

THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER: THE ROLE OF RURALITY IN
ECONOMIC PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Cultural, political and economic divisions between rural and urban communities are steadily growing in our nation. President Donald Trump's surprising electoral victory was in part attributed to rural resentment. Previous scholars such as Katherine Cramer have studied rural residents' perceptions of economic disadvantage, inattention from legislators, and cultural differences in comparison to urban residents. This paper will expand upon this research to analyze rural resentment as it pertains to perceptions of the national economy and vote choice in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 presidential elections. Statistical analyses revealed that rurality was correlated with pessimistic views of the national economy, particularly in 2012 and 2016. Further, among all economically pessimistic voters, rural voters were more inclined to vote for the Republican presidential candidate than urban voters in 2012 and 2016. The findings suggest that rural culture is something to be considered in analyzing political ideology.

Introduction

Life “out in the country” is unfamiliar to the majority of Americans who live in densely-populated urban regions across the nation. However, to the 46 million Americans who live in rural areas, which encompass just over 70 percent of the nation’s land yet less than 15 percent of the nation’s residents, the rural lifestyle is part of their identity as Americans (Kusmin, 2016). The cultural, economic, and political divisions between rural and urban communities in the United States are ones that are steadily growing. The rising tension and anger between not only the political elites but also among common Americans came to a boil in the 2016 election. Phrases such as “revenge of the rural white voter”, “hillbilly backlash”, “limousine liberals” are thrown as accusatory explanations as to why urban and rural dwellers do not just misunderstand each other, but even scorn each other.

The effects of declining rural industries and the Recession have manifested in rural voting trends. Katherine Cramer (2015) has analyzed the relationship between the party identification of rural voters along with perceptions of the economy and apportionment of resources. Many rural voters hold the perception that “resources” – such as funding and attention from legislators- are being unfairly allocated to the larger metropolitan areas, whereas rural folks are being left behind. This rural resentment is compounded with values that are characteristic of rural areas such as economic individualism and community identity, which all contribute to these voters’ historic support for the Republican Party. Fascinatingly enough, Cramer’s research was compiled before the electoral victory of Republican candidate Donald Trump and before the popularization of one theory that rural voters carried Trump to victory. Thus, I set out in this project to answer the questions surrounding rural voters in recent elections given the steady rise

of the economy since the Recession. Do rural voters have pessimistic perceptions of the national economy? Are they truly more likely to vote for the Republican candidate?

This paper is different from prior research in that instead of focusing on the effects that objective levels of economic decline in rural regions have on vote choice and economic rating, I am focusing on the subjective perceptions of injustice and inattention as they pertain to rural vote choice. I am expanding on the innovative insights of Cramer's research on "rural consciousness." Although there are multiple factors that affect presidential election outcomes, this project seeks to establish the significance of community type, particularly rurality, in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 election cycles.

In the past two years, political commentators and journalists have been persistent in using rural voting trends and rural identity to partially explain President Donald Trump's stunning electoral victory, many with a degree of incredulity and misunderstanding. However, cultural and political differences between rural and metropolitan areas have been long documented by scholars (Knoke and Henry, 1977). The existence of partisan echo chambers and cross-party political dialogue create misunderstanding and disdain. The examination into rural culture is only recently becoming acknowledged in popular media, yet it is crucial if we are to understand the complex politics of various geographic communities.

Literature Review

Definition of Rural

The term "rural" is often characterized by intangible terms, such as rustic and simple. Urban is defined as including "urbanized areas" with populations of 50,000 or more people, as well as "urban clusters" of between 2,500 and 50,000 people. The United States Census Bureau defines rural as any population, housing, or territory NOT in an urban area (U.S. Census Bureau,

2010). These definitions do not follow strict city limits, but entire populations, residences, and land. Already, the definition represents how we as a nation tend to perceive rurality: not quite understood except in terms of what it is not. Thus, using the Census Bureau's definitions only explains rurality in terms of numbers, and it is important to remember that rurality is also characterized by social and economic factors rather than mere population density.

Overview of Rural Areas

Rural areas are characterized by homogenous demographics. Over three-quarters of the rural population is white and non-Hispanic, compared to approximately 60 percent of the nation as a whole (Housing Assistance Council, 2012). The small percentage of minorities living in rural areas typically concentrate in certain regions, such as African-Americans in rural counties in the South. The majority of Hispanics/Latinos living in rural areas are in the states bordering Mexico such as Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California.

Rural counties and regions are also often much less educated than their urban counterparts. In 2015, 33 percent of adults age 25 and older living in urban areas had a college degree, compared to only 19 percent of rural adults (Marre, 2017). Furthermore, the median age of people in rural areas is over 50, a difference of over 5 years from the urban areas (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Thus, the lagging economic progress in these areas reflects the higher median age of rural areas and the lack of college-educated residents. Rural counties with particularly high populations of low-educated working-age adults have significantly high poverty levels. In addition, of the 467 counties designated as low-education counties, over three-quarters are rural counties. Employment and average earnings also lag within rural counties due to the lower educational attainment compared to urban counties (Kusmin, 2016).

