

Democrats remain behind the eight ball

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MADISON - Do a Google search for the words “Republican presidential debates” and “circus” and you get close to 2 million results. Search for “Republican presidential campaign” and “train wreck” and you get 4 million.

Off the national stage, Republican officials in places like Wisconsin are showing [clear signs](#) of worry bordering on panic when it comes to their standing with the public. With good reason.

Public approval of the GOP has

[reached its lowest point in decades](#)

. Support for the party has

[dropped sharply even among self-described Republican voters](#)

So far, the Democrats seem content to be the slightly less objectionable alternative. Their strategy largely consists of handing the Republicans plenty of rope and hoping they hang themselves.

There are a lot of reasons why that is a [questionable](#) strategy. There is one reason in particular why it is actually a recipe for Republicans winning in spite of themselves. Democrats have lost their mojo in rural areas. They used to know how to appeal to rural voters but evidently [have forgotten](#) .

The Democrats have a primarily urban support base that has been whittled down in Wisconsin to not much more than Madison and Milwaukee. The Republicans have a suburban support base. Neither party's base gets them to 50% in elections, so neither base alone can produce a governing majority. Democrats used to have an urban-rural coalition that produced governing majorities for them, but that alliance has fractured and in its place the Republicans have formed a suburban-rural, rich-poor alliance that has won them control of most statehouses across the country including Wisconsin's.

[Book](#) after [book](#) has been written about how the Republicans manufactured this realignment. But it wasn't just the Republicans' doing. It had every bit as much to do with what Democrats have made themselves into over the last several decades.

When the Democrats were at the zenith of their power, they were unapologetic economic populists, starting with FDR's [New Deal](#) for the Depression-ravaged masses in the 1930s and continuing right through the 1960s with LBJ's [War on](#)

[Poverty](#)

and

[Great Society](#)

programs. Shortly thereafter, it started to become fashionable for Democrats to describe themselves as socially liberal but economically and fiscally conservative. In practical terms, that meant being for such things as abortion rights, gay rights, gun control and legalization of marijuana while becoming increasingly friendly to Wall Street and royals of global industry. The party has been in decline ever since.

One important reason for the steady erosion of the Democrats' fortunes is that being socially liberal but economically elitist is exactly the opposite of what most rural people are. They are more socially conservative than your average Democrat, but are feeling vulnerable and exploited and taken advantage of economically.

It is definitely conceivable the Democrats could remain socially progressive and win over enough rural voters to win back statehouses and gain firm control over Congress, but only if they combine lifestyle liberalism with very assertive economic populism. It is not remotely possible to be socially liberal and economically elitist — as they are now — and make any meaningful political inroads in rural areas. Not even if Republicans keep shooting themselves in the foot.

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