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Introduction

RURAL AND URBAN BECOMES “US” VERSUS “THEM”

PATRICE HAWKINS, a Black woman in her forties, serves as the Democratic Party chairperson in a poor rural county in eastern North Carolina’s coastal plains.¹ Both the Democratic and Republican Parties aim to have such leaders in place in counties nationwide, because they are responsible for organizing the party at the grassroots level, and recruiting local candidates and mobilizing support for them. Some years ago, Hawkins—wanting to make a positive difference in her community—started attending the meetings of the local Democratic Party. The mostly older members welcomed her, and within a few months they selected her to be an officer; soon after, when the county chairperson resigned, she found herself catapulted into their job.

It’s hard work because, as in most rural counties, in recent decades local support for Democratic candidates has declined precipitously and the party’s membership has sharply diminished. Hawkins says wistfully, “We used to be a swing county that made or broke an election in the state.” But no longer. And a Democratic congressman, Bill Hefner, had represented the county from 1975 to 1999; he was one of the few Southerners to vote against the Reagan tax cuts in order to protect existing programs, and he also channeled resources to the area through his role on the Appropriations Committee. In the twenty-first century, by contrast, Republicans have held the seat in most years, and they have made

strong gains in down-ticket races as well. Now, typically, when Hawkins calls a local party meeting, just twenty people will show up, and although white people make up more than half of county residents, only three now attend.

As if these challenges weren't enough, the growing vitriol and extremism on the part of local Republicans can make things feel personal and threatening. Though Trump supporters feel free to "ride around with signs on their cars," Hawkins says, "I had my Biden–Harris bumper sticker on my car, and somebody told me, 'I should run your ass right off the road.'" After that, her son grew nervous and said to her, "Mama, take that sticker off the car."

Beginning in the late 1990s, a vast gulf emerged across the political landscape, dividing white rural Americans—those living in the countryside and small towns—from urban Americans, in both cities and suburbs. It did not merely divide "coastal elites" from the heartland, or "red states" from "blue states"; rather, it runs throughout the nation, fracturing nearly every state and permeating even down-ballot elections. Republican candidates have come to seem unbeatable in most rural places, and Democrats—who have dominated the largest cities since the New Deal—bolstered their support in metro areas and gained an advantage in the suburbs that surround them. This fault line changed politics on either side, so that many people not only vote differently but also view one another as political opponents, or even as members of hostile tribes or sects. In short, the United States has become profoundly polarized by place. We have yet to fully understand, however, why this divide emerged nationwide or how it is affecting the nation's politics.

We began our research by exploring these questions from afar. We collected and analyzed data spanning roughly five decades, examining thousands of counties, the individuals who live in them, and the elected officials who represent them. We wanted to learn more about rural places in particular, because that is where politics has changed most dramatically. We hit the road and drove thousands of miles to visit rural counties. We visited primarily counties where the winning margin of Republican presidential candidates has increased the most since the late 1990s, most of which have large white majorities. We also investigated

some rural counties where Black residents or Latinos make up a majority or substantial minority. Our travels took us to the wilds of northern Michigan's Lower Peninsula. In Georgia, we drove from the winding mountain roads of the north to the verdant, rich, red farmland of the south. In North Carolina, we explored eastern counties that take their livelihood from chicken production and processing, coastal ones such as those of the "inner Outer Banks," and several further inland—like those where Hawkins lives—where the departure of manufacturing industries has decimated the labor market, leaving few jobs aside from those in the fast-food restaurants that serve passersby from the nearby highways. In Ohio, we visited fertile farming areas in the north central region as well as the hilly southeastern Appalachian region. In addition, we conducted some interviews remotely with party leaders and others in rural Missouri and Texas.

These interviews revealed that rural dwellers in each state we visited face similar obstacles, including the growing feeling of partisan politics as "us" versus "them." Many Democratic county chairs told us about local supporters of the party who've become afraid to put political signs in their yard or sign a petition, for fear of losing friends, the services of repairmen, or even their job. Local businesspeople worry they'll lose customers if they reveal their political preferences. A few even mentioned receiving death threats. Nevertheless, these leaders themselves typically added that they refused to be intimidated.

By contrast, Republican Party county chairs in rural places have more often experienced growing opportunities. These trends have generally been decades in the making. They have also been accentuated since the rise of the Tea Party starting in 2010, and later the emergence of Donald Trump as a presidential candidate. In Michigan's Lower Peninsula, chairperson Kent Wilson told us that when Trump ran for office in 2016, "that was probably the biggest following that I had seen of banners, flags, and signs that were out for any presidential candidate in my lifetime." This enthusiasm among the rural electorate—predominantly white, as were its local leaders—helped Trump flip the state. In Wilson's county, where a dozen people might have attended monthly party meetings in the past, now hundreds do.

These rural Republicans despaired about place-based divisions, but from a different vantage point than Democrats. Rick Swenson, another county chair in northern Michigan, explained, “You’ve got [fifty-eight rural] counties that are ruled by [twenty-five urban ones].” His view reflects the sense of injustice perceived by rural Republicans when a candidate who wins in the large rural swaths of the state—or the nation—loses to a candidate favored in smaller, densely populated areas. He and his fellow partisans chafed at policy changes enacted by Democrats in power in their state, whom they perceive as urbanites imposing their will on them. Wilson said simply, “We live in a rural area, so cities don’t represent us.”

For all the differences in their experiences, both rural Democrats and Republicans told us that they despise the rural-urban divide and the polarization it fosters. And one person after another, in each party, said that they worry about the future of democracy.

