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# When Rural and Urban Become “Us” versus “Them”: How a Growing Divide is Reshaping American Politics

<https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2021-2029>

**Abstract:** The United States’ long-standing broad “catch-all” political parties have historically combined voters from distinct regions of the country, each including both rural and urban dwellers. Since the late 1990s, however, rural Americans nationwide have increasingly supported the Republican Party, while urbanites have persisted in their allegiance to the Democratic Party. The growing rural-urban divide has become mapped onto American polarization in ways that are fostering tribalism. This place-based cleavage is now contributing to the transformation of the nation’s politics and that of many states. It also threatens to have deleterious effects on democracy.

**Keywords:** rural-urban divide, tribalism, racism, partisanship, Republican Party, geographic polarization

The United States long featured two broad “catch-all” political parties that each combined voters from distinct regions of the country, including both rural and urban dwellers. The most enduring place-based feature of American politics, the allegiance of the South to the Democratic Party, subsided during the mid- and late-twentieth century as non-Hispanic whites in the region increasingly gravitated to the Republican Party. Since the late 1990s, however, a new place-based cleavage has emerged as rural Americans nationwide have increasingly supported the Republican Party, while urbanites have intensified their allegiance to the Democratic Party. This new geographic divide, one that exacerbates social polarization, is contributing to the transformation of the nation’s politics.

Throughout the mid-twentieth century and as recently as the 1970s and 1980s, presidential candidates received fairly equivalent support from rural and urban dwellers, nationwide. Since the 1990s, however, the rural-urban political cleavage has grown steadily as shown in Figure 1: a 2 percentage point gap in 1992 widened to 10 points in 2000 and a full 21 points in 2020. Although the rural-urban political

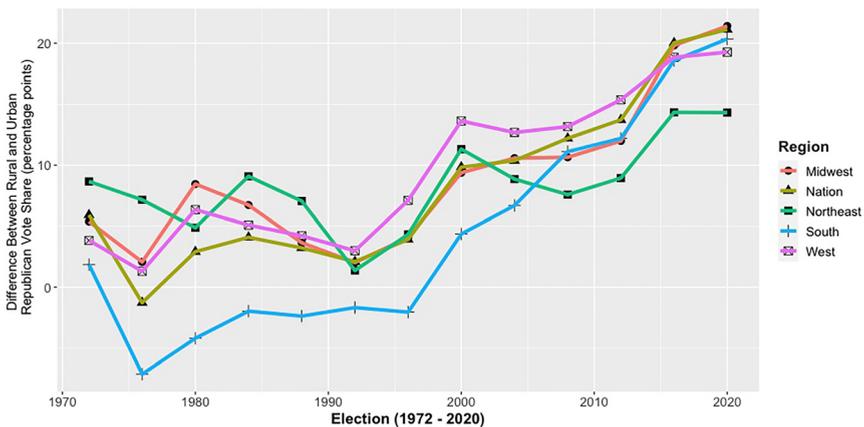
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divide in presidential voting has increased the most in the South, by 27 points between 1976 and 2020, it has widened in all regions over the same period, by seven points in the Northeast, 18 points in the West, and a striking 20 points in the Midwest.

The rural-urban divide separates people geographically who belong to different social groups, have different experiences based on the places where they live, and in some ways respond differently to similar circumstances given those place-based differences. For these reasons, this growing divide has the potential to contribute to social polarization, permeating politics with an “us” versus “them” dynamic. We argue that the rural-urban divide is contributing to the rise of tribalism, meaning strong loyalty to a group with which one identifies, such as one based on place, race, or religion, and hostility toward those outside of the group. It can spur prejudice, including but not limited to racism, xenophobia, and other forms of ethnic-based grievances. These attitudes are especially likely to transform politics if political leaders and politically-active organizations accentuate and channel them for political purposes, as conservative organizations and Republican leaders have done in recent years.

These place-based political distinctions now map onto the partisan divide in ways that make politics seem like a battle between distinct and hostile camps, with repercussions for the health of democracy. The significance of the rural-urban divide might seem paradoxical, given that only a small minority of Americans – presently 14% – live in rural counties, as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA 2018). And in fact, rural people perceive themselves to be relatively powerless: according to our analysis of the American National Election Survey (ANES 2020), 56% of those who identify as rural say that “people in rural



**Figure 1:** The rural-urban divide in presidential voting, by region.

areas have too little influence compared to people in cities,” and 66% said that they received “too little respect” compared to urbanites. Yet American political institutions, by organizing elections and representation through geographically-based political units, amplify rural political voice. Furthermore, when one party manages to garner most support from rural people, it not only accentuates rural power, but that party also gains political leverage, managing to “punch above its weight” and win more elections than it would if its voters were consolidated in urban areas. Today, the Republican Party enjoys these advantages, and its increasing dominance in rural areas is key to its success. As a result, the rural-urban divide is generating crucial political shifts at the national level as well as in many states around the country.

In this article, we explore the contours of this growing political cleavage. We first consider theoretical explanations for why this place-based political divide might foster social polarization and tribalism, and we anticipate the mechanisms through which such dynamics might operate. Then we engage in empirical analysis, considering concentrated population differences between rural and urban areas, the different experiences of rural and urban dwellers owing to place-based economic and demographic changes over time, and distinct ways rural and urban people might respond to such changes. We focus largely on non-Hispanic whites given their dominance in the population of rural areas, which heightens the potential for social polarization and its political impact.<sup>1</sup> Comparing rural and urban non-Hispanic whites, we consider their views of other racial and ethnic groups, politically-relevant identities, organizations, and social movements. Then we consider how growing tribalism is being filtered through the political system, in ways that have been altering the American political map and more recently, affecting the health of democracy itself. Understanding the rural-urban divide is crucial to bridging it and, ultimately, safe-guarding democracy.

## 1 Why Place Matters for Partisanship, Polarization, and Tribalism

Several scholars have identified a growing divergence in the lives of rural and urban people. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow argues that rural people feel “left behind” by changes in the economy, including declining population, the loss of

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<sup>1</sup> We do not assume that rural people of color will have similar attitudes or behave similarly to rural non-Hispanic whites, so we consider it crucial to analyze them separately; we plan to do this in future research.

family farms, the rise of the service economy, the closing of schools and businesses, and the ascent of economic inequality (2018). Trade liberalization owing to the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 led to the demise of manufacturing jobs through the South, including in heavily rural areas (Choi et al. 2021; Wright 2020). Imports from China, beginning in the early 1990s and intensifying in the early 2000s, heightened vulnerability particularly in some southern and midwestern states, leading to higher unemployment, lower workforce participation, and reduced wages (Autor 2013; Autor, Dorne, and Hansen 2013, 222). While many urban areas have managed to transition from an industrial economy to one revolving around services (Moretti 2012; Muro et al. 2020; Muro and Liu 2016), rural areas have faced far greater challenges in doing so.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, according to one estimate, urban areas captured a full 97% of all employment growth between 2001 and 2016 (Florida and King 2019, 7).

