

## 12 “Stop Overlooking Us!”

### Missed Intersections of Trump, Media, and Rural America

*Al Cross*

As the election maps grew redder on the night of November 8, 2016, reflecting the rural landslide for Donald Trump, Chuck Todd of NBC News summed them up: “Rural America is basically screaming at us, ‘Stop overlooking us!’” The network’s gray eminence, Tom Brokaw, a son of rural South Dakota, chimed in: “What we underestimated was the depth of the anger.” Todd’s exclamation helped explain the result: There was a sense in rural America, borne out by statistics, of being left behind. Brokaw acknowledged that the presumed “enthusiasm gap” between supporters of Trump and Hillary Clinton in polls was bigger than the news media had reckoned – perhaps because relatively few reporters spent much time in rural areas, missing the depth of resentment against urban elites.

Looking at a map of Florida, Todd said Clinton had racked up the sort of margin in Tampa and Hillsborough County – usually the state’s bellwether – that usually wins the state, but she lost the exurban and rural counties to the north and south by margins no one had expected. “That’s the story of what’s happening in rural America,” Todd told audiences. The trend was replicated in other battleground states Trump carried (Scher, 2016). Other news outlets quickly deemed Trump’s victory a rural one. *The Wall Street Journal* attributed Trump’s win to “running up wide margins in rural and blue-collar parts of the country, while Clinton showed a weakened hold on the major, urban areas” (Zitner & Overberg, 2016).

Nationally, one news media exit poll found that the smaller a place’s population – grouped in nine types from the largest cities to thoroughly rural areas – the stronger its vote for Trump, with one very small exception that was within the margin of error (Kurtzleben, 2016). Dividing the exit-poll results three ways – urban, suburban, and rural or non-metropolitan (for more, see Figure 12.1) – Trump won 62 percent of the rural vote and Clinton got only 34 percent (Huang, Jacoby, Strickland, & Lai, 2016). That continued a rural trend for Republican presidential candidates, but was a smaller increase from 2012 than from 2008 to 2012. Between those elections, there was a 6-percentage-point Republican shift in the rural vote, giving Mitt Romney 59 percent. Rural turnout was down significantly in 2012, especially among Democrats,

so that boosted Romney’s percentage (Bishop & Gallardo, 2012), but the shift in turnout and choice of candidate suggest there was a rural disaffection in 2012, and there is evidence to show it continued in 2016, providing fertile ground for Trump.

Each year from 2012 through 2016, fewer people lived in rural America than the year before. Each year, that set a record, because rural population had never declined before 2012 – except, of course, as a percentage of the total population (Marema & Bishop, 2017). Rural America is losing population partly because it lost, during the Great Recession, jobs and businesses that have not come back. In mid-2016, employment in metropolitan areas was 4.8 percent higher than in the first quarter of 2008, the official start of the recession, but non-metro employment was 2.4 percent *less* (Hertz, 2017).

That decline that can be seen all over rural America, in closed factories, vacant storefronts, and streams of workers commuting to more urbanized places. In many places, there is also a social and cultural decline, indicated by above-average drug use and divorces, poor health, increasing mortality rates among middle-aged whites, and a workforce that shrinks as disability payments expand. Also in rural America, there is a documented resentment of urban elites, including the news media, reflecting a feeling that rural areas aren’t getting a fair shake from government and its trade deals, and that they are looked down upon.

Onto this landscape strode a brash billionaire whose TV reality show and business career had made him a household name, offering few specifics but promising to “make America great again” and acting as a tribune for disaffected people who were hungry for a politician who

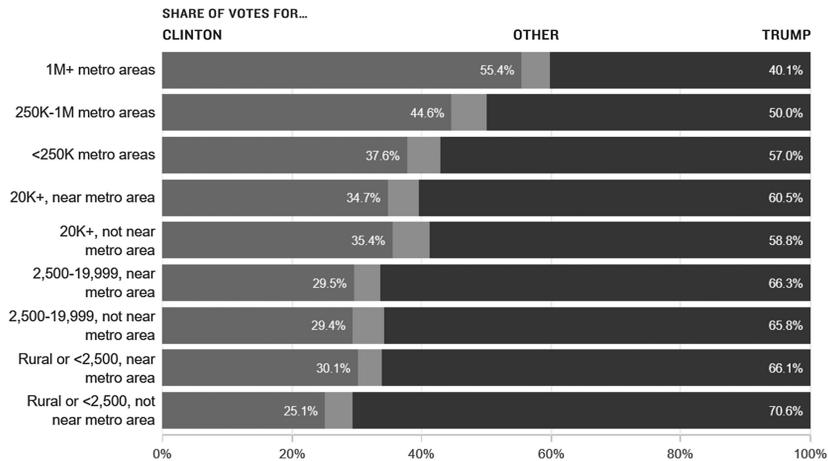


Figure 12.1 The 2016 vote by population area.

Source: NPR Analysis of AP data, using Rural-Urban Continuum Codes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Tyler Fisher and Alyson Hurt/NPR. Image edited by Carina Vo.

would improve their daily lives. In 40 years of covering politics, I have never seen a candidate who generated the reaction, depth of support, and enthusiasm as Donald Trump, especially in rural areas. This chapter suggests and explores some of the reasons he was able to do that, with special attention to the role of journalism in creating Trump’s rise.

### Meanings of Rural-Urban Divides

“Rural” is a fuzzy term. Its easiest definition is “non-metropolitan,” meaning a census tract outside a standard metropolitan statistical area (SMSA), which requires a core city of at least 50,000 people. But SMSAs are defined by commuting patterns, so many metro areas include census tracts that are defined as rural, and about half the rural population of the United States is in metro areas. There are many other ways to define “rural,” and federal agencies have more than two dozen, which range so widely that “The share of the U.S. population considered rural ranges from 17 to 49 percent depending on the definition used,” the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) explains (Cromartie & Bucholz, 2008). “Rural and urban are multidimensional concepts, making clear-cut distinctions between the two difficult. Is population density the defining concern, or is it geographic isolation?” The USDA has a rural-urban continuum with nine categories for counties (Figure 12.2).

