

# Authors Daniel Shea and Nicholas Jacobs discuss the challenges facing rural America in lecture

**Will Dotterweich, Politics Reporter**

Authors and professors Daniel Shea and Nicholas Jacobs explored political and social issues that rural communities face, drawing from their book, "The Rural Voter," during a lecture in Curtiss Hall Thursday.

The main question Shea and Jacobs set out to answer with their book was why rural communities have switched from primarily Democrat to Republican.

"There's been a change in our politics," Shea said. "There's been a change in this sort of geographic voting pattern in America."

Shea and Jacobs collected data from nationwide county elections and surveyed 14,000 American voters to find their answers.

"We took every county election results back to 1824 across the nation; it's a very extensive data set," Shea said. "Then we talked to 14,000 Americans, one by one. We talked to 10,000 rural voters and another 4,000 non-rural voters. We know this is the largest study of rural voters ever conducted, and we asked 250 unique questions."

Shea and Jacobs have found that rural Americans have a deep sense of place, and how they value their rural lifestyles and beliefs drives their political views. Past economic events are a main factor in the unprecedented change of politics in rural America.

"Since the 2008 recession, rural areas have not caught up with terms of employment nationwide since then," Jacobs said. "In fact, they barely caught up since the COVID-19 pandemic."

Jacobs stated that rural people feel left out of policy-making and believe that to live a fulfilling and economically safe life, people, especially young people, must move to non-rural areas.

Misconceptions and perceptions about rural Americans in pop culture and the media are another main factor Shea and Jacobs found in their research.

"Prior to the 1960s, rural life is probably best described as the pastoral tradition," Shea said. "That is, rural life becomes the refuge from the cities. All depression era films were set in rural areas and showed how great it was to live in these areas."

Since then, Shea said pop culture has depicted rural Americans in a different way, shown through television shows, such as "The Beverly Hillbillies."



Artemis Tack

Daniel M. Shea co-leads "The Rural Voter: The Politics of Place and the Disuniting of America" lecture with Nicholas F. Jacobs at Curtiss Hall, Oct 03, 2024.

Compared to the rest of their research, Shea and Jacobs found a similarity between rural and urban voters.

"Some similarities are interesting when it comes to religion, religious life and feelings of religiosity, including urban areas," Jacobs said.

According to Jacobs, this similarity has made it easier for the Democratic Party to say that they cannot help rural Americans as their beliefs are too different from the nature of their policies.

Jacobs, an assistant professor of government at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, has published two books and has appeared in many scholarly journals, including "Education and the Urban Society." He teaches American politics and research methods at Colby College.

Shea, a professor of government at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, has published and been featured in numerous journals. His most recent journal is "Why Vote? Essential Questions about the Future of Elections in America."

Shea and Jacobs's book, "The Rural Voter," is available online and at the University Bookstore.

For more information on lectures and to view a recording of Jacobs and Shea's lecture, visit the Lecture Series website.