As the economic conditions in rural and urban areas diverged, the rural-urban political divide emerged (e.g. Cramer 2016; Gimpel et al. 2020; McKee 2008). As recently as the 1980s, rural areas barely differed from urban areas in their support for presidential candidates. Yet since the 1990s, urban areas increasingly favor Democrats while rural areas overwhelmingly support Republicans (Hopkins 2017, Chap. 6). A low-income person who lives in an urban area is most likely to be a Democrat, whereas a person with the same income in a rural area tends to be a Republican (Gimpel et al. 2020). Rural America is by no means a monolith, however; it can also be understood on a continuum, with residents in the most rural counties supporting Republican candidates most strongly and those in the most urban counties supporting Democratic candidates most strongly (Johnson and Scala 2021; Scala and Johnson 2017).

Might the national rural-urban political divide be fostering tribalism, and if so, how and why? Scholars of comparative politics have long grappled with such questions. Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan argued that political parties, by attracting particular alignments of voters, can both integrate local communities into the nation and also crystallize conflicts between them based on the particular cleavages they create (1967). As they observe, “Conflicts and controversies can arise out of a great variety of relationships in the social structure, but only a few of these tend to polarize the politics of any given system” (p. 6). The structure of partisan cleavages changes over time, affecting the degree of political polarization and whether it is driven by region, ethnicity, religion, or class, for example. Put

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<sup>2</sup> To be clear, we do not mean to suggest that economic growth in urban areas has occurred evenly or fairly for all residents. In fact, economic inequality has increased precipitously in urban areas in recent decades (Theide et al. 2020). While the growth of inequality within cities and urban counties is a pressing topic worthy of future research, it is beyond the scope of this article.

differently, a large, diverse society may be politically organized in a variety of ways, and how it is may affect both the extent of political conflict and the form it takes. As Lipset put it, when “social strata, groups, and individuals have a number of cross-cutting politically relevant affiliations,” it diffuses political conflict, whereas when individuals or groups with the same political disposition overlap, associating only with one another and becoming isolated from others, it can make people become more intolerant of other views and more supportive of extremists (1959, 95–97).

Throughout much of the twentieth century, American society and political parties featured cross-cutting cleavages, meaning that individuals and groups were, in Lipset’s terms, “pulled among conflicting forces” (1959, 95–96). Through their places of residence, workplaces, churches, and civic organizations, individuals were likely to come into contact with both Republicans and Democrats. In recent decades, however, Americans increasingly associate primarily with people who share their political views, heightening polarization between partisans (Levendusky 2009). In short, political parties now seem to be reinforcing and exacerbating social cleavages rather than cutting across and diffusing them.

Scholars find evidence that growing social polarization indeed fosters tribalism. Drawing on social psychological theory, Lilliana Mason shows that as people sort themselves out politically and socially such that affiliations become overlapping rather than cross-cutting, they tend to develop more negative and stereotypical views of each other (Mason 2018). Resentment and anger intensify, and people perceive themselves to be immersed in an existential political battle of “us” versus “them” (McCoy and Somer 2019). Such divisions likely also foster greater “negative partisanship,” meaning particularly strong negative feelings toward those in the opposing party, such that voting against it becomes a stronger motivation to people than supporting their own party. As Alan Abramowitz notes, “supporters of each party have come to perceive the other party’s supporters as very different from themselves in values and social characteristics as well as political beliefs” (2018, 5).

American society has become more racially and ethnically diverse in recent decades due to higher immigration rates, but the supporters of the two political parties do not reflect these changes equally. The composition of the Republican Party remains disproportionately white, whereas the Democratic Party features a diverse coalition that is fairly representative of the population. Since the 1980s, whites in the two parties have diverged in their views on race, with Republicans conveying greater racial resentment over time while Democrats have shifted away from such attitudes and embraced greater inclusivity and egalitarianism (Mettler and Lieberman 2020, 225–226). Growing racial resentment among Republicans

may reflect the fact that as the US population has diversified, a significant portion of the white population has come to perceive itself to be under threat and this has politicized white identity, including in rural areas (Jardina 2019, 100; Parker and Barreto 2021).

Here we focus on how the growing rural-urban divide, by separating and isolating partisans geographically, may be fostering tribalism in American politics. We posit and find evidence that three different dynamics are operating. First, we expect some *concentrated population effects*, inasmuch as the divide effectively sorts social groups – for example, by race and ethnicity, age, etc. – who are likely to affiliate with a particular party. The geographic dimension of this is captured by the popular book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, by Bill Bishop, which suggested that Americans are increasingly living in communities with people who share their politics (2008).<sup>3</sup> The reinforcing effects of associating only with people who share one’s outlook may generate tribalism in the ways suggested above.

Second, *direct place-based effects* may be at work, as people have different experiences, depending on where they live, of emergent trends affecting the economy, patterns of migration, or social and political life. As we will see, places diverge in terms of how their economies are doing and changes in the degree of racial and ethnic diversity, for example. Rural areas, which have been buffeted in recent decades by pressures from international trade and the decline of key employment sectors, are particularly likely to be struggling economically today (Acemoglu et al. 2016; Choi et al. 2021). In one of the few studies on the rural-urban political divide, political scientist Katherine Cramer finds that rural dwellers exhibit a place-based sense of identity, of “rural consciousness,” rooted in both perceived cultural fissures and a sense of distributive injustice. Specifically, she finds that rural people tend to resent urban and suburban people because they understand them to be less hard-working than themselves and pampered by paying less in taxes, reaping more in government benefits, and often employed in public-sector jobs with more comfortable working conditions and generous benefits (Cramer 2016). Such resentment may generate a sense of “us” versus “them” in politics.

Finally, it is also possible that *complex place-based effects* will occur, if rural and urban people respond differently to similar circumstances. In other words, aspects of living in rural communities – that facilitate a particular identity

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<sup>3</sup> As Johnson et al. observe, while scholars have found limited only support for one of Bishop’s claims – that “polarization is linked to greater self-selection in migration patterns” – the other has considerably validity, namely that “the country is becoming increasingly polarized ... both nationally and at a variety of spatial scales” (2018, 201).

or consciousness – might lead people to experience the same developments differently than if they lived in an urban community. The worsening economic conditions in rural areas might spur residents to respond differently to growing diversity, for example, than those in urban areas where economic growth has been more robust. Any of these three dynamics or a combination of them emanating from the rural-urban divide might be driving tribalism. In the next section, we will explore these possibilities empirically, and then we will consider how – to the extent tribalism is present and growing – it may be channeled through the political system.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that we are *not* arguing that rural people are intrinsically predisposed toward tribalism or racism any more than urban dwellers. Indeed, the agrarian Populists of the late nineteenth century aimed to build a broad cross-racial coalition of rural and urban dwellers, and conversely, examples abound of bigotry-driven politics in urban life (e.g. Sanders 1999; Sugrue 1996; Trounstein 2018). Rather, we suggest that the emergence and character of the rural-urban divide is dependent on historically-contingent political circumstances (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 269–281), the particular alignment of parties and issues, and the role of political leaders and organizations, as discussed above and shown below, that can mobilize some issues and concerns into politics while depressing the significance of others.

