

OVERCOMING THE RURAL URBAN **DIVIDE**

A Guide to Understanding the Problem & Forging Solutions

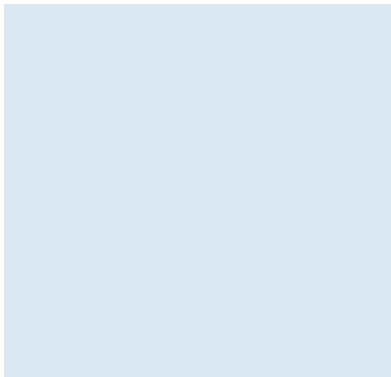


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This Guidebook recaps and, in some places, expands on material presented in RUBI’s Overcoming the Rural Urban Divide training. A recording of the training can be viewed [here](#), or you can request a live training for your group by contacting jacque@ruralurbandivide.org.

INTRODUCTION

By RUBI co-founder Anthony Flaccavento

Our nation's deep divides, along lines of race, class, and geography, seem intractable at times. **Prosperity and economic security remain out of reach for most Americans**, student debt overshadows the prospects for millions of young people, and enormous, long-standing problems, from climate change to homelessness, are getting worse. **This has pushed a large portion of the electorate to either drop out of the process or align themselves with Trump and the extreme Right.**

In the 2016 election, many rural people felt that Trump heard their grievances and understood them. How did a billionaire, elitist New Yorker persuade so many working people, especially in rural areas, that he is their champion? In part, because the Democrats and the liberal media establishment have demonstrated ignorance and indifference concerning the struggles of everyday folks, and how committed they are to a status quo that serves the corporate and financial elite.

Rural communities believe, with justification, that they've been dissed, marginalized and extracted from for decades. And that liberal pundits and political leaders either don't get that or don't care.

As someone who has lived and worked in rural Appalachia for forty years, who counts among his friends and colleagues numerous farmers, loggers, miners and small business owners, and who has twice run for Congress as a Democrat, **I have become convinced that overcoming the rural-urban divide is essential not only for rural America but for the future of our nation and world.** To that end, this Guidebook offers a framework for understanding and overcoming the divide, growing out of my own experience, broadened and enriched by the thinking and writing of many other observers whose works are referenced herein.

One more thing: This Guidebook does not spend much time analyzing Donald Trump and other right-wing forces that have contributed to extreme political polarization, economic malaise and the erosion of democratic institutions and norms. These are major factors in the divide, but they are already the focus of much discussion and action on the Left. **The focus here is on how and where we on the Left have failed, in word and in deed, and what we can do differently to overcome the divide and build a better world.**

1. BIPARTISAN ECONOMIC AND INDUSTRIAL POLICIES HAVE FAILED RURAL AND WORKING COMMUNITIES

The past forty years of federal economic policy has fostered growth without prosperity, concentrating nearly all of the increases in income and wealth among the top 20% of wage earners. The economy has grown nearly five times faster than the population, yet incomes for middle and working class people have stagnated or declined. At the same time, health care costs, college tuition, housing costs and economic insecurity have all skyrocketed.

While this is true across the nation, it is acutely so in rural and small town communities, where fossil fuel and manufacturing jobs have disappeared, independent retailers and small town banks have been swallowed up by big box stores, and mega-banks and farmers have struggled through low prices, unpredictable markets and increasingly challenging climate conditions.

Until recently, Democratic as well as Republican, administrations have supported bad trade deals, bank and Wall Street deregulation, and middling policies on health care, taxes, housing, and rural development. Over the same period of time, anti-trust laws were gutted and enforcement ignored, resulting in powerful corporate monopolies that crush small farmers and businesses and gouge local workers and consumers. Automation and offshoring of manufacturing jobs have gone unchecked. And, with a few notable exceptions, politicians from both parties have done little to stem the loss of wealth and opportunity in rural communities.

Both parties deserve their share of the frustration and grievance of rural and working class people. But while one at least spoke to their anger, the other insisted that such people were just “voting against their own interests.”

