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# Rural/Urban Differences: Persistence or Decline☆

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A long line of sociological research has found that rural residents tend to be more conservative than urban residents in the U.S. on a wide range of attitudes and behaviors. Two primary arguments have been utilized to understand why these differences exist. First, rural/urban differences were thought to be largely a function of rural isolation and differences in types of employment. As rural areas have become less isolated and employment differences have diminished, rural/urban differences are thought to diminish as well. Any remaining rural/urban differences can largely be explained by social class variations. Second, differing interaction patterns in rural areas resulting from fewer people and lower population densities continue to make rural areas unique. This manuscript found strong support for the second argument that rural areas remain unique. Even when statistically controlling for race/ethnicity and social class, rural residents were much more likely to vote for Trump in the 2020 presidential election, were more likely to choose the conservative side on six controversial political issues than urban residents. These findings have important implications in understanding our deeply divided nation. The need for quality social science research to understand modern rural America is apparent.

## Introduction

After decades of largely being ignored by policy makers and the U.S. national media, rural* America once again came under the microscope of the rest of the country during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. During these elections, rural residents were much more likely than their urban counterparts to vote for Donald Trump. Overwhelming rural support played a vital role in Trump's 2016 victory and his near victory in 2020 (Albrecht 2019; Bor 2017; Gimpel et al. 2020; Goetz et al. 2018; Monnat and Brown 2017). In seeking to understand Trump's overwhelming support among rural voters, a wide array of articles and books (e.g., Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Scoones et al. 2022; Smarsh 2018; Vance 2016; Wuthnow 2019) have appeared largely seeking to help urban readers understand modern rural America, and in some cases overcome stereotypes of rural residents as backward and even outright bigoted (Sherman 2009, 2021).

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*In this manuscript, rural and nonmetro; urban and metro are used interchangeably.

The questions that have emerged from efforts to understand modern rural America are the same questions that have been asked by sociologists since the beginning of the discipline. Among the questions being asked today that have been asked by generations of sociologists include: Are rural residents fundamentally different in their attitudes and behaviors than urban residents? Are the rural/urban differences that do emerge a function of the unique characteristics of rural life, or can they be explained by other factors such as type of employment or social class? Finding answers to these questions in a 21st century world may be more than just an academic exercise. It may provide vital insights as we seek understanding of and solutions to vexing questions in a deeply divided nation (e.g., Bonikowski 2019; Edelman 2019, 2020; Harris et al. 2017). It is not a stretch to argue that improved understanding of rural/urban differences may be essential to the very survival of U.S. democracy (Schafft 2021).

The goal of this manuscript was to improve our understanding of current rural/urban differences and the sources of these differences. To achieve this goal, data are analyzed comparing rural and urban residents on their vote in the 2020 presidential election and on several controversial political issues that have received extensive media attention in recent years. These variables were selected to provide a broad range of issues to better assess the extent and range of rural/urban differences. The manuscript continues with a discussion of theoretical reasons for the existence or lack thereof of rural/urban differences in the United States. The methods are then described, including an overview of the dependent and independent variables. The data analysis is then conducted. The concluding section discusses how this understanding is important in our deeply divided world.

## Explaining Rural/Urban Differences

A long line of sociological research has found important differences between rural and urban residents on a wide range of values, attitudes, and behaviors. Consistently, rural people are more likely to choose the more traditional or conservative behaviors and generally have more conservative attitudes (Larson 1978; Lichter and Brown 2011; Struthers and Bokemeier 2000; Willits et al. 1982). The degree to which these differences persist at the present time has been studied on some issues, but not others. Of the many differences that have been studied and could be mentioned, only a few will be touched on here.