Since 2010, rural populations have been in decline. Many factors have contributed to the population drop, but the struggling economy since the recession in 2008, in particular, has had lasting effects. Whereas urban employment and population have grown steadily in the years since the Recession, rural regions are seeing much slower progress and are still far below pre-recession levels. The lower employment rates reflect the relatively high median age of rural regions since many young people flock to cities for more job opportunities in service-based industries. In addition, rural areas are more dependent on the production of goods as a source of employment. Manufacturing accounts for 15 percent of earnings in rural areas, compared to less than 10 percent in urban areas (Kusmin, 2016). Since 2000, manufacturing employment dropped 30 percent, naturally hitting rural areas the hardest. Approximately one in six working-age residents receive government assistance through a program for the disabled poor, most often in primarily white, rural and working-class regions.

Yet, an argument often made is that rural and urban counties alike are in fact improving since the recession. Rural and urban unemployment rates have decreased since 2010, and despite reports of declining rural populations, the downward trend has plateaued in the past two years (Kusmin, 2016). Is the unemployment truly declining, or are fewer people looking for work? Labor force participation rates are significantly lower in rural areas than urban ones, 59.2 percent to 64.2 percent (Cheeseman Day, Hays, and Smith, 2016). Also considering that the median age of rural areas is significantly higher than urban and suburban areas, aging and disabled rural residents may have given up looking for work, especially when the employment opportunities are incomparable to the lucrative manufacturing and production-based industries to which they were accustomed. Additionally, although rural unemployment levels and earnings may be recovering from the Recession, many areas are still below pre-Recession levels and do not

compare to the progress and attention urban areas have received. Perception, rather than the numbers, may be at work here.

Economic Perceptions

Personal economic situations and finances affect respondents' answers when asked about the status of the national economy. According to the National Opinion Research Center, wealthier respondents were more likely to respond that the economy had improved since the 2008 Recession, while lower-income respondents viewed a slower recovery from the Recession (NORC, 2016). Thus, the personal finances of Americans do manifest in the ratings of the national economy overall. "Pocketbook", or personal, considerations are just as important in vote choice and economic ratings as sociotropic considerations (Healy, Persson, and Snowberg, 2017).

Further, there is partisan bias when evaluating the national economy. Those who view the economy as having gotten better are more likely to vote for the incumbent candidate or party, whereas the opposite is true of those who view the economy as having declined. Republicans were more likely to rate the economy as poor when President Obama was in office, but Democrats held this view once President Trump took office (Bailey, 2009, Fingerhut, 2017). Similar to Wlezien's (1995) findings on public opinion 'thermostat' reactions to public spending, voters shift their preferences of how to mend the economy between Republican fiscal policy to Democratic fiscal policy. After President Bush, Senator John McCain, and the Republicans were faulted during the 2008 election for the economy at the time, President Obama and the Democrats pushed economic policy leftward. In the 2010 midterms and 2012 elections (despite President Obama's victory), public sentiment started shifting back right, culminating in President Trump's narrow electoral victory (Bartels, 2013).

For rural voters in particular, perceptions of their economic situation in comparison to the situation of metropolitan voters, as well as perceptions of unequal distribution, are sources for rural resentment that affects vote choice and ideology. Rural voters are not necessarily envious of urbanites, per se. Resentment and envy are not synonyms, and envy does not adequately capture the cleavage between rural and urban residents. Resentment is related to perceptions of “deservingness.” When comparing social status and circumstances, resentment towards one’s perceived unjust disadvantage provokes feelings that the advantage of others is undeserved (Feather and Sherman, 2002). These feelings need not be established objectively; the *perception* of unmerited advantage clouds understanding of broader forces that are the causes of one’s circumstances. These broader forces may be social, economic and political in nature, but the “politics of resentment” make it easier to simply shift blame on less deserving social groups than to accept that one is not alone in their circumstances (Cramer, 2015).

Rurality and the Republican Party

Since 1952, the divide between North and South voting patterns has become more contingent on community type; in both regions, the cleavage between rural and urban voting trends has grown substantially, with Northern and Southern rural voters aligning with the Republican Party in increasing numbers each presidential election (McKee, 2008). From 1988 to 2012, heavily urban areas voted 32 points more Democratic than the average, whereas heavily rural areas were 11 points more Republican (Bump, 2014). In 2016, urban counties voted considerably more Democratic than they had in 2004, 2008, and 2012. There are only 137 of these counties, yet account for 157.8 million people. Conversely, 1,508 small counties each with less than 25,000 people swung Republican just as drastically since 2004 (Gamio, 2016). It is

evident that rural and urban areas are growing further and further apart in ideology each election cycle.

There is far less income inequality in rural areas, which allows economic individualism to prosper; thus, rural voters show little regard for government-sponsored measures to promote systematic equality at the expense of the individual (Gimpel and Karnes, 2006). Rural areas are characterized by values such as individualism and belief in limited government. This could in part explain the trend in these areas to gravitate to the Republican Party. These values contrast urbanite ideals of combatting the rampant income inequality of the cities and establishing government intervention within the economy, which are major issues of the Democratic Party platform. Thus, while some may argue that rural voters are foolishly voting against their economic interests (Frank, 2004), rural voters are connecting to the economic policies of the Republican Party through the values that the Republican Party attaches to its platform; namely, “hard work” (Cramer, 2012), individualism, and of course, limited government.