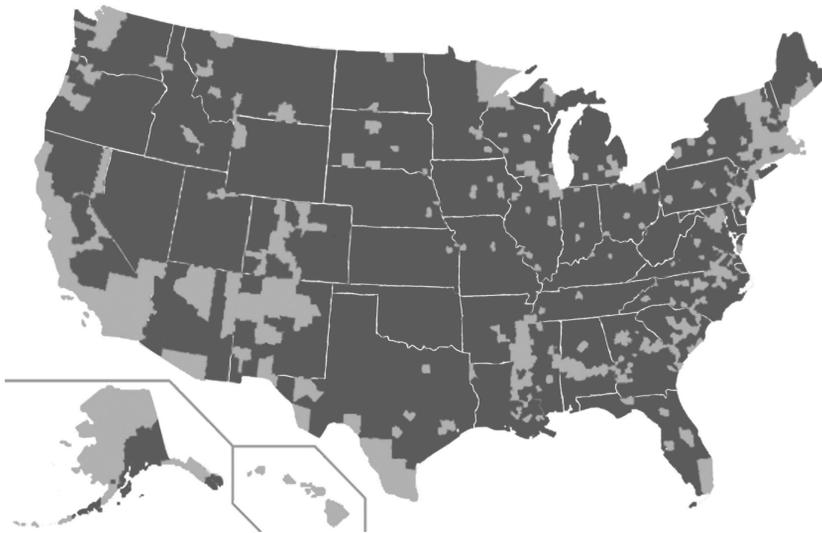


Figure 12.2 Darker shading of this map indicates counties that voted predominantly for Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Lighter shading represents counties that voted predominantly for Hillary Clinton.

Source: Image by Carina Vo. Adapted from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election\\_results\\_by\\_county,\\_2016.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:United_States_presidential_election_results_by_county,_2016.svg).

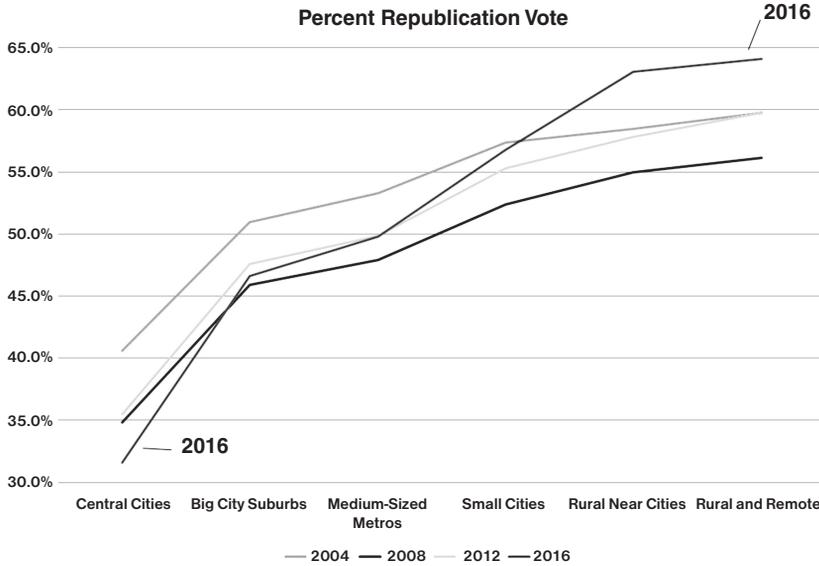
When *The Washington Post* and the Kaiser Family Foundation went looking for factors that drove Trump's victory, they used the CDC-NCHS designations (National Center for Health Statistics, 2017) and classified as "rural" the three least urban categories: "small metropolitan," SMSAs of less than 250,000; "micropolitan," labor market areas centered on an urban cluster with 10,000 to 50,000 people; and "non-core," counties outside the metros or micros (Hamel, Wu & Brodie, 2017). The three categories "are home to nearly one-quarter of the U.S. population," the *Post* explained (DelReal & Clement, 2017). The non-metropolitan population was 16 percent in the 2010 Census, which classifies as "rural" any area outside an urbanized area of 50,000 or more, or outside an urban cluster of 2,500 or more (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016).

The *Post*-Kaiser poll appears to be the most comprehensive, current public survey of the rural United States, broadly defined. Taken from April 13 to May 1, 2017, it surveyed 1,070 adults in counties it defined as rural, 303 in counties it defined as urban, and 307 in counties it defined as suburban. In exploring rural-urban differences, it helps to remember that some small metro areas are inherently rural in cultural terms, and rural disaffection is seen in areas that are classified as metropolitan. For example, Grand Junction, Colorado, population 58,000, is surrounded by much uninhabited land on the Western Slope of the Rocky Mountains, and the place has a rural feel, culturally and economically.

### **Examining the Rural Vote**

Donald Trump's margin among white voters without college degrees – typically called "working class" and broadly representative of the rural vote – was 39 percentage points, 13 points better than Mitt Romney's in 2012 (Zitner & Overberg, 2016). Hillary Clinton led in almost all polls until the election, but pollsters cautioned there was an "enthusiasm gap" that favored Trump, and that enthusiasm was on clear display in rural areas, and not so much in cities. A post-election study found that if Democratic turnout had been the same as in 2012, Clinton would have carried Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and would have won the presidency (Fraga, McElwee, Rhodes, & Schaffner, 2017).

In Wisconsin, the biggest Republican swings from 2012 to 2016 came in communities of 1,000 or less, and Trump won more than 500 towns and villages with a median population of 800 that had voted for Barack Obama (Gilbert, 2016). Nationally, rural turnout exceeded even the Trump campaign's expectations, and Clinton's urban turnout didn't meet expectations. Rural areas, as defined by the American Communities Project (ACP), produced about half a million more votes than in 2012, even though some of the ACP's four rural categories had



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Figure 12.3

lost population. Meanwhile, urban votes were down about 2.5 million (Todd, Murray, & Dann, 2016).