The Biden Administration has begun to take serious steps to reverse these trends, including major investments in rural economies and infrastructure, worker-friendly changes to labor laws and a dramatic strengthening of anti-trust law and enforcement. We applaud these long overdue measures. Unfortunately, it will take some time before these laudable steps bear fruit in terms of rural and working-class people’s perceptions of Democrats.

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

- Catherine Tumber, [“Land Without Bread: How the Green New Deal Forsakes America’s Countryside”](#)
- Elizabeth Henderson, [“Unfair Food-Pricing is Killing Family Farms and Regenerative Farming”](#)
- Clara Hendrickson, [“Why Democrats Don’t Have a Plan to Save ‘Left-Behind’ Places”](#)
- Nick Bowlin, [“Joke’s on them: how Democrats gave up on rural America”](#)
- Marc Edelman, [“How Capitalism Underdeveloped Rural America”](#)

FOR A DEEPER LOOK, CONSIDER THESE BOOKS:

- Matt Stoller, *Goliath: The 100-Year War Between Monopoly Power and Democracy*
- Farah Stockman, *American Made: What Happens to People When Work Disappears*
- Anne Case and Angus Deaton: *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*

2. RURAL RESENTMENT AND DISTRUST OF ELITES AND GOVERNMENT RUN DEEP

Across the nation, trust in the federal government has declined inexorably, from a high of 77% of people in 1964 to an all-time low of 17% in 2019. While this mistrust spans both cities and the countryside, a disproportionately large proportion of rural people distrust (or despise) the government and elites more broadly. To rural people, especially farmers, miners, loggers, drillers, factory workers and small business people, those elites are Democrats, academics, media, politicians, and government employees. They see these elites as out-of-touch with the concerns of everyday people, lacking in common sense, self-serving and intrusive.

An important component of the anti-government, anti-elite perspective is “regulatory aversion,” especially strong among farmers and others who work the land, as well as small business owners. Regulations and those who promote them are seen as either unnecessary, intrusive, or counterproductive. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild quotes a Louisiana man who perceives that regulators will punish him for spilling a gallon of oil but do nothing to the companies that spill hundreds of thousands of gallons. Is he wrong?

For the last decade-plus, Democrats and liberals have been trying to tell rural and working folks that Democrats have the best government policies, the ones that will most help those groups. At the same time, they frequently talk about our dynamic cities as the engines of progress, productivity and innovation. In *Listen, Liberal*, Thomas Frank makes the case that urban innovation hubs have become central to

the liberal imagination and to the culture and policies of the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, rural residents are chided for clinging to their guns and religion and told to move to the city and learn to code, leaving them to feel “left behind,” their communities disdained as stagnant backwaters.

This urban elite attitude overlooks a great body of innovation that is happening in many rural places and makes urban life and culture the standard, the benchmark, by which rural communities clearly don't measure up.

Little wonder then that anti-elitism runs high in rural America, affording phony populists like Trump ample opportunity to stoke anti-elite resentment.

Sometimes, but not always, anti-elite rhetoric has racist connotations. Political scientist Katherine Cramer explains:

[R]acism is a part of this resentment, but we are failing to fully understand these perspectives when we assume that racism is more fundamental than calculations of injustice. The two elements are intertwined. The way these folks described the world to me, their basic concern was that people like them, in places like theirs, were overlooked and disrespected. They were doing what they perceived good Americans ought to do to have the good life. And the good life seemed to be passing them by.

What to urban, professional-class liberals seem like principled, equitable positions on issues like immigration, can seem out-of-touch to people who, rightly or wrongly, believe they are negatively impacted. Whether it's residents of a border town ill-equipped to care for a sudden influx of immigrants or blue collar workers worried that immigrants will work for lower pay, most concerns about liberal immigration policies tend to be shouted down as “racist” or “nativist.” It can be hard for liberals, many of whom enjoy the benefits of vibrant multicultural cities and immigrant nannies and housecleaners, to understand that immigration concerns can have a legitimate, non-racist basis.

Research by the Russell Sage Foundation has shown that feelings of racial threat are higher in communities with high unemployment. Likewise, political scientist Steven V. Miller has found that, around the world, support for authoritarian leaders like Trump and Putin rises when citizens are experiencing high unemployment, inflation and economic inequality. Reversing economic decline in rural America would do more to combat racism than name-calling.

