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RESEARCH BRIEF

Corroding Democracy and the Roe Rollback: How Geographic Disparities in Representation Shape US Policy Outcomes

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1 INTRODUCTION

The future of U.S. democracy feels imperiled. While the losses of many election deniers in the 2022 midterm elections offered hope, the January 6th insurrection marked an unprecedented threat to U.S. democracy, exemplifying extremism in the name of loyalty to one ruler over upholding the will of the people. What's more, polls show eroding public faith in the Supreme Court, a core government institution and pillar of democracy. Trust in this institution has been on the decline since the decision to overturn Roe vs. Wade, which further rolled back the right to bodily autonomy previously protected by the Constitution.

This trend is worrying. A loss of trust in key pillars of our democracy – such as election integrity and the courts – has been linked to democratic backsliding.[1] In January 2022, an NPR/Ipsos poll found that 64% of Americans think U.S. democracy is in crisis, especially Republicans, two-thirds of whom believe in the 'Big Lie.' The crisis of faith has only accelerated over the past year. By December, the same polling group found that an overwhelming majority, 83%, of Americans believe there is a serious threat to democracy. There are other signs of this erosion of faith: Election denialism continues to be a key platform of many Republican candidates. And while many Big Lie supporting candidates lost in 2022, 87 won in their elections for state and federal positions around the country.

Election denialism, the January 6th insurrection, and deep social divisions over the right to an abortion reveal growing cracks in U.S. democracy that are increasingly difficult to patch up. History shows that we are treading a dangerous path: Researchers have found that only one in five democracies since 1993 have successfully avoided slipping into authoritarianism once democratic backsliding begins.[2] This slip from democracy often begins by tolerance or encouragement of political violence, a weak commitment to democratic norms such as the rule of law, and the rejection of the legitimacy of elections or political opponents. On the other hand, a recent study by Little and Meng[3] suggests that the extent of global democratic backsliding may be overstated.

There are hopeful signs; America's democracy has thus far held its footing. The peaceful transition of power was successfully carried out in 2021 despite the attack on the Capitol. And even though they won some elections, election deniers lost in many key swing states around the country in the 2022 midterm elections. Moreover, abortion rights were upheld in every state that put it directly on the ballot in 2022.

Additionally, research shows that most Americans ***do agree*** on some basic points about core principles for upholding democracy. At Public Wise, our polling shows that **a consistent majority of voters think those involved in January 6th should be held accountable**. Additionally, polling by Pew and Gallup reveals that most Americans believe at least some access to abortion should be legal and have confidence in the accuracy of U.S. elections, even though deep partisan divides exist.

Yet, if democracy is governance that reflects the will of the people, we would expect national policy to reflect the beliefs and opinions of the majority. However, current policy often does not align with public opinion. Despite general public consensus on account-

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[1] Huq, A. Z. (2022). The Supreme Court and the Dynamics of Democratic Backsliding. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 699(1), 50–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211061124

[2] Boese, V.A., Edgell, A.B., Hellmeier, S., Maerz, S.F., Lindberg, S.I. (2021). How democracies prevail: democratic resilience as a two-stage process. *Democratization*, 28(5), 885-907.

[3] Little, Andrew and Meng, Anne, Subjective and Objective Measurement of Democratic Backsliding (January 17, 2023). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4327307

ability for those involved in January 6th, those at the highest levels of involvement in the January 6th attack have not been held accountable. Similarly, legislative efforts to codify abortion rights in the federal government have not come to fruition and Republican-controlled states continue to enact abortion bans. While candidates that made election denial central to their campaigns lost in most down-ballot races in the 2022 midterm elections, incumbent house representatives that voted to not certify the 2020 presidential results were largely re-elected.

Here at Public Wise, we ask: What can explain the growing mismatch between popular opinion and national policy-making? While existing research identifies ideological, religious, educational, and identity chasms in voting behavior among American citizens, **the answer is also rooted in the partisan geographies of where voters live**.

Specifically, significant differences in opinion between rural and urban America warrant our attention. Researchers such as Brown, Mettler and Puzzi[4] worry that the growing geographic partisanship – living in areas surrounded by other ideologically like-minded individuals – contributes to tribalism, further entrenching political polarization in ways that are detrimental to democratic discourse and governance.

Additionally, **our electoral system gives outsized weight to rural voters**. As we describe in detail below, political gerrymandering translates into policy that may not reflect the will of the majority.

Our research finds that rural Americans' views diverge from the views of the general US public in several ways. For instance, Americans residing in rural areas are significantly more likely to think Trump won the 2020 election (i.e., the Big Lie) compared to those in

urban areas. This finding is particularly troubling given the number of recently elected politicians at all levels of government who made denying the outcome of the 2020 election part of their political strategy. We also find that rural Americans are less likely to want to hold January 6 insurrectionists accountable, and more likely to support abortion restrictions and bans, though these findings are only marginally significant. These differences in opinion and beliefs persist even after accounting for other differences associated with political ideology, such as political party, race, ethnicity, religion, education, and age.

How much does the rural vote really impact elections? In the remainder of this post, we describe how and why rural[5] votes disproportionately influence American politics, and then present original findings from our analysis of our survey data on January 6th attitudes and beliefs.

2 RURAL VOTES HAVE A DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON U.S. ELECTIONS

After the 2016 election, a flurry of stories emerged about the rural "silent majority" that carried the election for Trump. Depending on how rural is counted, rural voters make up around 14% of the voting population, so one might ask: why is there so much focus on rural political views and votes when they make up such a small minority of voters?

The answer lies partly in the structure of our electoral system. Because of gerrymandering and the electoral college system of U.S. presidential elections, your state and whether you live in an urban or rural area influence your ability to impact national election outcomes.

Gerrymandering refers to the partisan process of drawing congressional district maps that favor one political party over another. In

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[4]Brown, T., Mettler, S., Puzzi, S. (2021). When Rural and Urban Become "Us" versus "Them": How a Growing Divide is Reshaping American Politics. *The Forum*, 19(2), 365-393, https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2021-2029

[5]See appendix for detailed discussion of how we define rural and urban.

some cases, rural areas may be drawn into a congressional district map in ways that dilute the electoral power of residents in cities. For example, Greensboro, North Carolina - a large city and Democratic stronghold in the state - was split into the 6th and 13th district in 2016 in order to incorporate many Republican-dominated rural areas that diluted the votes of the urban population.