## 2 Methods and Data

In this paper, we draw on a number of sources to investigate the rural-urban divide. The individual-level survey data to proxy attitudes and vote choice come primarily from two sources: the Cooperative Election Study (formerly the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, CCES) and the American National Election Survey (2020). In addition to considering individual correlates commonly associated with political behavior that are included in those surveys, throughout we also use respondents’ zip codes, when available, to match their place of residence with county-level data tapping economic characteristics, demographics, and rurality.

Most of the economic data, including on employment and GDP growth, are drawn from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (2020), housed within the U.S. Department of Commerce. Demographic data are retrieved from various surveys conducted by the U.S. Census. Our central measure of rurality is from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The OMB and USDA construct a nine category rural-urban continuum based on counties’ (1) population density and (2) proximity to a major metropolitan

area (USDA 2020a). That continuum can then be collapsed into a measure of “rural” and “urban,” with densely populated and major metropolitan counties considered urban and non-metro counties considered rural.<sup>4</sup>

While we are able to use this measure for analysis of the Cooperative Election Study, we lack the data necessary to match it to the 2020 ANES data. There, instead we rely on a question that asks respondents about how they identify, as rural or urban. Though we recognize this is distinct from an objective place-based measure of rurality, we nevertheless believe that it taps important divides driving tribalism in American politics. We demonstrate such divides below.

## 3 Examining Place-Based Politics and Tribalism

### 3.1 Concentrated Population Differences

We begin by considering how rural and urban populations may vary from each other in individual characteristics, such that differences are concentrated or clustered, potentially exacerbating social polarization. As displayed in Table 1, according to the 2015–2019 American Community Survey (ACS), college graduates are far more prevalent in urban areas, where 34% of adults age 25 and above hold a four-year degree or more, compared to just 20% in rural areas. Rural dwellers tend to be older: while 21% of urbanites are age 60 or older, a full quarter of rural people are above the age of 60. Evangelicals are also more prevalent in rural areas, at 43.2% of the population compared to 31.7%.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to racial and ethnic diversity, rural counties are comprised predominantly of non-Hispanic whites, far more so than the general population, but less so than is often assumed. The total rural population is roughly 78% non-Hispanic white, while this group makes up about 57% of urban areas. Rural counties vary in diversity, and according to our analysis of the American Community Survey (ACS), roughly 11% feature a majority of non-white residents.<sup>6</sup> Generally, the portion of the population that is non-Hispanic white increases with

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<sup>4</sup> As Scala and Johnson (2017, 166) point out, most suburbs are contained within the USDA’s metro/urban definition.

<sup>5</sup> Because the US Census Bureau does not report estimates on religious adherence, we rely on the CCES for these estimates.

<sup>6</sup> Data analyzed here include five-year county level averages from the American Community Survey, for years 2015–2019 (US Census Bureau 2019). Analysis further shows that about 460 or 14% of US counties had non-white majorities, and among rural counties, 11%. Of the rural counties, 64 or 3%, are majority black, and 74, or 4% are majority Hispanic (US Census Bureau 2019).

rurality: on the nine point urban-rural continuum, discussed above, this group makes up 52% of the population in the most urban counties and 83% in the most rural counties.

The population differences described above mean that rural areas concentrate together people who may share common outlooks and for whom living together creates a sense of shared identity (e.g. Cramer 2016). Communities often define themselves in part by contrast to those perceived to be outside of their boundaries, and the extent to which they regard outsiders with hostility is likely heightened when political leaders and organizations take action to elicit and accentuate such responses and to mobilize them into politics.

### 3.2 Place-Based Differences in Social and Economic Developments

Several place-based differences between rural and urban communities – ways in which they are confronted by changing circumstances – may also matter. For one, rural areas have experienced economic decline in recent decades. According to our analysis of data from the BEA, from 2008 to 2020, employment grew by less than 1.6% overall in rural counties, compared to 15.6% in urban counties, also shown in Table 1. Over that same time period, average annual GDP growth in urban areas, at 1.2% annually, dwarfed growth of 0.7% in rural areas. In 2019, the poverty rate in

**Table 1:** Demographic and economic characteristics of rural and urban counties.

	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>
Share of population with a four-year degree	20%	34%
Share of population who is 60 and older	25%	21%
Share of population who identifies as non-Hispanic white	78%	57%
Share of population who identifies as Evangelical	43%	31%
Employment growth (2008–2020)	1.6%	15.6%
Average annual GDP growth (2008–2020)	0.7%	1.2%
Share of population living in poverty (2019)	15.4%	11.9%
Average manufacturing layoffs per worker (2008–2016)	0.1	0.05
Share of workforce in the “knowledge economy”	6.6%	14.8%
Average trade vulnerability score to Chinese imports	1.02	0.94

All demographic data, except for that on Evangelical status, come from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (2015–2019). Data on employment growth, GDP growth, and knowledge economy come from the BEA (2020), while the statistics on poverty are from the USDA (2020b). Data on trade exposure were retrieved from Autor et al. (2020) and analyzed independently; data on layoffs were secured from Baccini and Weymouth (2021) and examined independently.

rural areas, at 15.4% of the population, exceeded that in urban areas, where it stood at 11.9% (USDA 2020b).

Larger shares of rural workforces are employed in manufacturing, extractive industries, and agriculture, all sectors that are struggling in the modern economy (Moretti 2012). This is reflected in the higher average manufacturing layoffs per worker in rural areas: 0.1 compared to 0.05 in urban areas. Urban areas have excelled in gaining more jobs in the so-called “knowledge economy,” which now employs 14.8% of urban workers, compared to just 6.6% in rural areas, according to our calculations. When it comes to trade vulnerability, rural counties have been more likely to experience it. According to a trade vulnerability score devised by and retrieved from Autor et al. (2020), the average rural county scores 1.02, compared to 0.94 for the average urban county, in terms of vulnerability to Chinese imports from early 1990s to mid-2000s. While this difference is modest, in separate analysis, we find that rural counties predominate among the quartile of those counties most adversely affected by trade.<sup>7</sup> These stark differences mean that rural people have very different experiences of life in the contemporary United States based on the places in which they live. The poor economy in rural areas could foster resentment among residents toward those in urban areas.

As immigration increased in recent decades, many rural counties underwent change in terms of their racial and ethnic diversity. From 1990 onward, Hispanics – the largest immigrant group over this period – settled not only in established urban destinations but also in new rural ones, particularly in the South and Midwest (Lichter et al. 2010, 218–219). In rural areas, the Hispanic population increased by 44.6% between 2000 and 2010 (Lichter 2012, 4). Meanwhile, as political polarization increased, the parties diverged in their commitment to policies aimed to foster racial and ethnic equality and their stance on immigration.