Does the rural setting influence voter behavior? Or do the individuals' demographics and predetermined ideology form the political trends that become typical of rural areas? There is an argument for both. Bishop confronted the evolution of politically homogenous regions, demonstrating that in 1976, less than a quarter of Americans lived in uncompetitive political districts. In 2004, almost half of Americans lived in landslide counties (Bishop and Cushing, 2009). To say that millions of Americans move to communities simply to be near people that vote the way they do seems far-fetched, but it is reasonable to consider that people naturally seek to live in areas that reflect their values. Well-educated people tend to live and work near other well-educated people. People move to areas that have the type of industries in which they work. Political homogeneity is a natural consequence of this migration. As young people move to cities

for jobs or education, and families move to regions with good schools and low crime rates, the people that are left in the rural areas are those with similar values and ultimately similar political ideology. But even looking at political ideology explicitly, it does indeed have an effect on where Americans decide to live. In fact, the partisanship of an individual who moves to a new area or district is explanatory of the partisanship of that area or district as a whole, regardless of the partisanship of the migrant's original district (McDonald, 2009). It has been empirically demonstrated that many districts in the United States are comprised of residents with similar ideologies due to political sorting; in other words, the political ideology of an individual can predict their destination if they decide to migrate to another region.

The characteristics of rural areas provide a breeding ground for the issues faced by rural voters today; the unavoidable consequences of being in a remote geographic location and the sheer lack of people diminishes the attention these areas receive. Agriculture and manufacturing are decreasing in terms of GDP share, and remoteness makes it difficult for policymakers to interact with rural constituents. Essentially, the characteristics of living in rural areas do contribute significantly to the feelings and ideologies of the citizens living here.

Rural Consciousness in 2016

Katherine Cramer examined a mindset she dubs “rural consciousness” in her case study of Wisconsin rural voters. This mindset is “...an identity as a rural person that includes... 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 lifestyle.” The three key aspects of rural consciousness are the beliefs that rural areas are being ignored by legislators, rural areas do not get their fair share of resources, and rural residents are inherently different in their values and lifestyle than metropolitan residents (p. 12).

Although numbers show that the rural economic situation is improving since the Recession, the economy is still a significant source of discontent and tension for rural Americans. Cramer elaborates on the perspective that rural voters find resentment in the politics of redistribution. Rather than basing opinions solely on the raw percentages concerning their own region's unemployment levels or median earnings, rural voters feel slighted in comparison to metropolitan areas that are seemingly rebounding much faster from the Great Recession and receiving much more attention from the political elites.

Katherine Cramer's study of Wisconsin rural resentment was prior to the 2016 election. After Trump's victory, Cramer did later assert that the resentment that Governor Scott Walker tapped into – "the big cities and the capital don't care about you, you should be angry, you are not getting your fair share" – mirrored President Trump's campaign rhetoric in these farm towns, Rust Belt counties, and other sparsely-populated areas. Even rural Hispanics in small southwestern counties saw increased levels of support for President Trump; poverty was a major factor in these counties. These counties had lower median household incomes, high rates of unemployment, and low rates of labor force participation (Cadava, 2016). Similar economic factors were present in largely white counties in the Rust Belt and Midwestern rural counties. 592 counties shifted twenty points or more for President Trump in 2016. 387 of these had populations under 25,000, 133 were between 25,000 and 50,000. Only 26 flipped counties had populations of 100,000 or more people (Wilson, 2017).

In addition to unemployment rates and lower incomes, rural counties which saw a particularly large shift towards the Republican Party in the 2016 election witnessed a decline in life expectancy (Bor, 2017). Geography-specific economic despair was a significant aspect of

President Trump's electoral victory; his message of unfair distribution and inattention definitely struck a chord with many non-metropolitan counties (Monnat and Brown, 2017).

Theory

Thus, based on previous literature and very recent popular media analyses of the rural-urban cleavage, rural voters' perceptions of unequal attention to their economic plights have and may very well continue to their alter political attitudes and attitudes toward metropolitan residents. Although the steady alignment with the Republican Party can be contributed to many factors, this study will focus on feelings of economic resentment as they manifest in perceptions of the progress of the national economy. I would like to document this resentment and the rural alignment with the Republican Party in the three most recent elections, climaxing in the 2016 presidential election.

Considering the economics and characteristics of rural regions and rural voters themselves, I am drawing two hypotheses. Since rural areas are recovering more slowly from the Recession than urban and suburban areas and personal finances do affect judgments of the economy as a whole, I infer that this will result in pessimistic ratings of the national economy.

Hypothesis 1A

Counties that are more rural will have more pessimistic economic perceptions than counties that are more urban.

Hypothesis 1B

The relationship will become stronger from 2008 to 2016.

Rural values of individualism and traditionalism have been shown to foster alignment with the Republican Party, a trend that has been in the making for many years. These values also are factors in how rural voters view the economy. In order to assess how economic perceptions given a voter's community type affect vote choice, I am also making a second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2A

Among those with pessimistic economic perceptions, rural voters will be the most likely to vote for the Republican candidate in that particular election cycle.

Hypothesis 2B

The effect will become stronger from 2008 to 2016.

Methods

The survey used for this study is the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, which is administered by YouGov/Polimetrix. The survey reaches across the nation and can have upwards of 50,000 respondents. Since I am studying perceptions of the national economy as it pertains to vote choice in particular, I am utilizing three datasets from 2008, 2012, and 2016. These election years were chosen because they were the most recent and also documented the change from a Democratic president to a Republican one. In 2008, the survey had a sample size of 32,800. In 2012, the sample size was 54,535 and in 2016 it was 64,600.