While gerrymandering occurs at the state-level, the electoral college has broad national implications. What is the electoral college, exactly? The electoral college, enshrined in the Constitution, dictates that a state's electors are awarded to the candidate that wins the popular vote in *that state*,[6] attempting to strike a compromise between proportional representation (favoring more populous states) and equal representation (favoring less populous states).[7] The number of electors each state receives is determined both by the number of senators (two for each state, regardless of size) and house representatives (determined by population).

In practice, this system gives extra voting weight to more rural states. For example, California – the most populous state in the nation with 12% of the US population – accounts for only 10% (55) of electoral college votes. California is a highly urbanized state – around just 2.4% of the population of California is considered to be rural.

In contrast, states with the smallest populations (such as Montana, North and South Dakota, and Vermont) each had three electoral college votes in the 2020 election – the minimum number of electors per state. Despite collectively accounting for around 1% of the US population, these four states together account for 2% of electoral college votes, es-

sentially doubling their representation in respect to their populations. Another way to think about the overrepresentation of rural voters in the electoral college is that, for example, each elector in North Dakota represents 22,992 people (68,976/3), while each elector in California represents 718,877 people (39.5 million/55). Less populous states are much more likely to be majority rural: in these four states, 55% - 67% of their populations are considered rural. This means that a voter living in a majority rural state like Montana tends to have more say in national elections than a voter residing in California.
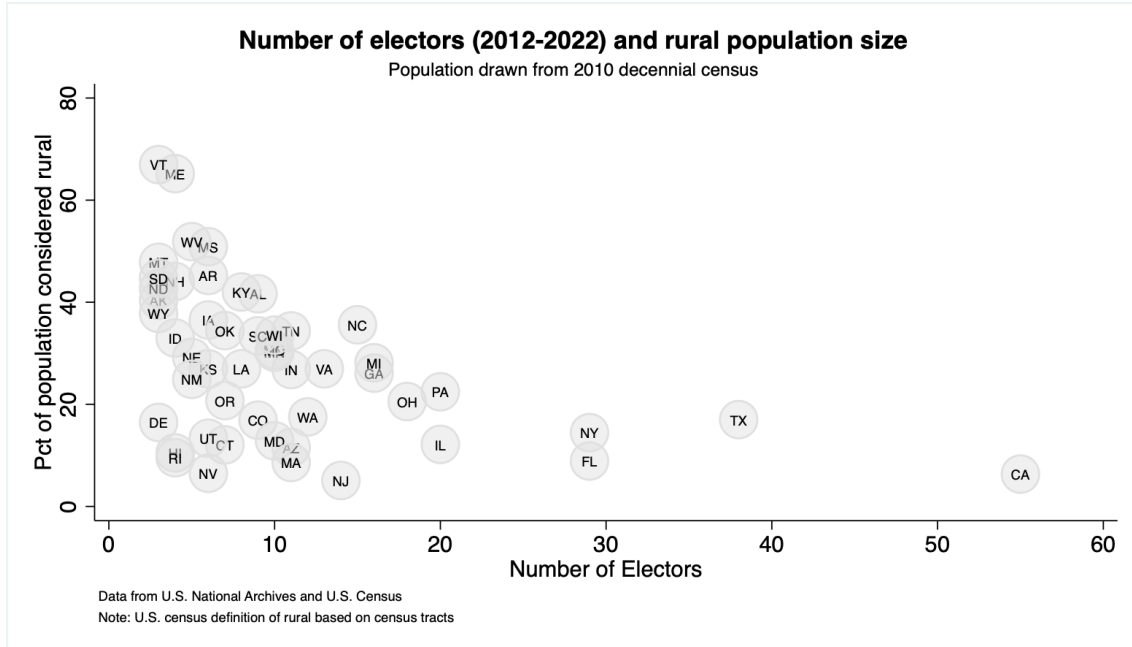
Another way that the electoral college distorts representation from "one person, one vote" is that it creates a 'winner takes all' system within states, such that even if a large minority of voters in a state choose a candidate that loses the election, all their votes will be counted for the candidate who won a majority, however slight that majority might be. What this means in practice is that in close elections in more populous states, a larger share of the population is underrepresented in the electoral college. For example, in Michigan, 50.6% of voters picked Biden in the 2020 presidential election, representing 2,804,040 voters. All of Michigan's 16 electors went to Biden, despite the fact that 2,649,852 (or 47.8%) voted for Trump.

Another outcome of the electoral college election system is that states that do not consistently vote for one party ("swing states") have more sway in some elections. Several swing states like Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin each happen to have sizable rural populations (between 20 - 30% based on the 2010 census) and together account for nearly 9% of all electoral college votes (46 total). In the 2016 presidential election, Monnat and Brown[8] found that fewer than 80,000 votes in Michigan, 45,000 in Pennsylvania, and 23,000

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[6]In two states, Maine and Nebraska, electors are not awarded to the candidate that wins the popular vote, but instead distributed based on the popular vote in each congressional district.

[7]Warf, B. (2009). The U.S. Electoral College and Spatial Biases in Voter Power. *ANNALS of the Association of American Geographers*, 99(1), 184-204.

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[8]Monnat, S. M. and Brown, D.L. (2017). "More than a Rural Revolt: Landscapes of Despair and the 2016 Presidential Election." *Journal of Rural Studies*, 55, 227-236.

Number of electors (2012-2022) and rural population size
Population drawn from 2010 decennial census

Data from U.S. National Archives and U.S. Census
Note: U.S. census definition of rural based on census tracts

in Wisconsin carried Trump to the presidency in 2016. In other words, 23-80 thousand individuals in three states had a dramatic influence in determining who would hold the presidency for the next four years.

All of these factors help explain how, in the U.S., Presidential candidates can lose an election despite winning the popular vote. For example, Trump lost the national popular vote by over 2 million votes in 2016.

Given that rural voters can have more influence, we might ask, what does this influence typically look like? What is the role of the rural vote in these crucial swing states which largely determine our federal election outcomes? In 2016 and 2020, residents of rural areas showed up strongly in favor of Trump. His victory in 2016 is linked to low urban voter turnout for Hillary Clinton relative to previous elections for Obama.[9] The differences that determined Trump's loss in 2020 are attributable to high voter turnout in urban areas in key battleground states like Michigan.