These developments beg the question of how non-Hispanic whites in rural areas, compared to those in urban areas, would respond to growing diversity, both in terms of their attitudes toward people of color as well as their political behavior. On the first relationship, two theories have prevailed. The “threat” approach anticipates that as the local population becomes more diverse, individuals may feel that their position is threatened by competition for scarce resources, particularly if members of an outgroup appear to be making political or economic gains. As a result, the “threatened” group may express greater antipathy. By contrast, the “contact” theory holds that racial attitudes are

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that rural counties also predominate among the quartile least adversely affected; we suspect the latter groups includes counties that did not feature much manufacturing to begin with, and did not suffer from its loss.

learned early in life, but can be unlearned through greater social contact, implying that individuals living in more diverse environments may shift from more racist attitudes toward more inclusive and egalitarian ones (e.g. Arora 2020; Branton and Jones 2005; Oliver 2010; Oliver and Mendelberg 2000). Empirical research finds that threat operates in some but not all circumstances (e.g. Hill, Hopkins, and Huber 2019; Mayda, Peri, and Steingrass 2018; Newman, Shah, and Collingwood 2018; Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2019). National political elites and the media, moreover, can activate threat, for example by stoking anxiety over racialized conceptions of crime (Gilliam, Valentino, and Backman 2002; Hopkins 2010).

### 3.3 Assessing Tribalism: Views of Groups and Parties

We begin our consideration of tribalism by assessing several indicators from the ANES (2020) that asked people to report how they rate various groups, on a “feeling thermometer,” with a scale of 0–100. For reasons discussed above, we have limited the respondents to non-Hispanic whites. We compare respondents who identify as “rural” with those who identify as “urban.”<sup>8</sup>

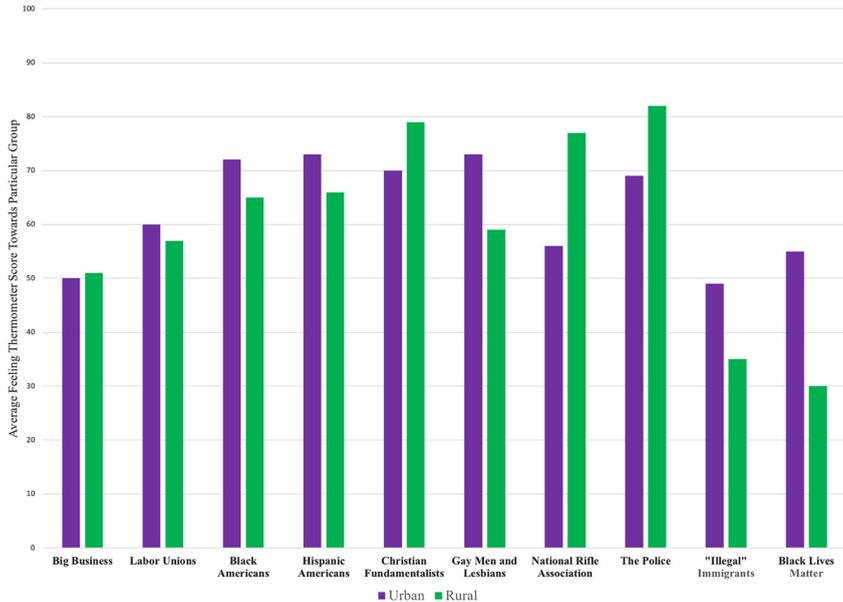
As becomes evident in Figure 2, rural and urban whites barely differ at all in their assessments of some groups, namely big business and labor unions. They differ by seven points in both their rankings of Black Americans and Hispanics, with rural people offering lower ratings. Rural and urban respondents diverge to much greater extents in their assessment of other groups, not least rural dwellers themselves, whom urbanites rank 16 points lower than rural dwellers’ own self-assessment.<sup>9</sup> They also diverge in assessments of Christian fundamentalists and the National Rifle Association, ranked by urbanites, respectively, at 11 points and 21 points lower than rural people; and gays and lesbians, whom rural people rank 13 points lower than do urban dwellers.

Larger gaps separate responses that pertain to law and order, such as when asked about the police – for whom rural dwellers have responses that are 12 points higher on average – and “illegal” immigrants, ranked 14 points lower by rural people. The most striking gap occurs for Black Lives Matter, which non-Hispanic white urban dwellers assign a 54 on average, while rural people offer an average

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<sup>8</sup> “Urban” respondents include those who identify as either a “suburban” or “city” person. Those who identify as “small town” were dropped from the analysis given the ambiguity of the phrase. In general, respondents identifying as “small town” tended to score between rural and urban respondents.

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the survey did not include a feeling thermometer question about urban people.

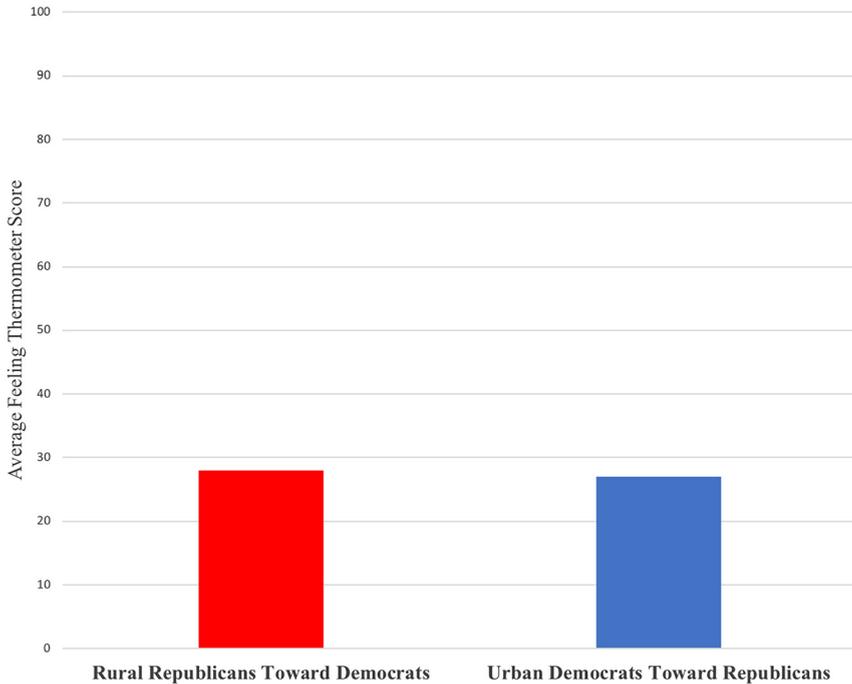


**Figure 2:** Feelings towards various groups among non-Hispanic whites, by rural and urban identity. ANES (2020).

score of 30 – the lowest assessment offered for any group, and 24 points below urbanites, reflecting by far the widest gap of all.

