

# Values and Religion in Rural America: Attitudes Toward Abortion and Same-Sex Relations

MICHELE DILLON & SARAH SAVAGE

## Summary

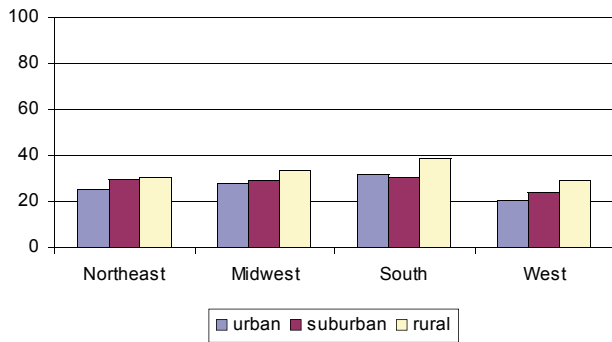
This issue brief uses cumulative data from the nationally representative, General Social Survey (1972–2004) (Davis & Smith 2004), to explore how rural Americans differ from their urban and suburban peers on religious involvement and in their attitudes toward politically contested moral issues, namely, abortion and same-sex relations. The data indicate that rural Americans are slightly more religious than their metropolitan neighbors as indicated by weekly church attendance and having had a born-again experience. Rural Americans, however, do not comprise a homogeneous group. There are significant regional differences, with rural Southerners much more likely than their rural counterparts in Eastern, Midwestern, and Western parts of the country to be highly religious. And while rural Americans are more likely to oppose abortion and same-sex relations than their non-rural neighbors, there is also evidence of variation in their attitudes toward these issues. Like Americans as a whole, rural Americans vary their opinion on abortion depending on the specific circumstances. Generation also matters, and this is especially evident in the fact that younger individuals are more tolerant of same-sex relations than their parents and grandparents. It is also noteworthy that religiosity trumps rural/non-rural location when it comes to social conservatism. Highly religious rural and non-rural Americans alike are much more likely to oppose abortion and same-sex relations than their less religious counterparts. Acknowledging and responding to these important nuances in the cultural values of rural Americans may improve the ability of both Democrats and Republicans to develop connections throughout rural America. In sum, it would be a mistake to categorize rural Americans as a single voting bloc. Rural America is diverse, and behavior, attitudes and beliefs vary by region.

## Introduction

In the turmoil of the current political climate, election season brings renewed political and media attention to rural America. Voter dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq, the economy, and with the Republican leadership has made several congressional races appear competitive for Democrats as they strategize to eke out a majority in the House and maybe even in the Senate. The rural vote was critical to the success of the Republican Party in both the 2000 and 2004 elections, and the ability of the Republicans to maintain control of the House and Senate in 2006 depends in large part on how well their candidates do among rural voters (Greenberg, Walker, & Greener 2005). Tracking polls indicate that “Republicans and Democrats are essentially tied in competitive rural districts and states” (Greenberg & Greener 2006:3). The Democrats, however, have a clear edge over Republicans among Independents (Greenberg & Greener 2006: 3). How this will play out on election day remains to be seen.

Party loyalty, the salience of the mix of specific local and national issues, and candidate charisma are all important factors in determining votes. We know that moral values matter to Americans and that they especially matter to rural voters. Even though “moral values” and “social issues” are not top priorities in the current polls (Greenberg & Greener 2006), values nonetheless are never far from many voters’ minds and invariably exert an important influence on their election decisions. In this issue brief, we examine rural Americans’ current attitudes on two hot-button, value-laden issues: abortion and same-sex relations. We use national survey data from the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted on a near-yearly basis since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago (Davis & Smith 2004). These data allow us to compare rural Americans with their urban and suburban peers and to explore how rural Americans differ on these value-based issues by region

FIGURE 1. WEEKLY CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY REGION<sup>1</sup> AND RURAL/NON-RURAL LOCATION, 1998-2004



Source: General Social Survey, 1972-2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

and generation, two important factors that shape cultural expectations and political behavior. Before examining these trends, we first contextualize their relevance to rural Americans by considering the importance of religion.

## Rural Americans are More Religious

The United States is one of the most highly religious countries in the western world, boasting remarkably high and relatively stable levels of church attendance and belief in God and the afterlife. More than 300,000 local church congregations provide church members and community residents with an impressive array of worship, social, cultural, educational, and counseling activities (e.g., Chaves 2004: 3). Not surprisingly, given the small town life of rural residents, the church is a focal point for many, a place where neighbors worship, socialize, and reflect on the state of the country. Rural Americans' denominational preferences tend to vary in distinct ways by region. In the South, for example, most people are Protestant (77 percent), and by and large they are Baptists, mostly Southern Baptists, whose conservative theology has long made a mark on Southern culture and everyday life. Catholics dominate in the East; the Midwest is more mixed, home to a large proportion of Protestants (mostly Lutherans, Methodists, and Baptists) and a sizable number of Catholics; and the West remains the most "unchurched" region in the country.

Southerners (36%) are more likely than Americans living in the Midwest (32%), the Northeast (29%) and the West (25%) to attend church on a weekly or almost weekly basis. And within each region, rural Americans are slightly more likely than those living in urban or suburban areas to be frequent church-goers. (see Figure 1).