My first hypothesis includes the main predictor variable, rurality, as well as nine other control variables. Rurality of the respondent's county was the variable whose effect was the primary object of the first hypothesis; in observing an additive relationship, the other variables acted as control variables. Variable "RuralUrban" was coded via the 2013 Rural Urban Continuum Code by the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture. Each county in the United States is classified from 1 to 9, 1 being completely metropolitan and 9 being completely rural. (See Appendix A for coding and frequency statistics of RuralUrban.)

The other independent variables include party identification, family income, education level, age, religiosity, sex, marital status, parent/guardian of children under the age of eighteen, race of the respondent, and employment status. Party identification was coded on a seven-point scale from 1 to 7, (Democrat to Republican): Strong Democrat, Not Very Strong Democrat, Lean Democrat, Independent, Lean Republican, Not Very Strong Republican, and Strong Republican.

Family income was coded low to high; beginning with those making \$10,000 to \$19,999, and increasing in ten thousand dollar increments until the highest income bracket- those making \$150,000 or more. Education level ranged from low to high, from “No High School” all the way to “Post Graduate”. Age was coded by sorting respondents into generational categories from oldest to youngest. Religiosity was a measure of the importance of religion in the respondent's daily life, ranging from “Very Important” to “Not At All Important”. Sex was a dummy variable with 1 being Male and 0 being Female. Marital status was operationalized using a dummy variable, with Married being 1 and single/widowed/divorced being 0. Whether the respondent had children under the age of 18 was a dummy variable with 1 being yes and 0 being no. Finally, employment status was measured with a dummy variable with 1 being Unemployed and 0 being Employed, regardless of the type of job or industry.

The dependent variable, Perception of the Economy, was operationalized through the survey question “The National Economy in the past year has gotten...”, with answers ranging from Much Better, Better, Stayed About the Same, Worse, and Much Worse. Increasing values of the Economy variable are consistent with more pessimistic ratings of the national economy in the past year. This question was consistent over the three election surveys in 2008, 2012, and 2016. It measures one’s impression of the economy not just at the moment of the survey, but the overall perception of the economy’s movement over the past year. As explored previously in the theory section, attitudes about the national economy often reflect one’s perceptions of their own economic situation.

To discern the relationship between the variables of interest, I conducted multivariate ordinary least squares regressions. I examined whether the relationship was first and foremost statistically significant. After determining that the relationship between the variables was indeed

significant, I assessed the direction of the relationship and the strength. Many of the observations were statistically significant, yet substantively their effect was minimal. Brief summaries of both hypotheses' results are discussed at the end of their respective sections, and more detailed analyses and potential explanations are discussed further in the "Discussion and Conclusions" portion of this paper.

Results of Hypothesis 1

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t	P>t
Rurality	-.004*	.002	-2.14	0.032
Party ID	-.096***	.002	-56.82	0.000
Income	.000	.001	0.18	0.860
Education	.006*	.003	2.33	0.020
Age	-.005	.004	-1.24	0.217
Religiosity	.056***	.004	14.80	0.000
Sex	-.097***	.008	-12.63	0.000
Married	-.008	.009	-0.95	0.343
Kids	-.001	.009	-0.17	0.865
White	.093***	.016	5.51	0.000
Black	.086***	.022	3.78	0.000
Hispanic	.011	.022	0.51	0.607
Unemployed	.088***	.018	4.62	0.000

Table 1: Rurality and Perception of Economy in 2008

The 2008 election was the victory of Senator Barack Obama over Senator John McCain. The economy was dismal due to the Great Recession, hitting the nation from coast to coast. Thus, the results of the regression reflect the perceptions of the economy at the time: negative on all accounts. The direction of rurality did not follow the assumed direction in Hypothesis 1, thus the results were significant in the opposite direction. Remembering that increasing values of variable RuralUrban are associated with increasing rurality (lower population density and urbanization), the relationship between perception of the national economy and rurality was negative. Thus, urban counties were more likely to rate the economy as having gotten worse in

the past year than rural counties. The effect was small. Comparing a completely metro county (1) to a completely rural county (9), the most metro county would have not even a single point more of a negative perception of the national economy than the most rural county on the scale of 1 (Gotten Much Better) to 5 (Gotten Much Worse).

A more notable effect is seen in the party identification relationship. In 2008, the last year of Republican President George W. Bush's term, negative perceptions of the national economy were associated with a more Democratic rating on the seven-point party identification scale. For example, as one moves from identifying from a Republican to a more Democrat identification, one would view the economy more negatively. This effect was substantively minimal.