As noted earlier, rural people are more likely than urban residents to vote Republican, and these differences have become more pronounced in recent decades (Albrecht 2019; Lyons and Utych 2021; Scala and

Johnson 2017). Rural people, on average, have lower incomes, less education and are more likely to be in poverty than their urban counterparts (e.g., Albrecht et al. 2000; Burton et al. 2013). This economic disadvantage has led to higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse (Monnat and Rigg 2016) and to more "Deaths of Despair" among rural residents (Case and Deaton 2015, 2020). Rural people tend to be more religious and hold more traditional religious beliefs (Amato 1993; Chalfant and Heller 1991; Glenn and Hill 1977). Rural people are more likely than urban people to be associated with the religious right and Christian nationalism (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014; Wilcox and Robinson 2018). Similarly, there have long been important differences in values and attitudes on a number of issues (Glenn and Hill 1977; Willits et al. 1982), including abortion (Dillon and Savage 2006; McKee 2007), gun control (Joslyn et al. 2017; Merino 2018; Whitehead et al. 2018; Wozniak 2017), immigration (Fennelly and Federico 2008; Garcia and Davidson 2013), and climate change and renewable energy use (Hamilton and Keim 2009). Rural people have traditionally had more conservative family structures. Historically, rural adults were more likely to be married than urban adults, these marriages were more resistant to dissolution, and rural women tended to have more children than urban women (Albrecht and Albrecht 2004; Cho, Grabill, and Bogue 1970; Duncan and Reiss 1956; Hathaway, Beegle, and Bryant 1968).

Two primary explanations have been used to explain rural/urban differences. These explanations include: (1) While rural/urban differences once existed, they were largely a function of rural isolation, social class, and the type of employment of rural compared to urban workers. As information and communication technology has improved and employment differences have diminished, rural/urban differences have also tended to diminish. From this perspective, any remaining rural/urban differences can be explained by socioeconomic factors. (2) Due to the unique nature of rural living, rural residents have always had, and will continue to have distinct attitudes and behaviors relative to urban residents. Each perspective is described below.

### Rural Life Is no Longer Unique

Over six decades ago, Vidich and Bensman (1958) described how improved communication and transportation technology reduced rural isolation as both rural and urban residents were now watching the same television shows, listening to the same radio programs, and reading the same newspapers and magazines. Enhanced transportation meant that most rural residents could reach a major urban center in a relatively short amount of time. Numerous scholars noted how these changes

combined to make rural populations less distinct, with norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors becoming increasingly similar to those of urban residents (Bealer et al. 1965; Bender 1975; Larson 1978).

Additionally, it has been long recognized that many rural/urban differences were a result of the unique forms of rural employment. Most prominently, at one time a majority of rural residents made their living from agriculture which is substantially different from virtually any other occupation (Nelson 1955; Weeks 1989). Furthermore, agriculture and the other major employers of rural residents (e.g., manufacturing, mining, and logging) employed high proportions of male workers, which may have led to more females being economically dependent on a male (Albrecht and Albrecht 2004).

In recent decades, employment differences between rural and urban areas have decreased considerably. Agriculture now employs only a very small share of rural workers, and the number of jobs in mining and logging is but a fraction of the number of jobs in these industries just a few decades ago. Declining employment in these sectors is largely a function of improved technology where machines replace human labor in the production process. As a consequence, the industry of employment for rural workers is much more similar to urban workers than in previous decades (Albrecht 2020).

Reduced isolation and more similar employment patterns have prompted some scholars to argue that rurality is now a meaningless concept (Hoggart 1990). Friedland (1982, 2002) maintained that there is really no rural anymore. While it may be true that some rural/urban differences remain, these scholars argue that remaining differences can be explained by social class and other factors such as race/ethnicity. In support of this argument, Kelly and Lobao (2019) found that the best explanation for rural/urban differences in voting behavior is variations in social status. Likewise, in county level analysis of the 2016 election, most of the rural/urban differences disappeared when controlling for race/ethnicity and education. Thus, residents of rural counties were more likely to vote for Trump, not because they were rural but because rural counties were more likely to have high proportions of non-Hispanic white residents and to have lower levels of educational attainment, characteristics strongly related to whether or not someone voted for Trump (Albrecht 2019; Jardina 2019).

