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Rural voters have turned their backs on the Democratic party - a Wisconsin political organizer describes which progressive economic policies can win them back

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A produce vendor sells apples a farmers market in Viroqua, Wisconsin, in October 2020. Kerem Yucel/AFP/ via Getty Images

- Paul Constant is a writer at Civic Ventures and a frequent cohost of the "[Pitchfork Economics](#)" podcast with [Nick Hanauer](#) and David Goldstein.
- In the latest episode, Civic Ventures president Zach Silk spoke with Bill Hogseth, a political organizer from rural Wisconsin, about the challenge of reaching rural voters.
- Hogseth says Democrats need to fight for small businesses and independent farms and against corporate monopolies if they want to win back support in rural areas.
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Not too long ago, states like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania were considered Democratic strongholds and not swing states. And the strength that Democrats enjoyed in those states didn't just come from deep-blue urban areas, either - Democratic politicians and policies were roundly popular with rural voters across the Midwest.

That rock-steady rural voting bloc, which stood strong for most of the 20th century, was a direct result of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, which delivered electricity infrastructure, transportation, and economic support to out-of-the-way rural areas. Because FDR promoted policies that delivered direct, life-improving results to voters, those voters and their families remained loyal for generations.

Pulling away from the Democratic party

It was only after decades of inattention from Democratic leaders, and a full-court campaign by Republican politicians promoting the lie that trickle-down economics would solve rampant job losses and business closures, that rural Wisconsin began to drift from the party.

In December of 2020, Bill Hogseth, a political organizer from rural Wisconsin, [wrote an incisive essay for Politico Magazine](#) about how Donald Trump's Republican Party won over rural Wisconsin. In it, Hogseth accused the Democratic Party of not offering "rural voters a clear vision that speaks to their lived experiences."

Still, Hogseth wrote, the opportunity for Democrats to gain ground was there. Rural areas are ailing: "Small-business growth has slowed in rural communities since the Great Recession, and it has only worsened with COVID-19," Hogseth wrote, adding that as "capital overwhelmingly flows to metro areas, the small-town economy increasingly is dominated by large corporations: low-wage retailers like Dollar General or agribusiness firms that have no connection to the community."

[In this week's episode of "Pitchfork Economics,"](#) Civic Ventures president and Wisconsin native Zach Silk interviews Hogseth about the progressive economic policies that could help Democrats gain ground in the rural areas their forebears abandoned. It's a substantive conversation that transcends the usual calls for just dumping money blindly into America's heartland.

[Read more: As he takes office, President Biden faces a unique economic crisis - and the chance to redefine economics forever](#)

Allowing small businesses to thrive

Hogseth makes the great point that FDR's economic policy wasn't just about building infrastructure and handing out money to rural voters.

"The most important thing" FDR did, Hogseth explains, is he "fought concentration - the robber barons, the previous generation of concentrated trust power." This progressive push against monopolies and unchecked corporate power allowed family farms and small businesses to thrive throughout America's rural areas.

Less than a hundred years later, here we are again: Rural areas in America are wastelands of small business, with Walmarts and Dollar General stores wiping out all the competition in retail, and gigantic agricultural corporations swallowing up family farms and replacing them with exploitative low-paying jobs and cruel and environmentally unsound farming practices.

Even though Joe Biden ran arguably the most progressive economic presidential campaign in three decades, Hogseth says his conversations with voters on Biden's behalf in his rural Wisconsin community were still challenging.

"It was hard for us to point to something that was going to change their life in a measurable, visible, tangible way that was connected to their experience as a rural American," Hogseth said.

"There's this overwhelming feeling amongst my neighbors that a lot of the decisions that affect their life are made somewhere else," Hogseth said. "Culture happens somewhere else, capital flows somewhere else, decisions are made somewhere else."

For organizers like Hogseth in areas that Democrats have all but abandoned, "if you don't have some transformative vision or some big audacious plan for how you're going to change people's lives that you can point to when you're doing that work, it makes the organizing really, really difficult," he said.

Read more: [Handouts to the wealthy did nothing to boost the pandemic economy. Here's how the US should take a different approach in 2021.](#)

The challenge of reaching rural communities

Despite what the snobbiest urban progressive in your Facebook feed may claim, the problem isn't that rural voters are idiots who have been brainwashed.

"The folks who I talked to around here - especially farmers, for example - they really understand the way the economic system works," Hogseth said.

And those farmers "really understand how economic power works, how the companies that they buy their fertilizer and seed from have pretty much monopolized that sector. Or they can't get the best price for their grain because there's only one or two buyers in the area," Hogseth said.

It's not that they don't understand the monopolies are sucking the life out of their land and their livelihoods - it's that they understand exactly how powerful the corporate monopolies are, and they don't believe Democrats will fight them on their behalf.

"There's significant economic power surrounding them and surrounding the communities that they live in," Hogseth said. If Democrats aren't willing to take the risk and dismantle the unfair monopolies, the farmers reason, there's no point in voting for them.

Hogseth can attest that winning the heartland back isn't a matter of Democratic candidates finding the right words to say, or the right stock footage of amber waves of grain to edit into their campaign commercials. And no matter what the Sunday morning news shows might claim, it's not about identity politics, or cancel culture, or any of the other buzzwords that conservative pundits are trying to sell these days.

Rural voters care about action, and taking a stand, and living up to your words. Unless Democrats are willing to demonstrate that they're fighting for small businesses and independent farms, and against job-killing market consolidation and corporate monopolies, they'll never win back the rural areas that used to be steadfast Democratic strongholds.

Business Insider Magazine URL: [How the Democratic party can win back rural voters \(businessinsider.com\)](https://www.businessinsider.com/story/how-the-democratic-party-can-win-back-rural-voters).