We also consider feeling thermometer responses by all partisans and partisan leaners in each place when they are asked about those in the opposing party. In recent decades, partisans have increasingly given very low assessments of their fellow citizens in the other party. As seen in Figure 3, among them, partisans in different locations offer the most scathing assessment of each other. White urban Democrats rate Republicans at just 27 points on average, while white rural Republicans' feelings toward Democrats are hardly much better, at 28 points. It should be noted that the only other comparably low score noted above is rural residents' feelings toward Black Lives Matter, making these attitudes the most virulent feelings of tribalism conveyed here.

To put these assessments in context, the majority of those who identify as urban today tend to support Democrats in elections while rural identifiers support Republicans. According to our analysis of the ANES, in 2020, for example, urban non-Hispanic whites voted for Biden at a rate of 59%, while rural non-Hispanic



**Figure 3:** Negative partisanship among non-Hispanic whites, by rural and urban identity. ANES (2020).

whites group supported Trump at a rate of 80%.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, in the same year, 69% of rural non-Hispanic whites identified as Republican, while just 42% of white urbanites did.

### 3.4 Considering Racial Resentment

Now we consider the broader question of how rural and urban people compare in terms of racism. To investigate the intersection of racism and the rural-urban divide, we use racial resentment scores derived from the Cooperative Election Study (CES). Developed by Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders in the 1980s, racial

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**10** It should be noted, also, that many of the social groups noted above for which rural or urban dwellers offer the strongest antipathy are highly politicized groups and are associated with the opposing party. Possibly tribalism toward particular groups is driving negative partisanship, though the reverse dynamic may also be occurring; investigating these “chicken and egg” questions lies beyond our scope in this article.

resentment questions have traditionally been asked to probe anti-Black sentiments among non-Hispanic whites, particularly as so-called “old fashioned” racism became socially undesirable in the late-twentieth century (for an overview, see Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo 2010). Scholars find that answers to these questions tend to correspond to individuals’ views toward other racial minorities and immigrants as well. In 2012 and 2020, the CCES asked two of the traditional racial resentment questions.<sup>11</sup> Following other scholars (e.g. see Tesler 2016), we average the responses for both questions to assign each respondent a racial resentment score, and place it on a scale from 0–100.<sup>12</sup>

We find that rural non-Hispanic whites exhibit significantly higher racial resentment scores overall than those living in urban areas; the average difference is about eight percentage points, which is statistically significant at conventional levels.<sup>13</sup> This is an important place-based difference in attitudes between rural and urban dwellers.

We furthermore find a complex place-based effect, namely that rural and urban white people respond differently to greater levels of diversity. As shown in Figure 4, as the share of a county that is non-white increases, urban whites become less racially resentful, while rural whites become more so. These estimates were derived from multivariate, multilevel regression models in which rurality was interacted with the share of non-whites at the county level with racial resentment as the dependent variable; these models included controls for age, education, family income, as well as other correlates typically associated with racial resentment.<sup>14</sup> In short, the “threat” theory described above seems to explain the reaction of rural whites, while the “contact” theory explains how urban whites respond. In fact, most rural whites live in places with little racial diversity, but those whose counties have seen larger influxes of immigration in recent decades may have shifted to greater resentment. This pattern likely also picks up on whites who live in what have long been counties with a majority of non-white residents; indeed, as far back as the 1890s, whites living in predominantly Black counties in

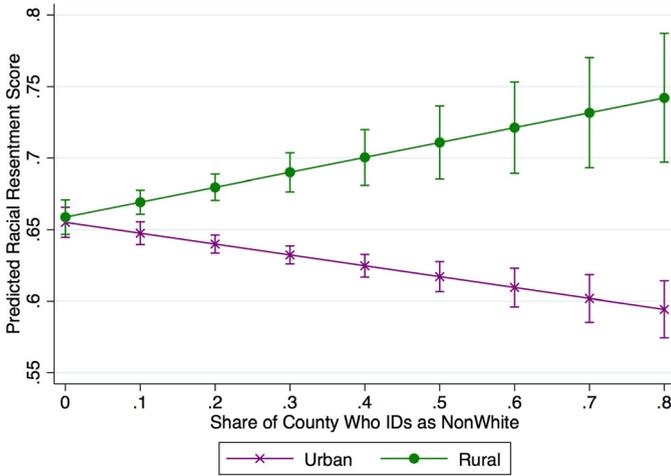
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**11** Specifically, respondents were asked, on a five-point scale, how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following two statements: “The Irish, Italians, Jews and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors” and “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.”

**12** Our descriptive and regression results remain substantively similar when using factor analysis to assign racial resentment scores to respondents.

**13** While racial resentment scores are usually placed on a 0–1 scale, here we transform them for ease of interpretation.

**14** We use multilevel models to account for the structure of our data, including individual- and county-level factors, as well as the fact that individuals are clustered within counties.



**Figure 4:** How county-level diversity relates to racial resentment among non-Hispanic whites.

the South most strongly supported suffrage restrictions to disenfranchise Blacks, thereby cementing their own political dominance for the next 60 years (Kousser 1974, Chap. 6).

### 3.5 Racial Diversity, Racial Resentment, and Vote Choice

How might the degree of racial resentment of rural and urban people affect vote choice in presidential elections? Using similar statistical methods as discussed above to predict vote choice, we find that among non-Hispanic whites, racial resentment is associated with voting for Republicans in both urban and rural areas, but an interactive effect is not present.<sup>15</sup> In other words, racial resentment does not activate rural whites politically in a distinct manner, at least when it comes to selecting presidential candidates (Brown and Mettler 2021). Nonetheless, although racial resentment operates to a similar effect among rural and urban whites, its higher levels among the former group is one factor that helps to explain their stronger levels of support for Republican presidential candidates.

Now we consider how racial diversity of places might be associated with vote choice. In one set of models, we found no relationship between a county’s level of

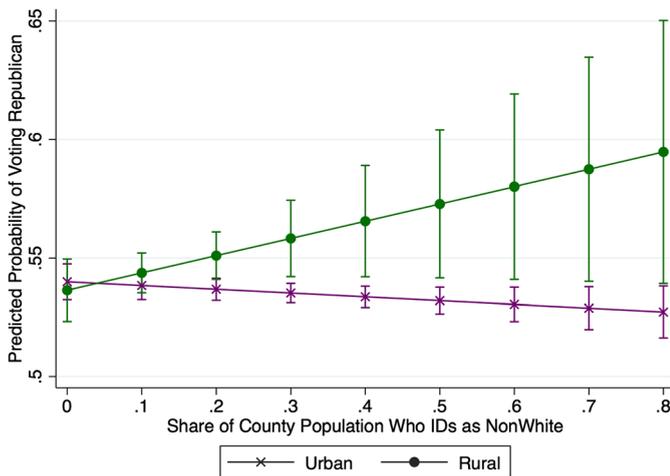
<sup>15</sup> Specifically, when we interact rurality with racial resentment in multivariate regression with individual-level vote choice as the outcome variable, we do not find that racial resentment operates differently among rural voters relative to urban ones, at least at statistically significant levels.

racial diversity and vote choice. Yet when we interact rurality with the share of non-whites at the county level, we find the interactive term to be significant, indicating a distinct place-based effect. As displayed in Figure 5, even after controlling for individual levels of racial resentment, as the share of people of color grows in rural areas, non-Hispanic white residents are more likely to vote for Republicans. In urban areas, the relationship is still insignificant. We would note that the confidence intervals are very large for rural dwellers at high levels of county diversity, suggesting considerable variation among them; possibly there are systematic reasons underlying this heterogeneity, and we plan to explore it in future research.

