

How 'Rural Studies' Is Thinking About the Heartland

What's the matter with America's rural voters? Many scholars believe that the question itself is the problem.



Photo illustration by Pablo Delcan



By [Emma Goldberg](#)

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Kristin Lunz Trujillo grew up proud of her family's way of life. She spent summers getting ready to show cattle at the county fair. During the school year, she rushed home after class to feed the chickens on her family's corn and soybean farm. Neither of her parents went to college, but they encouraged their daughter when she decided to go to Carleton, a liberal arts school a two-hour drive from their farm in Minnesota.

Despite being physically close to home, Ms. Lunz Trujillo was surprised by how foreign her upbringing seemed at the college. She was dismayed when she checked out the farm club and learned that its members wanted to brew kombucha, not milk cows. When an art history teacher asked students which famous paintings they'd seen in person, Ms. Lunz Trujillo stayed quiet, because she had never been to an art museum. This sense of cultural alienation molded her research when she became a political scientist: What is rural identity? How does it shape a person's politics?

This year, Ms. Lunz Trujillo, now an assistant professor at the University of South Carolina, was reading a new, best-selling book that cited her research to explore those same questions. But this recognition didn't bring the thrill she might have expected.



Kristin Lunz Trujillo studies political attitudes in rural communities. Credit...Sean Rayford for The New York Times

"It seemed to be more of a hit piece on rural America," she said.

Published in February, "White Rural Rage," by the journalist Paul Waldman and the political scientist Tom Schaller, is an unsparing assessment of small-town America. Rural residents, the authors argued, are more likely than city dwellers to excuse political violence, and they pose a threat to American democracy.

Several rural scholars whose research was included in the book immediately denounced it. In a critical [Politico](#) essay, Nick Jacobs, a political scientist at Colby College, wrote, "Imagine my surprise when I picked up the book and saw that some of that research was mine." Ms. Lunz Trujillo excoriated the book in an opinion piece for [Newsweek](#) as "a prime example of how intellectuals sow distrust by villainizing" people unlike them.

(The book's authors were taken aback. Mr. Waldman said in an interview that he surmised the academics were reacting out of protectiveness toward the subjects of their own research and that he viewed some responses to the book as "over-the-top insults.")

In recent decades, there have been many attempts to offer explanations of why rural Americans consistently vote for Republicans, from "[What's the Matter With Kansas?](#)," published during the George W. Bush administration, to "[Hillbilly Elegy](#)," which came out just before Donald J. Trump's victory in 2016. But this latest effort provoked a response that was swift and scathing and

revealed something new: the existence of a tightknit group of scholars who are clamoring for more empathetic political analyses of rural Americans.

People who study rural communities often feel that politicians and pundits extract the wrong lessons from their research, partly because they are too far removed from those communities. That's an issue that rural-studies scholars have tried to remedy, but also feel acutely. Some of these academics were raised on farms or in small towns, but their connections to universities can breed suspicion among the people they research. Books like "White Rural Rage" can make it all the more challengin

"We contribute to the further denigration of expertise when we say, 'This is what the experts say about these rubes and bumpkins,'" said Mr. Jacobs, a co-author of "[The Rural Voter](#)." "Who's going to trust the experts when that's what the experts have to say about you?"

A Rural Renaissance

There is an obvious reason for academics' neglect of the political urban-rural divide until recently: It barely existed.

From the 1970s to the early 1990s, rural counties resembled urban ones in their presidential choices, including supporting the Republicans Richard M. Nixon and Ronald Reagan and the Democrat Bill Clinton. It's [only since the late 1990s that there has been a marked gap](#) between rural and urban voting patterns in presidential elections, and it has widened ever since. In 2016, Mr. Trump won 59 percent of rural voters. Four years later, that climbed to 65 percent, according to [Pew](#). And in the 2022 midterms, Republicans won [69 percent](#) of the rural vote.

Even if that shift does hint that "rural" may now be its own kind of identity, it's a cohort that's hard to define. (The authors of "White Rural Rage" threw up their hands and declared that they were "agnostic" about the different definitions across the studies they cited.)

The Census Bureau classifies any community as rural if it isn't within an urban area, meaning it is not part of a densely settled area with [5,000 or more people](#) or [2,000 or more housing units](#). (In the 2020 census, 20 percent of Americans were classified as rural.) The Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service looks at different measures of counties including population size, proximity to metropolitan areas and commuting patterns.

Beyond these basic definitional problems, rural communities can be wildly different socially. “When you aggregate to the national level, you lose so much,” said Zoe Nemerever, a political scientist at Utah Valley University. “I get frustrated especially when people talk about rural America as white America. In some states, it’s Latino America. In the Deep South, it’s Black America.”

Traditionally, political scientists argued that measuring the effects of place was just a proxy for looking at other parts of identity, like race or education. And because many did not come from rural areas, growing up rural didn’t tend to strike academics as a salient part of political identity.

Maybe because so few people fashioned themselves as “rural political experts” until recently, the few high-profile explanations for the rise of rural Republicanism were widely embraced by the chattering classes.

The most digestible theory, for years, was laid out by Thomas Frank in his best-selling 2004 book, “What’s the Matter With Kansas?” Mr. Frank, a historian, argued that the Republican focus on social issues, like abortion and guns, persuaded rural voters to put aside their economic interests and vote on cultural values rather than for candidates who supported unions and corporate regulation.

But the “Kansas” theory of heartland Republicanism wasn’t satisfying to some readers who actually lived in rural America. In fact, a handful of academics were so frustrated with the book that it inspired them to pursue their own research.