3   PARTISAN GEOGRAPHIES

While national election results hinge on state-level outcomes, political disagreements often play out across rural and urban divisions. For example, politicians who voted against certifying the 2020 election overwhelmingly represented rural areas around the county.[10] In Kansas, high voter turnout in urban counties such as Johnson and Wyandotte helped determine the outcome of the 2022 ballot measure in favor of abortion access. Those in favor of upholding abortion access in the state were concentrated in fewer than 20% of Kansas counties, all of which are located in and around urban centers such as Kansas City and Wichita.

This leads to the obvious question: What is it about living in rural versus urban places that leads to such divergent political perspectives? Albrecht[11] argues that the difference is driven

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[10]Mettler, S., Brown, T. (2022). Rural-Urban Political Divide and Democratic Vulnerability. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political & Social Science.*, 699, 130-142

[11]Albrecht, D.E. (2022). Donald Trump and changing rural/urban voting patterns. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 91, 148-156.

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[9]*Ibid.*

by the demographic makeup of rural and urban populations. Americans in rural areas are typically whiter, older and have lower educational attainment compared to city-dwellers. Having lower levels of education, which is more common in rural areas, has been identified by rural scholars as a factor associated with poorer economic prospects and negative health consequences. These demographic, education, health and economic outcomes are all associated with political views.

On the other hand, rural-urban divides are not evenly patterned across the country: Journalist Colin Woodard contends geographic partisan dividing lines in the U.S. are more regional than national. In a New York Times opinion article, Woodard argues that there is really only a stark rural-urban voting split in the Midland region made up of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Iowa, and Missouri, which covers 15% of the U.S. population.

While regional differences between rural and urban voter divisions exist, rural areas nationwide have grown increasingly conservative over time – a pattern documented in the South by Hood and McKee.[12] This rural Republican concentration is in no small part due to a concerted effort by the Republican party to win the rural vote. Since the 1990s, Republicans have catered their messaging to appeal to rural grievances: The sense of being economically left behind, subjected to urban-centric laws that do not reflect rural lived reality, and emphasizing conservative values.

Republican concentration in rural areas may also have long-term social consequences. Increasing ideological and cultural sameness in shared physical spaces can foster distrust of information that does not reflect one's local reality. After all, if everyone you know in your town voted for one candidate, how can it be that your candidate lost? In fact, rural residence has been identified as a key predic-

tor for election denialism by researchers Clark and Peterson, due in part to a lack of exposure to those with different ideological views.

Given the outsized influence of rural areas on election outcomes and the growing partisan geographic divide, we investigated how rural residency is related to Americans' views on three key political questions that were at the forefront of the recent midterm elections: Views on accountability for Jan. 6th insurrectionists, access to abortion, and belief in the Big Lie of election fraud.

4   OUR SURVEY DATA

With our partners at Change Research, we fielded a national poll February 2-4th of 2022 with a total of 5,028 participants. In total 3,654 participants are included in our analysis,[13] assessing whether the opinions and beliefs among rural and urban county participants differ significantly.

In our statistical models, we account for each individual's political party, race, religion, gender, education, voter registration status and affiliation with the military to isolate the effect of living in a rural or urban county. [14] In addition, given unique state-level factors such as gerrymandering, political climates, and voting laws, we only compare individuals to others within their state. By controlling for factors associated with partisanship and context, we isolate the effect of being a resident of a rural or urban county in the U.S.

Our analysis is based on answers to the following questions:

- Accountability for January 6th insurrection: *"How important do you think it is that the people who participated in the events of January 6th be held accountable for their actions if a court determines they broke the law?"*

  - not at all important

[12]Hood, M. V., & McKee, S. C. (2022). Rural Republican Realignment in the Modern South: The Untold Story. University of South Carolina Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv23hcf2h

[13]See our piece explaining survey dropouts.
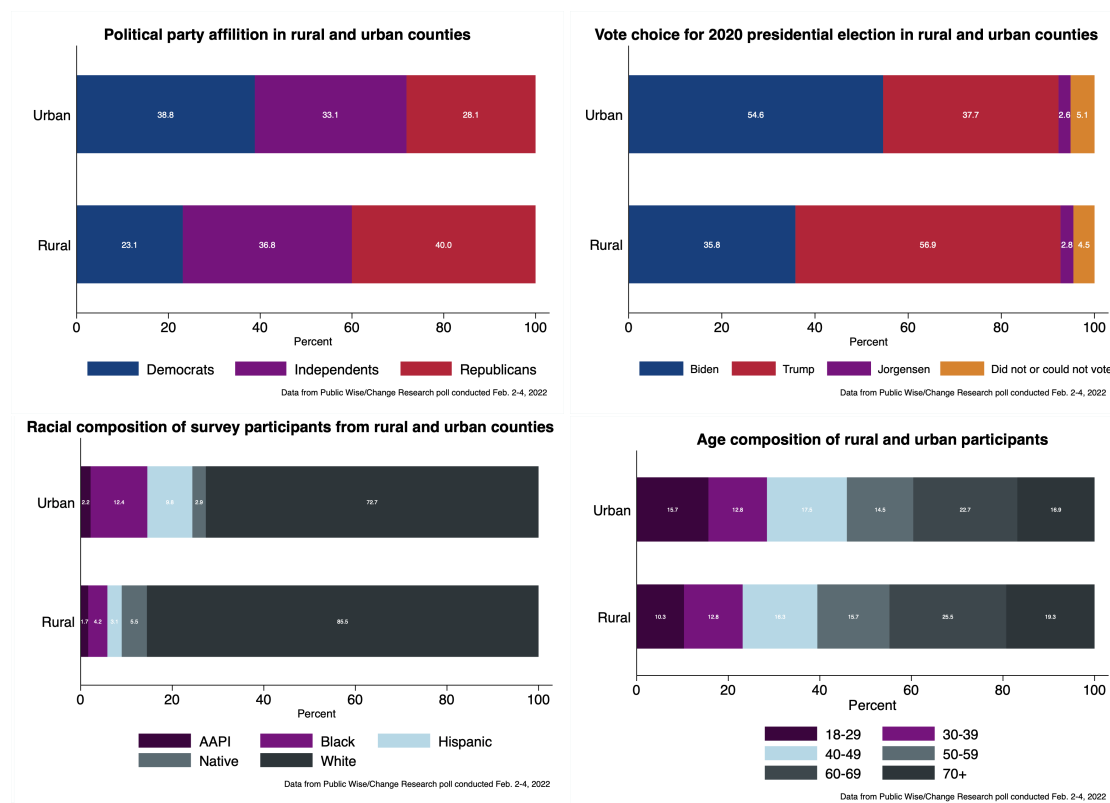[14]See appendix for detailed discussion of how we define rural and urban