2012

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t	P>t
Rurality	.010***	.002	3.97	0.000
Party ID	.296***	.002	139.41	0.000
Income	-.023***	.001	-14.99	0.000
Education	-.043***	.003	-13.93	0.000
Age	-.044***	.004	-9.13	0.000
Religiosity	-.085***	.004	-20.34	0.000
Sex	-.061***	.008	-7.00	0.000
Married	-.055***	.016	-3.44	0.001
Kids	.060***	.011	5.51	0.000
White	-.067***	.018	-3.60	0.000
Black	-.344***	.022	-15.42	0.000
Hispanic	-.086***	.023	-3.61	0.000
Unemployed	.230***	.016	14.00	0.000

Table 2: Rurality and Perception of Economy in 2012

In 2012, the year of President Obama's second victory, the economy had improved since the Recession. The assumptions made in the first hypothesis manifested in 2012; higher levels of rurality were associated with pessimistic perceptions of the national economy in the past year. The association was statistically significant, yet substantively minimal. A respondent from a completely rural county with less than 2,500 urban population and not adjacent to a metro area

(categorized as a 9 on the Rural Urban Continuum Code) would rate the economy in 2012 only half a point more negatively than a respondent from a county in a metro area of 1 million population or more. However, compared to 2008, the relationship was stronger and in the anticipated direction.

Party identification was again statistically and now also substantively significant, though the direction had flipped since 2008. During this election cycle, respondents identifying as more Republican were more likely to view the economy as having gotten worse in the past year. Moving just one point from a Strong Democrat to a Strong Republican would translate into a one-and-a-half-point shift in the rating of the national economy, from a more positive one to a more negative one.

2016

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t	P>t
Rurality	.025***	.002	10.27	0.000
Party ID	.219***	.002	110.17	0.000
Income	-.035***	.001	-23.13	0.000
Education	-.071***	.003	-24.25	0.000
Age	.041***	.004	10.01	0.000
Religiosity	-.041***	.004	-11.34	0.000
Sex	.146***	.008	18.26	0.000
Married	-.007	.009	-0.89	0.374
Kids	.003	.008	0.35	0.728
White	-.092***	.015	-5.97	0.000
Black	-.196***	.019	-10.29	0.000
Hispanic	-.062*	.021	-3.08	0.002
Unemployed	.179***	.019	9.10	0.000

Table 3: Rurality and Perception of Economy in 2016

In 2016, the year of Republican Donald Trump's electoral victory, the relationship between rurality and perception of the economy was the strongest of the three election cycles observed in this project. The association was statistically significant and more substantively significant than the prior two election years. Increasing levels of rurality were positively

associated with pessimistic perceptions of the national economy in the past year. A respondent from the most rural county would rate the economy in 2016 just over a point more negatively on the five-point perception scale than a respondent from a county in a metro area of 1 million population or more.

Interestingly, party identification had a slightly smaller effect on perceptions of the national economy than in 2012. The direction, however, remained the same; Republicans were more likely to rate the economy as having gotten worse in the past year. Moving one point on the party identification scale, such as from a Strong Democrat to a Not So Strong Democrat, translated to just over a one-point shift in rating the national economy—a more negative rating—compared to the point and a half shift in 2012.

Thus, the predictions made in Hypothesis 1 were mostly confirmed. From 2008 to 2016, the relationship between rurality and pessimistic economic perceptions became stronger. In 2008, the direction was in the wrong direction, however, in 2012 and 2016 the direction was as anticipated and was statistically significant.

Methods and Results of Hypothesis 2

Considering the large effect of party identification in the previous hypothesis, I then moved on to the second hypothesis: among those who viewed the national economy as having gotten worse in the past year, rural voters will be more likely to vote for the Republican presidential candidate than metro voters, with the relationship becoming stronger from 2008 to 2016. I ran logistic regression models to study the size and statistical significance of rurality on the likelihood of voting for the Republican candidate in each election year. This model was chosen because the dependent variable, vote for the Republican candidate, is a binary variable

with 1 being a vote for the Republican candidate and 0 being a vote for any other candidate/not voting.

I condensed the categories of rurality into three labels: Metro, Suburban, and Rural. Metro consisted of counties with a Rural-Urban Continuum Code of 1, 2, or 3. Suburban consisted of counties with a code of 4, 5, or 6. Rural consisted of counties with a code of 7, 8, or 9. I chose these breakdowns for the simplicity of interpreting the interaction and confirmed that the new labels were consistent with the definitions already assigned by the United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Urban Continuum Codes. Economy, now an additional predictor variable, is consistent with its categories in the first hypothesis: perception of the national economy ranging from Gotten Much Better to Gotten Much Worse (1-5). Thus, higher values of the Economy variable are consistent with more pessimistic economic ratings. The same predictor variables from the first hypothesis were used in order to determine rurality's effect on voting for the Republican candidate controlled by these other contributing factors.

For each election year, I ran a logistic regression model for each category of rurality separately; each model measured the likelihood of voting for the Republican candidate for only rural voters, then only suburban voters, and then only metro voters. Thus, I was able to analyze the significance, direction, and size of the coefficients for Rural, Suburban, and Metro in each model. In determining the effect of economic perceptions on vote for the Republican candidate across different levels of rurality, I assessed a one unit increase in Economy (such as shifting from viewing the economy as staying the same in the past year to viewing the economy as having gotten worse in the past year) and the logarithmic odds of voting for the Republican candidate based on the size and direction of the coefficient. For simplicity of discussing these

results, those who viewed the economy as having gotten worse in the past year will be referred to as “economically pessimistic”.