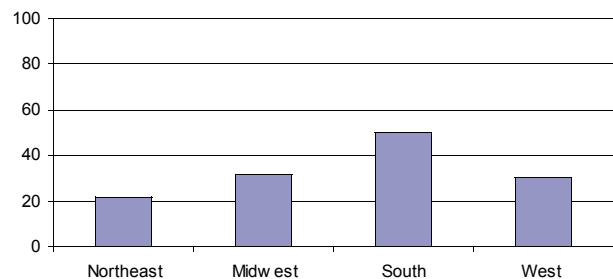
## More Rural Americans are Born-Again, Especially Southerners

One of the most interesting changes in the American religious landscape since the 1970s is the steady increase in the proportion of Americans who report being born-again Christians. According to Gallup data, just over one-third (35 percent) of Americans in 1976 said that they had had a born-again experience, while 42 percent report so today (Gallup poll data, various years; Winseman 2005: 119). The GSS data show a similar trend increase though at a lower incidence, with 36 percent responding that they have had a born-again experience. The increase in the proportion of born-again Christians is interesting for a number of reasons. Most particularly for political observers, its significance lies in the fact that born-again Americans, who tend to fall into the "evangelical" category in national polls, are more likely than others to express a biblically grounded conservative stance on moral and social issues and thus to support political candidates, Republicans mostly, who espouse a platform advocating traditional family values. Moreover, born-again Christians embrace the exclusivist biblical command that one must be born-again in order to attain salvation and hence they are likely to be suspicious of candidates who though religious, are not evangelical, and of others who embrace a more diffuse religious identity or who favor social policies that affirm the religious pluralism of American society (Wuthnow 2005).

According to the GSS data, Southerners are far more likely than Americans living elsewhere to describe themselves as born-again. Fifty percent of Southerners say they are born-again. By contrast, only 32 percent of Midwesterners, 30 percent of those in the West, and 22 percent of Easterners identify as born-again (see Figure 2).

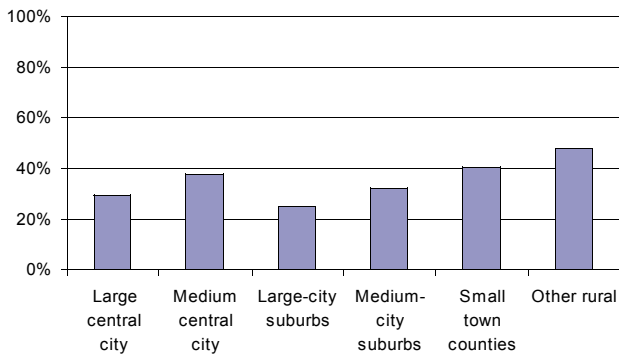
Regional variation aside, across America, people living in rural areas and in counties with small towns are more likely than more metropolitan residents to report being born-again (see Figure 3). Given the link we have noted

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO REPORT HAVING HAD A BORN-AGAIN EXPERIENCE, BY REGION



Source: General Social Survey, 1972-2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

**FIGURE 3. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO REPORT HAVING HAD A BORN-AGAIN EXPERIENCE, BY PLACE TYPE**



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

between born-again status and political views, this suggests that rural America will continue to be a bulwark of moral conservatism notwithstanding the cultural changes that will inevitably characterize rural America as it adapts to demographic and socio-economic change (e.g. Johnson 2006).

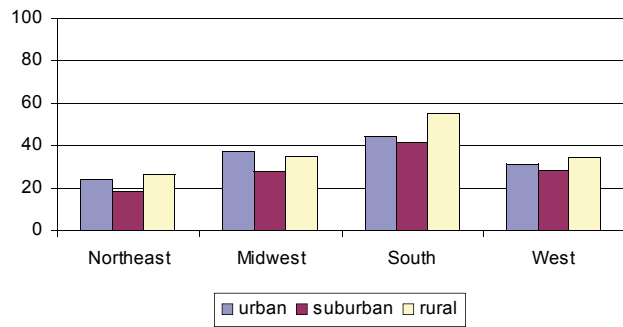
This general pattern holds within each region except in the Midwest, where urban residents are slightly more likely than those living in rural areas to report being born-again (see Figure 4).

Young adults in the GSS generally tend to be less interested in religion than their parents and grandparents, and we see this pattern too in who identifies as born-again: Members of Generation X (those born between 1966 and 1975) are less likely than their parents to report having had a born-again experience (Figure 5).

Many members of the baby-boom generation embraced born-again Christianity as part of the larger cultural and lifestyle experimentation that they spearheaded (Roof 1999), and we still see the effects of this today, with large proportions of their cohort in each region identifying as born-again (see Figure 6).

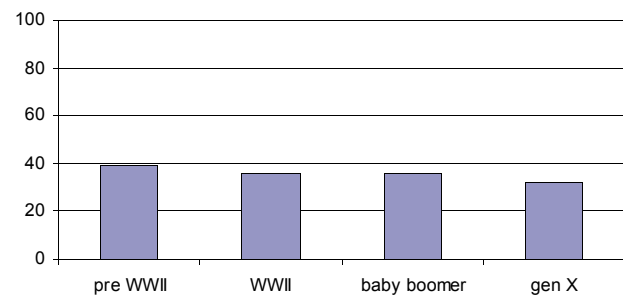
Notwithstanding these generational and regional differences, rural residence, once again, is a further source of variation. Within each generational group, rural individuals are the most, and suburbanites the least, likely to report a born-again experience (see Figure 7).