  – not too important

  – somewhat important

  – very important

  – not sure

• Abortion legality: *"Do you think abortion should be:"*

  – Illegal in all

  – Illegal in most cases

  – Legal in most cases

  – Legal in all cases

• Beliefs about who won the election: *"Who do you believe got more votes in the 2020 election?"*

  – Joe Biden

  – Donald Trump

  – Not sure

5 RURAL AND URBAN DIFFERENCES AMONG SURVEY RESPONDENTS

In total, our sample of rural and urban adults was consistent with national patterns. Fifteen percent of survey participants resided in counties designated as rural and 85% lived in urban counties. Politically, urban areas had larger shares of Democrats while rural areas consisted of more Republicans and independents. As expected, more rural voters voted for Trump in 2020, while more urban voters voted for Biden.

Demographically, participants in our survey from rural areas were less racially and ethnically diverse. Over 85% of rural participants identified themselves as white compared to nearly 73% of those in urban areas. But despite many rural areas having aging populations, age differences between rural and urban participants in our survey were minimal: 60% of rural participants were over the age of 50 compared to 54% of urban participants.

Political party affilition in rural and urban counties

Urban: Democrats 38.8, Independents 33.1, Republicans 28.1

Rural: Democrats 23.1, Independents 36.8, Republicans 40.0

Data from Public Wise/Change Research poll conducted Feb. 2-4, 2022

Vote choice for 2020 presidential election in rural and urban counties

Urban: Biden 54.6, Trump 37.7, Jorgensen 2.6, Did not or could not vote 5.1

Rural: Biden 35.8, Trump 56.9, Jorgensen 2.8, Did not or could not vote 4.5

Data from Public Wise/Change Research poll conducted Feb. 2-4, 2022

Racial composition of survey participants from rural and urban counties

Urban: AAPI 2.2, Black 12.4, Hispanic 9.9, Native 2.9, White 72.7

Rural: AAPI 1.7, Black 4.2, Hispanic 3.1, Native 5.5, White 85.5

Data from Public Wise/Change Research poll conducted Feb. 2-4, 2022

Age composition of rural and urban participants

Urban: 18-29 15.7, 30-39 12.8, 40-49 17.3, 50-59 14.5, 60-69 22.7, 70+ 16.9

Rural: 18-29 10.3, 30-39 12.8, 40-49 15.3, 50-59 15.7, 60-69 25.5, 70+ 19.3

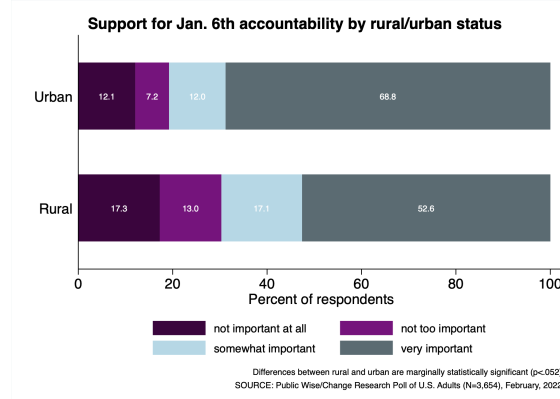Data from Public Wise/Change Research poll conducted Feb. 2-4, 2022

6   OPINIONS ON KEY SOCIAL ISSUES

Given the electoral imbalance that favors rural voters from certain states, it is important to understand and identify dividing lines between rural and urban voters that may motivate voters to go to the polls, such as opinions on accountability for involvement in the January 6 insurrection, views on abortion legality, and election denialism.

6.1   ACCOUNTABILITY

We find the **majority of both rural and urban respondents think accountability is either *somewhat* or *very important***. However, **those from rural counties are less likely to think it's important for those involved in the January 6th attack on our nation's capital to be held accountable**. In total, 70% of rural participants think accountability is (very or somewhat) important compared to 81% of urban participants.

Support for Jan. 6th accountability by rural/urban status

Urban	12.1	7.2	12.0	68.8
Rural	17.3	13.0	17.1	52.6

Percent of respondents

■ not important at all   ■ not too important
■ somewhat important   ■ very important

Differences between rural and urban are marginally statistically significant (p<.052)
SOURCE: Public Wise/Change Research Poll of U.S. Adults (N=3,654), February, 2022

One way to better understand whether the difference between rural and urban respondents' thoughts on accountability are significant is to look at odds ratios. In social statistics, odds ratios are used to compare the likelihood of an outcome occurring in one group versus another group.
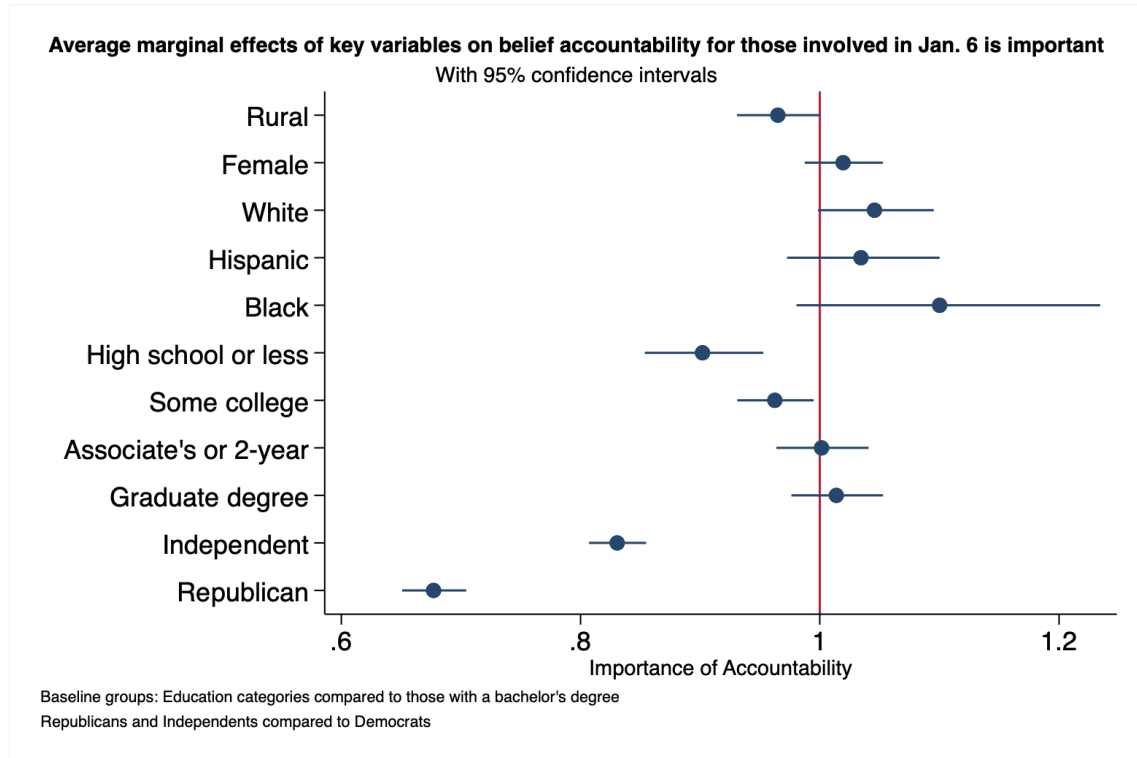
In our survey, we are interested in whether someone from a rural area would be *statistically significantly* less likely to support accountability for January 6th compared to someone in an urban area, accounting for other factors that might influence their opinion (such as their race, education, or religion).

