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American Electoral Politics is Dominated by the Rural-Urban Divide. What Factors Explain It? And Can Policy Intervention Ameliorate It?

The urban-rural divide is arguably the most defining characteristic of contemporary American politics, but policy interventions may be able to help bridge it

February 2023

Over the past three decades, rural areas have shifted their political support dramatically toward the Republican Party. Meanwhile, urban areas – particularly our country's largest cities– have become increasingly Democratic. This has produced what scholars and pundits refer to as the “rural-urban divide,” also known as “geographic polarization,” arguably the most defining characteristic of contemporary American politics.

The relationship between population density and support for the parties is so robust today that many of us can't imagine that there was virtually no urban-rural divide as recently as the mid-1990s. That is, knowing whether someone three decades

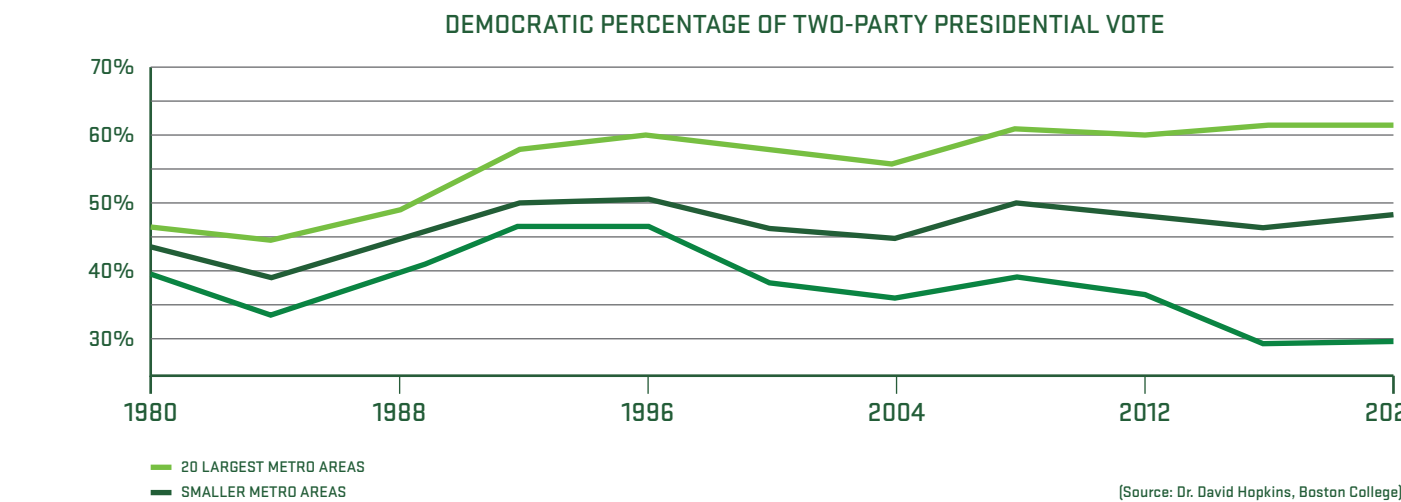


Figure 1: Democratic Share of the U.S. Two-Part Vote Across Time

A SHIFT FROM AN ECONOMIC POLITICS TO A SOCIAL ONE

The political discourse in the United States has always featured a mixture of issues that fall into categories that we today refer to as “cultural” (or “social”) and “economic”. However, different periods of American politics have witnessed a balance shift between cultural and economic issues.

From the post-war era up until the Reagan era, American political discourse was much concerned with economic issues¹. As in many other western democratic countries, such as the United Kingdom, politics in the United States focused a great deal on class and other economic concerns.

But this slowly changed throughout the latter half of the twentieth century as cultural issues like gun rights, abortion, and various identity-related issues began to take center stage. The ascendance of cultural issues was largely complete by the mid-1990s – a process to which Republicans and Democrats had both contributed. Also, in the 90s, congressional elections became “nationalized,” which meant voters from Connecticut to California would be exposed to many of the same campaign messages and themes.



The shift from focusing on economic policies to cultural ones had a significant effect. As political scientist David Hopkins documents in one of his books, the shift allowed the Republican Party to make rapid inroads in rural areas throughout the country, where culturally conservative stances on religion, gender, sexuality, and guns, to name a few, resonated strongly².

The Democrats, meanwhile, adopted competing perspectives that resonated disproportionately in urban areas on many of these same cultural issues.

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ago lived in Ovando, Montana (present-day population 70) or Orlando, Florida (present-day population 285,000) would have given you virtually no power to predict which party that person was likely to support.

So, what's changed? Why is there an urban-rural divide today, and what factors, or components, account for it? Below I explain how a shift in the focus of the political discourse from economics to social issues, differences in demographic composition and social ecology between urban and rural areas, and resentment stemming from perceived geographic inequity between urban and rural areas all fuel the urban-rural divide.

DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION: DIFFERENT TYPES OF PEOPLE ARE MORE LIKELY TO LIVE IN SOME AREAS THAN OTHERS

Why does a shift in focus from economic to cultural issues in American politics lead to geographic polarization? The main reason for this is that different types of people are more likely to live in different kinds of communities and these different types of people typically have predictably divergent views on cultural issues³.

Take rural areas, for example. Rural areas tend to be whiter, less affluent, more religious, and less educated than the nation as a whole. Considered individually, each of these demographic characteristics, to say nothing of their conjunction, is predictive of conservative cultural attitudes. That is, individuals who are members of these groups are more likely to hold conservative positions on social and cultural issues. Urban areas, meanwhile, are more racially diverse, less religious, and more highly educated than the country as a whole – and each of these groups is more likely to hold liberal positions on cultural issues. In other words, different types of



people tend to live in urban vs. rural areas and tend to have divergent views on cultural issues that align with one party over the other.

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SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT: MONITORING RURAL SPACES VS. ANONYMOUS URBAN SPACES



While the demographic composition of communities is critical, it's not all that matters – context matters too. In their recent study, political scientist James Gimpel and colleagues demonstrate empirically that if we compare urbanites and rural

persons “who are of the same race, religion, age, education level, income, sex, marital status, and reporting the same level of religious commitment” we'll usually observe “a difference in political party affiliation.” In other words, even the same types of people will often exhibit differences in political preferences depending on where they live⁴.

One reason for this is that the dynamics around day-to-day social interactions in rural areas are quite different than in urban ones. Rural life is less anonymous – meaning that just about everyone knows just about everyone else. Because of this, going against the grain socially in terms of one's behavior or opinions is more costly, which encourages the upholding of “traditional” norms, opinions, and behaviors. Resultingly, rural areas might be said to be inherently culturally conservative, making them more likely to be aligned with the contemporary Republican Party.

PERCEPTIONS OF GEOGRAPHIC INEQUITY AMONG THE RURAL POLITICIZES RURAL IDENTITY

In addition to composition and context, a third factor contributes to the urban-rural divide: the politicization of rural identity. Several recent studies have shown that “being rural” is central to how many rural people view themselves and that rural identity is generally more important to rural people than urban identity is to urban people⁵.

News media and (political) campaign narratives about geographic inequity – the idea that some communities are better off than others – have become commonplace. Some of the substance of these narratives is demonstrably true, such as the fact that rural areas are poorer and sicker than non-rural places, while other claims, such as the idea that government



neglects and ignores rural areas or that urban areas get more than their fair share of public resources, are more debatable. Regardless of whether claims about geographic inequity are true, research shows that large percentages of rural people believe them. This has led to a politicization of rural identity

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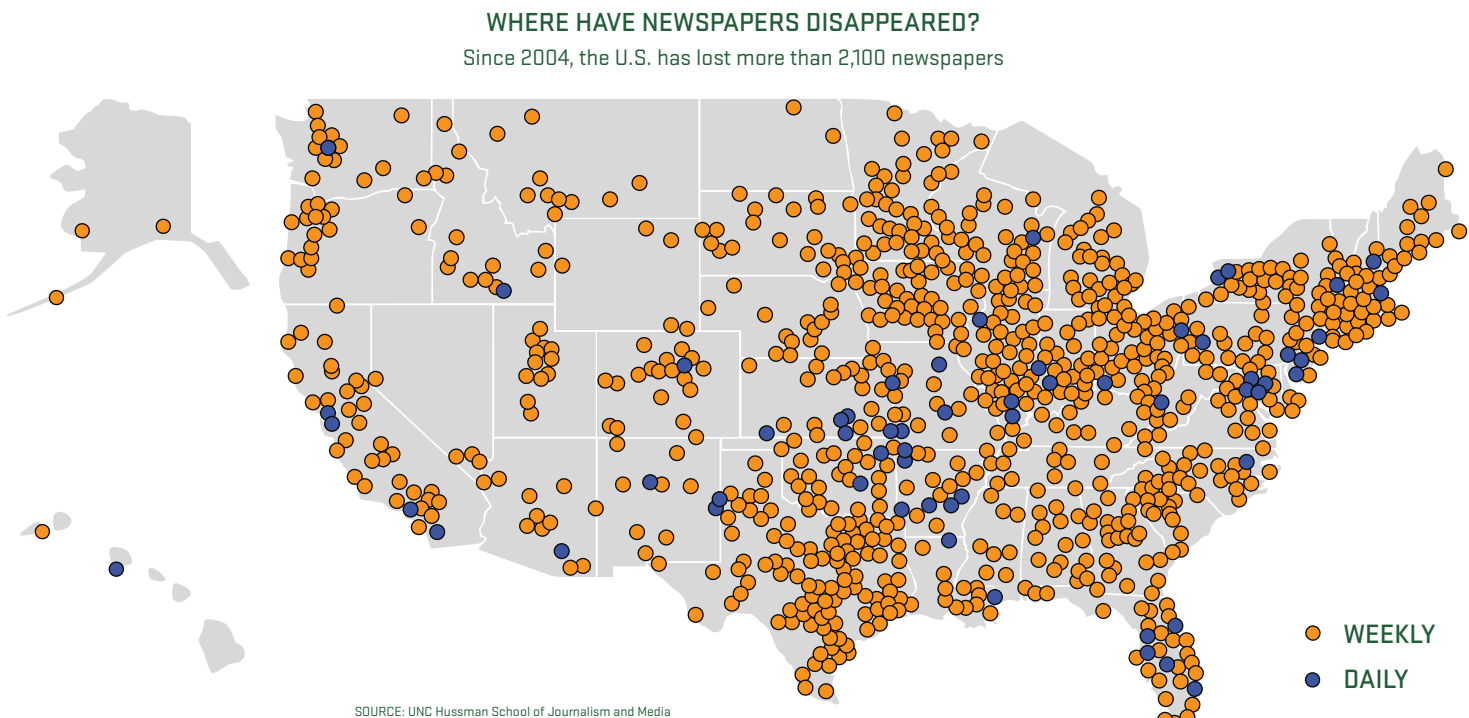
and what many scholars call “rural resentment.” Rural resentment has been a powerful force in recent elections. For example, even after accounting for the effects of partisanship, ideology, and other relevant factors, highly resentful rural voters were 14% more likely to vote for Republican U.S. House candidates in 2018 (and a staggering 49% more likely to vote for Republican U.S. Senate candidates) than non-resentful rural voters. Similarly, highly resentful rural voters were about 35% more likely to vote for Republicans running for the U.S. House in 2020 than non-resentful rural voters⁶.