Among counties with populations of 25,000 or less, 90 percent voted more Republican in 2016 than in 2004 when relatively rural President George W. Bush defeated urbanite Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts (Gamio, 2016; for more, see Figure 12.3). In the key states of Michigan and Pennsylvania, Trump received, respectively, 67 and 77 percent of the rural vote (Marema & Bishop, 2016c). ACP’s broader definition of the rural vote said Trump got 57 percent of it in Michigan, 71 percent in Pennsylvania, and 63 percent in Wisconsin (Todd et al., 2016).

The 2016 election confirmed a strong rural-urban divide. It continued a trend, seen since 1976, of more “landslide counties,” defined as those won by 20 percentage points or more. “It’s more evidence that we are sorting ourselves into communities of like-minded Americans,” wrote Bill Bishop, who first defined the trend in the 2008 book *The Big Sort*. The phenomenon showed a marked increase in 2016, most markedly in rural areas. University of Maryland political scientist James Gimpel told Bishop, who wrote about the phenomenon in 2016: “Some view this urban-rural split as a racial division, and there is an element of that present. But it also reflects other big cultural differences by occupation, affluence and religiously rooted values” (Bishop, 2016).

### Recent Rural Economics: Setting the Stage for Trump

In the *Post-Kaiser* poll mentioned earlier, 21 percent of rural respondents said a lack of employment was the biggest problem facing their communities. Only 6 and 7 percent of urban and suburban residents said that, respectively. Asked if they would “encourage young people in your community to stay in the area or leave for more opportunity elsewhere,” 59 percent of rural residents said they would advise the latter and 32 percent said they would advise the former (Hamel et al., 2017). Such results mark a major change in rural parts of the United States. Rural America’s workforce has been shrinking, partly because it had the fastest increase in disability rates from 2005 to 2015, accounting for 100 of the 102 counties where more than one in six working-age adults are on federal disability programs. *The Washington Post* reported:

The rise in disability has emerged as yet another indicator of a widening political, cultural and economic chasm between urban and rural America.... Majority-white counties voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, whose rhetoric of a rotting nation with vast joblessness often reflects lived experiences in these communities.

(McCoy, 2017)

Economic ills were also reflected in a reduced number of businesses. During the recovery, 59 percent of U.S. counties had a net *loss* of business establishments, far above the 37 percent and 17 percent recorded in the recoveries of 2002 to 2006 and 1992 to 1996, respectively. Counties of less than 100,000 population accounted for only 19 percent of net establishment creation and only 9 percent of net job creation. In the previous recoveries, they accounted for 20 and 27 percent of new jobs. And their net establishment growth rate from 2010 to 2014 was negative 1 percent (Economic Innovation Group, 2016). Simply put, the loss of business establishments eats away at the civic capital in small towns where local business people provide leadership and innovation. The shortage of civic capital is a problem in rural areas like south central Kentucky, where one lawyer and civic leader told me:

Now, if you want to go to college but want to live in Albany, or Greensburg, or Campbellsville to a lesser extent, you must teach (the last resort for many), go into medical or government service, or be one of a handful of professionals, and I tend to think that people who work for someone else can lose their motivation to be active and aggressive in local affairs and projects.... In other words, they work, collect a paycheck, and go home. The biggest drain is the loss of the local merchant/family business, thanks to Walmart, Dollar General, Lowe’s, Home Depot, RiteAid, and Detroit’s philosophy of bigger regional car dealers.

(D. Cross, email, May 27, 2017)

Meanwhile, many traditional industries of rural America have been hurting. Mark Muro, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, told a *New York Times* contributing columnist in April 2017, “Rural America has been hammered by the end of the post-crisis commodity boom, and now there is precious little relief there: Agricultural prices are low, coal prices and automation are hammering coal country, natural-gas prices are suffering from glut conditions” (Edsall, 2017).

So, as rural Americans went to the polls in 2016, many of them saw their communities as economically stagnant and needing a boost. But their problems went deeper than economics.

### A New “Inner City,” Discovered Post-election

What writer Thomas Edsall calls “the rural crisis” has been compounded, the Brookings Institution’s Moro told him, by rising mortality rates among non-college-educated, middle-aged white people, often from opioid overdoses, alcohol, and suicide (Case & Deaton, 2017). Broad problems of rural America were largely missed by national news media before the election. They were starkly documented by *The Wall Street Journal* in a May 2017 article titled “Rural America is the new ‘inner city.’” According to the newspaper:

By many key measures of socioeconomic well-being, those charts have flipped. In terms of poverty, college attainment, teenage births, divorce, death rates from heart disease and cancer, reliance on federal disability insurance and male labor-force participation, rural counties now rank the worst among the four major U.S. population groupings (the others are big cities, suburbs and medium or small metro areas).

(Adamy & Overberg, 2017)

As rural areas and small towns have fallen farther behind larger cities in wages as well as employment, the *Journal* wrote, “[m]any of the most ambitious young residents packed up and left, too.” It continued:

In 1980, the median age of people in small towns and big cities almost matched. Today, the median age in small towns is about 41 years – five years above the median in big cities.... Lawmakers from both parties concede they overlooked escalating small-town problems for years.

(Adamy & Overberg, 2017)

Issues of health was another indicator of who may support Trump. *The Economist*, using the County Health Rankings developed at the University of Wisconsin, found a strong correlation between a county’s health and its vote for Trump: “The data suggest that the ill may have

been particularly susceptible to Mr. Trump’s message” (*The Economist*, 2016). Rural America’s relatively poor health status has been exacerbated by the recent epidemic of opioid abuse and overdoses, a phenomenon that for years was disproportionately rural. In a spring 2016 series, building on academic research showing rising mortality rates among whites, especially the lesser educated (Case & Deaton, 2015), *The Washington Post* explored how drugs and other problems had created “an urban-rural mortality gap” (Achenbach & Keating, 2016).