**FIGURE 4. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO REPORT HAVING HAD A BORN-AGAIN EXPERIENCE, CLASSIFIED BY REGION AND RURAL/NON-RURAL LOCATION**



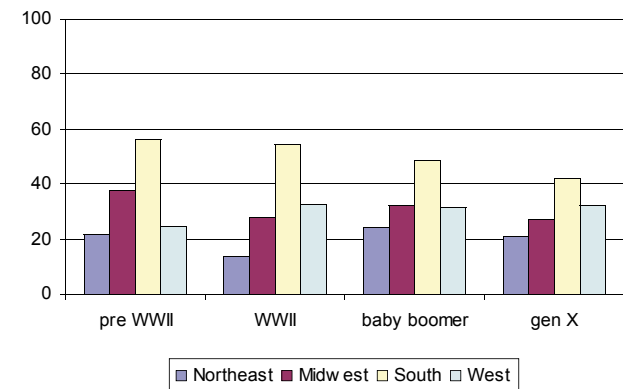
Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

**FIGURE 5. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO REPORT HAVING HAD A BORN-AGAIN EXPERIENCE, CLASSIFIED BY BIRTH COHORT**



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

**FIGURE 6. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO REPORT HAVING HAD A BORN-AGAIN EXPERIENCE, CLASSIFIED BY BIRTH COHORT AND REGION**



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

## Values in Rural America: Abortion

### Attitudes Towards Abortion Remain Steadfast, but Circumstances Matter

The legalization of abortion in 1973, following the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision, is one of the most significant markers of social change in America's recent past and the source of much political and cultural controversy. Once legal, the incidence of abortion rose steadily in the 1970s and 1980s. This was then followed by a noticeable decline and stabilization in the 1990s. In 1975, for example, 25 of every 100 pregnancies ended in abortion; in 1980, it was 30 per 100 pregnancies and remained so throughout the decade. By 1995, however, it had declined to 26, and in 2000, to 25 of every 100 pregnancies (see *Finer and Henshaw 2003: 8*).

Despite the recent dip in the incidence of abortion, the issue continues to be politically controversial. The recently reconfigured Supreme Court, with the successful elevation of two conservative justices (Chief Justice John Roberts and Associate Justice Samuel Alito), stirred the ever-bubbling cauldron of speculation about federal restrictions on abortion, including a possible overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. In spring 2006, South Dakota passed the country's most restrictive abortion legislation since *Roe*, and abortion is expected to be an issue in several congressional and state-wide electoral contests this year (e.g., *Davey 2006*).

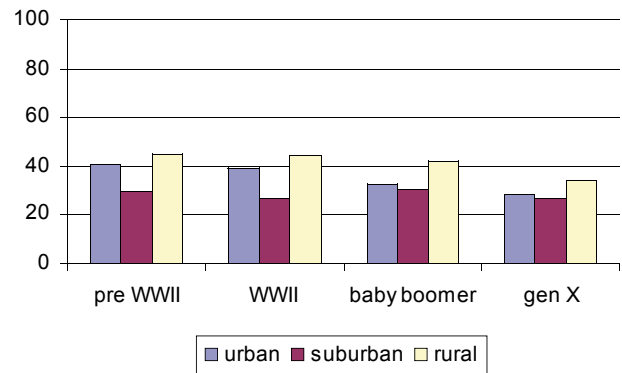
Despite the intensity of ongoing pro-choice and pro-life activism since the early 1970s, American attitudes toward abortion have remained steadfast over the years. The overall year-by-year trend traced in Figure 8 underscores the remarkable stability in abortion attitudes, despite some very slight, occasional dips and rises.

The solidity of abortion views is further illustrated in Figure 9; whether interviewed in 1975 or in 2005, a similar majority of Americans (about 60 percent) agreed that abortion should be legal but with some restrictions. Similarly, approximately one-fifth of Americans in 1975 and in 2005 agreed that abortion should be legal across all circumstances, and another one-fifth agreed that abortion should be illegal across all circumstances (Gallup poll data, various years).

According to the GSS, the vast majority of Americans believe that abortion should be legal in difficult circumstances, such as when the mother's health is endangered (90 percent), in the cases of rape (82 percent), or when there is a strong chance of a fetal defect (81 percent). Substantially fewer Americans, however, endorse abortion in circumstances of economic hardship (48 percent), or as an option for an unmarried woman (45 percent), or for a married woman who does not want more children (44 percent), or indeed for any reason (40 percent).<sup>2</sup>

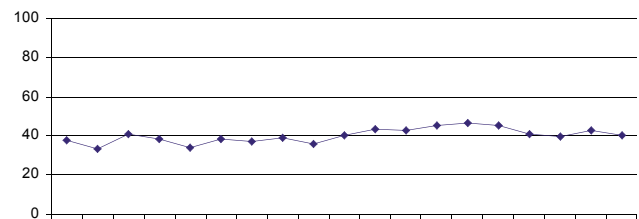
This variability is an important reminder that, although there is solid support for abortion as a legal option in American society, Americans nonetheless make moral distinctions about the acceptability of abortion depending on the con-