In sum, rural whites register higher racial resentment than urban whites, and for both groups, such attitudes act similarly in their relationship to voting for Republican presidential candidates. Rural whites also respond differently than urban whites to higher levels of non-whites in the places where they live. Immigration and the growing diversity in population that it has brought to some rural areas likely explain some of the heightened racial resentment and growing support for the Republican Party in those places. In these ways, rural people, perhaps due to worsening economic conditions, appear to be responding somewhat differently than urbanites to changes in American society, evidence of what we call “complex place-based effects.”

### 3.6 Racism, Immigration, and Law and Order

Differences in rural and urban whites’ abstract attitudes toward particular racial and ethnic groups are particularly striking when they are asked about these groups



**Figure 5:** How county-level diversity relates to vote choice among non-Hispanic whites.

in relation to law and order or the criminal justice system. This was evident in the “feeling thermometer” assessment above in which rural dwellers expressed particularly negative views of Black Lives Matter – matched only by rural Republicans’ view of Democrats. Several other questions from the ANES (2020) highlight additional large differences in rural and urban non-Hispanic whites’ views about how blacks are treated by the police, the legality of immigration, border control, and related issues.

According to our analysis of the ANES (2020), when asked whether police treat blacks or whites better, the majority of urban whites – 68% – say that whites are treated better, while the majority of rural whites – 61% – say that both are treated the same. Asked how often police officers use more force than necessary, the majority of rural whites – 61% – say “never” or “rarely,” compared to just 47% of urban whites. Another question asked whether in recent months, protestors had been mostly peaceful or mostly violent. The plurality of urban dwellers – 42% – indicated that they had been peaceful, while the majority of rural respondents – 56% – said they had been violent.

Perhaps the most noteworthy differences come in response to another question that asks the best way to deal with urban unrest, on a scale from 1 to 7, from “to correct the problems of racism and police violence that give rise to the disturbances,” to “use all available force to maintain law and order, no matter what the results.” The majority of white urbanites – 55% – gave answers at the low end of the scale, favoring action to deal with racism and police violence, while the majority of rural dwellers – 60% – gave answers at the high end of the scale, favoring greater force by police.

Finally, rural and urban whites diverged sharply in views about immigration and crime. One question asked respondents whether border spending should be increased or decreased in the federal budget, to which 67% of rural non-Hispanic whites say it should be increased, compared to just 40% of urban whites. Another budget question asked about funds to deal with crime; 65% of white rural dwellers support an increase, compared to 48% of the urbanites.

While striking, such gaps do not emerge from thin air. During the 2020 presidential campaign, particularly once the Black Lives Matter protests took off starting in June, Trump frequently lambasted cities run by Democratic mayors for an increase in crime. It is hardly new for politicians to emphasize crime and to invoke law and order in racially coded ways that are targeted to white voters: such efforts began in the 1960s and 1970s, and precipitated sentencing laws that in turn led to mass incarceration among men of color (Hinton 2017; Weaver 2007). Today, such messages likely speak directly to the Republican rural base, tapping into a blend of anti-urban, anti-Democrat, anti-Black, and anti-Latino sentiments. This is exemplified by a Republican National Committee 2021 tweet, “Crime is escalating

to a level we haven't seen in decades as a direct result of Democrats' defund the police movement and Biden-Harris open border policies" (Greenberg 2021).

Besides politicians, organizations help mobilize people around issues, including those noted above. The Republican Party at the local level has been assisted in recent years by organizations such as Fraternal Order of Police lodges and gun clubs affiliated with the National Rifle Association (Lacombe 2021; Zoorob 2019; Zoorob and Skocpol 2020). Indeed, we find that the latter are currently more prevalent in rural counties, and that lodge density is highly significant and associated with Republic vote choice (Brown and Mettler 2021). Meanwhile, labor unions—which have been shown to reduce racial resentment among whites (Frymer and Grumbach 2020)—are especially sparse in rural areas. In short, appeals from organizations and politicians that connect race and law and order tap deeply into the rural-urban divide and provide a potent means of political mobilization.

In sum, contemporary American politics appear to be evoking considerable antipathy across the rural-urban divide and generating tribalism particularly from rural areas. This is a recent development, one that has emerged over the past quarter-century, with growing momentum. Several particular mechanisms serve to facilitate it, as we have seen, including concentrated population effects, direct place-based effects, and complex place-based effects. Once unleashed and accentuated by political elites and organizations, tribalism emanating from less-populated places is magnified in American politics through political and institutional arrangements, to which we now turn.

## 4 Tribalism Magnified Through Political Structure

The fact that Republicans' new supporters hail disproportionately from rural areas make them particularly valuable politically, because several features of American electoral institutions give rural people an outsized voice in politics. When one party dominates rural areas, furthermore, these advantages accrue to enable that party to gain extra leverage in the political system generally. In the US Senate, the allotment of two Senate seats to each state regardless of population makes it one of the most malapportioned and powerful upper chambers in advanced democracies (Stepan and Linz 2011). With most disproportionately rural states today consolidated in the Republican Party, it enjoys extra power in the Senate, even when in the minority, owing to the filibuster and other Senate rules. The Electoral College, though less biased than the Senate, awards votes to states based on the combination of their Senate and House seats, so it also grants extra power to sparsely populated states by awarding each a minimum of three votes. The use of single-member geographic districts for electing Members of the

US House of Representatives and the nation’s state legislatures, paired with the growing concentration of Democrats in urban areas, means that these institutions especially advantage Republicans today because their voters are more efficiently distributed as the majority in less-densely populated areas (Rodden 2019).

