Rural America tires of waiting its turn



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Like most of America, I'm still processing the stunning November election results.

Oregon voters chose to increase the supermajorities of the Democrats in power and reelect our Democratic governor. Congress underwent, as AmericanHort's Senior Vice President Matt Mika said, a "blue-nami."

There are a lot of reasons for these developments, and our industry will figure out the rules of the game and get to work. Underneath it all, however, is that rural America — farmers — are no longer waiting to make their voices heard. The state and the nation should listen carefully.

Not-so-surprising election

With rural areas growing, and farmers facing increasing economic stress, the nation witnessed one of the more historic repudiations of tariff-driven economic policy in recent memory.

Since 2000, 12 of the last 14 federal election cycles have effectively been "change elections," resulting either in a transfer of Congressional control or a change in presidential party leadership. Americans clearly remain dissatisfied with the status quo.

But nowhere is that dissatisfaction more pronounced than in rural America.

For decades, politicians of both parties have appeared every four years, attend county fairs, promise broadband expansion, pledge support for agriculture, and then largely disappear after elections.

Rural voters increasingly recognize this pattern. They are tired of being treated as campaign props rather than long-term partners in national development.

The 'majority minority' is here

Immigration, internal migration, demographic shifts, and changing economic realities have reshaped large portions of rural America.

The nation's demographic future is already visible in many rural counties. While the United States is projected to become majority-minority around 2046, hundreds of rural communities crossed that threshold years ago.

Don't make farming harder

The economic foundation of rural life has also changed dramatically.

Agriculture remains central to many communities, but farming itself has become more difficult and more expensive. Consolidation has reduced the number of family farms. Input costs for fuel, fertilizer, equipment, labor, and insurance have risen substantially. Commodity prices fluctuate wildly, based on global markets over which local farmers have little control.

Tariffs have produced unintended consequences for many agricultural producers. Retaliatory measures from trading partners have reduced export opportunities for crops and livestock products, placing pressure on already thin margins. While government assistance programs helped offset some losses, many producers concluded that they would rather keep stable markets than rely upon federal compensation checks to survive.

That frustration extends well beyond farming. Rural economies today depend on a diverse mix of industries, including manufacturing, logistics, energy production, healthcare, tourism, food processing, and small business entrepreneurship.

Residents increasingly evaluate economic policy through practical outcomes rather than partisan loyalty. They want affordable energy, reliable labor markets, accessible healthcare, functioning schools, and economic opportunities that allow their children to remain in their communities.

This evolving demographic landscape is also reshaping political engagement. Rural voters are no longer a monolithic bloc. As former House Speaker Tip O'Neill (D-Massachusetts) was fond of saying, "All politics is local." Meanwhile, the internal Bill Clinton campaign mantra of the 1990s — "It's the economy, stupid" — still gets echoed to this day.

When local and economic factors collide, and the election cycle becomes a referendum on current leaders, you get what we got on November 3 — both locally and nationally.

As a result, political parties can no longer rely on outdated strategies.

Rural voters are demonstrating a willingness to change allegiances when they feel ignored, whether on trade policy, healthcare access, farm profitability, infrastructure investment, or workforce development.

Stand up and be heard

That lesson should not be lost on either party. Rural Americans are not demanding special treatment. They are demanding sustained attention.

They want policy discussions that extend beyond election season. They want leaders who understand that rural economies are interconnected with national prosperity. They want investments in roads, water systems, broadband, education, and healthcare that allow their communities to compete in the 21st century.

Perhaps most importantly, they want recognition that rural America is not standing still. It is changing economically, demographically, and politically.

The future of rural America will be more diverse than in its past. It will be driven by a broader range of industries than agriculture alone. And it will reward political leaders who engage with communities year-round rather than showing up every few years seeking votes.

The political message emerging from rural America is not simply a rejection of one policy or one party. It is a demand to be seen, heard, and valued. We have big issues facing the nursery industry and be assured, your voice will be heard and valued.