FIGURE 7. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO REPORT HAVING HAD A BORN-AGAIN EXPERIENCE, CLASSIFIED BY BIRTH COHORT AND RURAL/NON-RURAL LOCATION



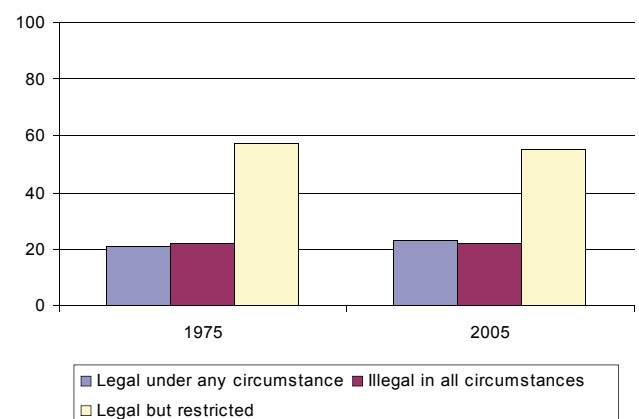
Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

FIGURE 8. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO FAVOR ABORTION FOR ANY REASON, BY YEAR



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

FIGURE 9. AMERICAN ABORTION ATTITUDES, 1975-2005



Source: Gallup Poll, various years

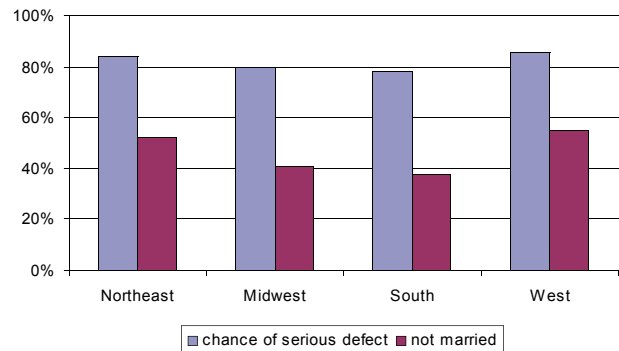
text. This gradient in abortion opinion indicates that politicians and activists who frame the abortion issue in terms of a polarized pro-choice or pro-life debate fail to speak to the nuanced complexity with which most Americans evaluate the issue. The circumstantial distinctions Americans make in regard to abortion also suggest that observers should not be too surprised by current moves across several states to restrict abortion; these initiatives are, to a large extent, in keeping with the long-standing view shared by many Americans that abortion should be legally available but restricted.

**Abortion Attitudes by Region:  
Rural Southerners are Less Likely to  
Support Abortion but Circumstances Still Matter**

Examining abortion attitudes across the four U.S. regions, it is evident that Southerners are less likely than other Americans to support abortion across the various circumstances that women confront. Regional differences are especially striking when Southerners are compared with residents of the Northeast and West. Nevertheless, as is true for the nation as a whole, within each region, Americans vary in their opinion when abortion is being considered for difficult medical (e.g., when there is a chance of a fetal defect) or nonmedical reasons (e.g., if the woman is unmarried) (see Figure 10).

The stability in abortion attitudes apparent for Americans as a whole since the mid-1970s is equally characteristic of urban, suburban, and rural Americans. It is also clear, however, that at each point in time, rural Americans are less likely than urban and suburban residents to support abor-

**FIGURE 10: PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO AGREE WITH ABORTION, BY CIRCUMSTANCE AND CLASSIFIED BY REGION**



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

tion. For example, as indicated in Table 1, currently only 37 percent of rural Americans compared with, on average, 49 percent of nonrural Americans agree with abortion when a woman cannot afford to have more children. As with national and regional trends, rural Americans are consistently more likely to endorse abortion in difficult circumstances (e.g., fetal defect, rape) and to oppose abortion for economic and other personal reasons (see Table 1).

Among rural Americans, rural Southerners (bottom panel of Table 1) are the least likely to agree with abortion. Figure 11 shows that there is a persistent gap between the

**TABLE 1. MEAN PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SUPPORT ABORTION BY REASON AND RURAL/NON-RURAL LOCATION IN THE 1970S AND 2000S, NATIONALLY AND IN THE SOUTH**

	NATIONAL					
	1970s			2000s		
	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Urban	Suburban	Rural
Any reason	43	45	29	44	51	35
Married and wants no more children	49	53	40	46	50	37
Low income; cannot afford	55	60	48	48	51	37
Chance of serious defect	82	85	83	79	83	77
Pregnant as result of rape	83	88	82	81	84	78
	SOUTH					
Any reason	35	48	21	34	46	27
Married and wants no more children	41	54	32	39	46	27
Low income; cannot afford	48	59	41	41	45	29
Chance of serious defect	77	86	80	74	80	72
Pregnant as result of rape	78	87	77	78	81	74

rural South and rural Americans as a whole, with the trends showing the rural South as the most opposed to abortion for any reason. The only exceptions across the 25-year interval are 1980 and 1994 when opinions converged.

