned, and where a sense of civic possibility is sustained between election cycles. These local leaders recruit the next wave of office seekers, often supplying the bench for state legislative contests and, in time, congressional races. In this way, county committees serve as a kind of *farm team* for the party—a structure that

identifies talent early, tests it in winnable districts, and creates durable pipelines of experience and loyalty. When the party neglects this tier, it sacrifices not only local representation but also the developmental system that produces its next generation of viable candidates and organizers.

The second reason is a bit more theoretical, but no less urgent. As Jacobs and Shea argued in *The Rural Voter* (2023) that healthy democracies depend on two viable, geographically distributed parties. When one party abandons vast swaths of the country, local politics withers and citizens lose access to meaningful representation. A depopulated political landscape—where Democrats no longer contest school boards, sheriff's races, or county commissions—erodes accountability and deepens cynicism. Revitalizing local party life is thus not merely about winning elections; it is about restoring the connective tissue of representative government itself.

The third reason is ideological and cultural. Over the past decade, Donald Trump has spearheaded not just a political campaign but a sweeping social and cultural revolution—a fusion of grievance, identity, and belonging that amounts to a religious-style movement. As David Brooks recently noted, "Although Trump's actions across these various spheres may seem like separate policies, they are part of one project: creating a savage war of all against all … Trumpism can also be seen as a multipronged effort to amputate the higher elements of the human spirit—learning, compassion, science, the pursuit of justice." (2025) In short, many rural Americans now see in Trumpism a cultural home—one built on outrage and affirmation, not just policy. If Democrats hope to counter that pull, competence alone won't suffice. They must marry progressive ideals with populist instincts—speaking again the moral language of fairness, dignity, community, and shared stakes that once bridged farmers and laborers, reformers and radicals (Brooks 2025). Reclaiming that fusion means taking rural voices seriously — not as relics of a faded America, but as indispensable partners in shaping its democratic future.

Looking forward, the task for Democrats is not simply to "message better" to rural voters, but to rebuild shared infrastructure and trust. That means restoring field capacity, empowering local committees, and giving rural leaders genuine seats at the table where strategy is made. It means replacing episodic engagement with sustained collaboration. And it requires a moral as well as organizational shift—seeing rural America not as a lost cause, but as a vital part of the democratic whole. Only by bridging these divides can the party hope to govern broadly, compete everywhere, and reassert the promise of a democracy rooted in both community and equality.

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Table 1. Perceived Organizational Vitality by Party and Place