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

- Katherine Cramer, “For Years, I’ve Been Watching Anti-elite Fury Build in Wisconsin. Then Came Trump”
- Joan Williams, “Democratic Elites Don’t Understand the Class Culture Gap”
- Steven V. Miller, “Here’s what Trump and Putin have in common, and why so many people approve”
- Russell Sage Foundation, “The Racial and Economic Context of Trump Support”
- Anthony Flaccavento, “Regulatory Aversion”

FOR A DEEPER LOOK, CONSIDER THESE BOOKS:

- Katherine Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*
- Thomas Frank, *Listen, Liberal*

3. “STRANGERS IN THEIR OWN LAND”: GROUP IDENTITY AND ALIENATION FROM MAINSTREAM CULTURE

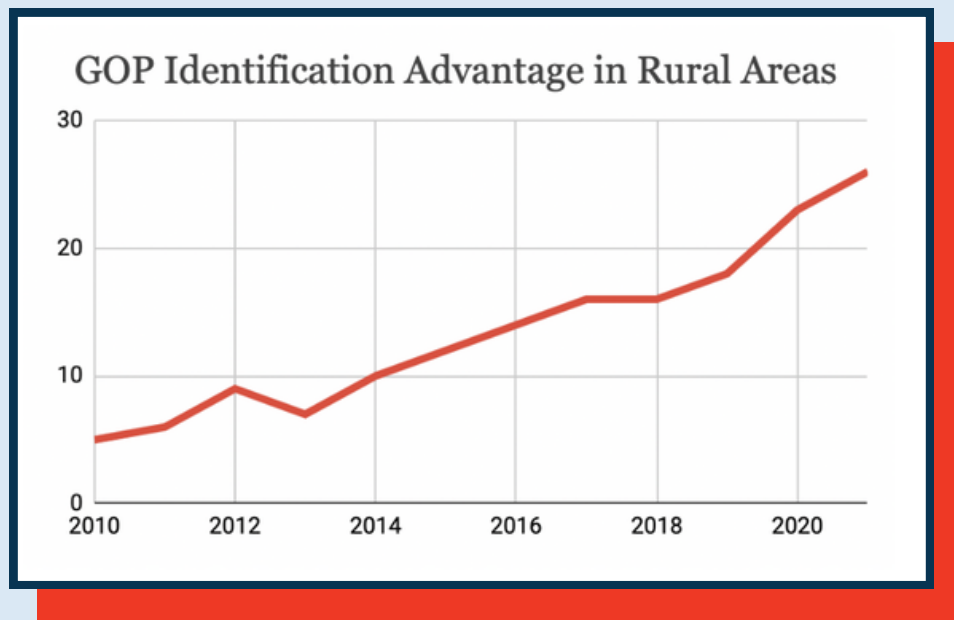
The concentration of college-educated, culturally liberal people in cities, and the resulting “liberal bubbles” in which rural and working folks are utterly foreign, is brilliantly described by Sarah Smarsh in her book, *Heartland*, and in the article, “Country Pride.” Elite liberal media, Smarsh also writes, have consistently been out of touch with rural people and their concerns, alternating between ignoring this swath of the country and badly generalizing and misrepresenting it as an irredeemable racist backwater populated by “deplorables.”

Arlie Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land* describes this deep sense of alienation among white people in rural Louisiana. Their alienation is rooted, in part, in racial resentment toward groups whose prospects are improving, while they themselves are losing their hold on middle class security. Taught since plantation days to ally themselves with the planter class, many poor whites look at non-whites and see a threat from below rather than exploitation from above. And as sociologist William Julius Wilson observes, this perception of threat is heightened when Democrats fail to include low-income whites in their rainbow coalition.

In addition to racism, Hochschild attributes resentment and alienation to a culture of stoicism, honor and shame that predominates in many rural communities. There’s a high value on self-reliance, shame around neediness, and concern that government undermines self-reliance when it hands out welfare benefits to those who don’t need or deserve assistance.