Even more concerning is that rural resentment appears to be linked to support for political violence. In new research that I conducted with Arif Memovic (Pennsylvania State University) and Olyvia Christley (Florida Atlantic University), we show that, even after accounting for the influence of many other factors (like partisanship, ideology, education level, and more), those with highly resentful ruralities are significantly more supportive of political violence against the state than those who do not harbor such resentments.

THE DEMISE OF LOCAL NEWS HAMPERS THE ABILITY OF RURAL DEMOCRATS AND URBAN REPUBLICANS TO PUSH BACK AGAINST THE RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE

Why aren't the parties doing more to combat the urban-rural divide? It's plain to see that this divide frustrates both parties. For Democrats, having so much of their support concentrated in cities rather than spread out across urban and rural areas makes it challenging to translate their routine national majori-

ties into governing majorities in Congress. For Republicans, meanwhile, having so much of their support confined to the hinterlands means that they have little influence in the country's most productive and dynamic economic, technological, and cultural centers.



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Clearly, the stereotypes and “brands” associated with the national Democratic and Republican parties are toxic in rural and urban communities, respectively. Troublingly, rural Democratic and urban Republican candidates experience difficulty distancing themselves from their parties' toxic national brands. This difficulty is primarily due to the declining health of local news in the United States. For example, even

ARE THERE POLICY INTERVENTIONS TO BE MADE TO AMELIORATE THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE?

Taking stock of the wellsprings of the urban-rural divide overviewed above, one might ask what, if anything, can be done to ease and close the divide. In particular, are there things policymakers could do to benefit the situation?

Some of the causes of the urban-rural divide are more amenable to policy intervention than others. For example, it is likely neither possible nor desirable to disrupt the social ecology of rural areas. After all, it's precisely the communal, less anonymized social dynamics of rural areas that make them unique and valuable to many. However, other causes of the divide, such as rural resentment over geographic inequity, and even the demographic composition of rural areas, can be addressed through the policy process.

As described above, perceptions of geographic inequity disadvantaging rural areas lead many rural Americans to harbor resentment toward the government and other elites that they see as “leaving rural areas behind.” This, in turn, not only contributes to partisan polarization but also leads to more openness to political violence toward the government. In other words, a belief that rural areas aren't getting their fair shake in the policy process is a core component of rural resentment, so it makes sense that policy interventions could help mitigate rural resentment. As for policy areas where rural communities lag behind their non-rural counterparts, two areas of particularly stark contrast include access to broadband and healthcare.