Mortality rates from what the *Post* called “risky behaviors” seemed to be another factor that fueled Trump’s rural vote. Compared with the vote for Mitt Romney in 2012, he did better “in counties with the highest drug, alcohol and suicide mortality rates,” wrote Shannon Monnat of Penn State. She elaborated:

Much of this relationship is accounted for by economic distress and the proportion of working-class residents. Trump performed best in counties with high economic distress and a large working class. Drug, alcohol and suicide mortality rates are higher in counties with more economic distress and a larger working class. Many of the counties with high mortality rates where Trump did the best have experienced significant employment losses in manufacturing over the past several decades.

(p. 1)

Political reporter James Hohmann (2016) of *The Washington Post* emphasized the drug angle, writing that Monnat’s study “suggests a relationship between the opioid epidemic and support for Donald Trump.” Citing counties in Ohio, West Virginia, and New Hampshire as examples in the study. Hohmann wrote:

Alcoholism, overdoses and suicide are symptoms of the deeper social decay that was caused by deindustrialization. This decay led to the fears and anxieties which Trump so effectively capitalized on... I saw this firsthand on the campaign trail all year, in countless interviews with folks who were down in the dumps and struggling to get ahead (or, quite frankly, just get by). Many supported Barack Obama eight years ago because they were desperate for hope and change. They’re still desperate, and now they’re hopeful Trump can bring the change they’re looking for.

(Hohmann, 2016)

### **Trump’s Win with Race, Immigration, and Trade**

Feelings about economics, race, immigration, and trade were related among Trump voters. Analysis of data from the American National

Election Studies found Trump voters were much more likely to agree that “Whites can’t find jobs because employers are hiring people of color.” About 10 percent of Trump voters said it was extremely likely, 17 percent said it was very likely, and more than 30 percent each said it was moderately or slightly likely. Among Trump voters who voted for Obama in 2012, the feeling was strong: 27 percent said it was very likely (McElwee, 2017). “While rural and urban Americans share some economic challenges, they frequently diverge on questions of culture and values,” two *Washington Post* reporters wrote after analyzing the *Post*-Kaiser poll. “On few issues are they more at odds than immigration” (DelReal & Clement, 2017).

Immigration was perhaps the most central plank in Trump’s platform: a wall on the Mexican border, disparagement of Mexicans (“They’re rapists”), and his call for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on” (Johnson & Weigel, 2015). Trump critics accused him of appealing to racial animus, noting that in the years just before his candidacy he was the most prominent supporter of the notion that Obama was born in Kenya. Whatever his motives, strategy or tactics, Trump clearly benefited from anti-immigration feelings and probably racial animus, research and election results indicate.

In Republican primaries and caucuses, rural Midwestern towns that have attracted many more immigrants – particularly Latinos – were Trump strongholds. A *Wall Street Journal* study used the diversity index, which measures the likelihood that any two people chosen at random in a county will have a different race or ethnicity. The researchers found that:

[i]n 88 percent of the rapidly diversifying counties, Latino population growth was the main driver. [Trump] took 73 percent of those where diversity at least doubled since 2000, and 80 percent of those where the diversity index rose at least 150 percent.

(Adamy & Overberg, 2016)

Research issued just before the election showed Trump polling well in racially isolated white communities, as defined by factoring the difference between the percentages of white population in their ZIP code and their commuting zone with the diversity index of the commuting zone divided by the diversity index of the ZIP code. This research, by members of The Gallup Organization, found that Trump voters appeared to be less motivated by economic concerns than by issues of race, ethnicity, and immigration. As the researchers wrote:

The results show mixed evidence that economic distress has motivated Trump support. His supporters are less educated and more

likely to work in blue-collar occupations, but they earn relatively high household incomes and are no less likely to be unemployed or exposed to competition through trade or immigration. On the other hand, living in racially isolated communities with worse health outcomes, lower social mobility, less social capital, greater reliance on Social Security income and less reliance on capital income, predicts higher levels of Trump support.

(Rothwell & Diego-Rosell, 2016, p. 1)

Indeed, research before and after the election concluded that aside from identification with the Republican Party, “fears about immigrants and cultural displacement were more powerful factors than economic concerns in predicting support for Trump among white working-class voters” (Cox, Lienesch, & Jones, 2017). While this research did not break out rural counties, those are disproportionately populated by the white working class (51 percent compared to 22 percent in urban areas), and other research provides strong evidence of the importance of race and immigration in Trump’s election. From Cox et al. (2017):

White working-class voters who say they often feel like a stranger in their own land and who believe the U.S. needs protecting against foreign influence were 3.5 times more likely to favor Trump than those who did not share these concerns... White working-class voters who favored deporting immigrants living in the country illegally were 3.3 times more likely to express a preference for Trump than those who did not... The effects of economic concerns were complex, with economic fatalism predicting support for Trump, but economic hardship predicting support for Clinton.

The researchers’ 2012 poll found that 42 percent of rural voters said immigrants are a burden on the United States, while only 31 percent of suburbanites and 16 percent of urbanites said that. Majorities of the latter groups agreed with the statement that “[i]mmigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents,” but only 48 percent of rural voters agreed with that statement. And when asked if “whites losing out due to preferences for blacks and Hispanics is a bigger problem” than the opposite, rural voters were evenly divided at 34 percent each, while only 25 percent of other voters agreed with the statement (Cox et al., 2017).

The same researchers also identified Trump’s position on trade, as a significant factor in his election:

One issue where white working-class Americans stand out from other Americans is free trade. Six in ten (60 percent) white working-class people say free-trade agreements with other countries are mostly

harmful because they send jobs overseas and drive down wages, while one-third (33 percent) say they are mostly helpful because they open markets for U.S. companies and allow Americans to buy goods more cheaply.