### Younger Americans Share Parents' Attitudes toward Abortion

Thus far we have focused on the aggregate trends in abortion attitudes. These analyses grouped people regardless of age or generation. Figure 12 presents abortion attitudes by generation or birth cohort and by rural/non-rural residence. Among each generation, the findings show rural Americans are more likely than those living in either urban or suburban locations to disagree with abortion. This is especially true among rural Southerners (see Figure 13). Cohort itself has very little effect. Although the oldest, pre-World War II generation is the most likely to oppose abortion for any reason, the remaining three cohorts do not appear markedly different. Of particular note, Generation Xers and their baby boomer parents share the same basic profile on abortion attitudes. This generational stability in abortion views is further indication of the relatively settled nature of abortion opinion (see Figure 8)—notwithstanding the ongoing public debate stoked by advocates on both the political right and left. This suggests that whatever changes might occur in abortion law and public policy over the next several years, they are unlikely to be driven by the efforts of middle-aged Americans; today's younger cohorts share their parents' views on abortion and it is unlikely that they will change as they age.

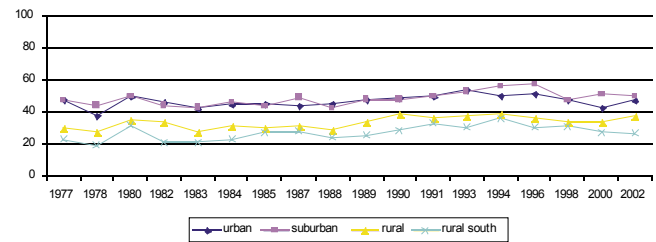
In sum, American abortion attitudes have remained remarkably stable since the 1970s; there is a solid consensus supporting the legalization of abortion. At the same time, however, Americans' abortion views are not easily summarized as either pro-choice or pro-life. Americans are consistently more likely to endorse abortion in difficult circumstances (e.g. fetal health and rape) and to oppose it for family-planning reasons. Southerners and rural Americans are more likely than others to disagree with abortion. From a political standpoint, the fact that Americans differentiate among the reasons for abortion suggest that state-wide initiatives to impose certain restriction on the availability of abortion may garner strong support especially in states (like South Dakota) that have a substantial rural population.

## Values in Rural America: Same-Sex Relations

### Overall, Americans' Approval of Same-Sex Relations is Rising but Southerners are More Likely to Disapprove

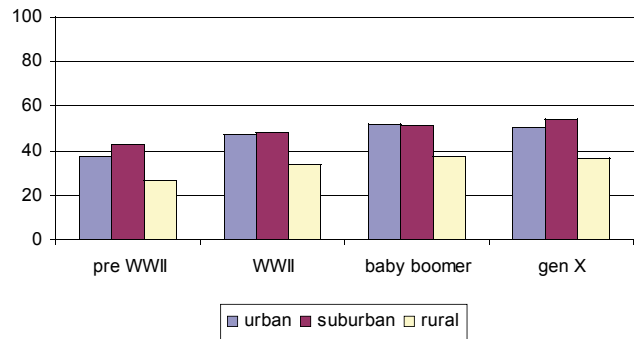
Although American attitudes on abortion have remained remarkably stable since the mid-1970s, their attitudes on same-sex relations have changed considerably. The heated public debate over same-sex marriage underscores the noted

FIGURE 11: PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SUPPORT ABORTION FOR ANY REASON, BY RURAL/NON-RURAL LOCATION AND YEAR



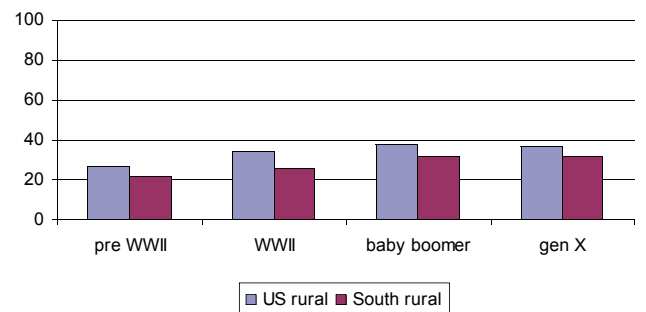
Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

FIGURE 12. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SUPPORT ABORTION FOR ANY REASON, BY RURAL/NON-RURAL LOCATION AND BIRTH COHORT



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

FIGURE 13. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SUPPORT ABORTION FOR ANY REASON, BY RURAL REGION AND BIRTH COHORT



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

unease Americans have toward the public visibility and recognition of gay relations. Nevertheless, although seemingly at odds with the intensity of the public rhetoric condemning gay relations, Americans' disapproval of same-sex relations has been quietly inching downward, according to the GSS. During the 1970s and 1980s (1972–1982 and 1983–1991), 86 percent of Americans expressed the view that homosexual sex is wrong. This figure dropped to 75 percent in the 1990s (1992–1997) and most recently, to 70 percent (1998–2004). This recent decline in opposition to same-sex relations is equally characteristic of rural, urban, and suburban Americans (Figure 14).

Southerners are far more likely than other Americans to disapprove of same-sex relations. Currently, a substantial three-quarters (75 percent) of those living in the South endorse the view that same-sex relations are always or almost always wrong; this is true of fewer than two-thirds of Midwesterners (62 percent) and of only approximately one-half of Westerners (52 percent) and Northeasterners (49 percent) (see Figure 15).