Stephanie Muravchik and Jon Shields shed further light on the “strangers in their own land” phenomenon in their depthful study of lifelong blue collar Democrats who voted for Trump. Muravchik and Shields discovered that pride of place and loyalty to one’s own community were such powerful forces that residents grumbled about “outsiders” when a superintendent from the county next door was hired.

And last, but not least, Hochschild, Muravchik and Shields cite the resentment rural and working people feel when liberal media and politicians look down at them as backwards, stupid, and racist. We’ll say more about this in the next section.



Data in above chart is from [NBC News](#)

Though the drivers of alienation vary, **alienated Americans gravitate toward Trump’s promise to “make America great again.”** Whether it’s putting liberal elites in their place, preserving the racial hierarchy, honoring hard work and self-reliance, or keeping “outsiders” out so as to preserve jobs and a local way of life that is fading away, Trump looked to many like the man who would set things right again.

It's worth noting that the post-2016 understanding among liberals--that Trump voters were driven primarily by racial resentment--has been strongly challenged by more recent research by political scientists Justin Grimmer, William Marble, and Cole Tanigawa-Lau. While Trump’s overt racism was undoubtedly appealing to some white voters, their data shows that white Trump voters had lower levels of racial animus and xenophobia than did whites who voted for Romney and other modern Republican candidates.

It's also important to be mindful of the ways in which liberals can inadvertently inflame racial resentment, by demanding that white working people "check their privilege" or by accentuating differences among racial and ethnic groups rather than emphasizing commonalities as Americans (see Karen Stenner's book).

People vote more on the basis of identity than policy, according to political scientist Lilliana Mason:

It's who I think I am, my place in the world, my religion, my race, the many parts of my identity are all wrapped up in that one vote...When you go to cast a ballot, whatever part of your identity is under the most threat is going to influence your choice the most.

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

- Arlie Hochschild, "[I Spent Five Years with Some of Trump's Biggest Fans: Here's What They Won't Tell You](#)"
- William Julius Wilson, "[Democrats and the white working class](#)"
- Sarah Smarsh, "[Country Pride: What I Learned Growing Up in Rural America](#)"
- Justin Grimmer, William Marble, and Cole Tanigawa-Lau, "[Measuring the Contribution of Voting Blocks to Election Outcomes](#)"
- Anthony Flaccavento, "[Is it Culture or Economics? Why Rural Communities Have Moved to the Right?](#)"

FOR A DEEPER LOOK, CONSIDER THESE BOOKS:

- Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*
- Sarah Smarsh, *Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth*
- Stephanie Muravchik and Jon A. Shields, *Trump's Democrats*
- Karen Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*

4. LIBERAL CONTEMPT TOWARD RURAL AND WORKING PEOPLE

Majorities of Republicans and Democrats view the other party “very unfavorably,” at triple the rate they did in the 1990s. Partisan and geographic polarization has turned politics into a blood sport and turned many Americans off politics altogether. Those still willing to engage tend to be at the extremes, where nasty, divisive rhetoric is the norm.

In *Beyond Contempt*, Erica Etelson documents the ways in which liberals and progressives fuel the partisan cycle of attack and counterattack. Liberal elites, including media, politicians, and entertainers, frequently exhibit condescension and scorn toward conservatives, moderates, and Trump supporters. They presume Republicans to be Fox News-brainwashed bigots, conspiracists and fools.

The insults come on extra fast and strong when the target is rural or working-class. Age-old stereotypes of “hillbillies,” “rednecks,” and “trailer trash” are deployed to render worthless the people and places on the losing end of a high-tech, global economy that rewards urban hypermobility, professional credentials, book smarts, and other arbitrary features a small minority of Americans possess.



The sting of contempt, Etelson shows, makes people feel defensive, angry and completely unamenable to considering the point of view of the person doing the denigrating. As such, it plays right into the right-wing strategy of distraction, promising to retaliate against sneering liberals in lieu of addressing substantive issues.

Trump instantly turned Hilary Clinton's "basket of deplorables" gaffe, which painted tens of millions of Americans as irredeemably bad people, into a highly effective campaign ad. The insult cost her Pennsylvania, according to campaign consultant, Diane Hessian.