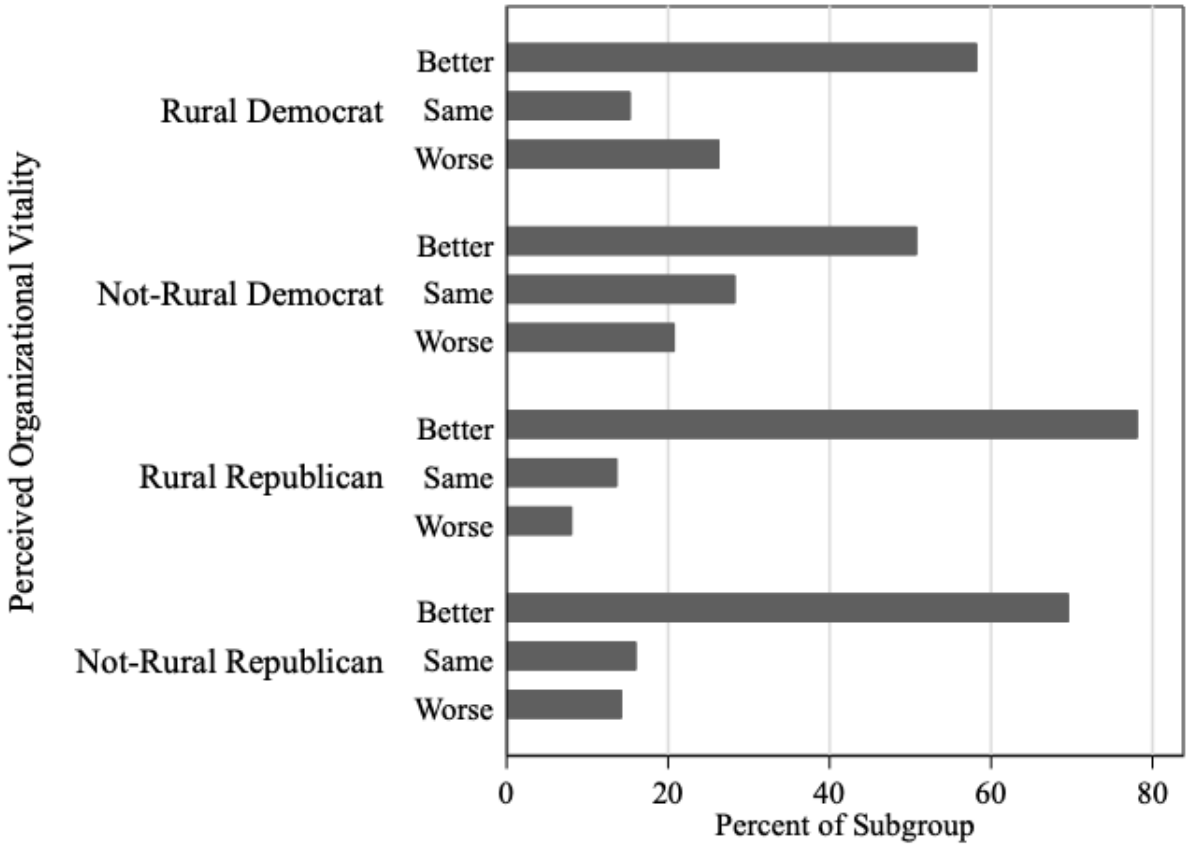

Table 2. Frequency of Uncontested Races

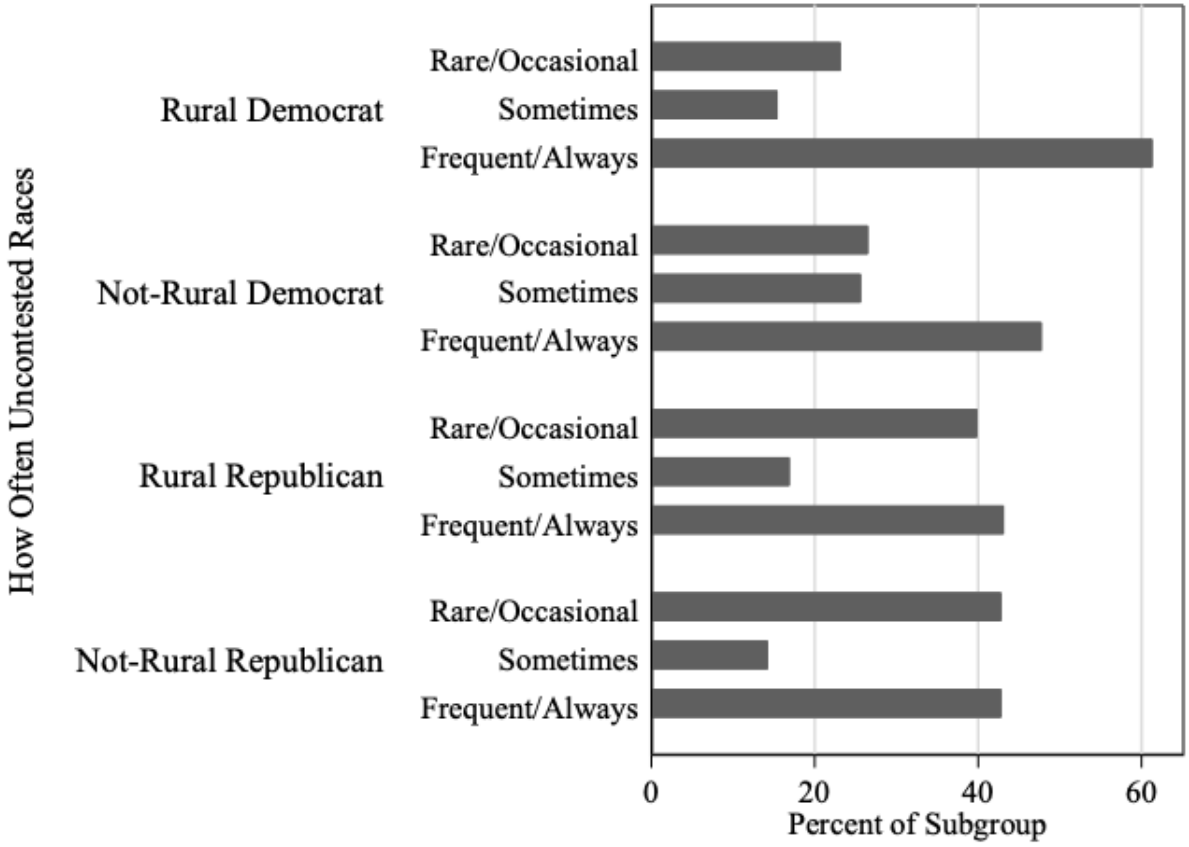

Table 3. Coordination with State Party

Party	Community Type	Close (%)	Limited (%)	Independent (%)
Democrat	Rural	30.2	**50.0**	15.6
Democrat	Sub/Urban	23.5	**61.8**	5.9
Republica	Rural	**34.3**	42.9	18.1
Republica	Sub/Urban	**43.5**	34.8	13.0

Source: 2025 County Party Chair Survey.

