



REPORT | JUNE 20, 2023

INVESTING IN RURAL AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

This report lays out the current state of fundraising and spending by Democratic and Democratic-leaning organizations in rural areas. Using a combination of publicly available financial disclosure data and lists of organizations compiled by the authors, this analysis suggests:

- Democrats are spending just one dollar in rural counties per Republicans' fourteen dollars.
- While about [30 percent of Americans](#) and [20 percent of registered voters](#) live in rural areas, barely 3 percent of Democratic-affiliated expenditures occur in rural geographies.
- While many rural organizations effectively raised and spent in recent election cycles, their overall spending is low, and Democrats' investment in rural areas remains small compared to their investment in mixed and metro areas
- Spending in rural areas is driven by organizations with a national portfolio, rather than organizations with a local, state, or regional specialization
- Many organizations with specialized knowledge and expertise concerning rural advocacy are not running independent expenditures
- In mixed and rural geographies, organizations that make bipartisan independent expenditures spend more than organizations that focus on Democratic candidates and causes

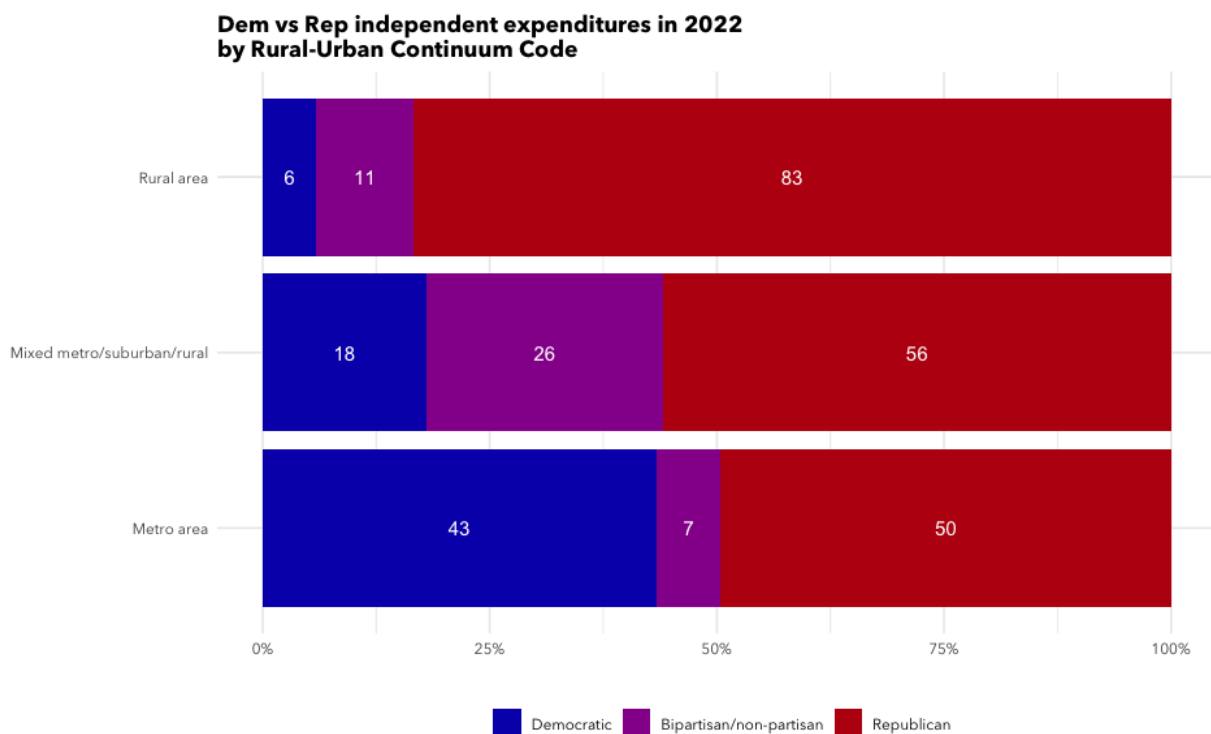
Together, this analysis suggests Democratic organizations are systematically underinvesting in rural areas. Because of the scale of this underinvestment, additional resource allocation to rural organizing efforts are likely to be highly efficient, and are necessary to continue Democrats' gradual gains in these areas.