2008

2008 rural	Coefficient	Standard Error	z	P> z
Economy	-1.00**	0.34	-2.93	0.003
Party ID	0.77***	0.04	18.14	0.000
Income	0.05	0.03	1.68	0.094
Education	-0.05	0.07	-0.73	0.465
Age	-0.30**	0.10	-3.06	0.002
Religiosity	-0.45	0.09	-5.06	0.000
Sex	-0.01	0.17	-0.04	0.967
Married	0.11	0.20	0.57	0.571
Kids	0.14	0.20	0.71	0.479
White	0.10	0.41	0.25	0.800
Black	-	-	-	-
Hispanic	-0.99	0.71	-1.38	0.167
Unemployed	-0.17	0.42	-0.42	0.677

Table 4: Likelihood of Rural Residents Voting for John McCain considering Economic Perceptions

2008 suburban	Coefficient	Standard Error	z	P> z
Economy	-0.92***	0.18	-5.13	0.000
Party ID	0.77***	0.03	29.87	0.000
Income	0.10***	0.018	5.54	0.000
Education	-0.05	0.04	-1.31	0.191
Age	-0.33***	0.06	-5.55	0.000
Religiosity	-0.55***	0.05	-10.19	0.000
Sex	0.16	0.11	1.53	0.127
Married	-0.10	0.12	-0.77	0.441
Kids	0.03	0.12	0.22	0.828
White	0.18	0.24	0.74	0.458
Black	-2.07***	0.62	-3.35	0.001
Hispanic	-0.44	0.43	-1.03	0.305
Unemployed	-0.41	0.23	-1.77	0.077

Table 5: Likelihood of Suburban Residents Voting for John McCain considering Economic Perceptions

2008 metro	Coefficient	Standard Error	z	P> z
Economy	-0.62***	0.07	-8.61	0.000
Party ID	0.88***	0.01	76.16	0.000
Income	0.06***	0.01	7.89	0.000
Education	-0.05***	0.02	-3.24	0.001
Age	-0.28***	0.02	-11.86	0.000
Religiosity	-0.45***	0.02	-21.08	0.000
Sex	0.25***	0.04	5.67	0.000
Married	0.26***	0.05	5.13	0.000
Kids	0.04	0.05	0.83	0.406
White	0.27**	0.09	3.02	0.003
Black	-2.16***	0.17	-12.48	0.000
Hispanic	-0.27*	0.12	-2.13	0.033
Unemployed	-0.43	0.11	-3.96	0.000

Table 6: Likelihood of Metro Residents Voting for John McCain considering Economic Perceptions

The abysmal economy and backlash against the incumbent party, the GOP, allowed the Democrats and then-Senator Barack Obama to take an enormous victory in the 2008 presidential elections. Rural, suburban, and metro voters who were economically pessimistic all demonstrated this backlash in their presidential vote choice. All three community types were less likely to vote for the Republican candidate Senator John McCain if they viewed the economy as having gotten worse in the past year, the strongest effect actually being among rural voters.

2012

2012 rural	Coefficient	Standard Error	z	P> z
Economy	2.16***	0.19	11.01	0.000
Party ID	1.10***	0.08	13.84	0.000
Income	0.16**	0.05	3.05	0.002
Education	-0.21*	0.10	-2.08	0.038
Age	0.03	0.16	0.21	0.833
Religiosity	-0.42***	0.13	-3.22	0.001
Sex	0.46	0.26	1.79	0.074
Married	-0.75	0.51	-1.47	0.140
Kids	-0.44	0.33	-1.33	0.185
White	-1.05	0.88	-1.19	0.235
Black	-2.99	1.69	-1.77	0.077
Hispanic	-2.38*	1.16	-2.04	0.041
Unemployed	-0.00	0.53	-0.00	0.996

Table 7: Likelihood of Rural Residents Voting for Mitt Romney considering Economic Perceptions

2012 suburban	Coefficient	Standard Error	z	P> z
Economy	1.80***	0.10	18.53	0.000
Party ID	0.98***	0.04	22.78	0.000
Income	0.10***	0.03	3.88	0.000
Education	-0.01	0.05	-0.18	0.854
Age	-0.16	0.08	-1.91	0.056
Religiosity	-0.41***	0.06	-6.41	0.000
Sex	0.36*	0.14	2.55	0.011
Married	0.27	0.27	1.02	0.306
Kids	-0.23	0.18	-1.33	0.183
White	0.09	0.31	0.31	0.759
Black	-0.92	0.56	-1.64	0.101
Hispanic	-0.79	0.65	-1.22	0.223
Unemployed	0.07	0.27	0.26	0.797

Table 8: Likelihood of Suburban Residents Voting for Mitt Romney considering Economic Perceptions

2012 metro	Coefficient	Standard Error	z	P> z
Economy	1.80***	0.09	18.53	0.000
Party ID	0.98***	0.04	22.78	0.000
Income	0.10***	0.03	3.88	0.000
Education	-0.01	0.05	-0.18	0.854
Age	-0.16	0.08	-1.91	0.056
Religiosity	-0.41***	0.06	-6.41	0.000
Sex	0.36*	0.14	2.55	0.011
Married	0.27	0.27	1.02	0.306
Kids	-0.23	0.18	-1.33	0.183
White	0.09	0.31	0.31	0.759
Black	-0.92	0.56	-1.64	0.101
Hispanic	-0.79	0.65	-1.22	0.223
Unemployed	0.07	0.27	0.26	0.797

Table 9: Likelihood of Metro Residents Voting for Mitt Romney considering Economic Perceptions

By 2012, the economy was recovering from the Great Recession that had marked the 2008 elections. However, the theory that the president and thus the president's party is held responsible for the economy still held true in this election; the Democrats were now on the receiving end of this blame. Economically pessimistic voters across all community types were more likely to vote for the Republican candidate Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential election. Community type did have an effect on the strength of this relationship; among economically pessimistic voters, rural voters captured the strongest likelihood of voting for the Republican

candidate, Mitt Romney. Suburban and metro voters who had pessimistic views of the economy also were more likely to vote for the Republican, yet the effect was the strongest among rural voters.

