



Who Are Rural Voters and What's Their Place in Our Federalism?

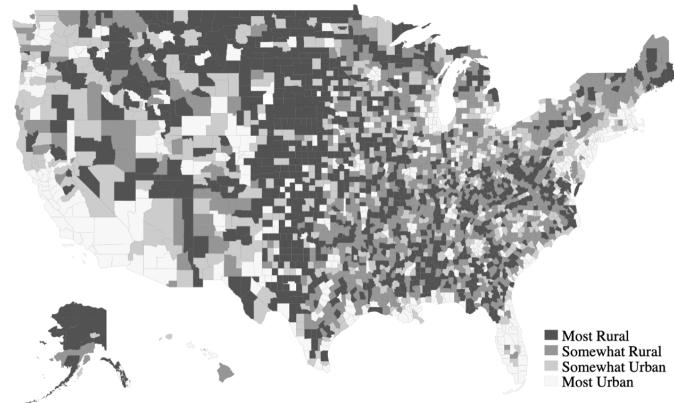
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Our federal system of voting and elections is well known in classrooms. Students and teachers routinely explore election topics ranging from the effects of misinformation on voting to voter fraud and voting access. One topic deserving more attention is differences between rural and urban/suburban voters. Many accounts of partisan polarization emphasize the disproportionate and perhaps unfair advantages rural voters have because of federal institutions. Some even say that federalism, through the Senate, Electoral College, and state gerrymandering, gives rural voters the “greatest political hand ever dealt.” Since the 2024 U.S. presidential election, these types of arguments are once again circulating, blaming or praising rural voters – a small, and shrinking segment of the American population – for the re-election of President Donald Trump.

Rural voters, often living in sparsely populated and economically disadvantaged regions, are a minority group. They comprise just 20 percent of the American population, but their relationship with federalism is more complex than commonly understood. This digest helps teachers examine rural voters, how they vote, and how they affect federal institutions like the United States Senate and Electoral College.

WHO IS A RURAL VOTER?

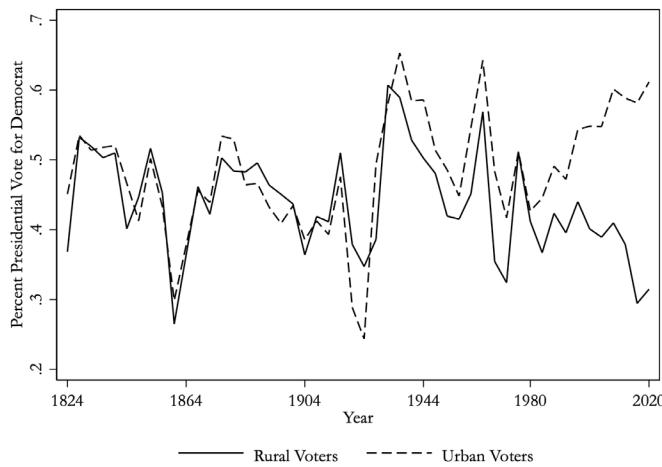
The term “rural voter” often conjures up a monolithic image, but the 66 million Americans who call rural America home are diverse and complex. Rural voters differ widely from each other in demographics, economic status, and cultural values. The rural South is not the same as the rural West or New England – racially, economically, or culturally. Politically, however, rural voters across these regions exhibit strikingly similar patterns. As we discuss in *The Rural Voter: The Politics of Place and the Disuniting of America*, rural voters share a collective political identity that transcends traditional demographics such as age, race, and income. This identity is rooted in a shared experience of rural life, characterized by values such as hard work, self-reliance, and a strong sense of community.



Federalism seems like a natural institution for rural voters because it reflects the idea of preserving and reinforcing political differences in a large, diverse republic. Federalism allows for localized governance that can address the specific needs and priorities of different regions, including rural areas, while maintaining the nation’s broader unity.

However, if federalism is about *states* and their relationship to our federal government, it is easy to forget that there are very few rural states. States like Utah and Wyoming, because they have small populations, but large land areas, are often confused for “rural states.” In fact, most residents in geographically large states live in urban areas, such as Salt Lake City and Cheyenne. As of 2020, rural residents made up a majority of the population in just four states – Vermont, Maine, West Virginia, and Mississippi. A *majority* of rural residents are a minority in their states. The average rural resident lives in a state that is only 27 percent rural.

