



Red Rural, Blue Rural

Rural Does Not Always Equal Republican

Dante J. Scala and Kenneth M. Johnson

Political commentators routinely treat rural America as an undifferentiated bastion of strength for Republicans. In fact, rural America is a deceptively simple term describing a diverse collection of places encompassing nearly 75 percent of the U.S. land area and 50 million people. Voting trends in this vast area are far from monolithic. Republican presidential candidates have generally done well in rural America, but there are important enclaves of Democratic strength there as well. In “battleground” states, these rural differences may have a significant impact on tightly contested elections.

KEY FINDINGS



Rural America is not the undifferentiated Republican bastion depicted by commentators.



Republican presidential candidates do best in rural counties dominated by farming.

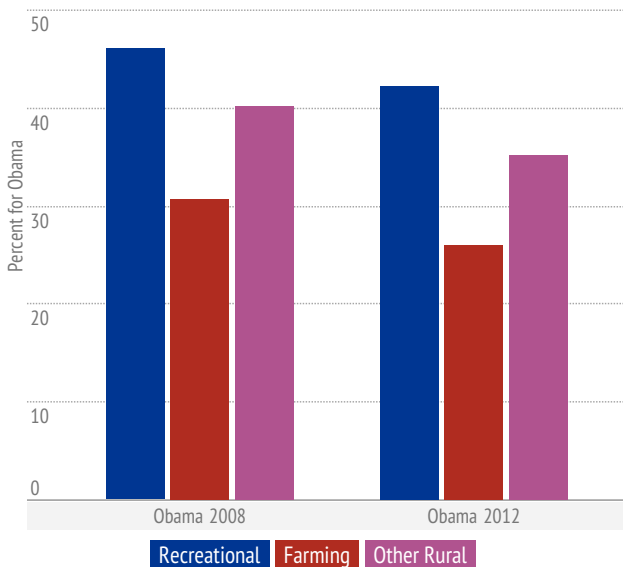


Democratic presidential candidates do well in rural counties dominated by recreation.



In “battleground” states, these rural differences may impact tightly contested elections.

FIGURE 1. PERCENT VOTING FOR PRESIDENT OBAMA IN RURAL COUNTIES, 2008 AND 2012



Source: Scala, Johnson, and Rogers, 2015

Rural Is Red With Pockets of Blue

The political divisions between urban and rural America are well documented. Democrats count on a strong performance in cities to offset a poor performance outside of them. The political divisions within rural America are less well understood. The growing political diversity of rural America is evident when counties dominated by the old and new rural economy are compared. For instance, voters who reside in areas dominated by the “old rural economy,” exemplified by farming, strongly favor Republican presidential candidates. In contrast, rural areas dominated by the “new rural economy” based on recreation, amenities, and services, have become critical pockets of strength for Democratic presidential candidates. These partisan differences remain even after controlling for demographic factors and the North–South split.

Democratic presidential candidates’ median performance in rural counties has remained under 40 percent during the last decade, yet they enjoyed improving prospects in the sections of rural America with an

economy based on recreational amenities. Within key “swing states” in the Northeast, the South, and the Far West, voters in recreational counties provided Democrats with significant support within the generally unfriendly environment of rural America. In contrast, Republicans consistently enjoyed their greatest success in presidential elections in farm counties.

In both 2008 and 2012, Barack Obama’s support in recreational counties was greater than in any other part of rural America, except in counties with significant numbers of African–American voters. His median vote in rural recreational counties was 46 percent in 2008 and 42 percent in 2012. In contrast, his median vote in rural farm counties was 31 percent in 2008 and 26 percent in 2012. In rural counties that were not dominated by either recreation or farming, Obama’s median performance equaled 40 percent of the vote in 2008 and 35 percent in 2012.

Rural Demographic Trends Have Political Implications

Demographic trends in areas dominated by the old and new rural economy differ as well and these differences have important implications for future elections.

The farm counties, which are bastions of Republican support, continue to lose migrants. Only 3 million people reside in the 403 rural farm counties, which have gained just 5 percent in population over the past two decades. Farm counties include roughly 6 percent of the rural population. Most have experienced decades of migration loss, particularly of the young adults who have been among President Obama’s strongest supporters. Rural farm counties lost nearly 24 percent of their young adults age 25 to 29 due to outmigration between 2000 and 2010.

Rural counties with economies based on recreation are among the fastest growing in rural America. Approximately 8.2 million people reside in the 289 recreational counties, a gain of 34 percent in the last two decades. Recreational counties include 16 percent of the rural population. Migration fuels this rapid population gain with new residents attracted by the scenic and built amenities that influence the quality of life. Because of these migrants, recreational counties possess a demographic profile distinctive from their peers across rural America. Residents of recreational counties tend to be wealthier, better educated, and are significantly more likely to reflect liberal stances than their peers in other rural areas. The many recent migrants to rural recreational counties were particularly likely to vote for the President: 61.4 percent voted for Obama in 2008, and 54.5 percent did so in 2012. Both the population and political influence of recreational counties in national elections are

likely to increase given their appeal to the 70 million baby boomers who will retire in the next two decades.

It is important to recognize that not all of rural America is dominated by farming and recreation. Nor is all farming and recreational activity limited to these county types; both exist to a greater or lesser extent in many of the other 1,361 rural counties that contain 39.7 million residents. But, recreational and farm counties represent two poles that serve to underscore the political differences within rural America.

In conclusion, rural America is not the undifferentiated whole often depicted by commentators. Our research documents the recent political diversification of rural America. Republican presidential candidates have performed better in rural counties dominated by farming, the most traditional of the “old rural” economies. Democratic presidential candidates have performed significantly better in counties dominated by the “new rural” economies based on recreation and amenities. The growth of this new rural economy has helped to create several new “swing states” that are now battlegrounds in presidential elections. Here migration has diminished the political polarization that normally characterizes the urban–rural divide in America. On the whole, this phenomenon has benefited Democratic candidates, who now have important enclaves of rural voters who are more sympathetic to their message.

Methods

We examine voting data for nearly 9,000 rural residents to identify how voting patterns differ across rural areas comparing farm and recreational counties to those elsewhere in rural America. We also examine voting data from the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections for each rural county. Alaska is excluded due to inconsistent county boundaries. Counties are defined as rural if they were delineated as nonmetropolitan by the Office of Management and Budget in 2006. Counties are defined as farm or recreational based on a typology developed by the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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