2016

2016 rural	Coefficient	Standard Error	z	P> z
Economy	1.02***	0.10	10.15	0.000
Party ID	0.83***	0.05	15.76	0.000
Income	0.03	0.04	0.72	0.471
Education	-0.22**	0.07	-3.10	0.002
Age	0.19	0.10	1.86	0.063
Religiosity	-0.33	0.08	-1.14	0.253
Sex	-0.21	0.18	-1.14	0.253
Married	0.43	0.19	2.26	0.073
Kids	-0.34	0.19	-1.80	0.073
White	0.66	0.40	1.66	0.097
Black	-0.49	0.75	-0.66	0.512
Hispanic	0.40	0.81	0.49	0.624
Unemployed	0.28	0.45	0.63	0.529

Table 10: Likelihood of Rural Residents Voting for Donald Trump considering Economic Perceptions

2016 suburban	Coefficient	Standard Error	z	P> z
Economy	1.07***	0.06	16.50	0.000
Party ID	0.87***	0.03	26.43	0.000
Income	0.04	0.02	1.74	0.081
Education	-0.21***	0.04	-4.97	0.000
Age	0.21***	0.06	3.45	0.001
Religiosity	-0.32***	0.05	-6.39	0.000
Sex	-0.21	0.11	-1.86	0.063
Married	0.05	0.12	0.40	0.688
Kids	0.12	0.12	1.07	0.284
White	-0.04	0.25	-0.14	0.887
Black	-1.65***	0.43	-3.86	0.000
Hispanic	-0.49	0.41	-1.20	0.229
Unemployed	0.00	0.26	0.01	0.989

Table 11: Likelihood of Suburban Residents Voting for Donald Trump considering Economic Perceptions

2016 metro	Coefficient	Standard Error	z	P> z
Economy	0.92***	0.02	42.30	0.000
Party ID	0.83***	0.01	75.22	0.000
Income	0.04***	0.01	5.34	0.000
Education	-0.21***	0.01	-14.32	0.000
Age	0.23***	0.02	11.27	0.000
Religiosity	-0.35***	0.02	-20.10	0.000
Sex	-0.50***	0.039	-12.74	0.000
Married	0.20***	0.04	4.60	0.000
Kids	-0.19***	0.04	-4.71	0.000
White	0.39***	0.07	5.51	0.000
Black	-0.97***	0.11	-8.66	0.000
Hispanic	-0.22*	0.09	-2.25	0.024
Unemployed	0.11	0.09	1.17	0.244

Table 12: Likelihood of Metro Residents Voting for Donald Trump considering Economic Perceptions

In 2016, I hypothesized that rural voters who have pessimistic views of the economy would have the strongest likelihood of voting for the Republican candidate Donald Trump, even more so than in 2008 and 2016. However, among rural voters who viewed the economy as having gotten worse in the past year, their logarithmic odds of voting for the Republican candidate rose on average by 1.02, compared to suburban voters' 1.07. The difference between suburban and rural voters in this election cycle was minimal, yet interesting in that the effect in 2012 was much stronger among rural voters. It appears that pessimistic views of the economy drove Republican vote choice among rural voters more for Mitt Romney than Donald Trump.

Another predictor variable that had a particularly interesting effect in different election years was level of education. Increasing values of the Education variable were marked by higher levels of educational attainment, with a post-graduate degree being the highest value. Across all three community types, higher educational attainment was associated with a smaller likelihood of supporting the Republican candidate. Education was not a significant predictor for rural and suburban voters until the 2016 election. For metro voters, however, high levels of educational attainment were significant in the decreased likelihood of voting for the Republican in all three election years. In fact, the effect became stronger from 2008 to 2016.

Rurality did seem to have some effect on economically pessimistic voters' support for the Republican presidential candidate in 2012 and 2016, yet 2016 did not record the strongest support that I had originally hypothesized. Additionally, all three community types actually were less likely to support the Republican candidate in 2008, which was the exact opposite direction I had originally predicted. It seems as though George W. Bush's party was punished at the polls for the dismal economy in 2008, and this repercussion did not discriminate among community type. 2012, interestingly enough, was the year with the highest likelihood of economically pessimistic voters' support for the Republican, and rural voters did indeed hold the highest likelihood in this year. Although the economy had markedly improved since 2008, economic progress was more pronounced in certain areas than others. Among economically pessimistic voters, rural voters' pessimistic perceptions were most salient in voting for the Republican. Finally, in 2016, economically pessimistic voters were all more likely to vote for the Republican candidate, though rural voters did not have the strongest likelihood. Suburban voters had the largest coefficient at 1.07, yet this was substantively identical to rural voters' 1.01, and also not very substantively different than urban voters' 0.92.