Nonetheless, since 2016, many liberals have doubled down on ridicule and scorn, while more well-meaning liberals condescendingly ask, "Why do these people vote against their own interests?" The better question is, "What are rural voters' interests?"

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

- Arlie Hochschild, ["Think Republicans are Disconnected from Reality? It's Even Worse Among Liberals"](#)
- Ivy Brashear, ["The Lies We're Told About Appalachia"](#)
- Erica Etelson and Anthony Flaccavento, ["Bette Middler's Contempt Fuels Right-Wing Populism"](#)
- Diane Hessian, ["Understanding the undecided voters"](#)

FOR A DEEPER LOOK, CONSIDER THESE BOOKS:

- Erica Etelson, *Beyond Contempt: How Liberals Can Communicate Across the Great Divide*
- Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*

5. WORKING CLASS DEMOCRATIC “DEALIGNMENT”

White non-college voters comprise 44% of the electorate. Non-white, non-college voters are 18%, for a grand total of 62%. Yet, over the past forty years, there has been a fundamental shift in the Democratic Party, away from the concerns of working people and toward a preoccupation with the professional class. This is reflected in multiple ways, including the choice of cabinet officials and top advisors, the focus on meritocracy and higher education (with trade school an afterthought) as the answer to poverty, the embrace of disastrous “free trade” deals, and the highbrow language and cultural affectations of liberals and Democrats.

This shift has also led the Party away from bold, radical solutions to a reliance on incremental changes, such as Dodd Frank Wall Street Reform Act and the Affordable Health Care Act. In lieu of concrete actions to improve the material well-being of working Americans, Democratic and liberal thought leaders are preoccupied with culture war issues, often of a symbolic or linguistic nature, that are not on the radar screen of most people. Likewise, they monotonously inveigh against the “MAGA fascist threat,” breathlessly hyping every chapter of the Donald Trump saga, oblivious to the fact that **most Americans have little interest in palace intrigue and are far more worried about paying their bills and feeling safe and healthy.**

Another symptom of elite capture of the Democratic Party is the tendency to advocate for equity using language that appeals only to progressive activists and academics who constitute a tiny percentage of the electorate. To put that in more

blunt terms, most “normies” (people who aren’t political junkies and didn’t graduate from one of the top fifty or so most exclusive colleges or universities) find social justice activist rhetoric baffling or counterintuitive at best, if not annoying and ridiculous.

There have been several positive developments for working people under the Biden administration, including an historic pro-union NLRB decision, a crackdown on corporate mergers and significant investments in rural infrastructure and economies. But Democrats have a fairly deep hole to dig out of, especially in factory towns that suffered steep declines in the wake of NAFTA, and in agricultural communities dominated by giant absentee corporations, like Tyson, that Democrats failed to rein in.

The Democratic Party has been losing working class voters of all races at a steady clip for decades and, as of September, 2023, Biden continues this trend. Increasingly, they are either voting Republican or not voting at all, with the most dramatic defections occurring in decimated factory towns in states formerly considered part of the “blue wall” but now very much up for grabs.