INDEPENDENT EXPENDITURES IN THE 2021-2022 POLITICAL CYCLE

In most election cycles, Republican-affiliated and Republican-leaning organizations [make more independent expenditures](#) than do Democratic organizations. On average, the

lopsided spending for Republicans is large but not overwhelming, averaging about three dollars of Republican spending for every two dollars of Democratic spending.

The following chart shows this Republican spending advantage is driven by independent expenditures made in rural areas. Using data from OpenSecrets' independent expenditures tracker, the following chart breaks down the share of independent expenditures made by organizations OpenSecrets classifies as "Conservative" or "Republican-affiliated," those it classifies as "Liberal" or "Democratic-affiliated," and those it does not classify either way or classifies as "bipartisan" with respect to their independent expenditure-making. This spending is then broken out by the Rural-Urban-Continuum Code for the counties where expenditures are made. This provides a rough approximation of which side is making independent expenditures in rural, mixed, and urban environments.



These results suggest the Republican advantage in independent expenditures is strongly driven by spending in rural areas. Republicans are responsible for about 83 percent of the independent expenditures made in rural areas in the 2021-2022 election cycle, compared to just 56 percent of those in mixed areas and 50 percent of those in metro areas. In other words, while Democrats roughly match Republicans dollar-for-dollar in the highest-population, metro-area counties in the US, **Democrats are spending just one dollar in rural counties per Republicans' fourteen dollars.**

It is important to caveat this result by noting that while the Democratic spending gap is largest in rural America, both parties invest less in rural American than in mixed-type counties and metro counties. The parties' combined independent expenditures in 2022 in

metro counties exceeded \$650m in metro areas and exceeded \$100m in mixed counties, partisan independent expenditures in heavily rural counties did not exceed \$20m. It is important to note this assessment does not report the share of independent expenditures that targeted rural voters, a quantity that is surely larger. Rather, this number reports the volume of expenditures that exclusively target America's rural geographies. This quantity refers to geographic, not individual or household specificity in the targeting of independent expenditures.

Nonetheless, the general trend is clear: Both sides, particularly the Democrats, are underinvesting in rural America. While about [30 percent of Americans and 20 percent of registered voters](#) live in rural areas, barely 3 percent of Democratic-affiliated expenditures occur in rural geographies.

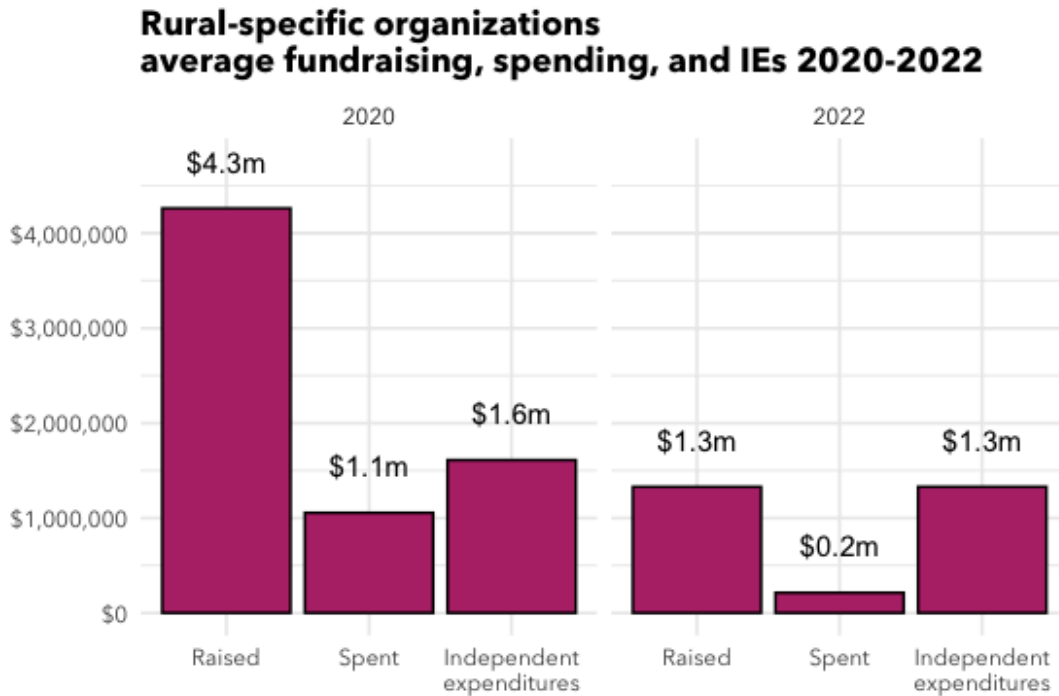
NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS LEAD INVESTMENTS IN RURAL PROGRAMS