When the general framework of American federalism was designed in 1787, however, almost all of America was rural. Fewer than 1 in 10 Americans lived in a city or large town on the eve of George Washington’s inauguration. Thus, federalism had very little to do with protecting “rural” interests as a goal of the new Constitution. And today, given the distribution and size of the rural population, states do not necessarily protect rural populations as a scattered minority.



THE RURAL VOTER'S PLACE IN FEDERAL INSTITUTIONS

While there are very few “rural” states, rural voters do affect American politics through their influence on federal institutions, particularly the United States Senate and Electoral College. Because small states tend to be more rural than average (but not always; think Rhode Island and Hawaii), the design of these institutions gives smaller states with large rural populations an outsized influence compared to their urban counterparts. Each state, regardless of population size, is represented in the United States Senate by two senators. Thus, rural-majority states like Vermont, with fewer than 700,000 residents, have the same Senate representation as California, with 39 million residents. This structure amplifies rural voters’ political power, allowing them to exert more influence than they otherwise might on national policy.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in states where a large segment of the electorate is rural, senators (and representatives in rural districts) are forced to address rural issues. Rural voters, by our measure, make up a majority of the electorate in 43 congressional districts, and over a third of voters in 105 districts. While this is no rural advantage, the concentration of these voters into House districts often means that these members of Congress become the *de facto* spokespersons for rural issues, often championing policies that make sure rural residents are included in federal decisions, despite being a small minority. If rural voters were a part of one, big national electorate, their unique concerns and issues might get lost in the crowd. Imagine, for instance, if rural voters were just a part of one big national parliament.

The same dynamic is evident in the Electoral College, where the distribution of electoral votes favors less populous states. We might hope that every American would have the same say in electing the president and vice president, but that’s not the case. Rural voters can have a significant effect on the outcome of presidential elections, even if they represent a smaller portion of the overall national electorate. This was evident in 2016 where rural support was crucial in securing an Electoral College victory for the Republican candidate in

just a handful of states, such as Michigan where rural turnout favored Trump by a few thousand votes. In 2024, the reverse happened; urban turnout dropped for the Democratic candidate, Kamala Harris, and because urban voters outnumber rural voters nearly 2:1, every swing state swung away from the Democratic Party.

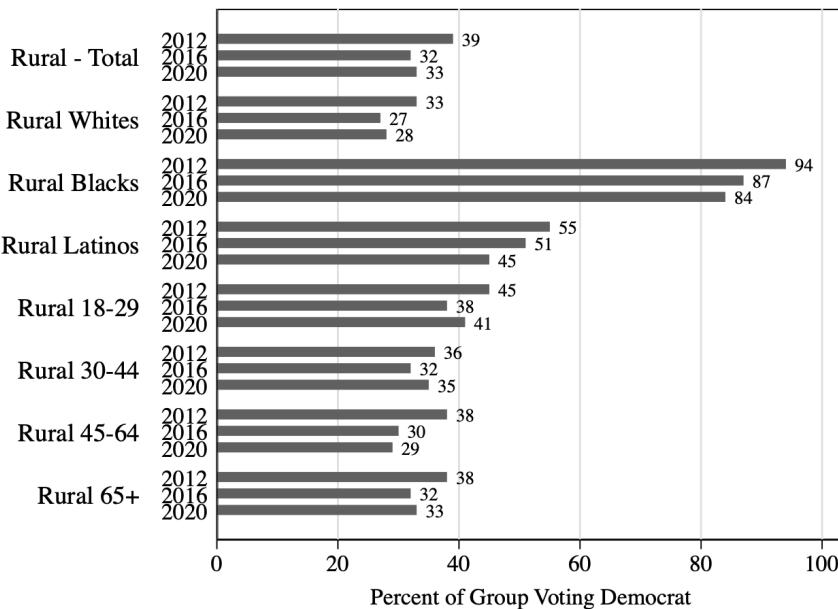
While this is unequal in terms of the overall national vote count, it reflects the intentional design of the United States federal system, which ensures that rural voters, despite being a minority in the national electorate, maintain a critical role in determining political outcomes. It reinforces the idea that different regions, particularly those with distinct ways of life like rural America, should not be drowned out by the majority.