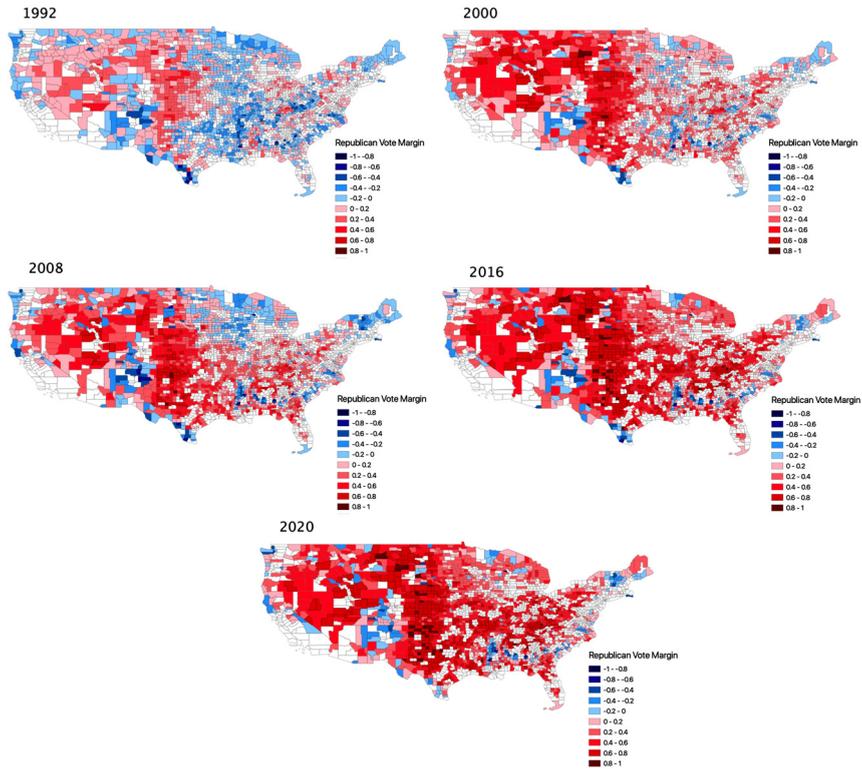
Republicans’ growing control of these institutional levers, fueled by the rural-urban divide, has been politically consequential, altering the electoral map. Although cities have become increasingly Democratic since the 1930s (Hopkins 2017), heavily rural states still elected numerous Democrats to Congress and statehouses as recently as the 1980s and 1990s. That has become rare, however, over the past two decades. Republicans’ gains at the state level have been particularly striking: after decades of Democratic dominance of both state legislatures and governorships, the GOP’s fortunes changed starting in 1994, and they have controlled the majority of both in most years since, and consistently since 2011 (Brown, Mettler, and Puzzi 2021).

Several disproportionately rural states – meaning any of the 27 states in which more than 25% of residents live in rural areas – that had long featured competitive races in national elections evolved in the 1990s or early 2000s into Republican strongholds, casting their electoral votes for Republican candidates for president, electing more Republican House and Senate members, and/or flipping their statehouses to Republican control. These states include, for example, Arkansas, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, and West Virginia. Others that more reliably elected Democrats for president have become swing states, such as Michigan and Wisconsin, and increasingly, Minnesota. The only states that have recently flipped in some election results toward the Democrats happen to be those with larger urban populations, notably Arizona and Georgia in 2020 presidential and Senate contests. The nation’s partisan divide has molded itself along the rural-urban geographic cleavage, and the widening polarization that has resulted shows no signs of abating.

In order to illustrate these trends, we have created several maps of county-level results in rural counties for presidential elections from 1992 to 2020, as shown in Figure 6, using data from Dave Leips’s *Atlas of US Presidential Elections* (Leips 2020).<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that, as of 2021, rural counties make up 62% of all counties in the nation. In 1992, rural counties were highly competitive, and

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<sup>16</sup> Because the categorization of counties change over time, to hold this constant, we use the 2003 USDA’s rural-urban definition—a year close to the center of our time span of observation—to assign rurality to each county for each election year (USDA 2003). Moreover, to save space, we have excluded the second election of two-term presidents, including 1996, 2004, and 2012; these maps each closely mirror the previous election.



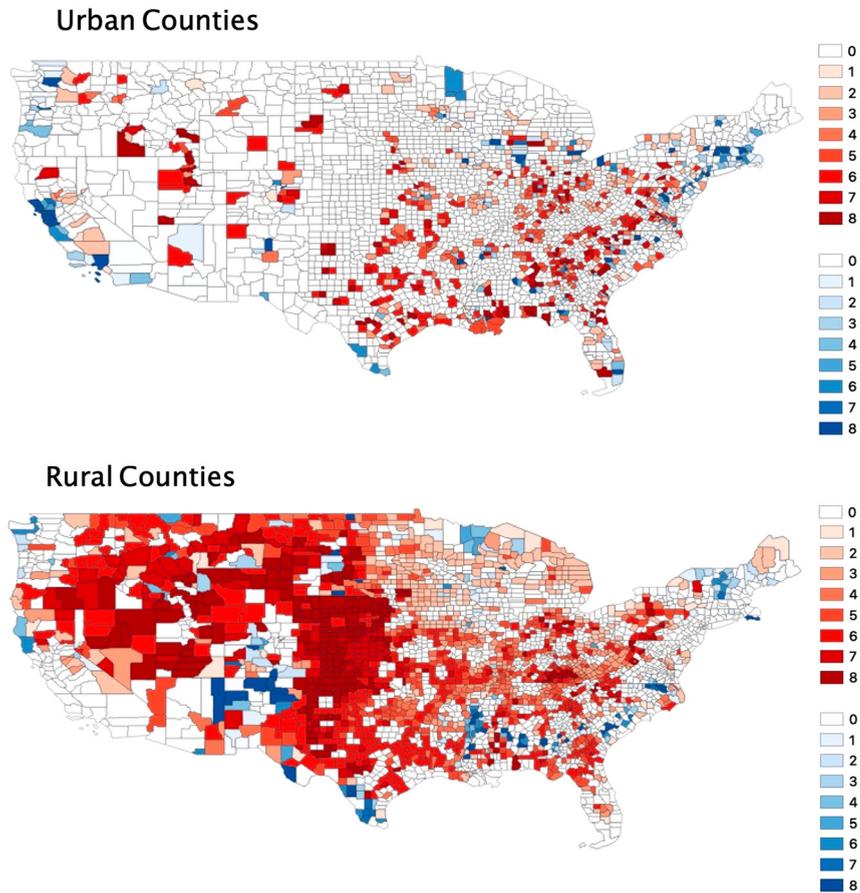
**Figure 6:** Republican ascent: electoral margins in rural counties, selected presidential elections 1992–2020.

Democratic candidate Bill Clinton won just as many of them as his opponent, George HW Bush, according to our analysis. By 2000 and in 2004, Republican candidate George W. Bush not only won a considerably larger share of rural counties—more than 80% in 2000 and 85% in 2004—but he did so with larger margins than Republicans candidates preceding him in the 1990s. Democratic candidate Barack Obama won back some rural counties in 2008, when Republicans prevailed in 77 percent of them, but by 2012 Romney gained back several for the party, winning in 83 percent of them. In 2016 and 2020, Trump dominated rural counties, winning a striking 90% in both years, and with particularly large margins.