(Cox et al., 2017)

Furthermore, in a post-election survey of four focus groups in Cincinnati, the researchers also found that “White working-class voters who said discrimination against whites is a serious problem were much more likely to favor Trump than those who did not (74 percent vs. 40 percent, respectively)” (Cox et al., 2017). Chris Clayton, who covers farm policy for DTN/*The Progressive Farmer*, though, said in a post-election television interview that race wasn’t an issue with rural voters in the Midwest – he noted that Obama carried Iowa twice – but immigration was a huge issue: “People are concerned that they’re losing their culture, somewhat” (NBC News Transcript, 2016).

### Cultural Differences, Religion, and Authoritarianism

There is a sense in rural America that its culture is not only eroding, but is under attack by urbanites. Analyzing the *Post*-Kaiser poll, *Post* reporters wrote:

The political divide between rural and urban America is more cultural than it is economic, rooted in rural residents’ deep misgivings about the nation’s rapidly changing demographics, their sense that Christianity is under siege and their perception that the federal government caters most to the needs of people in big cities.

(DelReal & Clement, 2017, p. 1)

The poll found that 68 percent of Americans it defined as rural said they have different values than people in big cities, and 41 percent said those values are very different. Among those the poll defined as urban, 48 percent said their values are different from those in rural areas and small towns, and only 18 percent said they were very different. To illustrate the difference, *Post* reporters chose this quote from a man who grew up in northern Wisconsin: “Being from a rural area, everyone looks out for each other. People, in my experience, in cities are not as compassionate toward their neighbor as people in rural parts.” Overall, the poll reflected that 72 percent of rural respondents said their community was excellent or good “as a place where people look out for each other.” Suburban and urban figures were 69 percent and 56 percent, respectively (DelReal & Clement, 2017).

While rural Americans in the poll expressed “far more concern about jobs in their communities” than those in more populated areas, the poll

found “that those concerns have little connection to support for Trump, a frequent theory to explain his rise in 2016,” the reporters wrote (DelReal & Clement, 2017). Adherents of the two parties view the world differently, and many Republicans do it through a religious lens, wrote the news director of a radio station in rural Knoxville, Iowa. Robert Leonard, a self-described liberal, said he had long struggled to understand how his conservative friends and neighbors in Marion County – which gave more than 60 percent of its vote to Trump – “could think so differently from me.” Then Leonard said he met J. C. Watts, a Baptist minister and former Republican congressman from rural Oklahoma. Leonard (2017) recalled Watts telling him in 2015:

The difference between Republicans and Democrats is that Republicans believe people are fundamentally bad, while Democrats see people as fundamentally good. We are born bad. We teach them how to be good. We become good by being reborn – born again. Democrats believe that we are born good, that we create God, not that he created us. If we are our own God, as the Democrats say, then we need to look at something else to blame when things go wrong, not us.

Leonard, writing on the op-ed page of *The New York Times*, continued:

Hearing Watts was an epiphany for me. No wonder Republicans and Democrats can’t agree on things like gun control, regulations or the value of social programs. We live in different philosophical worlds, with different foundational principles.

Leonard also cited an increasing number of young conservatives in rural areas like his:

They are part of a growing movement in rural America that immerses many young people in a culture – not just conservative news outlets but also home and church environments – that emphasizes contemporary conservative values. It views liberals as loathsome, misinformed and weak, even dangerous... Rural conservatives feel that their world is under siege, and that Democrats are an enemy to be feared and loathed.

Trump won 81 percent of the votes of white Evangelical Christians despite being “an insulting, profane, thrice-married, megalomaniacal billionaire from New York City who can’t even pronounce 2 Corinthians correctly,” a Pentecostal pastor and former religion reporter in Kentucky wrote in his regular newspaper column (Prather, 2016). The pastor deduced a reason from an article by a Ph.D. candidate in political science

at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, who conducted a multi-state poll among likely Republican primary voters and found that the strongest predictor of a vote for Trump was “authoritarian inclinations” (MacWilliams, 2016). The pastor-columnist wrote that Christianity has long been divided “between disciples who focus on authority and those who focus on freedom, between those driven and riven by fear, and those propelled by hope and joy.” Identifying himself with the latter, the pastor continued:

In the Christian vernacular, it’s a spiritual contest between “the Law” and “Grace.” Christians who lean toward the Law are all about God’s authority, the Bible’s authority, church leaders’ authority, men’s authority, civil authority. They’re the church’s cops and prosecuting attorneys. They serve a stern God who lectures dryly from above, brooks no dissent and expects them to flog the daylights out of the dense and disobedient. They thrive on order... In a world overrun by brigands and terrorists, authoritarian Christians prefer a ban-bar-and-bomb president, even if he’s a self-promoting heathen, over some milquetoast pseudo-Christian who embraces strangers and prefers negotiation to warfare.

(Prather, 2016)

Authoritarianism goes beyond religion to social class. White working-class Americans are much more likely than those with a college degree to express a preference for authoritarian traits (Cox & Jones, 2012). Using an authoritarian scale based on four questions about preferred childhood traits, a follow-up study found a similar gap: 64 percent of white working-class Americans have an authoritarian orientation, including 37 percent who were “high authoritarian.” But only 39 percent of the white and college-educated had an authoritarian profile (Cox et al., 2017).

### **Trump’s Manna: The Rural Resentment of Elites**

When cultural differences get political, there is often resentment. Trump ran an anti-elites campaign that appealed to “all the places and voters that feel left behind in an increasingly diverse, post-industrial, and urbanized America,” Ron Brownstein wrote for *The Atlantic* soon after the 2016 election. Relatedly, reporters on the *Post-Kaiser* poll wrote:

Disagreements between rural and urban America ultimately center on fairness: Who wins and loses in the new American economy, who deserves the most help in society and whether the federal government

shows preferential treatment to certain types of people. President Trump's contentious, anti-immigrant rhetoric, for example, touched on many of the frustrations felt most acutely by rural Americans.