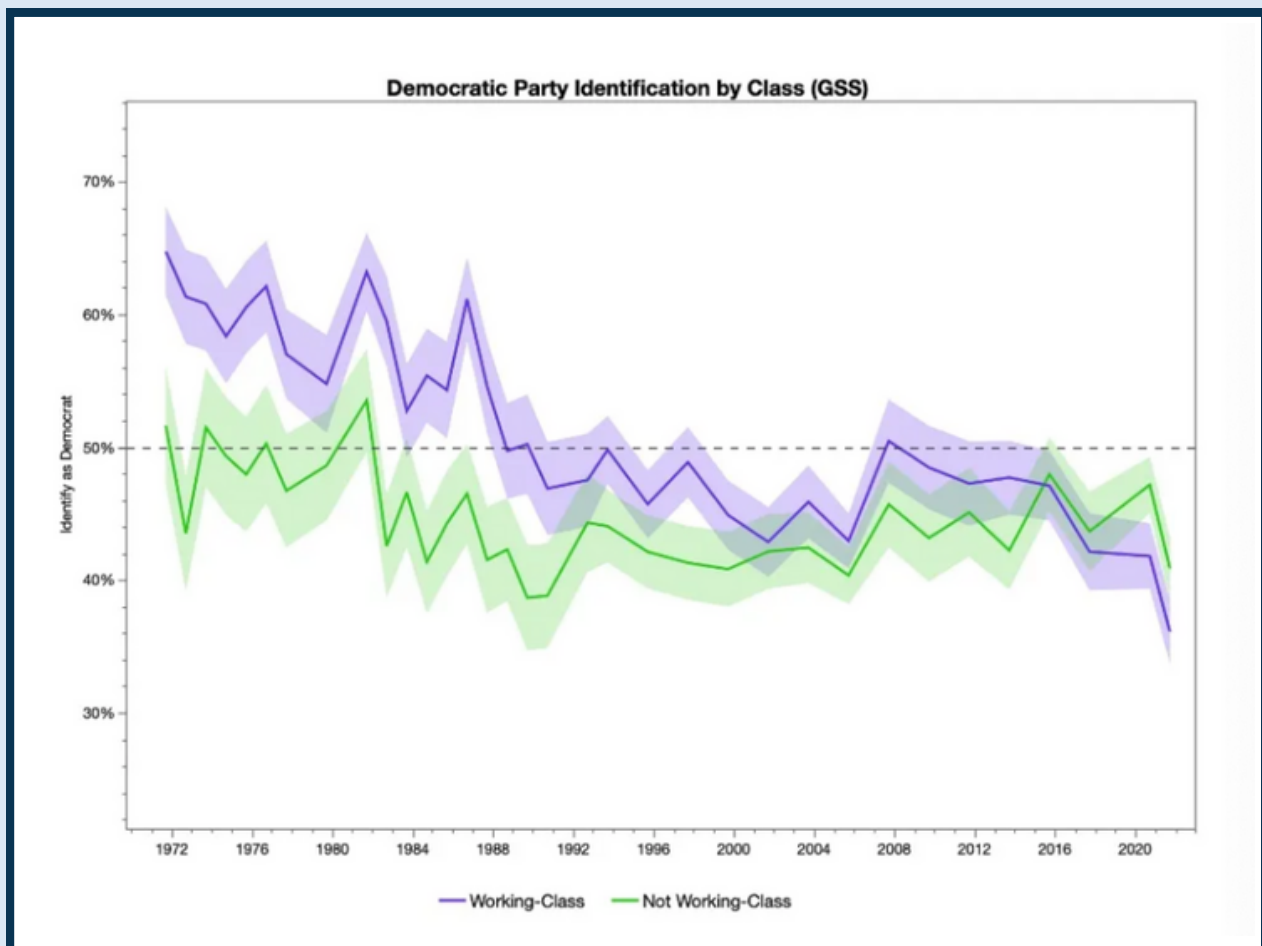


Image Credit: “Can Democrats Win Back the Working Class?”

If Democrats want to regain ground with rural and working class Americans, they will have to think differently, talk differently, and act differently, as we outline below.

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

- Matt Stoller, "[Democrats Can't Win Until They Recognize How Bad Obama's Financial Policies Were](#)"
- Matt Stoller, "[How Democrats Killed Their Populist Soul](#)"
- Julian Jacobs, "[Democrats Are Ditching Class, and It's Costing Them Working-Class Voters](#)"
- American Family Voices and 21st Century Democrats, "[Factory Towns](#)"
- Stephanie Paige Ogburn, "[Obama sides with big business over small cattlemen](#)"
- Stanley Greenberg, "[Democrats, Speak to Working-Class Discontent](#)"

FOR A DEEPER LOOK, CONSIDER THESE BOOKS:

- Thomas Frank, *Listen, Liberal or Whatever Happened to the Party of the People?*
- Joan Williams, *White Working Class*
- Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*
- Daniel M. Shea and Nicholas Jacobs, *The Rural Voter*

6. A WAY FORWARD: THINK DIFFERENT. TALK DIFFERENT. ACT DIFFERENT.

What would it take to shift the debate in and about rural America, to overcome the rural-urban, red-blue divide that underlies so many of our problems? We need to do at least three things: Reorder our priorities (and the policies that reflect them); improve our communications and messaging; and initiate effective, tangible action from the bottom up. In short, we need to think differently, talk differently, and act differently.

