

MADISON - There was an insightful and thought provoking story in the *New York Times* the other day by journalist Alec MacGillis about why the poorest parts of the country are inclined to support the politicians who are most hostile to any form of government assistance to the poor.

Democrats may not want to hear it, but MacGillis is speaking directly to them when he says: "The temptation for coastal liberals is to shake their heads over those godforsaken white-working-class provincials who are voting against their own interests. But this reaction misses the complexity of the political dynamic that's taken hold in these parts of the country. It misdiagnoses the Democratic Party's growing conundrum with working-class white voters. And it also keeps us from fully grasping what's going on in communities where conditions have deteriorated to the point where researchers have detected alarming trends in their mortality rates."

Democrats used to appeal to rural voters but don't anymore , and this fact makes it next to impossible
for them to construct coalitions broad enough to produce governing majorities.

If the Democrats are to avoid going the way of the dinosaur, they have to solve the rural riddle. There are countless clues to be found and just as many potential solutions to be tried. Here are five to start with:

1. **Restore home rule**. Republicans used to be for local control, now they are controlling the locals. If local communities want to put rules in place to protect their air and water and landscape from sand mining or put limits on high-capacity wells or manure spreading by large-scale animal feedlots, let 'em. Give 'em back control over their schools, their local zoning, their taxation. Let 'em manage their affairs.

2. **Keep rural schools open**. A local school is a rural community's bedrock, even to a greater degree than in urban or suburban areas. The rural school is a hub of community activity. Everyone goes to the school play or the high school football game. School district consolidation and school closings have hit many rural communities with the force of a bomb. Anyone who cares about the vitality of rural communities knows that extreme measures need to be taken to keep rural districts viable and their community schools operating.

3. **Rethink bypass-happy highway planning**. Most every major highway project done any time in recent or distant memory that reaches out into rural areas has featured bypasses of small towns. Think about the impact this has on those communities. Their family-owned cafes and coffee shops and restaurants close. Their main streets die. Shaving a few minutes off your or my travel time can be a death sentence for a small town. Rural communities don't need multi-lane monstrosities with clover leafs and traffic circles. They need high-quality, well maintained paved roads. Most city folk have no idea how many country roads are still unpaved to this day and how many of the paved ones are rutted and chock full of potholes.

4. **Universal access to high-speed Internet and mobile phone service**. Look at a map showing which parts of the U.S. have access to broadband. The urban centers do and the rural areas don't. The telecommunications industry and its apologists in public office often are heard saying that programs are in place to address this disparity. But the fact remains that in 2015 over half of all rural Americans lack access to high-speed Internet. Most can't get reliable cell phone signals either. How can you start a business and compete in today's economy without access to these services? High-speed Internet and mobile voice are to the 21st Century what telephones were in the 20th, namely essential communications technologies. Essential technologies that remain out of the reach of most rural people.

5. **Stop means testing**. Making everyone pay for government programs when only a few end up being eligible to receive the benefits may not be the cause of the growing division and political polarization in American society, but it surely has contributed to the problem and continues to aggravate it. The point MacGillis makes in his article about how many rural voters oppose programs to help what they regard as the "undeserving" poor is an incredibly important point for Democrats to ponder. For decades now the Democrats have ignored the political law of universality: That the most widely supported and successful government programs are ones where everyone pays and everyone benefits. When the Democrats won the hearts of a majority of people in the past, it was because the party had a big hand in creating things that tangibly benefited everyone or at least directly touched every American family. Things like Social Security and Medicare, rural electrification, the GI Bill and the interstate highway system. Today's Democrats seem to want to means test everything and target assistance to particular constituencies, which makes their programs highly vulnerable to the divide-and-conquer tactics of the Republicans.

Doing these five things would be enormously helpful to rural areas. But today's GOP won't do

any of them. They won't do the first four because today's breed of Republican is philosophically at odds with the measures required to accomplish those aims. In fact, they are moving in the exact opposite direction. And they won't do the fifth because it is politically advantageous for them to be able to pit the poor against the nearly-poor.

If these five steps are to be taken, it'll be the Democrats taking them. If enough of them wake up to the need . . . and the opportunity.