(DelReal & Clement, 2017)

The poll also found that 56 percent of rural voters agreed with the statement that “[t]he federal government does more to help people living in and around large cities,” while 37 percent agreed with the statement that it treats “both urban and rural areas equally.” While the federal government has many programs aimed at rural areas, the poll found rural voters are evenly split, three ways, on whether “[f]ederal government programs aimed at improving people’s standard of living generally make things worse, make things better, or don’t have much impact one way or the other.”

Feelings that government is biased in favor of urban elites has been most comprehensively described in Wisconsin, a state that University of Wisconsin political scientist Katherine Cramer studied closely in her 2016 book, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Walker is a conservative Republican governor who survived a recall election and ran briefly for president, himself, in the 2016 election.

In her book, Cramer (2016a) writes that she found puzzling the following phenomenon: “As income inequality has risen in the United States, low-income voters’ preference for redistribution of income has moved ... in the same direction as that of high-income voters” (p. 4). Cramer writes that conversations with people in 27 Wisconsin communities “enabled me to examine what it looks like when people who might benefit from more government instead prefer far less of it.” Cramer then discovered “a significant rural-versus-urban divide and the powerful role of resentment” and that “...many rural residents exhibit an intense resentment against their urban counterparts” (p. 5).

Through her work, Cramer discerned what she calls “rural consciousness,” a rural identity that goes beyond place, to “a sense that decision-makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural communities their fair share of resources, as well as a sense that rural folks are fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles, value and work ethic,” (p. 6) and that rural residents identify rural public employees as effectively urbanite. Cramer also noticed from her conversations that the Great Recession was a defining period for this rural-urban divide, and that it differed from the one Thomas Frank defined in his 2004 book, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, which showed how social issues drove social conservatives (who are disproportionately rural) to vote against their economic interests.

Cramer’s book presaged the identity politics that defined the 2016 election, with identity groups playing a stronger role than ever in the

Clinton campaign, and the Trump vote being driven in large measure by a resentment of elites. “Perhaps issues are secondary to identities,” Cramer writes (p. 7), stating a truth long known to professional politicians, pollsters, and other campaign consultants, but perhaps not so much to political scientists or even journalists. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Cramer said rural people believe they have less stressful, more meaningful lives with higher value on family and neighbor relationships than urbanites, but that they have become pop-culture caricatures, and their voices have been ignored in political debate (Quart, 2017). Cramer (2016b) wrote for the *Post*’s “Monkey Cage” platform that rural Wisconsinites:

...resented that they were not getting respect. They perceived that city folks called people like them ignorant racists who could not figure out their own interests. To them, urban types just did not get small-town life – what people in those places value, the way they live, and the challenges they face. Onto this terrain trod Trump. And he found firm footing, just as Scott Walker did in his rise to the governorship. His message was basically this: “You are right. You are not getting your fair share. And you should be angry about it. You work hard, you are deserving, and yet you are not getting what you should. Instead, the people currently in charge are giving some people way more than they deserve. Elect me and I’ll make American great again. I’ll give you back what you deserve and a way of life you are sorely missing.” For people who were feeling ignored, disrespected and overlooked by the urban elite, the Trump campaign had a strong appeal.

(Cramer, 2016b)

Wisconsin, especially its hilly southwest quadrant, had many counties that voted for Obama in 2012 and Trump in 2016. In Wisconsin, Iowa, and northwest Illinois, 64 counties, most of them rural, flipped that way. A typical county that flipped was Crawford County, Wisconsin, one of the state’s poorest, which gave 53 percent of its vote to Obama in 2012 but 59 percent to Trump – the first time it had voted Republican since 1984. There, the owner of a struggling small-engine repair shop told *The Associated Press*:

If you ask anybody here, we’ll all tell you the same thing: We’re tired of living like this. I just hope we get the jobs back and the economy on its feet, so everybody can get a decent job and make a decent living, and have that chance at the American dream that’s gone away over the past eight or ten years. I’m still optimistic. I hope I’m not wrong.

(Galofaro, 2017)

In Kentucky, which went heavily for Trump after he won its caucuses by four points over Senator Ted Cruz, there was a sense that Trump might not be the best tribune, but that he at least is one. Sharon Burton, editor and publisher of the statewide farm newspaper and a local weekly, wrote after the election that Trump wasn't among her top three choices for the Republican Party nomination, but that:

I think Americans are saying that our nation is spending too much of its resources caring for others and not enough resources taking care of its own. We have approved trade agreements at the expense of jobs... I hope we can survive Trump. I hope we can thrive with Trump. Mostly, I think our elected officials have been awakened to the frustration Americans feel toward their inability to address the nation's problems. Frankly, I think the Trump vote was a message to the political elite, and the message is, clean up your act, or "You're fired."

(Burton, 2016)

Another anti-elite part of Trump's campaign was about the Second Amendment. Trump was "the most pro-gun-rights nominee in modern GOP history," a New Yorker who grew up shooting guns in Kentucky wrote for *The New York Times* in August (Hayes, 2016). Trump's alliance with the National Rifle Association (NRA), which spent more than \$30 million to elect him, helped make up for his two-to-one spending deficit with Clinton. The NRA's chief executive, Wayne LaPierre, told its convention: "It's up to us to speak up against the three most dangerous voices in America: academic elites, political elites and media elites. These are America's greatest domestic threats." In turn, *The Nation* reported, "LaPierre understands the gun-rights movement as a culture war first and a battle over gun laws second" (Zornick, 2017).

The NRA-stoked fears that the Second Amendment was at risk, and the resentment that rural people increasingly feel toward urban elites, were fuel for Trump's anti-elite campaign that appealed to many rural residents' sense that their ways of life were in jeopardy.