While many organizations, including most large-budget PACs and super PACs with a national agenda, make expenditures in rural areas, a few organizations have specialized rural programs that focus specifically on that type of voter or geography. Next, we turn to a subset of organizations that have advertised having some form of rural program in either the 2019-2020 or 2021-2022 election cycles. Across those two cycles, this includes 46 organizations that made some form of expenditure or independent expenditure in the 2019-2020 or 2021-2022 election cycles (or both), and an additional 200 organizations that made some statement about a rural program but does not have an entry on OpenSecrets or the Federal Election Commission campaign finance repository pertaining to an independent expenditure. Please contact the authors for information about the full list of organizations included here.

These programs take a variety of forms, and we do not claim we should expect any such program to involve a certain volume. We do not make any claims about what the appropriate size of such programs might be – indeed, we readily acknowledge there are good reasons to expect rural-specific programs may be smaller, or lower-budget than programs focused on denser geographies. The following analysis suggests only that the current absolute size of Democratic-affiliated organizations' rural programs - including fundraising, direct spending, and independent expenditures - is just a fraction of the overall campaign spending environment and of the type of budget currently available in the Democratic space.

For example, the following chart shows the average volume of fundraising, spending, and independent expenditures made in any domain by these organizations in the 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 cycles. Many of these organizations are quite well-resourced financially. For example - and largely driven by large investments in Georgia and Texas in the 2019-2020 cycle - the average organization with at least some rural component raised over \$4m on behalf of candidates and committees. In 2022, the average volume of fundraising by these organizations fell to about \$1.3m on average. At the same time, in both cycles, the average volume of spending by these organizations was about half that of

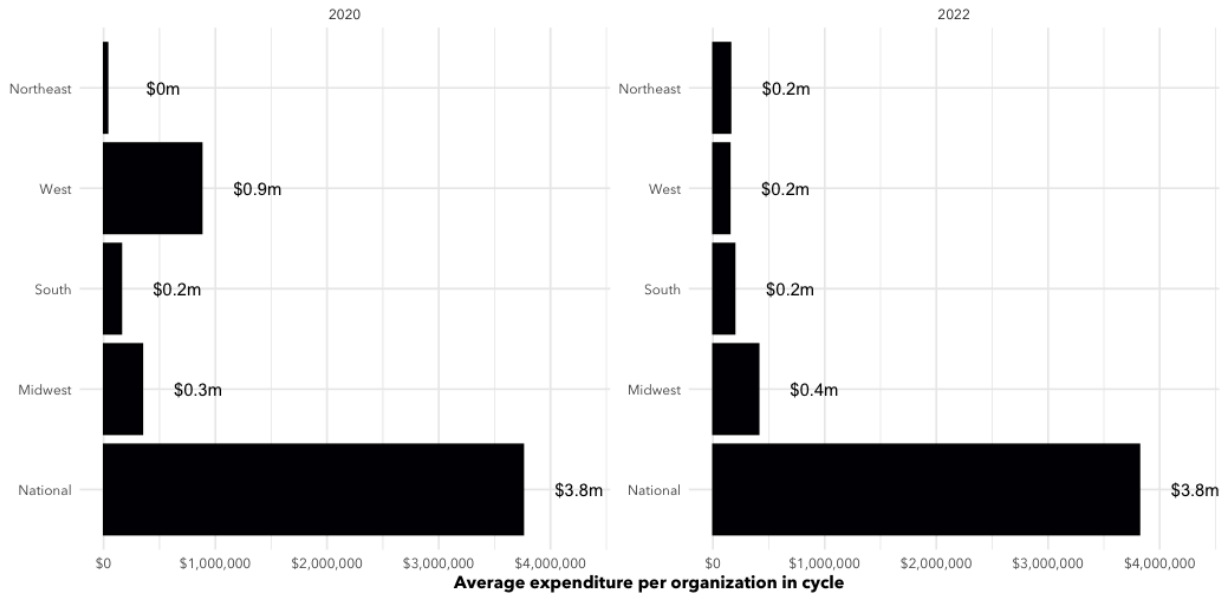
their fundraising, averaging about \$1.6m in the 2019-2020 cycle and about \$1.3m in the 2021-2022 cycle.