**Rural Life Continues to Be Unique**

Early researchers maintained that rural living resulted in different types of interpersonal relationships compared to urban life and these varying relationships would lead to continued rural/urban differences. Louis

Wirth (1939), for example, mentioned that smaller population size and reduced population density were important components of rural living. Reduced size and density allow community members opportunities to become acquainted with a higher proportion of community residents, reduces the total number of social contacts, and allow community residents get to know one another on a more personal level. The results are more primary relationships and fewer of the categorical and secondary relationships that dominate life in cities. While primary relationships do exist in urban areas, a larger proportion of interactions are more secondary in nature. The types of interactions that occur in rural areas were thought to result in greater levels of consensus on important morals and values. Higher levels of consensus would then lead to more conservative values and attitudes (Struthers and Bokemeier 2000; Winkler 1994).

Rural residents also face other unique obstacles. In the modern world, policy makers at both the state and federal levels are predominately elected by urban constituents since urban populations far outnumber rural populations. Currently, only 14 percent of U.S. residents live in nonmetropolitan counties (about 46 million people). In only five states (Mississippi, Montana, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming) are there more nonmetro than metro residents. Thus, even most elected officials from U.S. states with smaller populations and large farm sectors are elected primarily by an urban constituency (Jones et al. 2014). Consequently, the policies that emerge tend to favor urban residents. For decades, these policies, often lead by Democrats, have been a factor in driving rural exploitation (Ashwood 2018a; Carolan 2020). In particular, policies where corporate interests are given government authority to act with little consideration of local impacts have often been devastating to many rural communities (Ashwood 2018b).

Furthermore, rural people are recipients of subtle prejudice. Like racial prejudices, rural people are made aware that their manner of dress, the music they listen to, their accent or some other characteristic or behavior labels them as outsiders and may result in reduced opportunities. Rural people hear the media refer to them as bigots or deplorables. Rural people are fully aware that the major economic and political decisions affecting their lives are made in urban areas, and many decisions impacting their communities are beyond their control (Lyons and Utych 2021). All these factors combined to create a sense of group cohesion where rural people are united in opposition to much that is considered urban or elite. Combined with the economic stress that many people are feeling, rural America has become a breeding ground for racial hatred and regressive authoritarian politics (Edelman 2019; Jardina 2019). Some scholars argue

that an important part of the authoritarian populism that is emerging around the world has rural origins (Roman-Alcala et al. 2021; Scoones et al. 2022). These factors combined may result in rural attitudes and behaviors remaining unique, even from urban people otherwise similar in race/ethnicity, social class, or industry of employment.

In sum, if rural/urban differences in voting patterns and views toward divisive political issues largely disappear after race/ethnicity and social class variables are controlled, support is provided for the argument that rural areas are no longer unique. However, if differences remain, support is provided for the argument that rural areas remain unique.

## Methods

Data for this study were obtained from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES). This study involved 60 teams from throughout the country, yielding a Common Content sample of 61,000 cases (Ansolabehere et al. 2021). Participants were recruited during the fall of 2020. Each research team purchased a 1,000-person national sample survey, conducted by YouGov of Redwood City, California. The data are archived and available for download at the Harvard University Dataverse. The 2020 CES is part of an ongoing study that began in 2006 and has received support from the National Science Foundation for even-year studies when elections impacting the U.S. presidency, Senate and House of Representatives are scheduled. This manuscript uses all respondents who provided a valid response for each question used in the analysis. Thus, 54,212 responses are used for the analysis of political issues and 37,313 responses for the analysis of the 2020 election. The number of respondents is lower for the election analysis because some survey respondents did not cast a ballot in the 2020 election.

Two primary-dependent variables are used. The first is how the respondent voted in the 2020 presidential election. Respondents were asked "Which candidate for President of the United States do you prefer?" Responses were coded as "0" for Donald Trump, and "1" for Joe Biden. Any other choice was eliminated since votes for other candidates were few and had virtually no impact on election outcomes. For this analysis, it is expected that support for Trump will be much more extensive in rural compared to urban areas.

The second dependent variable was derived from respondents' expressed support or opposition to six controversial political issues. The six statements are listed below. For each statement, the phrase (listed in parenthesis) that will be used to refer to the statement in the discussion and tables throughout the remainder of the manuscript is provided.