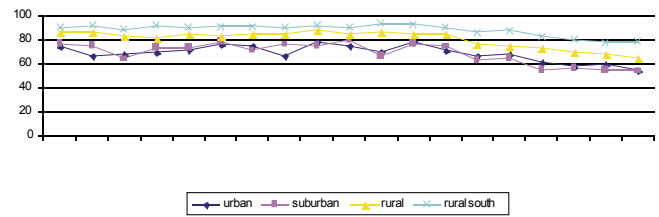
Paralleling the variation among Americans on abortion attitudes, rural Americans are consistently more opposed to same-sex relations than their urban and suburban peers. Among rural Americans, once again, those living in the South are the most conservative on this issue (see Figure 16).

### Young Americans are More Accepting of Same-Sex Relations than their Parents

Nonetheless, as Figure 14 shows, the acceptance of same-sex relations has increased even among the more conservative rural Americans. There are, however, notable generational differences in attitudes toward same-sex relations. Figure 17 indicates that members of Generation X are the least likely to disapprove of same-sex relations, and each ascending cohort is less tolerant than its successor. Thus, unlike with abortion, Generation X is not only more accepting than the World War II generations, but they are also more accepting than their parents' generation. Urban and suburban members of each generation are similar in their views toward same-sex relations, whereas rural Americans and, most notably, rural Southerners (see Figure 18) are the most opposed to same-sex relations.

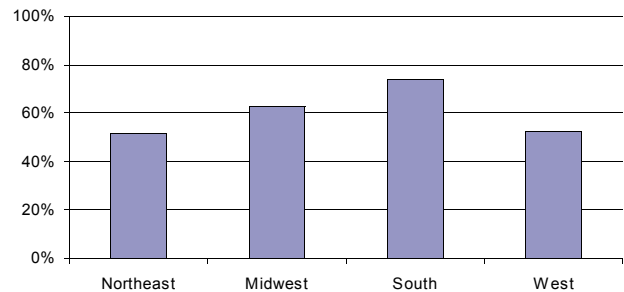
What does this generational shift in same-sex attitudes portend for the future? On the one hand, it seems reasonable to assume that the increasing approval of same-sex relations will continue as younger cohorts come of age and supplant the less tolerant opinions of older cohorts. On the other hand, although Americans have become more accepting of homosexuality in recent years, their favorable attitude may not necessarily translate to specific policy stances, such as legalization of same-sex civil unions or marriages. Moreover, as younger cohorts marry and establish families of their own, they may be less willing to endorse public policies that they might view as threatening the cultural dominance of the "traditional" family. These various factors suggest that we

FIGURE 14. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SAY THAT SAME-SEX RELATIONS ARE WRONG, BY RURAL/NON-RURAL LOCATION AND YEAR



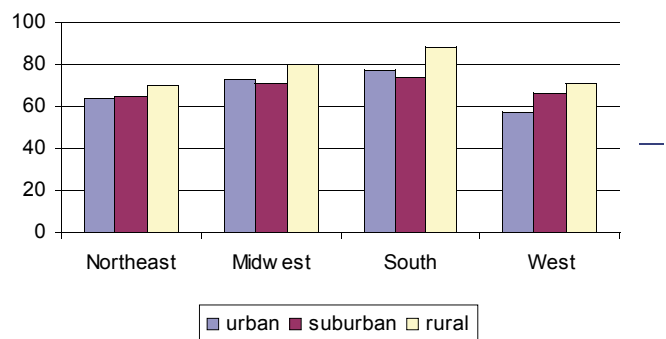
Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

FIGURE 15. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SAY THAT SAME-SEX RELATIONS ARE WRONG, BY REGION, 2000–2004



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

FIGURE 16. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SAY THAT SAME-SEX RELATIONS ARE WRONG, BY REGION AND RURAL/NON-RURAL LOCATION, 2000–2004



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

should not be too surprised if approval of gay rights plateaus, or even reverses slightly, depending on how the question of same-sex marriage is resolved. It is noteworthy that although nationwide support for same-sex marriage increased from 27 percent in 1996 to 36 percent in the first half of 2005, the trend data show an ebb and flow in American opinion on the issue over the past year coinciding with the increased intensity of the public debate. Moreover, support for gay marriage is slight overall.<sup>3</sup>

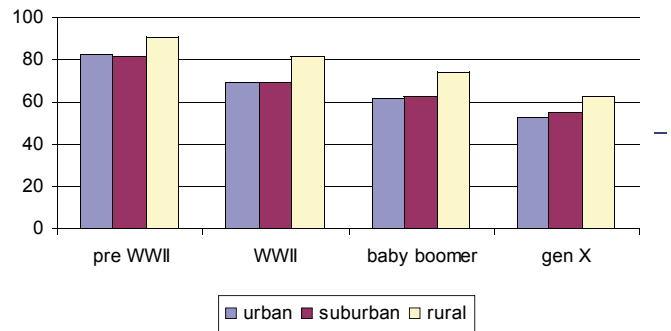
### Highly Religious Individuals Share Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Relations Irrespective of Rural-Urban Differences

As we would expect, conservative moral values, as indicated by disapproval of abortion and of same-sex relations, are strongest among the most religious Americans. Nonetheless, there is significant interdenominational variation on these issues. The general pattern shows that evangelicals are the most conservative, whereas Catholics and mainline Protestants are less so. These differences reflect important theological and cultural differences among the various denominational traditions in America. More immediately, they also underscore the challenge that confronts politicians who tend to assume that “values-voters” all speak the same language and can be mobilized by a similarly uniform political rhetoric. The denominational differences that characterize Americans’ attitudes on abortion and same-sex relations show that this is not the case.