Regarding healthcare access, rural areas have long lagged behind their urban and suburban counterparts, but the situation has become all the more dire in recent decades as many rural health clinics have closed throughout the country. While far from a silver-bullet solution to the problem, making telemedicine more accessible is one option for policymakers to have an impact. Because rural people typically have to travel considerably greater distances to access in-person healthcare than urbanites and suburbanites, telemedicine is an especially attractive option for rural residents. However, one obstacle to telemedicine access is that, in nearly half of the states in the country, insurers are not required to reimburse healthcare providers at the same rate for telehealth visits as in-person visits. Some states, including Utah and twenty others, have passed “payment parity” laws requiring health insurers to

reimburse in-person and telehealth visits the same. Utah's two rural neighboring states to the north, Idaho, and Wyoming (as well as their neighbors Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota), have not enacted any such law, however. As for broadband, not only is there a problem of access, but also one of cost – even where broadband is available in rural areas, rural residents pay over 30% more for subscriptions, mainly due to a lack of market competition. Notably, a lack of access to affordable, reliable broadband is another barrier to accessing telehealth, which typically requires consultation via live video

stream. In other words, lacking access to broadband doesn't just affect which entertainment streaming options are available to rural Americans; it's a significant public health issue. Another cause of the urban-rural divide that could be addressed by policy is the demographic composition of rural communities. As mentioned before, rural areas skew older and less educated due to most rural communities being major net losers in terms of migration. Rural communities struggle to retain and attract young, highly educated residents due to lacking job opportunities and amenities. Improving economic opportunity in rural communities would ultimately lead to greater rural diversity by making them more attractive to a broader cross-section of people.



While creating new jobs and employment sectors would be difficult in the short term in many rural areas, a more feasible solution would be to attract America's burgeoning share of workers who engage in remote work to move to rural areas.

Some rural communities, like Bemidji, Minnesota, offer incentives – such as free coworking space and subsidies to cover moving costs – to attract remote workers. To successfully attract remote workers, however, rural communities must also have

reliable broadband access, which further underscores how important a policy priority addressing rural broadband access should be on numerous fronts.

THE BIG PICTURE

In sum, social science research informs us that the urban-rural divide is caused by multiple forces – one related to differences in the types of people who tend to live in urban and rural areas, a second related to differences in urban vs. rural living and corresponding effects on political behavior, and a third involving politicized geographic identity due to perceived geographic inequities.

The nationalization of politics and political media reinforces the urban-rural divide. The withering away of local news in America has made it difficult for rural Democratic and urban Republican candidates to distinguish themselves from their parties' national brands.

Geographic polarization has had increasingly large effects on our national, state, and local elections over the past three decades, and it is highly likely that this will be the case in 2024 as well.

Experts have argued that the urban-rural divide is bad for the health of American republican democracy, as it leads to lower levels of competitiveness in most districts, which deteriorates accountability and representational quality. In the coming years, scholars and policymakers must direct substantial energy to discover ways to ameliorate this divide, as it arguably – like other stark geographic divides before it, that were a hallmark of some of America's darkest days, including the regional divide leading up to the American Civil War – a major destabilizing force in American society.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jacobs, Nicholas and Daniel Shea. *The Rural Voter*. Columbia University Press, Forthcoming.
- 2 Hopkins, David A. *Red fighting blue: How geography and electoral rules polarize American politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- 3 Bishop, Bill. *The big sort: Why the clustering of like-minded America is tearing us apart*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.
- 4 Gimpel, James G., Nathan Lovin, Bryant Moy, and Andrew Reeves. “The urban-rural gulf in American political behavior.” *Political behavior* 42 (2020): 1343-1368.
- 5 See, for example, Jacobs, Nicholas F., and B. Kal Munis. “Place-based imagery and voter evaluations: Experimental evidence on the politics of place.” *Political Research Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2019): 263-277, and, Jacobs, Nicholas F., and B. Kal Munis. “Staying in place: Federalism and the political economy of place attachment.” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 50, no. 4 (2020): 544-565.
- 6 Jacobs, Nicholas, and B. Kal Munis. “Place-Based Resentment in Contemporary US Elections: The Individual Sources of America's Urban-Rural Divide.” *Political Research Quarterly* (2022).
- 7 For a helpful overview, see Robert Saldin, Kal Munis, and Richard Burke, “Local Bears, National Consequences: The Link Between Local News and American Democratic Health,” Niskanen Center, Oct. 2021.

About the author: Dr. B. Kal Munis is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Utah Valley University, where he researches the urban-rural divide and partisan polarization. He teaches courses on American government, campaigns and elections, media and politics, and other classes. His peer-reviewed research has appeared in multiple prestigious journals, including *Political Research Quarterly*, *Political Behavior*, and *Political Geography*, among others. He has also contributed analysis and commentary to outlets such as *Washington Monthly*, *Democracy Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *National Public Radio*, *The Hill*, the *Brookings Institute*, and the *Niskanen Center*. Prior to coming to UVU, he earned degrees in political science from the University of Montana (B.A. and M.A.) and the University of Virginia (Ph.D.) and completed a postdoctoral research fellowship at Johns Hopkins University. He is a native of Philipsburg, Montana.