1. Always allow a woman to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice (Allow Abortion).
2. Ban assault rifles (Ban Assault Rifles).
3. Increase spending on border security by $25 billion, including building a wall between the United States and Mexico (Build the Wall).
4. Provide permanent resident status to children of immigrants who were brought to the United States by their parents (also known as Dreamers). Provide these immigrants a pathway to citizenship if they meet the citizenship requirements and commit no crimes (Citizenship for Dreamers).
5. Require that each state use a minimum amount of renewable fuels (wind, solar, and hydroelectricity) even if electricity prices increase a little (Increase Renewable Energy Use).
6. Withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement (Withdraw from Paris Agreement).

On each issue, respondents were asked whether they opposed (score of 0) or supported (score of 1) each statement. Analysis is conducted for each item individually, and then the six items are combined to create a political issues index where possible scores range from 0 to 6. The items are coded so that a higher score represents more liberal views. Thus, in developing the index, the scores on Build the Wall and Withdraw from Paris Agreement are reversed to assure liberal/conservative consistency. It is recognized that a single item on complex issues is inadequate to provide a true measure of the views and attitudes of respondents on these issues. The purpose of this manuscript, however, is not to provide an in-depth study of any particular issue, but rather to get a general assessment of the overall liberal/conservative views of rural compared to urban residents. On each item used in this analysis, the views of conservatives and liberals are well established. This approach allows at least a general assessment of the views of respondents on these common and clearly defined issues. In this analysis, it is expected that rural respondents will express more conservative views on all issues than urban respondents.

The primary independent variable in this analysis is residence along the Rural/Urban Continuum. As part of the survey, the county of residence was obtained for each respondent. This makes it possible to then assign each respondent a score relative to where they reside along the continuum. The Rural/Urban Continuum was developed by the Economic Research Service of USDA. Continuum scores range from 1 to 9. As scores increase, counties have progressively smaller populations and become ever more isolated from metro centers. Categories 1–3 are metropolitan, while categories 4–9 are nonmetropolitan. The most metropolitan counties in Category 1 are the 432

counties in a metropolitan area that have a population of 1 million or more. A majority of the U.S. population lives in Category 1 counties alone. At the opposite extreme, Category 9 counties are the 408 counties that are completely rural, with the largest community having a population of less than 2,500, and that are not adjacent to a metro area. Less than 2 percent of the U.S. population live in categories 8 and 9 combined.

It is critical to control for other variables in determining the extent to which rural/urban differences are real or a consequence of other factors. Three additional variables are used in this analysis including; (1) Race/ethnicity where respondents are categorized as either non-Hispanic white or minority; (2) educational attainment where respondents are categorized as either college graduates or non-college graduates; and (3) household income where respondents are categorized into four categories ranging from less than $50,000 to $200,000 or more. For the multivariate analysis, income is collapsed into two categories—those with household incomes less than $100,000 and those with incomes greater than $100,000. These independent variables were selected because they are factors that are likely to be related to the dependent variables and could possibly account for rural/urban differences.

The data analysis consists of an initial bivariate test of the relationship between residence and the dependent variables. Following this, multivariate procedures are used to determine if the relationship between residence and the dependent variables persists after the effects of the other independent variables are statistically controlled.

## Findings

Table 1 provides a bivariate overview of the relationship between residence and percent voting for Trump and the other political issues. Significantly, as expected, the percent of nonmetro residents voting for Trump (60.7 percent) far exceeds the percent of persons living in metro areas who voted for Trump (42.6 percent). The likelihood of voting for Trump increases consistently as the community of residence became smaller and more isolated. Respondents in the largest metro areas were the least likely to vote for Trump, while people living in smaller metro areas were more similar to people living in larger nonmetro communities.