Michael Shepherd, who grew up in Bardstown, Ky., read the book “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” and felt it “missed a lot of what was going on in communities like mine.” He’s now a political scientist at the University of Texas. Credit...Andrew Cenci for The New York Times

Michael Shepherd read the book in high school, college and again in graduate school, and never changed his opinion. “I felt like it was pretty snooty,” said Mr. Shepherd, now a political scientist at the University of Texas at Austin, who grew up in Bardstown, Ky., the heart of bourbon making. “It really missed a lot of what was going on in communities like mine.”

Another scholar who disagreed with Mr. Frank’s diagnosis was Kathy Cramer, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

But like Mr. Frank, she was interested in the question of how social class shaped politics, and thought that the way to get an accurate picture was through fieldwork. Over five years, starting in 2007, she visited 27 small towns in Wisconsin.

During meandering chats at McDonald’s, diners and gas stations, Ms. Cramer came to a different understanding from Mr. Frank’s of why people voted the way they did: Rural Americans resented city dwellers. They believed that national and state governments had enriched urban areas at the expense of rural ones, taking note of all the road-building in Madison, for example, when they drove to sports games.

Their reaction was hostility toward the very idea of government, so they supported politicians who promised to keep it out of their lives; Ms. Cramer called this “the politics of resentment.” (She herself was the target of resentment because she lived in Madison, the state’s capital. She assured people she interviewed that the university pens she handed out were funded by the alumni association, not taxpayers.)

Ms. Cramer’s 2016 book, “The Politics of Resentment,” quickly became an anchor in the growing field of rural political studies. At least half a dozen academics credit her with foundational thinking for their research. The “White Rural Rage” authors cited Ms. Cramer’s work, too, though she was dismayed by their conclusions.

“A lot of the focus has been on ‘What’s wrong with those people?’” she said. “But most people studying what’s going on with rural political behavior are people with empathy for people who live in rural places. They aren’t discounting them as ignorant or uninformed. There’s more of an attempt to understand the way they’re seeing the world.”

Community Ties

When Mr. Jacobs decided this year to convene a group of 15 scholars for a conference called Rethinking Rural, he was struck by the flurry of excitement that greeted the invitations. “It was like the first time they’d been asked to the dance,” he said.

Rethinking Rural, hosted at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, landed coincidentally on the week after the publication of “White Rural Rage.” Attendees joked about seeing the authors promoting their book on “Morning Joe” on MSNBC (presumably to coastal elites).

What [rankled](#) the experts who had read “White Rural Rage” was what they considered slapdash analysis. The authors build some arguments on polls with sample sizes as small as 167 rural people. The book is filled with critiques of rural Americans — their resistance to pluralism, their willingness to embrace conspiracies — that apply to many groups and that some scholars reject because they are not based on the long-term observation they say is needed to truly understand the political motives of any community.

The Rethinking Rural conference was full of a different type of political insight. Mr. Jacobs, with the political scientist Dan Shea, conducted surveys of 10,000 rural voters, from Gambell, Alaska, to Lubec, Maine. The pair were struck by a commonality: Rural residents tend to focus less on their own economic circumstances and more on their community’s prosperity.

Even individuals who are thriving are attuned to whether their community as a whole is being left behind by economic changes like automation or the decline of coal.

That sense of “shared fate,” as the scholars put it, arises in part because rich and poor tend to cross paths often, which Mr. Jacobs has noticed even in his own rural community, Vassalboro, Maine, population 4,520.

“If you go down my street in Vassalboro, the nicest house on the street is right across from the least nice house on the street,” Mr. Jacobs said. “Their kids go to the same school because there’s only one school.”

Such interconnectedness means that pollsters sometimes miss how rural voters are really feeling, he added. “It’s not enough to simply ask: Are you doing better than you were last year?”

There's a shared history in rural areas that binds people in other ways, too, detailed in research by Keith Orejel, a historian who examined the decline of agricultural jobs after World War II. As millions left rural areas seeking economic opportunity, an appreciation formed for the businesspeople who stayed and tried to create jobs. That led to an outsized influence by local business leaders in the political realm, driving support for anti-union laws and tax policies generous to businesses.

Broadly, rural Americans see free trade and the rise of new technologies as hurting their communities while helping cities prosper, Mr. Jacobs said. So the resentment they felt toward urbanites didn't come out of nowhere. Though Mr. Jacobs differentiated that resentment from the idea of "rural rage."

"Rage and resentment are not interchangeable terms," he wrote in [Politico](#). "Rage implies irrationality, anger that is unjustified and out of proportion. You can't talk to someone who is enraged. Resentment is rational, a reaction based on some sort of negative experience."

And while resentment, like rage, doesn't easily dissolve, he suggests that trying to understand where it comes from could start to build a bridge over that ever-widening urban-rural divide.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/29/business/rural-studies-american-politics.html>

It is hard to know where to take a stand in this debate. One foot in each world, urban and rural, straddling the divide? I do see virtues on each side—and the unscrupulous exploiting the impasse distorting the debate. But isn't there a saying warning against trying to straddle two canoes?

Yet we know the division is not so neat and clear as it is typically construed. I know sons now in the city who are as "conservative" as their father on the farm, and daughters now in the country as "liberal" as their mothers in suburbia.

It is about more than religion: I know "religious" and "nonreligious" on both sides. It is more about "culture", which boils down to reflex responses to sexual and gender identity postulates. As well, it is about money: What you do to make a living, hard hands-on "blue-collar", maybe as an entrepreneur having to prevail in a nasty business world, or soft "white collar" in a bureaucratic human services world, salaried and serving the hoi polloi. But still, too simple. Maybe "temperament", one of the few traits identifiable across the human genome. TJB