Denominational variation aside, it is interesting nonetheless to examine trends in social conservatism among highly religious individuals. It is evident from Figure 19 that whether we measure religious involvement either as having had a born-again experience or in terms of weekly/almost weekly church attendance, religious individuals living in rural areas are far less likely than their peers in urban and suburban settings to support abortion for any reason. Once again, this pattern is especially pronounced among religious individuals in the rural South.

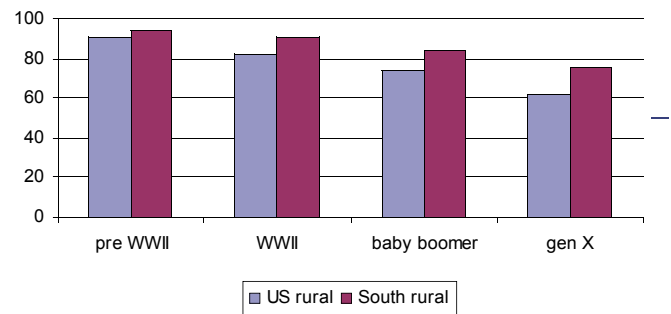
We see much greater homogenization among religiously involved individuals in attitudes toward same-sex relations. Figure 20 reveals that whether urban, suburban, or rural, at least 80 percent of highly religious Americans in the GSS oppose same-sex relations, although rural residents are slightly more likely than their nonrural peers to be negatively disposed toward gays. The solidity in anti-gay opinion among highly religious individuals irrespective of their urban or rural location is striking. It suggests that opposition to same-sex relations is of such critical importance to religiously involved Americans that it is able to override the more general urban-rural divide that tends to characterize Americans as a whole.

FIGURE 17. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SAY THAT SAME-SEX RELATIONS ARE WRONG, BY RURAL/NON-RURAL LOCATION AND BIRTH COHORT, 2000–2004



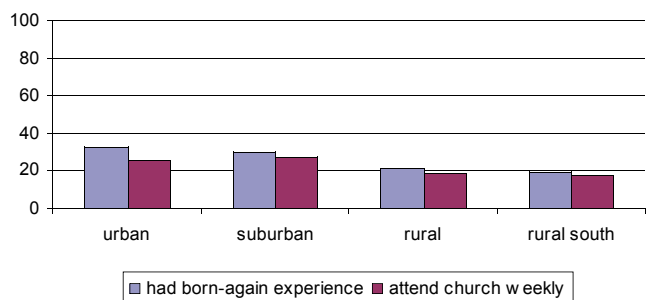
Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

FIGURE 18. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SAY THAT SAME-SEX RELATIONS ARE WRONG, BY RURAL REGION AND BIRTH COHORT, 2000–2004



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

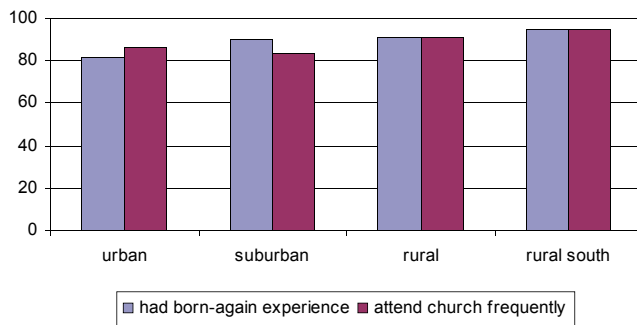
FIGURE 19. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO HAVE HAD A BORN-AGAIN EXPERIENCE OR WHO ATTEND CHURCH WEEKLY/ALMOST WEEKLY AND WHO SUPPORT ABORTION (FOR ANY REASON) BY RURAL/NON-RURAL LOCATION



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)



**FIGURE 20. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS IN 2006 WHO REPORT HAVING HAD A BORN-AGAIN EXPERIENCE OR ATTEND CHURCH WEEKLY/ALMOST WEEKLY AND WHO OPPOSE SAME-SEX RELATIONS, BY RURAL/NON-RURAL LOCATION**



Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2004 (Davis and Smith 2004)

## Conclusion: Church, Values, and Politics in Rural America

Rural Americans compose nearly one-fifth (17 percent) of the nation's population. Although they are often marginalized by policy-making and cultural elites, they are nonetheless a significant political constituency with the ability to swing electoral outcomes. The findings of this brief on the place of religion and values in rural America are quite unambiguous. Rural Americans are more likely than their metropolitan neighbors to attend church, and in particular, to identify as born-again Christians, and by extension are likely to embrace the traditional views associated with Christian exclusivism. They are also more likely to oppose abortion across a range of diverse circumstances and to oppose same-sex relations.