Table 4. Coordination with National Party

Party	Community Type	Close (%)	Limited (%)	Independent (%)
Democrat	Rural	1.9	11.8	**81.7**
Democrat	Sub/Urban	0.0	14.7	**73.5**
Republica	Rural	**10.5**	17.1	66.7
Republica	Sub/Urban	**8.7**	34.8	47.8

Source: 2025 County Party Chair Survey.

Table 5. Contact with and Perceptions of Campaign Consultants

Group	Consultants Commonly Active (%)	Frequent Interaction (%)	View Consultants as Out of Touch (%)
Democrat – Rural	7	9	51
Democrat – Non-Rural	27	24	26
Republican	33	28	22

Source: 2025 County Party Chair Survey. N-964

Table 6. Perceived Relationship with National Party

Relationship Category	Rural Democrat (%)	Non-rural Democrat (%)	Republican (%)
Operate independently with minimal coordination	**91.3**	85.8	71.3
Collaborate on a few issues / limited support	7.6	12.5	20.3
Work closely on many issues	1.1	1.8	**8.4**

Source: 2025 County Party Chair Survey.

Table 7. Does A Connection to the National Party Brand Help?

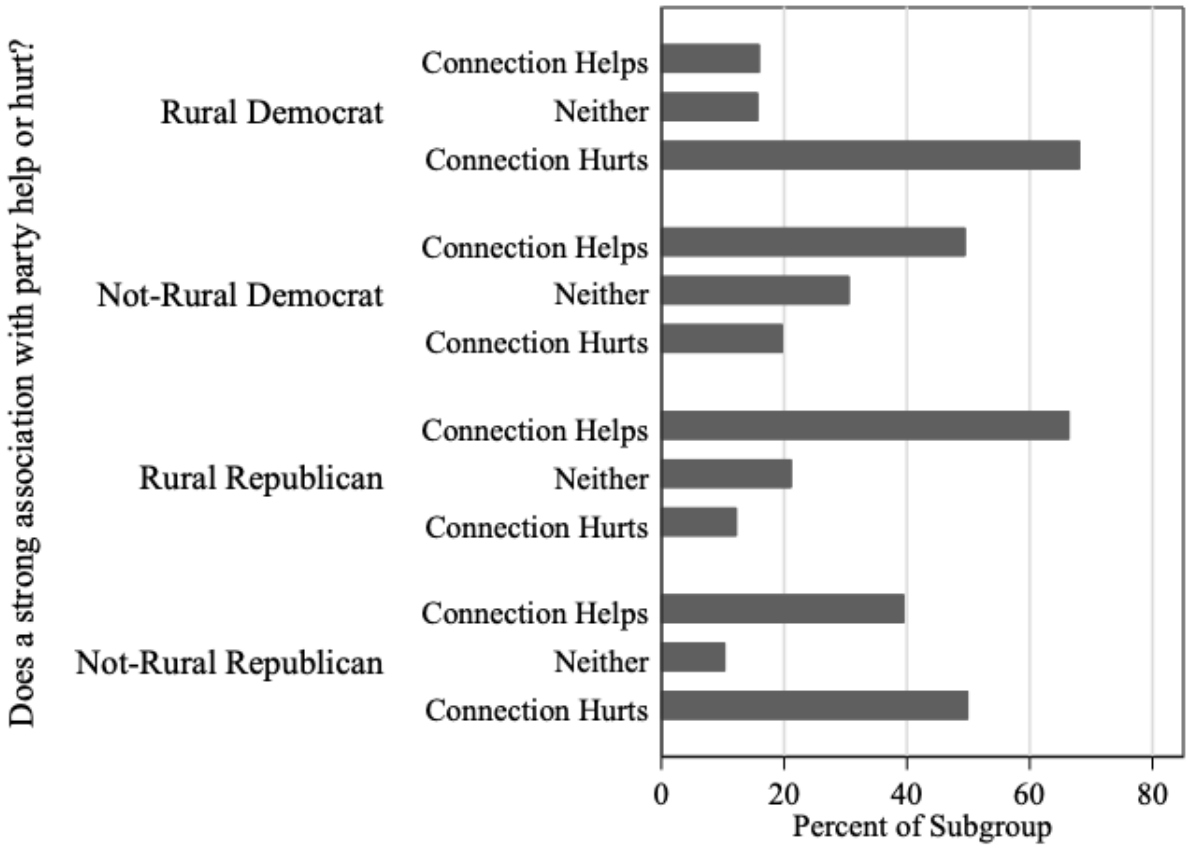

Table 8. Are the National Party's Strategies Out of Touch?