It is also worth considering that Vermont’s 400,000 rural residents exert more influence than the 2.3 million rural residents of California. So yes, on one hand, federalism’s creation of geographically disperse constituencies might help elevate the needs and perspectives of California’s rural residents who live in a state where 94 percent of their neighbors are city dwellers. On the other hand, while we often talk about rural America as one giant bloc of voters, when it comes to policymaking, rural Vermonters might have very different interests than rural Californians. It is less clear how federalism benefits rural California even as it may benefit rural Vermont.

THE ROLE OF RURAL VOTERS IN SHAPING STATE POLITICS

The influence of rural voters on federalism extends far beyond their representation in such federal institutions as the Senate and Electoral College. Rural voters play key roles in shaping political outcomes in state and local governments, where their growing alignment with the Republican Party has led to significant changes in state legislatures and governorships, particularly in states with large rural populations. Not long ago, states like Alabama and Georgia were controlled by Democrats in the state-house, despite most residents voting for Republican presidential candidates. The alignment of national voting patterns and state-house politics is owed, in large part, to shifts among rural voters in these states.

This rural-urban political alignment has deepened partisan divisions nationwide. As rural and urban areas increasingly support different parties, a widening divide has emerged between their representatives’ agendas. The divide between “blue” and “red” communities reflects different partisan priorities and different policies on hot-button issues, such as gun rights, abortion access, and education, which change dramatically once you cross state lines. These growing divisions have important consequences for federalism, often resulting in conflicts between states and the federal government over policy priorities. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many rural communities resisted federal recommendations to close schools. They viewed the mandates as an overreach that undermined local decision-making authority. While urban areas, often with denser populations and greater healthcare infrastructure,



followed federal guidelines to close schools and implement remote learning, rural communities faced different circumstances that made such policies more difficult to implement or less suitable. In many cases, students in rural areas lacked the necessary technology and infrastructure to participate in online classes effectively, and felt less strained by social distancing guidelines given small school enrollments.

Of course, not all these divisions arise from rural-urban differences. For example, millions more gun-rights advocates live in suburbs and big cities than in rural America. But rural voters often see gun ownership through a different lens, one that is rooted in a distinct culture and way of life. The question is whether federalism and policy decentralization allow rural voters to express their distinct values and preferences or whether they exacerbate tensions between rural and urban communities. Not all disagreement is bad. The tension between state and federal authority is a defining feature of American federalism—one that is increasingly shaped by the political preferences of rural voters, whose influence is felt across both state and national politics.

THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND THE FUTURE OF FEDERALISM

During the 2024 election, rural voters were just as important to Donald Trump's victory as in 2016 (and more so than 2020), but they also proved to be more complex. Republicans maintained the loyalty of rural voters, thus helping them increase their margins of victory in many swing states. Democrats failed to appeal to rural voters, but also lost voters in suburban and urban America, especially those who do not have a college degree. To the extent that rural America has become more politically distinct, as a place, voters there also reflect a broader national trend of political realignment around class and education. The increased polarization between rural and urban voters is not just a reflection of partisan loyalty but also a product of deepening cultural

and economic divides, growing frustration with economic inequality, and what many perceive as a disconnect between Washington and local communities.

Rural voters were pivotal in shaping states' policies on a range of constitutional issues in 2024. They showed they are more flexible and issue-driven than the stereotypical image of a uniformly conservative voting bloc. Seven states – four of which voted for Trump – enshrined abortion rights in their state constitutions, and exit polls suggested that a majority of rural voters favored these state protections. Rural voters in Kentucky and Nebraska were behind decisive majorities that rejected proposals to use public money for private school attendance. For instance, 83 percent of voters in deep-rural Pike County, Kentucky, voted for Trump, while 70 percent

rejected a policy supported by many Republican legislators to expand school choice.

From presidential elections to local referenda, the future of federalism in the United States will be shaped by how the political preferences of rural voters interact with the broader dynamics of American politics. As rural voters continue to play a decisive role in federal institutions and elections, their influence will be felt in the ongoing negotiation between state and federal power. The balance of this power will determine the ability of the federal government to address national challenges while respecting the diverse needs of its citizens.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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