### **Trump's Rural Campaign That Clinton Missed**

While the Republican share of the rural vote has increased steadily in recent years, the rural share of the electorate was decreasing, as metropolitan areas grew and rural population stagnated. So, when Trump put more emphasis in rural areas than Romney did, holding rallies in small towns that had never seen a live presidential candidate, traditional Republican strategists thought that was a mistake (Zitner & Overberg, 2016). However, polls had failed to predict a significant difference in turnout between rural and urban voters, and that helped Trump. After

the election, the Trump campaign revealed that it was pressing its rural turnout advantage. A campaign contractor told *Politico* that his analysis of early absentee voting in swing states showed signs of an “extremely high” rural turnout, which exceeded even those expectations (Evich, 2016).

Clinton’s campaign, on the other hand, ignoring Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack’s advice to pay more attention to rural voters, *Politico* reported, adding, “One source said a staffer in Brooklyn was dedicated to rural outreach, but the assignment came just weeks before the election.” Such a move was clearly too little, too late. “Rural communities are, almost by definition, not densely populated, so it requires much more time and effort to do outreach,” *Politico* noted, quoting a young Democrat who exchanged candor for anonymity:

It’s a tough slog. It’s hard to speak to rural America. It’s very regionally specific. It feels daunting. You have these wings of the party, progressives, and it’s hard to talk to those people and people in rural America, and not seem like you’re talking out of both sides of your mouth.

(Evich, 2016)

Unlike Trump, Clinton issued a relatively detailed rural-policy platform. Trump didn’t need to. Instead, he tossed out a few issues with rural appeal, such as Environmental Protection Agency regulation of farms, but in the end, experienced rural observers said he won the day with his anti-elite pitch and capitalized on Clinton’s clumsy comments about “deplorables” and shutting down coal mines. “What Trump did in rural areas was try to appeal to folks culturally,” said Dee Davis of the Center for Rural Strategies. “Our ears are tuned to intonation. We think people are talking down to us. What ends up happening is that we don’t focus on the policy – we focus on the tones, the references, the culture” (Evich, 2016).

Trump bet on rural audiences. In the last two weeks of the race, for instance, his campaign spent \$150,000 to buy every available spot on RFD-TV, a digital and satellite channel that reaches more than 46 million homes, largely in rural America. Clinton spent nothing with the Nashville-based channel, and its founder and president, Patrick Gottsch, blamed Clinton’s loss on a lack of outreach in rural areas – in addition to economic malaise and resentment of elites among rural voters. As Gottsch told *Variety*, “You could really see it turning in the last couple of weeks. I couldn’t find a woman in rural America who was going to vote for Secretary Clinton, and I found that odd” (Littleton, 2017).

Relatedly, the Trump campaign also made an unusual deal with Sinclair Broadcast Group, which at the time owned 173 TV stations, mostly in smaller markets, which often requires affiliates to run news and

commentary it sends them. In exchange for more access to Trump and his campaign, including extended interviews of Trump by local anchors, Sinclair sent the interviews to other stations to run without commentary. Sinclair reported that the Clinton campaign declined the same deal (Dawsey & Gold, 2016).

### **Trump's Rural Factor and News Coverage of It**

Trump's rural trend got noticed after March 1, "Super Tuesday," when he displayed major rural strength in winning 7 of 11 contests (Marema & Bishop, 2016a). Clinton also did well in rural areas that day, but low turnout in rural areas signaled trouble ahead (Marema & Bishop, 2016b). On March 14, with plenty of primary and caucus results in hand to match with 10 demographic variables, *The New York Times* identified the trend, but only on a blog:

The places where Trump has done well cut across many of the usual fault lines of American politics – North and South, liberal and conservative, rural and suburban. What they have in common is that they have largely missed the generation-long transition of the U.S. away from manufacturing and into a diverse, information-driven economy deeply intertwined with the rest of the world.

(Irwin & Katz, 2016)

In early summer, writers for *The Washington Post* saw the rural-driven United Kingdom vote to leave the European Union as a signal that some of the same forces were at work in both nation (Balz, 2016). Other news coverage around that time made clear that rural America was Trump's most solid base (Cross, 2016). By and large, however, major news media seemed to think it wouldn't make a difference. They were out of touch. Journalist Neal Gabler (2016) wrote on the Bill Moyers website, for example, that "pontificating political reporters and pundits ... got it all wrong about Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders." Gabler issued a near-indictment:

It is very possible that reporters – especially the Big Feet – dismissed Trump and Sanders because journalists couldn't possibly fathom the deep, seething, often unspoken economic discontent that afflicts so many Americans and that has helped fuel both the Trump and Sanders movements. They couldn't fathom it, perhaps, because they haven't experienced it.

Campaign reporters are generally in the air, on buses, and at events, not driving on the roads, where they would have noticed the prevalence of Trump yard signs and the dearth of support for Clinton, and where

they could have interviewed voters as the *Post*'s James Hohmann did. While there were occasional reports of Trump's rural potential, they were often limited to niche publications, such as the newsletter *Agri-Pulse*, in which Pennsylvania's Democratic agriculture secretary said the state was up for grabs and rural voters would decide it (Brasher, 2016).

Nearer to the election, a few journalists reported on rural unhappiness and suggested it could make a difference in states such as Iowa and Wisconsin, where more than 30 percent of the population is rural. The *USA Today* Network had reporters from its regional newspapers do stories from eight key states, and one reporter from *The Des Moines Register* did a story on rural Iowa that said Trump's "picture of a limping nation in need of more radical change" was "a message that seems tailor-made for rural America." The report carried a prescient headline: "If people in any place yearn to be made great again, it's in rural America" (Hardy, 2016). Aside from agriculture, though, the article offered no data showing broad, bad, rural trends.

Two days before the election, Nate Cohn (2016) of *The New York Times* was quite prescient, but again, only on one of the paper's blogs, where he wrote:

Trump's strength among the white working class gives him a real chance at victory. He could win enough Electoral College votes without winning the popular vote, through narrow victories in Midwestern and Northeastern battlegrounds like Wisconsin and New Hampshire, where Democrats depend on support among white working-class voters. Mr. Trump's strength with that group could even be enough for him to win Florida.