In short, from 1992, the nation transitioned from a competitive rural map to one dominated by deep red, and even victorious Democratic candidates in more recent years, including Obama and Biden, did not manage to reverse the trend. While

especially acute in the South, these trends also appear notably salient in Midwestern “swing” states, helping Republicans in national and state elections.

As a way to further examine geographical polarization, in Figure 7 we show counties where one presidential candidate enjoyed a landslide, with the lower map highlighting rural counties only and the upper map, urban counties only. A landslide is defined here as an election in which a candidate for one of the two major parties beats the other by 20 percentage points or more, following Johnson et al. (2018). The deeper the color, the greater the number of landslides the party won over the elections from 1992 to 2020. Republican candidates clearly dominate the rural map with landslides, which occurred in 82.1% of rural counties over



**Figure 7:** Republican and Democratic landslides, urban and rural counties, in presidential elections 1992–2020.

the period. In fact, 59% of rural counties experienced four or more GOP landslides over the period. By contrast, a much small number of rural counties – 19.7% – experienced any Democratic ones. When it comes to urban counties, there are a number dominated by Democrats – 25.4% experienced landslides by the party – but also a surprising number where Republicans prevailed by large margins, netting 60.1% of landslides. Clearly, the growing rural-urban political divide is permitting the GOP to dominate large swathes of the American landscape.

As the rural-urban divide has mapped onto contemporary American parties and electoral institutions to the benefit of Republicans, it has effectively magnified tribalism in American politics. This is changing the character of American politics in fundamental ways. Republican political leaders may have long made subtle appeals to voters with racist and nativist inclinations, but as recently as the 1980s and early 1990s, in public office many supported expansions of civil rights and voting rights and the liberalization of immigration. That has changed more recently.

In addition, Republican leaders have become willing to fuel resentment, including in ways that have the potential to undermine basic pillars of democracy. Rising polarization and conflict over who belongs as a member of the political community are both known threats to such features as free and fair elections, the rule of law, and the integrity of rights (Mettler and Lieberman 2020). As polarization and negative partisanship grow, partisans may become willing to go to any lengths to protect their “team,” for example to prevent their candidate from losing an election, regardless of the impact on democratic procedures. Similarly, as conflict over who belongs as a member of the political community intensifies, those who seek to preserve or restore an older social order may feel it is necessary to do so at all costs, even if democratic norms are damaged along the way. On the night of the January 6 insurrection on the Capitol, for example, Republicans who represent rural congressional districts were particularly willing to vote against accepting the results of the Electoral College in some states (Mettler and Brown forthcoming).

## 5 Conclusions

Throughout much of American history, political institutions from slavery through Jim Crow sanctioned and perpetuated tribalism in the form of overt racism. In the mid-twentieth century, its chief defenders dominated the Democratic Party in the South and in Congress, but over time they became increasingly at odds with their fellow partisans, including urban northerners and African Americans. In the wake of the enactment of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights

Act, this marriage became untenable. Meanwhile, Republican leaders sought to court such voters, using tacit appeals to racism, ranging from Richard Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” to dog whistle comments by Ronald Reagan and the Willie Horton ad featured in the George H.W. Bush campaign (Mendelberg 2001). It was not until the late 1990s, however, that rural southern whites flocked to the Republican Party en masse, as we saw in Figure 1. There they joined their rural compatriots from across the nation who already populated the GOP to a greater extent, and who also dramatically increased their allegiance to it from the late 1990s onward. At the same time, more educated people – who live disproportionately in more urban places – gradually flocked away from the Republican Party and toward the Democratic Party (Kitschelt and Rehm 2019). These different groups of voters changed the composition of both parties and they brought to them different place-based experiences and reactions to major shifts in the US economy and society.

A confluence of factors thus came together to drive between rural and urban dwellers a deep political wedge, one that has come to map neatly onto a deeply polarized party system and to foster tribalism. By the time Trump announced his candidacy in 2015 and appealed to racist and nativist sentiments far more overtly than his Republican forebears, supporters of the party of Lincoln had long since gravitated toward these views (Lee 2019). Trump, and gradually more Republican officials and candidates, exploited them for political gain.

People who identify as rural feel as though they receive too little respect and have too little influence compared to urban people. Despite holding outsized institutional power in American politics, this might not seem so surprising: for example, rural people have been hit especially hard by major economic transformations in recent decades, while facing a dramatically changing demographic landscape. As such, Republican leaders’ embrace of racialized grievance politics proves powerfully attractive. In fact, Trump used what might have appeared to be a surprising campaign strategy in 2020: “doubling down” on grievance politics to court base voters rather than trying to reach additional ones (Galvin 2020). While he missed winning re-election, nonetheless he gained more votes than any prior Republican candidate for the presidency and he proved to have long coattails, helping the GOP to gain seats in the House of Representatives and in state legislatures.

The Republican Party’s insistence on stoking division coupled with rural dwellers’ resentment portends a tumultuous period ahead in American politics. As we have seen, appeals to racism and nativism paired with law and order themes generate particularly strong responses among rural non-Hispanic whites. The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014, its escalation in 2020 following the killing of George Floyd, and calls by progressives to “defund the

police” likely spurred rural people to greater political anger and higher rates of participation in the 2020 presidential election. As the increasingly urban Democratic Party embraces racial equality and social justice more vociferously, it may continue to spark hostility, especially among rural non-Hispanic whites.

These political patterns are by no means inevitable.<sup>17</sup> Not long ago, Democrats competed effectively in many rural areas, and, as of 2020, roughly 31% still identify with the party. In future research, we aim to investigate what became of Democrats’ organizing efforts in rural areas since the 1990s, and how changes in the constellation of organizations mattered. We will also examine other explanations for the rural-urban divide, weigh them relative to the dynamics we have presented here, and explore how they may interact.

The fact that rural voters hold particularly strong leverage in American electoral institutions means that the nation’s politics may continue to be buffeted by tribalism for some time to come. Although rural voters feel relatively powerless, they enjoy extra leverage in national politics. In the contemporary polity, conservative political leaders and organizations are marshalling their political influence to privilege a politics infused by resentment and tribalism, and in which basic procedures of democracy may seem expendable. Understanding the rural-urban divide is crucial to mitigating its harmful effects.

**Acknowledgments:** We thank Ashley Jardina and Tali Mendelberg for their helpful comments on this paper. We are also grateful to participants of the American Politics Workshop at Cornell University, the American Politics Workshop at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and those at a convening of the American Democracy Collaborative for suggestions on work we presented previously that led to the development of this paper. The research was funded by a New Frontier Grant from the Dean’s Office of the College of Arts and Sciences, Cornell University.

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<sup>17</sup> This estimate is derived from the 2020 CCES. The 31% figure refers to all rural dwellers, including people of color. Among non-Hispanic rural whites, 26% identify as Democrats.

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