Discussion

The results in 2008 contradicted both of my hypotheses in that rural voters were *not* the most economically pessimistic, nor were they the most likely to vote for the Republican presidential candidate amongst economically pessimistic voters. The theory of placing economic blame on the incumbent truly seemed to be at work during this election, and Senator John McCain by default assumed partial responsibility for the poor economy under the executive leadership of the Republicans and President Bush. Additionally, Senator McCain had unusually low support from rural voters during the 2008 election, a weakness that haunted him throughout

the campaign season and into the election. Thus, because the national economy was so poor across all community types in 2008, and that particular election year was an enormous year for the Democratic Party, the results from both hypotheses do reflect the current events of that particular election.

The results from 2012 were particularly surprising, especially given that the economy had improved since 2008. Comparing the most rural voters to the most metro ones, rural voters rated the national economy a point and a half more pessimistically. These results were in line with my first hypothesis, and do seem to support the theory that perceptions of economic injustice relative to metropolitan areas became more pronounced as the economy improved for some areas and industries more so than others.

Finally, in 2016, rurality did affect economic perceptions as well as vote for the Republican candidate given these perceptions, though the effect was not as noteworthy as both popular media and my hypotheses would have assumed. The substantively small effect that rurality had in this election year may be a reflection of the fact that rather than a sudden “backlash” of rural voters flocking to Trump and the Republican Party, it may be more indicative of a long-time, steady trend of rural voters aligning with the Republicans. The economic decline of rural areas was definitely salient in 2016, but there are other factors tied up with the economy that play a large role in vote choice and political ideology.

It cannot be ignored that rural areas are largely made up of white voters, and race is a notoriously salient factor in vote choice and political ideology. President Trump frequently campaigned on tight immigration policy, provoking the sentiment by many Americans of feeling that that immigrants are taking away employment opportunities; particularly in blue-collar

professions that dominate rural America. Thus, race and immigration are also tangled up in economic perceptions, which this project could not completely capture.

Additionally, a notable shortcoming of analyzing rural data is the sheer shortage of it. Although the Cooperative Congressional Election Study was able to gather enough responses from rural counties to be considered significant, the mere fact of there being more people to poll in large counties created a large disparity in the number of rural respondents compared to urban respondents. Further, not all rural counties and areas are the same; Midwestern and Rust Belt counties categorized as rural have a very different culture than Southern or Far West rural counties. Careful consideration ought to be given to how the regional culture, in addition to community type, might affect the political and economic perceptions of respondents.

Finally, the most difficult challenge of assessing rural attitudes and politics is defining rurality in general. The Rural Urban Continuum Codes can capture statistical data on population density and economic typography, but, as Katherine Cramer found, rurality is a mindset that is difficult to categorize empirically. Both Republicans and Democrats would be wise to confront the reality of aging and deteriorating rural America and follow Katherine Cramer's lead in hosting actual discourse with these Americans in order to appease the sentiments of distributive and attentional injustice within these voters.

Appendix A***Frequency Statistics for Rural Urban Continuum***

RuralUrban

2008

1	Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more	13,396
2	Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population	5,871
3	Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population	2,712
4	Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area	1,458
5	Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area	542
6	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area	1,380
7	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area	824
8	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area	224
9	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area	252

2012

1	Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more	16,753
2	Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population	7,587
3	Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population	3,335
4	Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area	1,452
5	Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area	535
6	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area	1,407
7	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area	828
8	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area	226
9	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area	237

2016

1	Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more	20,459
2	Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population	8,423
3	Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population	3,560
4	Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area	1,672
5	Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area	541
6	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area	1,559
7	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area	874
8	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area	237
9	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area	261

Appendix B

Independent Variables

Party

*7 point party identification scale
(Democrat to Republican)*

1. Strong Democrat
2. Not Very Strong Democrat
3. Lean Democrat
4. Independent
5. Lean Republican
6. Not Very Strong Republican
7. Strong Republican

Income

*Family Income
(poor to wealthy)*

1. Less than \$10,000
2. \$10,000 - \$19,999
3. \$20,000 - \$29,999
4. \$30,000 - \$39,999
5. \$40,000 - \$49,999
6. \$50,000 - \$59,999
7. \$60,000 - \$69,999
8. \$70,000 - \$79,999
9. \$80,000 - \$99,999
10. \$100,000 - \$149,000
11. \$150,000 or more

Sex

0. Female
1. Male

Religiosity

*Importance of religion in your life
(important to not important)*

1. Very Important
2. Somewhat Important
3. Not Too Important
4. Not At All Important

Education

Highest Level Education Achieved

(low to highly educated)

1. No High School
2. High School Graduate
3. Some College
4. 2 Year
5. 4 Year
6. Post Grad

Age

Generation by Birth Year

(old to young)

1. Generation X (1996-1998)
2. Millennials (1977-1995)
3. Generation Y (1965-1976)
4. Baby Boomers (1946-1964)
5. Silent Generation (1917-1945)

Race

White/Black/Hispanic dummy variables

White

Black

Hispanic

Marriage

What is your marital status?

0. Not Married
1. Married

Kids

Are you the parent or guardian of any children under the age of 18?

0. No
1. Yes

Employment

Which of the following best describes your employment status?

(dummy variable)

Unemployed

0. No
1. Yes

Republican-

Who did you vote for President?

2008:

- 1 John McCain
- 0. Barack Obama/Other

2012:

- 1. Mitt Romney
- 0. Barack Obama/Other

2016:

- 1. Donald Trump
- 0. Hillary Clinton/Other

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