Table 1 also shows that nonmetro residents expressed more conservative views on all of the political issues, as expected. On each issue, persons residing in the largest metro areas were the most liberal, and respondents tended to become more conservative as community of residence became smaller and more isolated. Political index scores ranged from 4.19 for the residents of Category 1 counties to 3.17 in Category 9

**Table 1. Percent of Respondents Voting for Trump and Percent Supporting Various Political Issues Across the Rural/Urban Continuum**

| | Metro | | | | Nonmetro | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | Metro Total | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Nonmetro Total | Overall Total | Chi-Square |
| Percent voting for Trump | 38.8 | 47.2 | 52.9 | 42.6 | 59.9 | 53.8 | 61.6 | 62.7 | 63.3 | 66.1 | 60.7 | 45.3 | 944.1* |
| Percent supporting | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Allow abortion | 67.1 | 59.9 | 55.3 | 63.8 | 50.3 | 53.3 | 45.4 | 48.5 | 44.2 | 45.4 | 48.3 | 61.6 | 1013.9* |
| Ban assualt Rifles | 69.7 | 64.1 | 60.3 | 67.1 | 57.7 | 58.4 | 53.6 | 54.4 | 53.3 | 50.3 | 55.5 | 65.4 | 629.8* |
| Build the wall | 35.6 | 39.7 | 43.8 | 37.6 | 49.4 | 41.9 | 50.8 | 50.5 | 52.1 | 55.5 | 49.6 | 39.3 | 565.0* |
| Citizenship for dreamers | 80.9 | 78 | 76 | 79.7 | 72.9 | 75 | 71.2 | 71.8 | 67.5 | 70.1 | 73 | 78.7 | 316.1* |
| Increase renewable energy use | 70.6 | 66.9 | 63 | 68.8 | 61.6 | 64.9 | 59.4 | 60.1 | 60.9 | 56.6 | 60.8 | 67.7 | 339.5* |
| Withdraw from Paris agreement | 33.3 | 36.5 | 41.1 | 35.2 | 43.7 | 40.4 | 46.7 | 45.2 | 44.8 | 48.6 | 45.1 | 36.6 | 412.2* |
| Political issues index score | 4.19 | 3.93 | 3.69 | 4.07 | 3.50 | 3.70 | 3.32 | 3.39 | 3.30 | 3.17 | 3.42 | 3.98 | *F*-Value: 616.4* |

*Statistically significant at the .01 level.

counties. Overall, the average score for metro residents was 4.07 compared to 3.42 for nonmetro residents. It is relevant to note that a solid majority of all respondents took the liberal side on all of the issues studied. A majority of respondents supported abortion (61.6 percent), banning assault rifles (65.4 percent), citizenship for Dreamers (78.7 percent), increased renewable energy use (67.7 percent), and opposed building the wall (61.7 percent) and withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement (63.4 percent).

In Table 2, data are presented on voting patterns in the 2020 election by residence while considering the other independent variables. Significantly, metro/nonmetro differences persist when the other independent variables are considered. For example, non-Hispanic white nonmetro residents were more likely to vote for Trump than non-Hispanic white metro residents, and nonmetro residents with a college degree were more likely to vote for Trump than metro residents with a college degree. There were also important differences within the independent variables. As shown in Table 2, non-Hispanic white persons were more likely to vote for Trump than minority persons and college-educated persons were much less likely to vote for Trump than persons without a college degree. The effects of income were less apparent.

In Table 3, data are presented comparing average scores on the political issues index by residence while considering the other independent variables. It is clear from the data presented that nonmetro residents are more likely than metro residents to be conservative even when

**Table 2. Percent Voting for Trump by Residence, Race/Ethnicity, Educational Attainment, and Income**

| Variable | Residence | | Total | Chi-square |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Nonmetro | Metro | | |
| Total | 60.7 | 42.6 | 45.3 | 944.1* |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | | |
| Non-hispanic White | 65.2 | 49.9 | 52.6 | 367.3* |
| Minority | 37.7 | 26.1 | 27.1 | 53.3* |
| Educational attainment | | | | |
| Less than college degree | 64.8 | 48.0 | 51.0 | 388.2* |
| College degree or more | 49.3 | 34.2 | 35.7 | 124.1* |
| Income | | | | |
| Less than $50,000 | 59.7 | 41.2 | 45.0 | 344.8* |
| $50,000 - $99,000 | 62.9 | 44.2 | 46.8 | 207.7* |
| $100,000 -$199,000 | 63.1 | 43.2 | 44.9 | 83.9* |
| $200,000 or more | 52.7 | 38.6 | 39.3 | 5.9 |

*Statistically significant at the .01 level.