The plot at the top of the next page displays odds ratios and can be interpreted as follows: Each dot represents the odds that a particular sub-group of participants (rural residents, women, etc.) believes that accountability for those who participated in January 6 is important. Points on the vertical red line tell us the likelihood for someone in that particular group agreeing or disagreeing that accountability is important compared to others not in that group is about as predictable as a coin toss. Points below 1 indicate that that specific sub-group has lower odds of thinking accountability is important. Points higher than 1 represent higher odds of thinking accountability is important.

No estimate from a survey can perfectly predict an individual's response. Therefore, the lines extending out from each side of the dots represent 95% confidence intervals. Confidence intervals display the range for how high or low the odds could be if we repeatedly conducted the same survey; in other words, with a 95% confidence interval, we expect that the estimate will fall within this range 95% of the time. In the figures below, when the confidence interval lines cross the red vertical line at 1, the odds are ***not*** statistically significant. That is, we cannot say that the odds for that particular subgroup are *statistically* different from those not in that subgroup.
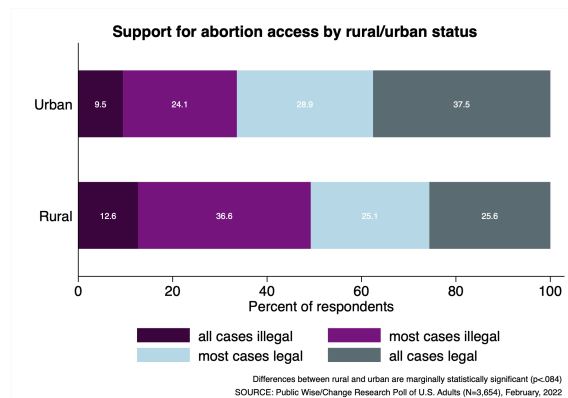
Only a handful of factors are associated with significantly lower odds of believing accountability for those who participated in January 6th is important. Those living in rural areas, those who have a high school degree or some college (as opposed to a bachelor's degree), and/or those who are either Independent or Republican (as opposed to Democrats) are significantly less likely to believe that accountability is important for those who participated in January 6.

Average marginal effects of key variables on belief accountability for those involved in Jan. 6 is important
With 95% confidence intervals

Baseline groups: Education categories compared to those with a bachelor's degree
Republicans and Independents compared to Democrats
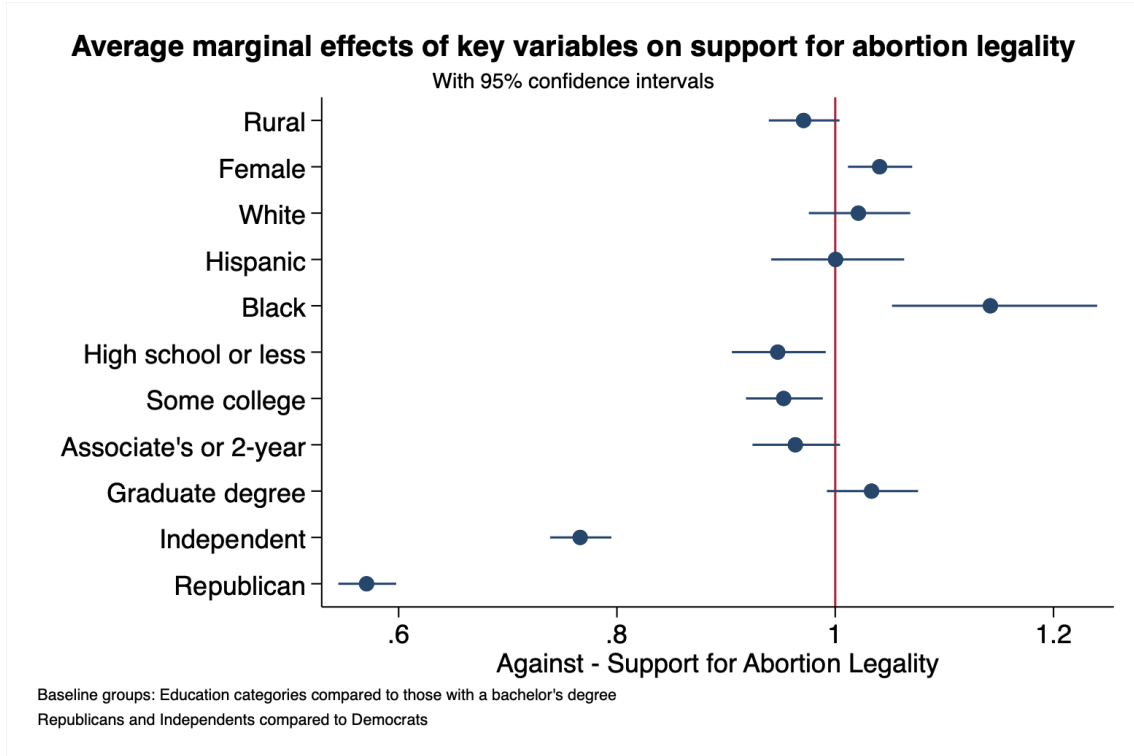
6.2 ABORTION LEGALITY

Americans from rural counties were less likely to think abortion should be legal in some or all cases compared to those from urban counties, though only at a marginally significant level.[15] **Just over half of all rural participants surveyed think abortion should be legal in most or all cases**, compared to two thirds (66%) of urban participants.