At a local level, campaign coverage by rural news media was driven by largely by local events, and the most rural places, served by weekly newspapers, got relatively little coverage from them, as usual, for weeklies. A small handful of rural dailies (reportedly, six) endorsed Trump, including the *Hillsboro (Ohio) Times-Gazette*, whose editor-publisher, Gary Abernathy, now does two columns a month for *The Washington Post*, which wanted a "Trump country" voice in its op-ed section. Asked in an interview if people in Highland County have a sense that rural America isn't getting a fair shake, he told me:

I just think rural America feels very much looked down on from the east and west coast elitists, including the media ... so when Trump picks on the media and talks about fake news – the media's not popular, especially in rural America – there's a natural anti-big-media feeling in this part of the country.

(G. Abernathy, telephone interview, July 28, 2017)

Dissatisfaction with the news media is common, but is more pronounced in rural areas. The *Post-Kaiser* poll asked, “How much do you think the news media respects people like you?” and found that only 37 percent of rural people responded with “a lot” or “some,” while 47 percent of other Americans said so (Hamel et al., 2017). Repeated news-media references to Trump polling well among both rural and lesser-educated voters may have stirred anti-media feelings, said Clayton of *The Progressive Farmer*. “I think they took some of these things that were said over and over throughout the last four, five months of the campaign, also very personally themselves,” Chuck Todd said Clayton’s remark stung him, because “[w]hen we would say these things, it was an academic exercise. But the minute he said it, I was, like, ‘Oh, my, my late father would’ve kicked me in the rear for that.’” *New York Times* columnist David Brooks said he had a *mea culpa* watching Clayton, because:

people with college degrees voted very differently than people with, with high school degrees, but... when you actually don’t have a college degree, you hear, ‘Oh, they think I’m stupid.’ I’m guilty of that because I use that shorthand too. And you saw so much sense of moral injury when you went around the Trump world.

(NBC News, 2016)

Trump’s media criticism has filtered down to community journalism, rural and small-town, editors have reported (Cross, 2017).

### **News Media’s Post-Election Response**

After the election, some major news organizations realized they had missed what was going on in rural and small-town America. They didn’t pay enough attention to rural areas, NBC’s Chuck Todd said, creating “a trust problem in rural America” (Mullin, 2017). Todd also said major news outlets downplayed Clinton’s rural unpopularity to avoid appearing sexist:

What we all knew as reporters, and didn’t fully deliver, was how hated the Clintons were in the heartland.... If we sort of were straight-up honest and blunt about, “Hey, do we understand the level of hatred that’s out there?,” and you know, all the “Hillary for Prison” signs that are out there, we certainly would have at least made the viewer know, “Hey, you know, she’s not well-liked in some places in this country in ways that’s times 10 when it comes to Trump.”

In reaction to the election result and feelings that they had missed something, some major news outlets responded. *The New York Times*, for instance, moved some national reporters around the country to better

grasp the people and factors that elected Trump. The Reuters wire service named Los Angeles correspondent Tim Reid a political correspondent covering the Midwest and Southeast. *The Washington Post* started “About US,” news and commentary about the nation’s changing demographics. And, the *Post* and NPR each named beat reporters to explore the rural-urban divide.

But what of rural news media? Soon after Trump took office, Civitas Media, which owns dozens of weeklies and small dailies, placed a button on its papers’ sites to display his tweets and news about him. “It wasn’t an endorsement of Trump; it’s just that Trump communicates so much by tweet,” said Gary Abernathy, whose Ohio paper was owned by Civitas at the time. Abernathy said the idea came from an information-technology professional at company headquarters (Interview, July 28, 2017).

It has been unusual to find such a national political link on the websites of rural newspapers, but Trump has changed many things. Just as he has driven up ratings of national news channels, now he is a traffic builder for rural papers.

### **Conclusion: Rural Under Trump**

When it comes to issues, as president, Trump has not always played to his rural base. Two central positions of Trump’s campaign, favoring more restrictions on immigration and repeal of the North American Free Trade Agreement, were averse to American agriculture, but he moderated those positions (Clayton, 2017). On several other issues, however, the Trump administration had made moves not to the advantage of rural Americans, such as supporting bills that experts said would lead to less access to health care in rural areas, including hospital closures (Bynum, Santana, & Foody, 2017), withdrawing regulations to limit predation by for-profit colleges, which is more prevalent in rural areas (Strauss, 2017), and proposing a budget that rural interests called “a slap in the face” (Wise & Lowry, 2017) that included cuts in such programs as Amtrak, the Appalachian Regional Commission, public broadcasting, and farm programs. Trump’s new Federal Communications Commission chair has talked much about extending high-speed internet to rural areas, but the president proposed cutting air-route subsidies that help rural airports stay open, and those interests also criticized his plan to privatize air-traffic control.

Beyond issues, though, what impact does having Donald Trump as president have on rural America’s daily life? In Grand Junction, Colorado, “[h]is tone has a deeper influence than his policies,” making life more contentious, the *New Yorker* said in a subhead on a story titled, “How Trump is Transforming Rural America” (Hessler, 2017). And what of rural journalism? The focus on Trump, driven by social media, has hurt smaller daily newspapers that focus on local and state news,

said Tom Rosenstiel, a Brookings Institution fellow who founded and ran for 16 years the Project for Excellence in Journalism. Quoted in *The Guardian*, Rosenstiel says:

The real crisis in American journalism is not technological, it's geographic. The crisis is that local journalism is shrinking. I wouldn't say it's dying but it's the most threatened. There is so much more national and international news available to people, it has changed what people are interested in. [During the election] I saw clear and distinct evidence that people were consuming more national news and less local.

(McLaughlin, 2017)

As president, Trump keeps the focus on himself, leaving less room in our news diet for detailed examination of issues. His election made urban-oriented media pay more attention to the rural problems that helped elect him, but the issues of rural America rarely get sustained attention from national news outlets. Trump's policies toward that major segment of his base should be fodder for accountability journalism, both urban and rural.

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