**Table 3. Average Score of Political Issues Index by Residence and Other Independent Variables**

| Variable | Residence | | Mean | *F*-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Nonmetro | Metro | | |
| Total | 3.42 | 4.07 | 3.98 | 616.4* |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | | |
| Non-Hispanic White | 3.34 | 3.94 | 3.84 | 404.6* |
| Minority | 3.89 | 4.36 | 4.32 | 76.9* |
| Educational attainment | | | | |
| Less than college degree | 3.30 | 3.83 | 3.74 | 320.6* |
| College degree | 3.78 | 4.40 | 4.34 | 160.0* |
| Income | | | | |
| Low | 3.54 | 4.06 | 3.96 | 244.4* |
| High | 3.27 | 4.08 | 3.99 | 393.8* |

*Stastically significant at the .01 level.

considering the other independent variables. Thus, for example, nonmetro residents with a college degree are more conservative than metro residents with a college degree. Similar differences are found across all of the independent variables. The data also show that non-Hispanic white respondents tend to be more conservative than minority respondents, and persons without a college degree are more conservative than persons with a college degree. The results relative to income are less clear.

Tables 4 and 5 present the results of multivariate analyses. Table 4 explores the relationship between voting behavior and residence while statistically controlling for the other independent variables. This analysis utilizes logit procedures (Swafford 1980). This approach was selected because it can be used when there is a dichotomous dependent variable (one could either vote for Trump or vote for Biden). This analysis allows an assessment to be made of the importance of the residential variable when race/ethnicity, education, and income are statistically controlled. A logit analysis with categorical independent variables allows the effects of each independent variable to be clearly evident. In the logit analysis, the logit (the natural log of the odds ratio) becomes the dependent variable.

The data in Table 4 present summary statistics for the logit model. All the independent variables were significantly related to voting behavior. The strength of the chi-square statistic shows that race/ethnicity was the strongest independent variable with non-Hispanic whites much more likely to vote for Trump than minority persons. Residence and educational attainment were also strongly related to voting behavior. When

**Table 4. Support for Trump in the 2020 Presidential Election by Residence, Race/Ethnicity, Educational Attainment, and Income**