Yet, this profile of moral conservatism belies the cultural variation that exists across rural America. Rural Americans are not a homogenized bloc who speak with one voice; many rural Americans, though a small minority, eschew church and religious involvement, and many support abortion and approve of same-sex relations. Moreover, as with Americans as a whole, rural Americans do not think of complex moral issues such as abortion in simple “black-and-white,” pro-choice/pro-life terms. Rather, they differentiate their stance on abortion depending on the specific circumstances of the decision. Generation also matters in rural America, with younger individuals being less conservative on some issues (most notably, same-sex relations) than their parents and grandparents. Most particularly, the opinions and views of rural Americans vary by region. Rural Southerners are undoubtedly the most conservative, and the gap in their views and those of their rural compatriots in the East and West is especially striking. Rural Midwesterners tend to be less con-

servative than their Southern neighbors but more conservative than rural Americans in the East and West. Nevertheless, depending on the issue, it is also the case that religiously involved rural Americans can share the same views as their religious peers living in cities and suburbs; homosexuality is one such issue domain.

Our portrait of values in rural America underscores the wisdom in T. P. O’Neill’s often-quoted aphorism that “all politics is local.” In short, despite the clear patterns in the aggregate data, there is no political package that will be equally attractive to all rural voters in any given election contest. The findings presented here, however, make clear that whatever the local salience of the varied issues being contested, it is unlikely that a majority of rural voters is going to vote for candidates whose policies are at odds with the social conservatism embraced by rural Americans. So while today, the war in Iraq and the state of the economy are major concerns for rural and urban Americans alike, it would be a mistake to assume that these are the only issues that rural voters will weigh when making their choices on election-day. Taking a longer term perspective, it is clear that because rural voters are not a homogeneous group--as we have shown, they vary especially by region-- it can only benefit both the Democrats and the Republicans if they begin to listen more attentively to the views of their rural constituents state by state. This may not yield clear electoral benefits in November 2006, but it will position the respective party officials and candidates to be attuned to the views of what may emerge as the salient swing voters in select states in future elections.

## References

- Chaves, Mark. 2004. *Congregations in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Davey, M. 2006, June 5. “In State Races, Tough Questions About Abortion.” *New York Times*, A14.
- Davis, J., and T. Smith. 2004. *General Social Surveys, 1972–2004: Cumulative Codebook*. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center.
- Finer, L., and S. Henshaw. 2003. “Abortion Incidence and Services in the United States in 2000.” *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 35: 6–15.
- Greenberg, A., and W. Greener. 2006, September. *Tracking Rural Voters in Competitive Districts and Senate Races*. Washington, DC: Greenberg Quinlan and Rosner Research.
- Greenberg, A., D. Walker, & B. Greener. 2005. *The Rural Vote in 2004*. Battle Creek, MI: W. K. Kellogg Foundation.
- Johnson, K. 2006. *Demographic Trends in Rural and Small Town America*. Reports on Rural America, Vol. 1. University of New Hampshire: Carsey Institute,

Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. 2006, August. *Pragmatic Americans Liberal and Conservative on Social Issues*. Washington, DC: Pew Forum.

Roof, W.C. 1999. *Spiritual Marketplace*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Saad, L. 2005, May 20. "Gay Rights Attitudes a Mixed Bag." *Gallup Poll Religion and Social Trends*. Princeton, NJ: The Gallup Organization.

Winseman, A. 2005, May 31. "U.S. Evangelicals: How Many Walk the Walk?" *Gallup Poll Religion and Social Trends*. Princeton, NJ: The Gallup Organization.

Wuthnow, R. 2005. *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Regional categorization throughout this report follow the standard categories used by the United States Census Bureau and are as follows: East: Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Mid-West: Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas. South: District of Columbia, Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Texas. West: Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Washington, Oregon, California, Alaska, and Hawaii.

<sup>2</sup> Other than the Gallup poll data depicted in Figure 9, the attitudinal data reported in this report are derived from the General Social Survey conducted almost every year since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The GSS cumulative data can be accessed on the web: [www.icpsr.umich.edu/gss](http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/gss). The question wording on whether the respondent is a born again Christian is: "Would you say you have been "born-again" or have had a "born-again" experience, that is, a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Christ." On abortion, the GSS asks respondents a series of closed-response questions: "Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if...she became pregnant as a result of rape; the woman's health is seriously endangered; there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby; she cannot afford to have more children; she is married and does not want any more children; the woman wants it for any reason. On same-sex relations, the GSS asks respondents (following similar questions about extra-marital and teenage sexual relations), a closed response question: "What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex--do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, sometimes wrong, or not wrong at all?"

<sup>3</sup> These findings are from a nationwide survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in August 2006. See also Saad (2005).

## Acknowledgements

We thank Barbara Ray and Amy Seif of the Carsey Institute for their editorial comments.

## Authors

MICHELE DILLON, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire ([michele.dillon@unh.edu](mailto:michele.dillon@unh.edu)).

SARAH SAVAGE is a doctoral candidate in the department of sociology at the University of New Hampshire ([ssavage@cisunix.unh.edu](mailto:ssavage@cisunix.unh.edu)).



Building knowledge for families and communities in the 21st Century.

The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire conducts independent, interdisciplinary research and communicates its findings to policymakers, practitioners and the general public.

Huddleston Hall  
73 Main Street  
Durham, NH 03824

(603) 862-2821

[www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu](http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu)

*The Carsey Institute Reports on Rural America* are supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's initiative to strengthen rural families, the Ford Foundation, and by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.