These expenditures are driven by organizations with a national scope. Using each organization’s general description - typically gleaned from its “About Us” page or other descriptive material from the organization (including simple cues such as if the name of the organization includes a specific state or region) - the following chart shows the average volume of spending each of these organizations made in the 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 elections.

On average, organizations with a national mandate or scope spent about ten times as much as organizations with a purely regional focus. This includes a nearly negligible average expenditure by organizations focused on “blue” regions like the Northeast, despite considerable Democratic challenges in this area including Maine and New Hampshire. That is not to say there is no spending being done in these regions - rather, this result suggests spending in these areas is driven by organizations that engage in programs across the country. This may mean organizations without a local, state, or regional speciality are driving the relatively small volume of expenditures Democratic organizations are making in rural areas.

Average spending by organizations that spent in 2019-2020 or 2021-2022
National organizations dominate region-specific rural organizations' independent expenditures

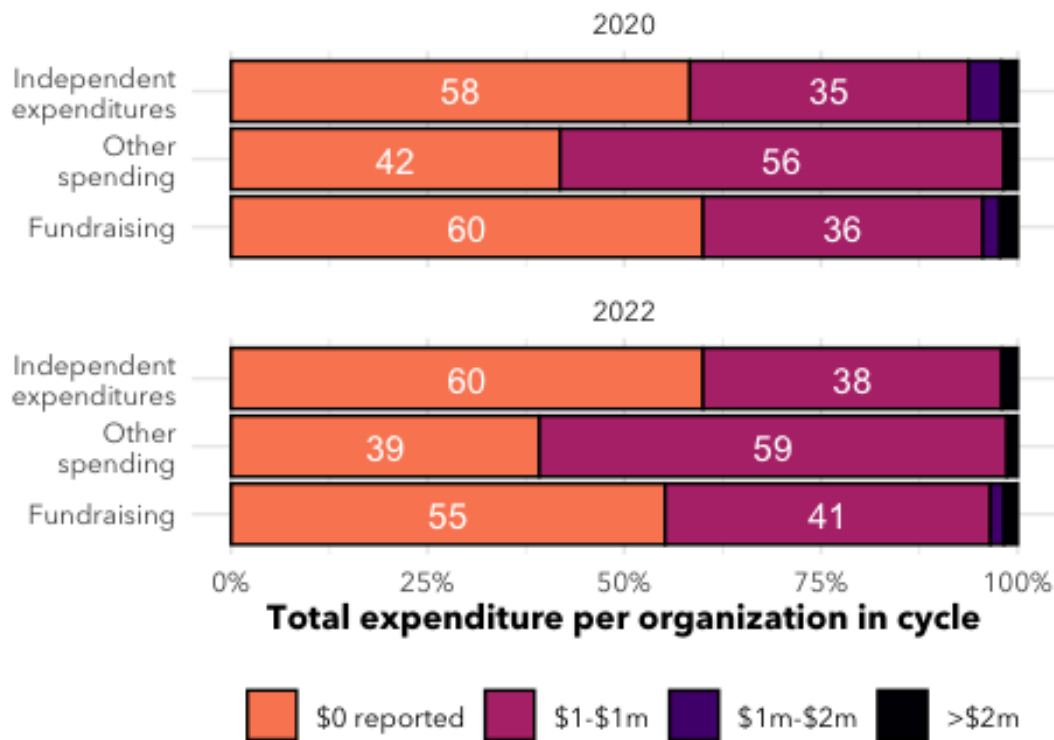


RURAL-FOCUSED ORGANIZATIONS MAKE SMALLER INDEPENDENT EXPENDITURES AND DON'T MAKE EXPENDITURES EVERY CYCLE

Many organizations that focus on rural America make smaller independent expenditures than larger, national organizations, and many of these organizations don't make independent expenditures every cycle. In our analysis based on publicly available spending records, only a handful of organizations are responsible for the largest investments, with about a dozen organizations that focus specifically on rural America making investments and expenditures that surpass \$2m per cycle.

The spending of these organizations fluctuates between cycles, with many organizations only spending in one of the 2019-2020 or 2021-2022. A smaller share made independent expenditures in neither cycle, but had made independent expenditures in previous cycles and are in continuous operation.

Rural organizations' spending volume, 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 cycles



Encouragingly, the net drop-off in the organizations included in these organizations is small. That is, while some organizations greatly change how much they spend in a given cycle, the total investment in organizing and mobilizing rural America is, in aggregate, steady across cycles. There is clearly interest in sustained fundraising (and spending) for these organizations to improve Democratic performance and democratic outcomes in rural areas. This analysis suggests the share of funding currently going to these efforts is negligible.

RURAL ENGAGEMENT IS LIKELY TO BE AN EFFICIENT INVESTMENT