As with our analysis of the question of agreement with the importance of accountability, odds ratios reveal which factors are stronger predictors of support for abortion access and legality. The plot below shows these factors along with their confidence intervals. We find
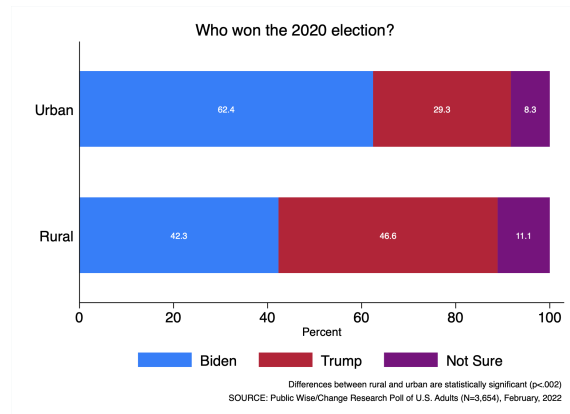
Support for abortion access by rural/urban status

all cases illegal   most cases illegal
most cases legal   all cases legal

Differences between rural and urban are marginally statistically significant (p<.084)
SOURCE: Public Wise/Change Research Poll of U.S. Adults (N=3,654), February, 2022

that identifying as Black or as a woman are associated with significantly higher odds of support for abortion legality. Conversely, having less than a full high school education or some college compared to those with at least a Bachelor's degree, or identifying as a Republican or Independent compared to Democrat are associated with significantly lower odds of support for abortion legality.

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[15]That is, if we adjusted the confidence intervals to 90% as opposed to 95% confidence intervals, the confidence intervals would not cross the red line for the effect of the rural variable on belief in abortion legality. A 90% confidence interval means that we expect our estimate will fall with the estimated range 90% of the time. This is generally considered a marginal level of significance since most quantitative social sciences prefer the more stringent 95% confidence interval.

Average marginal effects of key variables on support for abortion legality

With 95% confidence intervals

Against - Support for Abortion Legality

Baseline groups: Education categories compared to those with a bachelor's degree
Republicans and Independents compared to Democrats
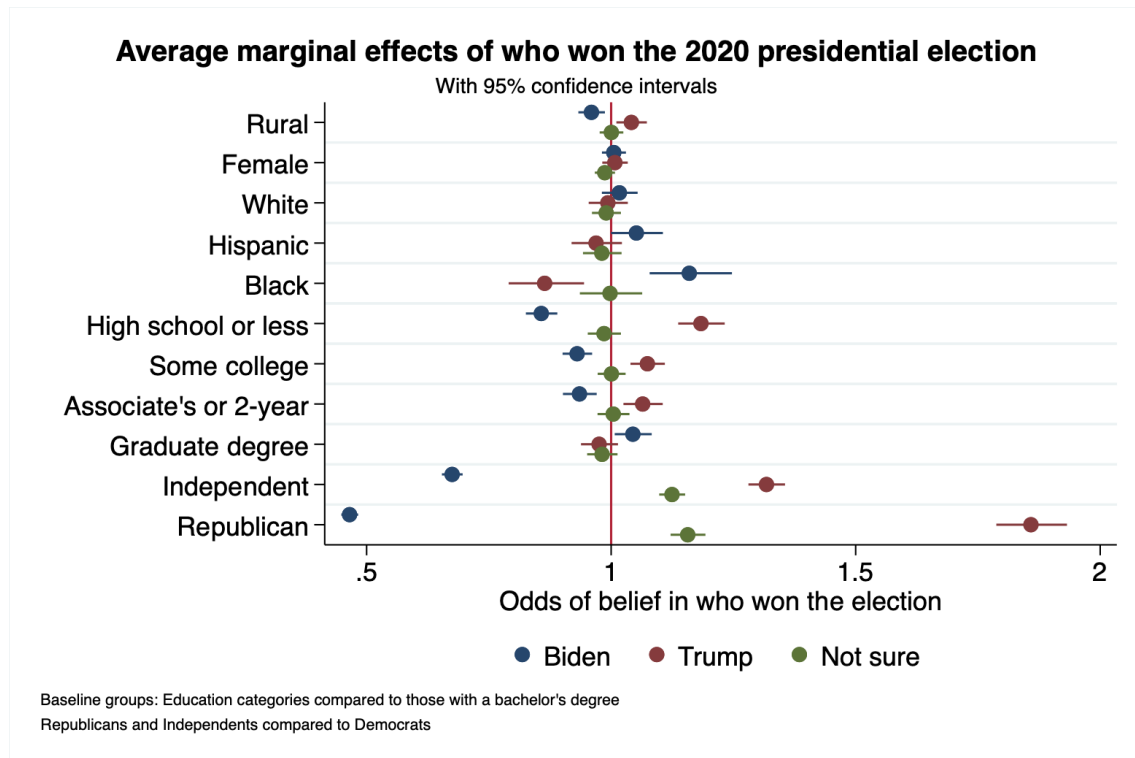
6.3   BELIEF IN THE "BIG LIE"

U.S. House Representatives who voted against certifying the 2020 election results on the day of the January 6th insurrection predominantly represented areas with sizable rural populations. Did their votes denying the election results reflect the will of their constituents? Our research suggests that they did, to some extent: **Over half (58%) of rural survey participants reported thinking either Trump won the 2020 election or that they were not sure who won** compared to less than 38% of urban voters, suggesting stronger alignment with the Big Lie in rural areas compared to urban areas. For belief in who won the 2020 election, we display the odds ratio for each population sub-group thinking a certain candidate won compared to the other two candidate choices.[16]

Who won the 2020 election?