| Population | | | | | Estimate of Logistic Function | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Residence | Race/ Ethnicity | Educatonal Attainment | Income | N | Effect | | | | | Logit | Odds Ratio |
| [R] | [RE] | [E] | [I] | [N] | λ | λR | λRE | λE | λI | ln [P/(1–P)] | P/(1–P) |
| Nonmetro | NHWhite | NCD | Low | 2,096 | –.9004 | .5547 | 1.3083 | .7173 | –.2259 | 1.1810 | 3.2576 |
| Nonmetro | NHWhite | NCD | High | 1,261 | –.9004 | .5547 | 1.3083 | .7173 | .2259 | 1.6328 | 5.1182 |
| Nonmetro | NHWhite | CD | Low | 377 | –.9004 | .5547 | 1.3083 | –.7173 | –.2259 | –0.2506 | 0.7783 |
| Nonmetro | NHWhite | CD | High | 756 | –.9004 | .5547 | 1.3083 | –.7173 | .2259 | 0.2012 | 1.2229 |
| Nonmetro | Minority | NCD | Low | 405 | –.9004 | .5547 | –1.3083 | .7173 | –.2259 | –0.8926 | 0.4096 |
| Nonmetro | Minority | NCD | High | 155 | –.9004 | .5547 | –1.3083 | .7173 | .2259 | –0.4408 | 0.6435 |
| Nonmetro | Minority | CD | Low | 87 | –.9004 | .5547 | –1.3083 | –.7173 | –.2259 | –2.3272 | 0.0976 |
| Nonmetro | Minority | CD | High | 144 | –.9004 | .5547 | –1.3083 | –.7173 | .2259 | –1.8654 | 0.1548 |
| Metro | NHWhite | NCD | Low | 6,307 | –.9004 | –.5547 | 1.3083 | .7173 | –.2259 | 0.0746 | 1.0775 |
| Metro | NHWhite | NCD | High | 6,282 | –.9004 | –.5547 | 1.3083 | .7173 | .2259 | 0.5264 | 1.6928 |
| Metro | NHWhite | CD | Low | 1,728 | –.9004 | –.5547 | 1.3083 | –.7173 | –.2259 | –1.3600 | 0.2567 |
| Metro | NHWhite | CD | High | 7,069 | –.9004 | –.5547 | 1.3083 | –.7173 | .2259 | –0.9082 | 0.4032 |
| Metro | Minority | NCD | Low | 3,583 | –.9004 | –.5547 | –1.3083 | .7173 | –.2259 | –2.0020 | 0.1351 |
| Metro | Minority | NCD | High | 2,198 | –.9004 | –.5547 | –1.3083 | .7173 | .2259 | –1.5502 | 0.2122 |
| Metro | Minority | CD | Low | 883 | –.9004 | –.5547 | –1.3083 | –.7173 | –.2259 | –3.4366 | 0.0322 |
| Metro | Minority | CD | High | 2,562 | –.9004 | –.5547 | –1.3083 | –.7173 | .2259 | –2.9848 | 0.0505 |
| **Source** | **OF** | **Chi-Square** | **Probability** | | | | | | | | |
| Intercept | 1 | 1,206 | <.0001 | | | | | | | | |
| Residence | 1 | 305 | <.0001 | | | | | | | | |
| Race/Ethnicity | 1 | 1,566 | <.0001 | | | | | | | | |
| Educational attainment | 1 | 859 | <.0001 | | | | | | | | |
| Income | 1 | 89 | <.0001 | | | | | | | | |
| ln [P/(1–P)] = λ + λR + λRE + λE + λI | | | | | | | | | | | |

**Table 5. Anova Results of the Relationship Between Residence and Other Independent Variables on Political Issues Index**

| Variable | Anova Sum of Squares | *F*-Value |
|---|---|---|
| Residence | 2,575.3 | 636.8* |
| Race/Ethnicity | 2,420.1 | 598.4* |
| Educational attainment | 4,371.3 | 1,080.9* |
| Income | 9.6 | 2.4 |

*Statistically significant at the .01 level.

considering the effects of the other independent variables, nonmetro residents and persons without a college degree were significantly more likely to vote for Trump than persons living in metro areas and persons with a college degree. While the contribution of income was significant, this variable was much less important than the other independent variables. Persons with higher incomes were slightly more likely to vote for Trump than persons with lower incomes.

The characteristics of the person most likely to vote for Trump were someone who lived in a nonmetro community (logit = .5547), who is non-Hispanic white (logit = 1.0383), does not have a college degree (logit = .7173), and has an income greater than $100,000 (logit = .2259). The logit is computed by adding these numbers together with the intercept (–.9004). The resulting logit is 1.6328. The odds ratio is then 5.1182, which means that there are about 5.1 persons with this combination of characteristics voting for Trump for every one person with these characteristics voting for Biden. The characteristics of persons most likely to vote for Biden were metro, minority, college educated, and with an income less than $100,000. The odds ratio for this combination of characteristics is .0322, which means that for persons with this combination of characteristics, there were about three people intending to vote for Trump for every 100 persons intending to vote for Biden.

Finally, Table 5 presents the results of an ANOVA analysis of the relationship between residence and the political issues index while controlling for the other independent variables. ANOVA was chosen because the political issues index can be considered continuous, while the independent variables are categorical. Most importantly, the results make it clear that residence remains significantly related to the political index measure while considering the effects of the other independent variables. As expected, nonmetro people are more likely than metro people to select the conservative choice. The most important independent variable is educational attainment where those without a college degree are more conservative than persons with a college degree. Race/ethnicity is

also an important predictor with non-Hispanic white people being more conservative than minorities. Income was not statistically significant when the other independent variables are included in the model.

