

RURAL AMERICA SOLUTIONS GROUP



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Homage to the Heartland: Obama and the GOP Reach out to Middle America

Gary Andres, Weekly Standard

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Some political commentators label Barack Obama as America's first "urban president." As Quinnipiac University's Peter Brown explained in the *Wall Street Journal* last November, "Let's be clear: Urban is not meant as a euphemism for black or liberal, although the president-elect is both. Mr. Obama is a city guy--not a suburban or rural person "

City guy indeed. But recent evidence suggests the president's urban image could produce some rural fallout--a reality not lost on the White House, which announced last week it would dispatch Vice President Biden and other cabinet members on a "rural" listening tour this summer.

The newfound interest in rural America is a reaction to some recent criticism. Earlier this year the White House took a political hit from a normally friendly media outlet--National Public Radio (NPR)--for failing to follow through on a campaign pledge to convene a bipartisan rural summit. "The Obama administration has yet to schedule a summit on rural issues, which candidate Obama promised to hold during his first 100 days in office," NPR's Howard Berkes wrote in March. "The White House appears to be modifying a campaign promise that arguably helped propel Barack Obama into the White House."

Republicans were not impressed with last week's announcement. The National Republican Congressional Committee's Ken Spain called it a "politically motivated stunt." And some GOP lawmakers believe the White House's policies create political opportunities for the GOP among rural voters.

Obama moves to the beat of large cities. Metropolitan mayors, union leaders and community organizers now bask in the hospitality of phone calls returned by an exceedingly attentive senior White House staff that even created a new Office of Urban Affairs.

But Obama's agenda seems increasingly out of step with rural America. "You get the sense

that this White House believes it's morally wrong to drive 20 miles to work. Well you know what, you don't really have an option if you live in Nebraska," a Republican political strategist said. "The Blue Line on the Metro doesn't go there."

Some Democrats in Congress concur. Rep. Dennis Cardoza (D-CA) recently told *Politico* that the White House has a "large city" worldview. "They don't get rural America," he said. Forty-four Democratic House members--many from rural areas--expressed this sentiment recently, bucking the White House by voting against the energy/climate change bill because they believed it imposed too heavy a burden on their constituents.

This rural disconnect could generate broader political problems for Democrats, who had been making steady progress attracting electoral support in these parts of America. It also creates some opportunities for Republicans trying to rebuild confidence in the heartland. Rural America is a land of myths. It's not all farmers (only 6.5 percent of the labor force in non-metropolitan areas are farmers, according to a 2006 report by the Carsey Institute); and it's not shrinking (since 2001 rural areas and small towns have actually grown in population, based on the same report). And, contrary to conventional wisdom, GOP strength in these areas has weakened. Rural America is increasingly politically competitive. George W. Bush received 59 percent of the rural vote in 2000. But in 2004 he slipped to 57 percent. In 2008, John McCain garnered only 53 percent from these regions, according to exit polling.

Republicans are trying to stop this drift. House Republican Leader John Boehner (OH) recently asked three senior GOP members--Reps. Sam Graves (MO), Doc Hastings (WA) and Frank Lucas (OK)--to lead the Rural America Solutions Group. These lawmakers are emphasizing the negative impact of Obama's policies on rural areas.

In recent days, they highlighted the impact of the White House-supported climate change bill, calling it an "energy tax" that would hit hardest in rural areas--a portion of the country where driving a truck is sometimes included in the job description. After all, it's hard to haul pork bellies in a Prius.

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Rural America represents over 20 percent of the electorate. It also includes many of the 49 congressional districts currently represented by Democrats that also voted for John McCain in November. But some believe it's also a forgotten constituency--particularly to a president so closely identified with the needs and interests of big cities. If the Rural America Solutions Group is successful, it might help send more Republicans to Congress after the 2010 election--and with them, a clear message: Even urban presidents need to pay homage to the heartland.

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