Differences between rural and urban are statistically significant (p<.002)
SOURCE: Public Wise/Change Research Poll of U.S. Adults (N=3,654), February, 2022

For example, blue points reveal the odds that someone from a sub-group (for example, from a rural area) believes that Biden won the 2020 presidential election compared to Trump or not being sure who won, red points represent the belief that Trump won the 2020 election compared to Biden or Not Sure, and green points are for those who reported Not Sure who won the election compared to either Biden or Trump. **We find that those from rural areas had *significantly lower* odds of be-**

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[16]For the "who won the election?" question, we fit a multinomial logistic regression as opposed to logistic regression that were used to analyze responses to the other two questions related to abortion and accountability. We do this to account for three possible answer choices rather than two.

Average marginal effects of who won the 2020 presidential election
With 95% confidence intervals

Odds of belief in who won the election

● Biden   ● Trump   ● Not sure

Baseline groups: Education categories compared to those with a bachelor's degree
Republicans and Independents compared to Democrats

lieving that Biden won the 2020 presidential election, and *significantly higher* odds of believing that Trump won the election. Having any level of education less than a bachelor's degree was also associated with significantly higher odds of believing Trump won the 2020 election, as well as identifying as either an Independent or a Republican.

7 IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY

Geographic partisan divides are one way to explore democratic vulnerability around key social issues. While we caution readers against dichotomizing rural and urban residents along partisan lines, numerous studies, media attention, and the patterns identified in our survey suggest that the rural-urban voter divide warrants attention. As evidenced by the 2016 presidential election, rural voters can have an outsized influence on elections given the structure of the electoral college. Therefore, it is pertinent to disentangle how voters in rural areas may differ on contemporary is-

sues if we want to understand what mechanisms may underlie these differences.

Encouragingly, **we find that most rural and urban participants in our survey reported support for the importance of holding those who participated in the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol accountable**. But the fact that 30% of rural residents (and 20% of urban residents) in our survey do not think accountability is important for an attack on our democratic processes, coupled with the rise of violent rhetoric and even acts of violence against political leaders and institutions, warrants concern. For example, Michigan's 2nd district is largely rural (74%) and recently elected John Moolenaar to the U.S. House of Representatives, despite the fact that Moolenaar supports the "Big Lie" and has spread misinformation online.

Rural respondents are less likely to think access to abortion should be legal. As Republican controlled states put increasingly severe restrictions on access to abortion, it is noteworthy that of these 27 states with policies that

either ban or are hostile to abortion, 23 abortion restrictive states have a quarter or more of their population considered rural. In other words, states with relatively more rural residents are implementing stricter abortion restrictions. However, as was the case in Kansas, Michigan, Vermont, Kentucky and California, these state-level policies may not be reflective of the popular will of the majority of the state's residents.

Of particular concern is that **rural respondents are significantly *more* likely to think Trump won the 2020 presidential election or to not be sure who won**. This acceptance of the 'Big Lie' among a voting block with outsized influence on national elections could have strong implications for subsequent elections and our democracy. Indeed, we saw a parade of voting restrictions ahead of the 2022 midterm elections justified by supposed concerns about rigged elections and voter fraud perpetuated by this lie.

8   WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Evidence suggests that more urban voters have to turn out to vote to make up for their electoral college disadvantage. This runs counter to the intuition that a democracy distributes equal rights to shape the government across the populace, with one vote for each person. With growing recognition of the inequalities wrought by our current system, a movement to dismantle the electoral college and implement a popular voting system for federal elections has been slowly building for years. While some worry this could result in backlash comparable or more extreme than that of January 6th,[17] providing each voter one equal vote in consequential elections has the potential to galvanize voters, particularly those who have felt their voices are unheard.

Most importantly, it would ensure that the popular will of the people is reflected in our elected leaders and their political agendas.

Republicans have used social and cultural issues such as abortion and racialized politics to galvanize their base, despite consistently enacting policies that undercut economic growth and prosperity in rural areas.[18] Some leaders such as Maine's state Senator Chloe Maxmin, are calling for Democrats to reach back out to rural communities. In a movement she calls a"Dirt Road Revival," Maxmin argues that the Democratic party has largely abandoned rural areas in favor of urban and suburban voters. This strategy has been a mistake, she argues, as rural areas are not a monolith.

In fact, in key swing states like Nevada, Arizona and Pennsylvania rural voters are and will be crucial to fending off election denying candidates that threaten to undermine our democracy. While the GOP has been successful at shoring up support in rural areas by focusing on social and moral issues, our polling suggests that rural voters care about accountability and therefore might be persuadable. Finally, our democracy depends on public trust, accountability, and a government that is responsive to the public will. Rather than promoting policies that are urban-centric, casting doubt on election integrity, or emphasizing so-called "culture wars," both political parties must prioritize policies that support and develop the diversity of rural and urban economies.

[17]Drutman, L. (2022). Moderation, Realignment of Transformation? Evaluating Three Approaches to America's Crisis of Democracy. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political & Social Science*, 699, 158-174.

[18]Grumbach, J., Hacker, J., & Pierson, P. (2021). The Political Economies of Red States. In J. Hacker, A. Hertel-Fernandez, P. Pierson, & K. Thelen (Eds.), *The American Political Economy: Politics, Markets, and Power* (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics, pp. 209-244). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781009029841.008

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9 APPENDIX

Methodology – what do urban and rural actually mean?

In order to assess rural-urban partisanship, it is important to note that the definitions of "rural" and "urban" are subject to much debate. [19] Rurality has been defined in terms of population density, main economic activity (e.g. agriculture), anything that is not urban, commuting times to urban centers, or a combination of one or more of these factors. It is widely acknowledged that rurality and urbanicity exist on a spectrum.[20] The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) offers a number of rural-urban classification systems.

For our analysis, we classify "rural" and "urban" at the county level using the Rural Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC). [21][22]RUCC is a continuum from 1-9 that ranks counties by population and adjacency to urbanized areas. The map below displays how metro ("urban") and nonmetro ("rural") are classified across the U.S. using the 2013 RUCC designations.[23]

Does this classification of counties as either rural or urban perfectly capture rurality and urbanicity in America? No. We acknowledge that classifying a county as either "ru-

ral" or "urban" does not adequately capture the nuanced population distribution within a county.[24] For example, both a city and rural agricultural spaces can exist within a single county, something Isserman[25] refers to as a "mixed rural" or "mixed urban" county. Smaller geographic units provide more nuanced portrayals of state and national rurality and urbanicity.[26]

On the other hand, county-level comparisons are common in analyses of the rural-urban political divide and offer a conceptually useful level of geography that is familiar to a wider audience. For example, in an analysis of rural-urban political polarization, Scala and Johnson[27] explain:

> "[County-level comparison] is appropriate because in much of the United States counties are important units of local government with broad authority over elections, law enforcement, health, and taxes—especially in rural areas, where fewer municipal governments exist. They also have historically stable boundaries and are a basic unit for reporting political, economic, and demographic data." (p. 166)

We utilize the county level rural-urban classification strategy in this post to understand differences across space regarding voter opinions on key social issues.