The starting point for this change is the recognition that rural America is not a hopeless backwater, as so many commentators suggest. There is, in fact, an extraordinary ferment of bottom-up experiments in economics, culture and media, community development and civic engagement. The many positive aspects of rural living, such as immersion in nature, the 4-H Club for youth, and seasonal festivals and fairs, are a source of pride that should be respected, not overlooked or scorned.

One example of emerging bottom-up economies comes from West Virginia, where Coalfield Development Corporation (CDC) is enabling laid-off coal miners and other dislocated workers to secure living wage jobs in solar energy, mined land restoration, deconstruction and other businesses. The education and on-the-job training system CDC has developed have been so successful that state and federal agencies have begun partnering with them.

In rural North Carolina, where cheap imports forced most textile factories to shutter their doors in the 1980s, a worker-owned cooperative called Opportunity Threads helped launch a revitalization of an industry most people believed was gone for good. Since the cooperative's formation in 2008, the whole textile industry has begun to rebound, with better pay and conditions than before, as part of a regional economic cluster called Industrial Commons.

Most folks know nothing about these rural success stories, nor about how neoliberal trade and economic policies have undermined these local efforts.

If liberals and progressives begin to see the positive change emerging in rural communities, the window for self-reflection and a new understanding of the rural-urban divide is more likely to open.

When it comes to talking differently, there are several key communication best practices. In *Beyond Contempt*, Etelson provides a roadmap to non-defensive communication principles that can help liberals get their point across without being condescending, judgmental or

argumentative. Etelson also urges educated liberals and progressives to purge academic and activist jargon from their vocabulary, to stay out of the policy weeds and, as Anthony Flaccavento likes to say, "talk like a neighbor, not a politician or professor."

Additional communication guidance is being continuously created, field-tested and refined by the Winning Jobs Narrative and the Center for Working-Class Politics. Both of these progressive populist outfits focus on how to effectively message to rural working-class voters on the issues they care about most.

Another essential communication element is the integration of race and class in order to counter the racist dog whistles voters have been hearing for decades. Ian Haney Lopez's work provides an excellent starting point for this, and the group We Make the Future continually iterates new "race-class narrative" applications.

Last but not least...act different! RUBI's Rural New Deal, developed in collaboration with Progressive Democrats of America, could become a winning platform for any rural Democratic candidate or activist group. The Rural New Deal, along with other bottom-up policy platforms from the Just Transition Fund, Rural Organizing and the Rural Democracy Initiative, demonstrates that there are many innovative, practical strategies for building thriving rural communities. What is lacking is broad public demand that they be implemented."

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

- Rural Urban Bridge Initiative and Progressive Democrats of America, [“Rural New Deal”](#)
- Claire Kelloway, [“How to Close the Democrats’ Rural Gap”](#)
- Jane Kleeb, [“Organizing on the Coasts Won’t Save the Planet”](#)
- George Goehl, [“If Progressives Don’t Try to Win Over Rural Areas, Guess Who Will?”](#)
- Antonia Noori Farzan, [“When a Deep-Red Town’s Only Grocery Closed, City Hall Opened its Own Store. Just don’t Call it ‘Socialism’”](#)
- Erica Etelson, [“The Seven Deadly Sins of Politispeak”](#)
- Anthony Flaccavento, [“Krugman’s Rural Despair Misses the Mark”](#)

FOR A DEEPER LOOK, CONSIDER THESE BOOKS:

- Anthony Flaccavento, *Building a Healthy Economy from the Bottom Up: Harnessing Real World Experience for Transformative Change*
- Erica Etelson, *Beyond Contempt: How Liberals Can Communicate Across the Great Divide*
- Ian Haney Lopez, *Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America*
- The Center for Working-Class Politics, [“Common Sense Solidarity”](#)
- The Center for Working-Class Politics, [Trump’s Kryptonite: How Progressives Can Win Back the Working Class](#)
- [Winning Jobs Narrative](#)



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RuralUrbanBridge.org