

# Jerry Hagstrom



## Parsing the “rural” results

THE RESULTS of the midterm elections once again appear to confirm the divisions between urban and rural America, but the results in what are called the rural states and districts are so varied that the very term “rural” should be banished from the political lexicon.

While Democrats took more than 30 seats from Republicans, mostly in suburban districts, all GOP members of the House Agriculture Committee won reelection except two: Reps. John Faso of New York and (assuming the current margin holds) Jeff Denham of California. The Virginia seat of retiring Rep. Bob Goodlatte, a former committee chairman, stayed in GOP hands.

In Minnesota, two rural districts that had been held by the Democrats went Republican while two suburban Twin Cities districts that had been Republican for years went Democratic.

But beyond those obvious facts, the picture gets messy.

There have been 19 Democrats on the House Agriculture Committee while the party has been in the minority. Most of them are from districts that are considered more urban than those represented by Republicans, and all Democratic incumbents running for reelection won. Two members who aren't returning were elected as governors—Reps. Michelle Lujan Grisham of New Mexico and Tim Walz of Minnesota. House Agriculture Committee ranking member Collin Peterson of Minnesota was reelected and is planning to become chairman again. He has already praised Rep-elect Angie Craig, one of the Minnesota suburban Democrats, for her knowledge of agriculture. In New Mexico, the geographically large seat in the southern part of the state that Republican Rep. Steve Pearce gave up to run for governor against Lujan Grisham went Democratic.

In Iowa, two partly rural districts went Democratic, leaving Rep. Steve King the only GOP House member in the state. At the same time, in Democratic Washington and Oregon, the blue wave failed to turn rural seats blue.

In the Senate, there is the same mixed picture. In North Dakota, Missouri, and Indiana, the Democrats lost seats, but they held on to those of Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Jon Tester of Montana.

For analysts who want to declare a difference between urban, suburban, and rural America, the problems begin with how to define “rural.” Should it be by people living outside standard metropolitan areas? Almost all congressional districts contain at least some statistically urban areas. Should it be by number of farmers? Should it be by

the value of agricultural production? California and New York are two of the most agriculturally productive states in the country, but no one thinks of them as rural even though Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, a New York Democrat who won reelection, sits on the Senate Agriculture Committee.

Kansas's image is quintessentially rural, but it is a much more complicated state. In its 3rd District, voters elected Sharice Davids, who will be the first Native American lesbian in Congress. Davids comes from the Kansas City suburbs. She won the seat from Rep. Kevin Yoder, a member of the House Appropriations Agriculture Subcommittee.

The problem with lumping all the rural states and districts together is that they aren't all the same and there is no real cultural theory to explain the rural areas of the United States outside the South. There are more rural districts in the South than any other part of the country because the rural population is larger there than anywhere else. But even though the rural areas of the Northeast, the Midwest, Plains, the Mountain states, and the Pacific states share some of the social conservatism of the South, their history and their demographic mixes are different.

Liberals from the big coastal states have taken to charging that the Senate and the Electoral College that give small-population states disproportionate power should be abolished. The political difficulty of achieving those goals aside, the advocates seem to forget that it was the Senate that saved Obamacare when the Republicans controlled the House, that senators have succeeded in forcing some of President Trump's more questionable nominees to withdraw, and that there are small-population liberal states.

Most people living in sparsely populated areas did stick with Trump-endorsed candidates in the election. But that doesn't mean they will view Trump and his policies positively in two years. There is strong evidence that the full impact of the retaliatory tariffs that other countries have imposed on U.S. farm products has not yet been felt because other countries purchased ahead. Trump and Congress are embarking on a program to counter opioid usage, but there is no evidence that this war on drugs will address the real problem: why people start using them.

Maybe by 2020, we can be clearer about the fact that not all “rural” Americans think—and vote—the same way. □



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