Why have so many rural dwellers—particularly those who identify as white, as we will see—become such strident supporters of the Republican Party in the course of thirty years or less? What could have led to such a broad and sweeping transformation that affects people living in disparate parts of the United States, so that they shifted in unison? And now that it has occurred, how is it affecting American politics?

In broad strokes, we find that the rural-urban divide began when the rural economy faltered, starting in the 1990s. Owing in large part to public policy changes, jobs diminished in agriculture, extractive industries, manufacturing, and local businesses that were supported by employees of those industries. Rural white people whose parents and grandparents had supported the Democratic Party, whether steadily or at least intermittently, came to believe that it had abandoned them, and they turned away from it. Meanwhile, many urban areas grew to be the core of the new American economy, and they became even greater bastions of support for the Democratic Party than they had been previously. *Place-based economic inequality* spurred the beginnings of this deep rift.

Next, especially after 2008, rural dwellers came to view Democrats as people who were better off than themselves and who had a penchant for telling them how to live their lives, through a wide variety of policies. Ironically, it's not that rural Americans disagreed so much with the policies on their merits; rather, what turned them further against the Democrats was the sense that they were imposing something on them—without listening, acknowledging their communities, or treating them with respect. Place-based economic inequality also activated anti-Black racism, encouraging white rural dwellers to view the Democratic Party as catering to Black people, a group stereotyped as urban. This second set of reactions involved rural people's perception of *elite overreach* on the part of Democrats, further provoking them to distance themselves from the party.

Organizational changes helped to cement the rural-urban divide. The Democratic Party, like many civic organizations, has been relatively weak at the local level, with only small groups of seniors volunteering to keep it afloat. Meanwhile, the Republican Party gained electoral assistance from conservative grassroots organizations on the rise in recent decades, which happen to be highly concentrated in rural places. Evangelical churches, antiabortion organizations, and gun groups conveyed messages about the changing circumstances in rural places and put the blame squarely on Democrats. They also provided the foot soldiers and social connectivity that helped to mobilize voters and channel them toward the Republican Party.

For democracy to function well, citizens need to have a sense that they constitute a political community.² In part, this requires something they share that transcends differences among them, such as, in the United States, the ideals inscribed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In addition, it necessitates a degree of fluidity among groups, so that social differences do not harden into rigid political divisions that turn groups against one another, threatening their common life. American society is characterized by all sorts of social and

economic diversity—such as income group, age, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and status regarding health, homeownership, and parenthood. Only some of these differences are salient in politics, and fewer still map onto political divisions associated with the party system. Maintaining fluidity among groups is crucial for preserving social peace and the capacity of people to work together to solve problems.

The most immediate effect of the rural-urban divide is the transformation of politics into an epic battle of “us” versus “them,” or social polarization. Within many rural areas, Democrats face intimidation or marginalization. Nationwide, this political chasm is dividing American society, undermining the cross-cutting social connections that hold people together and soften tensions. While the rural-urban split is by no means the only source of such divisions today, its geographic nature makes it particularly pernicious.

In addition, in rural places, this divide fosters one-party government. Representative democracy cannot thrive under such circumstances, because without a meaningful choice in elections, citizens cannot hold their representatives accountable. In places with one-party government, people are more likely to get elected not because they have good ideas or a proven record, but simply because they belong to the lone viable party, and do not face competition. At a minimum, this can lead to ineffective governance; worse yet, it can foster corruption and extremism. To be sure, many of the nation’s large cities have long been subject to one-party rule. Our concerns apply there as well.

Even more, the rural-urban divide combines with several long-existing U.S. political institutions in ways that further threaten democracy. These arrangements have always given extra political leverage to people living in less populated places, yet those advantages have never before been consolidated into a single party. Now that an increasingly extreme Republican Party overwhelmingly wins in rural areas nationwide, it can exploit these small yet important advantages to gain more political power.

The rural-urban divide now gives the GOP outsized opportunities to control each of the three branches of national government. Already in the twenty-first century, two presidential elections yielded winners who lost the popular vote but triumphed in the Electoral College in part

because of its rural bias. Meanwhile, the even more skewed nature of the Senate—two senators per state regardless of the now huge disparities in population—grants additional power to rural Republicans that can be used to influence legislation or judicial nominations. In fact, when Republicans held majority power in the Senate in recent decades, they were typically elected by states containing less than a majority of Americans.

Since presidents nominate federal judges and the Senate must approve them, these factors can permit stacking of the judicial branch by the party that dominates smaller, less densely populated states. Remarkably, in the current Supreme Court, most members of the conservative majority, five justices, were confirmed by senators who in combination represent less than half the U.S. population. Three of those justices were nominated by President Donald Trump after he won the 2016 election with a minority of the popular vote. Those justices have proven pivotal in undermining basic pillars of democracy, such as by declaring presidential immunity from criminal prosecution for crimes committed while in office, as well as overturning long-standing and popular precedents such as access to reproductive rights. In each of these ways, when rural voters are consolidated in one party, it can permit minority rule.

The combination of contemporary place-based polarization with U.S. institutional arrangements is threatening democracy itself. Together, these features can permit the party benefiting from them to further “stack the deck” in its favor. In time, leaders in that party may be able to change the rules to lock down their power, undermining representative government.

But it is not too late to repair the American polity. It will not be easy, and “quick fixes”—such as messaging tweaks—will not work. Neither will strategies that focus only on public policy. New policies in rural communities might improve the day-to-day lives of residents, but they are unlikely to reduce polarization by themselves. Repairing our broken polity requires rebuilding relationships. The Democratic Party needs to reestablish its presence in rural places, doing so through a long-term, full-time commitment, and by actively listening to residents. Rural dwellers deserve to have options at the voting booth, and restoring a vibrant two-party system in rural places is key to ensuring that and revitalizing American politics nationwide.

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