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[19]Although there has been some attention to the role of suburban areas in recent elections, our sample does not allow us to analyze how the views of registered voters in suburban areas compare to those in rural and urban areas.

[20]Lichter, D.T, Brown, D.L., Parisi, D. (2021). The rural-urban interface: Rural and small town growth at the metropolitan fringe. *Popul Space Place*, 27, e2415

[21]We tested all outcomes using the USDA's Rural Urban Commuting Areas (RUCA) as well and had substantively similar results. We opt for the RUCC designation to ensure an adequate sample of rural residents in our analysis.

[22]Thank you to Raeda Anderson, PhD for sharing code that converts zipcodes to county FIPS codes and county FIPS codes to RUCC codes.
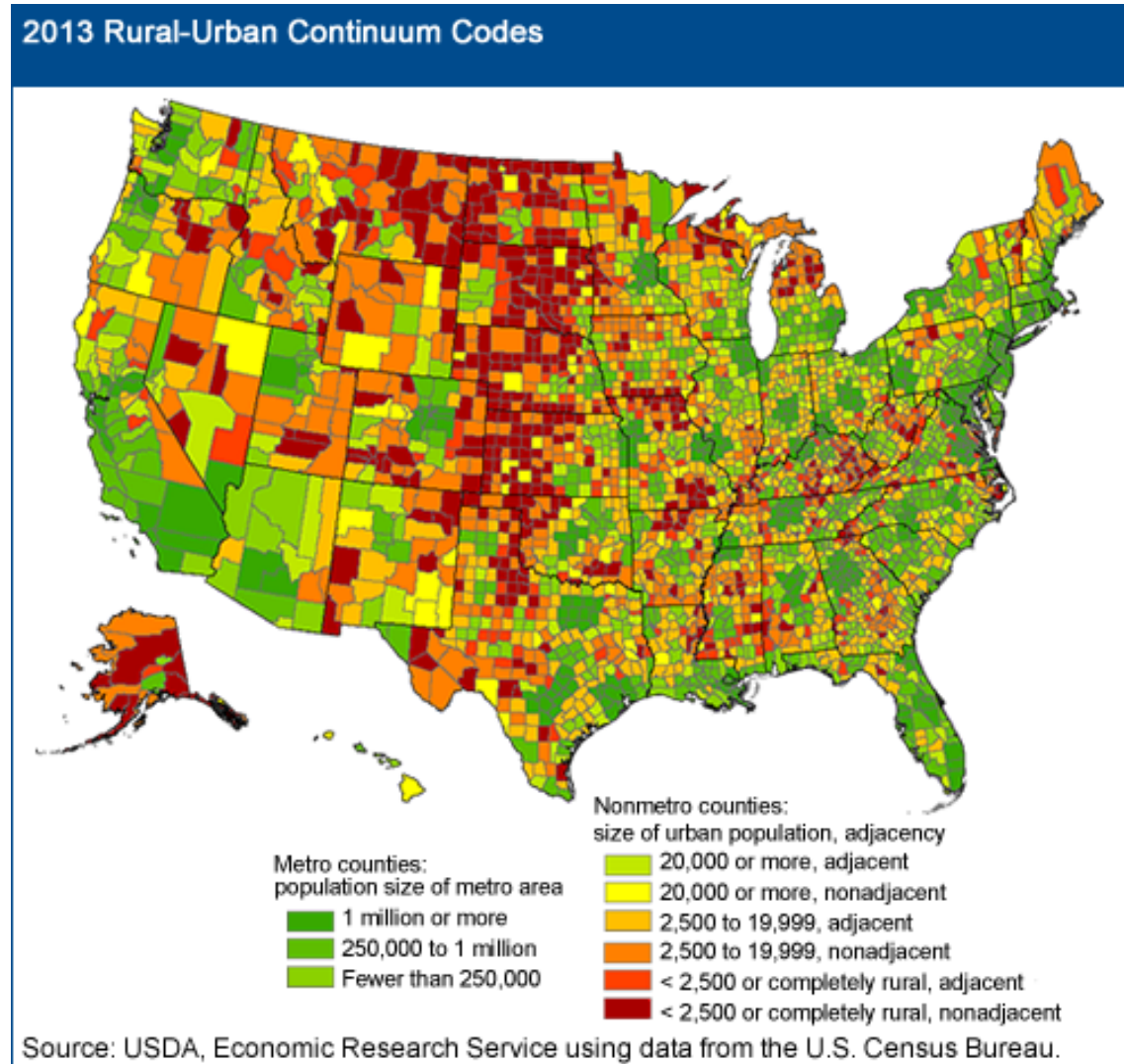
[23]For the purpose of consistency and clarity, we use the terms "rural" and "urban" throughout this post rather than metro and nonmetro (the official language of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

[24]Isserman, A.M. (2005). In The National Interest: Defining Rural and Urban Correctly in Research and Public Policy. *International Regional Science Review*, 28(4), 465-499.

[25]*Ibid*

[26]See the report by the Citizens Research Council of Michigan for an example.

[27]Scala, D. J., Johnson, K. M. (2017). Political Polarization along the rural-urban continuum? The geography of the Presidential Vote, 2000-2016. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political & Social Science*, 672, 162-184.

2013 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

Metro counties: population size of metro area
- 1 million or more
- 250,000 to 1 million
- Fewer than 250,000

Nonmetro counties: size of urban population, adjacency
- 20,000 or more, adjacent
- 20,000 or more, nonadjacent
- 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent
- 2,500 to 19,999, nonadjacent
- < 2,500 or completely rural, adjacent
- < 2,500 or completely rural, nonadjacent

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

More information about rural America

The American Communities Project
Rural Population Research Network
New Rural Project
Rural Voter Institute