



A Difference That Makes A Difference

Continuing Rural Clout Demonstrates Value of Sticking Together

The number of legislative districts in rural America has been in decline for decades, even in farm states. By 2012, fully half the nation's population lived in the 39 largest metropolitan areas. That has made the job of legislators who represent rural areas a lot harder, but not impossible.

Instead, rural caucuses in many states have become masters of coalition politics, still able to punch well above their weight in numerous states. They provide a good illustration of how a well-organized minority that sticks together internally and finds common cause with others can still get its way a good amount of the time.

Consider Nevada. As is the case in many western states, the bulk of the population is concentrated in the major urban areas. Fully 2 million of the state's 2.7 million people live in Clark County, which includes Las Vegas. "Southern Nevada has had a majority of the legislators and now has a supermajority," said Jon Ralston, a prominent commentator on Nevada politics. "If the delegation [could] stick together, they could get anything they want."

That seldom seems to happen, though. If you looked at how state resources are allocated strictly in terms of where people live, Clark County is consistently shortchanged. For example, Nevada's antique school-funding formula awards lots of extra money to

counties basically for being sparsely populated and remote. Clark County gets a little more than \$5,000 per pupil from the state, while Esmeralda County—home to fewer than a thousand people—gets more than \$17,000. That's an extreme case, but consider that the commission designed to study equity in school funding is also disproportionately made up of people from the more rural north. Things like that happen time and again in Nevada.

How? Rural delegations tend to stick together and take advantage of splits that are common within metropolitan areas. "The problem is the suburbs, which are often the biggest bloc, are fragmented and have not learned how to use their clout," said Lawrence Levy, dean of the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University in New York.

Generally, rural legislators are Republican, which means at times they are able to form partisan alliances that can run stronger these days than sectional ones. All kinds of horse-trading can happen when it's time to divvy up capital construction dollars, for example, and suburban areas are split. "Most of the Democratic legislators are clustered in the cities," said former Ohio GOP governor Bob Taft. "If you're trying to get Republican