

RED STATES NEED BLUE REPRESENTATION IN CONGRESS

by Roger Myerson and Kael Weston, January 2025

When the Democratic National Committee (DNC) meets to elect new leadership on February 1, representatives of all 50 states will be included. But after the DNC members go home, the Democrats' national agenda will be largely shaped by their caucuses in Congress, which include Democratic representatives from only 38 states. Twelve states have sent no Democrats to Congress, while another 8 states have sent no Republicans, and this single-party disparity across the U.S. has not been as high in over seventy years. Candidates for DNC chair like to talk about developing a 50-state strategy for their Party, but such plans are unlikely to succeed when voters in 12 states perceive that Democrats in the Capitol are not listening to them.

If leaders of the Democratic Party are serious about reaching out to Americans everywhere, an essential first step would be to ensure that every state has some voice in the Congressional Democratic caucuses. We have a proposal that would achieve that goal. For any state that has no elected Democratic representatives, the state Democratic Party would designate a recent congressional candidate to serve as a liaison with the House Democrats. The House Democratic Caucus includes nonvoting members from DC and the Virgin Islands, so why can't it add a few more to represent people in states like Iowa and Utah, where over a million Americans voted for Democratic congressional candidates last year?

Introducing such liaisons could help the Democrats to break a vicious cycle of contraction. For too long, regions that elect few Democratic representatives find that their local concerns get little attention from Democratic leaders in Washington, causing them to turn even more strongly toward the other party. In the coming years, America will need two healthy parties that can compete to serve the interests of people in every state, but voters cannot be expected to trust a party that has no effective mechanism for communicating their local concerns to its national leaders.

There are real opportunities today to widen Democrats' appeal in traditionally Republican strongholds. For example, the Utah Supreme Court recently unanimously declared the Republican-dominated legislature's extreme gerrymander of the state's congressional districts to be unconstitutional, possibly opening the door to more competitive races. Approximately one out of three Utah voters regularly vote for Democratic congressional candidates. These Democratic candidates, who are not intimidated by the odds of running in GOP-heavy gerrymandered districts, are well positioned to persuade swing voters and disaffected Republicans on issues where Democratic positions are broadly popular, like rural health care, local infrastructure investments, social security and Medicare, abortion access, farm aid, water conservation and clean air. Utah was the fastest-growing state between 2010 and 2020, and it exemplifies the opportunities for Democrats to gain traction as the Mountain West continues to be a magnet for transplants.

While farmer-turned-politician Jon Tester, a former Democratic US senator, lost his Montana seat last November, he was right to emphasize the importance of Democrats showing up and speaking up in all the unexpected places. Persevering Democratic candidates who run but lose in red America arguably have the most extensive election-year lessons to share with Democrats nationally, as they have faced Trumpism head-on. These politicians have learned how to pivot away from accusations of "you're going to take our guns away" and "you're all baby killers" to

messages of longstanding Democratic Party values and policy priorities that have helped people in small-town America. Congressional Democrats need to hear the lessons from these campaigns.

Working class voters used to be a key part of the national base for Democrats. To win them back, national Democratic leaders should help red-state Democrats keep at it, delivering the fundamental message that the Democratic Party is working for voters everywhere. But this message is harder for people in red states to believe when they know that Congressional Democratic leaders are not listening substantively or regularly to anybody in their state.

A strong Democratic bench of red-state congressional candidates needs to be ready by the 2026 midterms. Local talent will be more willing to step forward, and local voters will take them more seriously, if Democrats in Congress commit themselves now to keep listening to local Democrats even if Republicans win their state.

It is widely accepted that, for Democrats nationwide to appeal to more voters and win more elections, the Democratic Party must start looking at America's electoral map differently. Better integrating the 12 states that currently lack Democratic Congressional representation will be critical. The introduction of Democratic Congressional liaisons from these red states is a necessary first step in reckoning with Donald Trump's reelection and rebuilding the national Democratic brand.

This argument is not entirely new but has not gained as much support as it deserves if Democrats are to more successively engage voters in Trump Country. In addition to Montana's Jon Tester, former North Dakota Senator Heidi Heitkamp has spoken about the importance of the rural vote. JD Scholten, a Democratic state senator in Iowa and former candidate for Congress, has likewise been a strong proponent of the need for Democrats to "up our game in rural America." And in the last presidential election, Bill Clinton hit the campaign trail in rural parts of the South to attract more votes. President Trump himself recently said that he believed Bill Clinton was "a very good politician" by focusing on voters in Michigan and Wisconsin in the 2016 presidential election and had "a great political sense."

Directly taking on today's Electoral College math that currently favors Trump states can only begin when frontline Democrats in these red regions are able to help shape the Democratic Party's strategy and messaging in fundamental and enduring ways.

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