## Conclusions

Through an examination of voting behavior in the 2020 U.S. presidential election and support or opposition to six controversial political issues, this analysis found strong evidence that residing in rural areas has an impact on views and attitudes beyond what can be explained by race/ethnicity and social class. Rural residents were more likely to vote for Trump in the 2020 election and were more likely to express support for the conservative side on all of the issues explored than urban residents with the same race/ethnicity or social class characteristics. While the data support the uniqueness of rural areas, most likely these differences are less pronounced than prior to the advent of modern information and communication technology and reductions in employment differences.

The uniqueness of rural living is significant both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, a better understanding of what makes rural living unique is needed. Over 8 decades ago, Louis Wirth (1939) conjectured that rural uniqueness was a function of smaller population size and lower population density. What insights have we learned since then and what other factors explain continuing differences? Vidich and Bensman (1958) maintained that transportation and communication changes led to a reduction of rural/urban differences. In today's world, media options have proliferated and we are no longer consuming the same media (King et al. 2017). The significance of these changes for rural areas needs more scholarship. Certainly, future research should consider other variables that were not utilized in this analysis.

Practically, our need for understanding rural/urban differences is more pressing and is more than just an academic exercise. While there are millions of urban residents who voted for Trump and who express conservative views on other issues, these views are more firmly embedded in rural America as was evident in this analysis. Certainly, differing political views and attitudes are expected and needed in a democracy. Voting Republican and having conservative views in a Democracy is not a problem. Nevertheless, in the end, it is expected that a compromise agreement will be reached, and those people who are less than satisfied with the outcome will accept the decision in respect for the democratic system that produced it.

Things feel different in the United States and especially in rural America at the present time and respect for our Democratic institutions are under attack. A growing disadvantage, being ignored in the policy process, and being looked down upon by an urban elite has

resulted in deeply felt anger and frustration among many residents of rural America. As noted by Edelman (2019), these conditions have made rural America a breeding ground for racial hatred and regressive authoritarian politics.

It seems that the best way to bring about change is to reduce conditions in rural America that have resulted in extreme anger and frustration in the first place. This means doing things differently than they have been done in the past. Obviously, changes need to be made to stop the continued economic marginalization of the working class in general, and the rural working class in particular. Incomes of the median male worker reached a peak (in constant dollars) in 1973 and have never been as high since. Donovan and Bradley (2019) report that between 1979 and 2018, the median income (in constant dollars) for the average male worker declined by 5.1 percent. For white men without a college degree, buying power declined by 13 percent between 1979 and 2017 (Case and Deaton 2020). The consequence of these patterns of change is especially problematic in rural areas. These changes are the result of both technological changes where many working-class jobs have been replaced by machines and decades of policies that have favored the urban, the advantaged, and the elite at the expense of the working class and especially the rural working class. These policies have been implemented by both political parties (Kristof and WuDunn 2020). Writing about the deindustrialization of inner cities in the 1980s, William Julius Wilson (1987, 1996) discussed how the loss of jobs led to a cascade of social ills including family dissolution and substance abuse. It should come as no surprise that job loss in rural America has similar outcomes.

Overcoming economic problems in rural America is not as simple as bringing back working-class jobs. Many of these jobs are gone forever in a rapidly changing world. Economic marginalization also results from rising housing and healthcare costs and other policies that have made it increasingly difficult to achieve a quality standard of living on wages that have been stagnant for decades. Thus, how to rebuild the rural economy is a complex question that will require a broad range of programs and education and training efforts.

Moving forward, a couple of things are clear. First, rather than ignoring rural America, policy makers need to make a concerted effort to understand and consider the impacts of policy on the residents and communities of rural America (Ashwood 2018a, 2018b). Learning from the past and learning from the experiences of other nations may be a place to find workable ideas (Edelman 2020). Second, a better and more empathetic understanding of rural America is greatly needed. Excellent research conducted by rural sociologists such as Sherman (2009, 2021)

and Carolan (2020) provide vital insights. Much more of this type of research is needed.

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