This analysis suggests Democrats are currently “way behind” when it comes to fundraising for, and spending on behalf of, rural candidates and voters. At the same time, this result suggests both sides are spending so little in heavily rural areas that the partisan gap against Democrats will be easier to fill than will the spending gap in heavily metropolitan areas. For example, taking the back of the envelope calculation that Republicans are responsible for spending about 84 percent of \$20 million total worth of spending compared to about 6 percent by Democrats would suggest about a \$15.6 million independent expenditure gap between Democrats and Republicans in these areas. This does not account for fundraising or other types of spending, of course. In contrast, closing

the independent expenditure gap in heavily metropolitan areas, using a similar exercise, would run over \$70 million.

At the same time, recent polling by Rural Organizing suggests these investments could be highly fruitful for two reasons. One, many rural voters have no natural affiliation for the Republican party at all and are highly disaffected, not highly conservative. Democratic spending in rural areas, as many activists within this domain are already acutely aware, would help inform and empower voters who have been ignored by, and feel disaffected from, the entire political system, not just one partisan camp. Republicans' current success in rural areas relies on a core of ideological activists in communities where large shares of the electorate aren't paying much attention to politics, don't perceive any benefits from the current political system, and have little interest in candidates' and parties' current political positions. In many contexts, this means rural voters are likely more persuadable than those in areas already highly exposed to campaign activities.

Two, recent polling by Rural Organizing shows current Democratic messaging in many domains is very appealing to rural voters. Many were surprised to see Democratic gains in the 2021-2022 cycle via what was thought to be "conservative America" stemming from messaging focused on pro-choice policies and left economic policies. Yet those who have been putting in the work organizing and mobilizing in these communities find this result less surprising. Rural voters' preferences and values are not divergent from those everywhere else. Republican policies are so extreme - and many Democratic policies so appealing - that disaffected or uninterested voters living in rural areas respond very favorably to generally "mainstream" Democratic messaging.

Taken together, these results suggest a clear way forward for rural organizing. Additional investments must be made in organizations with rural programs - in turn, those organizations must do more to clarify their role in organizing and mobilizing rural voters. While the relative size of the Democratic-Republican investment gap in rural America is much larger, the absolute size of this gap is slightly smaller due to the relatively low investment by both parties in these areas.

The challenge for Democratic and progressive organizations is one of volume, not substance: Democratic policies and positions are popular in rural America. Many rural voters currently don't know and don't care what Democrats stand before, at least partially because campaigns and organizations have not made the effort to persuade them to do so. This report, and existing work by Rural Organizing, suggests clear potential benefits and improved electoral outcomes for Democrats by investing more in organizations engaging in difficult but eminently achievable organizing and mobilizing goals across rural America.